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This work on miracles is dedicated
To Rebecca and Brenda
Because they work miracles of healing
Every day.
I wish to express intense gratitude and high esteem for the meticulous and devoted labor of Beuna C. Carlson who read all the proofs with a sharp eye and sturdy hand for ferreting out errors. Surely the devil is in the details and she has mastered the devil.
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The interface between psychology, religion, and spirituality has been of great interest to scholars for a century. In the last three decades a broad popular appetite has developed for books that make practical sense out of the sophisticated research on these three subjects. Freud expressed an essentially deconstructive perspective on this matter and indicated that he saw the relationship between human psychology and religion to be a destructive interaction. Jung, on the other hand, was quite sure that these three aspects of the human spirit: psychology, religion, and spirituality, were constructively and inextricably linked.

Anton Boisen and Seward Hiltner derived much insight from both Freud and Jung, as well as from Adler and Reik, while pressing the matter forward with ingenious skill and illumination. Boisen and Hiltner fashioned a framework within which the quest for a sound and sensible definition of the interface between psychology, religion, and spirituality might best be described or expressed. We are in their debt.

This series of general interest books, so wisely urged by Praeger Publishers, and particularly by its editors, Deborah Carvalko and Suzanne I. Staszak-Silva, intends to define the terms and explore the interface of psychology, religion, and spirituality at the operational level of daily human experience. Each volume of the series identifies, analyzes, describes, and evaluates the full range of issues, of both popular and professional interest, that deal with the psychological factors at play (1) in the way religion takes shape and is expressed, (2) in the way spirituality functions within human persons and shapes both religious formation and expression, and (3) in the
ways that spirituality is shaped and expressed by religion. The interest is psychospiritual. In terms of the rubrics of the disciplines and the science of psychology and spirituality this series of volumes investigates the operational dynamics of religion and spirituality.

The verbs shape and express in the above paragraph refer to the forces that prompt and form religion in persons and communities, as well as to the manifestations of religious behavior (1) in personal forms of spirituality, (2) in acts of spiritually motivated care for society, and (3) in ritual behaviors such as liturgies of worship. In these various aspects of human function the psychological and/or spiritual drivers are identified, isolated, and described in terms of the way in which they unconsciously and consciously operate in religion, thought, and behavior.

The books in this series are written for the general reader, the local library, and the undergraduate university student. They are also of significant interest to the informed professional, particularly in fields corollary to his or her primary interest. The volumes in this series have great value for clinical settings and treatment models, as well.

This series editor has spent an entire professional lifetime focused specifically on research into the interface of psychology in religion and spirituality. This present set, Miracles: God, Science, and Psychology in the Paranormal, is an urgently needed and timely work, the motivation for which is surely endorsed enthusiastically by the entire religious world today, as the international community searches for strategies that will afford us better and deeper religious self-understanding as individuals and communities. This project addresses the deep psychosocial, psychospiritual, and biological sources of human nature that shape and drive our psychology and spirituality. Careful strategies of empirical, heuristic, and phenomenological research have been employed to give this work a solid scientific foundation and formation. Never before has such wise analysis been brought to bear upon the dynamic linkage between human physiology, psychology, and spirituality in an effort to understand the human mystification with apparent miraculous events in our experience and traditions.

For 50 years such organizations as the Christian Association for Psychological Studies and such graduate departments of psychology as those at Boston University, Fuller, Rosemead, Harvard, George Fox, Princeton, and the like, have been publishing important building blocks of research on issues dealing with religious behavior and psychospirituality. In this present project the insights generated by such patient and careful research are synthesized and integrated into a holistic psychospiritual worldview, which takes seriously the special aspect of religious tradition called miracle. This volume employs an objective and experience-based approach to discerning what happens in miracle stories, what that means, and in what ways that is an advantage or danger to our spiritual life and growth, as we pursue the irrepressible human quest for meaning.
Some of the influences of religion upon persons and society, now and throughout history, have been negative. However, most of the impact of the great religions upon human life and culture has been profoundly redemptive and generative of great good. It is urgent, therefore, that we discover and understand better what the psychological and spiritual forces are that empower people of faith and genuine spirituality to open their lives to the transcendent connection and give themselves to all the creative and constructive enterprises that, throughout the centuries, have made of human life the humane, ordered, prosperous, and aesthetic experience it can be at its best. Surely the forces for good in both psychology and spirituality far exceed the powers and proclivities toward the evil.

This series of Praeger Publishers volumes is dedicated to the greater understanding of Psychology, Religion, and Spirituality, and thus to the profound understanding and empowerment of those psychospiritual drivers that can help us (1) transcend the malignancy of our earthly pilgrimage, (2) open our spirits to the divine spirit, (3) enhance the humaneness and majesty of the human spirit, and (4) empower our potential for magnificence in human life.

J. Harold Ellens
Series Editor

NOTE

Miracle stories live forever. They appear in all religious traditions and though the traditions change greatly over the centuries, the miracle stories stay the same. Krister Stendahl, professor of biblical studies at Harvard Divinity School and bishop of the Lutheran Church of Sweden, wrote the foreword to Anton Fridrichsen’s *The Problem of Miracle in Primitive Christianity*. In it he approved of Fridrichsen’s “theological conviction that genuine faith and vital religion is and will remain mythical, miraculous, and resistant to theological reductionism—orthodox, conservative, liberal, or radical.” Regardless of the perspective one takes on the faith tradition that holds one’s attention, the miracle stories remain the same kind of enigma from generation to generation.

The questions asked today by devoted believers and agnostic critics, by theological scientists and empirical scientists, by mythologists and rationalists, are the same questions as the ancient Greeks, Romans, and Christians were asking about the miracles reported and celebrated in their world 2,000 years ago. Numerous explanations of miracle stories have filled uncountable volumes over the centuries. None, so far, quite satisfies the hunger of the human mind and spirit for a final answer to the question, “Are miracles real, or a chimera of our imaginations? What really happened and what does it mean?”

Is it possible to devise thoroughly rational and naturalistic interpretations of this mystifying phenomenon? Possibly, but then when that is said and done we have the sense that while the rationale holds up well enough, the intriguing center of the issue has not been exploded. Likewise, we may provide a
literal, psychological, or mythological explanation of the miracle stories and
discover in the end that we have not quite understood the depth of the narra-
tive that gives us the ultimate clue. We cannot escape the haunting suspicion
that in the miracle stories the transcendent world has somehow touched our
mundane existence. That is true whether it is a biblical narrative or a news-
paper report of some spontaneous remission of disease in the twenty-first
century. Paul J. Achtemeier observed that, as regards our understanding or
accounting for the biblical miracles, particularly those performed by Jesus
and recorded in the synoptic Gospels, in the end we must face the fact that
Jesus really did heal that demon-possessed boy in Mark 9, for example, and
if our explanation does not reflect that forthrightly we have distorted the
forthright Gospel report.2

It is a good thing, therefore, that we have been able to assemble a company
of the brightest and best scholars from around the world today to exam-
ine this profoundly important issue. The contributors to these volumes on
*Miracles: God, Science, and Psychology in the Paranormal* are esteemed scholars
whose life’s calling and professional specialty it is to know the New Tes-
tament thoroughly and scientifically. They have agreed to address, in this
volume, the issue of biblical miracles from every conceivable perspective we
could imagine. Here follows in 16 chapters the rather rich fruit of our de-
voted labor.

**NOTES**

1. Anton Fridrichsen (1972), *The Problem of Miracle in Primitive Christianity*,
Minneapolis: Augsburg, 8. This work was originally published in 1925 as *Le Prob-
lème du Miracle dans le Christianisme Primitif*, by the Faculty of Protestant Theology
at the University of Strasbourg.

2. Paul J. Achtemeier (1975), Miracles and the Historical Jesus: Mark 9:14–29,
In his recent volume, *Jesus the Village Psychiatrist: Disabling Anxiety in a World of Insecurity*, Donald Capps finally addressed definitively what psychologists and theologians have been dancing around for 20 centuries.¹ He has looked squarely in the face the issue of the psychological nature and method of Jesus’ healing ministries. Those ministries are more than adequately documented by the witnesses in the numerous New Testament miracle stories. It is clear from those narratives that people who were close to Jesus, or knew those who were, were wholly persuaded that Jesus cured sicknesses and impairments.

Furthermore, when you have a couple of generations of people standing around who were well aware of the person and work of Jesus of Nazareth, there is only so much hyperbole you can use in describing such a personage, and get away with it. Since the stories of Jesus’ miracles were so popular and so widespread within 50 years of his death, there must be something very important about them. If not, there would have been significant numbers of voices raised to counter the claims of the biblical stories. It is possible to make a heroic figure out of an ordinary man or woman simply by telling stories about them that embellish their reputation. However, even then one can only get away with telling stories that ring true to some characteristic of the person’s nature or behavior. If the stories are wildly exaggerated, beyond that which is believable about that character, they will be countered, contradicted, falsified, and forgotten.

If I told you that Jules Verne’s stories about trips to the moon or to the bottom of the sea were not fiction but truth, I might be able to get away with it if I could convince you that he is alive today, but I certainly could not
get away with that regarding a man who you know lived in the eighteenth or nineteenth century. You would immediately falsify my claim because you could prove that the technology did not exist then. Likewise, if I told you that the Wright brothers flew an airship for a few hundred feet at Kitty Hawk at about the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth century, you would probably believe it. However, if I expanded that story to persuade you that they also created a spaceship and visited the moon or Mars, you would laugh at me because the metals, tools, chemicals, and technology for such operations could not have been available to the Wright brothers under any circumstances. What were available were bicycles, primitive internal combustion engines, rather unrefined iron bars, canvas, and such stuff out of which to rig a rickety airframe for rather rustic experimentation. Their real story is only marginally believable. Anything wilder than that would not be believable at all! It was the same with Jesus’ miracle stories.

The nature, behavior, and equipment of the heroic character in a story must be such that he or she can authentically carry the freight that the reports heap upon him or her. So the question about Jesus as miracle worker is not really so much the question of whether he performed healings, but rather the question of what kind of character he must have been that this particular set of narratives, this meaning freight, could be placed upon him and become immediately believable regarding him. Apparently people who knew him or knew about him readily responded with something like, “Yes! That is the sort of thing he did or surely would and could have done.” The stories seem to have been affirmed from the outset without reservation, not because people were particularly gullible but because people knew something about Jesus that made the stories believable.

SPIRITUAL DYNAMICS AND SOCIAL DYNAMICS

A great deal of footwork has been employed by biblical scholars, other scientists, and popularizers over the centuries, dancing around the issue of biblical miracle reports; and a lot of ink has been spilled to explain away the fact or the meaning of Jesus’ miracles. Those perspectives generally leave one feeling less than satisfied, because they give the impression that they do not take the biblical narratives with adequate seriousness. Whether the miracles are explained in a sacred or secular manner, as divine or human acts, or denied altogether, one has the suspicion that something more should be said. One feels that the attempts to divinize, psychologize, or negativize the miracle stories in the Bible are simply leaving something out. The haunting sense persists that what is being missed in the explanation really has to do with the core of the matter.

That is the issue addressed in Capps’s fine book. It is worth our while and wholly appropriate that we should begin here, then, with a summary and
Biblical miracles and psychological assessment of Capps’s thesis and argument. Capps’s important volume begins with a discussion of the way in which the miracles of Jesus have been psychologized or rationalized away by scholars since the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. He discusses, for example, Albert Schweitzer’s argumentation about whether Jesus was delusional. In the fifth chapter of this work, Capps moves from a discussion of conversion hysteria as an explanation of some spontaneous healings to the issue itself of Jesus as the village psychiatrist.

Capps suggests that Jesus should be taken seriously as a member of our helping professions, particularly those focused primarily upon psychotherapy. Jesus would not have recognized the term psychotherapy, but might well have been conscious of that category, described in standard dictionaries as healing that deals with the treatment and prevention of mental illness such as psychoses and neuroses. Mental illness in Jesus’ day was caused by many things, just as it is today. Capps thinks that the normal emotional stress and strain for Jewish villagers in Palestine in Jesus’ time was greatly increased by Roman occupation of their land. That would have jeopardized their village livelihood since the wealthy Roman cities that sprang up, with their voracious appetites, would have dominated the landscape, economy, and politics. He suggests that these sociocultural factors would have worsened personal stress, family tensions among the villagers of established families, and intergenerational conflicts. Jesus was a rural psychiatrist, in the sense that he ministered in and to the junctures of conflict between rural and urban cultures, between families and social groups, and between parents and children.

Capps notes that having been a carpenter, Jesus was more accustomed to building up than tearing down. So his interest in the well-being of those around him would have enticed him into the helping professions. It is not surprising that he, like so many of us, saw that as a calling in ministry that was both material and spiritual, related to matters mundane and religious. The anxiety and dysfunction of the people around him would have attracted his attention.

Anxiety is the driver behind most mental illness, frequently leading to irrational thoughts and behavior. Free-floating anxiety, which is not focused upon a real source of danger, may lead to the behavior of denial, exaggeration of the perceived threat, or projection of a danger where there is none. Capps believes that anxiety was the underlying cause of the disorders that Jesus treated successfully. Some forms of neurotic or psychotic acting out of anxiety can lead to hysteria and its psychophysical manifestations, as Freud contended. In his explication of this perspective, Capps focuses first upon two biblical narratives, both having to do with paralyzed persons (Mk 2:1–12; Jn 5:1–9).

Everyone knows well the story of the paralytic who was let down through the roof in Capernaum so that Jesus would be compelled to notice him. We know this is a case of hysterical paralysis because of the way the cure
worked. Jesus undoubtedly knew this man and his family history since Jesus vacationed regularly in Capernaum on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. In fact, he eventually had a home in that city. He surely would have noticed the fellow or heard his story frequently, understood his family or life story, and realized the sources of the poor fellow’s dysfunction. When the four friends presented the man to Jesus, he addressed him immediately in a familiar manner by saying, “Your sins are forgiven. Get up and walk.” Carl Jung thought that half the healing power of a therapist lay in the aura and authority of healer that the patient projected upon the therapist. Jesus spoke with authority to inform the paralytic man that his fear, guilt, and shame had been removed by God from the equation of his life, so he could let go of his symptomatology and function normally. The point is that it worked. Jesus was an effective village psychotherapist.

The end of this story is a joke, of course, played on those who challenged Jesus’ right to forgive sins since that is God’s domain. It was obviously impossible to discredit the effectiveness for the healed man of Jesus’ intervention, because the man began to walk home. So Jesus asked whether the complainers thought it easier to heal the fellow by saying his sins were forgiven, which was obviously effective, or by telling him to get up and walk, which he was already doing? It is interesting that in the second narrative about the man at the pool in Jerusalem, Jesus simply instructed him to get up and walk. The authority in his voice led the man to believe he could, and so he did, throwing off his psychological dysfunction. Nothing here about removal of fear, guilt, and shame! Obviously, Jesus knew that the causes were different in each case, and that suggests that he knew the case history well enough to understand the causes in each case.

THE PSYCHODYNAMICS

Capps observes correctly that such cases of anxiety-induced hysterical paralysis develop from a person’s perception of a severely threatening danger, translated into conscious anxiety, internalized as free-floating unconscious anxiety that is disconnected from the danger source, and then somatized in psychophysiological dysfunction. At that point the original danger may have disappeared or been discovered as nonexistent in the first place; and the original anxiety may have dissipated. However, the unconscious anxiety persists, together with the psychosomatic dysfunction it induced, because the person has developed unrelated payoffs for persisting in the dysfunction. Such secondary gains, as we call them, can be the attention the handicap incites, the fear that acting against the symptoms might induce the original danger to recur, malingering, or other psychosocial payoffs. The person remains disabled because there are unconscious peripheral incentives. In such cases, the person usually wishes at the conscious level to be well; but at the unconscious level has numerous reasons to remain dysfunctional.
The effectiveness of a therapist’s intervention in such cases has to do with the action of a trusted authority, upon whom the patient has projected the aura of healer, who gives the patient permission to act on his conscious desire to transcend his or her dysfunction. Jesus outflanked the suffering person’s anxiety, inviting him to be free of psychospiritual imprisonment to both internalized and externalized fear, guilt, and shame. That act on the part of Jesus, as healer, permitted the patient a different perspective and hence a new master story, so to speak. Of course, we must remember that Jesus was not alone in that. The gospel records that there were others casting out demons in his society, at least one of whom was doing it by citing the authority of Jesus himself and Jesus commended him for doing so (Lk 9:49–50 and Mk 9:38–41).

It is interesting that when Jesus healed the man at the pool, he first asked him whether he wished to be healed. Undoubtedly, this suggests that Jesus was aware of the man’s ambivalence about his imprisonment to his symptomatology with all its unconscious secondary gains, on the one hand; and his conscious claim that he wished to be healed but could never quite manage the optimal timing for it, on the other. One would think that after lying there for 38 years, as he claimed, he would have figured out how to seize the moment, if he were really thoroughly persuaded that he wanted to be healed. Obviously, in both this man’s case and that of the paralytic let through the roof by his friends, Jesus’ invitation to act on whatever motive each man had for being well tipped the psychospiritual scales in favor of freedom and health.

Capps would like to know what was wrong with these fellows and why. Cases of conversion hysteria resulting in paralysis are quite numerous. Familiar ones, for example, tend to appear regularly in the literature. An adolescent boy in a repressively moralistic family discovers the delights of masturbation and is repeatedly caught at it by his abusively scolding parent; and is so filled with fear, guilt, and shame that he converts these terrors of the soul into a paralysis of the arm and hand he uses to masturbate. I have a patient who not only developed such paralysis, but moved across the line into a psychotic episode in which he cut off the offending limb with his band saw. The men in Jesus’ two stories may not have had sex-related hysteria, but may have faced physical threats they considered beyond their ability to defend against, and so saved their lives by retreating into dysfunction. So many dynamics can cause this kind of dysfunction that we cannot adequately speculate about or analyze what the operational sources of their suffering were. We only know what psychopathological category it is into which they neatly fit: classic hysterical paralysis.

In his chapter on “Jesus the Village Psychiatrist,” Capps expends a great deal of analysis upon setting the social and psychophysiological setting for the suffering of the two Jewish men in these very Jewish stories. This turns out to be pure speculation, however, and not very useful. We cannot adequately reconstruct the psychosocial setting in ancient Galilee or Jerusalem. Capps
relates the two healings of the paralytics to the stories of the healing at Jericho of the blind man Bartimaeus in Mark 10:46–50, and the healing at Bethsaida of another blind man in Mark 8:22–26. These too, he suggests, are cases of conversion hysteria. His judgment is based upon the fact that the stories indicate that the men both want to see, that both are spontaneously healed when Jesus invites or commands it, and that Jesus instructs one of them to go home and avoid the village.

Capps’s assumption is that something in the village was so difficult for the man that it caused his dysfunction, and he could relapse. Did he have eyes for a forbidden woman of the village? Social censure in small villages is unmerciful. Moreover, was there not an injunction afloat in those days that said that every one who looks at a woman lustfully thereby commits adultery with her? Moreover, what about Jesus’ observation that if your eye causes you to sin you should pluck it out and dispose of it, since it is better to dispose of one eye than lose yourself in hell (Mt 5:27–29)? That may not have been original with Jesus. It probably was a commonly known proverb of that day in that culture. Capps tops off his discussion with the additional observation that the length of average life in Jesus’ day was so short as to obviate most causes of blindness that we see today, such as macular degeneration, hence psychosomatic causes are more likely. Capps’s rationale regarding these two blind men is speculative, but of considerable interest.

Hysterical blindness is common, though usually temporary. I experienced it in one eye at about age 12 and it lasted for one night, though the trauma only lasted for a few hours. Capps reports that Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–92) was blind for nine months at age 22. The dysfunction was not unrelated to his chronic tuberculosis, but the onset of the blindness seems to have been induced by his attempt, in developing his Unitarian theological rationale, to prove that if a demonic god does not exist the good God is the source of evil. In mid-sentence, so to speak, while penning that thought, he was struck blind. He left his studies and left Cambridge to work as a farm laborer. There he met another laborer who persuaded him of the empirical evidence for the efficaciousness of prayer. He undertook to pray for his eyesight, which began to return in December and was fully restored by February so he could go back to his studies and his Cambridge podium. He never revisited the psychospiritual impasse on the occasion of which he went blind. Instead of his perspective of religious doubt he shifted to a constructive quest of theological reflection. In commenting on this, Capps reports that Emerson acknowledged that his psychospiritual stress and associated anxiety had a significant role to play in his affliction.

Emerson’s writings are filled with metaphors about eyes, vision, seeing, illumination, sight, and insight. His journals testify to the fact that Emerson began to recognize in college that he had an intense attraction response to glancing at some other persons, both male and female, for whom he felt an
immediate sense of erotic longing and intimate connection. This caused him much anxiety, he acknowledges, probably in response to the glances of males more than those of females, though we do not know with certainty. He first reports noticing it with regard to a male friend in his class at Harvard. Emerson was about 19 and was experiencing the awakenings of love in a way that was rather standard at his age for that time, and had to work through some gender confusion at first, as everyone does in puberty. This confusion dissipated for Emerson in young adulthood. Capps relates this to intense levels of anxiety in Emerson, likely related to his conversion hysteria blindness. The reason that it caused problems with his eyes, Capps implies, is that they were the offending organs inducing the anxiety and triggering the psychosomatic symptomatology that was used to manage his psychospiritual problem in a psychopathological manner.

CASTING OUT DEMONS

Contrary to many biblical scholars, Capps holds that Jesus’ miracles of casting out demons were healing miracles, similar to those of the healing of the paralytics and blind men. It is interesting that the persons whom Jesus cured of demon possession seem to have been predominantly males, though of course Luke 8:2 refers to women who were cured of evil spirits. Mary Magdalene was cured of seven demons, and both Mathew (15:21–28) and Mark (7:24–28) refer to a girl cured of demon possession. The cured males were mostly young males and adolescents, and Capps focuses primarily on these young men, who were brought to Jesus by their fathers. Capps does not address the case of the girl possessed of a demon and brought to Jesus by her mother (Mt 15:21–28, Mk 7:24–28). Only the two Gadarene demoniacs, found near the Sea of Galilee, seem to have been independent of close family. Probably because of the severity of their disorders, they seem to have been living in a cemetery. That would mean that they lived on the edge of the Jewish community, marginalized in their own region. This is confirmed by that fact that there was a herd of pigs close at hand, animals that Jews assiduously avoided.

Most scholars believe the biblical stories of demon possession are evidences of classic epilepsy. Capps argues for conversion hysteria or a combination of the two, a condition we might call automatism in which a person is induced to behavior over which he seems to have no control and which he cannot himself explain. He suggests the Freudian interpretation that a combination of sexual anxiety and role confusion anxiety can induce such hysteria. Jewish males in Jesus’ day, says Capps, would have been suffering from a sense of being unempowered by the ignominy inflicted upon them and their nation by Roman dominance.

This would have undercut their sense of phallic prowess and would have forced sublimation or repression of their sexual energies, causing a struggle
with problems of sexual diversion such as incest, adultery, and perversion; as well as a hysterical conversion of their normal assertiveness. The anxiety associated with this for a young man can induce the psychological parody of a conversion disorder that looks like demon possession or epilepsy; severely self-destructive and self-punishing behavior, such as casting him into the water and fire or throwing him violently upon the ground. Josephus says that Galilean boys were inured to war from infancy by harsh discipline and brutal training. Lack of maternal warmth and the presence of strong patriarchal discipline, in a context of male powerlessness and sexual repression and confusion, could prompt a child or adolescent to elect unconsciously for such a conversion reaction hysteria.

The implication of this state of affairs seems to be that males, particularly in Galilee, who were demasculinized by various forces including Roman disempowerment and harsh parental demeanment, would have had little opportunity for fighting back against this oppression as they gained the strength of late adolescence and young manhood. Jesus himself seems to have come to his unconventional break with that society very late. Only in his thirties did he finally find his voice and his true empowerment, and that was in a role and expression of a contrarian who rejected his family, community, vocation, and religious traditions.

To consider such unconventional choices as Jesus made in declaring himself to be the Messiah, or the decision of the Essenes to withdraw from the general society, or even more seriously the choice that the Zealots made to kill Romans, one by one, wherever they could catch one out, would have both raised and expressed enormous anxiety in individual males and in the society in general. Most of the time for most Jewish males those choices would have had to be rejected and repressed, sublimated into other channels of expression. For some, the impasse proved so serious, intense, and unresolvable, Capps claims, that it turned into the psychological conversion reaction of hysterical and self-destructive automatism; a severe psychospiritual pathology.

Instead of the aggressive expression being directed toward the “enemy” it would be directed against the self, just as in hysterical blindness or paralysis. Capps suggests that we have reason to believe that this was a fairly common state of affairs with young men in Jesus’ day and later. He cites a document from the third century after Christ, which relates a mother’s petition regarding the condition of her son, remarkably similar to the demon possessions cured by Jesus.

THE LARGER WORLD OF MIRACLES

Miracle stories decorate ancient literature of all cultures more elaborately than we generally realize. They are always assumed to be unexpected and abnormal events caused by divine action in this material world, either directly
by a god or by someone who acts for God. This tradition goes back to the very earliest legends or reports of human experience, and they bedeck the memories of primitive cultures and of the most sophisticated societies. Howard Clark Kee says that these events raise the questions about what happened and what it means; specifically, what divine message is intended to be conveyed by the event. Kee confirms Capps’ approach to the biblical miracles in insisting that it is inappropriate to describe a miracle as a violation of natural law. Surprising events in ancient societies were described as miracles because their worldview, technology, and science had no paradigm within which to manage this unusual data. Even the Stoics, who posited the notion of natural law, left room for direct divine action, and they thought they observed such interventions associated with major turning points in history such as those associated with Julius and Augustus Caesar.

According to Brown, it was only since the rise of modern science and its model of the pervasive lawfulness of the material universe that “miracles came to be defined increasingly in terms of violations of the laws of nature. This led Spinoza to seek natural explanations for the biblical miracles . . . and Hume to claim that the whole idea of miracles was self-refuting.” Since Spinoza the struggle to understand the nature and meaning of miracles or of the miracle stories in the Bible has fueled an ongoing debate as to whether a given miraculous event was extraordinary in the fortuitous nature and timing of the way the event unfolded, or in the overt violation of natural law. The former case might be a night-long “strong east wind” that parted the water in the Exodus (Ex 14:21). The latter case would be that of raising a dead person to life. In both cases, the event might be understood, indeed, was seen in the biblical world, as a divine intervention.

Kee cites biblical miracles that have the function of divine confirmation of some course of human action; divine illumination of someone’s sense of guidance and destiny; judgment upon some misbehavior; deliverance from dire circumstances; revealing divine purposes; and inauguration in this world of the divine rule of grace that works and love that heals. Jesus’ healings were miracles of deliverance that inaugurated the breaking in of the reign of God in human affairs. Kee concludes his article by declaring that the biblical miracles are presented as divine instruments by which transcendental purposes are disclosed and fulfilled in our world, illustrating that God is directly present to us in daily life. Exodus 8:19 makes this claim directly. Referring to Moses’ miracles before the Pharaoh and his staff, the Bible declares, “This is the finger of God.”

Seung Ai Yang observes that of the 35 miracles ascribed to Jesus in the four Gospels, most fall into one of four categories: healings, exorcisms, resuscitations, and control of nature. Of course, the line between the first two is difficult to confirm, as Capps insists; and the line between the last two may not exist, since raising the dead is an act of controlling nature. In
this regard Brown discusses C. S. Lewis’ Augustinianism in the matter of miracles.

C. S. Lewis represented a return to a more Augustinian position with his definition of a miracle as “an interference with Nature by supernatural power” (Miracles, p. 15). This leaves open the question as to how nature has been interfered with. It gives recognition to the fact that God’s working is ultimately a mystery. It allows for the fact that miracles are never seen directly. What is observed is a state of affairs before and after the event. Recognition of an event as a miracle is bound up with the wider view that one takes of reality, just as rejection of miracles is bound up with one’s beliefs about the uniformities of nature.5

The Bible, of course, assumes a worldview in which the veil between the mundane and transcendent world is permeable. God and his agents seem to move back and forth through that screen rather readily. We do not need to adopt that worldview in order to wrestle with the issues of miracles, though we should not dispose of that worldview too readily either. Since we do not know a great deal about the transcendent world and the barrier that seems to exist between us and it, we should keep a mind of open wonder about any and all of the possibilities. Brown’s emphasis is objective and useful.

In their descriptions of Jesus’ exorcisms, healings, and nature miracles the Gospels present the events either explicitly or implicitly as following His pronouncement of the word of God in the power of the Holy Spirit. Jesus acts and speaks with the authority of Yahweh Himself.

The tendency to treat the miracles of Jesus apart from His teaching and the course of His life has been encouraged by Christian piety, apologetic interests, and critical study. Piety has found encouragement and inspiration from reflection on individual miracles. Apologetics has tended to focus on the Gospel miracles as supernatural attestation of the divinity of Christ. Critical study has tended to prefer the teaching of Jesus to the miracles, and form criticism has seen the miracle stories as products of pious belief, produced by churches anxious to invest Jesus with the credentials of a divine man.6

Brown concludes that his miracles are an inherent part of his teaching and cannot be legitimately separated from it.

Miracles, and therefore miracle workers, were fairly common in the Jewish and Greco-Roman world during and after Jesus’ day. Two noted first-century CE miracle workers were Onias and Hanina ben Dosa, though it might be observed that their miracles were not associated with messianic claims, as generally Jesus’ were. Miracles were standard healing practices at the medical centers of Asclepius at Epidaurus and Pergamum. Moreover the Egyptian Serapis held the same reputation. It was a popular endeavor of
the History of Religions School of scholars, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, to demonstrate parallels between the biblical narratives and the miracle reports from the Hellenistic world in general. They were especially encouraged in this by the similarity between Luke 7:11–17, in which Jesus is described as raising the dead son of the widow at Nain, and the Life of Apollonius of Tyana iv:45, in which Apollonius restores to life a bride whose funeral he encountered at the city gate, and who had died just as she was to be married. Philostratus, who wrote the Life of Apollonius, expresses almost modern-day reservations as to whether Apollonius detected some spark of life or really raised a really dead person.

Through the centuries critics of Christianity have repeatedly drawn attention to what they conceived to be parallels between Jesus and Apollonius of Tyana, a Neo Pythagorean sage and wandering ascetic who lived in the first century and was credited with exorcistic and miraculous powers. Philostratus was commissioned by the Empress, Julia Domna, who was the wife of Septimius Severus, to write a Life of Apollonius. The circumstances and contents of the book have prompted the suggestion that Apollonius and his cult were fostered as a rival alternative to Christianity.7

In the September 2007 issue of Discover, Science, Technology, and the Future, Jeanne Lenzer published an article entitled “Citizen, Heal Thyself.”8 She declares that the sorts of miracles in the biblical narratives are happening all around us every day. John Matzke was 30 years old when informed that he had terminal melanoma with lung metastasis. The oncologist at the Veterans Administration hospital urged immediate treatment, despite the fact that patients with his condition have a 50 percent mortality within two and a half years after surgery. John chose to take 30 days to strengthen his body for the treatment. He spent much time walking in the mountains and forest, meditating, visualizing his healing cells killing the cancerous ones, and eating a healthy diet. When he returned to his physician the doctor expected to see two large lung lesions. Instead the radiographies showed a complete lack of any pathology. The physician said, “When John came back a month later, it was remarkable—the tumor on his chest x-ray was gone. Gone, gone, gone.” He was given 18 months to live. He lived another 18 years. Then recurrence of the cancer in his brain killed him.

Pinning down spontaneous remissions has been a little like chasing rainbows. It’s not even possible to say just how frequently such cases occur—estimates generally range from 1 in 60,000 to 1 in 100,000 patients. . . . But genuine miracles do exist, and throughout the history of medicine, physicians have recorded cases of spontaneous remission . . . not just cancer but conditions like aortic aneurysm, . . . Peyronie’s disease, a deformity of the penis; and childhood cataracts.9
Researchers speculate that Matzke’s immune system, reinforced by his change in lifestyle and psychospiritual address to his tumors, produced a healing effect. They noticed that during his month of meditation and healthy living his skin tumors were surrounded by white halo-like rings, indicating that the immune system was attacking the melanocytes, pigmented cells in the skin that give rise to the cancer. Ever since 1700 or so a medical record has been developing indicating that certain serious infections such as erysipelas or those associated with streptococcus cure cancer by causing tumor regression. It was by following up on these cures that nature spontaneously induces that physicians were able to develop the chemotherapy that is used today. The medical statistics now available indicate that a surprisingly high number of patients are cured or significantly improved in health by both spontaneous remission and by assisting nature by inducing the infectious condition created by chemotherapy.

Lenzer reports the case of Alice Epstein, a brilliant academic diagnosed with kidney cancer in 1985. A month after the resection of her kidney, the cancer showed up in both lungs. Her life estimate at that time was three months. Epstein, who says she had a “cancer-prone personality,” then turned to psychosynthesis, which she describes as a “combination of psychotherapy and spiritual therapy.” It helped her overcome depression, difficulty expressing anger, and suppression of her own needs in order to please others—traits she and some psychologists believe are characteristic of the cancer-prone personality. Although she never received any medical or surgical treatment for the deadly cancer invading her lungs, six weeks after starting psychosynthesis, her tumors began to shrink. Within one year, they had disappeared without a trace. That was 22 years ago.

Today Epstein is alive and well and 80 years of age.

The crucial points at stake here are as follows. First, given the right chance, the irrepressible life force in nature is able to induce spontaneous remission of horrible disorder in the physical organism of human beings. Second, the state of psychospirituality of that human person seems to have a great deal to do with the onset of illness and the effecting of cure. Third, a decisive shift in orientation in the psychospiritual world of that person seems to be the trigger that induces radical reorientation of the organic forces at play in the physiological organism, the human body. Focus upon the permission to be well and not sick, and focus upon the will to get well, is a high priority factor in mobilizing the power of our physiological organism to eliminate the deadly forces that work against the well-being of the person. It is clear that this works when the ill person determines to live and be well. One can confidently speculate that a directive to get well, given by an authority whom the sick person respects as a healer, would be enough in some cases to trigger the will to empower the immune system to overcome the pathological and pathogenic condition in his or her body.
Lenzer concludes almost lyrically. “Although medical advances have dramatically improved outcomes in certain cancers . . . modern medicine has yet to come close to nature’s handiwork in inexplicably producing spontaneous remission without apparent side effects for people like John Matzke and Alice Epstein, who have experienced the rarest hints of nature’s healing mysteries.”

The interesting question arising in the context of these reports of miraculous cures, combined with the focus of this volume upon the biblical narratives of miracles, is whether the miracle stories of the Bible were attempts to report similar literal histories of cured persons, or described the imagination of the primitive missionary church at work in glorifying the attention-getting aspects of their memory of Jesus.

NOTES
6. Ibid., 373.
7. Ibid., 377–78.
9. Ibid., 56.
10. Ibid., 56.
11. Ibid., 58.
12. Ibid., 73.

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In many ways faith in miracles exemplifies what traditional psychoanalysts think is wrong with religion. The psychoanalytic process is meant to improve the patient’s psychic well-being by helping him or her to cope with reality on its own terms. To hope for a miracle to happen and change the way reality works is to reject this kind of growth and opt for fantasy, regression, and wishful thinking.

However, some psychoanalysts today take a more positive view of religion (Black 2006). They emphasize that the distinction between fantasy and reality is not always crystal clear and some fantasies can be beneficial to health. Together with art and other creative forms of human culture, religion allows for a particular merging of inner reality and external life, personal and objectively perceived meanings, so as to facilitate psychic growth and the building up of a capacity for interpersonal relationships. From this perspective, religious stories about miracles are not necessarily epitomes of regression. Even if they are not true in the objective sense, they may still carry psychological truth.

In this chapter, I will look at the biblical miracle stories as a case example. I will argue that the role they play in the biblical narrative displays both regressive and mature tendencies. On the one hand, they do recount and envision extraordinary acts of salvation by divine intervention. On the other hand, the narrative implies that the high season of such acts only lasted for a limited time, after which they became increasingly a thing of the mythical past. There will never be another Moses who will know God face to face. Jesus was taken up into heaven and will only return at the end of times.
Meanwhile, people will have to cope with the present reality, where miracles are rare and the divine presence is less tangible. In this sense, the narrative is encouraging its audience in the task of reality-acceptance.

Yet the tension between the two tendencies is never resolved completely. They should therefore not be seen as successive developmental phases but rather as oscillating positions that together characterize the biblical stance vis-à-vis the world.

AT ODDS WITH REALITY

According to the Letter to the Hebrews, “faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (11:1). Believers are dissidents towards common reality. They will not bow to the obvious, and they reserve the right to rely on other things than mere cold facts—even if this means being criticized for foolishness. As the apostle Paul puts it,

God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are. (1 Cor 1:27–28)

Now, Paul may well be demonstrating an ego defense mechanism known as devaluation, that is, he dismisses the frustration of being denied something by claiming that he did not care for it in the first place. Even in that case, his words contain remarkable subversive potential. Who decides by what standards individual people are to be considered wise or powerful or noble anyway? Sometimes reality, and social reality in particular, deserves to be challenged. This is one reason why there is demand for the kind of idealism that is the business of religion.

On the other hand, common reality has found strong supporters, too. They have accused religion of deliberate or instinctive self-deception.¹ According to Karl Marx’s famous statement (Marx 1887), religion is the opium of the people.² The dream of a better world is a convenient painkiller: it helps the poor and the oppressed to put up with their lot.

Likewise for Sigmund Freud (1927, 1930), religious belief was essentially a pathology: in the religious worldview, infantile dependence and the demand for unlimited wish fulfillment survive into adult life as trust in the Heavenly Father’s omnipotence. Religious myths and rituals correspond to obsessive thinking and behavior that are meant to repress unpleasant truths.

There are three unpleasant truths in particular, says Freud, that religions refuse to accept: that the only reward for morality will be civilized life on earth; that nature has no purpose; and that death will be the end. As all the three are fundamental truths about life, religion amounts to massive denial.
No psychologically mature person needs it, as he or she will be able to face reality as it is.

The biblical miracle stories are a case in point. They affirm the very same three ideas of which Freud thought people should let go.

First, they attest that history is all about justice. If the oppressed keep crying out for help long enough, God will take notice of them, as he did when the Israelites were Pharaoh’s slaves in Egypt. The awesome wonders he displayed then signaled vindication to his people and judgment to their enemies. Similarly, Jesus’ exorcisms in the New Testament confirm that the rule of Satan is over and the Day of Judgment is near. Soon the good will receive their reward, and the evil will be punished. If the present reality cannot deliver this promise, God will intervene to establish a new one.

Second, the biblical miracle stories encourage their audience to take God’s acts personally. They imply that God gets involved because he cares for his own. Unwilling to have his chosen ones suffer any longer, he takes direct action, and reality will yield. So, when you see these extraordinary things taking place, you know that you are not insignificant. God’s interventions are signs of his personal affection.

Moreover, last but not least, you will be saved. The whole point of negotiating reality is that you will not have to die. Paul writes to the Corinthians: “If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied” (1 Cor 15:19). Indeed, Jesus did make the promise, in the Gospel of John: “Everyone who lives and believes in me will never die” (Jn 11:26). Death will not be the end.

MIRACLES EXPLAINED

So, Freud certainly had a problem with miracles, as did much of the psychoanalytic tradition after him. The same is true of the heritage of enlightened rationalism on the whole, including those enlightened rationalists who were willing to tolerate or even appreciate religion, once it was understood in a proper way. As the latter position characterizes the thinking of some contemporary psychoanalysts as well, it will be useful to take a brief look at the anatomy of the idea.

The eighteenth-century deists are a well-known case. They cherished the idea of a sensible natural religion that would stand for what they believed to be timeless spiritual values: faith in a benevolent creator and in the immortality of the soul, combined with high morals. Such religion would be in full harmony with scientific knowledge, and therefore not allow for miracles or any other kind of unreasonable superstition.

Today it is much easier than in the eighteenth century to reject religion altogether. It is now possible to conceive of life without a creator, and to explain mental and moral capacities in purely materialist terms. So there is no need to
have a natural religion to make sense of the world. Yet the idea is not forgotten. Unlike what was predicted by many social scientists just a couple of decades ago, religion is not going extinct, although institutional religion continues to lose ground, especially in the global North (Berger 1999). Among Western educated people, there still seems to be demand for a natural spirituality, that will go together with modern values and the basic assumptions of the contemporary scientific worldview, and still be genuine spirituality. But what to do with those elements of religious tradition, such as the miracle stories of the Bible, that run counter to reason and experience?

Ever since the Enlightenment, there have been attempts for a rationalist solution. One popular approach was to argue that miracles were not really miracles. The Bible, although historically accurate, does not really mean what it says, or the biblical writers did not understand correctly what they heard or saw. So, when the Bible tells us that Jesus was walking on the sea, what he actually did was stroll on floating logs of wood. Or, when it says that darkness came over the land when Jesus died, this was because a massive sandstorm hid the sun, and so on: for every biblical miracle a natural explanation was to be found. The German nineteenth-century rationalist theologians became famous for their efforts in this field, and the name of H.E.G. Paulus in particular stood out among them (Paulus 1828; see Albert Schweitzer’s account in Schweitzer 1906, 49–58).

This approach never turned out as a success, however. From a scholarly perspective, it is now a thing of the past, although in fiction, popular culture, and folklore, classic rationalist explanations of biblical miracles still flourish, and popular books presenting the natural causes of the biblical stories continue to be published (Humphreys 2003). In light of modern biblical criticism, not so much informed by rationalist arguments as by careful source criticism, the biblical stories are not direct eyewitness accounts but religious literature combining historical traditions, artistic creation, and folklore. There is therefore no need to explain every biblical account as historically possible.

Moreover, in their literary and religion-historical contexts, the biblical miracle stories hardly make sense except as stories about miracles. The biblical writers were not in the business to keep record of well-timed natural phenomena and furnish them with misguided explanations. Rather, they were to pass on, give expression to, and reshape genuine religious experiences and beliefs: what Moses or Jesus were believed to have been, done, and meant, and how this was integrated into experiences of the divine in the present. The same was true of Jesus himself. While we do not know too much about him with much certainty, we do know that he was not a naturalist philosopher preaching timeless moral truths. Most likely, he was a Jewish popular charismatic, a practicing healer and exorcist who, like many others in his time, waited for God’s radical intervention in history (Theissen and Merz 1996). The problems we may have with calling anything supernatural were not his
problems. What he and his followers believed made perfect sense in their historical and religious environment, although it may no more do so in ours.

This takes us to another solution, one that may have stood the test of time a little better. According to this solution, the biblical miracle stories are indeed about miracles, but their real meaning and value for our time lie on another level than that of historical truth. Modern history of ideas knows many versions of this approach, the roots of which go back to the allegorical exegesis of the ancient rabbis and the church fathers. They too thought the deepest meaning of the sacred text lay beneath the surface level and could only be grasped once one understood that the historical stories were in fact symbolic expressions of eternal spiritual truths. Like their modern colleagues, the rabbis and the church fathers were keen to apply this method to the texts they considered primitive (Smalley 1956, 2).

In the history of modern scholarship, a couple of key figures stand out for the influential way in which they reinterpreted the meaning of biblical miracles. The year 1835, “the revolutionary year of modern theology,” saw the publication of the first volume of *The Life of Jesus (Das Leben Jesu, kritisch bearbeitet)* by David Friedrich Strauss. An eminent pupil of the philosopher Hegel, Strauss rejected both the belief in the supernatural and the rationalist attempts to discover the natural causes of the biblical stories. Clearly, he thought, the biblical writers recounted, as authentic narratives, stories that were at odds with nature and reason and therefore could not be historical. They could, however, have theological value as myths that communicated universal truths about the human spirit. For Strauss, those truths were happily congruent with Hegel’s idealistic philosophy: in Christ, humanity became conscious of its true nature as absolute spirit.

One of the most important theological figures of the twentieth century, Rudolf Bultmann, introduced another famous program of demythologization (Bultmann 1933–65). He, too, considered the mythological language of the Bible severely outdated and therefore irrelevant to modern people. The answer was to reinterpret it so as to address the great existential questions of human life. While Strauss drew on Hegel, Bultmann’s source of inspiration was Martin Heidegger’s existentialist philosophy. For him, the real meaning of the Jewish and Christian scriptures, hidden under ancient mythological language, was to be found in how they related to the universal experience of the human condition.

Strauss and Bultmann were prime examples of progressive theologians running to the rescue of their religious tradition at a time when advanced scientific knowledge threatened to make it intellectually inadequate and ideologically irrelevant. Structurally, their solution was a standard one, known well from similar situations in the history of biblical interpretation, and the history of interpretation of sacred literature on the whole. The scriptures were to be interpreted symbolically as manifestations of some timeless truth.
The end result was a definition of biblical truth that conformed to the current scientific paradigm.

It is not unexpected that a similar approach to religious stories and traditions should occur within the guild of psychoanalysts. While Freud’s blanket rejection of religion became the dominant psychoanalytic view for decades, not all of his colleagues shared this view, not even in the beginning. Since then, the Western intellectual climate has become more tolerant, if not towards all forms of religion, at least towards a spiritual dimension of life. Most importantly, the psychoanalytic method itself stands in close connection with the tradition of allegorical interpretation (cf. Frosh 2006, 216, quoting Ostow 1982, 8). Freud’s very own oedipal interpretations of Christianity and Judaism assumed that the key to understanding biblical texts lay hidden beneath their surface level. Technically, then, it should be possible to neglect their supernaturalistic top layer and find other meanings that will not contradict the rationalist premises that psychoanalysis holds dear.

RETHINKING FANTASY

Since the mid-1980s, psychoanalytic interest in religion has grown steadily. Some commentators speak of “something of a flood” (Black 2006, 15). Numerous analysts, including Michael Eigen, Mark Epstein, James Jones, Sudhir Kakar, William Meissner, Paul Pryser, Ana-Maria Rizzuto, Jeffrey Rubin, and Neville Symington, have written on the topic, reconsidering the relationship between religion and psychoanalysis. Rejecting what they see as Freud’s overly simplistic critique of religion, they suggest that some forms of religious belief and practice can support healthy psychological development. As a means of furnishing experienced reality, including one’s experience of the self, with personal meaning, religion can help people in the task of reality-acceptance; quite unlike what Freud thought would be the case. This view seems to be gaining wider support, so that “overall among analysts today, there is a much greater openness to and acceptance of certain religious beliefs and practices than ever before” (Blass 2006, 23).

What happened? How is it possible to adopt an almost diametrically opposite position on religion from what was before, and still remain within the same psychoanalytic paradigm? It seems that two things made the difference: first, there was a new understanding of the sense of reality as a (or better, the) psychoanalytic criterion of psychic maturity; and, second, there was a new understanding of religion (cf. Blass 2006).

While the new psychoanalytic understanding of religion connects with the work of various theorists, it is probably D. W. Winnicott’s ideas of transitional phenomena, transitional objects, and transitional experience that have made the most profound impact on how many analysts today perceive the relationship of religion, reality, and illusion. Special extensions of the self,
transitional objects stand halfway between the subjective inner reality of the individual and the objectively perceived external reality or environment. Winnicott initially introduced these concepts with reference to a particular developmental sequence (Winnicott 1951); a typical example of a transitional object is a safety blanket or a soft toy that comes to be of special importance to the infant. Later, however, Winnicott expanded the idea into a broader vision of mental health and creativity. Giving birth to art and culture, transitional experience makes us able to connect our inner experience of the self with the world of other subjectivities (Winnicott 1971).

A key thing about the transitional phenomena is that their reality, outside fantasy, is not to be challenged. To ask if the teddy bear is really what the child conceives of it to be is to miss a point. The child is not lying or hallucinating. Instead, he or she is taking steps from subjective omnipotence, that is, the early, illusory experience of the world as created by the child’s own wishes, to the actual, external world that exists on its own right, independently of the child. As the transition progresses and the child builds capacity for secure, trusted relationships with others in the external world, the transitional object ceases to perform this function and is left behind.

Similarly, the point of art and religion is not to make positive, verifiable statements of the external reality in the ordinary sense of the word. Rather, they constitute a protected realm for creative vision and play that is vital for our being in touch with ourselves and for our relatedness with others. The illusion of art and religion is not a way to escape or avoid painful reality, but “a vehicle to gain access to reality” (Black 2006, 14; Meissner 1984; cf. also Hopkins 1989, 239).

What Winnicott and other British object-relations theorists did was redefine the concept of illusion so that a new psychoanalytic understanding of religion became possible. They, of course, were not the only ones in the business. Even earlier, Melanie Klein had called into question Freud’s clear-cut distinction between regressive fantasies and a mature sense of reality. Moreover, there are other instrumental cases as well. Heinz Kohut’s self-psychology and especially his work on narcissism and idealization (Kohut 1971, 1984) is another good example.

For Freud, narcissism and idealization were infantile features to be outgrown. For Kohut, however, there was a positive side to them that remained relevant throughout one’s entire life. In order to be well psychologically, people need to be able to feel that they, their love objects, and the communities to which they belong are special. This is not something dictated by the reality principle: objectively speaking, no part of reality is any more special, blessed, or meaningful than any other. Yet, such a feeling of worth is hardly delusional, either. It is rather something no one can live without: we need what Kohut called self-objects, special people, places, and things that help us sustain a sense of coherence and vitality. Religion provides for such experiences
of positive idealization, as it assumes there is such a thing as the supreme good; that human beings are valuable and called to salvation; that all God’s children are sisters and brothers to each other, and so on (cf. Jones 2002).

RETHINKING RELIGION?

The rehabilitation of illusion testifies to a shift of emphasis in the criteria of psychic maturity. Focus on interpersonal relatedness and self-experience has replaced oedipal notions of maturity in post-Freudian psychoanalysis. Illusion and fantasy are no more undesirable, by definition (cf. Blass 2006, 26–27). Yet it is still illusion and fantasy we are talking about, and herein lies another key question regarding the new psychoanalysis of religion. Does the revised understanding of religion as an (positive) illusion not imply a new, normative idea of religion? A religion that would not make any claims to truth but rather regards its teachings and rituals as illusions, or illusion-generators, certainly sounds like a novelty.

Many analysts, who have adopted a positive understanding of religion with a Winnicottian twist, would readily admit that this indeed is the case: it is not religion on the whole but religion in the mature sense of the term that is compatible with psychoanalytic theory and practice (Blass 2006, 28–29). Some make a distinction, in the spirit of the deists, between natural religion(s) and revealed religions (see, for example, Wright 2006, 177, with reference to Symington 1993, 2006, 197). Many focus predominantly on traditions of mysticism, especially as they are featured in Eastern religions, and on Buddhism in particular, although often in a somewhat Westernized, meditation-oriented form (cf. Blass 2006, 29). Some even volunteer to cure pathologies of the spirit by means of analysis, to attain an even more refined form of religious practice and belief (Rubin 2006).

On the other hand, it is fair to say that there is also a growing awareness within psychoanalysis of the diversity of religious experience. If Freud did not realize that not all religion is the same, proreligion analysts have come to learn that no religious tradition should be idealized, either. Primitive and enlightened ideas and habits coexist in all quarters (cf. Black 2006, 5).

In any case, the new illusionist (re)definition of religion has met with strong criticism (Blass 2006; cf. Hood 1997). The key point of the critique is that such an ideal religion hardly exists in the real world. Would any true believer of any religious tradition consider his or her faith a mere meaningful illusion with no interest in actual truth? Rachel Blass (2006, 33) hits the mark, I think, when she quotes the theologian Hans Küng.

The man who believes . . . is primarily interested . . . in the reality itself. . . .
He wants to know whether and to what extent his faith is based on illusion
or on historical reality. Any faith based on illusion is not really faith but superstition. (Küng 1984, 418)

Even in the mystical traditions, the ineffable, and, in a sense, only that, is considered real. While art may indeed imitate reality and create independent worlds of pure imagination, religions do seem to make claims to truth about this reality, and sometimes about other realities as well. Should these claims turn out to be invalid or, for the present purposes, incompatible with the rationalist premises of psychoanalysis, this would make religion, from a psychoanalytic point of view, not only a purposeful illusion but a distortion of reality, very much like Freud said it would.

Freud did, in fact, note that a philosopher might view religion as a kind of fiction accepted as true for its practical significance (Freud 1927; Blass 2006, 31; Hood 1997, 53–54). However, he said, no serious believer would accept this. This seems to leave the original controversy between psychoanalysis and religion unresolved. When it comes down to it, both religion and psychoanalysis apply the same criterion to judge whether a particular belief is healthy or not: Is it the truth? In the words of the Second Letter of Peter:

For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we had been eyewitnesses of his majesty. (1:16)

Still, both religion and psychoanalysis should be allowed to change. Many a thing in contemporary religious thought would have been incomprehensible some hundred years ago, just as Freud would be surprised to learn what kinds of ideas and practices carry the name of psychoanalysis today. Although in the business of absolute, eternal truths, religions have hardly reached the end of their development, or the peak of their diversity, as systems of belief, sometimes reluctantly and often with a marked delay, they nevertheless keep adapting to what each time and culture finds possible to accept as true. This is precisely because they are interested in reality. If the material reality should become too narrow for them, they will turn to other spiritual, philosophical, or psychological realities for more living space. This is nothing new under the sun: ancient allegorists like Philo and Origen did it, when they taught that awkward-looking passages of the Hebrew scriptures must be understood as symbolic expressions of Platonic or Christian doctrines. So did modern theologians like Strauss and Bultmann, although for them truth was Hegel and Heidegger. While they may represent a small intellectual elite rather than the common believer, they still succeeded in laying the basis for the entire systems of medieval biblical interpretation and modern liberal Protestantism, respectively; not to mention the impact
of those early Christian intellectuals who concluded that their Christ was not only a Jewish prince but also the Greek \emph{logos}, the ruling principle of the universe, incarnate.

So, perhaps the psychoanalytic mystics, too, are up to something, when they ask if religious stories can carry psychological truth. It is with this question in mind that I will now turn to the Bible and its treatment of miracles and the supernatural.

**THE FANTASTIC GOD**

At first sight, it seems that Freud was right. The biblical God is fantastic in the fullest sense of the word. The awesome signs and wonders he displays promise the restoration of the original state of “primary narcissism”: his loved ones will want no more. Their desire for protection, love, and worth will be satisfied. He has chosen them out of all the peoples on earth to be his people, his treasured possession. He will take them to a land flowing with milk and honey, and there they will eat their fill. Their friends will be blessed and their enemies will be cursed. Their souls will enjoy the calm and quiet of the weaned child (as in Ps 131:2).

Even in an utter catastrophe, the idealized image of God survives. The dominant interpretation of history in the Hebrew Bible is that the destruction of Jerusalem in the year 587 BCE was not a sign of God’s failure, but it was God’s premeditated punishment of his chosen people. That he failed to protect them was their own fault: they broke the covenant with him by worshipping idols and neglecting justice. This, of course, is a textbook example of securing a good object by means of creating a bad self-image. The object-relations theorist W.R.D. Fairbairn framed it in explicitly religious terms: “It is better to be a sinner in a world ruled by God than to live in a world ruled by the Devil” (Fairbairn 1943, 66).

Like Father, like Son: a successful healer and miracle-worker, Jesus has constant access to sources of nourishment and well-being. He encourages his followers to model themselves after little children, and he serves them like an ideal mother; indeed, so intensely that he has almost no room to move about or time to rest and eat. He neglects conventional social boundaries that would rather have satisfaction postponed: he will not wait until the Sabbath is over or his hands are clean to feed and heal people. Not surprisingly, people keep coming to him, while his enemies, the established religious authorities, become so jealous they could kill.

So, the infantile aspect is arguably there, even if the divine parental figure smacks more of a preoedipal, omnipresent mother than an idealized omnipotent father. The picture shows features of illusion: fantasy is incorporated in the representation of reality as God’s presence breaks into history in an unparalleled way.
In their wider narrative context, the biblical miracles build up to *epiphany*. In the Exodus narrative, which establishes the covenant between God and Israel and is in many ways the heart of the Hebrew Bible, God’s signs and wonders against Pharaoh make known to Israel his might. The revelation culminates in the apparitions on Mount Sinai and the giving of the Law. God descends on earth and speaks to Moses face to face.

Likewise, in the New Testament gospels, reports of signs, wonders, and fulfilled prophesies confirm that we are witnessing an epiphany: “we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s unique son” (Jn 1:14). The miracle stories verify Jesus’ true status: “these signs are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God” (Jn 20:31). The audience should take after the characters in the story, who, astounded at what they see, ask, “Who then is this?” (Mk 4:41), and conclude, “Truly this man was God’s Son!” (Mt 27:54; Mk 15:39). Make no mistake: the savior became flesh and lived among us.

**THE DISAPPEARING GOD**

However, fantasy seems to be only one part of the story. Epiphany is not the end but a beginning. As both Jack Miles (1995) and Richard Elliot Friedman (1995) have pointed out, the Hebrew Bible tells the story of a disappearing God. The Almighty gradually leaves the earth and finds a new residence in heaven. Likewise, the Gospels are literature of renunciation: Jesus’ followers need to accept that he must go away. The mythic Galilean spring is to be transformed into reality as we now have it, uncompromising and nonnegotiable. What results is a twofold coming-of-age story. On the one hand, God finds his proper place and role as a transcendent, otherworldly being. On the other hand, people are expected to cope with reality that involves frustration and suffering.

In the opening narratives of Genesis, God and humanity are simultaneously present in one space. It takes no special revelation to bring them together. Neither party has to leave its own reality to enter the reality of the other. In mythical Paradise, God’s world and the world of the humans are truly one.

In the world of the patriarchs, too, God is still very much like a human character. He enters and leaves the stage, approaches people and engages in conversation with them without special notice, in a matter-of-fact style. No cloud of smoke is necessary, no extraordinary light phenomena, or burying your face between your knees. The coming of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is no news, and if he needs people to know his will, he will tell them in person. It is only with Moses that changes crawl in. The God he meets is much more than ever before a *mysterium tremendum*, to quote Rudolph Otto’s (1917) classic definition of the holy. The revelations of this God are mystical and exceptional, and no ordinary person may know what he truly looks like: “for no one shall see my face (glory) and live” (Ex 33:20).
The hidden God reveals himself by hiding, in a burning bush, in a pillar of cloud or a pillar of fire, inside the curtain of the tent of meeting, or on a cloud-covered mountaintop with thunder and lightning and a blast of a trumpet. Moses alone may know him, even though he cannot know God’s essence, his full nature; so it is his lot to act as a mediator between God and his people.

Assisted by Moses, God makes the necessary preparations for his departure to heaven. He wants to make sure he will be remembered when he is gone, and he insists that each generation will be reminded of him:

When your children ask you in time to come, “What is the meaning of the decrees and the statutes and the ordinances that the Lord our God has commanded you?” then you shall say to your children, “We were Pharaoh’s slaves in Egypt, but the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand. The Lord displayed before our eyes great and awesome signs and wonders against Egypt, against Pharaoh and all his household. He brought us out from there in order to bring us in, to give us the land that he promised on oath to our ancestors. Then the Lord commanded us to observe all these statutes, to fear the Lord our God, for our lasting good, so as to keep us alive, as is now the case. If we diligently observe this entire commandment before the Lord our God, as he has commanded us, we will be in the right. (Dt 6:20–25)

Israel’s rescue from Egypt is something to remember. Yet it is the law that enables God to retire from service, when his people embark on a new life in the promised land. From now on the Law is the medium of God’s presence. Its directions guide people to responsible living now that God himself is no more there to give personal advice. And indeed,

Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face. (Dt 34:10)

Once the Torah, the Law of Moses, established itself as the supreme authority of the Jewish religion, there was no way God could come back. The Talmud tells the story of a Rabbi Joshua, who refused to take into account a voice from heaven in a debate of the law (Bava Metzia 59b; see Visotzky 1991, 51–55, for an entertaining treatment of the story). The point he made was that the law “is not in heaven” (Dt 30:12). Since God has tasked his people to observe it, he has no right to intervene in its interpretation. Upon hearing Rabbi Joshua’s words, God smiled and said, “My children have outwitted me.”

According to traditional Jewish thinking, God’s prophetic Spirit has left the world for good. In the time of the patriarchs, all righteous people had it. When the Israelites fell to idolatry and worshipped the golden calf, it was limited to few: prophets, high priests, and kings. With the death of the
last writing prophets, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi, it was quenched altogether, due to the sins of the people. Since then, the best you could hope to hear was a remote echo of God’s voice from heaven, a poor substitute, as the story of Rabbi Joshua so aptly illustrates (see Jeremias 1970, 80–82).

In the New Testament, however, the Spirit makes a flamboyant return. It descends like a dove from heaven on Jesus in his baptism. After all these years, God is here again, truly in the flesh, as John the evangelist is so keen to emphasize.

Yet he is not here to stay, not even this time. The Gospels are stories of bereavement, with the community of Jesus’ followers in the leading role. The believers will need to grow stronger and more independent, so that they may survive after Jesus has returned to his Father in heaven. The original fantasy of God’s all-encompassing presence must be transformed into a desire towards an absent God and an acceptance of reality.

The beginning of Jesus’ career is a dream come true. The sick are healed, the crippled and maimed are made whole, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. Jesus embodies the promise of absolute satisfaction: “Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty” (Jn 6:35).

Soon it will turn out, however, that following Jesus is no key to happiness. The gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life (Mt 7:14). There is no resurrection without suffering and death. This is a difficult lesson for Jesus’ disciples to learn, as they are quite fond of their original fantasy of unlimited personal wish-fulfillment. Although corrected by Jesus, the fantasy keeps returning, as fantasies do. The disciples argue with one another about who is the greatest (Mk 9:33–37; Lk 9:46–48) and pursue leading positions in the coming kingdom of God (Mt 20:20–28; Mk 10:35–45). This claim to power, comfort and security, however, is precisely what they need to abandon. Jesus’ followers are not to lord it over other people, but rather to be slaves of all. This makes them vulnerable to persecution, suffering, and even death. Jesus himself is destined to suffer and to die at the hands of his enemies.

The news about the necessity of suffering traumatizes the disciples, and they will not take in the message. In the famous scene in Caesarea Philippi, Peter rebukes Jesus: “God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you!” (Mt 16:22). Yet the message keeps repeating itself, as traumas do: on the road to Jerusalem, Jesus predicts his passion and death three times.

The story that began as a clean-cut fantasy is gradually transformed into a story about the necessity of a loss. The disciples witness Jesus to be wounded and dying, to go away and turn into symbols. Feeding miracles will be replaced by the bread and wine of the Eucharist, and Jesus’ care for his own survives in their own capacity to love: “Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another” (Jn 13:34). This is how life is going to be in God’s absence, between the magnificent days of the past and the numinous future.
world to come. The illusion of fulfillment in the present gives way to a longing for what once was and for what has not yet arrived.

Jesus’ ascension to heaven, where his Father has taken up residence already, marks the end of a mythical era. All the fantastic things that were possible when he was here are now irrevocably things of the past. From now on, that time will be a lost golden age, a paradisiacal island in history, an ideal to which there is no access from our present and hopelessly imperfect world. Encased in the story of the mythic Galilean spring, the ideal survives alongside the reality that is now allowed to follow its own, natural rules.  

THE “GOOD-ENOUGH” GOD

So, there is a peculiar dialectics of infantile fantasy and mature realism running through the biblical narrative. The latter element culminates in God’s gradual exit from this world on the one hand, and in his appearance in the form of a vulnerable human being on the other. The same God who at one point was prepared to take on reality and make all things well for his children is now encouraging them to bear with the toil and trouble of their earthly life. The good God, who would never fail to fill the needs of his little ones, turns out to be a good-enough God, who provides a secure framework for their acceptance of reality, very much like Winnicott thought a good-enough mother would do, another term he coined for psychoanalytic use.

Yet the two elements do not make one coherent story of maturation and growth. In Winnicott’s words, “the task of reality-acceptance is never completed” (Winnicott 1951, 217). Instead of constant progress, there is a continuing struggle between two conflicting interests, namely, the resolve of the heart to have what it desires, and the call of reality to be recognized in its full severity. As a result, God is inclined to return from heaven whenever the existing patterns of religious thought, such as apocalypticism or certain forms of charismatic Christianity, make it possible.

For the serpent-handling pentecostals, the biblical reality of Mark 16:17–18 is fully intact even today, and their case is not as extraordinary as it may seem. What makes them exceptional is not so much the principle but the extreme way in which they put it to a test. It was never an option for Christians to turn back time and pretend that the return of the prophetic Spirit never happened. As promised by Jesus, the Holy Spirit came and took his place in the world, which enables the Christian churches to assert God’s continuing presence in their midst. The more concretely they take it, the more relevant it makes any tension between the biblical (mythical) truth and the present (experiential) reality. What was possible then should be possible now as well. If this does not seem to be the case, which reality will yield?

Moreover, Jesus said he would come back, which brings in a further element of instability. Time and again apocalyptic movements seize the hope that
his return is at hand; and the same happens to Jews who wait for the Messiah and to Muslims who wait for the Mahdi. Sometimes they even believe he has actually arrived, for example in the figure of some charismatic religious person. Although Jesus warns against this in the gospels (Mt 24:23–24; Mk 13:21–22; Lk 21:8), it is bound to happen over and over again. The idea of a divine revelation is a risky one: once God has proven his ability to appear to people, he is known to have that capacity, even if he was said to have retired for good. At the moment he first made himself known on earth, heavens were torn apart, and sealing them off again has turned out to be difficult.

Perhaps this is good: perhaps the realms of illusion and reality cannot and should not be kept too far apart. Fantasy, transitional phenomena, and idealized self-objects are believed to be vital for human health. Maybe the biblical fantasy would be too weak to fly, if it was strictly a thing of the mythical past or a mere dream in the distant future.

However, the higher the tension, the greater the risk. There is no return to the kind of supernaturalism that was characteristic of the biblical times. Faith in miracles cannot replace empirical science as the basis of medical treatment. That the end times are here is a feasible working assumption for a limited time only; after that, it becomes denial. If a person today tells us that Jesus is alive and well and calls her every day on a magic telephone, we probably should not speak of illusion at all but psychosis.

There is more at stake than the simple question of truth or self-deception. An essential feature of mature reality-acceptance is the ability to tolerate ambiguity, to accept that even the best of the things we hold dear can only be good-enough. As long as we live in this world, God will not be there to fill all our needs. If we cannot comply with this, the consequences can be grave. To protect an idealized image of an all-satisfying God, we need to repress any negative feelings we may have about our religious life. Typically, we will project them onto others, each onto his or her favorite enemy, or introject them back into ourselves, blaming ourselves for not being worthy of the good things we have. This kind of behavior is characteristic of religious extremists. The absolute perfection of their beliefs is something they will not contest. Whatever frustration it may make them feel, they transform that feeling into guilt, or develop paranoia to explain why they should feel worried.

**THE COMPASSIONATE GOD**

A key dynamic of early human development, the challenge of accepting reality, reemerges and intensifies in times of crises. Denial is a standard first response to a major personal loss, and acceptance is where a successful process of grief work is supposed to end.

The biblical storyline, of course, rambles from one major crisis to another. The expulsion from Paradise is no small loss, and the End of the World
and the Last Judgment sound critical enough. Between these two cosmic mega-crisis there are plenty of minor catastrophes: the Flood, the slavery in Egypt, the destruction of Jerusalem, the Babylonian Captivity, the scandal of Jesus’ death, the failure of the Christian mission among the Jews, and Jesus’ delayed return. At the individual level, too, the biblical characters go through tribulations that put their faith to a test. The patriarchs must leave home for an unknown destination. Jesus’ followers are to leave house, wife, brothers, parents, and children for the sake of God’s kingdom. The identity of the biblical God takes form through a series of crisis narratives. He is the one who hears cries for help, comes over, gives consolation, helps us through, restores hope, and encourages action.

But what sort of a counselor, or therapist, will a Savior God make? Will he lead people to acceptance, or is he rather encouraging futile, unrealistic hope? Drawing on Walter Brueggemann’s work on the biblical psalm of lament (Brueggemann 1977), Donald Capps (1981) has made an informative structural comparison between the psalm of lament and the classic Kübler-Ross model of grief work (see Kübler-Ross 1969). The two have marked similarities. They both provide a structure for recovery from a personal or communal loss. They also allow expression of anger. However, whereas according to the Kübler-Ross model the fifth and final stage of grief is acceptance, the typical lament concludes with an assurance of God’s help and a vow to praise him for what he has done on the supplicant’s behalf. From the perspective of realism, this is the critical point. Not only do we receive the good at the hand of God, but also the bad. Does an over-optimistic reliance on divine intervention not border on denial?

On the other hand, there is a variant of the same lament form that involves a less simplistic position. In the books of Isaiah, Hosea, and Jeremiah, a new version of the lament emerges. In “The Lament of God” God himself bemoans the afflictions he must bring on his people due to their transgressions. This reversal of roles opens a view to yet another development in the characterization of the biblical God. The intervening God, who used to reward the faithful with oxen and sheep and slay the wicked with famine and plague, is joined by and gradually gives way to a compassionate God, a source of hope rather than retaliation. While the compassionate God will not necessarily step in and rescue his servant from “the arrow that flies by day or the pestilence that stalks in darkness” (as in Ps 91:5–6), he will pity the desolate and “weep with those who weep” (Rom 12:15b).

In the Christian grand narrative, the compassionate God goes so far as to empty himself of his divinity altogether, “taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness” (Phil 2:7), to share human pain and vulnerability. It is true that he will later resume his power in full, “so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth” (Phil 2:10); inside the compassionate Son of God, the not-so-compassionate
apocalyptic Son of Man remains dormant, waiting for the appropriate moment to return. That moment, however, is now pushed far over the edge of the present reality, to the numinous world to come. Meanwhile, the compassionate God will be happy to make his sun rise on the evil and the good, and to send rain on the righteous and the unrighteous (Mt 5:45).

The compassionate God’s long experience of humans seems to have refined his character. The trigger-happy world policeman has grown into a keen listener. The original promise of a timely and decisive intervention on behalf of the righteous has lost credibility, as injustice, unfairness, and misery abound in the world. At the same time, however, the claim that God understands what people go through and feels sympathy for them gains new weight. Great wonders are replaced with silent appreciation and assurance of worth: no matter how life may treat people, they are still of immense value to God, more so than sparrows, ravens, or lilies, which are not insignificant, either (cf. Mt 6:25–34; 10:29–31; Lk 12:6–7, 22–31).

In a sense, the compassionate God has paid the price of becoming more real. He is considerably smaller than the old intervening God was, and he has essentially left the business of miracles. Yet he has the advantage of being commensurate with the present reality and therefore not being rejected by it. He has grown to accept, for the time being, the reality he is said to have created, and reality is willing to tolerate him in return, as a matter of faith.

CONCLUSION

From a psychoanalytic point of view, the Bible displays not one but many strategies of coping (or not) with historical and existential crises. Judged on the grounds of whether they support reality-acceptance, some of these are healthier and more mature than others. Some of them seem primitive, while others have obviously taken some time to take form. They do not, however, represent successive stages of development but rather complementary positions. It is not unusual for them to coexist even if there are apparent contradictions between them.

It seems clear that the Bible contains fantasy, infantilism, and wishful thinking. Faith in miracles can become a way of rejecting reality and clinging to primary narcissism. On the other hand, there are biblical themes and traditions that, implicitly or explicitly, challenge infantile religious thinking as a barrier to spiritual growth. Both the Hebrew Bible and the Christian New Testament introduce the idea that God’s direct involvement in reality increasingly belongs to the mythical past and to the eschatological future, whereas the present reality, between the biblical story time and the future eschaton (end time), is something with which people need to cope on their own. In Judaism, the supreme role of the law as the people’s self-managed guide to life makes this particularly clear. In Christianity, the presence of the Holy Spirit in the
world leaves more room for God to move in personally, yet the anticipated fruits of the spirit, self-restraint, ethical excellence, and concern for the well-being of others (see Gal 5:22–26), hardly count as narcissistic fantasy.

While Freud’s rejection of religion became the dominant view in the psychoanalytic movement, many analysts today are tolerant or even appreciative towards religious beliefs and practices. However, their idea of religion as beneficial illusion has met with criticism, as it seems incompatible with the way most religious believers understand their faith. Yet it is hardly disconnected from contemporary (Western) religious experience. On the contrary, it seems to be linked to a general rise of interest in mysticism in its many forms: Zen Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish Cabbalistic, Christian Charismatic, Islamic Sufi.

It is not surprising that the mystical idea of God should have appeal among Western educated people, including, and especially, psychoanalysts. If traditional God-images, including the biblical portrayal(s) of God, are merely illusions hiding rather than revealing the true nature of the ineffable God, then there is no need to worry about their scientifically or morally questionable features. Besides, the evasive God of the mystics is so much like the treasured unconscious of the analysts (cf. Bomford 2006, 256): never to be exposed, he only appears “in the mirror, dimly” (1 Cor 13:12).

NOTES

1. This is the core idea expressed in Deuteronomist theology, which is suggested to have motivated the final redaction of the so-called Deuteronomic History Work (Dt, Joshua, Jud, 1–2 Sam, 1–2 Kg) in the Hebrew Bible. The theory of the Deuteronomic History Work and the ideology behind it originated with the publication of Martin Noth’s Überlieferungsgeschichtliche Studien in 1943.

2. In his Introduction to a Critique of the Hegelian Philosophy of Right, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engel’s Collected Works, Vol. 3, London: Lawrence and Wishard, 1987, p. 175, Karl Marx wrote, “Religion is the sign of the oppressed creature, the feelings of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of unspiritual conditions. It is the opium of the people.”

3. The emphasis on Jesus’s ministry as a bygone golden age when things were different from now—not only in terms of supernatural influence, but also as it comes to the social radicalism of the early Jesus movement as opposed to the more bourgeois lifestyle of the later church—is particularly characteristic of Luke (see Robinson 1986, 108–109; Robinson is here building on Hans Conzelmann’s classic work, Die Mitte der Zeit [1954]).

4. See also Brooke Hopkins’s Winnicottian account of the story of Jesus (Hopkins 1989). In Hopkins’s interpretation, based on Winnicott’s concept of object usage, Jesus’ survival of human wickedness into a new, eternal life in resurrection corresponds to the baby’s experience that the mother survives the “ruthless” way the baby uses her as an object for his own pleasure. The growing sense of the durability of the mother as a love-object leads the baby to understand that she is a real other who
exists independently of the baby’s inner feelings and sensations. A similar sense of the durability of the other is essential in all our love-relationships—and finds an illustration in what Hopkins calls “the resurrection myth.”

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Thomas Jefferson was a Deist who believed that Jesus was a great moral thinker—rather like Jefferson himself, only better. He assembled his own version of the Gospels, slicing out everything miraculous with a razor.

—Richard Brookhiser

A miracle is the violation of mathematical, divine, immutable, eternal laws. By this very statement, a miracle is a contradiction in terms. A law cannot be immutable and violable at the same time. . . . God cannot do anything without reason; so what reason could make him temporarily disfigure his own handiwork?

—Voltaire

Miracles are not contrary to nature, but only contrary to what we know about nature.

—Augustine

There are only two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as if everything is.

—Dan Wakefield

When Thomas Jefferson deleted everything miraculous from his version of the Gospels, he might have exercised more caution had he realized that the word miracle, as he understood it, does not appear in the original Greek or Hebrew. For him, and Voltaire, the word miracle denoted a violation of eternal, immutable laws of nature and nature’s God. Augustine, in the fourth
Jesus and Miracles in Historical, Biblical, and Psychological Perspective

In his book, *Healing in the New Testament: Insights from Medical and Mediterranean Anthropology*, John J. Pilch (2000), a New Testament scholar with expertise in medical anthropology, argues that in approaching stories of healing, miracles, and cures, in cultures far removed from our own, one must adopt a cross-cultural approach that acknowledges the difference between *emic* and *etic* perspectives. Pilch writes:

> Generally speaking, *emic* is the native view, the perspective from within any system under study, the insiders’ views. The *emic* view includes the shared ideology and perceptions of phenomena by members of a given society. Thus, natives in Matthew’s community apparently recognized an illness that they called moonstruck (Mt 4.24; 17.15). This is the *emic* perspective. English translators routinely render this as epileptic, representing the translator’s *etic* perspective. Both perspectives are an integral part of the discipline of cross-cultural studies. (Pilch 2000, 153; italics added)

Our purpose in this chapter is to examine the New Testament miracle stories in historical, biblical, and psychological perspective: (1) the historical perspective, aimed at *emic* assessment, describes the environment of miracles, healings, and healers commonplace in the Greco-Roman and Judaic worlds of the Gospels; (2) the biblical perspective, aimed also at *emic* assessment, refers to appreciation of the different types of miracle stories in the biblical text, the language used to speak of miracles, what biblical writers were attempting to communicate with these stories, and how these stories would have functioned in the mind of a first-century audience in the nascent Judaeo-Christian cultus; and (3) the psychological perspective, returning to a contemporary *etic* view, will examine analogues to the miracles of Jesus in twentieth and twenty-first century perspective.

THE HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Howard Clark Kee reminds us in his 1986 book, *Medicine, Miracle, and Magic in New Testament Times*, that the healing techniques of medicine, miracle, and magic are not unique to the New Testament. They are indigenous to human society. In fact, their appearance in the New Testament is fundamentally a function of their ubiquitous presence in first-century Greco-Roman and Jewish culture. Kee provides a thumbnail sketch of the differences among the three:
Medicine is a method of diagnosis of human ailments and prescription for them based on a combination of theory about and observation of the body, its functions and malfunctions. Miracle embodies the claim that healing can be accomplished through appeal to, and subsequent action by the gods, either directly or through a chosen intermediary agent. Magic is a technique, through word or act, by which a desired end is achieved, whether that end lies in the solution to the seeker’s problem or in damage to the enemy who has caused the problem. (Kee 1986, 3)

The difference in the three forms of healing are evident in the three theories concerning the cause and cure of illness. “These include the theory that human difficulties are the work of demons, for which exorcism is the appropriate cure; or that they are the results of a magical curse, for which counter-magic must be invoked; or that they are functional disorders of the body, which call for medical diagnosis and a prescribed remedy” (Kee 3–4).

Surprisingly, medicine, as opposed to miracles and magic, was not the healing agency of preference for many. Pliny the Elder (23–79 CE) in his Natural History voices a suspicion about physicians, shared by many. He denigrates the growing numbers of physicians whose healing protocol has displaced the authentic, tried and true folk remedies found “in the kitchen garden,” where herbal remedies provided a fitting cure for every ailment known to human or animal (26.21.5; Kee 1986, 5–7). Pliny expresses disgust over the fortunes these charlatan physicians have accrued with their excessive charges, concocted procedures, and diagnoses. He cites a particularly odious example in a certain Asclepiades, who had turned to medicine only after failing to earn a decent living as a rhetorician (Kee, 5). Pliny does concede the excellence of the medical standards laid down by the great physician, Hippocrates (460–350 BCE), but adds to his list of complaints the tendency of physicians to attribute their healings to the work of the gods in order to “lend an aura of sanctity to their enterprise” (Kee, 6).

A hint of this same disdain for physicians is captured in Mark’s Gospel, telling of a woman who comes to Jesus with a 12-year history of a “flow of blood.” Mark tells us she “had suffered much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had, and was no better but rather grew worse” (Mk 5:26).

THE GRECO-ROMAN CONTEXT

Though various routes to healing were available in the Empire, often vending on the same street, the most admired and popularly sought after were the shrines and temples associated with the Egyptian deity Isis and the Greek god Asclepius, whose sanctuaries were havens for the ill, fountains of healing.

By the first century, the cult of Isis had spread to Rome, the British Isles, the Eastern Mediterranean, and Western Europe. The most common mode
of cure was incubation, sleeping in the temple precinct. Diodorus Siculus describes the setting. A supplicant, often disappointed with physicians, spent the night awaiting a healing dream.

Standing above the sick in their sleep she [Isis] gives aid for their diseases and works remarkable cures upon such as submit themselves to her; and many who have been despairing of their physicians because of the difficult nature of their malady are restored to health by her, while numbers who have altogether lost the use of their eyes or of some other part of the body, whenever they turn for help to this goddess are restored to their previous condition. (Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History*, 1.25.5; Kee 1986, 68)

A second source of healing, also known across the Empire, was Asclepius (Latin: Aesculapius) whose primary shrine was at Epidaurus in the Peloponnesus in Greece. As with Isis, the many shrines and temples were the equivalent of hospitals. They consisted of large halls for the sick to recline, rest, and await the powers of healing to work during their sleep. The shrine at Epidaurus was known for its dogs and snakes that would quietly visit the incubants sleeping on the temple grounds, licking the wounded part of the body. The ailments listed in the testimonies at Epidaurus include “facial and mouth injuries, dumbness, kidney and gall stones, extended pregnancies, leeches, baldness, dropsy, tumors, lice, worms, headaches, tuberculosis, disfigured limbs, wounds from weapons and blindness” (Kee 1986, 70). Cripples were reported to walk again; mutes regained speech; the blind recovered sight. Testimonial symbols of cured parts, sometimes wrought in silver and gold, were exhibited in the shrine of Epidaurus as Pausanias (II.xxvii.3) and Strabo (VIII.374) attest (McCasland 1962, 400; Lohse 1976, 226–27).

In addition to the care and cure associated with the shrines of Isis and Asclepius, Asia Minor produced one of the most widely recounted healers in the first century, Apollonius of Tyana, an itinerant philosopher who healed the sick and exorcised the demonized. His story was recorded in mid-third century by Philostratus under the patronage of Julia, the wife of the Emperor Septimius. In fact, it is speculated that the publication of the *Life of Apollonius* may have been supported by imperial Rome in order to counter the growing popular interest in the Christian cultus and the healing it offered.

As an indication of the popular image of healers, Apollonius is reported to have had the gift of understanding a foreign language without studying it, and of telepathic ability to see events far removed in time or space from the present. He is said to have cured a boy bitten by a dog and to have exorcised the daughter of a woman who was demonized by the ghost of the woman’s husband, who had become outraged over her having remarried so quickly after his death (Kee 1986, 84–86). On one occasion Apollonius, lecturing in Athens, was interrupted by a young man, known for a dissolute life, who
broke out in boisterous laughter. Apollonius announced to the man that he was possessed of an evil spirit. Philostratus tells us:

He actually was possessed, without being aware of it. He laughed when no one else laughed, wept without cause, and sang and talked to himself. The people thought that his licentious youth was to blame for this, but the truth is that he was being guided by an evil demon, and he appeared, in his impiety, as drunken. Now when Apollonius looked at him still more steadily and wrathfully, the demon cried out, like a person who is being branded or otherwise tortured, and swore that he would leave the youth and never again attack a man. But when Apollonius angrily addressed him, as an angry master might address a shamelessly wicked servant, and commanded him to come forth visibly, he cried, “I will throw down yonder statue,” and pointed to a statue in the king’s portico. Then the statue started moving and fell over. What fear and wonder! Who could describe it all! But the young man rubbed his eyes like someone just awakening, looked toward the sun, and was embarrassed because all eyes turned toward him. From that time on he no longer appeared wild and unrestrained as previously, but his healthy nature appeared, as though he had been treated by medicines. (Philostratus, *Life of Apollonius* IV.20; Lohse 1976, 227–28)

Healing stories were also told of prominent figures with special powers, in this instance, with a parallel to the Gospel stories. In his history of the emperor Vespasian, Suetonius reports the emperor’s trip to Alexandria shortly after he was instated, only to be asked to moisten the eyes of a blind beggar with his saliva, and to touch the leg of a lame man with his heel, resulting in the cure of both (Suetonius’ *Vespasian*, vii; Lohse 1976, 227; see Jesus’ use of spittle in Mk 8:23; Jn 9:6).

THE JUDAIC CONTEXT

Though Judaism in the first century lacked the shrines associated with Isis and Asclepius, its sacred literature and popular memory were awash in miraculous events associated with prominent Old Testament figures: Moses, Aaron, Joshua, Elijah, and Elisha. Moses had precipitated a path through the Red Sea (Ex 14:21–25), brought forth water from a rock (Ex 17:1–7), set up a healing bronze serpent in the wilderness (Nm 21:9), and competed magically with the wise men and sorcerers in Pharaoh’s court (Ex 7:8–13). Joshua had made the sun stand still (Jo 10:12–14). Jonah survived three days in a “whale” (Jon 1:17). Elijah had raised a youngster from the dead (1 Kgs 17:17–24), saved a widow and her son from starvation with a self-refilling jar of meal and cruse of oil (1 Kgs 17: 8–16), and had ascended to heaven in a fiery chariot (2 Kgs 2:11). Elisha had caused an axe-head to float on water (2 Kgs 6:5–7), had resuscitated the Shunammite’s deceased son (2 Kgs
4:11–37), and had cured a Syrian king of leprosy (2 Kgs 5:1–14). Shadrach, Meschach, and Abednego had been delivered from the fiery furnace, and Sarah, Rachel, and Hannah had been cured of their barrenness. The biblical miracle stories had even been expanded in the Dead Sea Scrolls in the Genesis Apocryphon from Qumran Cave 1, which reports Abram engaged in laying on of hands and prayer to cure a Pharaoh of an affliction caused by an evil spirit (Fitzmyer 1991, 60).

Beyond first-century Judaic consciousness of the miraculous past, is an active tradition of healers, miracle workers, and exorcists. The New Testament, in fact, makes reference to the commonplace reality of exorcism in first-century Judaism (Mt 12:27).

Within Judaism, stories were told of miraculous cures and events associated with individuals whose virtue produced special powers. Some of the tales bear resemblance to Gospel stories in the New Testament. The *Babylonian Talmud* recounts a seafaring tale reminiscent of the calming of the storm in Mark 4:35–41. The key figure is Rabban Gamaliel II, a scholar-teacher, who found himself aboard ship when the storm struck. Fearing that it was punishment for his collaboration with an opposing rabbi, Eliezer b. Hyrcanus, with whom he should never have in good conscience collaborated, Gamaliel turned to God in prayer, explaining that his collaboration was motivated not by pride but by his desire for harmony in Israel. We are told that when the prayer was completed, the sea calmed (*Babylonian Talmud*, Baba Mezia 59b. See Lohse 1976, 179).

Exorcisms were also known in the Judaic tradition, as noted by Josephus, who recounts the expulsion of a demon in the Emperor Vespasian’s presence by a certain Eleazar.

He [Eleazar] held under the nose of the possessed man a ring in which was enclosed a root. . . . He had the sick man smell it, and thus drew the evil spirit of him through his nose. The possessed man immediately collapsed, and Eleazar then adjured the spirit, by pronouncing the name of Solomon . . . [commanding the spirit] never to return to the man. (Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* VIII 46–49)

In the postlude, Eleazar, whose exorcism leaves some in doubt, performs another wonder to prove his power over the spirit. He sets up a vessel filled with water and commands the spirit when it leaves the possessed man to upset the vessel, in order to demonstrate to the gathering that it had really left. Josephus tells us, “This in fact happened and thus Solomon’s wisdom and knowledge became known” (Lohse 1976, 180).

Two figures stand out in Talmudic and Mishnaic literature as models of charismatic Hasidim, devout men with remarkable powers, who stood in the tradition of Elijah, whose prophetic powers could cause rain (1 Kgs 17:1). In
their piety, their prayer, their confidence in the Almighty, their seemingly miraculous powers, and their lives of renunciation, they bear resemblance to certain aspects of Gospel records about Jesus. Both “were venerated as a holy Hasid so close to God that his prayer exhibited miraculous efficiency” (Vermes 2001, 254).

The first is a rabbi from the first century BCE, named Honi the Circle Maker, who was famous for the power of his prayer to bring much-needed rain to his people. Mishnah Taanit 3:8 relates the story:

Once Honi the Circle-Drawer was asked: “Pray that it may rain.” He answered “Go and bring in the Passover ovens [made of dried clay] that they may not become soft.” He prayed but it did not rain. What did he do? He drew a circle and stood in it and said to God, “Lord of the world, Thy children have turned to me because I am like a son of the house before Thee. I swear by Thy great name that I will not move from here until Thou hast mercy on Thy children.” Drops of rain fell. “I have not asked for this,” he said, “but for rain to fill the cisterns, the pits and rock-cavities.” There came a cloud-burst. “I have not prayed for this but for a rain of goodwill, blessing and grace.” Then it rained steadily until the Israelites were compelled to flee from Jerusalem to the Temple Mount. (Vermes, 255)

Josephus tells us of the circumstances of Honi’s death, following the pattern of a prophet. He was stoned to death by Hyrcanus II when he refused to collaborate in Hyrcanus’ plot to depose Hyrcanus’ brother, the high priest, Aristobulus II.

The second is a first-century CE figure, a rabbinic counterpart to Jesus, who lived in the first half of the first century. He was a Galilean rabbi named Hanina ben Dosa. He was born a dozen miles north of the city of Nazareth, and became a pupil of Johanan ben Zakkai, one of the founders of rabbinic Judaism. Rabbi ben Dosa was portrayed in the Mishnah as a saintly man with thaumaturgic powers, whose personal life was marked by humility, unworldliness, and stoic frugality (Vermes, 259–63). One story relates how his prayers led to the cure of one of ben Zakkai’s sons. Another healing was telepathic, taking place at a distance, with the healing of the son of the patriarch Gamaliel II. Though far from the lad, Hanina ben Dosa assured Gamaliel that his son had been cured, a fact attested to subsequently by Gamaliel’s servants. Popular lore also recounts his ability to make the rain cease and to endow common vinegar that had mistakenly been poured into a lamp with the properties of lamp oil that burned all the next day (Yarushalmi Berakot v. 9d).

The story is also told of a lizard biting ben Dosa. He was so engrossed in his prayers he barely noticed. The Mishna Berakhot 5.1 had dictated that if a man is at prayer, even a snake wound around his leg should not deter him. When Hanina ben Dosa’s disciples expressed concern, they found the lizard
dead, leading to the rumor that animals biting ben Dosa did so at their peril. “Woe to the man whom a lizard bites, and woe to the lizard that bites R. Hanina ben Dosa!” (Yarushalmi Berakot v. 9a).

Geza Vermes proposes that Hanina ben Dosa was rabbinic Judaism’s most prominent wonder-worker whose death marked the end of the era of the “men of deeds.” Jesus of Nazareth, he observes, “as healer and exorcist . . . is perfectly at home in Hasidic company” (Mishna Sotah 9.15; Vermes, 258, 269).

THE BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE

Howard Clark Kee concludes in his 1986 book, Medicine, Miracle and Magic in the New Testament, that healing is “a central factor in primitive Christianity, and was so from the beginning of the movement. It is not a later addendum to the tradition, introduced in order to make Jesus more appealing to the Hellenistic world, but was a major feature of the Jesus tradition from the outset” (Kee 1986, 124). That it was true of Jesus is affirmed by the fact that all Gospel sources (Mk, Mt, Lk, Q, and Jn) attest to the miraculous as a prominent feature of his ministry.

Our goal in this section is to adopt an emic approach (Pilch 2000, 153) in examining the New Testament healing stories of Jesus, which seeks to examine healing and the miraculous from the perspective of the original New Testament audience. We will examine (1) the terminology and protological thinking employed to describe these so-called miraculous events, (2) the four types of miracle stories (healings, exorcisms, resuscitations, and nature miracles), and (3) the rhetorical function of the miracles stories within the earliest Christian communities.

TERMINOLOGY AND PROTOLOGICAL THINKING

The Greek of the New Testament uses six words to refer to miraculous events, none of which means miracle in the sense Thomas Jefferson or Voltaire understood it, namely as violation of natural law. One is the word ergon (a word), connoting something produced with remarkable effect. A second is paradoxa (Lk 5:26), a counter-intuitive, inexplicable happening. The third is dynamis (power), an event that has achieved a powerful outcome. Fourth is thaumasia, wonders or marvels (Mt 11:15), the rough equivalent of the Latin miraculum, having nothing to do with the notion of a violation of natural law. Fifth and sixth are a recurring word combination rooted in its matching pair in the Old Testament, translated “signs (semeia) and wonders (terata),” appearing frequently in Hebrew as ’ôt and môpet, as for example in the Exodus saga (Ex 7:3, Dt 4:34), referring to events that signify something beyond themselves.
It is important to recognize that in describing these events, the Gospel authors and their communities resort to protological or primary thinking, native to their time. For example, they attribute illness to demons or diagnose an epileptic as being moonstruck (Mt 17:14; Fitzmyer 1991, 59). Protological thinking is at work in the description of techniques Jesus uses to heal, putting his finger in the ear of a deaf man with a speech impediment, then spitting and touching his tongue (Mk 7:33–34), or by spitting on the eyes of a blind man and laying his hands upon him (Mk 8:23), or by uttering an Aramaic word, Ephphatha (be opened) (Mk 7:34), echoing the magical-sounding Hebrew incantations of Jewish healers of the period. Jesus’ healings can be effected with a touch (Mk 1:31; Lk 5:12–25; Lk 13:11–13; Mt 9:27–30), or by seeming telepathy, at a distance, as with a centurion’s slave (Mt 8:5–13), the daughter of the Syrophoenician woman (Mt 15:22–28), and the royal official’s son (Jn 4:46–54). On occasion, the Gospel authors add folkloric additions to the stories, for example, reporting a demonized herd of pigs jumping over a cliff into the sea in a locale (Gadara) more than five miles from the water (Fitzmyer 1991, 58).

FOUR TYPES OF MIRACLE STORIES

The gospel records cite four types of miracle stories: healings, exorcisms, resuscitations, and nature miracles.

Healing stories, along with exorcism, constitute one-fifth of all the stories about Jesus in the synoptic Gospels (Kee 1986, 1). In an unusual scene, when John the Baptist sends his disciples to inquire of Jesus whether he is “the one to come or whether they should look for another,” Jesus replies in a way that suggests he regards what he is about to share as the most distinctive aspect of his ministry: “Go tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them with” (Lk 7:22).

A glossary of Jesus’ healings in the Gospels include a demonized madman from Gadara (Mk 5:1–20), a paralytic (Mk 2:1–12), a man with a “withered” hand (Mt 12:9–13), a woman bent over for 18 years (Lk 13:10–13), a woman with an issue of blood for 12 years, who had spent her fortune on physicians to no avail (Mk 5:25–34), Peter’s fevered mother-in-law (Mk 1:30–31), an official’s son near death with a fever (Jn 4:47–53), the blind beggar, Bartimaeus (Mk 10:46–52), a man with dropsy (Lk 14:1–4), and a young boy with epileptic convulsions (Mk 9:14–29).

Exegetical study of the Gospel accounts of the healing stories makes plain that for the Gospel authors, the main point of a miracle story is not the miracle itself, but the truth(s) to which it points. Two examples will suffice.

A first example is an opening scene in Mark’s gospel (1:21–27), that describes Jesus confronting a man with an “unclean spirit” in the synagogue at
Capernaum. When Jesus commands the demon “to come out of him,” Mark tell us that the onlookers respond with the words, “What is this? A new teaching! With authority he commands even the unclean spirits.” A Christological leitmotif of Mark’s Gospel is Jesus’ authority (exousia). Chapter after chapter, Mark’s objective is to spell out the authority of Jesus—over demons, over tax collectors and sinners who had been excluded by the ritual requirements of the law, over the sea, over disease, over ritual traditions of the Pharisees, over nature, and eventually over the temple, symbolized with the rending of the temple veil.

A second example is the tale of Jesus healing a man with a withered hand (Mk 3:1–6). The telling point of the story is not the cure itself, but that it took place on the Sabbath, challenging a law that prefers compliance to mercy, and introducing a new teaching that “the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath” (Mk 2:27–28).

The healings and exorcisms exercise a religious-subversive function within the storytelling tradition of early Christianity, portraying Jesus’ acts of healing as acts of protest against the policies and practice of the first-century cultus. Jesus heals on the Sabbath, contrary to religious law (Mk 3:1–6); he assumes the prerogative of the religious hierarchy by forgiving the sin he construed to be the cause of an illness (Mk 2:1–12); he healed the religiously marginalized—tax-collectors (Lk 19:1–10), a Greek, a Syrophoenician woman (Mk 7:24–30), a demonized man from Gerasa who lived in the ritually unclean haunts of a pagan cemetery (Mk 5:1–20), a leper, regarded as ritually unclean (Mark 1:40–45), and a ritually unclean menstruating woman (Mk 5:25–34; Kee 1986, 78–79).

Exorcism is rooted in the sociocultural conviction that illness is caused by demons and is played out in socially conventional patterns of demoniac behavior. Demon-possession and exorcism were standard features of first-century Palestinian, biblical, and Greco-Roman culture.

The New Testament mentions demons 90 times, sometimes referring to them as unclean spirits (Mk 3:30) or evil spirits (Lk 7:21). The lords of the demons are also mentioned, Beelzebul (Mt. 16:24) and Satan (Mk 3:23). Luke, both in his Gospel and in Acts, assumes the presence of demons and spirits as a feature of everyday life (e.g., Lk 8:2; 13:16; 22:3; Acts 16:16–18).

The Gospels never imply that Jesus alone had the power to exorcise. It was a widely practiced art. The Gospels imply that Jesus acknowledges exorcists among his rivals: Jesus tells them, “If I cast out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your sons cast them out?” We sometimes hear of itinerant exorcists casting out demons in the name of Jesus (Mt 7:22; Acts 19:13–14).

The Gospels indicate that Jesus’ religious rivals acknowledged that he was competent as an exorcist (Mk 3:22). It is also clear that he trained and commissioned his disciples in the art of exorcism (Mt 10:8; Mk 3:15; 6:13).
When the disciples are sent out on mission, they return glowing: “Lord, even the demons are subject to us in your name” (Lk 10:17).

Demons are widely acknowledged in the culture at large. The Dead Sea Qumran covenants had composed hymns against the demons with psalms of exorcism and antidemonic incantations (Martinez 1994, 371–78). In the Magical Greek Papyri we read of encounters between the demon-possessed and exorcists in language that resembles verbal exchanges between демониакs and healers in the Gospels. Mark 1:24 reads, “I know who you are.” The Papyri Graeca Magicae VIII.13 reads, “I know you, Hermes, who you are and whence you came.” In Mark 5:7 we hear, “I adjure you by God.” The Papyri Graecae Magicae XXXvi.189–90 reads, “I adjure you by the great name Ablanatha.”

What meaning did the first Christians find in these stories of exorcism? A key is found in Luke’s report of a statement of Jesus: “If it is by the finger of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you” (Lk 11:19–20). For a first-century Gospel audience the stories of Jesus’ authority over demons, and therefore over disease, represented the collapse and unseating of the demonic powers, a theme that will be played out on a much larger screen with the writing of the Book of Revelation during the persecution in the reign of Domitian, 81–96 ce. This same eschatological image of the dispossessing of the demonic is a theme in the Dead Sea Scrolls (1QS 3:24–25; 4:200–22; 1 QH 3:18; 1 QM 1:10–11). Thus, exorcism connotes personal healing but also a corporate social healing in which the oppressive power of principalities and powers are in the process of being brought down.

The incipient collapse of the demonic world powers may be hinted in Mark’s elaborate version of the story of the Gadarene demoniac (Mk 5:1–20). When Jesus asks the demoniac, “What is your name?” he replies, “My name is Legion, for we are many.” In the mind of first-century Christians the word Legion (rendered as a recognizable Latin word, transliterated in the Greek text) would ring with associations of another kind of “being possessed,” in view of the presumed setting of Mark’s Gospel shortly after the brutal Neronic persecution of Christians in the winter of 64–65 ce.

Resuscitations constitute the smallest class of miracle stories. There are three of them: the raising of the daughter of Jairus, ruler of the synagogue (Mt 9:18–25), the raising of the widow’s son at the village of Nain (Lk 7:11–15), and the raising of Lazarus, brother of Mary and Martha (Jn 11).

No story of being brought back to life from the dead could be thought of in the early church without reference to the resurrection of Jesus and to the general doctrine of final resurrection of the dead that originated in Pharisaic thought. For the early Christian cultus, the three resuscitation tales reflected the conviction that the age of resurrection and the messianic return were breaking in. The most dramatic and extravagant expression of this conviction is found in Matthew 27:51–53, with the news that at the death of Jesus,
tombs were opened and bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised and had been seen in Jerusalem. The age of resurrection was dawning.

Beyond this echo of resurrection, these stories also propagated fundamental convictions about Jesus.

The central rhetorical point in the story of Jairus’ daughter resides in the phrase, repeated three times, that Jairus was “one of the rulers of the synagogue.” Within the apologetic pattern of Mark’s Gospel, forged in the growing tension within the earliest church between traditional Jews and Christian Jews, the story announces that a synagogue leader is among those who have recognized the new life that Jesus brings.

The second story, of the widow’s son at Nain, derives theological power in its transparent parallel to Old Testament accounts of the life of Elijah. Why Elijah? The Old Testament stories about Elijah gained popularity in the early church as parallels were discerned between Jesus and Elijah. 1 Kings 17:8–24 tells of Elijah’s visit at God’s command to a poverty-stricken widow, who discovers, with Elijah as her guest, that her jar of meal is miraculously replenished, and subsequently, that her son, who suddenly dies, is brought back to life by Elijah. In the story of the widow at Nain, the Early Christians saw a “return” of Elijah at a time within Judaism when Elijah’s messianic return was expected (Mal 4:5–6) and when speculation abounded on whether John the Baptist (Mt 11:11–15) or Jesus might be his reincarnation.

The third resuscitation story, the raising of Lazarus, constitutes an entire chapter in the Gospel according to John. It serves a dual purpose theologically. The first is to promulgate the Christological confession that Jesus is the true resurrection and life (Jn 11:25). The second is to see the story of Lazarus’ resurrection in the first half of John’s Gospel as a typological anticipation of the resurrection of Jesus in the second half.

In all, these stories affirm the evidence of new life that has been infused individually and communally into the community by the presence of the man Jesus, *Elijah redivivus*, who resuscitates the dead.

Nature miracles in the New Testament put the greatest strain on credibility of any of the miracle narratives. There are six of them: the story of Jesus calming the storm, the walking on the water, two stories of Jesus feeding people in the wilderness, the horticultural oddity of Jesus cursing the fig tree, and the coin found in the fish’s mouth.

I came to appreciate the difference between an *etic* and *emic* reading of the nature miracles in my reaction to an altar painting in a church I attended over the course of a decade. It was a wall-size Renaissance-style fresco of the Matthean account of Peter beginning to sink in the waves, reaching out to Jesus for help as he was coming toward him, walking on the water. My post-Enlightenment, academic response was a sense of disdain, born of disappointment, that any contemporary church would install a nature miracle as its centerpiece of faith. Within a decade, however, my *etic* opposition to the
painting began to change as I began to consider what the early church, or for that matter, what members in that congregation, might have seen in that painting as they contemplated it week after week.

From a contemporary critical, etic perspective, the nature miracles fall into the genre of legend or prodigy. But for the biblical authors and their first audience, they functioned as mythos or homily, inviting hearers to consider their meaning for daily existence. Ironically, the nature miracles, as stunning as they are in their meta-rational extravagance, point beyond the miracle itself to the rhetorical message seated in the story.

The story of the calming of the sea (Mk 4:35–41) recounts Jesus’ rebuking the fierce wind of a storm on the Sea of Galilee and inducing a magical calm in a scenario which only minutes before had struck fear in the disciples. As is often the case in this genre, the point of the story for the Gospel author is found in the last verse. In this case it reads, “Who then is this, that even sea and wind obey him?”

Within the context of a first-century Jewish-Christian congregation, an answer is found in a psalm that provides a mirror image of the tale:

Some went down to the sea in ships,
Doing business on the great waters;
They saw the deeds of the Lord,
His wondrous works in the deep.
For he commanded, and raised the stormy wind,
Which lifted up the waves of the sea.
They mounted up to heaven, they went down to the depths . . .
They reeled and staggered like drunken men,
And were at their wits’ end.
Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble,
And he delivered them from their distress;
He made the storm be still,
And the waves of the sea were hushed. (Ps 107:23–29)

Who is it that sea and wind obey? For the early Christians it was Yhwh, the God of the Exodus, now present in the Lord Jesus as his word and spiritual presence were seen to calm the troubled seas on which they rode.

The story of Jesus walking on the water (Mk 6:45–52), in similar fashion, contains several lines that highlight meanings implicit in the text for early Christian ears. The first is the utterance of Jesus to the disciples in their terror as they see him approaching their boat, walking on the water: “Take heart. It is I. Have no fear.” At the heart of this statement, both for the disciples in the boat and for the listeners in the congregation hearing the story, is the highly symbolic phrase, “It is I,” which in the Greek text, can be construed simply as “I am.” Early Christians would have instantaneously recognized the “I am” as the name that God disclosed to Moses at Mt. Sinai: “Say
this to the people of Israel, I am has sent me to you” (Ex 3:14).\(^2\) The phrase I am appears scores of times in Hebrew scriptures as the shorthand symbol for the God of the Exodus.\(^3\) It appears 26 times in the Gospel of John on the lips of Jesus (e.g. I am the bread of life; I am the good shepherd, etc.) as a way to express Jesus’ presumed sense of transparency to the I am at work in him, implying that the one whose powers parted the Red Sea is again working powerfully in their midst, making his “path through the waters”:

The crash of thy thunder was in the whirlwind.
The lightnings lighted up the world
The earth trembled and shook.
Thy way was through the sea,
Thy path through the great waters,
Yet thy footprints were unseen,
Thou dist lead thy people like a flock
By the hand of Moses and Aaron. (Ps 77:18–20)

A second flashpoint of meaning lies in the incorrigibly cryptic last line of the story, which reads: “They (the disciples) were utterly astounded for they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened” (Mk 6:52). No line in the New Testament can better demonstrate the fact that the Gospel authors have planted special meanings between the lines for the readers to find. No line in the Gospels is more hermeneutically challenging.

The most likely explanation of this cryptic statement about the loaves is found in an odd interlude about “bread” in Mark 8:14–21. Jesus asks the disciples, “When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you take up?” The answer the disciples offer, correctly, is “Twelve.” The question is repeated concerning the feeding to the four thousand and the answer is “Seven.” After they answer, Jesus says with puzzling abruptness, “Do you not yet understand?” And the answer to this question for most readers is, “No.”

But one thing is clear. For Mark the meaning of this episode (and the story of the walking on the water) resides in the significance of the numbers, two sets of them. The first set is a combination of 5 (thousand) and 12. The second is a combination of 4 (thousand) and 7. Commentators have suggested that the first set could be symbolic of Judaism (five books of Torah and twelve tribes), and the second symbolic of Pythagorean (i.e., gentile) interest (the virtues of the numbers 4 and 7). A compelling case can be made that the two sets of numeric symbols represent the transition of Jesus’ ministry, so conspicuous in Mark, from a Judaic (5 and 12) to a gentile (4 and 7) context. The transition is conspicuous in Mark’s geographical-theological scheme in chapters 1 to 8, which show Jesus taking his ministry from Judaic (3:7) to gentile territory (7:26–31). Though this solution is necessarily tentative, there is nothing tentative in the judgment that the numbers symbolism
of the loaves is on Mark’s mind and that he wants you to seek out its meaning if you are to understand the larger significance of Jesus walking on the water.

The two stories of feeding the multitudes, feeding the five thousand (Mk 6:30–44) and feeding the four thousand (8:1–10) also provide hermeneutical clues to their meaning. One needs only to read them aloud to pick up the flashpoint in the language that would spark a connection in the cultic memory bank of the Gospel’s first audience.

In the introductory statement of the first feeding, Jesus invites the disciples and the townspeople to a “wilderness” place (often incorrectly translated “lonely” place; Mk 6:31), evoking the memory of wilderness as a place where the wandering people of Israel “saw” God and where they received bread, the manna in the wilderness. In this wilderness Jesus distributes the loaves, using a sequence of words: he “blesses,” “breaks” and “gives.” Eight chapters later with the institution of the Lord’s Supper the same sequence of words appears: “he blessed and broke it and gave it to them” (14:22).

The nature miracle stories of the feeding in the wilderness are less focused on the miraculous multiplication of the loaves, than on the typological repetition of Yhwh’s feedings in the wilderness: in the time of Moses, in the life of Jesus, and now, in the life of the Markan readers as they celebrate the Eucharist within the wilderness of their own time.

A fifth, in some ways the oddest of the nature miracles, is the story of Jesus cursing the fig tree, a tale that Matthew tells in two stages, sandwiched around the story of Jesus driving the money changers out of the temple (Mt 12:12–14, 20–25). The reader steeped in the prophetic literature of the Hebrew Bible will soon see the point.

The fig tree story is told at the outset of a face-off between Jesus and temple Judaism, beginning in Mark 11:11 with the note: “And he entered Jerusalem, and went into the temple, and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.” What may sound to the modern reader as a gratuitous travel note, the reader of Mark’s Gospel will recognize as a battle-cry between Jesus and the temple as a symbol of a religious system that had lost its way and from which the early church was gradually dissociating itself. The theme of Jesus’ opposition to temple Judaism is played out in the stories immediately following the fig tree episode. The first is a series of Jesus’ encounters with chief priests and scribes (11:27), with Pharisees and Herodians (12:13), and with Sadducees (12:18) and scribes (12:28). In each case Jesus confounds them in debate over central religious and political issues in the life of Mark’s church. The sequence continues with the Little Apocalypse in Mark 13, predicting that not one stone of the temple will be left upon another. It concludes with the stark announcement following the crucifixion, that the curtain of the temple has been torn in two, from top to bottom.
How does the fig tree story relate to this? A clue is to be found in the prophet Micah’s protesting the corruption of the temple hierarchy with the words: “Woe is Me! For I have become as when the summer fruit has been gathered . . . there is no cluster to eat; no first-ripe fig which my soul desires.” The fig tree for Micah is a symbol of the religious bankruptcy of the temple system in his own time. Luke’s version of the story makes the same point. Luke chooses to omit the story of the cursing of the fig tree, but replaces it with a parable that tells of a fig tree that will be cut down if it continues to be fruitless.

The sixth nature miracle is the most amusing. Matthew 17:24–27 recounts the story of Peter asking Jesus about the legitimacy and financial feasibility of paying the half-shekel temple tax, a point on which Peter had been pressed by the tax collectors. Jesus responds to Peter with a rejection of the tax in principle, but adds this witty counsel: “But so as not to give offense to them, go to the sea and cast a hook, and take the first fish that comes up, and when you open its mouth you will find a shekel; take that and give it to them for me and for yourself.”

Jesus’ response raises the question whether Peter in fact did go fishing to find the coin, or whether Jesus’ response was a political witticism, counseling compromise but at the same time providing assurance that the funds will appear somehow in God’s grace, even miraculously. If the latter, the story no longer belongs in the nature miracle category and constitutes one of the most explicitly political statements in the collection of Jesus’ sayings. If the former, it remains to be determined whether Peter caught the coin-bearing fish, a likelihood that I found extremely remote, that is, until I read a British morning paper one day in 1970, while on sabbatical leave in Cambridge, England. It reported that a young man had caught a fish with a first-century Roman coin in its gullet. The moral? Even the most preposterous biblical legend might have a grain of a dimly remembered historical truth at its core. In any event, from the standpoint of the earliest hearers of the tale, the message would have been clear. Christians wrestling with the question of paying the half-shekel temple tax should refuse in principle, but in the spirit of political compromise, pay the tax, with the assuring footnote that “the Lord will provide.”

PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

Having examined the miracle stories from an emic perspective, we turn now to the etic task of reflecting on them from a psychological perspective, restricting our observations to the first two types of miracle story, healings and exorcisms. 4

Though we are far too removed to offer precise reconstructions of what transpired behind these stories, we can make observations about the psychodynamics operative within the stories themselves, noting that in each case the healing rests on a therapeutic exchange between two persons.
Within the spectrum of fields that constitutes the discipline of psychology, the group that has emerged under the aegis of the psychoanalytic tradition, including cognitive psychology, developmental psychology, object relations theory, family systems theory, and the like, seems most capable, with their diagnostic and prescriptive protocols, to illumine the therapeutic transaction between a healer and the diseased.

These diagnostic and therapeutic protocols include the heuristic concepts of neurosis and psychosis, of introversion and extraversion, of defense mechanism, projection, transference, dissociation, sublimation, repression, displacement, reaction formation, introjection, rationalization, obsessive compulsive disorder, inflation, substitution, cognitive dissonance, posttraumatic stress disorder, multiple personality disorder—all of which have been employed to date by biblical scholars and psychologists in analyzing the nature and habits of the human psyche at work in biblical stories, as well as in the processes of creating and interpreting biblical texts (see Ellens and Rollins 2004; Rollins 1999; Rollins and Kille 2007).

A number of commentators offer helpful preliminary observations on the psychology of healings and exorcisms. For example, in speaking of the protological thinking at work in biblical descriptions of exorcisms, Bible scholar Joseph Fitzmyer, S.J., writes: “Persons afflicted with what we would call today mental disturbances were regarded as possessed, because observers were unable to analyze or diagnose properly the causes of the maladies in question” (Fitzmyer 1991, 59). Pastoral counselor Morton Kelsey comments that many illnesses are the “result of psychogenic rather than physical causes.” He cites the cases of hysterical blindness, muteness, or paralysis that he believes lie behind the conditions of the blind, dumb, and paralytic healed by Jesus. The “hysterical person can copy reliably nearly any disease syndrome,” Kelsey writes. “There is little organic damage, only the unconscious idea that one cannot use that particular organ—an idea so deep that the person is literally unable to do so, while hysterical patients can be suggested out of this state or tricked in various ways to reveal the psychic cause of the problem, still they are genuinely ill and cannot just snap out of it” (Kelsey 1995, 59). *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* confirms instances of paralysis and motoric immobility as a function of catatonic disorders (American Psychological Association 2000, 293).

One of the miracle stories that serves as a case study for psychological commentary is the exorcism of the Gerasene demoniac in Mark 5:1–20. It has attracted extensive psychological commentary because of its elaborate interpersonal detail. The commentary illustrates the richness of insight forthcoming from a variety of psychological and psychosocial perspectives that lay bare the dynamics at work in this account, especially when considered within the setting of Roman-occupied Judea in the first century CE.
The story is told in three episodes. The first tells of Jesus meeting a man with an unclean spirit who lived in the tombs. No one could bind him. Even when bound, he broke the fetters and chains to pieces. He wandered night and day among the tombs, crying out and bruising himself with stones. When Jesus saw him he ran and bowed down before Jesus, crying aloud: “What have you to do with me? I adjure you by God, do not torment me.” “For Jesus had said to him, ‘Come out of the man, you unclean spirit!’” When Jesus asked him his name, he replied, “My name is Legion, for we are many.” A great herd of swine was feeding on the hillside. The demoniac begged Jesus, “Send us to the swine, let us enter them.” Jesus complied, and two thousand pigs rushed down the bank into the sea and drowned.

The second episode takes place in the city to which the herdsmen, who had witnessed the event, went with the tale. People came out to the tombs to see what had happened, and found Jesus and the demoniac sitting there. The demoniac was clothed and in his right mind. In seeing this sight the crowd was filled with fear. They begged Jesus to depart from their neighborhood.

The third episode describes Jesus getting into the boat to leave, when the man who had been possessed with demons begged that he might be with him. Jesus refuses: “Go home to your friends, and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you.”

Some commentators have made observations on the nature of the demoniac’s illness in terms of a contemporary psychological reading of Mark’s description. Hankoff (1992) sees in the story the earmarks of Multiple Personality Disorder, created by a “dissociation, which works by splitting off unbearable feelings, images and thoughts that create psychological overload,” leading to the acting out of these feelings with no conscious memory of his bizarre, self-destructive behavior (Hankoff 1992, 8; Ludwig 2006, 5).

Robert Leslie sees the demoniac’s illness as the symptomatology of a person who had become ill because of a sense of having been robbed of his dignity. The result is behavior that expresses “anger turned in against himself. Angry at himself, at war with himself, he feels only the conflict of the unresolved forces struggling within his make up and loses sight of the essential unity that dignity implies” (Leslie 2007, 214).

Paul Hollenbach offers an insightful commentary on the phenomenon of the demoniac from a social-psychological perspective. “The Gerasene’s possession is both disease and cure… His very madness permitted him to do in a socially acceptable manner what he could not do as sane, namely express his total hostility to the Romans; he did this by identifying the Roman legions with demons. His possession was thus at once both the result of oppression and an expression of his resistance to it” (Hollenbach 1981, 581).

In his comprehensive analysis of the story of the Gerasene demoniac, Michael Willett Newheart (2004) introduces the work of Rene Girard (1986) on scapegoating, spelling out the ways in which a three-way relationship
combines to create a small society of pathological interaction, consisting of a demoniac, of the society that excludes him and tries to chain him, and of a Roman occupation government that allows no protest other than that which may come in a disguised form from a demoniac (Newheart 2004, 70–78).

Other commentators have focused their observations on the psychodynamics of exorcism that transpire between Jesus and the demoniac. Carroll Wise (1954) recounts the story of Harry Stack Sullivan, a skilled psychiatrist at work with a schizophrenic patient during a staff presentation. The doctor making the presentation was unable to evoke any response or communication from the patient. With a “shrug of futility” he deferred to Harry Stack Sullivan:

Sullivan’s first move was to edge his chair just a little closer to that of the patient and to lean forward so that he could look directly at the patient in a very friendly, warm manner. To the amazement of all, the patient responded to every question and comment that was made by Dr. Sullivan. For half an hour or more they conversed together, seemingly oblivious to the fact that there was any one else in the room. (Leslie 2007, 216; Wise 1954, 57)

Leslie comments that such radical change in behavior demonstrates an observation of Victor Frankl: “even the manifestations of psychosis conceal a real spiritual person, unassailable by mental disease. Only the possibility of communication with the outside world and of self-expression are inhibited by the disease; the nucleus of man remains indestructible.” The schizophrenic, as well as the manic-depressive, has a remnant of freedom with which he can confront his illness and realize himself, not only in spite of it but because of it (Frankl 1965, 98; Leslie 2007, 217).

With respect to episode three, Jesus’ departure and the healed man’s request to go with him, Wilhelm Wuellner and Robert Leslie draw on a book by James Dittes, When the People Say No, making the point that people who at times oppose us, do so to our own benefit by leading us to a new level of responsibility. “Like any good counselor who recognizes an unhealthy dependency, Jesus sent the man back home to his friends . . . to be . . . integrated,” which in effect called for “an active program on the man’s own part of taking the initiative” for his own continued health. Furthermore, in commending to the man that he tell his friends “how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you,” Jesus invites a cognitive shift in the healed man. This develops in him conscious recognition of life as a context of mercy that sustains him (Wuellner and Leslie 1984, 36; Dittes 1979).

The story of the Gerasene demoniac is an example of one of the primary postulates of the NT, that healing was a primary objective of the ministry of the historical Jesus, and that this healing was the function of a transaction
between the healer and the healed, lending credence to the contention of analytical psychologist Carl Jung that “Religions are psychotherapeutic systems in the truest sense of the word” (Jung 1963, vol. 10, par. 367).

NOTES

1. A typical example is found in the Paris Magical Papyrus, dating from 300 C.E.: “For those possessed by daemons, an approved charm by Pibechis. Take oil, make from unripe olives, together with the plan mastigia and lotus pith, and boil it with marjoram saying: ‘Joel, Ossarthiomi, Emori, Theochipoith, Sithemoech, Sothe, Joe, Mimipsothiooph, Phersothi, Aeeioyo, etc.’ . . . Write this phylactery upon a little sheet of tin: ‘Jaeo, Abraothioch, Phtha, Mesentiniao. . . .’ And hang it round the sufferer: it is of every demon a thing to be trembled at” (Barrett, 34).

2. The verb I am in Hebrew is from the same root as the name YAHWEH (Jehovah in the King James Bible), which means “He who causes things to come into being.”

3. Its significance in the Hebrew scriptures is epitomized in Isaiah 52:6: “Therefore my people shall know my name; therefore in that day they shall know that it is I who speak; here I am.” See, also, for example, Isaiah 43:10, 11, 13, 225; 51:12; Exodus 12:12; 14:4, 18; 15:26.

4. Despite the protological thinking that often colors the biblical accounts of healings and exorcisms, the healings and exorcisms belong to the genre of first-century historical writing, whereas the second two classes of miracle story, resuscitations and nature miracles, fall within the genre of legend, that is, events with possible vestiges of historical truth that have been exaggerated for apologetic effect.

REFERENCES


The aim of this chapter is to orient the modern reader on how to read the Old Testament (OT), and understand the miracles that are recounted in those ancient Hebrew scriptures. I shall describe ancient Near Eastern speculative thought and the way the semantic fields of the Hebrew terms for miracles were connected with it. Then I shall discuss how certain explanations in modern science are useful models for the so-called miracles, but also how scientific methods are limited.

**SPECULATIVE THOUGHT OF ANCIENT MAN**

There is a fundamental difference between our modern culture and its scientific preconditions on the one hand, and the intellectual and speculative thought of ancient man, on the other. Therefore, we can understand miracle stories in the OT only if we have an idea about this distinction. In fact the concept of miracle should be regarded as a post-OT idea. There are no good equivalents of the concept of miracle in OT Hebrew. Nevertheless, we have different Hebrew terms that have been used to characterize certain extraordinary features in the OT stories. How can we explain this lack of the term *miracle* in Hebrew?

Frankfort and Frankfort edited an interesting study on the speculative thought of ancient man. Their study “attempts to underpin the chaos of experience so that it may reveal the features of a structure: order, coherence, and meaning” (3). They argued that ancient man had only one mode of expression: personal. They understood reality as personal but other, the you
out there; and “the gods, as personifications of power among other things, fulfill early man's need for reasons that explain the phenomenal world” (17). The distinction between an ancient and modern man could be demonstrated, for example, by the reaction of each to the collapse of a house in which people are killed. The modern man seeks causal reasons for this accident. He could come to the conclusion that termites have destroyed the wood and finally led to the fatal accident. The ancient man was less interested in these causal reasons. He wanted to know why the people living in the house died. His interest was less in cause and effect and more in meaning and purpose. Why do gods or divine powers want to kill such people?

The expression of reality as personal other (you) led to various myths that tried to explain what was going on in nature and human life. Everything that happened in reality was an action and a reflection of the personal other. The language of myth was an attempt to capture the actions of the personal other in an understandable form. The language of myth opened the mind of the ancient man to miracles. The myth of divine powers behind the mysterious otherness of things helped explain the extraordinary events that are beyond human control. This explains well why the boundary between miracle and ordinary natural event was not very opaque, indeed, it was permeable. Rain was always an expression of the mysterious other. The myth of Baal, for example, was an attempt to explain how the storm god, Baal, is responsible for this event. If the rain did not come in time, this mysterious other had some personal reasons to postpone it.

This being the case, we can say that ancient man lived in miracles. He could see every day how the mysterious other in various natural phenomena appeared and produced events that were beyond human control and comprehension. Such an ancient Near Eastern mythic background is a necessary precondition to understanding the Hebrew concepts used in the OT to speak about miracles or rather extraordinary events.

THE CONCEPT OF MIRACLE IN THE HEBREW LANGUAGE

The Hebrew language contains five different terms that can be connected with the concept of miracle. These terms are connected with the mighty acts of God in history. One of the most important terms is the feminine plural form of the adjective great: gedolot. The basic meaning of this plural form is mighty acts, or something similar. The adjective great is often connected with Yahweh and his mighty deeds in the OT. According to Mosis there are two roots for the theological tradition of Yahweh's greatness: (1) the Zion tradition, which is expressed in Psalms and in such expressions as “Great is Yahweh”; and (2) historical experiences. In particular, historical experiences are important in this connection because the mighty acts of Yahweh
are regarded as milestones in the history of Israel, indicating that God will take care of his people even in the unknown future.

A typical example of the mighty acts of God is marvelous events he is described as performing in the Land of Egypt. Therefore we read, for example (Dt 10:21): “[H]e is your God, who performed for you those great and awesome wonders that you saw with your own eyes.” In Psalm 106:21 the people are accused of forgetting the God “who had done great things in Egypt.” The great acts of God indicate that there are no other gods who can be compared with him: “Your righteousness reaches to the skies, O God, you who have done great things. Who, O God, is like you?” (Ps 71:19). Among the great things that God is reported to have done are not only historical events but also natural phenomena. Job 37 describes how God is behind all natural phenomena. In verses 5–6 it is said: “God’s voice thunders in marvelous ways; he does great things beyond our understanding. He says to the snow, ‘Fall upon the earth, and to the rain shower, ‘Be a mighty downpour.’” This passage of Job corroborates well our introductory remarks of ancient Near Eastern speculative thoughts: God’s mighty acts in nature are beyond human understanding or human efforts. God does not only perform great acts for his people but even his revenge can be great. Ezekiel 25:17 refers to Yahweh’s great revenges against Philistia.

The term, great deeds (gedolot) has also been used for the miracles performed by Elisha. Thus we read (2 Kgs 8:4), “The king was talking to Gehazi, the servant of the man of God, and he had said: ‘Tell me about all the great things Elisha has done.’” Elisha could do great things; and the people could do great sins. Thus, for example, the prophet Ezekiel accused his people of doing “utterly detestable things,” that is, great things of an evil nature. This expression appears three times in Ezekiel 8 (verses 6, 13 and 15) and indicates well how the term, great things emphasizes events and phenomena that are extraordinary in some sense, but do not necessarily fit in well with our category of the miracle.

As indicated above, in Deuteronomy 10:21 and Psalm 106:21, great things is used to describe the great things God performed in Egypt. In the Exodus story itself, as well as in Deuteronomy, the Hebrew term for sign (’ot) is used frequently to describe those mighty acts and plagues against the Egyptians. According to Exodus 10:1–2, “The Lord said to Moses, ‘Go to Pharaoh, for I have hardened his heart and the hearts of his officials so that I may perform these miraculous signs of mine among them, that you may tell your children and grandchildren how I dealt harshly with the Egyptians and how I performed my signs among them, and that you may know that I am the Lord.’” In Exodus 7:3 the Hebrew word ’ot (sign) is used together with another Hebrew word, mopet, portent,† “But I will harden Pharaoh’s heart . . . though I multiply my signs and portents in the land of Egypt.” Deuteronomy 6:22 connects the adjective great with sign: “Before our eyes the Lord sent miraculous signs and
portents—great and terrible—upon Egypt and Pharaoh and his whole household.” It is worth noting that the adjective great is connected with signs and portents in numerous other OT texts speaking about the mighty acts of God.5

Words for signs and wonders are often used in parallel and then the reference is to extraordinary things or events, as in Exodus 7:3. But sign can also be prophetic as in 1 Samuel 2:34: “And what happens to your two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, will be a sign to you—they will both die on the same day.” In a similar way Samuel predicted some signs to Saul that would take place so that Saul could be sure that God would be with him (1 Sam 10:7, 9). According to Deuteronomy 13:1–2, the false prophet can do signs and wonders and exhort the people to worship other gods than Yahweh: “If a prophet, or one who foretells by dreams, appears among you and announces to you a miraculous sign or portent, and if the sign or portent of which he has spoken takes place, and he says, ‘Let us follow other gods,’ gods you have not known, ‘and let us worship them.’”

While the terms ‘ot and mopet do not exclude the aspect of wonder or miracle, their basic meaning is sign. Sun and moon are signs for festivals, days, and years (Gen 1:14). Circumcision is a sign for the covenant God established with Abraham (Gen 17:11). The birth of the child can also be a sign (Is 7:11, 14). Sometimes it has been emphasized that the sign in Isaiah 7:14 refers to an extraordinary birth like the virgin birth. Even though such a reading cannot be categorically excluded it is clear that such an interpretation in Isaiah 7:14 is not necessary. The woman referred to in this verse is a young woman (‘almah) who is not necessarily a virgin (translated with parthenos in the Septuagint). For example, in Isaiah 37:30 (cf. 2 Kgs 19:29) the prophet Isaiah gives a sign of salvation to Hezekiah that refers to ordinary events: “This will be the sign for you, O Hezekiah: This year you will eat what grows by itself, and the second year what springs from that. But in the third year sow and reap, plant vineyards and eat their fruit.” On the other hand, in Isaiah 37:7–8 (cf. 2 Kgs 20:8–9) sign refers to an extraordinary natural phenomenon: “This is the Lord’s sign to you that the Lord will do what he has promised: I will make the shadow cast by the sun go back the ten steps it has gone down on the stairway of Ahaz.” So the sunlight went back the ten steps it had gone down.”

The prophet himself and his symbolic action can also be a sign for the coming event that Yahweh will realize. Therefore Isaiah was exhorted to walk naked: “Then the Lord said, ‘Just as my servant Isaiah has gone stripped and barefoot for three years, as a sign and portent against Egypt and Cush, so the king of Assyria will lead away stripped and barefoot the Egyptian captives and Cushite exiles, young and old, with buttocks bared—to Egypt’s shame’ “(Is 20:3–4). In a similar way both the prophet and his disciples are signs and portents in Israel for the message of Isaiah that will be realized (Is 8:18). Also Ezekiel himself became a sign to the people (Ez 24:24, 27). According to Zechariah 3:8 the high priest Joshua and his colleagues are
“men of portent” of the coming of the Messiah, the Branch: “Listen, O high priest Joshua and your associates seated before you, who are men symbolic of things to come: I am going to bring my servant, the Branch.”

Psalm 74 is a lamentation of the people who have experienced the destruction of the enemy. In verse 4 it is noted how the enemy has set up their signs of victory: “Your foes roared in the place where you met with us; they set up their standards as signs.” In this distress the people lament that they have no signs that is, prophetic visions, that could give them hope: “We are given no miraculous signs; no prophets are left, and none of us knows how long this will be” (Ps 74:9).

The term sign (‘ot) can also be used to denote the covenant between Yahweh and the people. In Ezekiel 20:12 the Sabbath is a sign of the covenant: “Also I gave them my Sabbaths as a sign between us, so they would know that I the Lord made them holy” (so also Ez 20:20). Beside signs and wonders we should also mention the Hebrew word nes, often used for standard, banner, signal, or sign, which could be stood up in the battle or as a pole for the copper snake (Num 21:8–9). But even this word could be used in the OT figuratively and its meaning in that case was similar to signs and wonders. According to Numbers 26:10, “the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them along with Korah, whose followers died when the fire devoured the 250 men. And they served as a warning sign.” Even a person can be a banner. In Isaiah 11:10 the reference is made to the Root of Jesse, that is, the Messiah who will stand as banner for the peoples: “In that day the Root of Jesse will stand as a banner for the peoples; the nations will rally to him, and his place of rest will be glorious.” Specifically, in Isaiah 40–55 the word for banner is used a decisive historical event where the people and the exiles are gathered (Is 49:22; 62:10). In later Hebrew and Aramaic as well as in rabbinical Hebrew, nes (banner) began to denote sign, wonder, and providential event.

Finally there are the Hebrew verb pl’ and the related words pele’ and nifla’ot (only in plural). Concerning the meaning of the verb pl’ Conrad writes that “the texts all deal with extraordinary phenomena, transcending the power of human knowledge and imagination.” Thus these Hebrew words refer to things that are beyond one’s power, difficult, extraordinary, or wonderful. Nifla’ot is used in the OT almost always as substantive wonderful acts or mighty acts. Job experienced (10:16) that God was against him and acted inexplicably against him: “If I hold my head high, you stalk me like a lion and again display your awesome power against me.”

The Hebrew word pele’ designates an extraordinary thing or event, which has often been translated with the English word, wonder. Typical is the expression about God who “performs wonder(s).” For example, in Exodus 15:11 the reference is made to the Exodus from Egypt and the mighty acts of God in the Reed Sea (so also in Ps 78:12): “Who among the gods is like you, O Lord? Who is like you—majestic in holiness, awesome in glory, working wonders.”
The semantic field of *pele* does not restrict it to wonders. For example, Isaiah 29:14 uses the word to describe unpredictable political events that Yahweh will realize in Judah (cf. Hab 2:5–8): “Therefore once more I will astound these people with wonder upon wonder; the wisdom of the wise will perish, the intelligence of the intelligent will vanish.” Isaiah 9:6 calls the coming righteous Davidic ruler with various names and one of them is Wonderful Counselor (*pele yo’ets*). These throne names in Isaiah 9:6 are connected with the Assyrian (and Babylonian) throne titles.11

Psalm 119:129–30 calls Yahweh’s instructions wonderful, which can give understanding: “Your statutes are wonderful; therefore I obey them. The unfolding of your words gives light; it gives understanding to the simple.” In a corresponding way *nifla’ot* is used for the Torah: “Open my eyes that I may see wonderful things in your law” (Ps 119:18); “Let me understand the teaching of your precepts; then I will meditate on your wonders” (Ps 119:27).

David can express that Jonathan’s love and friendship toward him was extraordinary: “I grieve for you, Jonathan my brother; you were very dear to me. Your love for me was wonderful, more wonderful than that of women” (2 Sam 1:26).

The Hebrew word *nifla’ot* is used when Yahweh’s deliverance from Egypt is described. Thus we read in Exodus 3:20: “So I will stretch out my hand and strike the Egyptians with all the wonders that I will perform among them.” In Psalm 106 reference is made to the same event: “When our fathers were in Egypt, they gave no thought to your miracles; they did not remember your many kindnesses, and they rebelled by the sea, the Reed Sea. . . . They forgot the God who saved them, who had done great things in Egypt, miracles in the land of Ham, and awesome deeds by the Red Sea” (Ps 106:7, 22).

The expression *do mighty acts* appears often in the OT when it speaks about God.12 Another common expression is to *tell mighty acts of God*, which emphasizes often God’s mighty acts in history that the people should commemorate.13 Psalm 107 is a thanksgiving hymn in which the great acts (*nifla’ot*) of Yahweh are commemorated. It contains four repetitions of the expression: “Let them give thanks to the Lord for his unfailing love and his wonderful deeds for humankind” (Ps 107:8, 15, 21, 31).

This survey has shown how the mighty acts of God are connected; in particular, the events of the Exodus from Egypt. We have also seen that there are several linguistic and thematic parallels between God’s mighty acts in creation and in history. This gives us reason to study this connection in detail.

**MIGHTY ACTS OF GOD IN CREATION AND IN HISTORY**

In the light of our introductory remarks it would be reasonable to assume that ancient speculative thought plays an important role in the description
of the historical events in the Hebrew tradition. The divine personal, you or other, is evident both in nature/creation and in historical events.

One of the most influential studies in understanding the history and religious ideas in early Israel is Frank Moore Cross’ *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic*. He argues that the mythical language of the Canaanite myth of Baal’s victory over chaos powers in creation was transformed to describe in early Hebrew epic how Yahweh managed to help his people in history. In the Canaanite myth, gods promised Baal a palace if he could destroy the powers of chaos and establish harmony. Baal struggled against *Yammu* (Chaos, Sea) and later against *Mot* (Death) and managed to establish harmony. He was granted the palace “which is his sanctuary where he is worshiped.”

Exodus 15 follows this same theme by describing the crisis, the political chaos that threatens the existence of Israel, and can be presented as follows:

- **Combat victory and theophany of Divine Warrior (vv 1–12)**
- **Salvation of the Israelites (vv 13–16a)**
- **Building of the sanctuary and procession (16b–17)**
- **Manifestation of Yahweh’s universal reign (18)**

Yahweh will appear and struggle against the enemies of Israel and establish his people in the land of Canaan. The sanctuary is established for Yahweh. Cross demonstrates in different ways that this connection functions well in the early poetic texts where the Divine Warrior is described. The themes of creation, in which the god struggles against the powers of chaos, were historicized in the early Hebrew epic. They indicate Israelite understanding of God who intervenes in historical events. Cross showed that this mythical pattern of the coming of Yahweh to help his people has lived in Hebrew epic and Israelite theology and has been used also in very late eschatological texts.

Cross’ analysis explains well the theological emphasis in the OT, according to which Yahweh is the Lord of creation and history. In particular, the Book of Isaiah takes up this connection. In his massive commentary on Isaiah 1–39, Hans Wildberger has analyzed some key texts that connect Yahweh’s mighty acts in creation and history. One good example is Isaiah 17:12–14:

Oh, the raging of many nations
they rage like the raging sea!
Oh, the uproar of the peoples
they roar like the roaring of great waters!
Although the peoples roar like the roar of surging waters,
when he rebukes them they flee far away,
driven before the wind like chaff on the hills,
like tumbleweeds before a gale.
In the evening, sudden terror!
before the morning, they are gone!
This is the portion of those who loot us,
the lot of those who plunder us.

Wildberger connects this passage to the Zion tradition, which is presented in Psalms 46, 48, and 76, among others. Nations are compared with raging chaotic waters that threaten the existence of the inhabitants of Jerusalem; but Yahweh will rebuke these waters and they will suddenly disappear. Similar texts in Isaiah 1–39, in which enemies are compared with chaotic powers attacking Jerusalem, are Isaiah 8:5–10 and 29:1–8, among others. I have contended elsewhere that these texts are closely connected with the story of Sennacherib’s invasion of Judah (Is 36–37; cf. 2 Kgs 18–19).

Sennacherib attempted to conquer Jerusalem but was stopped by mighty acts of God when the Assyrian army, according to 2 Kings 19:35, was destroyed by the angel of Yahweh.

There is a very useful analysis of how the language of creation is used to describe Yahweh’s salvation acts in history. It is in C. Stuhlmueller’s work *Creative Redemption in Deutero-Isaiah*. He has shown how the typical Hebrew vocabulary of creation motifs has been used in the texts that describe the redemption of Israel from the Babylonian exile: The “idea of creation served to enhance many features of the prophet’s concept of redemption, transforming it into an exceptionally wondrous redemptive act, performed with personal concern by Yahweh for his chosen people, bringing them unexpectedly out of exile, into a new and unprecedented life of peace and abundance, with repercussions even upon the cosmos and world inhabitants.” A good example is Isaiah 51:9–16. I have quoted this text below and added square brackets some explanations in order to emphasize how creation, Yahweh’s mighty acts in history, and the coming salvation from the Babylonian captivity are connected with each other.

9. Awake, awake! Clothe yourself with strength, O arm of the Lord.
Awake, as in days gone by,
as in generations of old.
Was it not you who cut Rahab to pieces,
who pierced that monster through?

[9. Yahweh has beaten Rahab, the symbol of the powers of chaos, in creation]

10. Was it not you who dried up
the sea, the waters of the great deep.
Who made a road in the depths of the sea
so that the redeemed might cross over?

[10. Yahweh has saved his people from slavery in Egypt]
11. The ransomed of the Lord will return; they will enter Zion with singing. Everlasting joy will crown their heads; gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away.

12. I, even I, am he who comforts you; who are you that you fear mortal men, The sons of men, who are but grass, that you forget the Lord your Maker, who stretched out the heavens and laid the foundations of the earth, that you live in constant terror every day because of the wrath of the oppressor, who is bent on your destruction; for where is the wrath of the oppressor?

14. The cowering prisoners will soon be set free; they will not die in their dungeon, nor will they lack bread.

15. For I am the Lord your God, who churns up the sea so that its waves roar—the Lord Almighty is his name.

16. I have put my words in your mouth and covered you with the shadow of my hand. I who set the heavens in place, who laid the foundations of the earth, and who says to Zion, “You are my people.”

The cursory reading of Isaiah 40–55 reveals that themes of creation and redemption of Israel are intertwined. The Lord of the creation is the Lord of history. The Lord who could execute mighty acts in creation can perform similar wonderful acts in history. Isaiah 43:9–13 presents us the following scenario.

All the nations gather together and the peoples assemble. Which of them foretold this and proclaimed to us the former things?
Let them bring in their witnesses to prove they were right, so that others may hear and say, “It is true.”

“You are my witnesses,” declares the Lord, “and my servant whom I have chosen, so that you may know and believe me and understand that I am he. Before me no god was formed, nor will there be one after me. I, even I, am the Lord, and apart from me there is no savior. I have revealed and saved and proclaimed—I, and not some foreign god among you. You are my witnesses,” declares the Lord, “that I am God. Yes, and from ancient days I am he. No one can deliver out of my hand. When I act, who can reverse it?”

The text seems to be dependent on the Babylonian creation-epic, *Enuma Elish*, according to which the creation was a process in which various gods came into existence. However, the text in Isaiah 43 emphasizes that no other gods have been before Yahweh or appear after him (in the process of creation). Therefore, Yahweh is the only one who can save his people from the Babylonian exile.

The idea of Yahweh’s coming to help his people continued in postbiblical apocalyptic literature. In his study, *Dawn of Apocalyptic*, Paul Hanson contended that many texts in Trito-Isaiah (Is 56–66) and Deutero-Zechariah are connected with this old idea about Yahweh’s kingship in creation. In the postexilic period this theme was developed further and it was used to describe how Yahweh will help his loyal servants against established and godless government in the land of Judea.

HISTORICAL CREDO

Our analysis has shown that Yahwism was deeply rooted in a belief that God acts in history. This explains well the so-called historical credos in the OT. The basic analysis of these credos was made by Gerhard von Rad. His massive work on the theology of the OT is based on this idea. God is no philosophical idea but a God whose mighty acts can be seen in creation and history. The OT contains several historical credos in which Yahweh’s mighty acts in history have been listed. Von Rad began his analysis with the historical credo in Deuteronomy 26:5–9. The one who brings first fruits and tithes to Jerusalem should recite the following credo:

Then you shall declare before the Lord your God: “My father was a wandering Aramean, and he went down into Egypt with a few people and lived
there and became a great nation, powerful and numerous. But the Egyptians mistreated us and made us suffer, putting us to hard labor. Then we cried out to the Lord, the God of our fathers, and the Lord heard our voice and saw our misery, toil and oppression. So the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great terror and with miraculous signs and portents. He brought us to this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey; and now I bring the first-fruits of the soil that you, O Lord, have given me.”

This credo uses typical terms for the mighty acts of God and indicates that Yahweh-belief is belief in God who intervenes in history with mighty and wonderful acts. There are several other texts where similar historical surveys of Israel have been presented. Such historical credos structure the history of Israel and emphasize that Yahweh has governed its course with his mighty acts. Therefore, it is also understandable why the actions of Yahweh in history are a constitutional element in OT theology. Horst Dietrich Preuss formulated a thesis that Yahweh-belief has always been belief in God who will also act in the future. The constitutional element in Yahwism is openness to the possibility of mighty and wonderful acts. This background helps us to understand the New Testament (NT) stories about the miracles of Jesus. They are not loans from the Hellenistic world but intimately connected with the OT and the Jewish milieu.

MIRACLE WORKERS

We have seen that, according to the OT, Yahweh has power to do mighty acts in creation and history. Therefore also a man who is close to God and becomes part of the divine sphere can perform wonders. Moses is capable of wonderful acts in Egypt because God has given this power to him, as we can read in Exodus 7:1: “Then the Lord said to Moses, ‘See, I have made you like God to Pharaoh, and your brother Aaron will be your prophet.’ ”

Problems of magic became actual in this connection. In the story of Exodus the Egyptian magicians could perform miracles similar to the miracles of Moses. Moses ordered Aaron’s staff to become a snake and Exodus 7:8–13 tells us that even Egyptian magicians could do the same. It is worth noting that the present form of the OT contains critical attitudes toward divination and magic. One reason for the rise of this criticism is that mighty acts of God have become the constitutional basis for the Israelite religion and, therefore, no new magical tricks or wonders can change this basis. We have already seen that Deuteronomy 13:1–3 warns the people that no extraordinary acts would lead it away from its God: ‘If a prophet, or one who foretells by dreams, appears among you and announces to you a miraculous sign or wonder, and if the sign or wonder of which he has spoken takes place, and he says, ‘Let us follow other gods,’ gods you have not known, ‘and let us worship
them,’ you must not listen to the words of that prophet or dreamer. The Lord your God is testing you to find out whether you love him with all your heart and with all your soul.” This warning indicates well how the religious reality was understood in Deuteronomy and subsequently also in the present form of the OT. All kinds of extraordinary acts and events can take place but they cannot change or nullify the mighty acts of God in history, which constitute the existence of Israel and guide the people to live according to instructions of God given through Moses.

CONFUSED MODERN READER

When a modern reader studies the OT he may be readily confused as to how to interpret texts about the mighty power of Yahweh, manifest in producing wonderful acts in history. I have attempted to level the path to understanding this problem in the context of the ancient Near Eastern speculative thought that lies behind the OT. Clearly, it is impossible to choose any restricted scientific approach in studying the narratives that report the biblical miracles. Our choice options are limited and simple. First, we must simply understand the fundamental attitudes toward reality that prevailed at the time the narratives were crafted. Second, we cannot avoid reductionism when we employ scientific methodologies that are bent upon trying to prove whether some extraordinary events have actually taken place.

The use of such compartmentalized methods of verification imply that a scholar wants to seek some natural explanation for the extraordinary act in the text. After all, in terms of scientific philosophy it is impossible to conclude, by methods of scientific verifiability, that a miracle has occurred. If such a result would be achieved then other scholars could replicate the examination and come to the same conclusion. If that were possible the object of examination would not be a miracle.

Therefore, in scientific analysis the fundamental question is not whether a miracle has occurred, but rather whether we can discern a responsible way to approach the story of miracle. If we aim to give a scientific answer then we have simply decided to find relevant natural clarifications to the outcome of the story of miracle. A third option is, of course, that modern scholars consider scientific and verifiable methods as restricted approaches to understanding phenomena that are described as miraculous. In that case scientific analysis can attempt to give useful information about the story of the miracle without proposing to explode the story or afford us a final answer regarding the reality behind the story of the miracle.

When a modern scholar begins to study an OT miracle text he or she usually takes into consideration the following three methodological viewpoints that concern the transmission of the text.30
1. With the aid of textual criticism he studies the Hebrew text and ancient translations in order to establish as accurate and reliable a version as possible. Copyists can have caused various inaccuracies or intentional modifications in the text, though it is always surprising how well the biblical texts have been transmitted over the centuries.31

2. Literary and redaction (editorial) critical analysis is an attempt to discuss in which way the story has been reworked. For example, scholars agree that the Elijah and Elisha stories in the present form of the Deuteronomic History32 are based on earlier traditions. By carefully analyzing these stories in 1 and 2 Kings it is possible to detect which parts have been reworked by Deuteronomistic redactor(s) or editors. With the aid of literary and redactional analysis it is possible to come closer to older literary cores behind the present form of the OT text.33 For example, in the biblical story of the mysterious setback of the Assyrian army at Jerusalem (2 Kgs 18–19 = Is 36–37) I argued that 2 Kings 18:14–16 consists of an independent source that should be separated from 2 Kings 18:13, 17–19:38 (= Is 36–37) because it had been added later by a different editor.34

3. Finally a scholar has the option of dealing with possible oral traditions behind the transmission process of the OT texts. In the case of the Elijah and Elisha stories it is necessary to discuss whether these two story-cycles have been transmitted together or whether they were two separate stories that finally were modified and edited into the Deuteronomistic History.

After having established the transmission process of the biblical text the scholar relates the evidence of different literary strata to other available methods.

4. Form historical analysis of phrasing, sentences, and sections of the story aims to discuss which kind of text we are reading. For example, the literary form of the letter is different than a novel. Scientific articles with footnotes differ from newspaper articles, and so on. Every literary form in the OT has also its own typical features. For example, 2 Kings 18:14–16 is a typical annalistic account that apparently originates from royal archives of Jerusalem; while 2 Kings 18:13, 17–19:38 (= Is 36–37) is composed of two stories circulated among the people. These considerations help the modern scholar to evaluate his sources when he makes an historical synthesis.

5. Tradition history is a method used to study the cultural, religious, and ideological background of the text. For example, 2 Kings 18:13, 17–19:38 (= Is 36–37) is possible to connect with Zion theology such as is presented in Psalms 46, 48, and 76, for example. These psalms deal with the attacks of nations against Zion and the way the Lord of creation, Yahweh, will rebuke these enemies and save his city. This same theme is visible also in many texts of Isaiah 1–39 (8:5–10; 17:12–14; 30:27–33; 31:4–9; 33) and gives the scholarly orientation in which the spiritual and theological atmosphere 2 Kings 18:13, 17–19:38 (= Is 36–37) has been composed.

6. The historical situation or setting of the text aims to detect all available historical information that can be acquired. In the case of 2 Kings 18:13, 17–19:38 it is possible to date the Assyrian invasion in Judah in 701 bc. We
have Sennacherib’s own inscriptions related to this event as an independent source outside of the Bible. Sennacherib tells us that he was victorious and humiliated Hezekiah. The Greek historian, Herodotos (Book II, 141), preserved this story as he heard it from Egyptian priests, who recorded in their archives the mystical setback of the Assyrian army. The famous Lachish Reliefs found in the palace of Sennacherib in Niniveh depict how the Assyrian army besieged and overtook the city. Finally, we have also archaeological evidence that shows the total destruction of the cities of Judah in that year, 701.

All these methodological options give the modern scholar a better possibility of evaluating which kind of story we have in the Bible, when the biblical record recounts an extraordinary event or miracle, to use our modern term. If the scholar wants to continue and attempts to explain such an extraordinary event he must find good scientific solutions for the miracle. In case he succeeds, the phenomenon no longer can be characterized as a miracle because natural scientific causes have been discovered to explain it.

EXAMPLES OF SCIENTIFIC ATTEMPTS TO PROVE A MIRACLE

The modern scholar who examines the story of a miracle attempts to find a relevant explanation to it by seeking cause-and-effect relations in it. An illustrative example could be the 10 plagues in Exodus and the way these events have been interpreted in the OT. The modern scholar can illumine the story of the 10 plagues by seeking possible prototypes in the ancient Near East. For example, he finds that even Egyptian sources (The Admonitions of Ipuwer) record that at certain times under certain circumstances the River Nile turned to blood. Assuming that there is some real natural phenomenon behind this transformation of the river to blood, the scholar may present a theory that could explain the order of these plagues. Greta Hort has written an interesting article in which she presents the following natural theory for the plagues. Hort’s theory is very detailed and I shall briefly summarize its main ideas.

Heavy rains in the highlands of Ethiopia caused the tropical red earth in the basin of the Blue Nile and Atbara to be discharged into the river. This turned the water red. The Nile seemed to be turned to blood (first plague in July–August). A consequence was that oxygen decreased and great amounts of fish died. When fish did not eat the tadpoles, many frogs appeared (second plague in September–October). Unusual flooding and dead fish became a good breeding ground for insects, which can explain mosquitoes (third plague in October–November) and bloodsucking flies (fourth plague). The disease of cattle can be explained as having been caused by bacteria that multiplied in the dead fish and in the fly stings on the cattle (fifth plague). The
inflammation or anthrax was caused by flies that transmitted this disease to human beings (sixth plague). In this way Hort could explain the six first plagues as natural consequences of the unusual high flooding of the Nile.

The plagues of hailstorms (seventh plague between November and March) and locusts (eighth plague in February–March) can easily be explained as frequent natural events in Egypt. So also the case of darkness (ninth plague in March), which is caused regularly by sandstorms called *khamsin*. Assuming that this chain of natural catastrophes followed each other in the land of Egypt, we can well imagine that it was understood as divine intervening. In this way the modern scholar may find relevant scientific explanation for the miracles recounted in the Book of Exodus. The result of this kind of scientific analysis is the explosion of the miracle narrative. In point of fact, in such a case, there were no miracles, namely, events contrary to natural laws.

Another example of the way to give a natural explanation to a miracle narrative is that regarding the mysterious destruction of the Assyrian army (2 Kgs 19:35). “That night the angel of the Lord went out and put to death a hundred and eighty-five thousand men in the Assyrian camp. When the people got up the next morning—there were all the dead bodies!” After having studied Sennacherib’s inscriptions I conclude that they seem to follow the principle detected also in other Assyrian annals. All setbacks have been played down. Herodotos’ story is another witness to the mysterious setback of the Assyrian army, and is independent of both the biblical narrative and Sennacherib’s reports. Herodotos tells that field mice destroyed the weapons of the Assyrian soldiers. The mice-motif is probably connected to the god, Apollos Smintheus, that was responsible for the bubonic plagues. In a corresponding way the angel motif has been used in the OT as referring to the bubonic plague (2 Sam 24). It is my view of the events of 701 BC in Judah that the Assyrian army was victorious, as indicated in 2 Kings 18:14–16, and Sennacherib’s inscriptions; but that it was forced to stop its military invasion because of the bubonic plague.

These examples give a good indication of how scholars can analyze wisely and accurately some of the biblical stories of miracles. On the other hand, it is clear that scholars do not always want to give a scientific explanation. One reason may be that they do not regard restricted scientific viewpoints to be good enough to solve the problem of some miracles described in the biblical text; or that they see that our present knowledge does not yet allow us to understand completely the dynamics of a given reported miracle. The American philosopher and the “father of semiotics,” Charles Sanders Peirce, formulated this in a nice way:

If, walking in a garden on a dark night, you were suddenly to hear the voice of your sister crying to you to rescue her from a villain, would you stop to reason out the metaphysical question of whether it were possible for one
mind to cause material waves of sound and for another mind to perceive them? If you did, the problem might probably occupy the remainder of your days. In the same way, if a man undergoes any religious experience and hears the call of his Savior, for him to halt till he has adjusted a philosophical difficulty would seem to be an analogous sort of thing, whether you call it stupid or whether you call it disgusting. If on the other hand, a man has had no religious experience, then any religion not an affectation is as yet impossible for him; and the only worthy course is to wait quietly till such experience comes. No amount of speculation can take the place of experience.

NOTES


3. I follow the New International Version translation if I do not interpret the text otherwise.

4. S. Wagner notes in his article concerning móp’t (*TDOT* 8, 174–81) that 19 of 36 passages where the Hebrew word appears “occur in an immediate or, in a few instances, indirect connection with the Exodus event” (175). In a similar way F. J. Helfmeyer, in his article ’ôth (*TDOT* 1, 167–88) asserts that the Hebrew word ’ôt appears often in the contexts of Exodus events.

5. See, e.g., Job 24:17; Ps 78:43; 105:27; Neh 9:10.

6. According to H. J. Fabry (*TDOT* 9, 436–42), the secular use of n’s remains speculative because the word is not mentioned in any of the Old Testament descriptions of battle. It is also worth noting that in the Qumran War Scroll (1QM) the Hebrew word ’ôt denotes “military standard” and not n’s. Cf. also Ps 74:4, quoted above.


9. Ex 15:11; Is 25:1; Ps 77:14; 78:12; 88:10, 12.

10. The Hebrew expression yam sûf (Ex 10:19; 13:8; 15:4–22; 23:31; Ps 106:22) means the Reed Sea. In the Septuagint the name was translated *thalassa erythra* and through that term the translation Red Sea was established in many biblical translations.

Miracles in the Old Testament

12. See Ex 3:10; Jo 3:5; Jer 21:2; Ps 72:18; 78:4; 86:10; 98:1; 105:5; cf. also Ps 107:24.
13. See, e.g., Jgs 6:13; Ps 9:2; 26:7; Ps 71:17 [the verb higgid]; 75:2; 96:3.
16. See Dt 33:2–3, 26–29; Jgs 5; and Ps 29, 77–78, 114.
17. Cross, *Canaanite Myths*, 144.
21. Ibid., 233. Italics are Stuhlmueller’s.
23. See the study by Hanson, *The Dawn of Apocalyptic*.
26. See, e.g., Job 24:2–13; 1 Sam 12:8; Ps 78; 105; 136:1–26; Neh 9:6–14. It is worth noting that even these passages contain Hebrew terminology that refers to the mighty acts of God.
29. See, e.g., Ex 22:17; Dt 18:10; Mi 5:11; Mal 3:5. A good survey of how magic and divination was practiced in ancient Palestine and Syria is Ann Jeffers (1996), *Magic and Divination in Ancient Palestine and Syria, Studies in the History and Culture of the Ancient Near East* 8, Leiden: Brill.
32. Scholars have established that Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, 1–2 Samuel, and 1–2 Kings consist of coherent historical work in which similar vocabulary, style, and theology have been used. They call this work Deuteronomistic History. This historical
work received its final form during the exile in the sixth century, but it contains earlier traditions that have been adopted, modified, and redacted.


37. See, e.g., Bürchner (1927), Sminthe, Sminthos, Paulys Real-Encyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft (PRECAW) 2. Reihe III/1, Stuttgart, cols 724–25. The name Smintheus is etymologically derived from the Greek word μυς (mouse).


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Miracles in the Old Testament


Religio-historical investigation has carefully observed the contacts between the Greco-Roman miracle tradition and the New Testament (NT). Simultaneously, the rich Jewish tradition was too often overlooked. This tradition included historical persons, like Theudas or the “Egyptian,” but also the later reputation of the great figures of scripture. Later generations eagerly retold biblical stories, always changing more or less the original by adding, omitting, or modifying the biblical narrative. Thus it is a fascinating task to study exactly what was retained and what omitted, or what new material or perspective was introduced to the stories. This is the impact of the study of the “Rewritten Bible,” or more precisely here, the study of rewritten biblical stories. The investigation of the narrative tradition tells how and when new details were added to the reputation of the biblical figures. When the question of miracles is asked, markedly new traits are seen in the later traditions. I have investigated all Jewish texts retelling the Old Testament (OT) miracles diachronically in my book The Old Testament Miracle-Workers in Early Judaism. In this article I will briefly present the most important biblical figures who were treated as miracle workers in the later tradition.

ABRAHAM

The biblical material on Abraham includes nothing that a modern reader could define as miracles. However, the later tradition eagerly retold the stories and partly reshaped the figure of the father of the nation. In this tradition, Abraham was considered invincible, and sometimes he also performed
miracles. Jews were known as great astrologers in classical antiquity. Some Jewish teachers rigorously rejected astrology as magic, but others proudly accepted it, and Abraham especially was presented as the father of all astrologers. The only biblical starting point was Genesis 15:5, which informs us merely that God showed Abraham the stars of heaven; but this was enough for people who were willing to present him as a master of all astrological knowledge. Artapanus, an Egyptian Jew, wrote a romantic, historical work, Concerning the Jews, that is preserved only in fragments; but in his work many biblical figures were reshaped as astrologers, especially Abraham.

Genesis tells us how God miraculously protected and saved Sarah, who had been taken from Abraham and led to Pharaoh’s house. In the Jewish tradition, Abraham, who is a powerless man in the scripture, receives a more important role. The fragments from Qumran (Genesis Apocryphon, 20) inform us that Abraham prayed that the ruler must be punished, and tell us how God sent a spirit who tormented the king during two years such that no Egyptian was able to help him. The Pharaoh gave Sarah back, and Abraham was willing to help: he prayed for the king and laid his hands upon his head, and the spirit was banished from him. Perhaps this story helped people to make Abraham an exorcist, who expelled bird-like demons (cf. Gen. 15:11), as in the Book of Jubilees (11.11–13) and in the Apocalypse of Abraham (13.4–14). In this role, he certainly acted as patron of Jewish exorcists: what Abraham did could not be wrong.

MOSES

Although almost all the biblical stories were retold by ancient Jewish teachers, the stories about Moses received a special status. We hardly can imagine how minutely Jews studied these stories, finding both urgent problems and new solutions that are both rather alien to a modern reader’s perspective. This especially is true of the stories with miraculous elements. The later tradition reflects the ideas of the retellers. The stories of Moses’ childhood and youth were retold and the miraculous traits were exaggerated. Moses’ birth was foretold, he was born circumcised, and his capacity to learn was extraordinary.

Both Philo and Josephus seem to have believed that God taught Moses to perform miracles in the theophany at Horeb, so that he could repeat them at will. Indeed, he needed these skills, because the Jewish tradition often retold in rich colors the meeting with Egyptian opponents. The opponents are interpreted as priests (Artapanus, Josephus), sorcerers (Jubilees, Philo), physicians (Artapanus), or bad philosophers (Philo): All these variants mean that the biblical story is used to attack a new front; the ancient scholars did not always distinguish sharply between their own time and the biblical era, but mostly used the biblical material to attack opponents of their own days. The tradition gave names to Moses’ opponents (Jannes and Jambres), and
had here the evidence that miracles could also be performed by people hating God: some miracles were allowed and were done by God’s will, some were not, but were caused by evil spirits.

All the Jewish writers known to me retold the plagues in Egypt (Ex 7:14–12:36) freely. The roles of God and Moses vary greatly. Sometimes, as in Wisdom 17, it is only God who performed miracles, but sometimes God is hardly mentioned, and Moses gains more importance. The writers change the order, omit some plagues or combine them with others, as Artapanus does (Fr. 3.27–33), and embellish the original with many interesting details. If they do not interpret the plagues allegorically, as Philo often does, they may describe the catastrophe in a way that adds new details, such as the gnats of Exodus 8:16–18. Sometimes the retelling simply exaggerates them, as when Josephus claims that the greater part of the Egyptians died from the wounds (Ex 9:8–12; Antiquities 2.304). Many details, like the unnatural darkness (Ex 10:21–29), were soon adopted by Christian writers like Melito of Sardes, and became a part of the Christian tradition.

Hardly any modern Bible reader is able to repeat in accurate order all the details of the events at the Red Sea (Ex 13:17–14:31), and all early Jewish versions deviate from the biblical original. The tradition treats Israel’s overwhelming victory over the Egyptians freely and in rich colors. Ezekiel the Tragedian, for example, puts everything in the form of a classical Greek tragedy, imitating the famous Persians of Aeschylus. The narrative tradition, like Philo but especially Biblical Antiquities of Pseudo-Philo, knew that Israel was divided: some tribes were willing to surrender, others willing to fight (10.3). Of course, the number of drowned Egyptians was given variously, sometimes a million (Ezekiel the Tragedian, v. 203), sometimes (Josephus) in precise numbers of infantry, chariots, and horsemen (Antiquities 2.324). These events were never forgotten in Judaism: the Passover was always present in Israel, and the hymns celebrating the great miracle never ceased.

The Christian tradition has always used the journey from Egypt to Canaan in ethical instruction (cf. 1 Cor 10), but Jewish scholars had long before paved the way for such applications of the Exodus and the triumphal and redemptive metaphor that it became. For Philo especially, the escape from Egypt and the trials on the way meant, allegorically, that the soul must leave pleasures and go through much arduous labor to freedom. This kind of escape meant, according to him, that a human being becomes as divine as possible through the ordeal. The model is openly Platonic. But all the biblical stories lived in literal interpretation, too, and with new details. The miracles of manna, the water from the rock, the mutiny of Korah and his sons (or did the sons join their father?), Israel’s punishment by snakes, and the miraculous help through the bronze snake were, like all biblical miracles, retold in early Jewish tradition. They attest to the way in which the concept of miracle was alive in Judaism.
Moses’ death meant a puzzling problem for early Jewish teachers. On the one hand, the Torah says that he died. On the other, “Moses” tells about his own death in the Torah. Moreover, Deuteronomy 34:1–8 first tells about the death and burial of Moses, and then informs us that he was “a hundred and twenty years old when he died, yet his eyes were not weak nor his strength diminished.” These two details allowed different speculations about the end of his earthly life. Some thought that he did not die at all. Moses died and did not die, in the tradition. These various versions were to some degree compatible with and perhaps reflective of Greco-Roman mythology. Josephus depicts Moses as disappearing like Aeneas or Romulus (Antiquities 4.326). However, one is reminded that similar stories were told in the scripture about Enoch and Elijah.

Like Abraham, the father of the nation, Moses, the law-giver, was always present in early Judaism. The scripture often tells about Moses’ great deeds, which meant that his miracles were retold and reshaped for centuries, first among Jews and then among Christians, as well.

**JOSHUA**

In most cases, the scripture tells about miracles of God, and although human beings may act as his helpers, it is usually clear that the great deeds are not their work but God’s. Werner Kahl developed a useful tool that leads scholars to ask for the role of the human beings. This role is clearly a subject of variation in the later tradition. When God led Israel to Canaan, he and not Joshua performed the great miracles, namely, stopped the Jordan (Jo 3:1–5:1) and destroyed the walls of Jericho (Jo 5:13–6:27). Already here, Joshua acted as God’s helper and as a superb leader of the nation. Moreover, he was able to stop the sun with his prayer (Jo 10:8–14). But Joshua understandably may receive a stronger role as miracle worker in the later tradition.

The militant Joshua was, however, a person who divided opinions in later traditions. Ben Sira could still refer to his deeds freely (Sir 46:1–8), but he was a problematic figure for people who had to deal with foreign overlords in Israel. Josephus heavily abridges the stories of Joshua, and does certainly not emphasize his militant miracles (Antiquities 5.17–61). However, there were others who took the opposite direction. Joshua, the spirit-filled and militant leader of the nation, was highly esteemed by everyone who was waiting for God’s help against overlords. This part of the tradition is preserved only in fragments, but it illumines the distinctively Jewish element in miracle stories. Miracles and God’s help in the sacred history belong together with the hope for a usable future. The eschatological hope waited for another man like Joshua. This thought is attested in the fragments the last Jewish rebels left behind in Masada during the Jewish war. Understandably, Josephus and
other authors collaborating with Romans were not emphasizing the material that had stimulated, for example, Theudas and the “Egyptian.”

SAMSON

Samson, the spirit-filled judge (Jgs 13–16), was simultaneously a problem and an inspiration for early Jewish teachers. On the one hand, he was not an ideal model for later Jews; his sexual morals and his affair with Delilah, the Philistine woman, were not compatible with the ideals with which Jewish teachers were inclined to inspire their followers. We happen to have a Jewish sermon that explains how Samson, the man of God, could lose the spirit and be beaten by his enemies. The reason was, of course, that his errors gave Satan an opportunity to destroy his power.

On the other hand, Samson was clearly a man of God. The spirit moving him around and his extraordinary physical power made him useful for everyone who supported brutal violence against the opponents of Israel. Pseudo-Philo, in his Biblical Antiquities, retells these stories, expanding them and emphasizing the violence. Josephus, of course, shows that after the Jewish war he had learned his lesson. He had no more interest in spirit-filled men who mixed religion with militant violence. A careful investigation of Josephus’ text shows that the role of the divine spirit is removed from the stories. Sometimes, retelling biblical stories meant a quarrel about the heritage of Judaism. Josephus, who had promised that he did not add or omit anything in his accounts of the history of his people, nonetheless, took part in this quarrel through additions, omissions, and changes.

DAVID

The biblical David did nothing that we would call a miracle. However, the scripture tells us something which could be and indeed was useful for the retellers of later generations. It is told that an evil spirit tormented Saul, and that David was sought to relieve his problems with playing music (1 Sam 16:14–23). This was enough for later Jewish exorcists. Pseudo-Philo expands the story by rendering the psalm David sang. In this psalm, David exactly tells the cosmological origin of the demons and threatens the spirit with a harsh punishment.

The psalm added by Pseudo-Philo resembles hymns in Qumran (esp. 11Q11) and attest that Jews attempted to ward off evil spirits with help of biblical and more or less reworked Psalms inside as well as outside of the walls of Qumran. In this tradition, the decisive element seemed to have been the cosmological knowledge. An exorcist who was able to describe the cosmological order got the upper hand over evil spirits. God created the world
and set here his order, and it is not allowed that any spirit should violate it by assaulting God’s people. On the other hand, the Book of Jubilees (10) boldly says that the reason why there are demons in the world is that it is their mission to assault all nations except Israel and lead them astray.

ELIJAH

The biblical Elijah (1 Kgs 17–2 Kings 2) caused enthusiasm and problems similar to the ambivalence felt regarding Joshua. Elijah, who did numerous miracles in scripture, was the zealous prophet who fearlessly stood before kings, attacked the false prophets, and killed hundreds of them. He called fire from heaven to destroy his enemies, and finally he left this world in a fiery chariot. Malachi promised that Elijah the prophet would return to this world to complete a new mission given by God.

Ben Sira could still celebrate Elijah freely without political reservations (48:1–11). At least in the times of Biblical Antiquities of Pseudo-Philo (48.1) he was even identified with Phinehas, another zealous servant of God (Num 25:6–15). The man who was expected to return had returned already once and saved Israel. This identification attests how closely miracles were connected with politics. Josephus, of course, treated Elijah with caution and did not emphasize his political fervor (Antiquities 8.319–9.28). However, the power of the biblical stories prevented him from completely removing Elijah’s political import.

ELISHA

Unlike his teacher, Elijah (1 Kgs 19–2 Kgs 13), Elisha never found a marked reputation in early Judaism as a leader. Of course, the stories of his miracles were noted (cf. Sir. 48:12–16) and Josephus was clearly fond of him (cf. Antiquities 8.535–s9.180). However, in the scripture Elisha rarely played a political role, which means that he was never a favorite of later militant miracle-workers. However, not all miracles needed political importance. Some of them happened in the ordinary circles of daily life. It is precisely here that Elisha’s miracles could be imitated. Healings, feedings, resuscitations of dead people; surprisingly many of Elisha’s miracles were repeated in Jesus’ activity.

ISAIAH

Sometimes the rewriting of the scripture narratives already begins within the OT, itself. A good example of that is what the Hebrew Bible (OT) says about the miracles of Isaiah, namely the healing of the king Hezekiah. The story is reported with a prominent role for the agency of the prophet in
the similar narratives of 2 Kings 18:13–20:11 and Isaiah 36:1–38:22; but in 2 Chronicles 32 the prophet’s role has been almost totally forgotten. Ben Sira, for his part, gives a role back to Isaiah and expands it (48:20–25). It was now Isaiah who turned the sun back and prolonged the king’s life. Taken separately, the lines in Ben Sira attribute a very strong role to the prophet, and only the wider context and the Jewish faith tradition prevented the reader from interpreting Isaiah as a figure who was able to perform great miracles without God’s help. Ben Sira apparently considered God’s covenant with David broken, and did not emphasize the role of the king. The king’s normally primary role is reduced. The author was not awaiting a Davidic king. Other figures, like prophets, took the role of David’s divinely inspired dynasty.

JEREMIAH

When Jesus asked his followers to tell him who he was thought to be, according to popular opinion, they replied, “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets” (Matthew 16:14). This answer is one of the several fragments illuminating the role of Jeremiah in the later tradition. The scripture only tells about his prophecies, but early Judaism knew more. Unfortunately, we only have fragments of this tradition. However, Second Maccabees reports that in Judah’s vision, Jeremiah gives a sword from heaven to the Jews (2 Macc 15.13–16). The Lives of the Prophets, a collection of small biographies of the biblical prophets, refers to Jeremiah’s miracles in Egypt where he was exiled. He offered protection against snakes and crocodiles, a role that Egyptians used to give Horus. In the Life of Jeremiah, the prophet also takes and hides the ark, which is protected from the enemies, and causes a rock to swallow it. There it waits for the resurrection and the end of the world. This is only one of the several versions of the story of how the ark was rescued when the enemies destroyed Jerusalem. Apparently, Jeremiah became a strong, eschatological figure. Some of his extrabiblical miracles were militant.

DANIEL

The figure of Daniel, the sage at kings’ courts, offers a good example of how the tradition of the biblical miracles unfolded in early Judaism. The book of Daniel was not yet written when the Egyptian Jews translated the scripture into Greek as the Septuagint (LXX). The Aramaic and the Greek texts found their final form very slowly. The role of miracles and miracle-workers varies between these two different versions. But the later writings in particular reworked the traditions that had already been written before the book of Daniel, and set new accents. The Life of Daniel, for example, pays attention only to the story told in chapter 4, and introduces Behemoth, the
demon who tortured the king. Daniel’s faithful intercession during seven years led to forgiveness for the king’s sins and to his healing. This all shows how flexibly stories could be used in the later tradition.

EZEKIEL

Sometimes the later tradition needed only a few biblical words to produce a miracle story. At other times a long passage was reinterpreted and a miracle was introduced into it. The use of the long biblical book of Ezekiel offers examples of both, and more. Ezekiel 47:10 mentions fishermen (“Fishermen will stand along the shore; from En Gedi to En Eglaim there will be places for spreading nets”). Apparently, these words were enough to produce a tradition, which the Life of Ezekiel (v. 11a) summarizes as follows. “Through prayer he furnished them of his own accord with an abundant supply of fish.” The Life does not tell more, and apparently the author considered it needless. The background story was apparently well known to the ancient audience, but unfortunately not to us.

A completely different history of tradition is revealed when another passage in the Life of Ezekiel is examined. The biblical book of Ezekiel includes in chapter 37 a vision of dead bones that are miraculously resuscitated. The historical sense of the vision is unambiguous: The people of Israel will rise again and return from the exile. Now, however, the interpretation is very concrete. The prophet showed the miracle of resuscitation to the enemies of Israel. The Life is not the only source in which the concrete interpretation is attested. It appears in fragments at Qumran (4Q385) and surprisingly often in early Christian sources. The prophecy made Ezekiel a prophet who revived dead people, and this tradition could be used in various ways.

CONCLUSION

The modern reader no longer lives in the world of the people who lived in the time of the NT. Historical analysis helps us to understand how ancient people interpreted what they heard and read. When dealing with miracles, the task has been and is very difficult. However, it should be clear that the vivid Jewish miracle tradition has been widely neglected. The biblical stories of the OT miracles were frequently retold, often freely and innovatively. Biblical passages that do not include miracles at all were reinterpreted. This tradition of telling and retelling miracles often included narratives of battles between good and evil spirits. Miracles could be militant, but they could also happen in ordinary daily life and play no political role. Consequently, the traditions could empower political leaders, attempting to legitimate themselves with traditional miracles. It could also encourage people to apply to the Jewish world all the Mediterranean magic and call themselves followers
of Solomon the wise. This fascinating setting forms the background of Jesus’ miracles in the Gospels.

The history of investigation shows that it has not been easy for scholars to deal with miracles. We have often been tempted to think we are much smarter and understand everything better than ancient people. The scholarly failures that have derived from that supposition should make us cautious.

NOTES


2. The term “Rewritten Bible” was first used by Geza Vermes and soon by several scholars who, unfortunately, used the phrase differently. See Erkki Koskenniemi and Pekka Lindqvist, Rewritten Bible, Rewritten Stories, Studies in Rewritten Bible 1, Antti Laato and Jacques van Ruiten, eds., in press.

3. Pekka Lindqvist investigates the story of Moses, who broke the tablets of the Law, and presents how problematic early Jewish writers found the story, in her book, Sin at Sinai: Early Judaism Encounters Exodus, 32, Studies in Rewritten Bible 2, Åbo, in press.

4. See especially Artapanus, Fr. 3.1–4, and Biblical Antiquities 9, but also Philo, Moses 1.1–33 and Josephus, Antiquities 2.205–37.

5. See especially the ancient book about Pharaoh’s magicians, Jannes and Jambres, preserved today in fragments, but referred to by Pliny, Philo, Origen, and the Decretum Galasi. A strong ancient tradition on magic preceded this work.


7. According to Numbers 16:32, Korah and his sons were killed, but they are subsequently mentioned in Numbers 26:11. Consequently, Pseudo-Philo allows the sons to reject their father’s call and confess their commitment to the Law (16:5).

8. Kahl has helped scholars to consistently ask who is making, who is mediating, and who is praying for a miracle, or in his terms, who is the BNP (“Bearer of the Numinous Power” actually causing the miracle), who the MNP (“Mediator of the Numinous Power” used as the agent of the BNP), and who the PNP (“Petitioner of the Numinous Power” asking the BNP to make the miracle). See Werner Kahl (1994), New Testament Miracle Stories in their Religious-Historical Setting. A Religionsgeschichtliche Comparison from a Structural Perspective, Forschungen zur Religion und Literature des Alten und Neuen Testaments (FRLANT) 163, 62–65, Göttingen: VandenHoeck und Ruprecht.


10. See chapter 7 of this volume.


REFERENCES


There is miracle and miracle. Or, more accurately, there is miracle and there is prodigy, two aspects of the “wonderful” that need to be mutually distinguished. The Hebrew vocabulary does not always differentiate the two in the Old Testament (OT) stories. Their domains overlap and there is a reason for this, as we shall see: interpretation of the sign is decisive.

This chapter focuses on a somewhat embarrassing text, which is strategically situated at the heart of Israel’s self-consciousness, namely, in the book of Exodus. The story has to do with Moses’ training before his return to Egypt, where a price has been put on his head (Ex 4:1–9). After repeated objections by Moses to God’s mission, he is commissioned to perform a series of three awesome acts that should convince Egyptians and Hebrews alike of God’s presence and power. Convincing Pharaoh was designed to get him to let the Israelites out of bondage. Convincing the Hebrews was intended to encourage them effectively to leave.

Let us reflect upon the differentiations to be made between the supernatural and the miracle proper, concentrating on this most intriguingly relevant text. Exodus 4:1–9 presents all the appearances of magic. Scholars have regularly stumbled over these verses that, biblically speaking, are unexpected and paradoxical. The very fact that Egyptian magicians are capable of duplicating most of the wonders displayed by Moses and Aaron at Pharaoh’s court seems sufficient to give any reader a spontaneous impression of unease.

Yet, that initial reaction may be premature and bypass the essential message of the text. Moses’ signs are polyvalent, differing in their psychological bearing according to three elements: the person of the miracle-worker, the...
nature of the wonder, and the conflicting standpoints of the witnesses. The Egyptians and the Hebrews do not see the same phenomena eye to eye. We can draw substantial conclusions if we sharpen our definition of the miracle and the sign within it.

THE SUPERNATURAL AND THE MIRACLE

Edgar Poe considered that when the supernatural is approached through the “Calculus of Probabilities,” it is an anomaly to apply “the most rigidly exact in science . . . to the shadow and spirituality of the most intangible in speculation.” Belief in a miracle or in a prodigious event rests upon the conviction that there exists an invisible powerhouse, a heaven, that at times breaks through from the invisible to the visible (see Is 64:1).

The miracles that the present world acknowledges are of the medical order, of the electronic sphere, of special exploration, of genetic manipulation, and the like. Today, Moses’ burning bush would be a technical creation at Hollywood. Such wonders leave us blasé or desperate. For, in a one-dimensional technological world, the human being is a senseless speck lost in a meaningless horizontal cosmos. Desperation leads to violence, for the feeling of emptiness must be assuaged by something to fill it, even though it be artificial or compulsory. Hitler found fellow Germans that had lost all vision of a goal, and he provided the illusion of a transcending goal, through rage and outrage.

Regarding Exodus 4 and its display of prodigies, the word “technical ethos” comes from the pen of Martin Buber in his book on Moses. In that Exodus narrative, we are facing manifestations of wonders presented as “proofs of truth,” an idea otherwise generally foreign to biblical literature. Martin Buber reminds us that, for the prophets, a miracle is a signification of some transcendent truth, and such a sign is the incarnation of that revealed truth. That is different than the miracle being a proof (see Is 20:3; Ez 4:3).

One of the terms used in the Bible for the miraculous is niphla ’oth, a problematic designation. It properly means marvels and suggests something contradicting the natural and scientific laws; though Buber erroneously says that the miraculous in the Bible is never contrary to nature. On the contrary, the term sign (’oth in Hebrew; in the New Testament [NT] Greek, semeion), signifies a heavenly or divine truth. The miracle does not suppress the natural, but transfigures it; “eternity changes it,” says Mallarmé. When the prophet Elisha heals Naaman the Syrian, the latter’s leprosy is not denied but, as it were, set within God’s intent for creation, which does not include the maladies that plague humanity (cf. 2 Kgs 5).

A biblical miracle is an historical act, that is, a history-shaping event, as can be seen, for example, when the fleeing Hebrews crossed the Sea of Reeds. As such, the witness of the sign does not focus on the materiality of
the phenomenon, but upon its value as revelation of a transcending reality. This is especially clear in the reports of Jesus’ miracles (see the Lukan theology in 2:20; 17:15; 18:43; 19:17; Acts 5:13).

The Hebrew discourse about miracles does not always distinguish clearly between the miraculous and the prodigious. The Gospel of John is more precise on the topic. Jesus’ miracles are called signs, semeia, while what the populace demands are supernatural-appearing wonders, terata. We find both words in the same saying of Jesus in John 4:48. They are not, however, synonymously used. Remarkably, the Nazarene’s miracles invariably enjoin the beneficiaries to praise God. That way, the attention is deflected from the miracle-maker and from any self-reference of the phenomenon. The miracle “rends the veil” (cf. Mt 27:51 and para.) and reveals the divine intervention in human time and space. In other words, the miracle is prophetic (cf. Ps 74:9).

As such, the sign demands interpretation, itself interpreting the human reality in a sense that surprises, in that it does not remain at the surface level of meaning but renders audible or visible a more profound message or proclamation begging to be revealed (cf. Mt 8:4; Lk 17:14). On this score, the miracle is less the irruption of the extraordinary than of God’s ordinary. It puts the creation back on track towards its plenitude. It is an “anti-sin.” Characteristically, Jesus says, “Go and sin no more” (Jn 5:14; 8:11). That is why miracles are the presence of eternity, that is, eschatological markers at the heart of human development and the unfolding of human history. This cannot be said of a prodigy or wonder. Of course, miracle and prodigy have something in common: they are both wonderful. They are arresting. A prodigy can even at times become a sign. However, while the miracle has prodigious dimensions, the prodigy does not necessarily have a miraculous value. In Exodus 4, for example, it is conceivable to have an Egyptian magician duplicating, at least to some extent, Moses’ wonders (cf. 7:9–12; 8:3), but it is unimaginable that magicians work a miracle proper, in the sense of their action signifying some divine or heavenly meaning. Of this, the biblical texts are unanimous in their denial (see Gn 41:8, 24; Dan 1:20; 2:2, 10, 27; 5:7–8; Acts 13:6–12). This is evident when the Egyptian magicians are defeated in their own game by Moses’ wonders, although we are at that point still in the domain of sheer extraordinary manifestations.

Moses, ever since the beginning of his dialogue with God, set himself on the terrain of magical performances as the means for establishing three things: his personal authority, the foundation of his call, and his immunity from the Egyptian death threat against his life. His only excuse is his belief that magic is the sole language capable of persuading both Pharaoh and the Israelites in Egypt. Pure miracles, so to speak, would have isolated Moses and Aaron. For the miracles are valid only within the parameters of the people of Israel. Their effectiveness is intramural because they occur each time
as a kind of theophany for Israel; and there is no theophany of Israel’s God outside of Israel. Hence, what Exodus 4 displays is not a series of miracles, but a series of wonders; a more neutral term susceptible of designating either a prodigy or a prophetic sign, or perhaps both at the same time, according to whomever is interpreting it.

The prodigious aspect of Moses’ demonstration puts the whole scene on a stage familiar to Egyptian soothsayers: magic. In this sense, the performance and counter-performance are elements of a dialogue. Moses, like St. Paul later, becomes “all things to all people” (1 Cor 9:22). The psychological lesson is of great importance. Moses in Egypt behaves and acts as an Egyptian. We are at the antipode of arrogance. Moses does not import a worldview so foreign to his audience as to be totally incomprehensible. Yet, if he does at all, it must be veiled (cf. Ex 34:33) and “as in a glass darkly” (cf. 1 Cor. 13:12), lest it be so strong as to blind instead of to illumine the Egyptians. And the Israelites, perhaps? The competition with the Egyptians has an aspect of compassion. Moses’ purpose is not to destroy his competitors, but to convince them. From this perspective, there must be a margin of freedom left to the magicians in their response to Moses. Pure miracles would paralyze them. Soon this will be demonstrated in full when the miracle of the Sea of Reeds will occur; it will open itself to the Hebrews and close itself upon the drowning Egyptian army. Evidently, at that point the dialogue was over. Meanwhile, at the court of Pharaoh, Moses must defeat the Egyptians at their own game.

A closer look at the vocabulary of Exodus 4, describing the future of Moses’ performance in Egypt, will help one focus on the nature of these extraordinary phenomena. Throughout the pericope, the word ‘oth (sign) is used. In verse 8, for instance, we find the term repeated twice; in verses 17, 28, 30, the same word appears in the plural, ‘othoth. We have encountered the same situation above about the Gospel of John (semeia). Moses’ signs may, however, be called, by some and in some circumstances, marvels. In verse 21 the term mophthim is found with this meaning; but, whether in the former case or in the latter, the wonders here are signs. They are no gratuitous and random acts; they signify something. So it is not surprising that we see the miracles associated with the term qol (voice) (verses 1, 8, 9), or with peh (mouth) (verses 10, 11, 12, 15 [three times], 16); three times with peh and seven times with qol.

The expressed purpose of the signs is to earn the trust and faith of the people (see verses 1, 5, 8 [two times], 9, 31), and to convince Pharaoh to let God’s people go (verses 21, 23 [two times]; note that the verb “to send” is again used five times in associated contexts: verses 4 [twice], 13 [twice], 28). This duality of purpose corresponds to the duality of interpretation offered by the ambivalence of the signs. The latter may appear to the Egyptians as sheer performance challenging their own know-how. To the Hebrews, in
contrast, the signs are fraught with divine message, with proclamation (*ker-
ygma*). Exodus 11:3 makes a clear distinction between “in the sight of Pha-
raoh’s officials and in the sight of the people” (of Israel).

ON EXODUS 4:1–9

Let us take one example from among the three wonders Moses performed
in Egypt. It seems clear that for the water of the Nile to be changed into
blood (verse 9) is no random transubstantiation. To the Egyptians, this
meant death. To the Hebrews, it was something like an unveiling of their
suffering under Egyptian taskmasters. Therefore, we should probe all the
signs as to what kind of message they may convey.

In fact, there are three elements involved: the signs themselves; the re-
cipients of the signs (Egyptians and Hebrews); and the person of the sign-
worker (God/Moses/Aaron). This latter element must be emphasized and
singled out as the main one of the three. Moses is the performer, but God is
the giver of the wonders. The text’s attribution of them to God thwarts, from
the outset, all magical interpretation. Only their duplication by the Egyp-
tians is magical and, therefore, the competition at the court of Pharaoh is not
magic against magic but *logos* against *magos*.

Moses is the carrier of a message, he is no magician. Of course, he can be
mistaken as one, like Daniel later will be considered as the chief of Nebuchad-
nezzar’s magicians (Dan 4:9; 5:11). Yet, this is an optical illusion, as it were,
on the part of the gentiles. For in reality the Pharaoh is facing, in the person
of Moses, a prophet (cf. Dt 34:10); a servant of the Lord (Dt 34:5; Ps 105:26);
God’s elect (Ps 106:23); indeed the mouthpiece of God himself (Ex 4:16; 7:1).
The pagan confusion is powerfully denounced in Daniel’s declaration to King
Nebuchadnezzar, “The mystery about which the king inquires, no wise man,
astrologer, magician, or diviner can set forth before the king, but there is a
God in heaven who reveals mysteries” (Dan 2:27–28). As usual in the Bible,
the messengers are hidden behind their message. Joseph, Moses, Daniel,
all the prophets in Israel, deflect the attention from themselves to God who
sent them. Is, then, a psychological approach to the human heralds made in-
appropriate or improper? Indeed not, as we shall see below; but some aspects
of the signs must first be clarified.

From what precedes, we may conclude that Moses’ demonstration is *revela-
tory*. The Egyptian courtiers’ misunderstanding is reported tongue in cheek.
Their blindness is incurable. They have eyes but do not see (cf. Ps 135:16).
They are fascinated by the spectacle and ignore its meaning. However, when
their eyes are opened, the spectacle becomes highly symbolic, as when Jesus
changed the water into wine at Cana (Jn 2), unmistakably referring to the
sacrament of the Eucharist ushering in Christ’s passion (see Jn 2:4).
Are Moses’ signs symbols? Moses performs an act of transubstantiation, the change of the Nile waters into blood. Here also the context is clear. It is the truth of the matter that the channel of life to the land of Egypt is a river of blood, metaphorically the blood of the slaves compelled to build mausoleums to dead pharaohs and dignitaries. It is the truth that the “house of slavery” is obsessed with death and pours the blood of the living on the stones of funerary monuments. Thus, the pouring by Moses of the Egyptian water on the ground goes much beyond witchcraft. It broadens the perspective to the whole land of oppression and metaphorically signifies its destruction. What used to be the vital artery of the country is punctured and the blood gushes out until Egypt is bloodless. Some time, in the near future, the tenth plague hitting Egypt will actualize that which the third sign in Exodus 4 signified (see Ex 12:20 ff).

Another reference to blood spilled on the ground is Cain spilling Abel’s blood, of which we read in Genesis 4 (see verses 10–11). Here again, the blood is shed by a wicked agent, Cain. Hence, Exodus 4 may allude to Egypt as a collective Cain the murderer, as both pericopes are from the hand of the same author. There are also other biblical texts denouncing the scandal of human blood polluting the soil. It clamors for justice or vindication (see Is 26:21; Ez 9:9; Jb 16:18). Only blood can redeem the victims’ blood (Nm 35:33; Ps 106:38). Moses and the people are living in an impure land, polluted by crime, violence, and inhumanity. It tries to hide its pollution behind a deceptive culture and other architectural artifacts; but the hiding is in vain, for the Egypt unveiled by Moses’ sign is like a bloody naked rock (Ez 24:8).

“To the one a fragrance of death to death, to the other a fragrance of life to life” (2 Cor 2:16; cf. Ws 18:8). If the Egyptians do not understand the portentous bearing of the sign, soon the first plague will fulfill the omen in a terrible way: Moses strikes the Nile with his staff “and there was blood in the land of Egypt” (Ex 7:21).

With this last of the three signs given by God to empower Moses, we have gone from metamorphosis to metamorphosis. The other two signs follow suit in terms of their bearing: Even Moses’ stick upon which he leans is something of a serpent, that is, something impure to God and a fiend to the humans. Does it look like a staff or does it look like a snake? Is it a serpent or a support? Moses leaning on such a dubious staff is surely no possessor of immortality. He is fundamentally vulnerable, constantly accompanied by tokens of death: serpent, leprosy, spilled blood. The threatening signs that he brings with him to the Egyptians appear not to make him immune to the same fate. A certain analogy with Cain’s story holds true if we remember that Cain may have thought that by killing the competition he guaranteed his own survival: you die, I live.
Moses, to be sure, is not Cain, but he also, it seems, is humbled by God with the realization that as messenger, he is not some kind of Nietzschean superman. Not really unexpectedly, he is physically laid hold of by the very God who sent him back to Egypt as God’s champion (Ex 4:24–26). Thus, the clash with Pharaoh is between two wounded men, one deeply aware of his injury, like Jacob at Jabbok (Gn 32:22–32), the other unconscious of being stabbed to death by the God he chooses to ignore. The blows they inflict upon each other are enormous, though the sparring in Exodus 4 is only a kind of warm-up before the unremitting match in 10 rounds from which Moses comes out the victor.

So, the first wonder God gave Moses concerns the staff that he leans upon. We soon learn that the various signs given him are as many onslaughts against his person before becoming weapons against Egypt. Is not Pharaoh a “broken reed of a staff, which will pierce the hand of anyone who leans on it” (Is 36:6 [NRSV])? Such concordance between the message-giver and the message-recipient is food for thought. There is here an uncanny consubstantiality of traditor—traditio—receptor that very much falls in parallel with the prophetic process. We are at a far cry from the prodigy where, on the contrary, there often is dissociation between the performer, the performed, and the witnesses.

In analogy with the prologue to the book of Job, Moses is first hit in the realm of his belongings: “What is in your hand?” (Ex 4:2). Then, the second sign becomes intimately personal: Moses’ bodily integrity is impaired: his hand becomes leprous before it is again healed. As regards the third and last wonder, the water of the Nile changed into blood, it is clear that it puts Moses in a very awkward situation vis-à-vis his Egyptian hosts, who no doubt will take umbrage at such an insult to or violation of the Nile and the whole of Egypt. When the magicians also succeed in transmogrifying the water into blood (Ex 7:22), they prolong the duel with Moses/Aaron as well as their own blindness; while in a way unwittingly rescuing Moses from the lethal wrath of Pharaoh! In short, the three wonders do involve Moses as dramatis persona in the scheme of liberating the Hebrews from thralldom.

Of course, the wonders could have been confined to the realm of artifices contrived by human skill, leaving intact the person of the performer. However, they are precisely not mere artifices in this case. Moses’ staff becomes a serpent and he must grab it by the tail. Then his flesh is rotting under his eyes and we can imagine his distress. Eventually, Moses is literally attacked by God who “sought to kill him” (Ex 4:24)—that is, Moses returning to Egypt is under no status of immunity! The signs he is equipped with are too closely personal to constitute an efficient shield of protection. If the wonders do not work as expected, Moses is no better than dead. The point is important. Moses’ bargaining dialogue with God has the double purpose of getting
a magical protection for his person and providing an inescapable argument for the fulfillment of his mission.

On both counts, Moses does not get what he wants, as he did not earlier when he asked to be privy to the Name of God (Ex 3:13–14). What he gets is less and it is more. On both occasions God shifts the realms from magos to logos. No divine sacred “name of power” is at Moses’ disposal. Similarly, no magical shield will immunize him from harm, and no argument he will formulate will appear incontrovertible to his audience. As messenger, he passes from a desired automatic outcome to a feared responsibility. The liberation of the people of Israel from the land of graves (Ex 14:11) demands that Moses first shares the present endangerment of the Hebrews (cf. Nm 20:15; Dt 26:6; Jgs 10:11), as later when Queen Esther must first put herself in harm’s way (“If I perish, I perish” Est 4:16). Exodus 4, or more accurately Exodus 3–4, is about the training of Moses for leadership, but also for some sort of martyrdom.6

POLYVALENCE OF MOSES’ SIGNS

“What is in your hand?—A staff!” We, the rereaders of the old Bible stories know that Moses’ staff will have multiple functions. Marvelously as a scepter or a serpent, it will hit the Nile waters and change them into blood; it will also be stretched over the Sea of Reeds and part its waters to let the people ford to the other side; further, it will again hit a rock and water will gush out. A magical wand of sorts, its multilayered function transcends any flat interpretation. In the eyes of the Egyptians, Moses’ stick effects lethal signs for the present and in the future: serpent; blood; drowning tide (Ex 14:26). Not so in the Israelites’ eyes. Moses’ staff is salvific: the “Hebrew” serpent swallows up the Egyptian serpents (Ex 7:12); the sea’s waters are split and its bottom turns into dry land for the people (Ex 14:11–22); the rock is hit and gushes drinking water in the desert (Ex 17:6). Therefore, the so-called “Aaron’s rod,” after it miraculously bloomed, is deposited within the Ark as a token of divine interventions (Nm 17:23–26 [Engl. 17:8–11]). Elsewhere, it is called “the staff of God” (Ex 4:20; cf. Is 10:26).

This polyvalence is verified once more as regards the intermediary sign granted by the Lord to Moses: the leprous hand.7 This second wonder belongs to the category of “miracle of trial,” in the same way that Exodus 15:25 says that the Lord “tested them” by the sweetening of the bitter waters of Marah (cf. also 16:4). Moses’ staff was already a sign testing its owner; now the probing becomes more personal.8 The message is branded in his own flesh. For the physical limitation and transience of Moses’ disease must not blind us. From now on, as a matter of fact, one will wonder whether his body is whole and wholesome (and accidentally plagued), or unhealthy (and graciously, incessantly restored to wholesomeness).
“Skin for skin! All that people have they will give to save their lives,” says Job 2:4 (NRSV). Between the property and the proprietor, the difference is biblically one of degrees. But now, the divine onslaught reaches its apex, for Moses’ leprosy signifies his death (see Nm 12:12; ExR 11.23). Moses’ mission is to save from death an enslaved people. He must first go himself through death (see Ex 4:24). In no way will Moses be an outsider or a diplomat. His testing in Midian before his daring return to Egypt implies his going down into the crucible, in common with those that Pharaoh submits to a slow genocide (cf. Ex 1:22: the drowning of the Hebrew boys is symbolically a forced disintegration, a return to chaos).

Of significance is the fact that Moses is not hit from above by his vulnerability and humanness, but from the mere contact with his own flesh. When facing himself Moses discovers his impurity (Lv 13:2 ff.). Even the partial spread of the disease contributes to the demonstration, for were he entirely leprous he would retrieve his purity by the laws of cleansing (see Lv 13:13, 45–46). Moses is impure because he is a sinner before God (see Nm 12:9–15, 19; Miriam; 1 Kgs 13:4–6: Jeroboam; 2 Kgs 5:27: Gehazi). The return to health (Ex 4:7) is thus Moses’ “resurrection” by the grace of God (cf. King Jeroboam’s recovery; and in a different context, see Isaiah’s purification before being sent on a mission, Is 6). Moses experiences his “exodus from Egypt” before he leads the people out of the “land of darkness” (Ex 10:22).9 Earlier, he had shown his commitment to and his capacity for leadership and liberation in Exodus 2:17.

We must stress the idea of substitution as the basis of Exodus 4, including, of course, the rite of circumcision in verses 24–27, “prerequisite for the participation in the Passover.”10 Moses is not merely a messenger; by substitution he incarnates his people. Had he been killed in Egypt, there would be no Israel in history. True, his incarnation is in the form of a servant (cf. Nm 11:11; Dt 34:5; Jos 1:2; Heb 3:5; Rv 15:3), humble to the point of death (cf. Ex 32:32; Nm 12:3; cf. DeutR Ki Tavo 7.10). God’s testing purported to exalt him as the promise of his people’s glorification (cf. Ws 19:22).

**SUMMARY AND ELABORATION**

Let me highlight a few points and develop further some of their implications. The very ambiguity of the signs granted to Moses and performed in Egypt is revealing. These phenomena are considered magical or prodigious by the Egyptian witchcraft workers, while Israel interprets them as miraculous and thus worthy of being told from generation to generation. It is not surprising that the Exodus history is absent from the Egyptian annals. That is in keeping with the skewed Egyptian interpretation of Moses’ wonders as little more than circus performance. Yair Zakovitch is thus right to emphasize the nature of the reception of a sign as decisive to how it is experienced.
He writes, “The decisive factor is a literary one: the expression of excitement and wonder in the face of an incident and the amount of words devoted to its description.”  

That is somewhat one-sided. First, it is true that the marvelous has the property of stirring a feeling of wonderment, while “most people think they sufficiently understand a thing when they have ceased to wonder at it,” as Spinoza says. Yet, we must also insist with Franz Rosenzweig that a miracle is intelligible only when it is experienced as miracle at the time of its occurrence. “When it no longer seems a thing of the present, all there is left to do is explain. . . . In fact nothing is miraculous about a miracle except that it comes when it does.” This effect in the moment of the miracle being perceived as a miracle prevents the development of any supernaturalism as the basis of religion.

For it is quite clear that the very notion of the miraculous implies a confrontation between transcendence and nature. This philosophical problem was hotly debated already by Renaissance thinkers. Much earlier, Tertullian famously exclaimed, “credo quia absurdum” (I believe such and such because it is absurd, i.e., there is no way to apprehend or handle this absurd reality but to embrace it by faith). Theology, in such a case would be in opposition to nature; a proposition rejected by Thomas Aquinas for whom the mysteries transcend nature.

On this point, Aquinas is closer to the Hebrew worldview, namely, that the universe is wrapped up in transcendence. At times, there occurs, as it were, a tear in the heavenly envelope and transcendence becomes visible, like sunshine piercing the clouds—“O that you would tear open the heavens and come down . . . so that the nations might tremble at your presence!” (Is 64:1, 2 [NRSV]). This does not strike out nature; it makes nature meaningful. Moon, wind, earth, are St. Francis’s brothers and sisters!

This same conception lies, for instance, at the basis of Jeremiah “seeing” a branch of an almond tree with its signification. “Then Yahweh said . . . ‘You have seen well, for I am watching over my word to fulfill it’” (Jer 1:11–13). It has nothing to do with idealism or with pantheism. As the earth cannot live without the sun’s light and warmth, so the world draws its substance, sustenance, and meaning from the beyond. Although, to be sure, not everyone in ancient Israel was a saint, everyone was religious because no other kind of existence was conceivable.

Furthermore, I emphasize not only the referential quality of the sign, but also the person of the performer. An Egyptian wizard is able to change a stick into a snake and the act looks the same whether performed by him or by the Hebrew man, but there is a world of difference between the magician and Moses producing the same phenomenon. The problem arises not so much on the cognitive as on the psychological level. Before becoming a literary feature, the miracle is experienced as a miracle, not by all to be sure but by some
eyewitnesses; and then remotely through tradition by generations of hearers and readers, for whom the miracle is then explained, as Rosenzweig said.\(^\text{15}\)

The explanation of a miracle does not consist in displaying its hidden controls but in the revelation of its proclamation (\textit{kerugma}). That is why Jesus spoke of persuasion or belief and said, “If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced (believe) even if someone rises from the dead” (Lk 16:31 [NRSV]).

The witness to a wonder faces the impossible. It takes hard-won will and humility to accept a manifestation of the miracle. Such attitude amounts to commitment. When acknowledged, the miracle, as a matter of fact, does not constitute an end but the starting point of a new life (“Go and sin no more!” Jn 8:11; 5:14). This indeed is a strong criterion for determining the nature of the wonder, whether it is a prodigy or a miracle. The miracle’s property is to reorient life in the right direction; the prodigy, at the least, leaves one indifferent and, at the most, gravely disturbed, as it destroys an elementary trust in the stability of nature.\(^\text{16}\)

Hence, the decisive question regarding a wonder is: what kind of newness of life does it usher in?

Most of Jesus’ miracles are in the form of healing the sick. In fact, it is not an exaggeration to view those healings as a marker of the general nature of Jesus’ actions: they heal and restore. “Go to tell John [the Baptist] what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them” (Mt 11:5; Lk 7:22). The point is valid also as regards our Exodus text: Moses’ signs eventually bring Israel’s liberation from the “house of bondage,” to their liberation from the dangerous sea waters (Ex 14), from the bitter waters in the desert through their being changed into sweet water (Ex 15); and from the snakes’ venom, which is neutralized (Nm 21:4–9).

Remarkable is the frequent cooperation of both God and a human agent in the performance of the miracle, until the supreme agent in the NT arrives.\(^\text{17}\) Exodus 14:31 states, “The people feared the Lord, and believed in the Lord and in Moses, his servant.” As God’s word is only proclaimed through human intermediaries, as mouthpieces or interpreters, so God’s work is wrought by human agency.\(^\text{18}\) Joshua 10:14 and 1 Kings 17:22 say that “God heeded a human voice” before intervening in history, obeying as it were the human injunction. In the case of Exodus 4, it is rather Moses who heeds the voice of God.

THE YAHWIST’S PSYCHOLOGY

With this remark, we enter the domain of the Yahwist’s psychology. The Yahwist was the author or editor of the very early narratives in the Hebrew Bible. One of the characteristics of those early biblical narratives is an
emphasis on the necessity of human agency in the fulfillment of divine directives. From the beginning of the world, there is according to the Yahwist a cooperation of the divine and the human. Adam works in a Garden planted by God. The humans are under a divine command that respects their freedom (“You shall / you shall not”). This kind of partnership with the divine finds an uncanny echo in the familial partnership between man and woman, and the societal relationship between the one and the many.

On this, the Yahwist is in full agreement with all other biblical sources and traditions: God and the human race are in an ongoing dialogue, a phenomenon that is highly arresting as God puts himself in a situation of need. God needs the human labor to cultivate the Garden; God needs the human agency to actualize his lordship over the whole of creation; God needs prophets and legislators to spell out his will, and poets to laud his glory. A daring rabbinic midrash on Isaiah 43:12 amplifies the biblical text as saying, “‘So you are my witnesses, declares the Lord, and I am God.’ That is, if you are my witnesses I am God, and if you are not my witnesses, I am, as it were, not God.”

It is within this perspective that the Yahwist’s adoption of popular traditions is to be understood. His enthusiasm for his people’s unique consciousness of the covenant that binds them with God prompts him to repeat for them the legends about God’s miraculous intervention in the Exodus history. For, as we take into consideration the multiplicity of marvels in the Yahwist’s narratives, especially in the desert between Egypt and Canaan, their very accumulation creates a certain feeling of uneasiness. Clearly, the Yahwist has inherited a folkloric trend of interspersing stories with the marvelous. What this suggests is that the biblical author grounds our trust less upon the actuality of the reported events than on their signification.

On the other hand, we need also to be reminded of the irrefutable historicity of miracles attributed to modern personalities such as the Curé d’Ars or Don Bosco; within Judaism, the Hasidic tradition in particular, reports of miraculous rabbis. Thus, the miracle exists, and its exploitation by the populace also exists. This fact puts in relief the limit of the psychological in our interpretation of miracles. Psychologically speaking, there is a similarity of attitude and expectation on the part of people motivated either by faith or by superstition. Theologically, however, the difference between them is an unbridgeable divide. A rationalistic approach to miracles presses the psychological beyond its proper limits and reduces the transcendent to the trivial. As in everything that pertains to human existence, interpretation is the decisive factor. I have tried to put in relief some features of the marvelous that can serve as criteria of authentication. To repeat the main point, it is less a matter of historicality than of signification. Moses’ signs signify.

While the prodigy can be said to be “monologic,” the miracle is fundamentally dialogic. The prodigy demands, it is true, an audience like the miracle, but the witnesses remain passive. All that is required is awe and amazement.
Not so with the miracle: when there is only a watching, there is no miracle. Miracle demands the witnesses’ participation, that is, faith. As long as the Nile waters, changed into blood, remain a spectacle, as for the Egyptians, the event is prodigious, merely a wonder. When the Nile is revealed for what it actually represents, as for the Hebrew slaves in Egypt, namely, divine intervention for their salvation, the prodigy itself is also changed into miracle. Interpretation is what gives breath to the lump, so to speak.

However, interpretation is a two-edged sword. On this score, the Egyptians in Exodus 4 are confounded by an act that negates the apparently immutable laws of nature. After that, they cannot trust anything in the world. They have become subjected to the arbitrary. The sun can be obscured; the rivers can be streams of blood; the fields’ crops can swarm with frogs or insects. Nothing makes sense anymore; existence has become as meaningless as the prodigy itself was. The Egyptian interpretation results in a nihilistic view of the world. The prodigy is destructive and produces only despair.

For the Hebrews, by contrast, the marvel, after some hesitation on their part as to its message, has opened up an entirely new perspective on life. What their experience in thralldom meant to them is now broken open for all to see. The Nile, the life artery of the land of Egypt, is in truth flowing with their blood. The Egyptian civilization is in fact a broken reed that pierces the hand of anyone leaning on that unreliable staff (see Is 36:6). It can be revealed anytime as a lethal poisonous serpent. The Egyptian toleration of the Israelites, as long as they were useful as laborers, is a transparent veil thrown over what all now can see as impurity, indeed leprosy.

We remember Manetho’s contemptuous depiction of the Hebrews as being themselves leprous. Manetho certainly expresses the persistent Egyptian sentiment regarding the non-Egyptians and especially their northern neighbors. Moses’ move with his hand becoming leprous in contact with his own flesh would thus fill the role assigned to him as a Hebrew. For it goes without saying that, in the eyes of the Egyptians, the leprous Moses did confirm an ingrained Egyptian opinion of the Hebrews. But in a second phase of this story, Moses demonstrates his purity and, consequently, the purity of his people. By contrast, among the plagues that eventually afflict the Egyptians, there are a deadly pestilence and boils (Ex 9), but none for the despised but exalted Israelites.

While the prodigy leaves all people voiceless with awe, the miracle is always dialogical in that it invites conversation about and response to the signification: divine interventions of healing and deliverance. No healing performed by Jesus left his audiences indifferent. Besides stirring a reaction of praise to God, there was always the possibility of the signification of the miracle being contested. In other words, the conviction, the persuasiveness of the miracle and its signification, is never coerced. The Egyptian side in the audience is safeguarded and respected.
There is no reasonable reply to the prodigy, but with the miracle there is the ongoing invitation to believe, that is, to agree with being reoriented toward a different way of life. For the Hebrews, the process starts with the miraculous Exodus from Egypt, the metaphoric value of which has defined the life and destiny of the people of the Bible ever since. Not an easy life, but a life of freedom and purposefulness. That signification is the core of Judaism and Christianity. Happy are those who have eyes to see and ears to hear; they will leave the land of oppression, while the mere rationalists will stay there forever.

NOTES

2. Martin Buber (1947), Moses, the Revelation and the Covenant, London: East and West Library.
3. As Yair Zakovitch states, “A clear and frequent purpose of the miracle is to inspire faith in God” (see Ex 4:30–31; 1 Kgs 18:37–39; Nm 14:11; Jo 4:23–4; etc.). “A strengthened faith in God is frequently combined with a strengthened trust in God’s messenger” (see Ex 14:31; 1 Kgs 18:36; 2 Kgs 2:15). See his article, Miracle (OT), Anchor Bible Dictionary (ABD) 4, 855.
4. The book of Deuteronomy also recognizes that “signs and wonders” can be worked by false prophets (see Dt 13:3).
5. This does not apply to the shaman who, nevertheless, remains a magician.
6. A strong Jewish tradition states that Moses was a martyr and died as such; see for instance Sifre Deut, Ha’azinu, 306, fol. 131 b.
7. On the ambivalence of the ‘oth, see, for example, Exodus 12:13.
8. The Deuteronomy insists on God testing his people; see 4:34; 7:19; 29:2–3.
9. A bitterly ironic expression to designate a country worshipping the sun.
11. Miracle (OT), ABD 4, 848a.
14. See a negative example in the person of Gehazi, for example (2 Kgs 4:31).
15. See above note 13. Refer especially to Psalm 78:2–8.
16. Baruch Spinoza warns against nature’s disruption, which, he says, “not only can give us no knowledge of God, but, contrariwise, takes away that which we naturally have, and makes us doubt God and everything else.” See (1951), A Theologico-Political Treatise, R. H. Elwes, trans., Mineola, New York: Dover, 85. He refers here to Deuteronomy 13:2–4. This Spinoza stance is countered by Samuel Hirsch (1808–1888), who says that the miracle demonstrates that nature is not omnipotent in (1841, republished in 1986) Die Religionsphilosophie der Juden oder das Prinzip der Jüdischen Religionsanschauung, Hildesheim: Georg Olms. See Wisdom 19:6, “the whole creation in
its nature was fashioned anew, complying with your commands, so that your children might be kept unharmed."

17. No text, however, went so far in the same direction as Exodus 7:1 (see also 4:16): "Yahweh said to Moses, 'Behold, I have made you God to Pharaoh, and your brother Aaron shall be your prophet.'"


21. In the Talmud already, we find, for instance, rabbis like Honi ha-Me’aggel (= the Circle Maker) in the first century BCE and Hanna ben Dosa in the first century CE (see Taanit 23–25, Babylonian Talmud, Finkelstein ed., 1956, New York: Jewish Publication Society).

22. See Manetho’s History of Egypt, This is a lost work of the third century BCE, but according to Josephus’s, Contra Apionem 1,232–51, it is alleged that Manetho had an anti-Judaic description of the Hebrews as unclean lepers. The Hebrews, he says, were in fact an Egyptian rubble “deported from Egypt for leprosy and other diseases” (1,229), thus “cleansing the whole country of lepers and other ‘unclean’ people” (1,233), “with deformed bodies” (1,234), with “some learned priests afflicted with leprosy among them” [Moses and Aaron, Miriam?]. (See also 1,241, 248, and 251.) Their leader was a priest from Heliopolis, an Egyptian who “changed his name and was called Moses” (1,250).

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Manetho, History of Egypt, see: Josephus, Contra Apionem 1, 232–51.


The biblical miracles have never been easy to understand and have not always been easy for theologians to explain.¹ Long before the beginnings of scientific interpretations of scripture and critical exegesis, Spinoza formulated the relation between the Jewish-Christian belief and the critical mind (1670): God has created the universe and the laws of the Nature. If something like a miracle accidentally broke these laws, it would contradict God’s wisdom and the good harmony in his world. So miracles, in his view, do not support religion but contradict it.² This concept is a good example of how miracles may lose their religious relevance completely.

The laws of nature, a concept unknown to the people of the Old and New Testament, have come to be perceived as independent from God, and the immanent reality of God present in his creation is what matters, even to many religious persons. God is not understood so much as a fascinating or awesome mystery, but as something which is compatible with our reason. He is the source of all rationality, as in large parts of medieval scholastic theology. Consequently, much biblical material, such as miracles, was marginalized. Many attempts have been made to marginalize it further with rational or scientific explanations.

Albert Schweitzer skillfully served some of these attempts in his history of Leben Jesu-Forschung (Research on the Life of Jesus).³ H.E.G. Paulus, for example, avoided no means to show that Jesus’ miracles were simply based upon misunderstandings of his disciples. Today we may find these interpretations humorous, but the challenge was once considered serious. Otto Weinreich, a prominent scholar of Classical antiquity, who contributed to the
early religious-historical investigation with his work *Antike Heilungswunder*;\(^4\) quotes in his preface the words of Björnstjerne Björnsson: “*Ich bin der A nsicht, dass die Mirakel einer ebenso grossen Gesetzmässigkeit unterliegen wie alle andern Dinge, ob wir gleich das Gesetz nicht schauen*” (“I believe that miracles follow a similar order as all other matters, although we do not see it”).\(^5\) These words illumine the atmosphere in which religious-historical work was done in the beginning of the last century.

**GREEK NARRATIVE AND LITERARY MODELS**

A decisive innovation in the New Testament interpretation of the early twentieth century was the introduction and adaptation of the form-critical method, which had formerly been used in the investigation of the Old Testament (OT). Form-criticism, as Laato pointed out in chapter 2, is an analysis of texts on the basis of the type of literature an author uses: poetry, stories, historical report, mythic imagination, miracle story, and the like. The German masters, K. L. Schmidt, Martin Dibelius, and Rudolf Bultmann, developed a toolbox that is still used today, although perhaps with reservations. Scholars tried to define the genres of the New Testament (NT) material. In this concept, the evangelists were considered collectors and bearers of tradition rather than independent authors and theologians: it meant that scholars thought that they were able to go over their works that belonged to “Kleinliteratur,” to the oral tradition, and to listen to anonymous mediators of the Jesus tradition. This concept also drastically influenced the investigation of the miracle stories.

According to Dibelius, some early Christian teachers only briefly stated what had happened, and the genre was then “paradigm.”\(^6\) There were, however, others, who were able to expand the tradition, and the narrative skills caused the brief “paradigms” to grow to “novels.” All this meant that the scarce Christian material was expanded according to models of the Graeco-Roman folklore. Miracle stories attested how early Christians increasingly adapted themselves to literary models and forms of their world.

Dibelius’s work, completed and introduced with Bultmann’s *Geschichte der synoptischen Tradition*, often led scholars to consider miracle stories alien to real, original Christianity.\(^7\) It is easy to understand that several scholars later tried to rescue every NT writer who could be rescued. Luke could not, and that is why he was sometimes vehemently criticized for adaptation to his world.\(^8\) But Paul allegedly fought a battle against his opponents, who were all too fond of miracles.\(^9\) Few scholars, if any, observed what he proudly wrote on his own “signs that mark an apostle” (2 Cor 12:12), and how proudly he wrote about what he had done “by the power of signs and miracles, through the power of the Spirit” (Rom 15:19). Mark allegedly criticized the theology of his sources or even all the disciples of Jesus.\(^10\) It took time before scholars\(^11\)
noted that Mark does not speak critically or skeptically of miracles. According to Fortna, for example, John was critical of miracles, and it is partly true (cf. Jn 4:48).\textsuperscript{12} However, John pays attention to several miracles and emphasizes them, as for example, in John 9 and 11.

The classical form-critical research took the genre of miracle story for granted. However, miracle stories strongly differ from each other and it might be problematic to treat them as a single category. Klaus Berger denied the existence of the literary model or genre called miracle story, claiming that this category includes several different genres containing miraculous elements.\textsuperscript{13} Theissen tried to improve the form-critical method with his work.\textsuperscript{14} Accurate works on how every NT writer dealt with miracles were already published during the 1980s, but the task is huge. It is clear that miracle stories should not be investigated superficially. As Laato presents in chapter 2 of this volume, even the concept of miracle is problematic and by no means identical in the usage of early Judaism and of the modern world.

**GREEK “DIVINE MEN”**

The most important contribution of the religious-historical investigation of the biblical miracles was the theory of divine men, which influenced scholarship almost the entire twentieth century. The rise and fall of the theory illuminates the dangers of comparative investigation of religions. Simultaneously with and partly influenced by the form-critical research, scholars were impressed by the Greek parallels of Jesus’ miracles. The first to use the words *divine men* was Reitzenstein (1906, 1910), but very soon Wetter (1916) contributed to the study of comparative religion and adapted his results to the study of the NT, especially of the Gospel of John. According to Wetter, classical antiquity knew several men who were considered divine, sons of god or gods. They originated from different nations or of different religions, but the classical world considered them belonging to a certain category of divine men.

To verify his claim he referred to numerous classical texts. However, he neither gave exact definitions of divine men nor dated his sources, which understandably led to problems later. Moreover, it is crucial to recognize Wetter’s background. Like several of his fellow scholars, he believed that religion was originally alike in all primitive societies and developed later towards higher religions. Wetter apparently considered it irrelevant to date his ancient sources, because he still could recognize the same primitive traits of early religion on the streets of the Orient in his own days.\textsuperscript{15} This concept should be problematic to a modern scholar, who does not believe in the evolution of religions.\textsuperscript{16} However, although it is easy to understand that the view was held in Wetter’s time and that most prominent scholars referred to concepts like *mana* or *taboo*, adapting them to the NT miracle stories, it is curious that the view could survive in the derivatives of the divine men hypothesis.
Moreover, Bieler, the famous Austrian classicist, added philosophical color to the debate with his influential book in 1935–36. This expert of the classical Greek and Roman literature offered an immense collection of material, not only from classical antiquity, mostly from the Christian era, but even of tales from Africa, Lithuania, and early North America. He explicitly says that the concept of divine man is a Platonic model, with great universal appeal.\textsuperscript{17} No wonder that he did not pay attention to the date or provenance of his sources, because in his view every holy man was predestined to go the way of Socrates, Apollonius of Tyana, or Jesus. It is curious that it took more than 40 years before Bieler’s views were thoroughly criticized,\textsuperscript{18} and even then scholars overlooked the circular reasoning of the later research.

Christian texts, both the Gospels and later writings, formed a crucial element in Bieler’s pattern. It was not a problem for Bieler, because he openly assumed a Platonic model, but it should have been a problem for scholars using Bieler’s pattern to investigate the Gospels. However, they compared, for example, the theology of the Gospel of Mark with Bieler’s pattern and found them widely similar. This would not have surprised anyone who had analyzed how the Christian texts helped Bieler to construct his pattern. The reason for the error was, of course, that only a few NT scholars were able to deal with classical texts and did not realize that Bieler had used texts that were mainly substantially later than the NT.

The pattern of \textit{divine men} was already used in NT scholarship before World War II. However, the redaction critical method at first meant an explosion of books and articles using the concept. Since Hans Conzelmann and Willi Marxsen, scholars asked questions that had been neglected for a long time. They no more considered the Gospels mere collections of individual pearls but as pearl necklaces, and asked for the role of the writers who had decided to select precisely these pearls and put them exactly in this order. Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John were considered authors and theologians again. It was now current to ask again for the role of the miracles in the Gospels or in their sources. The work of the previous generations was now carefully observed. It is hard to overestimate the role of Rudolf Bultmann, who had early\textsuperscript{19} accepted the pattern of \textit{divine men} and used it to interpret the Gospels. Talented students went to study at Marburg, and after some decades, his pupils sat on chairs overall in the learned world.

Once activated, the concept of \textit{divine man} was widely used in the New Testament exegesis. Scholars used it to interpret the miracles in Mark, Matthew, Luke, John, and their sources. It was used to define the theology of the opponents of Paul in 1 Thessalonians, Philippians, and especially in 2 Corinthians. However, the use of this hypothesis peaked and began to decline in the 1980s. Scholars investigating Mark were increasingly critical,\textsuperscript{20} as well the ones investigating John.\textsuperscript{21} Only a few, however, rejected the entire concept, which had and still has prominent supporters.\textsuperscript{22} Critical voices have been
louder, and today I consider it difficult to defend the traditional hypothesis. Actually, it would be difficult to define what is meant with the “traditional hypothesis.” The views of Reitzenstein, Wetter, and Bieler differed so much that it is impossible to speak of the hypothesis.

After a century of religious historical work some points seem clear:

1. The classical world called some men divine (theios), but did not construct a fixed pattern of divine men (theios aner) although the words sometimes occur.\(^{23}\) This is not an ancient category, but a modern concept, which may be useful if defined and used critically.

2. We do not know Greek or Roman historical miracle workers or works about them that could have served as models for Jesus or the Gospels. Actually, we know virtually no Greek miracle workers from 300 BCE to about the year 150 CE.\(^{24}\) When constructing the pattern of divine men, scholars used sources that date later than the Gospels, and did it uncritically.

3. Ancient people believed in miracles and magic. The most important parallels for Jesus’ mighty deeds are the miracles of rulers and gods, and the miracles performed by anonymous magicians.\(^{25}\)

4. Scholars have badly neglected the rich Jewish tradition. In this volume, it is treated in the articles written by Antti Laato and me.

THE JEWISH TRADITION

I have briefly presented the rich tradition of the Old Testament miracle workers and their role in the later Jewish writings.\(^{26}\) The mighty deeds of Abraham, Moses, Elijah, Elisha, and several other figures played an important role in early Judaism. This tradition was part of the past that defined the identity of the nation. Several historical figures attempted to use this tradition to legitimate themselves as leaders. They were not, however, the only Jewish miracle workers in the times of Jesus.

Political Jewish Miracle Workers

Our sources tell of several Jewish men whose miracles played a political role. The New Testament briefly mentions Theudas in a speech by Gamaliel: “Some time ago Theudas appeared, claiming to be somebody, and about four hundred men rallied to him. He was killed, all his followers were dispersed, and it all came to nothing” (Acts 5:36).\(^{27}\)

Josephus too mentions Theudas (Ant. 20.97–98):

\[ \text{[He] . . . persuaded the majority of the masses to take up their possessions and to follow him to the Jordan River. He stated that he was a prophet and that at his command the river would be parted and would provide them an easy passage. With this talk he deceived many.} \]
Cuspius Fadus, the procurator (ca. 44–46 ce), sent cavalry against the crowd. Theudas was captured in the massacre and his head was cut off and sent to Jerusalem. If Josephus’ version is correct, the events happened between 44 and 46 ce, namely, years after Gamaliel’s speech described in Acts. At any rate both writers mention Theudas and say that he was one of several of his kind. Luke does not report precisely Theudas’ claims, which were clearly political, saying only “claiming to be somebody.” Josephus calls him a sorcerer, and says that the man claimed to able to repeat the miracles of Moses at Red Sea and of Joshua at the Jordan. The changed function of the miracle illumines the role of mighty deeds. People who followed Moses were rescued by the miracle, and the parting of the Jordan made the invasion into the Promised Land possible in Joshua’s time. Now, the people did not need to be rescued and there were several ways to the Land of Canaan without a miracle. However, the miracle was needed to legitimate Theudas as a leader like Moses and Joshua once were. The Roman army did not need more hints to know what the intention of the crowd was. A right to collect people and to freely talk to them may belong to the modern human rights, but it was not allowed in Rome and still less in the provinces. It mattered not whether the people were armed. The Romans first sent in the constabulary and only afterwards asked for the reason for the people assembling.

Luke informs us that the Romans identified Paul mistakenly with a famous man when they detained him in Jerusalem:

“How do you speak Greek?” he replied. “Are you not the Egyptian who started a revolt and led four thousand terrorists out into the desert some time ago?” (Acts 21:38)

This Egyptian, who had appeared between 56 and 60 ce, was a famous man and Josephus mentions him twice in two not fully compatible passages (War 2.261–63; Antiquities 20.169–72). The Egyptian called 30,000 men (War), at first in the desert (War) and then to the Mount of Olives (War and Antiquities), and wanted to show how his words could cause the walls of the city to fall down (Antiquities). Claudius Felix let the soldiers kill 400 and take 200 men (the numbers only in Ant), but the Egyptian escaped his enemies, as even Luke takes for granted. The words (in Ant. 20.172), “the Egyptian became invisible,” are easily interpreted as referring to a miracle, causing people to wait for his return. The Egyptian was not the only one with this art. Josephus himself links him tightly with some other troublemakers: The Egyptian serves in Antiquities as an example of impostors and deceivers; in War Josephus tells immediately after him that the miracle workers and the robbers joined their powers (War 2.264). Although they often were conventional robbers and the miracles are not mentioned (War 2.271), Josephus often uses with regard to them words he also uses describing the Egyptian (War 2.565).
It is interesting that no one of the three sources gives the name of the man: He is always “the Egyptian.” The strange detail that the Egyptian Jew is not supposed to speak Greek, although Greek was their most important language, may reveal that anonymity is not the issue. Maybe it did not refer to his provenance but to his claims. The man did not come from Egypt but from the countryside of Palestine, and was called “Egyptian” because he wanted to repeat the miracles made in Egypt by Moses, and during the conquest by Joshua, both of whom had come up out of Egypt. As Joshua came from Egypt and conquered the land from the Canaanites, the man claimed to be able to repeat the miracle of Jericho and expel the Romans. We cannot be certain of all this, but his models were certainly taken from the sacralized past. Miracles were politically important. Religion and revolt were intimately interwoven. It is important to observe that, according to Josephus, the Jerusalemites fought side by side with Romans against the man. This certainly shows the tension between the rich, Hellenized aristocrats in Jerusalem, and the religious poor people in the countryside.

The last events of the Jewish war dramatically attested the power of the militant miracles. When the fall of Jerusalem was imminent, a prophet led people to the temple to see God’s saving miracles; or rather, to be burned alive with the temple (Josephus, War 6.281–287). But even after the end of the last rebels in Masada, a man named Jonathan still gathered poor people to the desert to show them God’s miracles. Catullus, the Roman governor, cruelly used the option to fight his own Jewish war and killed the unarmed people (War 7.437–442 and Life 423–425).

Nonmilitant Jewish Miracle Workers

Sources also inform us of less militant Jewish miracle workers, who helped people in their daily life. The best known of them is Honi the Circle-Drawer, or Onias, as Josephus calls him. He lived about 65 BCE and his successful prayer that ended a long drought made him famous. Josephus mentions the miracle only briefly and tells how he was stoned to death when he refused to curse his fellow Jews during their civil wars. His death by stones apparently refers to his miraculous skills: Deuteronomy 13:1–6 orders this punishment to false prophets. The fragmentary and often suppressed evidence of Honi in the Rabbinic sources attests to how difficult it was for the mainstream rabbis to accept people with miraculous skills. Miracles were present, and they divided the opinions of the teachers; and the danger of magic made the majority of them cautious. However, Honi was slowly and carefully “rabbinized,” though this process was present initially only in the later texts. A similar process was apparently required before Hanina ben Dosa, who lived about 70 CE and was allegedly the last of the “men of deed,” was accepted by the rabbinic authorities.
Two figures in particular inform us of Jewish people who healed by throwing out demons. The Gospel of Mark informs us of a man who started to use Jesus’ name in his exorcisms. Jesus’ disciples tried to hinder him because the man was not identified with Jesus’ band (Mark 9:38–41; cf. Luke 9:49–50). We only can regret that the interest of the gospel writers is not focused on the anonymous exorcist but on the attitude of the disciples. Even the Old Testament contains a similar story (Num 11:26–29), which might have been a model for Mark, or even his source. At any rate, we here meet a Jew who healed by exorcism. Another Jew who threw out demons had, according to Josephus, famous spectators and made a great success. Vespasian, his sons, tribunes and other soldiers were watching when Eleazar performed the exorcism:

He put to the nose of the possessed man a ring, which had under its seal one of the roots prescribed by Solomon, and then, as the man smelled it, drew out the demon through his nostrils, and, when the man at once fell down, adjured the demon never to come back into him, speaking Solomon’s name and reciting the incantations which he had composed. Then, wishing to convince the bystanders and prove to them that he had this power, Eleazar placed a cup or foot basin full of water a little way off and commanded the demon, as it went out of the man, to overturn it and make known to the spectators that he had left the man. (Antiquities 8.42–49)

Eleazar was only one of the Jewish wise men deeply informed of “Solomon’s wisdom.” Apparently, this wisdom was a door that made it possible to adapt and apply all kinds of Hellenistic knowledge, occult as well as nonoccult, among Jewish people.

We also know of several Jewish miracle workers who acted as professionals. In general, Roman mighty men seem to have appreciated the help of oriental wise men. Tiberius had many astrologers and especially Thrasyllus filling his needs; and Otho took a man named Ptolemy with him when traveling to Spain. Both of them are mentioned by the skeptical Tacitus (Annals. 6.20–21, and Histories 1.22). Apparently, oriental sages were a kind of status symbol, and Jews were appreciated among them. The New Testament tells how Barjesus Elymas served Sergius Paulus (Acts 13), and according to Josephus a man called Atomus helped Antonius Felix, the procurator of Judea about 53–58 CE, who had fallen in love with a Jewish married lady named Drusilla:

He sent to her one of his friends, a Cyprian Jew named Atomus, who pretended to be a magician, in an effort to persuade her to leave her husband and to marry Felix. Felix promised to make her supremely happy if she did not disdain him. She, being unhappy and wishing to escape the malice of her sister Berenice, for Drusilla was exceedingly abused by her because her beauty, was persuaded to transgress the ancestral laws and
to marry Felix. By him she gave birth to a son whom she named Agrippa (Ant. 20.141–143).

We do not know what the methods were that Atomus used to persuade the lady, but the text shows the power of the Jewish magician. Apparently, the “Seven Sons of the High Priest Sceva” in Acts 19, hardly sons of a high priest and hardly brothers, were a band of professionals, who sought their clients among the lower layers of the people in Ephesus.

**CONCLUSION**

It is curious that this material has been so rarely observed during the decades of the *divine man* hypothesis, and I cannot explain it. Perhaps early Judaism was not a popular subject in Germany before World War II. At any rate, the scholars seem to have had an inadequate grasp of the ancient Jewish tradition. They considered the most important parallels to be found in the Greco-Roman world, the reason being the huge influence of the German History of Religions School (*Religionsgeschichtliche Schule*). According to the basic view of this school, the research of the New Testament starts with the idea that early Christianity was a syncretistic religion. Greek and Roman influence were sought and found in it, but sometimes, as in the investigation of miracles, influential patterns were uncritically developed, without adequate foundation in fact. Such modern constructions do not help, but hinder, the critical understanding of biblical miracle stories. It is time to return to the religio-historical work without distorting our lenses. The first task is to observe the rich Jewish tradition properly.

**NOTES**

2. See Gerhard Maier (1986), 50–51.
5. Ibid.
8. See, for example, Karl Ludwig Schmidt (1923), *Die Stellung der Evangelien in der allgemeinen Literaturgeschichte*, in *Eucharisterion Hermann Gunkel zum 60ste


19. Bultmann had previously been rather critical of the concept. See his (1925), Die Bedeutung der neuerschlossenen mandäischen und manichäischen Quellen für das Verständnis des Johannevangeliums, Zeitschrift für Neuestamentliche Wissenschaft (ZNW) 24, 100–146. He later changed his mind. See his commentary on John: Bultmann (1941), Das Evangelium des Johannes, Kritisch-exegetischer Kommentar über das Neue Testament (KEK), Göttingen: VandenHoeck und Ruprecht.


24. The Greek and Roman miracle-workers are listed by Blackburn (Theios Aner, 185–87), and by me (Apollonios von Tyana, 207–27).


31. Prominent scholars disagree whether rebellion and revolt were closely connected. Martin Hengel (1989), with his famous book The Zealots: Investigations into the Jewish Freedom Movement in the Period from Herod I until 70 A.D., Edinburgh: T&T Clark, linked rebels and militant religion very closely, and many scholars agree with him. Morton Smith was critical until the end; see The Troublemakers, 542–44, 566.


34. On Eleazar, see Bernd Kollmann (1996), Jesus und die Christen als Wundertäter. Studien zu Magie, Medizin, und Schamanismus in Antike und Christentum, Forschungen...

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It is not generally recognized that there are two views of the miracle of Christ’s birth in the Bible. The purpose of this essay is to point out that this is in fact the case and to indicate when and how these two views originated and came to be included in the same Bible. The better known of these views is set forth in vividly told stories in the Gospels of Matthew (1:18–25) and Luke (1:26–35). Here we learn—in the Greek text of Matthew 1:18—that Jesus was conceived *ek pneumatos hagiou* (“of the Holy Spirit”) in the womb of a virgin without a human father. Luke describes this event similarly in Luke 1:35. Being conceived in this manner is so extraordinary that we expect it to be referred to again and again in the scriptures that follow, but this is not the case. The miraculous conception of Jesus *ek pneumatos hagiou* (“of the Holy Spirit”) is never mentioned again in the entire New Testament.

Silence about a miracle of such import is perplexing until it is realized another perspective on the conception of Christ was pervasive in the first Christian communities. This is the view alluded to by the Apostle Paul at the beginning of his letter to the Romans where he writes (Romans 1:1–4) about the gospel he was called to proclaim to the world. It is a gospel, he states, about “God’s Son,” Jesus Christ, “promised beforehand . . . in the Holy Scriptures who according to the flesh was conceived of the sperm of David” (*ek spermatos David*). Referring to Christ’s conception in this way reflects the thinking of the time regarding how life begins. A human life began, it was thought, when male sperm was deposited in a woman’s womb where it coagulated like milk (Job 10:10–12) and grew into a child. There was no awareness as yet of the part played by the female ovum.¹ The origins of children
were thought to be totally in the sperm of their fathers. This is why the genealogies of children were traced through the sperm-line of their fathers—as in genealogies of Jesus in Matthew 1:1–17 and Luke 3:23–38—and why Paul in Romans 1:3 can write of Jesus being conceived “of the sperm of David” (ek spermatos David). Paul was signaling to his readers that Jesus truly is, “according to the flesh,” the “son” or descendent of David.

**EXPLORATION OF THE ISSUE**

So what is miraculous about that? The very question indicates one of the reasons why this view is not as well known as the other. The miraculous nature of Jesus being conceived in the womb of a virgin “of the Holy Spirit” (ek pneumatos hagiou) is at once recognizable, but what is unusual about his being conceived “of the sperm of David” (ek spermatos David)? An explanation is required. We must be reminded that Jesus was a Jew—and first-century Jews were hoping and praying as never before for the coming of God’s kingdom through a divinely anointed descendent of David. We need to know as well that David was Israel’s most illustrious king and had been promised a dynasty that would last forever. When therefore Paul states in Romans that Jesus Christ was conceived ek spermatos David he was announcing this promise had been fulfilled and the much hoped for kingdom of God was already dawning and about to appear in its fullness. Hence, this view of Christ’s conception was as miraculous for those who espoused it as was the view of his virgin birth for those who espoused it, but in a different way. The view that he was conceived “of the Holy Spirit” (ek pneumatos hagiou) was a miracle of divine origins, the view that he was conceived “of the sperm of David” (ek spermatos David) was a miracle of providence related to God’s rule on earth.

**TWO VIEWS SIDE BY SIDE**

How did two such different views of Christ’s miraculous conception originate? The already mentioned fact that only two texts in the entire New Testament tell of or allude to Christ’s miraculous conception “of the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 1:18–25 and Luke 1:26–38) hints at a possible answer. On closer inspection we observe that these two texts are located side by side with two genealogies—Matthew 1:1–17 and Luke 3:23–38—that trace the paternal sperm-line of Jesus to David and Abraham. This is hardly accidental. It suggests that these two texts which tell of Christ’s miraculous conception “of the Holy Spirit” might have been secondarily inserted where they are in each Gospel to supplement or modify the view of Christ’s conception “of the sperm of David” in the genealogies.

Textual oddities in the genealogies confirm this impression. At the beginning of Luke’s genealogy (Luke 3:23–38) unexpected words occur between “son” and “of Joseph” (3:23): “Now Jesus himself. . . was about thirty years old
being the son—as was supposed—of Joseph, of Heli, of Matthat, of Levi. . . .”

Given their location, the words “as was supposed” cast doubt on the validity of
the opinion of those who prepared this genealogy—implied is that they were
sincere but mistaken. They “supposed” Jesus to be the son of Joseph but were
mistaken about that. It is hard to imagine that those who wrote the genealogy
would question the accuracy of their own account in this way. By contrast it is
easily imaginable that these words were expressive of the sentiments of those
who might have inserted the prior story of Christ’s virgin birth (Luke 1:26–
38). When they did this, they were mindful of the discrepancy between their
view of Christ’s conception and the view of the genealogy.4 They could have
deleted the genealogy—but for reasons to be discussed they decided to retain
it. Instead, they modified it with a few words questioning its assumptions.

Matthew’s Gospel posed a similar dilemma to the person or persons who
inserted the virgin birth stories in this Gospel. In this instance the original text
likely said that Joseph “begot” Jesus, as Joseph was “begotten” by a line of fathers
before him beginning with David and Abraham (Mt 1:1–16). So in their case
too they faced a choice of deleting the genealogy or changing it at the point
where it stated, “Joseph begot Jesus who is called Christ.” They too chose
to retain the genealogy but changed it in the following way: After the word
“Joseph” they deleted the word “begot” and between “Joseph” and “Jesus who
is called Christ” the words, “husband of
Mary who gave birth to” (Mt 1:16). By doing so, they erased the fact that Jesus
was Joseph’s son and emphasized instead that Joseph was nevertheless Mary’s
husband—a fact referred to in the story they placed right after the genealogy,
relating how Joseph and Mary were engaged, but before coming together,
Jesus was conceived “of the Holy Spirit” (Mt 1:18). With these changes Mat-
thew’s genealogy is made to dovetail with the following virgin birth story.

ORIGINS OF THE OLDER VIEW

As to the origins of these two views, it seems evident that the view re-
lected in the genealogies is the older of the two. Where did that view come
from? From various sources it can be concluded that this was the view of
Jesus’ family and first disciples. Since Jesus did not object to being called
David’s son (Mt 20:29–34; Mk 10:46–52; Lu 18:35–43), it may be that the
Davidic descent of his family was common knowledge. Paul’s letters, which
were written in the middle of the first century and circulated widely among
the churches of that period, indicate as much. They were among the earliest
extant writings of the Christian movement—hence, that Paul could write
as he does in his letter to the Romans that Christ’s conception was “of the
sperm of David” (Rom 1:3), and take for granted that he would be under-
stood, indicates this was the accepted view of the time.5

But from where did Paul obtain his views in this regard? He was not per-
sonally acquainted with Jesus or his family before his conversion. He likely
would not have known of Christ’s descent from David unless someone had told him. Who might have told him? In one of his letters Paul writes of going to Jerusalem to spend time with the “pillars” there, to consult about the message he was preaching (Gal 1:18–2:10). Among the “pillars” he mentions was Jesus’ brother James, who was their leading elder (Acts 15:13–20). How James would have felt about his brother’s sperm-line is indicated in an incident recorded by the church historian Eusebius. In his *Ecclesiastical History* he mentions an attempt by the Roman emperor Domitian (81–96 CE) to execute “all who were of David’s line” among the Jews of Jerusalem. Quoting from an older historian, he describes Domitian’s action as follows: “And there still survived of the Lord’s family the grandsons of Jude, who was said to be His brother, humanly speaking. These were informed against as being of David’s line, and brought . . . before Domitian Caesar who was as afraid of the advent of Christ as Herod had been. Domitian asked them whether they were descended from David, and they admitted it.” After interrogating them further—and discovering the “kingdom” they were hoping for was no threat to his own—“Domitian found no fault with them . . . and issued orders terminating the persecution of the Church” (*Ecclesiastical History* 3.20). Eusebius concludes his report with these words: “On their release they became leaders of the churches, both because they had borne testimony and because they were of the Lord’s family; and thanks to the establishment of peace they lived on into Trajan’s time” (98 CE).

From this report it seems apparent that the brothers of Jesus and their children and grandchildren were utterly convinced of their descent from David. In all likelihood, this was the reason that Jesus’ conception “of the sperm of David” (*ek spermatos David*) was the taken-for-granted view of the Christian movement from its inception—and also why, later on, this Judean sector of the church stubbornly rejected the notion of Christ’s virgin birth when it arose. It was not their “vanity” that made them do so, as Irenaeus would assert in *Against Heresies* in 185 CE when it was published—but their integrity. Being convinced of their family’s descent from David, his brothers and their offspring had no other option—they knew for a fact that Jesus was of “David’s line” too.

**ORIGINS OF THE LATER VIEW**

When and how then did the alternative view of Christ’s conception arise—that he was conceived “of the Holy Spirit” (*ek pneumatos hagiou*) without a human father? And when and why was this view included in two Gospels of the Bible? We have come to a point of considerable uncertainty among researchers of these issues. A respected Catholic biblical scholar has recently concluded that all proposals to date regarding the origins of the
“virgin birth” stories are “meager and disappointing”—and that he too, does not know where these traditions originated (Meier 222).

My own view is that more can be known about this matter than is generally acknowledged. The two blocks of virgin birth stories in Matthew and Luke are themselves suggestive in this regard. It can be readily observed how different they are. While they agree on certain core details (name of Jesus’ parents, miraculous conception, birth in Bethlehem) their accounts of what occurred before and after his birth are astonishingly different. Matthew’s version begins with Jesus’ parents living in Bethlehem—and there is where his miraculous conception occurs; then, when Jesus is born, fearing he might be killed by soldiers of Herod, they flee to Egypt and from there go to Nazareth where Jesus grew up. In Luke’s version Jesus’ parents were living in Nazareth before Jesus was born—and Nazareth is where his miraculous conception occurs; then the parents go on a brief trip to Bethlehem where the birth takes place; shortly afterwards they return to Nazareth with a stopover in Jerusalem to visit the temple. What shall we make of these differences? At the very least they testify to a lack of fixed traditions.

Do we have any clues as to who might have composed these accounts? I have begun to think that we do. Several decades ago in a meticulously researched essay, a respected church historian, Hans von Campenhausen (1964), traced the origins of the theology of virgin birth in the ancient church to a church leader named Ignatius, who was bishop of the church at Syrian Antioch from about 69 to 107 ce. This church was one of the oldest and largest of the time. It was made up of Jews and Gentiles (Acts 11:19–21). Here Christ’s “disciples were first called Christians” (Acts 11:26) and it was from here that Paul and Barnabas started on their first missionary journey (Acts 13:1–3). This too was the church where a controversy erupted over whether Gentiles should be circumcised (Acts 15:1–2). This led to the first consultation of church leaders in Jerusalem in 49 ce (Acts 15:4–29). Another controversy at Antioch was over food laws and this time there were sharp differences between Paul and Peter that could not be resolved (Gal. 2:11–14). It was over this large conflict ridden church that the man presided—Bishop Ignatius—who was the sole source of the virgin birth theology of the early church according to Campenhausen.

When reading Campenhausen’s monograph I sensed its insights might be relevant for discovering the source of the virgin birth stories as well. To understand why, it will be necessary to understand why he came to believe Ignatius is the sole source of the virgin birth theology in the early church. His reasoning is as follows. “It seems to me,” he writes, “that too little account is taken of the fact that all the so-called ‘apostolic fathers’—with one important exception—do not seem to know of the virgin birth. . . . The exception is Bishop Ignatius of Antioch, the Bishop of Syria as he calls himself. . . . No
other fragments of Christian writings up to the middle of the second century that have been handed down to us, other than his writings, speak of the virgin birth” (Campenhausen 1964, 19).

To get the full weight of Campenhausen’s argument we must ask what “fragments of Christian writings” he is referring. They are not mere “fragments,” as he calls them, but substantial documents like the long letter Clement, the bishop of Rome, wrote (in 96 CE) to “the Church of God” at Corinth; the letter Polycarp, the bishop of Smyrna, wrote to the Philippians; the Epistle to Diognetus, a treatise on the beliefs and customs of Christians; the strident Epistle of Barnabas; the imaginative Shepherd of Hermes. These copious writings were written by contemporaries of Ignatius, yet in none of them is there a single reference to Christ’s virgin birth. The only writer in the first century to even mention this miraculous birth is Ignatius, bishop of Antioch.

Even more remarkable, Campenhausen goes on to point out, is the fact that Christ’s “virgin birth” is not just mentioned in the writings of Ignatius, but is at “the centre of his conviction.” For him, Campenhausen continues, “The virgin birth is the very special sign of salvation in the Christian faith. Indeed, the whole of Ignatius’ theology revolves around the great contrast between the human and the divine, the realm of death and the realm of life. . . . The primary miracle of redemption depends on the incarnation, on the paradoxical fact that Christ was both the Son of God and, in a new sense that expressly emphasizes the earthly aspect of his being, the Son of man, or, what comes to the same thing, that he is descended on the one side from the seed of David, but on the other from the Holy Spirit” (29). In summary, before Ignatius, there was not a whisper of Christ’s virgin birth in the extant writings of his contemporaries; by contrast, in the writings of Ignatius, Christ’s virgin birth is at the center of an innovative theology.

The conclusion Campenhausen draws from this remarkable fact is paradoxical. He believes Ignatius to be “the starting point” of the ancient church’s theology of virgin birth but not of the accounts of Christ’s virgin birth in the Gospels (Campenhausen 1964, 25). He is persuaded that the Gospel accounts of Christ’s virgin birth predate Ignatius and were already part of the version of Matthew’s Gospel which he and others of this region were reading. As such, he speculates, these Gospel accounts were the starting-point of all later expositions of virgin birth theology in the early church. This is the point at which I find his research flawed but relevant for an understanding of the origins of the virgin birth accounts in the Gospels as well—for I want now to indicate why I believe it was the other way around. The starting point of Ignatius’ theology was not the Gospel accounts of Christ’s virgin birth but Ignatius’ theology was the starting point for the Gospel accounts. The total silence about Christ’s virgin birth in the extant writings of his contemporaries would alone suggest this. If the virgin birth stories were already part of Matthew’s Gospel, why would Ignatius be the only one in his time to
comment on them? Moreover, we know of Jewish-Christians living in this region and time who were devoted to Matthew’s Gospel but opposed to the idea of Christ’s virgin birth when it arose—so obviously, in their version of Matthew’s Gospel these stories were missing.\(^{10}\)

However, the most compelling reason for thinking Ignatius did not derive his virgin birth theology from the stories in Matthew’s Gospel is that he never even hints at doing so, but on the contrary, gives every indication that the source of his thoughts in this regard was himself. Virtually all that we know about Ignatius is found in seven letters written while he was on his way to a martyr’s death in Rome (in 107 CE). Most of them were drafted on the spur of the moment in response to delegations from the churches who visited him during this momentous journey. Like Paul, whom he admired and sought to emulate, he wrote candidly about his fears, thoughts, and concerns. Also like Paul, he was a man of exceptional talent who felt called by God to foster the unity of the churches of his region in a time of strident conflicts due in large part to the fact that they did not yet have a set of agreed upon scriptures—and those they did have only acerbated their disagreements. Among these were scriptures Christians inherited from Judaism, the letters of Paul, and the Gospel of Matthew.

All Christians, more or less, respected the scriptures of Judaism but they interpreted them in increasingly different ways. One faction embraced the perspective on these scriptures in the writings of Paul, the other faction embraced the views in Matthew’s Gospel.\(^{11}\) The faction devoted to the letters of Paul inclined more and more to an interpretation that viewed Christ as a God of grace that had come to earth from a totally different realm to liberate human beings from the material world and its laws for a spirit-home in heaven where Christ now lived. The faction that embraced the Gospel of Matthew viewed Christ as the divinely anointed Son of David who had come as a messianic teacher to fulfill the law and prophets and bring about God’s kingdom on earth as it was in heaven. These two groups were increasingly in conflict with each other. Those who espoused Matthew’s Gospel regarded Paul and his letters as subversive of the Law of Moses and the promises of the prophets; those who espoused Paul’s letters thought the adherents of Matthew’s Gospel were fostering a kind of legalism and materialism that was the exact opposite of the spiritually liberating Gospel of Paul.

We know from his letters that Ignatius was searching for a way to unite these divided factions.\(^{12}\) An aspect of his strategy was to exalt the role of the bishop in each and every church—but in what would the bishops be united? From his letters, we sense this was the question preoccupying him and he was excited by the answers welling up within him. It would be a shared new perspective on the centrality and importance of Jesus Christ as both God and man. It was of this that he began to write at the end of his letter to “the deservedly happy church at Ephesus in Asia,” as he calls it.\(^{13}\) He characterizes
his thoughts in this regard as a “preliminary account for you of God’s design for the New Man, Jesus Christ. It is a design for faith in Him and love for Him, and comprehends His Passion and Resurrection” (Letter to Ephesians 20). He adds, “I hope to write you a further letter—if in answer to your prayers, Jesus Christ allows it, and God so wills—in which I will continue this preliminary account...”

He had previously written in this same letter about the “mysteries” of Christ’s Death and Resurrection as set forth in the letters of Paul (Letter to Ephesians 12), but Paul did not have much to say about Christ’s birth. His own thoughts about this, is what Ignatius now wants to share. And so, perhaps for the first time (in the middle of paragraph 18 of his letter), abruptly and without forewarning, he begins to put down on paper a “preliminary account” of his thinking in this regard. He writes as follows:

[18.] Under the Divine dispensation Jesus Christ our God was conceived by Mary of the seed of David and of the Spirit of God; He was born, and He submitted to baptism, so that by His Passion He might sanctify water.

[19.] Mary’s virginity [he continues in a new paragraph] was hidden from the prince of this world, so was her child-bearing, and so was the death of the Lord. All three trumpet-tongued secrets [literally, “these mysteries of a loud shout”] were brought to pass in the deep silence of God. How then were they made known to the world? Up in the heavens a star gleamed out, more brilliant than all the rest; no words could describe its luster, and the strangeness of it left men bewildered. The other stars and the sun and moon gathered round it in chorus, but this star outshone them all; the spells of sorcery were all broken, and superstition received its deathblow. The age-old empire of evil was overthrown, for God was now appearing in human form to bring in a new order, even life without end. Now that which had been perfected in the Divine counsels began its work; and all creation was thrown into a ferment over this plan for the utter destruction of death.

The theological premise with which Ignatius began this “preliminary account”—namely, that “Jesus Christ our God was conceived by Mary of the seed of David and of the Spirit of God”—is exactly what is conveyed through the genealogy of Matthew’s Gospel, showing Jesus to be “of the seed of David,” and its follow-up account of Christ’s virgin birth, showing him to have been conceived “of the Spirit of God.” Either Ignatius found this theological premise when reading Matthew’s Gospel, or he created it. In the light of the fact that none of Ignatius’s contemporaries testifies to finding it in Matthew, nor does Ignatius, the probability is that he created it and the follow-up stories in Matthew’s Gospel (2:1–23) about Jesus’ birth at Bethlehem and the “star” that led the magi to worship the newly born “Emmanuel” (“God with us”; Mt 1:23). All are themes touched on by Ignatius in his “preliminary account of God’s design for the New Man, Jesus Christ.”

There can be little doubt as to Ignatius’s motives for wanting to divulge his novel thinking in this regard, for after doing so he spells them out. At
the very end of his letter he writes of his desire to write further about these matters “if the Lord reveals to me that you are all, man by man and name by name attending your meetings in a state of grace, united in faith in Jesus Christ, who is the seed of David according to the flesh and is the Son of Man and Son of God, and are ready now to obey your bishop and clergy with undivided minds” (Letter to Ephesians 20). To unite the churches of his time in his newly coined vision of Jesus Christ as both Son of David and Son of God was right then, as his martyrdom in Rome approached ever nearer and nearer, his passion and calling.

THE CREATION OF THE BIBLE

When and why was a block of virgin birth stories inserted in Luke’s Gospel; and when and why were Matthew and Luke assembled along with other writings and published in a one-volume Bible such as we have today? There is evidence that both actions, the insertion of virgin birth stories in Luke’s Gospel and the creation of the first one-volume Bibles, were made in response to the same controversies in the churches of the first half of the second century. These controversies were similar to those Bishop Ignatius had to contend with at the end of the first century. As a first step toward understanding them it is important to note what the results might have been of his efforts to address them.

There is evidence that soon after his death a new edition of Matthew’s Gospel, with the virgin birth stories added, was accepted by a growing number of churches. The chief witness to this development is to be found in the writings of Justin Martyr (110–165), born shortly after Ignatius’ martyrdom in Rome. Justin is the first to mention these stories as they appear in the Gospels (Campenhausen 1964, 30–33). He accepts them at face value, and makes ample use of them as proof of Christ’s divinity, even while acknowledging that there are Christians who reject them (Dialogue with Trypho 48). So in this sense the endeavors of Ignatius appear to have been successful.

At the same time the theological proposals he had made did not reconcile the contending Christian factions of his time: namely, the adherents of Matthew’s Gospel and the devotees of Paul’s letters. Above all, Ignatius’s endeavors did nothing to deter those devoted to Paul’s letters from developing their theology in new, more radical directions that would turn out to be more divisive than ever.

The writings of Justin Martyr also bear witness to this development. They are not only the first to mention the virgin birth stories in the Gospels but the first to warn of a new, more virulent threat to the unity of the churches in the teachings of Marcion, “a man of Pontus,” as Justin refers to him. He describes this threat as follows: “And there is Marcion,” he wrote, “. . . who is even at this day alive, and teaching his disciples to believe in some other god greater than the Creator. And he, by the aid of devils, has caused many
of every nation to speak blasphemies, and to deny that God is the maker of the universe, and to assert that some other being, greater than He, has done greater works" (*First Apology* 26). What Justin is referring to is a theological movement that was arising from within the church and threatening to take it over. The “god greater than the Creator” that Marcion was proclaiming was Jesus Christ. Marcion had come to believe in him as such through studying the letters of Paul. In other words, the churches of Asia Minor, and the world, were now, with Marcion on the scene, more bitterly divided than ever and facing an unprecedented crisis. How had this happened?

From all that we can know about Marcion, the “man from Pontus” must have been an extraordinary individual. He was a pastor’s son who had become a wealthy shipbuilder. He was also an innovative and assiduous student of the church’s older and newer scriptures, the letters of Paul in particular. When studying the latter, Marcion was struck by what Paul wrote in Galatians about the revelation of Jesus Christ from which he derived his Gospel, a Gospel of grace and forgiveness that stood in sharp contrast with the Law of Moses in the scriptures of Judaism. This is what likely led Marcion to the radical conviction that there were two Gods: the just, law-obsessed God of Judaism, who created this miserable world; and Jesus Christ the God of grace who came to rescue those who believed in him for a totally different spirit-world in heaven where he now lives.

Utterly convinced of his insights, Marcion felt compelled to act. First, he wrote a book called *Antitheses* in which he tabulated the differences he observed between Jesus Christ, as revealed to Paul, and the law-obsessed God of Judaism as he perceived to be portrayed in the scriptures of Judaism. Next, as a replacement for the scriptures of Judaism, which he called upon Christians everywhere to stop reading, he created a first Christian “Bible” consisting of a version of the Gospel of Luke, a companion of Paul, and ten letters of Paul (nine to seven churches: Galatians, Corinthians, Romans, Thessalonians, Ephesians, Colossians, Philippians; plus Philemon). Then Marcion went to the church at Rome, the leading church of the time now that Jerusalem was destroyed. After giving its elders a large sum of money, he presented his ideas in a bid for their support. His ideas were rejected and his money returned, whereupon he began propagating his teachings on his own.

His teachings and Bible, a single codex, spread like wildfire to all parts of the church. Scholars estimate that Marcion’s followers outnumbered non-Marcionites in the decades of the 160s and 170s (Miller 2004, 49). His success stunned and energized those who opposed him. They rightly sensed a definitive moment had come. Marcion had called upon the churches to get rid of their Jewish scriptures and embrace as their scriptures his own newly created Bible. Instead, those who opposed him did an amazing thing. They quickly produced an alternative Bible by having the entire body of Jewish scriptures, still on scrolls, copied onto the pages of a single codex (as Marcion had done) and then added, in the same codex, many additional
Christian writings, including those that Marcion had in his Bible. By this act alone those who did this were saying in effect: Jesus Christ is not a new God; Christianity is not a new religion. Christians believe in God the Creator, Maker of heaven and earth. Christianity is part of the same story, guided by the selfsame God that is witnessed to in the scriptures of Judaism (Miller 2004, 60–75).

This alternative Bible, a prototype of Bibles today, was huge! Nevertheless, it too was disseminated and embraced by more and more churches worldwide (Trobisch 106). It was at this time, for example, with this alternative Bible in hand, that Irenaeus (130–200 CE), bishop of the church in Lyons, France, wrote Against Heresies in which he subjected the teachings of Marcion, and other like-minded teachers, for the first time, to a thorough theological critique. Fifteen years later Tertullian of Carthage (160–230) did the same in a treatise entitled Against Marcion. Three manuscript copies of these first alternative Bibles have survived. They are known as Codex Alexandrinus, Codex Sinaiticus, and Codex Vaticanus.

Usually dated to the fourth or fifth centuries, they are examples of what the “first edition” Bibles of the second century looked like (Trobisch 24; Miller 2004, 52–54). A treatise of Tertullian (160–230), Prescription against Heresies, published at the end of the second century indicates not only when but where these first one-volume Bibles were first published (Miller 2004, 130). In it he praises the church at Rome for having at some point earlier in that century “united the law and prophets” (scriptures of Judaism) with “the writings of evangelists and apostles” (Christian scriptures) in a volume from which the church “drinks in her faith” (Prescription 36).

Vibrant testimony to the creation of a compendium of this kind in mid-second-century Rome is also to be found in an ancient text called the Muratorian Fragment. It reports on a conclave to draw up a list of books that would be read “publicly to the people in the church” (line 78). It refers to disputes over scriptures that were being discussed and settled. The “heresy of Marcion” is mentioned. The name used for the scriptures under discussion is “Prophets” (“Old Testament”) and “Apostles” (“New Testament”). The list of “Apostles” to be read publicly is one that resembles the list of books in the New Testament of Bibles today. The document’s first lines were destroyed. So it begins as follows: “The third book of the Gospel is that according to Luke”—and then we read the following: “The fourth of the Gospels is that of John.” So we can surmise that the four Gospels in the order we have them in Bibles today were being singled out for a collection of books that would be read publicly in those churches that agreed with this conclave.

**TWO VIEWS IN ONE BIBLE**

We have confirmation of the work of this conclave in the three codices referred to above: Codex Alexandrinus, Vaticanus, and Sinaiticus. In all three
the four Gospels are grouped together at the forefront of what would become known as the “New Testament” of this Bible. The Gospel of Matthew is first, undoubtedly because some version of this Gospel had played a vital role from the beginning of the Christian movement—but also because of its opening genealogy. That genealogy, linking Jesus to a line of fathers going back to Abraham, now serves a dual purpose within this newly formed one-volume Bible: showing the ancestry of Jesus—but also now connecting his story (and the story of the world-mission of his disciples) to the story recounted in the prior scriptures of Judaism beginning with creation (Genesis 1). So with Matthew’s Gospel now an integral part of this one-volume Bible, the story of Christ’s virgin birth, which follows, is now also an integral part of this larger story extending from creation to the world-mission of Christ’s disciples. Hence, as it turns out, the lofty goals that Ignatius had in mind for its theological perspectives were being realized—to unify and strengthen the churches of the whole world (and the world itself) with a “preliminary account of God’s design for the New Man, Jesus Christ . . . a design which provides for faith in Him and love for Him and comprehends His Passion and His Resurrection” (Letter to Ephesians 20).

What then are we to make of the quite different stories of Christ’s virgin birth a few chapters later in this same Bible, in Luke’s Gospel? When were these stories added to Luke’s Gospel—and why were they also included in the first one-volume Bibles? As previously indicated, this may have occurred at the time this one-volume Bible was created and for similar reasons—to combat Marcion’s teachings and Bible. A similar thesis is proposed by veteran biblical scholar Joseph B. Tyson in a recently published study (Tyson 2006). Marcion taught that since Jesus is God, it was absurd to think that he was born as a baby or really died. He was eternal, but manifest on earth as a fully grown man. So in all likelihood, Tyson suggests, the version of Luke’s Gospel Marcion had in his Bible did not begin with infancy stories. Marcion’s version may have been the original version of Luke’s Gospel, Tyson argues. “Quite apart from the Marcionite issues,” he writes, “there are good reasons to think that the infancy narratives of Luke’s Gospel were late additions to an earlier version of Luke’s Gospel” (Tyson 90). The earlier version began with the third chapter where Jesus is introduced, as he is in Mark’s Gospel, as an adult. So the infancy stories in Luke 1:5–2:52 were inserted into Luke’s Gospel, Tyson suggests, after Marcion’s Bible was published and in circulation, with the intent of combating his mistaken ideas about Jesus only appearing to be human.

How, in Tyson’s opinion, do the infancy narratives of Luke’s Gospel do this? Tyson points to three ways. First, “Above all, the narratives maintain that Jesus was born of a woman; he did not suddenly descend from heaven to Capernaum. . . . For the author of canonical Luke [Tyson observes], although Jesus was born without the agency of Joseph . . . his is nevertheless a human birth. The language that the angel Gabriel uses in addressing Mary
in Luke 1:31 seems to have been selected specifically to offend the Marcionites: Mary is to conceive in her womb and produce a son. . . . Anatomical references are also stressed in the meeting between Elizabeth and Mary (Luke 1:39–45), when the child of Elizabeth leaps in her womb (Luke 1:41–44). . . . The language throughout Luke 1:5–2:52 emphasizes the humanity of Jesus” (Tyson 98–99).

Secondly, “The Lukan infancy narratives also stress the relationship of Jesus to Israel,” Tyson writes. “Jesus’ relationship to the Jewish people is made clear in the references to Joseph and Jesus as of the house of David (Luke 1:27; 1:69; 2:4) and to David as Jesus’ father (Luke 1:32). . . . The fidelity of the family to Jewish practices is shown in Luke 2:22–24, the stories of the presentation of Jesus and of Mary’s purification. . . . The author also implies that Jesus himself incorporated these practices, noting that as a child he was obedient to his parents (Luke 2:51). But Jesus’ Jewishness is nowhere more emphatically signified than in the story of his circumcision (Luke 2:21). . . . Together with others, this passage indicates that the legitimacy and right of Jesus to speak and act in the name of the God of Israel for salvation on behalf of the people and nations is beyond doubt. For our purposes,” Tyson summarizes, “it is important to observe that the vital link with Judaism signified by Jesus’ circumcision would have been highly offensive to Marcion and his followers” (Tyson 99).

A third feature of these stories that would have been offensive to Marcion, Tyson points out, is “the pervasive influence of the Hebrew Scriptures . . . notable in Luke 1:5–2:52. Allusions to a number of books may be found throughout the narratives, but the author makes prominent use of Daniel and Malachi. . . . These considerations make it highly probable,” Tyson concludes, “that the Lukan birth narratives were added in reaction to the challenges of Marcionite Christianity. It would be very difficult to explain why Marcion would choose a gospel with these, to him, highly offensive chapters at the beginning only to eliminate them. Further, it would be difficult to imagine a more directly anti-Marcionite narrative than what we have in Luke 1:5–2:52. . . . The author of Luke 1:5–2:52 wants his readers to know that Marcion is wrong in denying the human birth of Jesus, his Jewish connections, his fulfillment of Jewish expectations, and the role of the prophets in predicting his coming. In a relatively short span our author has succeeded in challenging and rejecting major Marcionite claims” (Tyson 100).

Tyson’s thesis includes more than the infancy narratives in Luke’s Gospel. He believes other inserts were made to this Gospel at this time and an additional volume was created, the New Testament book of Acts, to produce a work “that would clearly and forcefully respond to the claims of the Marcionites” (Tyson 120). He visualizes this as a stand-alone project. He does not consider what, in my opinion, is the more likely possibility, namely, that the infancy narratives were added to Luke’s Gospel in the process of adding
this Gospel to a one-volume Bible that the church was preparing to combat Marcion’s teachings and Bible. Viewed in this light, the infancy narratives in Luke’s Gospel can be seen as a corrective response not only to the mistaken ideas of Marcion but as a corrective supplement as well to the infancy narratives in Matthew’s Gospel, which are located just a few pages earlier.

In any case, in their present setting, as part of a one-volume Bible, these two blocks of virgin birth stories will inevitably be compared and it will be noticed how the infancy narratives in Luke’s Gospel do in fact supplement and correct certain possibly wrong impressions that might be taken from the infancy narratives of Matthew’s Gospel. For all their differences, Luke’s virgin birth stories are sufficiently like the stories in Matthew’s Gospel that it can be assumed that Matthew’s account served as a model for the stories in Luke, but the stories in Luke are more human, more realistic, more credible, conveying a picture of Jesus’ family as it really might have been in the times in which Jesus grew up. In this way the stories in Luke serve to humanize and historicize Jesus not only vis-à-vis Marcion’s Bible but vis-à-vis Matthew’s infancy narratives.

Do we have any clues as to who might have written the stories in Luke’s Gospel? There is one possible candidate—it turns out to be someone Ignatius of Antioch knew and admired. On his way to his martyrdom in Rome Bishop Ignatius arranged for a prolonged stopover at the port-city of Smyrna, where a much younger man was bishop. Over the next fifty years, until his own martyr’s death, this young man, Bishop Polycarp of Smyrna, would become the pre-eminent leader in the whole of Asia Minor and Rome, in the struggle against Marcion. Of Antioch knew and admired. On his way to his martyrdom in Rome Bishop Ignatius arranged for a prolonged stopover at the port-city of Smyrna, where a much younger man was bishop. Over the next fifty years, until his own martyr’s death, this young man, Bishop Polycarp of Smyrna, would become the pre-eminent leader in the whole of Asia Minor and Rome, in the struggle against Marcion. That stopover in Smyrna was the setting in which Ignatius received his first church delegations, and where he drafted his letter to the Ephesians (cited above). In that letter he went public for the first time with a “preliminary account” of his new thinking about Christ’s virgin birth (Letter to Ephesians 20). During that stopover a bond was formed between Ignatius and Polycarp that is evident in their subsequent letters (Staniforth 126).

Polycarp not only went on to lead the fight against Marcion in Asia Minor and Rome but there is evidence that he may have had a hand as well in helping design the first one-volume Bible to combat Marcion. History is an inexact science, but sources at hand all point to Ignatius as having shaped, if not written, the virgin birth stories in Matthew’s Gospel, and to Polycarp as having influenced, if not written, the virgin birth stories in Luke’s Gospel. The older view of the miracle of Christ’s birth, that he was conceived ek spermatos David, is also still present in this one-volume Bible, but in modified form. Even so, this older view continues to serve as a reminder that the story of Christ’s virgin birth is not to be interpreted too literally, but, to repeat, in the way Ignatius hoped it would be read, namely, as “a preliminary account of the New Man, Jesus Christ . . . which provides for faith in Him and love for Him” (Letter to Ephesians 20).
1. In his essay “On the Generation of Animals,” the fourth-century Athenian philosopher, Aristotle, spelled out the reproductive science of the time as follows: “Male is that which is able to concoct, to cause to take shape, and to discharge semen possessing the ‘principle’ of the ‘form’.” Whereas “female is that which receives semen, but is unable to cause semen to take shape or discharge it” (Lefkowitz and Fant 84). The persistence of such reproductive concepts in Middle Eastern culture is indicated by a reference in the eighth-century Qur’an to a child being fashioned by Allah from a “sperm drop” (Sura XVIII:37). For details on these views and their relevance for interpreting the Bible, see Miller (1999), Chapter 3, “Male-Centered Reproductive Biology and the Dynamics of Biblical Patriarchy.”

2. David Mace (1953) has noted how consistent this reproductive view is with the biblical principle of succession from father to son, for if children originate in the sperm of the father, then “the continuity of the ‘line’ can logically exist only through the males of the family,” he writes, and “the particular woman who happens to bear sons to a man is from the point of view of succession a matter of indifference; hence the complete absence in Hebrew thought of our modern conceptions of ‘legitimacy.’ The woman supplies nothing of her essential self. She merely provides in her womb the human incubator in which the man’s seed becomes his child, the reproduction of his image” (206).

3. On the intensification of these hopes right at this time, see Collins (1995) who summarizes the situation as follows: “the expectation of a king from the Davidic line, which is dormant for much of the postexilic era, resurfaces after the restoration of native, nonDavidic, Jewish kingship in the Hasmonean period (late second to early first centuries BCE). It then reappears in more than one setting. By the first century CE it can fairly be said to be part of the common heritage of Judaism” (49).

4. The opinion of Vermes (1973), a respected Jewish scholar, is similar. He writes that “the logic of the genealogies demands that Joseph was the father of Jesus”—but “To make place for the dogma of the virgin birth, this logic had to be tampered with by the compilers of Matthew and Luke” (215). However, as will be seen, I differ with Vermes about who did this and their reasons for doing so.

5. The failure of Paul to refer to Christ’s virgin birth counts especially heavily against its being known to him, since his theological legacy is so large and rich in Christological formulae. In several places he would surely have referred to it, or expressed himself differently, if he or his churches were aware of it. One such place is Galatians 4:4 where, to stress his abasement, Paul writes of Jesus being born, not of a virgin, but of a “woman.” This is consistent with his view that Christ’s conception was ek spermatos David (Rom 1:3; 2 Tim 2:8).

6. These citations are from the translation of Eusebius’ Ecclesiastical History (3.19–20) by Williamson (1965).

7. This is the charge Irenaeus (in 185 CE) levels against Jewish Christians he calls “Ebionites” in the fifth volume of Against Heresies (5.1.3). “Ebionite” means “the poor”—which may refer to “the poor among the saints at Jerusalem” (Rom 15:26). Irenaeus had earlier written (in volume one of Against Heresies) of the Ebionite belief that Jesus was “the son of Joseph and Mary according to the ordinary course of human generation” (Against Heresies 1.26.1). Now here, in volume five, he takes them
to task for not accepting “by faith” the story of Christ’s virgin birth. For information regarding the “Ebionites” and other Jewish Christians of this period, see Wilson (143–59).

8. Meier (1991), after an exhaustive investigation of the Catholic view that the “brothers” of Jesus were not Jesus’ biological brothers, concludes that they were. The Greek word, \textit{adelphous}, he writes, except when used metaphorically, always means “blood brother,” not cousin or step-brother (328). But then he goes on to hypothesize that they might have been “half-brothers”—and cites as proof of this novel notion, Mark 6:17, where Philip is called the “brother” of Herod Antipas, when in fact he had a different mother. Meier is therefore of the opinion that the word “brother” in this text “has to mean half-brother, since Herod Antipas was the son of Herod the Great by still another wife. Hence, the blood bond [Meier writes] was only through the common biological father, and so Philip (whoever he was) was the \textit{adelphia} of Antipas in the sense of being a half brother” (328). Meier’s conjecture in this instance is flawed. As noted earlier in this essay, in the culture of the time sperm, not blood, defined genealogical relationships. “Brothers” were brothers by virtue of being begotten by the same father, regardless of their mothers. When therefore it is written that Jude was brother of James (Jude 1), as James was brother of the Lord (Gal 1:19), this is tantamount to saying all three had the same father.

9. He writes that, “Taken by itself, historical-critical research simply does not have the sources and tools available to reach a final decision on the historicity of the virginal conception as narrated by Matthew and Luke. . . . Once again, we are reminded of the built-in limitations of historical criticism. It is a useful tool, provided we do not expect too much of it” (Meier 222).

10. Once again, we are referring to the Ebionites. For them and their views about Christ’s virgin birth, see footnote 7. According to Irenaeus they “use the Gospel according to Matthew only” (\textit{Against Heresies} 1.26.2). Campenhausen is aware of this group and their beliefs but believes they deleted the stories of Christ’s virgin birth from their version of Matthew’s Gospel (Campenhausen 1964, 20). This is improbable. Why would they be devoted to a Gospel from which they first had to delete an important account like that? On the other hand it is completely consistent with everything else we know about them that they would cherish a Gospel that began (as Matthew’s Gospel does) with a genealogy showing that Jesus was “begotten” by a line of fathers beginning with Abraham and David (Mt 1:1).

11. It is notoriously difficult to give a credible account of the controversies among Christians in this region and period. This and the following summary description are based partly on what we are told in the New Testament about the controversies that plagued the church at Antioch (see Acts 15:1–35; Galatians 2:11–14), partly on what Ignatius writes in his letters, and partly on what I learned from my research on controversies of this region when the churches opposing Marcion created the first one-volume Bibles such as we have today. For the latter development, see Miller (2004) and the discussion that follows.

12. The letters of Ignatius address now this faction, now that. Two address the perils of Docetism (or “spiritualism” as I prefer to call it)—his letters to the Ephesians and Tralles; three address the “old leaven” of Jewish thinking and observances—his letters to the Magnesians, Philadelphians, and Smyrnians. Staniforth (1968), who has prepared an excellent translation of these letters, describes the “disunity” in the
church to which they are addressed as follows: “He [Ignatius] found it split into three divergent parties, which we might describe in modern terms as left, right and centre. On the left were Docetists [spiritualists], whom he saw as the most serious of the dangers threatening the Catholic faith, and against whom he launches his sharpest shafts. On the right were those whose Christianity was still deeply impregnated with the ‘old leaven’ of Judaism. Midway between the two stood the congregation of faithful believers, with Ignatius as their leader. The paramount need, therefore, as he [Ignatius] saw it, was to find some means of creating an undivided church by inducing the dissenters on either side to unite themselves with this central body” (67). My impression is that “central body” may not have been as united as Staniforth implies, at that time at least—but a “central body” of this kind is certainly what Ignatius was trying to foster.

13. I am quoting from the translation of these letters in Staniforth.

14. Staniforth offers the following explanation of the peculiar wording used here. This is “a deliberately paradoxical expression,” he writes. “They [the secrets] were prepared in the silence of God, in order to be proclaimed abroad to the world.”

15. Virtually all that we know about Marcion is through the writings of those who wrote against him, since none of his own writings have survived, except possibly the so-called “Marcionite Prologues” to Paul’s letters, present in all branches of the Latin Vulgate and thought by some to be a surviving remnant from Marcion’s Bible. Of those who wrote against him, the most informative are Irenaeus in his magnum opus, Against Heresies (185 CE), and Tertullian in his five volume work, Against Marcion (200 CE). The latter volumes are completely devoted to critiquing Marcion, both his teachings and his Bible. All students of Marcion are indebted to the painstaking research of Harnack (1924), corrected and supplemented by Hoffman (1984), summarized and updated by Wilson (1995), synopsized and related to the formation of the first Bibles by Miller (2004).

16. This is likely why Galatians was at the forefront of Marcion’s letter collection in his Bible, right after his version of the Gospel of Luke. Galatians was important to Marcion not only for his interpretation of the teachings of Paul, but for his belief that Paul was the only faithful apostle of Jesus Christ—for in Galatians Paul writes of how he had to rebuke the leading Apostle Peter for his failure to stand up for the Gospel of God’s grace revealed in Jesus Christ (Gal 2:11–14).

17. For date and description of this intriguing manuscript, see Miller (2004, 127–30).

18. For a chart showing the books in each of the three codices, listed side by side for purposes of comparison, see Miller (2004, 57).

19. Irenaeus (130–220), a younger contemporary of Polycarp (70–156), who as a boy saw him in action and greatly admired him, says this about him (among other things): “But Polycarp . . . was not only instructed by apostles and conversed with many who had seen Christ, but was also, by apostles in Asia, appointed bishop of the Church in Smyrna. . . . He it was, coming to Rome in the time of Anicetus [155–66] caused many to turn away from the aforesaid heretics [Valentinus and Marcion] to the Church of God” (Against Heresies 3.3.4).

20. Based on a comparison with Polycarp’s letter to the Philippians, Campenhau- sen (1977) believes Polycarp (or his associates) may have been responsible for some of the letters in the end-section of the Bible, namely, 1 and 2 Timothy, and Titus. These letters, he writes, are charged with “the same strength of feeling and with almost the
same phrases” as Polycarp uses in his Philippians letter (181). It is also apparent from their content that they, like Polycarp’s letter to the Philippians, are aimed at Marcionites. There is a possible allusion to Marcion himself in the first of these letters. It was widely known that Marcion was a “shipbuilder”—in 1 Timothy those “who have put conscience aside” are said to have “shipwrecked” their faith (1:19). At the end of this same letter (1 Tim) there is also a likely allusion to a book Marcion wrote called Antitheses—the final verse of 1 Timothy reads as follows: “O Timothy, guard the deposit, turning away from profane empty utterances and the contradictions [Greek: antitheseis] of the falsely called knowledge” (1 Tim 6:20).

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In October 2005, the unthinkable happened to Shana West. In what must be every skydiver’s worst nightmare, after she leaped from the plane, Shana’s tangled parachute only partially deployed, leaving her to fall toward the earth at an astounding fifty miles per hour. The resulting collision broke multiple bones in her face and body but did not kill her. To complicate matters, unknown to her, Shana was two weeks pregnant. Amazingly, she not only survived what was almost a total free fall, but in time gave birth to a healthy baby boy. In reporting the story in March 2007, Robin Roberts, coanchor for Good Morning America, called Shana’s survival miraculous. It is doubtful that many people, especially people of faith, would have disagreed with Roberts’s assessment.

A few days later, ABC News reported that Christa Lilly of Colorado Springs had slipped into a coma in October 2001. After six years, though, she suddenly and unexplainably woke up. Calling her ordeal mystical, Christa’s neurologist could not explain why. Family members, however, had a different take. They called it a miracle from God. It is doubtful that many people would have disagreed with their assessment either.

A few weeks afterwards, Good Morning America reported yet another story, in which a teenager by the name of Levi Draher survived after passing out for five minutes, during which time his brain was deprived of oxygen. Draher was participating in a fad known as the choking game, in which teenagers intentionally choke themselves in an attempt to get high. Fortunately, Draher was resuscitated in time to save his life. Despite the fact that he suffered a dramatic loss of speech and motor skills and would have to spend the next
two years in rehabilitation in order to fully recover, reporter Chris Cuomo hailed Draher’s survival as “nothing short of a miracle.” In a speech to a group of high school students Draher himself recounted, “Do I consider myself a miracle? Yes, I do.” As in the above cases, few would probably disagree with Cuomo’s and Draher’s assessments either.

In early May 2007 a tornado that was about a mile and a half wide, with winds greater than two hundred miles per hour, ripped through the small town of Greensburg, Kansas. It destroyed about 85 percent of the town and caused the deaths of what was reported at the time to be eight people. ABC News titled their story “Miracle in Kansas.” Even though the town had been warned a few minutes earlier by the National Weather Service, the alleged miracle was the fact that more people were not killed from such a large and powerful storm.

These examples illustrate the fact that we are quick to label as miraculous things that we cannot explain. Is this correct procedure? Whenever an individual narrowly avoids what could have been a major automobile accident while traveling at a high rate of speed, or trapped coal miners are extracted alive from deep within the earth after several days without food and water, or individuals with terminal diseases who are given weeks to live suddenly go into remission, individuals of faith are quick to call these incidents miraculous. However, do any of the above examples actually qualify as miracles?

My purpose in this chapter is to address this issue from a biblical perspective. Specifically I want to examine how miracles are depicted in both the Old and New Testament narratives. Additionally, and equally important, I want to analyze what differences, if any, there may be between the miraculous and the providential. What role, if any, does God play in these two areas according to the Bible?

Before going further, a few preliminary issues may be addressed. Why should we analyze miracles as depicted in the Old and New Testaments? The answer is relatively simple. Many people, who are quick to call miraculous those seemingly unexplainable events that defy the odds, are usually people of faith, primarily Christians, who have read at least portions of the Bible. In many cases it is because they have read stories about the miraculous in the Bible that they believe in the possibilities of miracles today in the first place. But should they?

Because people are quick to label unexplainable, positive outcomes as miraculous with little thought to what they are saying, this topic is important. Furthermore, there are a number of televangelists and faith healers today, such as Benny Hinn, Gloria Copeland, and Pat Robertson, who make the claim to an unsuspecting public that they can and should receive some type of miracle in their life, be it financial, physical, social, or emotional, provided they have enough faith. However, if miracles do not exist today, what televangelists are teaching is problematic. For example, unsuspecting individuals
may decide that they have indeed received a miraculous healing. This in turn may lead them to stop taking badly needed medicine or throw away essential medical apparatuses and die. Even if these individuals do not die but never improve when they think they should, simply because some preacher is telling them to believe in miracles, this is torturous. Boggs rightly points out that, “It is a very serious thing to raise the hopes of multitudes of sick people with assurances that God will always reward true faith by healing diseases, and then to lead the great majority of these people through disillusionment to despair.”

In analyzing the Old and New Testament narratives, my intention here is not to argue one way or the other regarding their veracity. I understand that there are a number of people who dismiss the biblical narratives as mere myth. By doing so, one does not have to grapple with the issue of miracles in the first place, at least as the Bible portrays them. They can be simply dismissed as impossible. However, there are thousands of people who accept the claims regarding the miraculous as revealed in the Bible. Moreover, as was suggested, in most cases it is because individuals read stories about the miraculous in the Bible that they believe they occur nowadays. My intention is to provide a better understanding of miracles as they are depicted in the Bible for people of faith today. I want to offer these individuals a clearer understanding of what constitutes the miraculous and what constitutes the providential from a biblical perspective without throwing God out of the picture.

Differentiating the miraculous from the providential is not merely a matter of semantics. Knowing what a miracle is, what providence is, and the differences in the two is very important in helping individuals to have realistic expectations. I will argue that, in spite of whether a person believes in God, miracles do not occur today because their original purpose has ceased. I will also suggest that what some claim to be miracles today, especially those related to physical healings, in no way resemble what one reads about in the biblical literature. However, despite the fact that it cannot be verified today, one may continue to believe in the providential, which is different from the miraculous. Let us turn our attention first to the miraculous.

**MIRACLES**

**Miracles Violated Natural Law**

One of the first things that we should understand about miracles, as they are revealed to us in the Bible, is that they always violated the laws of nature. McCarron argues that it is one thing to pray on the way toward the ground that one’s tangled parachute open, and it does so, and another to stop in midair and untangle it before proceeding further. Stopping in midair would constitute a violation of the laws of gravity, making it miraculous.
In the Old Testament when God called Moses to lead the Israelites out of Egypt some fifteen hundred years before Christ, Moses was not confident he could do the job. Part of his problem was that he was not convinced that the Jewish elders would believe him when he would go to them with the message that God had called him to lead.

Exodus 4 records that God gave Moses three “signs,” that is, miracles, to demonstrate to the Jews that he had chosen him as their leader. God first told Moses to cast his rod on the ground. When he did, it turned into a snake. When Moses picked the snake up by the tail, it turned back into a rod. The second sign involved Moses putting his hand into his bosom and taking it out. At that point it turned leprous. God then instructed Moses to return his leprous hand to his bosom and to remove it a second time, at which point it was restored. The third sign God gave Moses was to pour water from the river onto the ground. When Moses did so, it turned into blood. All of these involved a violation of nature. Rods left alone do not morph into snakes. Hands do not naturally change instantaneously from healthy to leprous and back to healthy again. In nature, whenever skin diseases heal, they take time—weeks, months, or even years—but they certainly do not heal immediately. Water does not change into blood in nature if left on its own.

Another popular story from the Old Testament that illustrates that miracles were a violation of the laws of nature involved Elijah the prophet and his contest with the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel. 1 Kings 18 records how Elijah, in an attempt to persuade the Israelites to believe in God, suggested that they build two altars on which to offer a sacrifice, one for Baal and one for Elijah’s God. Elijah proposed that the God who “answereth by fire” would thereby demonstrate that he was the true God. He allowed the prophets of Baal to go first. After these prophets invoked their god from morning until noon, nothing happened. Then came Elijah’s turn. He commanded the people to douse his altar three times with water before he invoked his God to consume it. The narrative tells us that “the fire of Jehovah 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.” What makes this miraculous is the fact that in nature fire does not rain down from heaven or burn up stones.

One of the best examples of nature being violated is the conception of Christ to the Virgin Mary as recorded in the New Testament. Christ’s conception is considered miraculous because the laws of nature tell us that women, especially virgins, do not conceive children without being inseminated by a man. Before we go further, let us be clear that conception and birth are two different things. Births in any species are in no way miraculous, even though they are often speciously referred to as miracles. The fact is, births occur every day in nature and have been occurring for millennia. As I argue elsewhere, they are as common in nature as thunderstorms. So, while babies being born are glorious events, they hardly qualify as miraculous. However,
among some Christians, Mary’s conception of Christ is a different matter. It is miraculous.

At least once in the Bible a miraculous conception occurred even with normal sexual intercourse as in the case of Sarah, wife of Abraham. What makes this conception miraculous is that the laws of nature do not allow women who have gone through menopause to conceive babies even though they may engage in sexual intercourse. Sarah was 90 years old when she conceived Isaac. When she overheard messengers from God tell her husband that she would have a son, the Bible records how Sarah “laughed within herself, saying, ‘After I am waxed old shall I have pleasure, my lord being old also?’” Sarah was fully aware of the laws of nature regarding conception for women of her age. She knew that left on their own, she and Abraham were not going to have any children at that stage in their life together.

As stated earlier, while the conceptions of Christ and Isaac were miraculous, the physical births themselves were not. We assume that both Mary and Sarah, once they had conceived, carried their babies to full term and delivered them in the natural way that women give birth. The only way these births would have been miraculous is if Mary and Sarah had delivered them in some mode that would have violated the laws of human gestation and delivery. C. S. Lewis suggests, “If God creates a miraculous spermatozoon in the body of a virgin, it does not proceed to break any laws. The laws at once take it over. Nature is ready. Pregnancy follows, according to all the normal laws, and nine months later a child is born.”

Other examples of the laws of nature being violated or suspended can be found in the New Testament (NT). According to the narratives, Jesus, for example, walked on water and turned water into wine. On other occasions he stilled the storm on the Sea of Galilee, restored the right ear of Malchus, which had been cut off by Peter in the Garden of Gethsemane, and even raised a dead person. The above-mentioned miracles are just a few of the many types recorded for us in the Old and New Testaments that demonstrate a violation of natural law.

Miracles Were Unlimited in Scope

Throughout the Bible miracles dealt with a wide variety of phenomenon. Perhaps this is most easily seen, though not exclusively, in the ministry of Jesus in the NT. Cogdill points out that Jesus demonstrated authority over nature when he calmed the storm on the Sea of Galilee. He also demonstrated authority over material things when he multiplied the loaves and fishes and fed five thousand people. In healing lepers as well as “all manner of disease and . . . sickness,” Jesus demonstrated power over physical ailments. He also demonstrated power over demons by casting them out. Ultimately he showed his authority over death when, for example, he raised Lazarus from the dead.
In short, nothing was impossible for Jesus. After arguing that contemporary faith healers would not attempt to do what Jesus did but, nonetheless, would have people to believe that nothing is impossible with God and that Jesus heals today through them, Cogdill persuasively asks, “If Jesus is doing the healing now why doesn’t He heal now like He did then?”

Miracles Caused Astonishment

Vine suggests that the word *miracle* in the New Testament comes from two Greek words: *dunamis* and *semeion*. *Dunamis* carries the idea of power or inherent ability and “is used of works of a supernatural origin and character, such as could not be produced by natural agents and means.” *Semeion* “is used of miracles and wonders as signs of Divine authority.” Another word that is frequently found in the same context with signs and/or mighty works is the word *wonder*. Vine points out that wonder, from the Greek *teras*, causes the beholder to marvel. He suggests that while “A sign is intended to appeal to the understanding,” and “power (dunamis) indicates its source as supernatural . . . a wonder appeals to the imagination.” Miracles, in other words, caused astonishment on the part of those who witnessed them.

There was a “wow” factor involved in beholding miracles as they are revealed to us in the Bible. For instance, when Jesus healed the man with palsy in Mark 2, the narrative tells us that those who looked on “were all amazed and glorified God.” When he healed Jairus’ daughter, witnesses “were amazed . . . with a great amazement.” When many saw a man possessed with a demon be healed, the narrative says that “amazement came upon all.” When Peter healed the lame man who was laid daily at the gate of the temple in Acts 3, Luke records how the people who witnessed it “were filled with wonder and amazement at that which had happened unto him.”

This particular incident caused many problems for Peter and John. When the authorities heard of the healing, they arrested them. In deciding what to do with Peter and John, the authorities huddled together. Their conversation is telltale: “What shall we do to these men? for that indeed a notable miracle hath been wrought through them, is manifest to all that dwell in Jerusalem; and we cannot deny it.” The point to be understood here is that even the very enemies of Peter and John could not, nor did they try to, deny that a miracle had occurred. The New Testament also suggests that when Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead that the religious leaders asked, “What do we do? For this man doeth many signs.” They could not, nor did they try to, deny the miraculous event. A similar situation occurred in Matthew 12 where Jesus reportedly cast a demon out of a man. The narrative says, “the multitudes were amazed.” Rather than try to deny the miracle, which they
honestly could not, the enemies of Christ put the worst possible slant on it by saying that Jesus was able to do what he did only because he was in allegiance with the devil himself.

What I am trying to illustrate in this section is that whenever a miracle occurred, people did not question it. Biblical miracles did not cause skepticism like many so-called “miracles” today do. Miracles in the biblical narratives caused astonishment, even to the point that hardened critics could not deny what had occurred. While they may have been inconvenient for various religious leaders, miracles were nonetheless astounding. Moreover, these miracles never occurred in an emotionally charged atmosphere where people had been whipped into a frenzy to believe.

Miracles Were Immediate

A fourth characteristic of miracles, particularly as they related to healings, is that, with one exception, which I will discuss momentarily, they were always immediate. In other words, there was no waiting period. A person who was healed miraculously, for example, did not have to go home, lie around the house for a few days or weeks, and experience ups and downs before gradually being cured. The healing occurred instantaneously. In the story of a man cured of leprosy, for instance, the New Testament records how he was healed “straightway.” In fact, “straightway” is often used to describe individuals’ healings. The scriptures say that when Jesus healed a paralytic man who had been let down through the ceiling “he arose, and straightway took up the bed.” The woman with “an issue of blood” was healed “straightway.” The narrative records how Peter’s mother-in-law was healed of a fever and “immediately . . . rose up.” This implies that there was no waiting period for her healing. Returning to the lame man of Acts 3 who had been laid daily at the gate of the temple, the scriptures suggest that when Peter healed him, “immediately his feet and ankle bones received strength” and he leaped up and ran around.

In his book *Healing: A Doctor in Search of a Miracle*, medical doctor William Nolen analyzed over 80 cases of individuals who had supposedly received a miraculous healing during one of the crusades in Minneapolis of the world-renowned faith healer Kathryn Kuhlman. After following up these cases, Nolan concluded that not only had many of these people never received a healing, let alone an instantaneous cure, but many had died from their life-threatening ailments. One case specifically that Nolen cites of an individual who claimed to have received a miraculous healing but did not truly receive one was 23-year-old Rita Swanson. Rita “had blemishes all over her face . . . that is a common consequence of severe adolescent acne,” reports Nolen. He reveals how Kuhlman said, “In three days that skin problem will be cured.” Even Nolen himself, upon future examination, agreed that
Swanson’s face “was very much improved.” However, Nolen points out that “skin is highly subjective. You look in the mirror, and unless things are too shockingly obvious, you will see, at least in part, what you want.” Even though Rita’s skin may have been improved, one can hardly call this miraculous. Nolen concludes that “none of the patients who had returned to Minneapolis to reaffirm the cures they had claimed at the miracle service had, in fact, been miraculously cured of anything.”

Popular contemporary faith healer Ernest Angley, like other faith healers, occasionally tells individuals who come through his healing lines to “Go and get well.” This is ironic due to the fact that, ostensibly, a person is in the healing line in the first place to immediately get well, not to have to wait a period of time afterward. Where is the miracle in having to wait? What contemporary faith healers claim does not square with the biblical narratives, wherein miraculous cures were always instantaneous.

The story of Jesus healing a blind man in Mark 8 is sometimes offered as evidence that not all miraculous healings had to occur instantaneously. The narrative suggests that, after Jesus “spit on his eyes, and laid his hands upon him,” he asked the man if he could see. The man responded that he could see men but he saw them “as trees, walking,” which suggests that he was not fully healed. Seconds later, Jesus again laid his hands upon the man’s eyes, at which point the man “saw all things clearly.” For reasons which we can only surmise, the blind man was not able to see clearly the first time.

Foster argues, “We cannot tell why the miracle was gradual: whether by the purpose of Jesus or because of the slow-moving faith of the man.” Christians would probably not concede that it was because Jesus did not have the ability to “get it right” the first time. Regardless of whatever reason the man was not able to see clearly the first time, the point that should be understood is that Jesus did not tell him to go home and gradually improve over time. The man was healed before he left the presence of Jesus, therefore, nonetheless, immediately. In no way should this example be used to justify the fact that miracles were not instantaneous. Foster argues, “it is absurd” to take this example “as the necessary model for all [miraculous healings] when the peculiarities are” an exception to the other examples “in the life of Christ.”

Miracles Were Always Complete

Closely related to the idea of immediacy is the notion that miraculous healings in the Bible were always complete. In other words, individuals’ ailments were always made whole, the above example from Mark 8 notwithstanding. Never was an individual just a little healed and then sent on his way to get better, perhaps never to fully recover. The man in the gospel of Matthew who had a withered hand, for example, was “restored whole.” The lame man in
Acts 3 did not need crutches or a cane after he was healed. There were no recurring side effects to anyone who received a healing in the biblical narratives. Moreover, individuals never lost their miracle once they received it.

Perhaps one of the best examples of individuals in our time who claimed to have received miraculous cures but clearly was not wholly healed is that of a young woman in one of Kathryn Kuhlman’s crusades. This woman, who had no knee cap, came to the stage claiming that, until she was just healed, she could not walk without her brace. In what was a noble attempt to demonstrate her “miracle” to the thousands of people in attendance, she had taken the brace off of her leg and hobbled badly, yet courageously, across the stage to thunderous applause. Moreover, she hobbled off the stage as badly as she had hobbled onto the stage, without any obvious improvement because she was still missing her knee cap. This could hardly be called a miracle.

In one of contemporary faith healer Benny Hinn’s crusades, a young woman came to the stage, claiming she had been healed of deafness. However, she could not speak. One of Hinn’s assistants reminded Hinn and the entire auditorium that because the young lady had not been able to hear since birth, she would have to learn how to speak. Ironically, in other words, the young lady was not whole. Why is it that she could receive a miracle involving hearing but not speaking? This makes no sense.

**Miracles Were Empirically Verifiable**

One very important characteristic of biblical miracles, especially those involving physical healings, was the fact that they could be seen by everyone present. This principle seems to be lost on many people today. In the biblical narratives one could see, for example, Malchus’s ear put back on the side of his head, withered hands restored whole, totally blind men receive their sight, lame individuals leap for joy, lepers’ skins completely made whole, or even dead people brought back to life after having been dead for days. There were other types of miracles that were visually verifiable as well, such as water instantaneously turning to wine, a man walking on water, or a storm suddenly being calmed, to name a few.

So-called “miracles” today, especially “miraculous healings” cannot always be verified with one’s eyes. We are forced to take people’s word for the fact that they were once infirm but now are healed. For example, the types of miracles that one witnesses in faith healing services today involve poor blood circulation, weak eyes, backaches, deteriorated disks, internal cancers, depression, and other emotional problems, heart conditions, bursitis, arthritis, rheumatism, inability to smell, and even cigarette and drug addiction. Body parts are never regenerated like those cases in the Bible, which is one reason an individual will never see glass eyes or other prostheses in the trophy cases of faith healers.
In short, none of the types of “miracles” one supposedly sees are visually verifiable on the spot like those recorded in the Bible. Therefore, they are non-falsifiable. In other words, witnesses cannot say, “No, you were not really healed.” Audiences are simply asked to take the word of the person being healed. They cannot see for themselves like audiences in the Bible could. Biblical audiences were never merely asked to take the word of anyone. They could see the healing with their own eyes. Even when people occasionally stand up from wheelchairs today during some healing service as proof of the miraculous, audiences still do not know to what extent the individual could or could not walk prior to coming there.

Miracles Preceded Faith

We are told today that faith is necessary to experience a miracle, especially a miraculous healing. The fact is, in the Bible, miracles almost always occurred prior to belief. In other words, most of the time, faith was not a prerequisite to receive a miracle. In fact, quite often, it was because of the miracle that audiences developed faith. This is not to say that in every case where a miracle occurred faith always followed. Rather, what I am suggesting is that miracles were designed to produce faith, not vice versa. For instance, in the case of God giving Moses three signs, these miracles were given “that they may believe.” After Moses performed these miracles to the Israelites “the people believed: and . . . bowed their heads and worshipped.”

In Elijah’s contest with the prophets of Baal in 1 Kings 18, he invoked his God to rain fire from heaven to consume the altar that he had built “that this people may know that thou, Yahweh, art God.” The narrative suggests that “when all the people” witnessed the altar consumed with fire from heaven, “they fell on their faces: and they said, Yahweh, he is God; Yahweh, he is God.” Shortly before Elijah’s confrontation with the prophets of Baal, the Old Testament tells us that he raised the dead son of the widow of Zarephath. Afterward, the woman said to Elijah, “[N]ow I know that thou art a man of God, and that the word of Yahweh in thy mouth is truth.” Faith followed both of these miracles in the biblical narratives. It did not precede them.

Jesus performed miracles to produce belief in those around him as well. When he told a palsied man that his sins were forgiven, after realizing that there were some who were skeptical of who he claimed to be, Jesus told his onlookers, “But that ye many know that the Son of man hath authority on earth to forgive sins (then saith he to the sick of the palsy), Arise, and take up thy bed, and go unto thy house.” When “the multitudes” witnessed the healing, “they were afraid, and glorified God.” When John the baptizer was put into prison, he sent his disciples to inquire about Jesus. “Ask him,” John instructed, “art thou he that cometh, or look we for another?” Jesus responded to John’s disciples, “Go and tell John the things which you hear and see: the
blind receive their sight, and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up.” Jesus was saying, in other words, “Go offer John the evidence. Tell him what you see for yourselves. Then he’ll know who I am.”

Nicodemus understood this idea when he said to Jesus, “We know that thou art a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that thou doest, except God be with him.” The apostle Peter articulated a similar notion when in his inaugural address of Christianity on the day of Pentecost he described Jesus as “a man approved of God unto you by mighty works and wonders and signs which God did by him in the midst of you, even as ye yourselves know.”

The apostles of Christ also performed miracles to produce faith. For instance, when the Apostle Paul smote Elymus blind, Sergius Paulus “believed, being astonished at the teaching of the Lord.” Acts records that the people became believers after having seen the “signs and wonders” performed by Peter and other apostles. Hebrews explains how the apostles were validated as messengers of God “by signs and wonders, and by manifold powers, and by gifts of the Holy Spirit.” In fact the Apostle Paul himself reminded the Corinthian church that the “signs of an apostle” were performed among them “by signs and wonders and mighty works.”

Roberts argues that a miracle was not “just any divine intervention. . . . It was a very special type of divine intervention that could serve as a sign that the person performing the miracle had the power of God behind him.” Roberts contends that miracles “were a very special class of supernatural interventions of particularly astounding nature that were especially designed by God to serve as signs in the hands of certain men that he selected to be his messengers.”

To reiterate, miracles were designed to produce faith. Faith was not designed to produce miracles. It is true that on one occasion Jesus demanded faith on the part of two blind men before he healed them. This was the exception to the rule, though. In the majority of cases, faith was not a prerequisite. This was the rule. In his text, Modern Divine Healing, Miller points out that there were 31 cases of miraculous healings performed by Christ in the synoptic Gospels. Of these cases, only once did Jesus require faith on the part of recipients before he healed them. Miller points out that there were other cases where faith was present but not required. It seems, then, that while Jesus may have rewarded faith, it was not necessarily a condition for one to receive a miraculous cure. Most cases of healing involved no faith whatsoever.

In the biblical narratives, sometimes those who were healed knew absolutely nothing about the healer. Hence, there could be no faith. Sometimes those healed were not even present with the healer when they were healed. Sometimes those healed were not even alive. How could they have faith?
Sometimes people were healed because of the faith of other people. If a miraculous healing failed, it was due to the faithlessness of the healer, not the person being healed. What faith healer today would admit to being the cause of someone not receiving a miraculous cure?

Before closing this section, permit me to deal with a narrative that is sometimes cited to prove that faith is necessary for miracles to occur. Mark 6:5–6 suggests of Jesus, “And he could there do no mighty work, save that he laid his hands upon a few sick folk, and healed them. And he marveled because of their unbelief.” The argument is that because the people did not believe (i.e., had no faith), Jesus could not perform miracles at that location. Two observations are in order here: (1) the phrase “mighty work” is much broader than just performing miracles. It probably has reference to Jesus’ general teachings and attempts to persuade people to accept him; (2) the phrase “mighty work” obviously does not include miraculous healings because the very next phrase says that he laid hands on a few sick people and healed them. He apparently did this regardless of the lack of faith on the part of the people. So, the phrase “could there do no mighty work . . . because of their unbelief” does not suggest that faith is necessary for miraculous healings to occur. However, this passage does seem to suggest that one cannot be successful in a ministry if that person is rejected by the faithless. Jesus’ point about a prophet not being without honor except in his own country emphasizes that the folks in his hometown rejected him. They knew him. They grew up with him. Apparently, for whatever reason, they were not impressed with him. Hence, he could do no “mighty work” there.

THE PROVIDENTIAL

Having discussed the miraculous as depicted in the Old and New Testament narratives, let us now turn our attention to the providential to see what differences there are between the two. If miracles do not occur today, does this mean that we should not believe in God or that we should not believe in his providential care? The answer to these questions, I believe, is no.

The word providence, per se, is used only one time in the entire Bible, in Acts 24:2. Here the orator Tertullus explains to Felix, the governor of Palestine, that it was by Felix’s providence that “evils are corrected for this nation.” The term providence, comes from the Greek pronoia, which means forethought. It is derived from pro, meaning before, and noeo, to think. Corroborating Vine, Strong suggests that pro and noeo carry with them the idea “to consider in advance, i.e., look out for beforehand,” to “provide (for).” Citing McClintock and Strong, Jackson (1988) points out that providence comes from the Latin providentia, which suggests foresight. Jackson argues, “The word is used to denote the biblical idea of the wisdom and power which
God continually exercises in the preservation and government of the world, for the ends which he proposes to accomplish.”

Citing the biblical scholar Merrill Tenny, Jackson (1988) also reports, “Providence concerns God’s support care and supervision of all creation, from the moment of the first creation to all the future into eternity.” According to Jackson, providence is the opposite of chance or fate, which suggests that events are “uncontrollable and without any element of benevolent purpose.” Bowman argues that the concept of providence, “whether in Greek, Latin, or English has to do with getting something ready, preparing something ahead of time, with equipping or furnishing what is needed.”

Although the word providence appears only once in the Bible, the concept of God looking out for or providing for his people can be found throughout the Bible. In Genesis chapters 37 through 46, for instance, we read about how Joseph’s brothers sold him into Egyptian bondage but how Joseph eventually rose to second in command of Egypt and saved his family from a famine, including the very brothers who sold him. Ostensibly, at least, it appears that God was operating behind the scenes providentially to care for both Joseph and the Israelites. In Exodus 2:1–10 we read about the Egyptian Pharoah’s daughter finding baby Moses floating in a basket in the crocodile-teeming Nile river and giving the baby back to his Hebrew mother to nurse him.

This may have been the irony of ironies. The mother who had to give up her son in order to save him was now nursing him. Was this by coincidence or by the providence of God? People of faith would suggest that God was probably behind this action, too. In the book of Esther, we read about the Persian King Ahasuerus (i.e., Xerxes) granting permission to his servant Haman to issue a decree to kill all of the Jews in his kingdom. When Mordecai, Queen Esther’s cousin, found out about Haman’s plot, he asked Esther (a Jewish woman herself) to risk her life and appear before her husband’s throne to intercede for the Jewish people, which she reluctantly did. Haman was ultimately hanged on the very gallows that he had built for Mordecai, and the Jews were allowed to resist their attackers, thus saving them from annihilation.

In Esther 4:14, Mordecai persuaded Esther with these words, which suggest, on their face, possible providential intervention by God for His people: “For if thou altogether holdest thy peace at this time, then will relief and deliverance arise to the Jews from another place, but thou and thy father’s house will perish; and who knoweth whether thou art not come to the kingdom for such a time as this.” Mordecai is saying, in other words, “Esther, God will take care of us Jews. But how do you know that it was not God’s providence that made you queen and put you here for a reason?” The idea behind the above examples is that God dwelt in the affairs of humans. In the New Testament we are reminded that God continues to be active in the lives of people.” But how, miraculously or providentially?
PRAYER AND PROVIDENCE ARE BOUND TOGETHER

People of faith pray today because they believe that God will respond in some way to their prayers. Bowman suggests, “If I didn’t believe in providence, I would not take the trouble to pray.” The apostle John taught that “if we ask anything according to his will, he heareth us.” The apostle Peter suggests that “the eyes of the Lord are upon the righteous, and his ears unto their supplication.” James suggests that “The supplication [i.e., prayer] of a righteous man availeth much.” Jesus himself taught, “Ask, and it shall be given you.” He also reminded his disciples, “If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatsoever ye will, and it shall be done unto you.” The whole idea behind prayer is that there is a supernatural being behind the universe who hears the requests and groanings of his people. However, when God grants the requests of an individual, does this mean that he has to do so miraculously? In other words, is everything that God brings about in the lives of individuals who pray a violation of natural law? Stated differently, should we call these events miraculous? I think not, for reasons that follow.

The Providential Involves God Working through Nature

Jackson (1988) rightly points out that whereas “A miracle is God’s working on a plain [sic] that is above that of natural law; providence is his utilization of natural law.” In the miraculous, God operates directly.” “In providence, He operates indirectly, employing means to accomplish the end.” Let us be careful here to understand that both the miraculous and the providential involve supernatural intervention. However, supernatural intervention can come through nature, not necessarily through a violation of nature. Let us look at some examples from the biblical narratives to illustrate these points.

Jackson (1988) argues that while Mary’s conception of Christ was miraculous, Hannah’s conception of her son Samuel was providential. First Samuel 1:6 narrates that “Jehovah had shut up her [Hannah] womb.” However, she prayed to God to give her a son. The scriptures say that her husband “Elkanah knew Hannah, his wife; and Yahweh remembered her.” The idea behind “knew” is that they had sexual relations. Later, “Hannah conceived, and bore a son; and she called his name Samuel, saying, ‘Because I have asked him of Jehovah.’” Hannah’s prayer had been answered. Jackson suggests, “Here by means of the law of procreation, God intervened and sent a child into the world.” One child (i.e., Jesus) came into the world through a miracle. Another child (i.e., Samuel) came into the world providentially. Nonetheless, God was behind both events.
One might ask, “How is it that Hannah’s conception was providential, but Mary’s (and Sarah’s) were miraculous?” Mary’s and Sarah’s conceptions were miraculous because both clearly violated natural law in their own way, as stated earlier. However, there is no indication that any natural law was violated with Hannah. Occasionally in nature, even when God is not involved, women can go for years thinking that they cannot have any children, when suddenly, seemingly out of nowhere, they become pregnant with the help of their male mate. This is certainly not miraculous. We do not really know why Hannah could not conceive other than the fact that the narrative tells us that God had closed her womb. What God had closed, God could open through natural means. The point to be understood here is that providence still involves supernatural intervention. However, supernatural intervention does not necessarily come miraculously.

When the Jewish King Hezekiah prayed to God to deliver him from the Assyrian King Sennacherib, who had besieged Jerusalem, the narrative tells us that “an angel of Jehovah” smote 185,000 Assyrian troops. Sennacherib was then forced to withdraw to his capital Nineveh. This was miraculous because an angel—a supernatural being—was responsible for single-handedly slaying thousands of enemy soldiers—something impossible to do naturally. Earlier, God had told Hezekiah that He “will cause him [Sennacherib] to fall by the sword in his own land.” But how would God accomplish this? When Sennacherib returned from Jerusalem, two of his sons slew him in the temple as he was praying at the altar. Sennacherib’s death came about through natural means. God was behind his death, though, making it providential.

In the New Testament, when King Herod jailed Peter, the narrative tells us that Peter had been “bound with two chains” and was asleep between two guards. Two other soldiers were guarding the doors of the prison. However, “an angel of the Lord stood by him [Peter] and a light shined in the cell: and he smote Peter . . . and awoke him . . . and his chains fell off from his hands.” The angel proceeded to miraculously lead Peter out of the prison, past all of the guards and the locked door. Eventually he came to “the iron gate that leadeth into the city.” This gate “opened . . . of its own accord” allowing Peter to flee from his captors. This all occurred miraculously. In the natural realm, chains and locked doors do not automatically fall off or unlock themselves.

There was another escape that one could argue occurred providentially. In Acts 19, the Apostle Paul had gone to Ephesus to preach. Demetrius, a silversmith who made shrines of the goddess Diana, took offense at Paul’s preaching and stirred up an insurrection against him and his traveling companions Gaius and Aristarchus, who had been “seized.” Eventually a man named Alexander quieted the mob and persuaded them to take up their cause peacefully in the courts, thus allowing Paul, Gaius, and Aristarchus to leave. One could make an argument that it was God who allowed Paul and
his companions to escape. However, no laws of nature were violated as in the above case with Peter.

In the biblical narratives we read where God destroyed two cities, one miraculously and one providentially. The scriptures say that “Jehovah rained upon Sodom and . . . Gomorrah brimstone and fire from out of heaven.”$^{82}$ This occurred miraculously for roughly the same reason that Elijah’s altar caught fire, because fire and brimstone do not fall from heaven according to any laws of nature. On the other hand, Matthew 24 reveals how God would come in judgment against the city of Jerusalem. This was accomplished in 70 ce by the Romans. One can argue that God was behind this act. However, the destruction of Jerusalem was not miraculous. God operated through the realm of nature, in this case, using a foreign army to destroy the city, making the event providential.

One last example of the providential and the miraculous should suffice. It is one thing to miraculously rebuke “the winds and the sea” and bring about “a great calm,”$^{83}$ thus showing power over nature, but another thing to pray to God to send rain. This is exactly what Elijah did after Israel had endured a three-and-one-half-year drought. The scriptures say that “the heavens grew black with clouds and wind, and there was a great rain.”$^{84}$ There was nothing miraculous about rain clouds even though God had answered Elijah’s prayer and brought about the change. God had operated providentially through nature.

This discussion about the miraculous versus the providential means, practically speaking, that God has not performed a miracle even though he may have supernaturally intervened in the lives of people. This is a point that many people today fail to understand, especially when it comes to praying for the sick and afflicted. If a sick or ailing individual recovers, it might be because God effected a change through natural law. In other words, God may have operated providentially. However, we should not make the mistake of calling it a miracle. Nevertheless, we have not thrown God out of the picture simply because we deny that a miracle occurred.

But what role, if any, does faith play in all of this? It is true that God could, at any time, make something happen providentially without anyone invoking him. In other words, no prayer or faith on the part of anyone whatsoever need be involved. Oftentimes, though, individuals beseech God through prayer. It is during these times that faith is required. In fact it would not make sense for a person to pray unless he or she had faith in the first place. The author of Hebrews suggests that “without faith it is impossible to be well-pleasing unto him; for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that seek after him.”$^{85}$

Even though faith may be necessary to bring about change under the providential, one must understand that realistically there are limitations
Individuals who have lost a limb or some other bodily member, for example, may pray with all the faith they can muster that their body parts will grow back, but they will never regenerate themselves because this never occurs in nature. Furthermore, some individuals have gone through multiple surgeries and have such ailing bodies that nothing will ever change organically no matter how full of faith their prayers are. Like the Apostle Paul’s “thorn in the flesh,”\textsuperscript{86} whatever that might have been, the best that they can hope for is what Paul could hope for—strength to endure it. At the beginning of this chapter, I pointed out that the difference between the miraculous and the providential is not merely a matter of semantics but has everything to do with expectations. Knowing the differences between the two allows us to understand that some things we may be inclined to pray for will never occur. Therefore, we should not expect them to. The fact is, we can pray until we’re blue in the face with all the faith in the world but still not see any organic change in our defective bodies. Instead, what individuals ought to be praying for is strength to overcome. This is realistic.

**Providence Cannot Be Proven Factually**

Often events happen in our day and age that appear on the surface to be the workings of God. The fact is, though, we cannot be so sure. Bowman (1992) argues, “We strongly suspect that in certain instances, God has altered circumstances, changed situations so that our best interests were served, perhaps even in what seems to be the answer to our prayers. But we cannot know for sure; we can be certain only if God has revealed [them].”\textsuperscript{87} Similarly Hagewood (1990) warns against being “dogmatic about our interpretation” of God’s providence. “Accept the fact that God has simply not made us privy to His providence,” he concludes.\textsuperscript{88} Likewise, Jackson (1988) contends that “no person can point to particular circumstances of his or her life and confidently assert, ‘I know that this was the providential intervention of God at work!’” Jackson concedes that an event may very well be the result of the providence of God at work but our “subjective assertions” can “prove nothing.” He goes on to point out that, “while it is true that God does work in the lives of men, they are frequently unaware of it. We may suspect it, believe it, hope it to be the case, and even act in such a way as to accommodate it; but, in the final analysis, we walk by faith and not by sight (2 Cor 5:7).”\textsuperscript{89}

Turner (n.d.), too, warns about “thinking a certain event or set of circumstances definitely means that God has done this or that or wants this or that to happen.” He rightly points out that “an event can happen because God wants it to happen and causes it to happen or it may happen for various
other reasons,” neither of which we can really know for sure. Citing Mordecai’s words to Queen Esther (i.e., “Yet who knows whether you have come to the kingdom for such as this?”) Turner argues that Mordecai was not demonstrating a lack of faith. Instead, he was merely being careful not to assume something he should not be assuming. The fact is, people of faith should be careful about what events, whether good or bad, they attribute to God. It just might be that God had absolutely nothing to do with them.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have tried to demonstrate that there are significant differences between the miraculous and the providential as they are portrayed in the biblical narratives. Miracles involved a suspension of the laws of nature, were unlimited in scope, caused astonishment on the part of onlookers, were always immediate, were always complete, were always empirically verifiable, and almost always occurred without faith on the part of onlookers or recipients. Providence, on the other hand, is linked to faith and prayer, involves God working through nature, but cannot be proven factually. While both involve supernatural intervention into the lives of people, they are not the same things and, therefore, should not be confused.

Having a proper understanding of each has everything to do with what a person can realistically expect to receive when he or she prays to God, or even what he or she should be praying for in the first place. While God is “able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think” there is a limitation to what we can and should expect him to do. This is not a lack of faith, however. This is the reality that is presented for us in the biblical narratives. Specifically with regard to miraculous healings, Miller points out that “the issue” is not “whether we believe God capable of healing the sick today. He most certainly is able to heal the sick today, and possesses abundant power to do so miraculously now, if this were his will. . . . The issue is not what God is able to do, but what he wills to do today.”

In the infant Christian church miracles were designed to produce faith and guide it in the will of the Lord during a particular period in history, not to serve as God’s way of leading people to him forever and certainly not to benefit society as a whole. In 1 Corinthians 13, the Apostle Paul argues that we would no longer need the miraculous after “that which is perfect is come.” Perfect, in this verse, does not mean sinless. Nor is it referring to Christ’s second coming. Instead, perfect means complete, fully grown, or mature (from the Greek teleios). The perfect refers to the completed revelation of God’s will (i.e., the canon of scripture). The apostle James argues that “he that looks into the perfect
(teleios) law, the law of liberty, and so continueth . . . shall be blessed in his doing.”

In the context of 1 Corinthians 13, “that which is in part” (i.e., miraculous gifts) is contrasted to that which is “perfect” (i.e., something to be completed). “Childish things” are juxtaposed to the mature. The dim is contrasted to the clear. There would come a time when spiritual gifts and other miracles (i.e., things done “in part,” “childish things,” or dim things) would give way to the “perfect” (i.e., the complete or mature). Moorhead (2004) argues that the “gist of 1 Corinthians 13:10 is that gifts [miracles] would cease in relation to the universal attainment, or coming of the canon.” This has been accomplished today. “The community of faith gathered for edification via the scripture is God’s plan for the edification of the church today,” not through signs, miracles, or spiritual gifts.

Moorhead (2004) also argues that the miracles mentioned in 1 Corinthians 13 “enabled the Christian to minister beyond human capacity during transition from [the] old covenant to the new covenant program.” Their purposes “were to glorify God by equipping and edifying the body of saints in sound doctrine toward maturation and to serve as a sign to unbelievers.” Moorhead freely admits that the “exact time of the cessation of spiritual gifts is up for debate” but that there are at least four “prevailing views” of when this occurred: (1) after the book of Revelation was complete; (2) “after the last Apostle died; (3) after the last gifted person died following the close of the canon; and (4) upon the dissemination of the canon throughout the region.” All of these probably occurred at or near the end of the first century.

While the miraculous has ceased, this should in no way alarm people of faith because the providential continues. Nothing in the biblical narratives suggests that God has stopped providing for his people. So, while we should be careful about what we label a miracle, even be so bold as to say that miracles no longer exist, this is not to suggest that God does not exist nor that he does not intervene in the lives of humans. But supernatural intervention does not necessarily equate with the miraculous.

Although Shana West’s story, like that of Christa Lilly’s and Levi Draher’s, may be amazing, they hardly qualify as miracles. Certainly they do not violate any laws of nature. The truth is, many people before them have had similar experiences. And just because we may not fully understand them from a scientific point of view, this does not give us the liberty of labeling them miraculous. Whenever an individual escapes a tornado, a car wreck, a mine cave-in, or a life-threatening illness, although they may be wonderful outcomes, they do not qualify as miracles in the biblical sense of the word. Was God looking out for all of these people? Perhaps he was. Perhaps he was not. It could be that sometimes God simply allows nature to run its course without intervening whatsoever, in other words, to allow “time and chance” to occur “to them...
all.” This is quite possible even though some may not want to admit it. We can never know about every situation with absolute certainty. Even though we may not always know when God is at work, we can still believe in a God that dwells in the lives of people today. We do not have to throw the baby out with the bath water.

NOTES

8. 1 Kings 18:24 (American Standard Version). All biblical references hereafter come from the American Standard Version unless otherwise noted.
9. 1 Kings 18:38.
10. See Matthew 1.
14. For a similar story, see the conception of John the Baptist to Elisabeth and Zacharias in Luke 1. Verse 18 describes Zacharias as “an old man,” and Elisabeth as “well stricken in years.”
17. John 2.
23. Mark 2:12.
24. Mark 5:42.
30. Matthew 8:3.
31. Mark 2:12.
32. Mark 5:29.
42. Personal observation of the author who attended a Benny Hinn revival in Nashville, October 23–24, 1997.
45. Exodus 4:5.
47. 1 Kings 18:37–39.
48. 1 Kings 17:24.
49. Matthew 8:1–8.
50. Matthew 11:2–6.
51. John 3:1–3. For other narratives that support the idea that miracles of Jesus were used to produce faith in his audiences, see John 2:11 and 23; John 11:42; and John 20:30.
54. Acts 8:12–16.
56. 2 Corinthians 12:12.
64. Matthew 8:5–13; 17:14–21; John 4:46–49.
70. See, for example, Matthew 5:45; Matthew 6:33; and Romans 13:1 (compare to Daniel 2:21).
71. Bowman, 2.
72. 1 John 5:14.
73. 1 Peter 3:12.
74. James 5:16.
75. Matthew 7:7.
77. Jackson, A Study of the Providence of God, 2.
78. Ibid., 3.
84. 1 Kings 18:44–45; Jas. 5:16–18.
86. 2 Corinthians 12:7.
87. Bowman, Providence, 2.
89. Jackson, A Study of the Providence of God, 3.
93. There were at least two examples in the New Testament where the Apostle Paul could have performed a miracle to benefit two people had that been the purpose of miracles. However, he chose not to. In 2 Timothy 4:20 we read where he left Trophimus at Miletus, “sick.” In 1 Timothy 5:23 he told Timothy to “use a little wine for thy stomach’s sake and thine often infirmities.” If miracles were intended as social benefits, why did Paul not heal these two people?
94. 1 Corinthians 13:10.
96. James 1:25.

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Historians, anthropologists, and sociologists have much to teach us about the social, political, and even economic dynamics that produce and sustain miracle narratives and miracle traditions in particular cultures and communities (cf. Claverie 2003; Markle and McCrea 1994). Pyysiainen (2004) described how believing in miracles was the most efficient and least costly way of processing information in certain cultural settings, given our brain architecture. This chapter looks at the logic of belief and believers, and at the psychological process leading believers to embrace such narratives.

Explaining the general belief in miracles and/or acceptance of specific miracle narratives does not require us to use any concepts beyond those needed to explain the existence and prevalence of religious discourse in general. This chapter elaborates the notion that miracle narratives are prototypical religious fantasies. Secular fantasies may express improbable or impossible ideas, but there is always a unique element of religious ideation in all religious discourse. It has to do with the world of the spirits.

DEFINING RELIGIOUS DISCOURSE

Religious beliefs have been around for 100,000 years, or even longer, and have changed relatively little. The irreducible core common to all religions, tying humanity to the cosmos, contains the belief in spirits inhabiting an invisible world and having a relationship with us (Beit-Hallahmi 1989). All religions promote the idea of an invisible world, inhabited by gods, angels, and devils, that control much of what happens to us. Religion as a social
Religious and spiritual events

institution is for us the mediator between the invisible supernatural or transcendent world and the visible human and natural world. That institution, with the behaviors associated with it, does not exist without the belief in the supernatural or transcendent world. Belief systems will be defined as religious only if those following them make specific references to supernatural agents or interventions. Thouless stated that what distinguished religious individuals from others is that they “believe that there is also some kind of spiritual world which makes demands on our behavior, our thinking and our feeling” (1971, 12).

The presence of the supernatural premise is the touchstone for defining behaviors as religious. What is this premise? “It is the premise of every religion—and this premise is religion’s defining characteristic—that souls, supernatural beings, and supernatural forces exist. Furthermore, there are certain, minimal categories of behavior, which, in the context of the supernatural premise, are always found in association with one another, and which are the substance of religion itself” (Wallace 1966, 52).

Similarly, William James described the coexistence of the visible and the invisible worlds:

Religion has meant many things in human history: but when from now onward I use the word I mean to use it in the supernaturalist sense, as declaring that the so-called order of nature, which constitutes this world’s experience, is only one portion of the total universe, and that there stretches beyond this visible world an unseen world of which we now know nothing positive, but in its relation to which the true significance of our present mundane life consists. A man’s religious faith . . . means for me essentially his faith in the existence of an unseen order of some kind in which the riddles of the natural order may be found explained. (James [1897] 1956, 51)

Religious utterances contain both supernaturalist and naturalist claims (Beit-Hallahmi 2001). While naturalist claims are often found in religious discourse, they are not what gives religion its unique character. While a claim such as “A man named Jesus was born in Judea under Herod” is straightforward and naturalistic, though lacking any supporting evidence, it is part of a religious narrative that is anything but naturalist, and replete with miracle stories. The naturalist, mostly fictitious, claims that religions offer us are less central and less essential than miracle narratives, which dominate religious discourse everywhere. This is the substance of religion, the discourse that makes religion attractive and is designed quite consciously and purposefully to attract believers.

Religion’s most unique claim, which combines the two worlds, that of nature and that of the spirits, is the denial of death. Common to all religions is avoiding the recognition of death as the end of any individual existence, and
this is one of religion’s strongest compensators (Beit-Hallahmi and Argyle 1997). “Religion, whether it be shamanism or Protestantism, rises from our apprehension of death. To give meaning to meaninglessness is the endless quest of religion. . . . Clearly we possess religion, if we want to, precisely to obscure the truth of our perishing. . . . When death becomes the center, then religion begins” (Bloom 1992, 29).

Frazer described religion, with “the almost universal belief in the survival of the human spirit after death” (Frazer 1933–36, v) at its center, as resulting from the fear of the dead, which is the fear of death itself. The terror of death leads to the creation of powerful psychological and cultural mechanisms (Becker 1973; Greenberg, Pyszczynski, and Solomon 1995; Pyszczynski et al. 2004), religion being the most important. James described the function of religion as follows “Religion, in fact, for the great majority of our own race, means immortality and nothing else” (James 1961, 406).

The illusion of immortality, pivotal in all religions, is humanity’s reaction to the inevitability of death, the universal threat to every individual human. Within the religious framework, death is not a singular event occurring only once in the history of the individual, but a transition from one form of existence to another. All religions state that dying is only a passage, a transition point in the existence of the soul, as it comes out of a particular human body.

Most humans accept the supernatural premise, and its corollary: the two-worlds assumption. The two-worlds assumption leads us to two separate modes of comprehending the physical world. The first is that of observing physical events and coping with them through much hardship, as we eat bread in the sweat of our faces, and constantly confront suffering, frustration, and injustice. The second is the notion of exceptions to hard work, frustration, and suffering in this world, which constitute miracles. For most religious people their particular tradition is experienced through routine rituals, rather than ecstasy. There are no miracles, no religious crises, and no mystical experiences in their own lives, so that any claims about exceptional events easily stand out.

DEFINING MIRACLES

Millions of miracle narratives have been circulating in human history, many obviously reused and recycled. Each one of the approximately 10,000 religions currently active on earth has claimed a few. Miracles are, for those who believe in them, natural material events that imply an intervention by supernatural forces. They are often defined as events that seem to violate our sense of the laws of nature or the order of nature, but the point of the supernatural premise is to tell us that the true order of nature includes entities and actions that transcend our mundane experiences.
Miracles are believed to take place in this world, not in the invisible world of the spirits. This is their most important characteristic in the framework of religious discourse. They are believed to occur through the intercession of benevolent spirits, but their effects are totally material, palpable, and provable to the believers, in naturalist terms. When it comes to explaining disease and cures, what is unique about miracles is not a deficient knowledge of physiology, for such can be found in many purely secular assertions, but the claimed intervention by the great spirits.

Reports of miracles deal chiefly with being saved from immanent death, either through a hostile attack or through life-threatening illness. In the Roman Catholic Church today, miracles are defined as cases of great suffering and danger, in which a physical solution is inadequate, and a special contact with a saint, such as putting his picture on the patient’s body, praying to him, or making pilgrimage to his tomb, is followed by a total recovery, not explainable by the physicians involved. The only explanation then is an intercession by a saint, who, from his or her abode in the world of the spirits, chose to intervene in physiological processes occurring in this material world. To the Roman Catholic Church, the recovery must be proven with standard medical tests, including modern imaging devices.

The idea of *mana*, a powerful essence found in some objects, is reflected in common beliefs about places and persons that are imbued with the ability of causing miracles. Special miracle-making powers have been attributed to kings, saints, or sacred objects. Pilgrimages to special locations all over the world are initiated in the hope of finding miracle cures, visiting relics such as a hair from the beard of the prophet Muhammad, or tombs, places in which apparitions have been reported, or just mountains considered sacred since time immemorial.

A few years ago I visited the Oratoire Saint-Joseph du Mont-Royal and had a chance to observe hundreds of pairs of crutches hanging from the ceiling, evidence of miracle cures effected by the resident saint. Lourdes, France, is one of the best-known pilgrimage sites in the world since the nineteenth century and is the scene of numerous reported miracles (Cranston 1957). As Paloutzian (1996) pointed out, actual cure rates at Lourdes are lower than expected from what we know about spontaneous remissions of serious illness, which do occur sometimes. Sometimes the miracle-making object can come to believers who experience its power:

Eight miles from Lyesopolye lay the village of Obnino, possessing a miraculous icon. A procession started from Obnino every summer bearing the wonder-working icon and making the round of all the neighboring villages. The church-bells would ring all day long first in one village, then in another, and to little Pavel (His Reverence was called little Pavel then) the air itself seemed tremulous with rapture. (Chekhov 1915/1979, 279)
Claims about persons with special powers can be found today all over the world.

Dan Stratton is the founder and pastor of the Faith Exchange Fellowship, a fundamentalist Christian congregation in Manhattan’s financial district. His wife Ann is described as a born-again miracle worker, “whose prayers once supposedly raised a German au pair from the dead on the street in front of the Blue Moon Mexican Cafe in Englewood, N.J.” (Chafets 2006, 21).

Ann Stratton told the congregation that, thanks to her prayers,

A woman with brain cancer was healed, another was saved from a hysterectomy and a man came out of a seemingly permanent coma... a little deaf boy regained his hearing; ... her prayers replaced a blind eye in a woman’s socket with a healthy, perfectly matched green eyeball. And then, in Englewood, the au pair came back from the dead... Today that woman’s alive and well in Germany. Say, “Amen!” (Chafets 2006, 21).

Dan Stratton testifies: “She’s a prayer warrior. That woman in Englewood was gone, she was dead weight; I picked her up myself. But Annie refused to give up on her until she came back to life. That happened. I saw it. Not figuratively. Literally” (Chafets 2006, 21). Despite much effort, the Faith Exchange Fellowship has had trouble finding a suitable permanent home in lower Manhattan, which proves that raising the dead can be easier than negotiating the New York City real estate market.

FOUNDATIONAL AND CONFIRMATORY REVELATIONS

Mythologies, written or orally transmitted, tell us about the creation of the cosmic order and the centrality of humans in that order. This, of course, is miraculous, and so is the revelation of the cosmic plan. All revelations, that is, the transmission of messages from the spirit world to humans, are miracles. Some miraculous events that have led to the founding of religions were individual illuminations such as Buddha’s celebrated recognition of human suffering and mortality (Beit-Hallahmi 2006–2007). In addition, all mythologies offer us the stories of those saved miraculously from death through divine intervention at the right moment: Perseus, Krishna, Isaac, Hagar and Ishmael, Moses, and the baby Jesus, to name a few.

While all religions report foundational revelations, events that led to their founding, many traditions have room for confirmatory revelations, which reinforce and sustain long-held beliefs. These are apparitions in which specific messages from the spirit world are conveyed, or the presence of spirits and gods is directly felt. Most are made public, while a few remain private. One of
the best-known confirmatory revelations in modern history was reported by the great mathematician Blaise Pascal. On Monday, November 23, 1654, Pascal had a vision in which he saw, in his own words: “Fire. GOD of Abraham, GOD of Isaac, GOD of Jacob, not of the philosophers and of the learned. Certitude. Certitude. Feeling. Joy. Peace.” Pascal chose not to make the revelation public during his lifetime (Cole 1996).

**PHYSIOLOGICAL MIRACLES**

In some religious traditions, we find congregations and individuals practicing faith healing, the origin of many reported miracles (Rose 1971; Harrell 1985; Randi 1989). There have been some follow-up studies of some of those treated. Glik (1986) interviewed 176 individuals who had attended charismatic and other healing groups, and compared them with 137 who had received regular primary care. Those who had been to healing groups reported better health and subjective well-being, though their actual physical state was no different. Pattison, Lapins, and Doerr (1973) analyzed 71 cases of healings at healing services; 62 “recoveries” took place during the service, half of them suddenly; 50 had been suffering from serious illnesses.

Again there was no actual change in physical condition or life-style; what had changed was their subjective condition. They believed that they had been healed by the casting out of sin. Their MMPI (Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory) profiles showed that these “recovered” individuals engaged in denial. In both of these studies the changes were improved in subjective health, and not in actual physical condition. Miettinen (1990, in Holm, 1991) studied extensively 611 cases of healings in Finland. The findings were that there was no evidence of any physical improvement, but the clients, 450 women and 161 men, of limited education and social status, experienced a subjective change, attributed to suggestibility and personal instability.

Sometimes it is claimed that in death, saintly bodies show no evidence of decay, believed to be incorruptible, thanks to the saintly qualities of the souls formerly residing in them. Testimonies about the imperishable bodies of saints are found in Christianity, Buddhism, Judaism, and Hinduism (e.g., Lenhoff 1993). In some cases the naturally mummified bodies of religious teachers became the objects of worship and pilgrimage. The mummified, well-preserved body of the Buryat Lama Itigelov, who died in 1927, can be seen at www.neplaneta.ru. His disciples claim that before dying, he asked to be exhumed. Since 2002 the body has been on display for venerating pilgrims. In the Roman Catholic tradition, the notion of the Odor of Sanctity refers to the specific scent, often compared to that of flowers, that emanates from the dead bodies of saints. St. Frances Cabrini, whose body is on display in upper Manhattan, is said to be incorruptible. In Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers*
**ESTABLISHING PLAUSIBILITY AND AUTHORITY**

The first goal for every group is survival, which necessitates the creation of a common worldview. Group cohesion, created by common loyalties to imaginary beings, has great survival value. Miracle narratives, whether foundational or confirmatory, buttress and provide evidence for the validity of particular religious assertions. “These narratives are decisive proof of the truth of the group’s particular religious message. The authority of Jesus was established for the early church by the resurrection, the virgin birth, and one other important group of phenomena, the miracles he performed in the course of his ministry” (Anderson and Fischer 1966, 179).

A new tradition has to establish its authority, power, and uniqueness. This leads to a valued identity, for individuals and for the whole group. The community of believers is united in accepting a particular authority, but it is naturally challenged, and this sometimes takes the form of doubting specific narratives tied to foundational beliefs.

“If Christ be preached, that he rose again from the dead, how do some among you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? But if there be no resurrection of the dead, then Christ is not risen again. And if Christ be not risen again, then is our preaching vain, and your faith is also vain” (1 Cor 15:12–14). This is a relatively modern formulation of the basic problem of all supernatualist belief systems.

Impossible and improbable narratives are simply vital to faith. They constitute proof that those who speak for the world of the spirits are indeed in direct contact with it, and that the great spirits do intervene in mundane reality to reward those of faith and devotion. Moreover, they serve to persuade us, not about the reality of the world of the spirits in general, but about one particular belief system and one particular claim to authority. The narratives demonstrate that a particular tradition, inspired by “our” great spirits, is better and stronger than traditions based on spirits worshipped by other collectivities. “Our” miracles are clearly superior to theirs. Superiority and self-esteem are vital psychological supplies, provided by religions, and often, with less of an impact, by other ideologies.

The process of establishing religious plausibility through miracle narratives can be closely observed in the case of newly formed religions. The history of Mormonism is a case in point. This is a U.S. Christian-polytheistic millenarian group, founded by Joseph Smith, Jr. (1805–44) in 1830 in northern New York State. At age 14 Smith declared he had spoken with God. Later he had other visions, during some of which he claimed an ancient book, written on four tablets, was given to him. He claimed to have transcribed this text,
which has become known as The Book of Mormon and has given its name to the Mormon church. The Book of Mormon is believed to be an ancient revelation to the inhabitants of America, written in Egyptian. This book is the movement’s main scripture (Taves 1984).

The case of theosophy is similar. The Theosophical Society was founded in 1875 at 46 Irving Place, New York City, by Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831–91), who first attracted public attention as a spirit medium. Madame Blavatsky claimed to have spent about 40 years traveling in the East, especially Tibet, and meeting the Masters of Ancient Wisdom, or the Adepts. Actually, she was born in Russia, married General Blavatsky at 17, and a year later ran away. There is no proof of any early travels to India or anywhere else in Asia, but she is known to have founded a spiritualist group in Cairo around 1870. In 1874 she came to the United States and gained some attention as a defender of Spiritualism.

Madame Blavatsky claimed that she had been chosen by a Buddha incarnation named Tsong-kha-pa to be guided by two secret masters in the Himalayas, known as the Mahatma Morya and the Mahatma Koot Hoomi, in order to save the world. The Mahatmas are one rung in the hierarchy of perfected beings (the White Brotherhood, the Adepts, the Masters, the Mahatmas), who really supervise the evolution of this world. Blavatsky’s followers reported many cases of communications from the Adepts, including written messages (Williams 1946).

Both Joseph Smith, Jr., and Madame Blavatsky took unnecessary risks by claiming physical evidence for their revelations in the form of golden tablets or written letters. This laid them open to ridicule and criticism. Some of Blavatsky’s claims for supernatural powers and contacts were investigated in India in 1884 by Richard Hodgson of the London Society for Psychical Research, who denounced them as a fraudulent trickery. This was the first in a series of such denunciations.

What about exceptions to the rule that miracle narratives are vital to faith? We can think about mainstream Protestant denominations in the United States, whose austere traditions do not celebrate miracle cures or institute public displays of deserted crutches. But followers of these traditions, if they proclaim any faith, still believe in some foundational miracle narratives.

PROPHECIES AND PROMISES: APOCALYPTIC NARRATIVES

All miracle stories are but minor variations on the great theme of victory over death. Miracles are reminders that indeed nature could be overcome by the power of the spirits. Those who can negotiate with the spirits in the right way will enjoy these minor victories. They will also remember that bigger
Prophecies are promises of miracles to come, and prominent among them are apocalyptic narratives that appear in many religions. The essential ingredients of such ideas are first a total destruction of the world as we know it at present, and then a birth of a “new heaven and a new earth,” for the elect, who are only a remnant of humanity. In addition to the well-known end-of-times historical traditions, there are many cases of new religious movements in which apocalyptic dreams are prominent. Even before our eventual death, we all frequently experience suffering, frustration, and failure. The eschatological vision is about eliminating both death and injustice. The promise is of overcoming the limitations and pressures of the body in life and in death, as well as a victory of justice over evil. The dream is of the resurrection, Judgment Day, and the abolition of death. The profane world of the body and its demands has to be destroyed. Who can resist the wishes for a victory of justice and life over evil and death?

The eschaton is the time when human history ends and what we know intuitively as the laws of nature are abolished. In the apocalyptic worldview, only the true believers, a segment of humanity, have been chosen to share in the secret of total redemption and to bring it about. Eschatological dreams promise us an end to the cycle of birth and death. In addition to our cosmic victory over nature, whose laws are to be abolished, there will be a human victory of our own group of the elect over all others. With the coming eschaton, believers may be in ecstasy, because they are living at the center of history and at the heart of the cosmos. This is the climax of the universal religious drama, played out on the cosmic stage. Following rebirth through blood and fire, birth and death will disappear. There will be no body, no aggression, and no sex.

Modern religions loudly proclaiming the coming eschaton include not only Jehovah’s Witnesses and ISKCON (Hare Krishna), but The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (Mormons) that promises upheavals and catastrophes that would leave only the Mormons unharmed, the Baha’i movement that promises a global catastrophe, and Osho Meditation (formerly known as Rajneesh Foundation International) that offered many proclamations of catastrophes. Only Rajneesh followers may survive. Rajneesh and his followers often discussed an expected cataclysm that would end life on earth. In 1983 Rajneesh predicted an earthquake that would devastate much of the West Coast. In 1984 he announced that AIDS was the scourge predicted by Nos tradamus, and billions would die from it within the next decade, and in 1985 he predicted floods, earthquakes, and nuclear war within the next decade.

A recent version of the end-of-times fantasy is the idea of the true believers being saved by a spaceship and moved to another galaxy, following the
total destruction of all life on planet earth. These ideas have been circulating for many decades and have been made famous by the often-cited, but rarely read, book by Festinger, Riecken, and Schachter (1956). This was an observational study of a religious group, founded by a “Mrs. Keech” in the early 1950s in a major U.S. metropolis. The founder claimed to have had information from a source, Sananda, that was both extraterrestrial and divine about the coming end of the world. Sananda was the Jesus of Christian mythology. She announced to the world that on a specified date, December 24, 1953, all of humanity would perish, except group members, who would be taken away in a spaceship.

A similar fantasy led to the tragedies of Heaven’s Gate and the Solar Temple, in which cases the collective death ritual was intended to lead members to a rebirth on another planet (Beit-Hallahmi 2001). Heaven’s Gate, first known as Bo and Peep, or the Higher Source, was a Christian-UFO group started in 1975 in Los Angeles by a former music professor, Marshall Herff Applewhite (1932–97), and a registered nurse, Bonnie Lu Trousdale Nettles (1928–85), who met in the early 1970s in Texas. The couple called themselves Bo and Peep, and were also known as Winnie and Pooh, Chip and Dale, Do and Ti, “The Him and the Her,” or “The Two,” in reference to a New Testament prophecy about two witnesses. The group’s doctrine was known as Human Individual Metamorphosis (HIM), aiming at the liberation of humans from the endless cycle of reincarnation.

The leaders claimed that they would fulfill an ancient prophecy by being assassinated and then coming back to life three and a half days later. Following the resurrection, they would be lifted up by a UFO to the divine kingdom in outer space. Members traveled around the United States recruiting new followers and proclaiming their prophecies. They were promised immortality, androgyneity, and perfection, provided they followed the group rules. Members agreed, in preparation for the outer space journey, to get rid of most material possessions and worldly attachments, including family and work. They wore uniform clothing and identical haircuts. Marriage and sexual relations were also forbidden.

Bonnie Nettles died in 1985 of cancer, and then the group started operating in complete secrecy. Applewhite told his followers that Bonnie Nettles was actually his divine father. In late March 1997, 39 group members, including Applewhite, committed suicide in Rancho Santa Fe, California, by ingesting barbiturates and alcohol. They were found lying on bunk beds, wearing cotton pants, black shirts, and sneakers. Most of them were covered with purple shrouds. They all carried on them passports and driver’s licenses, as well as small change. The victims ranged in age from 26 to 72, but 21 were in their forties. There were 21 females and 18 males. In videotaped statements read before committing suicide, members stated that they were taking this step in preparation for an expected encounter with extraterrestrials, arriving in a spaceship.
following the Hale-Bopp comet. It was discovered after their deaths that some of the male group members had been castrated several years before.

Making a prophecy that specifies the date of the coming apocalypse leads to unnecessary problems, because it always leads to what nonbelievers would regard as a public disconfirmation. This has not stopped scores of group leaders in modern times from making such prophecies. These prophecy failures have sometimes led to visible crisis or collapse. In other cases the prophecies have been reinterpreted or reformulated, as religious and secular belief systems are typically flexible enough to accommodate such failures (Beit-Hallahmi and Argyle 1997).

BELIEVING IN MIRACLES

Two international surveys conducted during 1991 and 1993 by the International Social Survey Program (ISSP) looked at religious beliefs in 17 countries, including data on the belief in miracles. These were the questions:

1. God: I know God exists and I have no doubts about it.
3. Bible: The Bible is the actual word of God, to be taken literally, word for word.
5. Hell: I definitely believe in Hell.
7. Miracle: I definitely believe in religious miracles.

The results are shown in Table 10.1.

These findings show that belief in miracles is in most cases correlated with other religious beliefs, as it should be. The United States leads the 17 nations studied in terms of the level of beliefs in miracles, heaven, afterlife, and hell. This is consistent with what we have known for a long time about religiosity in the United States.

COSMIC OPTIMISM

Religious beliefs in general, including the belief in miracles, reflect a universal human optimism about existence and the cosmos, the material world. The experience of the past few centuries has shown that an extremely optimistic worldview is possible within an atheistic framework, but historically, religion has been the cultural institution embodying and expressing the propensity to be hopeful. This is selected by evolutionary pressures (Greeley 1981). It is a classic adaptive response to the challenges of life. It should be noted that secular optimism, as exemplified by Condorcet or Marx, is historical, rather than cosmic. It hopes for a change in the social order, but not in
Table 10.1  Believing in Miracles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>God</th>
<th>Afterlife</th>
<th>Bible</th>
<th>Devil</th>
<th>Hell</th>
<th>Heaven</th>
<th>Miracles</th>
<th>Evolution</th>
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<tr>
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<td>45.4</td>
<td>49.6</td>
<td>63.1</td>
<td>45.6</td>
<td>35.4</td>
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<td>61.4</td>
<td>53.5</td>
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<td>47.9</td>
<td>63.7</td>
<td>44.2</td>
<td>51.5</td>
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<td>35.2</td>
<td>53.7</td>
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<td>29.6</td>
<td>41.9</td>
<td>27.7</td>
<td>60.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>45.9</td>
<td>24.9</td>
<td>24.8</td>
<td>25.9</td>
<td>51.8</td>
<td>36.9</td>
<td>60.1</td>
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<td>37.4</td>
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<td>27.0</td>
<td>20.4</td>
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<tr>
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<td>27.4</td>
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<tr>
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<td>7.0</td>
<td>12.7</td>
<td>12.8</td>
<td>24.6</td>
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<tr>
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<td>9.3</td>
<td>18.2</td>
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<td>18.7</td>
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<td>60.7</td>
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</tr>
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<td>2.6</td>
<td>10.2</td>
<td>11.8</td>
<td>81.6</td>
</tr>
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</table>

any laws of nature. It does not expect to conquer death, but assumes human progress in this world only (cf. Fromm 1947).

The survival value of optimism is clear (Beit-Hallahmi and Argyle 1997). In the face of death and of life’s many difficulties, humanity must come up with a basic optimism, a persistent hope, that has essential survival value (Tiger 1979). This evolutionary optimism is reinforced by the experiences of infancy. Early human experience, starting with any individual conception, may be viewed as a series of miracles. An invisible hand seems to protect those of us who have survived infancy. This survival was in itself highly uncertain until recent times. We can understand why mythology and fairy tales express the idea of children under threat of desertion and extinction, and why dangers are squarely projected on parents, whose power makes them into the witches, fairies, gods, or angels of fantasy. As we grow up, we realize that powerful gods have been on our side so far, and we assume that our luck will not run out.

Hebb (1955) hypothesized that higher mammals are more vulnerable to emotional breakdown, because with greater development of intelligence, the susceptibility to imagined dangers and unreasoning suspicion is greater. Humans are protected by the protective cocoon of culture. Illusory beliefs, rituals, and art seem to have no survival value, but on reflection we realize that they play an important role in relieving anxiety and allowing culture to survive (cf. Becker 1973; Greenberg et al. 1995; Pyszczyns et al. 2004).

The content of religious beliefs may be related to a basic optimistic gullibility, displayed by humans on many occasions (mostly secular). The human tendency towards magical thinking, errors in judgment, and distortion of reality has been documented often enough. Observations of children’s thinking (Piaget 1962, 1967) have noted its domination by magical notions, false causality, egocentricity, and animism. Studies of adult reasoning show it to be frequently deficient, with basic rules of evidence and logic ignored or selectively followed. Both psychoanalysis and modern cognitive psychology agree on the basic human difficulty in paying reality its due.

THE QUESTION OF REALITY TESTING

Is it possible that the belief in miracles is the result of some deficiency in the ego’s capacity for reality testing? The content of many religious narratives invokes an oneiric mode of experiencing, presenting events that defy logic, and that are not just improbable but impossible and absurd. When we hear religious narratives, we often know that we are in a fairy tale mode. One may ask whether a conscious commitment to religious ideation would not undermine reality testing in general. When we listen to stories about disembodied voices coming from heaven and to fantasies about miracles and promised triumphs, we have to ask to what extent accepting such ideas
affects one’s negotiations with social and physical reality, and whether it does not betray a real character flaw in the believer.

The question of explaining religion within the psychopathology framework has been clearly posed: “There is no doubt that hallucinations and delusions of any sort, religious or not, are abnormal phenomena. . . . Must we accept the idea that in some of its beliefs religion is a form of collective schizophrenia, and in some of its practices a form of obsessive-compulsive psychoneurosis, different from the psychiatric syndromes because it is socially acceptable?” (Arieti 1976, 252).

Indeed, the first fact to consider in this context is that religious individuals have not invented their religion. Religious beliefs are usually acquired through social learning (Argyle 1958; Argyle and Beit-Hallahmi 1975; Beit-Hallahmi and Argyle 1997). These ideas are not private creations. The social learning of religion presents religious ideas, which may be crazy, as part of social reality.

There is no religious behavior without a prior exposure to specific religious ideas. We know that the content of mystical visions, the most intense and personal of religious acts, is wholly predictable from exposure to certain ideas, which are always learned. Visions of the Holy Virgin occur exclusively among Catholics or those exposed to Catholic ideas. It has never occurred among orthodox Muslims, and we understand why. If social learning is indeed the more important variable in creating religiosity, then social variables, rather than personality variables, should be more successful in predicting it. The question to be answered in the study of individual religiosity becomes the individual’s reaction to cultural traditions.

The received social consensus may have little to do with individual dynamics. “[T]he most significant difference between a religion, as held by a person, and a state of systematized delusion resides in the element of social participation. Some people necessary to the particular person have incorporated in their several personalities approximately the same structure of transcendental beliefs and rituals . . . there is a community of assumptions. . . . It is not necessary to set up a special teaching situation in order to inculcate in the young the most consistent and constantly manifested traits of the family culture complex. Very special educative situations indeed are needed if one is to eradicate the effects of this most facile sort of acculturation. It is safe to assume that the nucleus of one’s personal religion has been acquired in this automatic way” (Sullivan 1964, 81).

Social learning may imbue certain prelogical or paleological ideas with apparent immunity to critical thinking. Arieti (1956, 1976) has referred to paleologic thinking as “the foundation of many societal or collective manifestations: rituals, magic, customs, and beliefs that are transmitted from generation to generation and accepted without questions being raised as to their validity.”
La Barre (1970) suggested that not only was religion the expression of impaired reality testing, but that its practices were likely to lead to greater problems. There are certainly numerous examples of catastrophes caused by religious ideas, but our observations of religious individuals and communities show that their adjustment to reality is, in most cases, quite good. One explanation is that religious beliefs are used selectively and kept marginal or compartmentalized in everyday life, and that believers know well the limits of acting on faith. It is possible to conceive of them as illustrating the mechanism of “regression in the service of the ego” (Beit-Hallahmi 1989). Psychoanalytic ego psychology has suggested that there is a natural limit to rational reality testing, and the tension of rationality is relieved by opportunities for controlled and limited regression from reality. It is this mechanism, which is not only normal but productive, that creates both art and religion.

**MIRACLES AND METAMORPHOSIS**

Most miracle stories relate unlikely physical events, but the domain of religious discourse includes narratives of psychological miracles, which are rare and dramatic transformations that have turned miserable humans into purposeful, happy beings. Some individuals report solitary events of experiences leading to religious conversion, which often make up a significant part of religious discourse. Beyond the dramatic, subjective “experience” we can find evidence for true changes in behavior and functioning, a true miracle cure, putting previously uncontrollable drives under control.

What characterizes the convert is an intensity of commitment, emotion, and activity. The testimonials follow a narrative formula, as the convert’s autobiography is divided into Before and After. Life until the moment of epiphany is described as wasted, a total mistake, or as a providential sequence leading up to the epiphany. Every sin must be confessed so that the power of redemption is magnified (Arendt 1979).

A conscious self-transformation is openly proclaimed, as the convert relates how a past of doubt and error has been transformed into wholeness in one great moment of insight, order, and certainty. What was once fragmented and decentered is made coherent, at least in its conscious center. The new self is not just triumphant but triumphalist, expecting us to follow its example. The convert’s emotional state reminds us of romantic love, which brings about exhilaration, euphoria, self-confidence, and intense energy (cf. Fisher 2004).

Offering the conversion testimonial is a real test for the new self, first because it is a public confession, exposing sins and weaknesses, and then because it is a public, self-enforcing act of commitment (bridge burning). Religious conversion has been a classical topic in the psychology of religion, starting with William James and Edwin D. Starbuck in the late nineteenth
century. But both James and Starbuck were looking at converts from the outside, with fascination, amazement, and curiosity, rather than identification. We admire converts, and some of them, especially talented or charismatic ones, become culture heroes, such as Thomas Merton (1948), but we reject, with James and Starbuck, their accounts of divine intervention.

The ability to really change is considered a major achievement and an ideal in modern culture, which promotes an imaginary triumph of an uncovered, authentic self. The common theme of reorganizing the self around a new center is modern, together with the (mostly imagined) freedom to choose or reconstruct one’s identity. More recently, the search for a social utopia is being replaced by the private utopia of the reinvented self. If we cannot change the world, we are told that we can change ourselves.

THE MIRACLE OF MAX JACOB (1879–1944)

Max Jacob’s story is an enigmatic story, full of contradictions, tragedies, and secrets. Fhima (2002) described Jacob’s “symbiosis of paradoxical identities”: Jew, avant-garde artist, homosexual, convert, Catholic writer, and Jewish martyr. Jacob is remembered as a minor painter and a remarkable poet. A member of an explosively talented group, among whom were Pablo Picasso, Guillaume Apollinaire, and Amadeo Modigliani, he is immortalized in portraits by Picasso and Modigliani, and in hundreds of photographs and film clips in which he always appears next to Picasso.

In 1934 Jacob gave extended interviews (Guiette 1934) that provide us with the best source for the way in which he wanted his life to be remembered. What Jacob tells us about his childhood is heartrending. He was physically abused by his parents and siblings, and tried to commit suicide three times. At age 13 he was taken to Paris for treatment by the great neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot. Jacob was a brilliant student, and his artistic talents were noted early. At age 19 he came to Paris with 29 francs, stolen from his mother. Trying his hand at various jobs and careers to survive, he graduated from law school, but chose painting as a career. In 1901 he met Pablo Picasso, and the two became inseparable. In 1905, the two met Guillaume Apollinaire, and made a threesome that stayed together till Apollinaire’s death in 1918.

In the 1934 interview Jacob denied his homosexuality and improbably reported a love affair with a married woman, using her real name. He states that the only moments in his life he would like to relive were the first night with his lover, and the “sacred moment of God’s first appearance to him, six years later” (p. 18). He reveals that he arranged to have a painting exhibited at the Salon des Independants so that his lover, Mme. Germaine Pfeipfer, would show up, only to be rebuffed by him. When she did, he was in the company of Picasso and Braque, who found her very pretty. He found her grotesque.
In 1909, in his rented room at 7 rue Ravignan, came the revelation, whose text is somewhat reminiscent of Pascal’s 1654 testimonial:

There was somebody on the wall, “Truth, truth, tears of truth, joy of truth, unforgettable truth, the Divine Body is on the wall of this poor room. . . . What beauty, elegance, and delicacy! His shoulders, his bearing! He wears a yellow silk robe with blue cuffs. He turns and I see his peaceful and shining face. Six monks bring a cadaver into the room. A woman with snakes around her arms and hair is next to me.

_The angel:_ “Innocent, you have seen God. You don’t understand your happiness.”

_Me:_ “Cry, Cry I am a poor human beast.”

_The angel:_ “The Devil has departed, He will come back.”

_Me:_ “The Devil, yes.” (Guiette 1934, 254–55)

While this happened in 1909, Jacob was baptized on February 18, 1915, through the order of Notre Dame de Sion, founded by the Ratisbonne brothers (cf. James 1902). In 1921 Jacob escaped the temptations of the big city for the deserted monastery of Saint-Benoît-sur-Loire, and spent much of his time there, continuing his literary activities. He also became a supporter of L’Action Francaise, a fascist, monarchist, anti-Semitic movement. This did not help when the Nazis came, and he had to wear the yellow star. Arrested in February 1944, Jacob died the following month in the Drancy concentration camp, near Paris, on the way to Auschwitz, where most of his family died.

Jacob’s conversion was not externally rewarded in any way. It was not only a negation of his family, but of his social network as well. Some of his friends thought the whole thing was a joke, another game played by a surrealistic clown. What we realize is that in the midst of all the Bohemian gaiety, Jacob was the sad clown, feeling as unloved and lonely as he did in childhood. His eyes had “all the sadness of the Jews,” according to Daniel Henry Kahnweiler, the Jewish art dealer and another member of his circle (Warnod 1975, 106). The conversion created center and balance, but Jacob, by his own admission, still had all the character traits found in him before 1909. They were only differently colored.

EXPLAINING PERSONAL TRANSFORMATIONS:
INTERNAL STRIFE AND INTERNAL PEACE

Conversions seem like real miracles, unplanned initiations into certainty in old or newly found beliefs. But both religious experiences and conversions are ultimately social in their sources and consequences. Sharing infrequent private revelations and conversions with the majority of believers becomes a major ritual and a source of confidence for both converts and their audiences. The dream of metamorphosis for individuals
and collectivities is nourished by the example of individual, miraculous transformations.

While we are ready to believe in dramatic change, we offer secular, psychological explanations for such occurrences. When it comes to psychological miracles, we feel that we can figure out the causal processes with some (speculative) precision. The psychodynamic assumption is that both positive and negative changes mean an internal change in an unconscious system of representations (Beit-Hallahmi 1996). The source of self-reported rebirth is the resolution of conscious and unconscious conflicts, worked through a series of conscious and unconscious fantasies, to produce an attachment to a set of delusional beliefs. Every successful case of individual rebirth is the result of an internal truce among opposing personality elements.

The psychodynamic view of conversion (Freud 1928) delineates an unconscious conflict, resolved through a sudden reorganization of impulses and attachments. The ego is invested in a new love object, and this leads to higher self-esteem and a better performance of life’s tasks. This internalized object may serve as a new superego, supplying the ego with an impulse control system, which has been missing.

The specific content of religious beliefs and commitments is irrelevant, and conscious religious certainty reflects the internal state of the ego. The outer peace and happiness observed in many converts is the result of an inner truce between ego and superego. What is achieved through superego victory is reconciliation with one’s father and with all paternal authorities, gods included. While, on the surface, distance from the parents may be growing, the convert experiences an internal, imaginary reconciliation.

ANTECEDENTS TO METAMORPHOSIS

In both individuals and societies, religious awakening is tied to crises and anxieties. Millennial movements, Cargo Cults, and Ghost Dances have always followed catastrophes (Beit-Hallahmi and Argyle 1997); and conversion is most often preceded by personal crisis, stress, and demoralization (Beit-Hallahmi 1992; Beit-Hallahmi and Argyle 1997; Paloutzian, Richardson, and Rambo 1999; Starbuck 1899).

Parental loss is common in the early lives of converts and leaders. Muhammad, George Fox, and Ann Lee are just a few of the religious founders who were orphaned early in life. The historical founders of religions might have experienced a conversion through “creative illness,” “Spontaneous and rapid recovery accompanied by a feeling of elation . . . the conviction of having discovered a grandiose truth that must be proclaimed to mankind” (Ellenberger 1970, 449–50). In a study of modern United States televangelists, an absent father, and admiration for one’s mother, were uniformly reported in
autobiographies. Well-controlled studies found that converts’ relations with their parents are in most cases problematic.

Any desire for change must stem from dissatisfaction with the present, and a desire for radical change must stem from a radical dissatisfaction. Strozier (1994), in a study based on extensive interviews with members of apocalyptic communities, suggested that the transformation to fundamentalism, shared by millions of Americans, is a reaction to insecurity, fear, and rage. This is how the inner motivation of converts seems to be shaped. Those likely to report dramatic conversions are also likely to be socially isolated (Argyle and Beit-Hallahmi 1975; Beit-Hallahmi and Argyle 1997).

Psychological readiness, vulnerability, or individual psychopathology may be called upon to explain why particular individuals, and not others in similar social situations, have chosen, or have grown into, conversion experiences. The minority of individuals who report experiencing conversion may be regarded as being more vulnerable and more disturbed in terms of psychopathology (Olsson 1983).

Conversion has been an adolescent phenomenon, and according to Anna Freud (1966), adolescent preoccupation with religious ideas is one way of coping with instincts. The ego finds many ways of controlling them, including the neurotic, regressive solution of religious conversion (cf. Blos 1979). The vocabulary of psychopathology does not lack terms to describe those more likely to find their salvation in religion or in secular miracles: dependent and inadequate personalities, borderline personalities, hysterical tendencies leading to dissociative states, or outright psychosis. There is a parallel, noted by James (1902), between the psychological state of despair, preceding the experience of conversion or salvation, and the elation and happiness following it. One might suggest that the intensity of any salvation experience is going to be matched by the despair that preceded it. It is those disturbed individuals, often quite seriously, who are more likely to experience such sudden transformations that, in themselves, are evidence of severe pathology. The enthusiastic believers who tell us about their conversion may be covering up a deep depression.

Pruyser (1968) suggested that sudden religious conversion is an indication of a severe psychological crisis, and, at the same time, a way of warding off a total breakdown. He recommended that “sudden conversions in people whose religious traditions do not demand them . . . must be carefully evaluated in the religio-cultural background of the person” (Malony and Spilka 1991, 128). Similarly, Erikson (1968) described severe identity confusion as a serious form of pathology, from which some recover successfully and creatively (instancing William James), while others do not, sinking further into psychosis. Boisen stated that both religious experiences and psychosis are capable of producing a dramatic change in the self, whether salvation or disintegration, and described cases where a religious conversion is closely followed by a psychotic breakdown (Boisen 1945).
Preschizophrenic adolescents show a preoccupation with philosophical, religious, and metaphysical ideas (Moller and Husby 2000). In most cases, this leads to a full-blown psychosis, sometimes combined with a self-defined conversion: “The initial ineffable self-transformation is being progressively infused with content, reflected by new interests in the Buddhist thought and motivated by charismatic and eschatological concerns” (Parnas and Handest 2003, 131).

THE CONSEQUENCES OF METAMORPHOSIS

Converts want us to believe they have profoundly changed; this is part of what defines them. One change we must take seriously is self-reports about elevated self-esteem and mood. Even if what happens is a change in self-presentation, such a change is highly significant. After all, spontaneous self-presentation is what we use in diagnosing depression or schizophrenia. James (1902) and Starbuck (1899) reported a period of elation in the wake of conversion that led to higher self-esteem, and this is supported by more recent research (Zinnbauer and Pargament 1998). Ho-Yee Ng (2002) studied individuals treated for drug addiction and found that conversion led to significant positive changes in self-esteem and self-perception.

Joining a new and supportive community of believers may be therapeutic, but in many cases this cannot prevent another breakdown (Witztum, Greenberg, and Dasberg 1990). One modern observer claimed that it was easy “to discern in all the ties with mystico-religious or philosophico-religious sects and communities the manifestations of distorted cures of all kinds of neuroses” (Freud 1921, 132). In a study using converts and controls, Paloutzian (1981) found that Purpose in Life scores were significantly higher following conversion. Relief from distress has been reported in many studies (Beit-Hallahmi and Argyle 1997). On specific measures of mental health, results are more ambiguous, but conversion is helpful as a treatment for drug abuse. Despite the evidence for higher self-esteem, better impulse control, and reduction in anomie, basic personality structures do not change (Paloutzian, Richardson, and Rambo 1999), and that is what Max Jacob already told us in 1934.

One problem with psychological rebirth is its inherent instability. Individual conversion (as well as its effects) is rather precarious and susceptible to reversals. Following the dramatic events surrounding conversion, there is decline in excitement and gratification. The individual is always in danger of reverting to the old self, because of internal psychological or external reasons.

We all suffer existential anxieties, but vulnerability and deprivation, together with an openness to religious ideas, are what cause individuals to reach high levels of ego-involvement in religion (cf. Merton 1948). The painful histories and psychological triumphs of the twice-born virtuosi have
made them the leaders, models, and creators of religious traditions. We in
the Western world are ready to take seriously the possibility of radical trans-
formation and renewal in the context of religious fantasies, but since the
beginning of the psychology of religion in the nineteenth century, we have
thought that we can offer cogent psychological, nonreligious explanations
for their occurrence. We do not believe in physical miracles, but we are ready
to accept claims about psychological transformations and dramatic reduc-
tions in self-destructive behaviors. We are eager to believe in the possibility
of psychological change for the better, even though we are skeptical about
similar physical changes in the absence of biomedical intervention.

SECULAR TRANSFORMATIONS

We can observe miraculous transformations in the absence of any reli-
gious faith or rhetoric, and we can assume that the internal dynamics are just
as described above: the powerful attachment to a new/old love object. Love
can transform an accursed life into a blessed one. Abraham (1925) described
the case of an impostor, a young man with a criminal record, who joined
the German Army in World War I, and continued his criminal career in the
military, always charming, always on the run, always finding willing victims.
After the war he was still a criminal telling tall tales, always being believed.
Then came the great transformation in the form of real love, and the impos-
tor became a decent human being. There was no talk of enlightenment or
satori, but a true rebirth.

The remarkable story of Jane Edna Hunter (1940) is another case of a
secular, private metamorphosis through an emotional experience of reliv-
ing her dead mother’s love, which imbued a young woman in crisis with the
power to become a leader. Coming from a background of great poverty, and
with the help of significant personal talents, this African-American woman
became a major organizer, a benefactor, and a model to others.

In secular psychotherapy we can observe a few cases of real transformation,
despite the lack of evidence for its overall efficacy, and the exaggerated claims
offered by advocates, which sound much like religious testimonials. What can
be called psychotherapy conversions occur, first, thanks to the attachment to
the psychotherapist, a powerful love object (Freud 1940), who may supersede
earlier ones, and cause a new ego-ideal to be formed. In some kinds of psycho-
therapy the client develops a new identity, through the discovery of recovered
trauma memories or even multiple personalities. The life of such clients is
divided into Before and After, as they celebrate their new identity as victims of
long-hidden trauma. The diagnostic label (e.g., dissociative personality disor-
der, PTSD) and the recovered memories of childhood events provide an iden-
tity and a meaning system: I have been victimized by monsters, and now I can
take my revenge by exposing evil deeds and gaining respect in this world.
INTERPRETATION: SHADOW AND SUBSTANCE

Religion has been the dominant meaning system in human history, because it puts human existence into a framework of design, intention, and purpose. Human life is viewed not only as an integral part of a cosmic plan, but as being at the center of this plan. Clearly, this is one of the most gratifying illusion humans can ever create, and it is inextricably tied to some other gratifying illusions. Every religion in its turn brings us the good news of a great miracle, which is that humans possess an eternal soul, and thus can overcome the reality of death. Humans have been enjoying this miracle, which is the essence of religion, for countless generations.

The promise of everlasting life is to be grasped and held on to, for nothing could be more pleasing and reassuring. All supernaturalism is predicated on the notion of suspending the limitations that we all are sadly subject to in everyday life. If you start with the denial of death, other aspects of reality are likely to be ignored, and thus, in religious discourse, we are used to improbable or impossible things. Moreover, many religions tell us not only that each of us will live eternally through our souls, but that we can expect death to be eventually abolished when the end of this world comes, and those who deserve it live in a reality of bliss, justice, and eternal life right here on earth. So the good news of all religions is not the solution to individual death anxiety, but a triumph of good over evil, and all life over death. Religious assertions quite explicitly aim at going above and beyond nature, which necessarily means moving to the realm of human fantasy, guided by desire. The religious imagination is a great human triumph over nature, most directly expressed in the denial of death.

All supernaturalist beliefs are really about miracles, and all discussions of supernaturalist beliefs deal with assuming the miraculous. Victory over nature and over our natural limitations is the fantasy with which religious discourse starts. Once you accept the supernaturalist premise and the denial of death, then all reality limitations are swept away, and “all things are possible to him that believeth” (Mark 9:23). After being able to deny death, what other challenges could we have?

Supernaturalist assertions are about events, states, and prospects that are implausible, improbable, and impossible. Every religious claim is miraculous, as it denies reality and defies everything we normally experience. If we start with the supreme promise of immortality, all miracles are but small installments on the road to blissful eternity. Religion provides us fictions we are eager to embrace. A wishful, ideal solution to the human condition, religion itself is a miracle: a breakthrough in the darkness, confusion, and frustration often surrounding life. Religion in all its manifestations reflects wishes we all share, as it promises a total victory over the trials and tribulation of living and over the finality of death.
There is an obvious continuity and consistency in religious discourse uniting foundational miracle narratives and claims that may be regarded as less central and less important. Following the great denial and the great promise contained in immortality, all other denials follow, and miracles are just many small denials of pain and misery. Common miracle narratives are part of the great plot, a texture of compensations and consolations leading up to the promise of an absolute triumph. The believers can be sustained by narratives of past glories and promises of future triumphs. Miracle narratives assure us that even if the universe is not totally benign, benevolent forces are active on our side and will intervene on our behalf, if we only obey their commands. Religious devotion means pleasing the spirits, which in many cultures may mean pleasing our ancestors.

Miracles are always naturalistic claims (Beit-Hallahmi 2002) presented as evidence for the power of spirits and the power of those connected or obedient to them. Humans are subject to clear rules of reward and punishment, administered meticulously by the great spirits. Divine punishments are as vital to the religious worldview as miracles. Disasters and miracles are both part of divine plan, and the cosmic calculus is evident in both. Disasters used to play a much bigger role in religious discourse (Kelly 2005), but the discussion of natural catastrophes as evidence of a cosmic justice has become rare since the Lisbon earthquake of 1755, showing the clear impact of secularization.

Secularization means that religious discourse loses its authority and its salience in any given culture. Miracle narratives lose their status as reverence for past traditions weakens and recedes. Doubts about the veracity of miracle narratives and about the need to take them seriously have always been around, even in the Middle Ages. “It ain’t necessarily so,” the Gershwin brothers’ 1935 song rhythmically declares. That is a modern expression of an ancient sentiment, which did not often gain public expression.

With growing secularization, which meant primarily that religious institutions were losing their political power, meaning the power to command respect and obedience, miracle stories were treated with skepticism and ridicule. Educated religionists regarded miracle narratives as an embarrassment. We can see the consequences of such embarrassment in the contemporary Roman Catholic definition of miracles, which bows to the authority of secular biomedicine and ask for its imprimatur. On the Protestant side, there have been the celebrated attempts to interpret miracle narratives, which are the essence of the New Testament, as demythologized, or existential parables, thus mocking and denying the experiences of untold millions of believers and readers, who have read these narratives and had no trouble deciphering their message (Anderson and Fischer 1966). Fortunately for those concerned about the survival of miracle narratives, no amount of demythologized or “existential” interpretations will affect the billions of believers eager for excitement and consolation, to relieve their quiet desperation.
Well-educated religionists will prefer their gods to remain transcendent, avoiding any entanglements with humans in ICUs. Most believers, however, still prefer extending the range of divine intervention, which means that the great spirits need to get their hands dirty, so to speak, chasing ambulances.

A fascinating religious reaction to the triumph of biomedicine can be observed in recent years in the United States, with millions of dollars being spent on studying the efficacy of prayer in helping with various medical problems. What we have here is the last and desperate stand of the sincere believers in miracles, who happen to have medical degrees and research budgets to spend. The results are expectedly pitiful (Carey 2006; Sloan and Ramakrishnan 2006). What these researchers obviously don’t know is that the last word on the subject was said already in 1872 by one of the founders of academic psychology, Francis Galton (Galton 1872).

A continuing process of socialization and resocialization is essential for the maintenance of committed members and the group’s survival, and this is referred to in Christianity as apologetics. A religious group can survive only when the implausible is embraced, and this must happen because without it there is no hope for immortality and cosmic salvation. Nagging doubts are always likely to come up, and confirmatory narratives and revelations allow for rejuvenation and renewed certainty.

Reik (1951) suggested that the preoccupation with dogma is a reflection of unconscious doubts. Historical struggles over the minutiae of Christian beliefs were a displacement of recurring doubts, ambivalence, and anxiety. What should be added to Reik’s psychoanalytic interpretation is that doubts and anxiety about religious beliefs are not always unconscious. The same may be said of the preoccupation with miracle narratives.

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Jesus [said], “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners to repentance.”

—Luke 5:31 (NRSV)

At least since the time when Thomas Jefferson edited his version of the New Testament (1804), deliberately eliminating miracles, Western cultures have taken for granted the idea that Jesus, as physician, is only a metaphor. Some readers assume that Jesus healed only sinners and the moral side of the person. Others assert that spiritual healing was performed only in the past, or only by Jesus. Nevertheless, in the middle of the twentieth century, significant voices began to take healing and other miracles in the Gospels seriously. Most significant is Rudolph Bultmann, universally known for his thesis that the stories of the Bible are myths. By his definition, myths are belief or creedal statements; not necessarily untrue, but if they represent some truth, it is symbolic and metaphorical. Yet even Bultmann, writing on the subject of Jesus’ miracles, said this:

The Christian community was convinced that Jesus had performed miracles. . . . Most of the wonder tales contained in the gospels are legendary . . . But . . . undoubtedly he healed the sick and cast out demons. He obviously understood his miracles as a sign of the imminence of the Kingdom [reign] of God (Lk 11:20, Mk 3:27, Mt. 11:5), exactly as his church was later convinced that it possessed the powers of the Messianic age to work miracles. (Acts 2:43, 4:9–12, etc.)

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Bultmann goes on to say why it must be so that miracle is central to the story of Jesus:

God is distant, wholly other, in so far as everyday occurrences hide Him from the unbeliever; God is near for the believer who sees His activity.\(^2\)

Bultmann was very much a part of the nineteenth and twentieth century cultural movement called scientific materialism, the theory that if we cannot humanly reproduce a certain object or result, then there is no such thing in the universe. This view reduces all of reality to what our limited minds and knowledge can produce. We should know better in this age of the Hubble Space Telescope and the discovery by physicists of black energy, which supposedly fills what used to be considered empty space in the universe. Today, that old theory of empty space is increasingly shown to be inadequate to explain the universe, or even the natural healing ability of the human body.

For this reason, even the medical community is today beginning to look at the spiritual side of healing. For this reason also, we must take another serious look at healing and other miracles in the Gospels. The task of this chapter is to explore and describe the Gospel stories of healing and their theological import.

**THE GREAT PHYSICIAN**

Some scholars think that the stories of healing in the Bible are simply part of a traditional ancient hero story. However, the fact is, there was an actual Jesus. He was a historical figure, mentioned in the works of Josephus, a Palestinian Jew who worked as a historian for Caesar in Rome in the first century. Josephus wrote:

> At this time there appeared Jesus, a wise man. . . . For he was a doer of startling deeds, a teacher of people who receive the truth with pleasure. . . . and when Pilate . . . condemned him to the cross, those who had loved him previously did not cease to do so. . . . And up until this very day the tribe of Christians, named after him, has not died out.\(^3\)

Several writers of the early second century, such as Roman historians Tacitus, Lucian, and Suetonius, confirm various facts about Jesus despite their prejudice against the Christians. Finally, the Jewish law book that is part of the Talmud, known as Sanhedrin, which is very much opposed to Jesus and the Christians, also confirms certain major tenets of the Gospel story, albeit through negative statements. The Talmud was written in the third or fourth century, but reflects the Jewish reaction to Jesus very near to the time of his earthly life. In general, these negative sources converge upon two points:

- Jesus was a teacher (Josephus, Sanhedrin 43a)
- Jesus did in fact work wonders (Josephus, Sanhedrin 43a, Lucian)
The Gospels of course tell us firmly that Jesus did heal, and we have no historical records to contradict that assertion. Just as important, at the end of Mark’s Gospel, we are told that it was not all in the past. In Mark 16:17–18, Jesus says: “These signs will accompany those who believe: In my name . . . they will place their hands on sick people, and they will get well.” The epistle of James commands the church to carry out spiritual healing (Jas 5:13–16). Clearly, Jesus and his disciples held that the task of healing was to be a major aspect of Jesus’ mission, and also the mission of the incipient church.

In fact, the Gospels present healing as the whole point of Jesus’ coming, the changing of people’s lives at all levels of existence. Four times in the Gospels, Jesus refers to himself as physician in the context of healing sinfulness. However, his healing ministry was far wider than that reported in the biblical text. To see this, we need only to think about the word, salvation; in Greek, σωζó, to save, to heal, to deliver from illness. English derivatives include save, salve, salvage, to bring about the literal salvation of something. It is intrinsically connected with healing, to save from being sick, death-ridden, or destroyed materially, physically, emotionally, and spiritually.

The Gospels do not present Jesus as one who came to bring only an ethereal, invisible afterlife. There is no place in the Gospels where it says Jesus came to save people’s souls. The Gospels proclaim a total healing of the whole person.

Why the Misunderstanding?

The misunderstanding about the nature of healing in the Gospels persists for historical and philosophical reasons. We are heirs of Greek culture and of a Western, rational mode of thought that has been superimposed upon the teachings of Jesus. Ancient Greek philosophers, particularly Plato and Aristotle (fourth century BCE), wrote that the physical and the spiritual are essentially different and separate from one another. Plato said, in essence, that the human being was a spirit trapped inside a body. Aristotle softened this proposition by making it subtler, but still, the physical person was a pale reflection at best of true humanity. For Christians and Jews, this position means that if we were made in the image of God, we are still so distant from God’s nature that we are essentially incompatible with the spirit.

Beginning sometime in the first century, certain early Christian groups held a view parallel to that of Plato and Aristotle: that the physical and earthly were actually negative or evil and a spirit, particularly the Spirit of God, would never stoop to become one with its material or physical container. For them, Jesus could not be both divine and human in his earthly presence. Therefore, the Spirit of God could not enter into a person’s physical body to heal it. These views were later solidified and promoted by a group called Gnostic Christians.
This negative dualism denied the Incarnation, God become human. Though the resurrection is the miracle that launched Christianity, without the Incarnation there is no Jesus, no God-as-flesh to be resurrected. For this reason, the birth of Jesus is recorded in Matthew and Luke. “The Word became flesh” (John 1:14), is John’s once-for-all pronouncement of the incarnation and its theological import. It is also John’s birth story for Jesus. If the Incarnation is denied, then Jesus’ healing can be denied; in fact, the entire Gospel story falls apart.

It is for these reasons that the Gnostic denial of Jesus’ dual nature was later condemned as a heresy. Jesus, as truly human and truly divine, is central in the Nicene Creed and in Christian theology generally. However, a negative form of dualism crept back into Christian theology during the Middle Ages when Plato and Aristotle were rediscovered in Europe. These philosophers’ work became the basis of the most influential theology of the Middle Ages. The body was again seen as a temporary and imperfect representation of personhood or God-likeness. Healing of the body by means of prayer went out of fashion. These attitudes toward healing persist today. As a result, some Christians believe that the miracles in the Gospels did occur, but those things no longer happen, a stance called “cessationism.” Others believe that even the miracles in the Gospels are simply the product of uneducated believers presenting Jesus as a mythical hero.

**Excursus: The Resurrection of the Body and the Denial of Healing Miracles**

Since this chapter is devoted to the Gospels, we cannot go deeply into systematic theology. However, a sketch of what became of the doctrine of bodily resurrection in theology is appropriate. The resurrection of the body was maintained by most of the church as a doctrine. This is important because it directly contradicted the denial of miracles. Yet it went largely unnoticed that the body is either holy to God or not, and therefore worth saving or not, and cannot be both.

The greatest theologian of the Middle Ages, Thomas Aquinas (1200s) rejected Plato’s absolute division between the physical and spiritual, and accepted Aristotle’s more subtle argument that the physical is the temporal and limited expression of a spiritual essence, for instance, of humanity. Thus Aquinas distinguished between the physical and spiritual while maintaining the doctrine of the resurrection of the body. However, notably Aquinas did not support the healing of the body in his theological works. Some modern theologians have maintained the doctrine of bodily resurrection, although Bultmann did not. More recently, even some Roman Catholic theologians have rejected the resurrection of the body (directly refuting Catholic doctrine), notably eminent Catholic theologian Hans Küng (in *Eternal Life? Life after Death as a Medical, Philosophical, and Theological*
Problem, Doubleday, 1984). Influential Episcopal bishop John Spong also denies the resurrection of the body.

However, one of the greatest biblical theologians of the modern era, N. T. Wright, has written a massive investigation of the meaning of resurrection in the Bible and its contemporaneous cultures (The Resurrection of the Son of God). In it, he shows that our only evidence (the Gospels) do credibly maintain that Jesus was in fact resurrected. He thus effectively refutes new theologies that reject all physical resurrection as irrational or as revisionist history.

Other theologians argue the issue of when the body is resurrected—immediately or at a final moment in natural time when God resurrects the faithful from the dead. To this Karl Barth answers “immediately”; others say that this conclusion goes beyond the text of the New Testament. Certainly Jesus’ body is represented in the Gospels as resurrected immediately. It is possible that the resolution lies in the fact that God created natural time as he created all other things and therefore can dispose of it as he wishes.

Nevertheless, the great creeds of the historic church maintain the doctrine, specifically the Apostles’ Creed (“I believe in . . . the resurrection of the body”). To deny this doctrine is tantamount to denying the whole fabric of the New Testament (and the Old) because without the resurrection of the body we deny Christ’s resurrection and therefore the whole basis and impetus for Christianity. Bodily healing was offered by Jesus and through his believers as evidence of this greater miracle; therefore the two things go together. This fact is made explicit in the Gospels where resurrections of the dead were among Jesus’ healings.

It is notable that other religions often consider the body to be of no further use after death, unless it is given back to nature. The Tibetan Book of the Dead, an ancient “guide” for the soul of the dead and for the mourners, is an example of this very different take on the holiness of God’s creation that is the body.

Now let us return to the subject of the denial of miracles.

Modern Arguments over Biblical Miracles

Some argue against miracles because some strata of the New Testament (NT) text are late, but the entire New Testament was written by the beginning of the second century, and our oldest complete manuscripts are from the fourth century. We have to take the Bible on its own terms; it is the text around which the church grew and flourished. D. Moody Smith’s, John Among the Gospels (2001, Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, Second Edition), indicates how complex the development of the texts of the Gospels was, and sets the question of strata dates in context.

There is a valid question whether a passage appears to have characteristics that mark it as part of the oldest stratum of the story of Jesus as opposed to a later interpretation by someone with an interpretative agenda. N. T. Wright has shown the originality and reliability of the greatest miracle, the
resurrection. Some argue that the Gospels differ from each other and therefore some part of them must be incorrect. Every Gospel has the aim of telling the story as faithfully as possible, addressing the issues that faced particular communities of believers, with slight differences. All were written within a century of Jesus’ life and death, by those who had heard the witness of the apostles and had been transformed by the story to which they witnessed. All the Gospel writers present a concept of the human being that is different from the Western idea, one in which healing by miracle is fully logical and, indeed, necessary to their message. In the Gospels, the incarnation says firmly that the body is holy to God, and in the resurrection, the ultimate healing has incipiently been fulfilled. Therefore the healings and miracles in the Gospels must remain valid, or the message is seriously damaged.

The Whole and Indivisible Person

There is a specific reason Jesus’ healing by means of prayer is perfectly sensible to the Gospel writers. The Hebrew notion of personhood is that of a unitary entity. Paul’s letters seem to take a Greek view of body, spirit, and soul. However, in the Judaic perspective, persons are characterized by integrated and unified personhood. To put it another way, Hebrew thought is aspective, not partitive: we can speak of physical, spiritual, and other aspects of the person, but not of those things as distinct and separate from one another. In the Greek New Testament, as in English, there simply were not words that could express the total unity of the human being and make the intention clear. But to Jesus, Paul, and the other writers of the Bible, the inseparability of the human being was an unquestioned reality. Persons are made in the image of God, body, heart, brain, mind, spirit, genitals, and all (Gen 1:27).

The impact of Jesus’ resurrection upon the apostles and disciples was the immediate reason for spreading their belief in Jesus and the one reason to write down the accounts of Jesus’ life later in the first century. The resurrection is the reason we have the NT. This ultimate teaching of the NT contains within it what is implicit in creation: that the physical body is holy to God and to be honored as the instrument, not merely a disposable container, of our spirituality, our relationship with God. The resurrection of Christ, as presented in the Gospels, puts back the holiness of the entire creation, including its physical aspect.

The concept that the essential aspects of a person cannot be separated is confirmed by the resurrection. It does involve a paradox. Surely, the physical body disintegrates after our death. Paul makes an analogy with a grain of wheat. The seed has in it the entire wheat plant. When planted a tall plant grows; a living thing. It is the whole of the plant. Notably this resurrection is not resuscitation. The original seed is not dug up and dusted off but is as a whole transformed.
Another analogy to resurrection is that of a fine perfume. I am told that among professional perfumers, there are people called *noses* who can take a complex perfume and identify every type of flower, spice, or other scent in it. A really good *nose* can tell you exactly where the flowers were grown. The flower, in its original physical form, is no longer visible. In fact, to our human eyes, it has been destroyed. However, the essential identity of the specific flower is still intact.

An individual person dies and the body is gone, but God knows that person in his or her individuality, just as surely as we would know a friend if she came back in her original body. That is the basic Christian understanding of salvation. Paradoxical as it seems, Jesus came to save the whole, essential self of each one of us, not just a part of us. In the Gospels, Jesus gave to people a foretaste of the healing of the total self, in the form of the healing of illness or injury. He also thereby showed that God's plan is to redeem the entire creation, not only an invisible spiritual part of it.

**MIRACLES: GOD’S DEMONSTRATION PROJECT**

In fact, Jesus deliberately used his healings and miracles as an audiovisual aid to show people what more God has to offer them. Ancient people were not necessarily superstitious or naïve, as we tend to think. The Jews knew that the Messiah would be able to perform such saving acts. Imposters were stoned. In the Gospel stories, most of the witnesses treated the miracles of Jesus as invitations to a new kind of understanding. Jesus performed a miracle, and the crowds followed him, listening to his teaching. They saw the miracle before they came to believe in him (Jn 2:11). The healings were his way of getting people’s attention and demonstrating God’s power, the presence of God’s reign. Thus Jesus did not heal all the sick, but just a paradigmatic few.

For the above reasons, one-fifth of the verses in the Gospels are devoted to healings. Over one-third of the Gospels address healing, apart from the accounts of the incarnation and the resurrection. This is not a minor matter.

**What Healings?**

All in all, by the count of the *Thomson Chain Reference Bible’s “Chain Index,”* where repetitions of the same story have been consolidated, Jesus performed 18 physical healings, four resurrections including his own, five exorcisms, each of which included some physical and psychological healing, and 10 other miracles. About 20 times, the Gospels refer to Jesus healing all who came, or to God’s healing in general. Of the 10 other miracles, seven are miracles of provision, feeding, or nurture, also a form of healing because it sustains the life of the receiver. These miracles include turning water to
wine at the marriage in Cana, feeding the 5,000, feeding the 4,000, provision of tribute money in the mouth of the fish (Mt 17:27), the catch of fish in Luke 5, the second catch of fish in John 21, and the resurrection appearances. The appearances provide for the life of the incipient Christian community and sustain them emotionally and physically as they begin to go out into all nations (Mt 28:19).

The other three miracles are the stilling of the storm, walking on the sea, and the cursing of the fig tree, all demonstrations of the power and presence of God in the world. These miracles signify provision for improved life in this world and the next.

The Essential Credential

In performing these miracles, Jesus deliberately invoked what was, for the Messiah, the essential credential. John the Baptist sent some people to ask: “Are you the one who was to come?” (Mt 11:3). By this, John meant, “Are you the Messiah?” Jesus replied: “Report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor” (Mt 11:4–5; see Lk 4:16–21). That is the one proof Jesus needed, and the only qualification he offered. This list of types of healing comes from Isaiah 61:1–2, the accepted list of the credentials of the genuine Messiah. Jesus gave a similar testimony in Luke 4. At the synagogue in Nazareth, he read aloud that passage from Isaiah. When he finished, he said to the congregation: “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (4:21).

Such was Jesus’ claim. Much of the reason the Gospels give for believing Jesus’ claim comes, paradoxically, from the circumstances of the crucifixion. We need only to look at the last of the plots to kill Jesus. The occasion was the raising of Lazarus. In John 11, the stated reason was specifically the miracles. When Lazarus had been raised, some people “went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done” (Jn 11:46). The immediate result is recorded in John 11:47–48: “The chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the council, and said, ‘What are we to do? This man is performing many signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation.’” They had to kill Jesus, precisely because his miracles could not be disproved. Jesus’ worst enemies acknowledged his miracles.

Finally, Jesus made it clear that his followers were to do the same kinds of healing. He never once sent out his disciples to preach without also telling them to heal; and they did so. The story of the formation and growth of Christianity after the resurrection, found largely in the book of Acts, shows the continuation of healing miracles in the church. The disciples continued to use miraculous healing as evidence of the truth of Jesus’ promise of
salvation, just as Jesus himself had done. Healing was their essential credential, too.

One among Many? About Ancient Healers

Some scholars believe that the stories of Jesus’ healing simply are a Christian parallel of the ancient pagan literature about spiritual healing and healers. Or they believe Jesus was just one of many wonder-workers of his time. In the pagan literature, the healings were the entire point. In the Gospels, the healings were all about ministry to the suffering, with the exception, perhaps, of John 9 in which Jesus manipulates and exploits the suffering of a blind man to make his own political-theological point about the superficiality of Jewish legal constraints. The miracles pointed to the divinity of Christ, the completion of salvation, and the unique and ongoing relationship between the believer and God.

The truly important thing in understanding healing in the Gospels is that Christianity was brought about by Jesus, and then by the disciples demonstrating the power of God on this earth, through healing. The miracles stunned Jews and pagans alike, and some of each were transformed forever by the direct and indirect action-in-the-world of this healer and savior, Jesus. That Jesus healed and therefore demonstrated and promised a genuine salvation was the point of the Gospels. In short, the healings and miracles are presented as the essential credential.

WHAT KIND OF HEALING?

What kind of healing did Jesus do? He did the kinds that are still today the most difficult. In general, there are three kinds of healing: physical, including functional and organic; emotional; and ethical. In functional physical illness, something in the body does not function correctly, but the function can be restored. In organic illness, part of the body is defective, and more is needed than restoring its function. The emotional is what we would call psychological healing. Ethical relates to change of character and behavior. In all of the Gospels, there are only two ethical healings, the woman at the well (Jn 4), and Zacchaeus, who decided to stop extorting money from people (Lk 19:2–9).

Many of the healings by Jesus were the kinds that are still a mystery for modern medicine: the organic, and the psychological. For example, Jesus healed the paralytic (Mt 9). We do not know if his bones were deformed, which would be an organic illness; otherwise, it was a functional illness. The healing of the man with the withered hand (Mt 12:10) is definitely in the organic category of physical healing.

What about psychological healing? While on the cross, Jesus presented his mother and his disciple John to each other as a new mother-son family.
That was in the category of emotional healing, even though the text does not tell us how they felt afterward. We do know that the terrible fear felt by the disciples after the crucifixion was replaced by joy and confidence when they saw the resurrected Jesus. His statement to them was a healing of the emotions and of the spirit: “Jesus said to them again, ‘Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I send you.’ And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit’ ” (Jn 20:21–22). Though the resurrection itself is the focus of the story, we should not overlook the fact that an emotional healing of enormous proportions had also taken place.

Now let us consider actual mental illness, that is, emotional illness that is severe enough to interfere with a normal life. It is common knowledge that mental illness is often impossible to cure. Clinically ill people are frequently recidivist. Alcoholics and addicts are even more so. Jesus’ healing of the young boy in Matthew 17:14–18 is described as an organic disorder, epilepsy, and a psychological disorder. Jesus cast out a demon. Both probably refer to the organic disorder of seizures. However, Jesus is described as performing a number of exorcisms, all of which were likely some serious form of psychopathology. The ancient cultures thought that evil spirits could be one source of a tormented mind, and so there is a connection between exorcism and psychological healing. One thing we know: the Gospels tell us that those who had been possessed, and all of the others who were healed by Jesus, were totally healed (Mk 1:23–26).

Healed persons never returned to Jesus for another cure of the same thing. In one healing (Mk 8:22–25), a man who had been treated by Jesus for blindness returned to say the healing was not yet complete: “I see people like trees walking” (v 24). Jesus gave him another treatment and his healing was complete. The Gospel writers did not cover up this instance. In fact, this odd detail of the story sounds a lot like an eyewitness account of the event. Clearly we have here a careful attempt to preserve the accurate history of the miracle.

The critical point is: Jesus successfully carried out the most difficult of all healings. He most pointedly took on the worst sickness of all, our mortality. Jesus resurrected three people: Jairus’ daughter (Mk 5:21–24, 35–43; Lk 8:41–42, 51–56); the son of the widow of Nain (Lk 7:11–17); and Lazarus (Jn 11:1–44). Such was the demonstration project of healings and miracles confirming the incipient presence of the reign of God’s grace that works and love that heals.

**Jesus’ Approach to the Sufferer**

Jesus, apparently, never turned anyone away. The point is made strongly in the story of the man who, in asking for the healing of his son, makes it
clear that he has little confidence in Jesus. He says to Jesus, “If you are able to do anything, have pity on us and help us” (Mk 9:22). Even after Jesus’ assurance, he is still uncertain. However, being desperate, he says, “I believe; help my unbelief!” (Mk 9:24). In this case, his desperation was what brought him to Jesus in the first place. He would have tried anything. Of course, Jesus did heal the son of the man. The father’s lack of faith was no barrier to healing.

Likewise, Jesus never told anyone, apparently, that he was too sinful to be healed. In certain specific instances, he healed the person and then said “sin no more” or “your sins are forgiven.” In those healings, notably that of the paralytic (Mt 9:2; Mk 2:3; Lk 5:18), forgiveness is a healing unto itself. Jesus used the healing to demonstrate to the onlookers that he possessed God’s power to forgive sin. In any case, and in every case where sin was involved, he healed first, and only then commanded holiness. Though Jesus acknowledged that sin can be a cause of suffering, he also made a point (Jn 9) that sin may have nothing to do with the affliction. More important, however, is the overall theological issue: if Jesus was to be true to his own purpose in coming, the message of salvation and its audiovisual aids, the healings, could not depend upon people’s limitations. This is the doctrine of grace, unearned mercy from God, which is central in the Christian worldview. In this, Jesus contradicted one entire stream of OT theology that maintains that suffering is always God’s punishment. Jesus represents the other stream of OT belief, namely, that God is only good and brings his people only good, and out of his loving-kindness grants healing in a broken world.

In fact, Jesus promised that prayers in his name would be answered (Jn 14:13). He did not say when or how. However, the act of asking for healing, that is, one type of prayer, may itself be a sort of healing, of the relationship between the person and the Lord. Thus in the healing of Mark 9, the son was healed of possession and the father was also healed by being brought into relationship with God through a personal interaction with Jesus.

THE THEOLOGICAL PURPOSE OF HEALING IN THE GOSPELS: A VIEW FROM THE GREEK

A great deal of the significance of Jesus’ miracles is carried in the Gospels through the choice of specific Greek words. Several Greek terms are used for one concept such as healing or miracle. When there are many occurrences of any one of those terms, or if different groups of people used one versus another, we know that the writer was trying to convey more than what occurred factually. He was making a specific theological point or interpretation by his choice of Greek words.

Further, as with body, spirit, and soul, there are often no English words that are precisely equivalent to the intended meaning of a Greek term. Various Greek terms are often translated by just one English word such as
healing. In such a case, as indicated in the work of Laato and Koskenniemi in this volume, the biblical writer’s intended connotations are lost. Thus translations often dilute meaning of the text, hiding it from the modern reader.

For example, in John 11:12, most translations say something like, “if he [Lazarus] is sleeping, he will get better.” Actually, the last word is a form of sozo, he will be saved. The theological meaning of the healing of Lazarus is thus obscured in translation. For these reasons, let us explore the terms for two central concepts: healing and miracle or mighty work. There are three terms for healing, and three for miracle.

Terms for Healing: Salvation in Nuce

The Gospels contain 52 uses of the term to heal. This English term actually represents three different Greek terms, as shown in the following Table 11.1.

Let us begin with sozo because we have already talked about its meaning. The four instances of its use for healing occur in Matthew 9:21; Mark 5:23; Luke 8:50; John 11:12. The use in John refers to Lazarus. The other uses are not repetitions of a single saying from one Gospel to another but occur in the context of other, distinct healings. Thus there are four distinct witnesses, three of them in the mouths of people who were looking for healing and received it. These witnesses are saying to the reader: healing is a sign, foretaste, and guarantee of the greater salvation. Here is the explicit message that the healing we see, in itself, is not the entire point. The Gospel writers are distinguishing Jesus from other healers and instituting the reign of the God of Israel, signified by Jesus’ kind of healing.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Greek Term</th>
<th>Pronunciation</th>
<th>Principal Meaning</th>
<th>Gospel Usage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Therapeúo and therapeía</td>
<td>Ther-a-pew’-o (long o) Therapy’-a</td>
<td>Total healing emphasizing the direct action of God</td>
<td>27 times together</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iátro</td>
<td>Ee-at’-ro (“at” as in English; long o)</td>
<td>“Heal” with emphasis upon the Great Physician (NT: Jesus; OT: the LORD).</td>
<td>20 times</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sózo</td>
<td>So’-dzo (long o’s)</td>
<td>1. “Heal” as a sign of the availability, through Jesus, of personal relationship with God. 2. “Save” as in salvation per se</td>
<td>4 times 7 times #</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#There is one use of one other term with which we will not deal here.

These seven are not among the 52.
Therapeúo (a verb) and therapeía (a noun) bear meanings in the Gospels that are distinct from their use in other ancient literature. The original root meaning in classical Greek was to serve, as a servant serves his master, but also as a human being serves or worships God. The verb implies devotion to and advancement of the good of the one served. Classical writers, specifically Plato, also used it to mean to care for the sick. In the Gospels it is used pointedly to mean causing the wholeness of:

- Persons (for example, Lk 9:11) or
- The nations (that is, Gentiles, see Rev 22:2).

The latter signifies that God is going to bring the nations to worship and be accepted by the God who raised Jesus from the dead (Rom 4:24). These healings are represented as the direct action of God in the world, taken in the name of Jesus and by the agency of the Holy Spirit of God. This message is the essence of the Gospel, embodied in Jesus and acknowledged by the persons who gave the original witness to Jesus.

Iátro emphasizes the role of the spiritual physician. In the Gospels, the focus is on the great physician, Jesus. In the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the OT, iátro is used to translate the Hebrew word raphah, to heal. In Hebrew, the Lord is called, among other titles, Adonai Ropheh, the Lord the Healer. The understanding in the Gospels, as in the OT, is that the Father in heaven is the ultimate healer. The healing itself is never the point, but rather, a demonstration of God’s reign breaking in upon the world. Iátro in the Gospels particularly keeps before the reader one point, namely, that central in every healing is the person of Jesus present with the one who is healed.

SUMMARY: THE MEANING OF HEALING

Thus the three terms for healing, all mixed together in English, actually make a series of theological statements and promises. Healing is accomplished by God’s direct intervention for the person on this earth, intending to restore wholeness of the entire person. The personal presence of Jesus is central in the act of healing and, of course, in salvation. Finally, a personal relationship with the healer is offered to everyone, no matter who they are. In ancient Judaism, it was unthinkable that God would include pagans in salvation, even though Isaiah and others prophesied that the Gentiles would all worship God, and that in fact, Abraham’s original blessing was in part for the “healing of the nations” (goyim). The book of Acts depicts Paul’s mission to the Gentiles. These Greek terms, taken together, anticipate that God intended to extend his healing reign to all ethnic groups and persons. The Gospels intend to propel the reader to these conclusions. The promises in English pale compared with what the writers of the Gospels intended to say.
Miracle: God’s Power on Earth

The terms for miracle are also theologically significant. There are three major words, shown in Table 11.2. In understanding these terms, it is useful to know the distinction made by scholars between John and the first three Gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke (Synoptics—seen as similar). Dýnamis (power, mighty work), semeíon (sign), and érgon (a work), are used somewhat differently by the Synoptics than in John. All of the usages, however, specifically invoke the power of God as manifested in the OT. Their use in general conveys one message: the Jesus of the Gospels is fulfilling the promises of the OT prophets that God intends to restore his creation. The principle term for Jesus’ wonder works in the synoptics is dýnamis, power or act of power, hence also miracle or great work. The use of this term to refer to Jesus’ mighty works, however, is limited to the Synoptics. The Synoptics put a strong emphasis on Jesus’ coming to destroy evil, and proclaim God’s reign on earth. Dýnamis perfectly expresses this double purpose, particularly in connection with exorcisms.

Sign in the Synoptics

Semeíon (“Sign”) Is Used in Three Ways

1. In an eschatological (end of the world) setting. This usage stems from the prophetic and apocalyptic parts of the OT such as Daniel 4:2.
2. When nonbelievers demand a miracle as proof.
3. As a simple description of the miracles of Jesus and the apostles.

Matthew, Mark, and Luke use sign in the pejorative context. An example is Matthew 12:38: “Then some of the scribes and Pharisees said to him [Jesus], ‘Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you.’ But he answered them, ‘An evil and adulterous generation asks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah.’” He was referring to the Jonah story in which he was in the belly of the fish for three days, and then was saved. Jesus’ burial for three days and rising again would be a sign to all. The Synoptics also use semeíon in phrases such as the signs of the times (Mt 16:3, an eschatological usage) and signs from heaven (Mt 16:1, a simple designation of the miraculous).

Sign in John

John’s use of semeíon is unique and very deliberate. Except for the summary in 20:30, John uses sign only in chapters 1 to 12, hence the term the book of signs applied to those chapters. In John, semeíon is used by other people to describe Jesus’ works; Jesus himself uses érgon (“work”). It has been said that sign
expresses the human viewpoint about the miracles (who is that fellow?); while work expresses the divine viewpoint (salvation fulfilled “in your hearing”).

The most characteristic Johannine use of sign is as a favorable designation for a miracle, similar to the third usage above, but with a punch. For example, 2:11 says: “This [changing water to wine], the first of his signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee, and manifested his glory; and his disciples believed in him” (emphasis mine). The reader is given to know that there will be a series of demonstrations of the Lord’s power (the first of his signs), of his oneness with the Father whose power it is since such signs cannot be performed by a mere human, and therefore of God’s glory. These signs will create the unique relationship between Jesus and his disciples, and they believed in him. All of this is contained in the term semeion in the context of that sentence.

John is usually said to recount seven signs, each of which demonstrates these same theological points. The seven are:

• healing the official’s son (4:46–54)
• the multiplication of loaves (6:1–15)
• walking on water (6:16–21)

These three have parallels in the Synoptics; the next two of the seven are:

• healing the paralytic (5:1–15)
• the man born blind (9).
These are similar to healings in the Synoptics, but from different sources; and finally:

- changing water to wine at the marriage in Cana (2:1–11)
- the raising of Lazarus (11:1–44)

which have no Synoptic parallels. In fact, there are eight signs, not seven, the last being the resurrection of Jesus. The number eight signifies the beginning of the new creation, seven and the Sabbath (seventh day) symbolizing the completion of the original creation. The seven miracles explicitly named signs in John signify that the old creation is complete in the sense of having fulfilled its purpose and being ready for a resurrection in toto.

Each sign is accompanied by a verbal exposition of its meaning. For example, in John 6:1–15, Jesus miraculously fed the 5,000; this event is followed by the discourse wherein Jesus proclaims “I am the bread of life” (6:35). Jesus is thus compared with both Moses and manna. Whereas Moses was an earthly leader, though appointed by God, and manna could sustain only earthly life, John makes the point that Jesus was able to sustain life eternal, through the direct action of God (6:32–33).

John places tremendous emphasis on the oneness of Jesus and the Father. For example, in John 8:28–29: “Jesus said, ‘When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will realize that I am he, and that I do nothing on my own, but I speak these things as the Father instructed me. And the one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what is pleasing to him’” (see also Jn 5:30; 12:50; 14:10). In this connection, John often uses sign in a way that is analogous to the second Synoptic usage. In John, faith may be based on signs, but it is an incomplete faith because it fails to focus specifically upon the relationship between Jesus and the Father.

**Sign and Evil: The Reign of God Now Present**

Unlike the Synoptics, John does not emphasize Jesus’ mission against evil per se. (In fact, John records no exorcisms.) His emphasis is upon the miracles as revelation—as signs—inextricably connected with salvation. Sign pointedly evokes the signs and wonders of the Old Testament, particularly related to salvation and liberation from bondage, as in Exodus 3:12: “[God] said, ‘I will be with you; and this shall be the sign [sēmeion] for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain.’” In John, such physical restoration is always a sign of spiritual life granted by God (see Jn 11:24–26).

In John, the new spiritual life is already granted. Where the Synoptics look for a second coming of the Lord in which judgment and salvation will finally
take place (Mk 10:30), John looks at Jesus’ physical presence as well as his resurrection appearances as the realization of God’s reign on earth. It is incipient but nevertheless already victorious. Thus he can write (Jn 1:12), “to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God.” It is significant that in Greek, the verb “he has given” is a continuing past tense; it is already a done deal for believers in general and it is ongoing. God has continued to give this power to new believers in the time since the Gospel was written. The end of John complements the beginning; unlike the Synoptics, Jesus’ last words are “It is finished” (19:30), signifying that the entire task of salvation has been completed. See also John 17:4 where Jesus prays and says to God that he has completed the work God gave him to do.

The reader can see the two different views of salvation as complementary. The Gospel of John was written later than the Synoptics and had greater signs and wonders continuing in a later decade—to which John witnesses. Also, the kingdom is not fully come; John’s point is that we need not be in suspense; it is promised. It is a done deal.

Johannine signs parallel the prophetic actions of the Old Testament. Jesus performs an action at God’s command like, for example, Isaiah 20:2; Jeremiah 13:1–11; Ezekiel 12:1–16. As with the prophets, the action (sign) points beyond itself. The signs point to a present spiritual life and foretell a spiritual life that is to be attained without the necessity of signs after Jesus’ resurrection. However, there is a difference between Jesus’ signs and those of the prophets. With Jesus, the sign itself is intrinsically valuable and directly changes the lives of those who are healed, fed, or given a view of the reign of God (as in changing water to wine). The prophets’ signs are followed by a prophecy in words, but the words often foretell something fearful such as invasion by the Babylonians. With Jesus, the people sometimes do not want to hear what he says in explaining the signs, but the prophetic word is always an invitation to salvation.

Work in John

I have already introduced the third term, érgon, work. Érgon is used by Jesus of his miracles 17 times in John, many of them powerful statements of the relationship between Jesus and the Father. As an example: Jesus said, “Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves. Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater [works] than these, because I am going to the Father” (John 14:10–12) (emphasis mine). Érgon is used with this meaning only twice in all of the Synoptics, in Matthew 11:2 and Luke 11:28.
In these verses, as elsewhere, word and work are closely related, and the Father’s words and works are the sole source of the words and works of Jesus. The word work in brackets represents a place in Greek where the word is not literally present, but is implied. John clearly means us to hear works four times, emphasizing their importance. Note that if it is by their fruits that we are to know people, it is much more so with the Son of God.

In John, érgon, unlike the other two terms for miracle, represents the entire mission of Jesus. The term has a special function that is augmented by semeion: it very deliberately and pointedly echoes the mighty acts (works) of God on behalf of his people in the OT. Most importantly, érgon and semeion are prominent in the accounts of creation and of the exodus. In the creation story, there is a special connection between work and word because God accomplishes creation by the word alone. In the Gospels, as Raymond Brown writes, “Word reminds us that the value of the miracle is not in its form but in its content; the miraculous work reminds us that the word is not empty, but an active, energetic word designed to change the world.”14

**SUMMARY: MIRACLE IN THE FOUR GOSPELS**

All of the Gospels proclaim the continuation and fulfillment of God’s promises as recorded in the OT. However, the miracles in John are fewer than in the Synoptics. The Synoptics, taken together, emphasize a future kingdom, the defeat of evil and the reign of God to be completed after a second coming of Christ on the clouds of heaven. John, on the other hand, dwells most upon God’s reign already incipiently granted, the oneness of Jesus and God, and the relationship of Jesus and the believer. The significance of the difference between John and the Synoptics, regarding miracles, is this: In the Synoptics, miracles are demonstrations of the reign of God returning through Jesus Christ. By the later time of John, the signs had been accepted as the backbone of all that Jesus was and is; in themselves, they constitute the definitive statement of the Gospel and thus the salvific work of God in the world.

**Reactions to the Signs: The Man Born Blind**

In the Gospels, the people who witness the healings and other signs respond in several different ways. These are most clearly delineated in John but occur in all of the Gospels. There are four general categories of response:

1. Refusal to see the sign with any faith (Caiaphas, Jn 11:47)
2. Regarding signs as wonders and believing in Jesus merely as a wonder-worker: Jesus refuses to accept this response, for example, in John 2:23–25; 3:2–3; 4:45–48; 7:3–7.
3. John 10:38 regarding signs as evidence of Jesus’ oneness with the Father, particularly after the resurrection (Thomas in Jn 20:28: “My Lord and my God!”)
4. Believing in Jesus without seeing signs (Jn 20:29; compare 14:12), based on the word of those who were with Jesus when he was present on earth.\textsuperscript{15}

John and the Synoptics all propel the reader to one conclusion, specifically through the stories of healing and the ultimate healing, the resurrection: the faith of the apostles is available to God’s people even in the present age. The gospels charge the believer to take to heart the word of the apostles’ testimony and to ask for healing for themselves and others. The healing includes a relationship with Jesus, though that relationship may come after healing. The believer is then to pass on the healing and the relationship to all nations.

The point is brought home forcefully in John 9, when Jesus was about to heal the man born blind. The disciples asked Jesus, “Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” Jesus answered, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life.” Look carefully at what this must mean. It cannot be that God wanted the man to be blind. What Jesus was saying, and what he then acted upon very forcefully by healing the man, was this. First, the man’s sin did not cause the blindness. Second, in this man’s body, the glory of the Lord God will be known. The healing of blindness, regarded as something only the Messiah could do, will be accomplished. With the repetition of Jesus’ statement, “I am the light of the world” (Jn 9:5, echoing 8:12), the onlookers are given to know that genuine knowledge of God in the world will be given to anyone who is open to it.

All four types of reaction to the miracle occurred in this healing. The rulers of the synagogue refused to see the healing as a work of God at all. The man’s parents apparently acknowledged the wonder work but did not acknowledge Jesus as one with God’s own person and power: “His parents answered, ‘We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; but we do not know how it is that now he sees, nor do we know who opened his eyes’” (9:20–21). The man himself, with crushing and ironic simplicity, testified to the oneness between Jesus and God. Responding to the Pharisees’ refusal to believe in the divine origin of the miracle, “the man answered, ‘Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. . . . Never since the world began has it been heard that any-one opened the eyes of a person born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing’” (9:30–33). It is evident from this text that the reader of a later era is also to see the entire miracle as evidence of Jesus’ oneness with the Father and of his ability to bring about the ultimate salvation.\textsuperscript{16} Indeed, the irony of this last statement makes the reader feel totally idiotic if he does not agree with the statement of the healed. That is John’s style.

Finally, the man, having been excommunicated by the rulers of the synagogue, met Jesus again. John strongly implies that Jesus came specifically to
show him that with God, he was still a participant in the covenant, synagogue or no synagogue. The man, evidently healed of the powerful social and religious rejection he had just suffered, turned to Jesus and said, “‘Lord, I believe.’ And he worshiped him” (9:38). At this juncture, Jesus also rebuked the establishment, in another of John’s ironies, by referring to the Pharisees as blind. Overhearing, “some of the Pharisees near him . . . said to him, ‘Surely we are not blind, are we?’ Jesus said to them, ‘If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, We see, your sin remains.’” The roles were reversed; the blind saw and the seeing were theologically blinded. In John 9, then, the essential credential has been demonstrated, the credential that states that Jesus is one with God and that he is salvation come in person.

CONCLUSION

Healing in the Gospels thus represents the entire message of the Gospel writers and of Jesus himself as they remembered him. With the incarnation, Jesus reclaimed the human body as holy, prophesying the restoration of creation. The defeat of the final enemy, death, is promised. With the resurrection of Jesus’ body, his whole self, he became the fulfillment of that promise. In between, the healings and other miracles each present the promise and the incipient victory of God’s reclamation of the world.

The Gospels, particularly John, leave the reader with a challenge. Put in modern terms it is this: does the reader choose to be Thomas Jefferson or Thomas the Apostle? With Jefferson, idealizing Jesus’ ethical standards but denying the miraculous and God’s presence in him? Or with the apostle, realizing the unique nature of Jesus and the immediate presence in him of “My Lord and my God!” (Jn 20:28)?

Certainly, the Gospels were written to propel the reader to the latter revelation. However, it is not just an aspect of the Gospels, a literary style, or a superstition superimposed upon a reforming Jewish prophet. The miracles are the very substance of their message. The medium is the message, as McLuhan declared! Without the miracles, the promise of eternal life and salvation is reduced to a mere ethical proposition, a speculative philosophical statement that can be put aside if the reader so chooses. As Bultmann wrote, “Everyday occurrences hide Him [God] from the unbeliever; God is near for the believer who sees His activity. . . . Undoubtedly he [Jesus] healed the sick and cast out demons . . . as a sign of the imminence of the Kingdom of God.”17 With the miracles, then, the Gospels proclaim the renewed dominion of the God of history, the one who can, truly and directly, be known.

NOTES


3. Josephus, Flavius (1996), Testimonium Flavianum, *Antiquities* 18.3.3, quoted in Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Real Jesus: The Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Traditional Gospels*, San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco. Josephus also confirms the historical existence of John the Baptist and James the brother of Jesus. Luke Timothy Johnson’s book analyzes the work of the Jesus Seminar and contends that their methods are arbitrary and unscholarly, such as in their method of voting on the historicity of Jesus’ sayings as recorded in the gospels. Many scholars conclude, however, that the reference to Jesus in Josephus is a late Christian interpolation. Moreover, Johnson seems to have missed the point that the voting on the part of the Jesus Seminar was an agreed upon method, among the scholars participating, of expressing consensus, to the degree that it existed among them, and not a method for asserting absolute truth.


5. This expression of what does not happen to the seed is from N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, 342.

6. The woman at the well in John 4 is usually assumed to be a sinner because she had had many husbands. However, in the ancient Judaic world, women often did not have a choice about marriage. Her questionable status is that she was a Samaritan, and thus was not accepted by the Jews. Nevertheless, there may be an ethical healing in her. Instead of remaining alone and keeping her knowledge of Jesus to herself, she began to talk to all of the townspeople and thus reoriented her own and their entire thinking about the Messiah.

7. There is also the account of Jesus in Nazareth (Mk 6:5–6), where “he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. And he was amazed at their unbelief” (see also Lu 4:14–30). If these potentially embarrassing episodes are preserved faithfully, we have no reason to think that the rest of the account hides any failure of power against suffering. The theological point is in fact positive: Jesus did not do his work against the will of the persons who were invited to experience the incipient Kingdom of God.

8. The book of Job argues these points graphically and comes to the conclusion that Job did not sin; his afflictions were caused directly by the fact of evil in the world (represented by Satan); and God loves him and honors his undaunted faithfulness by healing him. *Nota Bene*: “Satan” means “false accuser.” Job is not about God allowing Satan his way, but about God’s awareness of the falseness of the accusation of the sufferer. It also attests to God’s personal intervention and restoration of the accused sufferer.

9. One place the meaning of *sozo* is not obscured in translation, but nevertheless is misunderstood, is James 5:15: “The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up.” *Save* here is *sozo* with all of its meanings, and “raise up” means exactly that—a literal and/or prophetic resurrection by divine healing. Together, these two terms are unambiguous.

10. As in Mark 9:24, “Immediately the father of the child cried out [to Jesus], ‘I believe; help my unbelief!’ ”

11. John does not emphasize Jesus destroying the work of the devil as do the Synoptics; but consider 1 John 3:8, thought by many scholars to be the work of the same author as the Gospel of John.

13. “I am” sayings are unique to John; there are seven of them, loosely connected with the seven signs.


17. Bultmann (1958), *Jesus and the Word*.

REFERENCES


While theologians have long debated what could be learned about God from the study of miracles, we consider in this chapter what might be learned about human health from a close study of miracle cures. We think the traditional scientific approach to reports of miracles has all too often been concerned merely with debunking these reports and events rather than with learning from them. The assumption seems to be that if the events can be debunked then nothing can be learned from them. Or rather, given that miracles cannot occur, it follows that the only thing to be learned from them is that people are gullible and easily fooled. There apparently is no end to the boundless credulity of human beings.

We believe this debunking approach to reports of miracles is unfortunate because it neglects real study of these events. While debunking may have a constructive role to play when it urges ill and vulnerable people to not neglect consultation with medical experts, it all too often is merely a destructive and triumphalist enterprise that leaves these ill and vulnerable people feeling tricked and demoralized rather than empowered and focused. In the standard debunking scenario the hero-scientist runs to the side of the individual whose cancerous lesions have suddenly receded and informs him that there really is no cure and no chance that he will escape death; that instead he is gullible, stupid, and still has the cancer and that therefore he is just buying into an illusion; and that finally our hero the scientist should be thanked for providing this information to the unfortunate man.

In the zeal to debunk all miracle cures, there is a tendency to eschew careful study of the facts. We believe that extraordinary healings do occur...
What We Can Learn from Miraculous Healings and Cures

Weil (1996) points out that an elaborate healing system exists in the body, a system that repairs wounds, renews bone and, most important, corrects mistakes that creep into our DNA blueprint and, if uncorrected, could result in cancer or other disease.

RELEVANT DATA

Our biology, apparently, can promote remarkable cures, given the right circumstances. This is the stark and extraordinary lesson to be learned from miraculous healings, yet it clearly has not been learned by the scientific community. There is no concerted effort by the biomedical community to investigate reports of miraculous healings, spontaneous remission, or to investigate potential physiologic correlates of these healings. Yet reports of spontaneous healings and spontaneous remissions of chronic diseases, like the cancers, regularly appear in the medical literature.

Unfortunately very little is known about these spontaneous healings. We could find no reviews of the literature and no controlled epidemiologic studies of incidence of spontaneous remission in any of the major diseases. According to the Institute of Noetic Sciences (http://www.noetic.org/research/sr/main.html), the number of spontaneous remissions from chronic disease may be 10- to 20-fold greater than previous and poorly documented estimates of one in 60,000 to 100,000 cases.

Aside from the well-known but poorly documented phenomenon of spontaneous remission and healing there is the well-documented but poorly understood phenomenon of the placebo response. With respect to the placebo response there is a better, more intensive research effort, but once again, this research effort is not strongly supported by the larger biomedical community nor are there many laboratories dedicated to exploring and understanding the placebo response.

Benedetti, Mayberg, Wager, Stohler, and Zubieta (2005) suggest that the placebo response is a psychobiological phenomenon that can be attributed to the patient’s subjective expectation of clinical improvement on the one hand and to classical mechanisms of Pavlovian conditioning on the other. The best-documented placebo effects have been in the field of pain and analgesia, but there are recent indications of strong placebo effects in the immune system, in motor disorders like Parkinson’s Disease, and in depression. Benedetti’s review of neuroimaging studies of placebo effects revealed increased activation of a large set of frontal regions with concomitant decreased activation in the amygdala.

The frontal cortical networks are known to inhibit subcortical limbic sites that mediate emotion and impulses and further that the amygdala is known to mediate aversive emotional states. Benedetti, therefore, suggested that one
facet of the placebo responses involved a powerful suppression of negative emotions. While this suggestion is undoubtedly true it can only be a partial explanation of the placebo effect. A huge part of the placebo response of course involves the expectation that relief is on the way as well as faith and belief in the efficacy of the cure. In order to adequately understand the placebo response therefore we will need a full account of the role of emotion, expectancy effects, belief, and finally of faith. Certainly faith and hope are the major psychological factors involved in miracle cures.

Miracle cures go way beyond mere placebo effects. While placebo effects can temporarily relieve distress, a miracle cure is a cure or a reversal of a severe illness or impairment. In contradistinction to placebo effects, the psychology of expectation and the effects of expectation on health seem much more promising avenues for understanding miraculous healings—yet funding for this research is hard to get and journals only rarely accept papers on expectation effects. Even expectation effects, however, are not rich and powerful enough to capture the phenomenon of miracles. Indeed we know of no models that have yet been able to capture the complexity of miraculous healings. That is because there are no detailed scientific models of faith. What is faith? Who has it? How does one acquire it? While there are theological answers to these questions, scientists routinely ignore the theological accounts of faith and hope. At a minimum, however, faith is a religious trait and hope is a spiritual virtue. Yes, it is true we speak of faith in doctors and scientists, and the like, but when we speak of the active ingredient in miraculous healings we speak of religious faith.

Faith, of course, is connected to and dependent upon religion or at least a religious or spiritual context. The context for most miraculous healings is typically religious. Religion and religious belief, in turn, is extraordinarily complex. Religious belief at a minimum involves a history of acquisition or education in the belief system; current emotional and personality makeup, participation in public rituals, practice of private rituals of devotion, and the like. There is something about religious belief and practice that facilitates miraculous healings in certain individuals. That apparently involves faith. Thus a rational approach to the study of miraculous healings should include both a study of the impact of religious practices on healing, the biology of the healing itself, and the wild card factor: faith.

One recent theoretical approach to the relationships between religion and healing is McClenon’s ritual healing theory (McClenon 2002). McClenon argues that the development of human religious rituals functioned in part to facilitate healing and it was their efficacy in doing so that promoted the evolutionary rise of religion among human beings. According to McClenon, early hominids practiced repetitive, therapeutic rituals based on dissociative processes. These rituals, practiced over many millennia, provided survival advantages to those with genes promoting dissociative psychological
processes and the ability to go into hypnotic and trance like states. Rituals facilitated biologically based forms of unusual experience: trance, apparitions, paranormal dreams, and out-of-body experiences. These episodes created recurring patterns within folk religion, generating beliefs in spirits, souls, life after death, and magical abilities. These beliefs are the foundations for shamanism, humankind’s first religious form. The ritual healing theory argues that ritual healing practices shaped genotypes governing the human capacity for dissociation and hypnosis, allowing modern forms of religiosity.

While clinical studies indicate that hypnosis and trance is particularly effective in alleviating pain, asthma, warts, headache, burns, bleeding, gastrointestinal disorders, skin disorders, insomnia, allergies, psychosomatic disorders, and minor psychological problems (Bowers and LeBaron 1986), there is no evidence that suggests that the placebo response depends on the ability to go into dissociative psychological states like trance. Nor is it clear why dissociation should facilitate any kind of healing. Certainly manipulation of attention can distract a person for a little while from the feeling of pain, but the placebo response as described above is related to expectancy and belief and faith, not merely to distraction.

Because the ritual healing theory of religion and religious healings depends so decisively on the ability to go into dissociative states it cannot explain miraculous healings. That is because most reports of miraculous healings have not involved reports of dissociative or ecstatic states of any kind. Instead what seems to be the most important factor is this thing called faith and its accompanying virtue, hope.

Let us look at concrete examples (Leuret and Bon 1957, 94–98).

**Cure of Pierre Bouriette (1858) (Traumatic Blindness)**

Pierre Bouriette was a quarry worker on de Pic du Jer. It was his job to set off the blasting charges, which produced stones for the quarry men. Twenty years before the apparitions of Mary at Lourdes, in 1838, his right eye had been injured by an explosion. For twenty years this organ had been a blind, red, oozing sore. One day he came to a Dr. Dozous and asked whether he should go to Lourdes, stating that he understood that “Bernadette’s water cured people.”

Three days after his interview with Dr. Dozous, Bouriette washed his blind eye in the still muddy spring water. He did not really have much faith in the water’s powers; curiosity rather than hope was the driving force behind his action. He was quite taken aback when he realized that, when he had washed his eye, he could see with both of his eyes. It might be thought that his immediate reaction would have been to thank the Lady of the Apparitions, or Bernadette, who happened to be there at the time. He actually did what not a few still do, he rushed to the physician, to have his cure properly verified.
Dr. Dozous did in fact verify the cure, the first such medically verified cure at Lourdes. Bouriette evidenced no signs of going into a dissociative or trance-like state. Instead he simply had faith in the curative quality of Bernadette’s waters. But is faith really the curative factor? What about cases of healings in children or people without any religious faith at all? Perhaps the most difficult case for the view that religious faith is the key ingredient in miraculous healings is the phenomenon of healings of sick infants. The second historically recorded cure at Lourdes involved an infant and was medically verified by Dr Dozous. This is the case of Louis-Justin Bouhohorts.

Cure of Louis Bouhohorts (1858) (Osteomalacia and Febrile Wasting)

Louis Bouhohorts was 18 months old. He lay quite still in his cot, for he had not moved since birth. He suffered from a syndrome characterized by fragility of his bones—then given the name of osteomalacia. He never had moved, nor sat, nor stood up—nor, obviously, had he ever walked.

In addition to this he suffered from a febrile wasting disorder which had at that time brought him to death’s door. As he lay in extremis in his cot, his father remarked to his mother, still stubbornly nursing him, “Let him be; it’s obvious he’s nearly dead.” At which he left to fetch a neighbor to sew his shroud—who soon arrived with the necessary material. But his mother snatched the child from his cot and wrapped him hurriedly in the first thing that came to hand—a kitchen cloth. Running to the grotto, she covered the last fifty yards on her knees. This part was then rough and stony, unlike the smooth modern pathways. Making her way through about 40 curious people standing at the foot of the grotto she arrived to find Bernadette praying and Dr. Dozous awaiting events.

There was a small pool, roughly five feet by two, dug by quarry workers of the Pic du Jer in thanksgiving for their fellow worker Bouriette’s cure. Into this icy water (48°F) she plunged young Louis-Justin to his neck. She kept him there for fifteen and a half minutes (timed by a concerned Dr. Dozous). When she took him out, he was stiff and blue, which was hardly to be wondered at.

His mother, rather ashamed of what she had been doing, wrapped him, still stiff, in his kitchen cloth, took him into her arms, returned home and put him in his cot. When his father saw him in this condition, he felt no anger but simply said to his wife, “Well, you should be happy anyway, you’ve managed to kill him off.” He turned away with tears in his eyes while the child’s mother remained in prayer beside the cot. After some moments she tugged at her husband’s coat. “Look—he’s breathing.” Which in fact, he was. He fell asleep now and spent a quiet night. He woke gurgling next morning and took his breakfast—this, despite his age, at his mother’s breast. According to
her he had a good meal. She put him back into his cot and went into the next room to do her household chores. Leaving him alone did not worry her—he had never moved. A little later she heard behind her the patter of feet. On looking around there was Louis-Justin—cured of all his suffering, the osteomalacia, the wasting illness, which had almost carried him off. Furthermore, he could walk—without having learned to walk.

While Bouriette’s cure might be ascribed to a simple faith or to some extraordinarily potent placebo effect or more likely some sort of expectation effect, surely the infant’s cure cannot be accounted for in these terms. Given that the child was only 18 months old it seems unlikely that the cure could be ascribed to faith, trance, or belief effects. A child of that age does not believe in anything. Thus, neither our emphasis on faith nor science’s emphasis on the placebo effect nor the ritual healing theory described above can explain the cure.

In short we have no explanation for the miraculous healing of an infant. At most the current state of science might help to explain miraculous healings in adults. For the rest of this essay we will therefore focus on healings in adults and ask what might science and medicine learn from these extraordinary healings.

For a religious person no special explanation is needed for these miraculous cures, but for the scientist some sort of explanation must be attempted, not in order to debunk the religious explanation but in order to learn from the cures. What sort of naturalistic explanation might help?

**COSTLY SIGNALING THEORY, CST**

We situate our approach to understanding illness phenomenology and illness recovery within an evolutionary theoretical framework concerned with communication between people or between animals or organisms of any kind. This communications theory is known as Costly Signaling Theory (CST; Bliege-Bird, and Smith 2005; Bradbury and Vehrencamp 1998; Grafen 1990; Maynard-Smith and Harper 2003; Zahavi 1975; Zahavi & Zahavi 1997). CST is concerned primarily with understanding animal signaling behaviors. The basic idea is simple: for signals between two parties to be workable or believable by both parties they must be reliably unfakeable. Only signals that cannot be faked can be trusted to carry honest information. Unfakeable signals are those signals that are metabolically, motorically, or behaviorally difficult to produce (costly). Their production costs or costliness is their certification of honesty.

Costly signals are preferred by animals under conditions in which the animals are capable of deception but require reliable and honest signaling between the parties, for example, between the two sexes during mating season. Many of these costly signals have come to be known as handicaps. For a
signal to classify as a handicap the net benefits for displaying the signal (illness in our case) must be higher for a high-quality individual than for a low-quality individual (or the costs of an illness must be higher for low-quality individuals). Thus a low-quality signaler must be able to send a signal suggesting high quality; must be able to fake high quality. The signal must be costly to fake but not impossible to fake. The handicap principle asserts that low-quality signalers generally do not send false signals because it simply does not pay; the net costs are too high.

We suggest that in some cases an illness, after it has passed the acute phase, can function as a signal. That is because illnesses carry information about the genetic qualities of the ill individual. At a minimum if the illness is severe and the individual survives the illness, then the individual displays resilience and good genes. This is the kind of information that CST claims is crucial for development of cooperation between two parties. In the human context people want to partner, in a marriage or a business or for a hunt, with reliable, resilient, intelligent, robust, trustworthy individuals. To identify such individuals they need to find reliable, unfakeable sources of information. Surviving an illness is one such source of reliable information. It is not the only source but it is one source and thus illness behaviors are scrutinized by others whether we like it or not.

So the questions we need to ask ourselves when considering illness as a signal bearing important information about an individual’s genetic quality are the following: (1) Do people use illness to signal others? and (2) Is illness correlated with genetic quality? We answer each of these questions in turn and then turn to a summary about how CST might treat miraculous healings in religious adults.

**Do People Use Illness to Signal Others?**

Humans, of course, engage in a range of signaling behaviors, but can illness plausibly be considered one of them? Human signaling behaviors include everything from speech and language exchanges to emotional displays; body language such as clothes, postures, tattoos, and gestures; and other nonverbal behaviors. Our basic claim in this paper is that illnesses can function as signals. Illnesses, for example, can function to facilitate signaling when they produce some effect such as an emotion or a mood or a bodily posture or a behavior that communicates a message to an observer. An ill person typically behaves differently than a healthy individual. Many illnesses create background moods and behavioral dispositions that linger long after the illness has passed. Showing an illness to another gives the other a direct window onto recent brain/mind activity, and thus a direct window into the quality of the individual sharing the illness.

Like many other costly signals, illnesses are considered to be involuntary physiologic, cognitive and emotional experiences and thus less fakeable than
voluntary signals. We contend that many of the signals produced by a person who is ill can be and should be construed as costly signals, emotions or behaviors that are costly to the individual. The informational and affective content of the illness creates a mental set in the individual that signals other people concerning the qualities of the individual who is ill. For example, an ill or impaired person is very obviously handicapped.

People use information concerning the health of an individual when considering interactions with that individual. Among other things an illness is interpreted as a signal to remove the acutely ill individual from social circulation. During acute phases of an illness the person is removed from daily interactions and obligations and allowed to rest. After the acute phase of the illness has run its course however, the individual is treated differently. Depending on the strength and vitality of the recovered individual, he or she may be treated with greater respect and deference, even if the illness becomes chronic. As long as he or she survives the illness he or she will attain to greater prestige and status. If on the other hand the illness becomes chronic and increases in severity he or she may be shunned and stigmatized.

The opposite social effects, enhanced prestige versus stigmatization, that follow the opposite outcomes of an illness demonstrate the capacity of an illness to be interpreted as a signal bearing enormously consequential information. An individual who has recently been ill may find either that he is shunned and left to die or that his social prestige is considerably enhanced. An illness is therefore treated as if it bears reliable unfakeable information about the quality of an individual. Illnesses thus satisfy the primary condition to function as a costly signal within the framework of CST.

What information regarding quality will an individual send with an illness? First it may be information concerning resilience. If I have survived an illness I may be able to survive another illness and therefore I will be a valuable member of the tribe. Another signal or piece of information that an illness might carry concerns an individual’s character. Let us back up a step to explain how the issue of character fits in with CST.

For cooperation to evolve, the problem of the free-rider, the faking ill person, must be overcome. A free-rider is someone who takes the benefits of cooperation without paying any of the costs associated with cooperation. They are cheats and exploiters. One way to handle this problem of the free-rider is to impose stringent membership conditions for participation in the cooperative group. These membership requirements can serve as hard-to-fake tests and ultimately signals, when the individual adopts them, a person’s willingness and ability to cooperate with others. What kinds of signals could serve such a role? CST theorists (Irons, 1996, 2001; Sosis, 2003, 2004) have pointed out that a number of religious behaviors, like restrictive diets, participation in rituals and rites, ascetical practices, and altruistic giving might be such signals as these behaviors are both costly and hard-to-fake. It is precisely
the costliness of these behaviors or traits that render them effective since individuals incapable of bearing such costs could not maintain the behavior or trait. Free-riders would find it too expensive to consistently pay the costs of religious behavior and thus could be winnowed out of the cooperative group. Most people, even free-riders, can sustain a restrictive diet or attendance at ritual services for a short period of time, but few free-riders would be willing to engage in such costly behaviors over long periods of time.

Since group members cannot measure directly a person’s willingness to inhibit free-rider behavioral strategies, they will need a different measure of willingness to inhibit free-rider tendencies. Willingness to perform costly religious behaviors for relatively long periods of time can function as reliable signals of willingness to inhibit free-rider strategies and ability to commit to cooperation within the group. Included in such costly religious behavioral patterns are the hard-to-fake virtues and character strengths, as free-riders would not be willing to incur the costs in developing and practicing such virtues. Sustaining virtuous behavior is, to say the least, difficult. That is why character and virtue cannot be faked, at least over the long term. Character therefore can serve as a signal of quality (Steen 2003). Just as ritual and religious practices, when practiced consistently over time, help winnow out free-riders from the group, so too will development of hard-to-fake character strengths. To act generously and altruistically consistently over time is a convincing indicator of character as it requires the ability to consistently inhibit short-term gratification of selfish impulses. We suggest that coping with a long illness over time can be a particularly potent revealer of a person’s character. Given that is the case it follows that individuals who potentially interact with that individual will use the illness as a way to study that person’s character.

It is extremely important to remember that we are dealing with the so-called environment of evolutionary adaptation in which people lived in relatively small groups of no more than 200 people. The average life span was 40 years with sickness and illness a frequent event. While reputation and prestige certainly were used in estimations of a person’s character, it is reasonable to suggest that a person’s behavior during an illness was used as well. If tribal members observed a person’s behaviors during an illness then it follows that the ill person would use the opportunity to signal concerning his quality and his social intentions (willingness to cooperate) to these others.

Though there is no guarantee that an illness will be used by an individual to signal information concerning social intention, illness certainly functions that way. An illness can allow the person to advertise quality and thus honesty in communicative interchanges, and so the long-term results of a strategic illness are improved social interactions for the individual and thus increased fitness. It may seem odd to us that the way Mother Nature defeats free-riders and achieves cooperative interchanges among her creatures is to have them develop and display handicaps, or to have them use an illness and its associated
negative emotions to signal willingness to cooperate. After all, negative emotionality and illness is, on the face of it, not too attractive, and many handicaps, like the paradigmatic peacock’s tail, works precisely because it is attractive to peahens. So how can illnesses serve a handicapping strategy if most of what they produce is content containing a lot of negative emotionality?

Negative emotions can be powerful signals when used as leverage in social interactions (eliciting sympathy/empathy from conspecifics; Frank 1988; Hagen 2003; Sally 2005). When used in this way they enhance social ties or alliances. In any case at least 30–50% of the population exhibit and report a chronic experience of negative emotionality (Kessler et al. 2005; Riolo, Nguyen, Greden, and King 2005; Watson and Clark 1984). Negative emotionality treated as a trait evidences moderate to high levels of heritability (Bouchard 2004). Evidently people who exhibit high negative emotionality are considered attractive enough to at least a portion of the general population as they marry mates and produce offspring who inherit the disposition for negative emotionality.

Current evolutionary approaches to negative emotionality, and game theory simulations of the evolution of cooperation in human groups, predict that some portion of the population will exhibit high levels of negative emotionality as negative emotionality performs several different signaling and social functions. These include indicating the presence of cheats or free-riders in the population; indicating withdrawal or voluntary abstention from social bargaining processes; indicating resilience against adversity, that is, character strength; and eliciting sympathy or empathy from conspecifics. These enhance social ties and alliances (Fessler and Haley 2002; Hagen 2003; Neese 1998; Sally 2005). It is not for us to solve the problem of the existence and widespread prevalence of negative emotionality. The available evidence however indicates that it is widespread and it can function as a signal and be attractive to others.

Can Illness Signal Genetic Quality?

The short answer to this question is no: illness does not signal inferior genetic quality. Surviving an illness, however, can signal genetic quality as it suggests resilience. It will be recalled that the conditions for the evolutionary or game-theoretical stability of costly signaling (Grafen 1990), in the realm of illness effects, were that individual differences or variation in illness effects must be correlated with some value or quality, such as genetic quality, of the individual who uses illness to send signals to some observer. Or more precisely, the cost or benefit to the signaler of illnissing must be quality dependent, namely, the marginal cost or marginal benefit of illnissing is correlated with the signaler’s quality.

Illness is a perfect medium for the signaling of quality. Depending on previous mental and physical health, individuals differ in their abilities to bear
the cost associated with a new illness. Some individuals experience little or no long-term effects of illness, while others suffer severe mood and cognitive changes including psychotic hallucinations. Many illnesses leave scars and sometimes these scars are worn as badges of honor. An individual who carries scars from these illnesses reveals something of his history and quality. The scars reveal that he is a survivor.

How Then Might CST Account for Miraculous Healings in Religious Adults?

First recall that we are agnostic on the supernatural origins of miracles. Our task here is the more modest one of trying to present one naturalistic approach to these phenomena so that medicine may learn from them. If illness can signal crucial information about genetic quality and social intention in individuals who unconsciously use illness that way, then once the signal is sent and verifiably received by the intended receivers the information-bearing function of the illness is completed. At that point our version of the CST approach to miraculous healing would predict a miraculous healing. The scenario is roughly this: an individual gets sick. He goes through the acute phase. He survives the acute phase and now the illness begins to be a candidate for taking on a signaling capacity. If the individual finds himself in a social situation where he needs to signal convincingly that he is a quality individual and is not a free-rider; that he is truly interested in cooperating and that he is trustworthy and resilient; he will begin to use the chronic phase of the illness to signal this information to significant others. The greater the need to convince others that the signal is unfakeable and trustworthy the more dramatic the illness symptoms will be. Once the individual is convinced that the message has been received and believed, then the purpose of the signaling behavior has been fulfilled and there is no further need for the illness. At that point conditions for a miracle cure are present and that is when CST predicts they will occur.

If we are correct, miracles can teach medicine a great deal. First and foremost miracles tell us that an innate biology exists that can reverse an illness and that this innate healing system can be accessed and activated under social, communicative, and contextual conditions described and captured by costly signaling theory.

REFERENCES


Miracles are reported in all the major world religions. This seemingly universal embrace of miracles in religion, in itself, seems to suggest there is something very important about the role of miracles in faith traditions. However, there are many ways to interpret miracles, and the placement of miracles varies greatly. For example, in Buddhism, the role of miracles is typically much more peripheral than in many of the theistic traditions, which will be our primary focus in this chapter. Perhaps that is understandable since Buddhism is essentially an ethical philosophy and psychology rather than a faith system with a divine figure or force at the center.

Kathryn Tanner, in her exploration of cultural influences on theological beliefs, asserts that within Christianity there is nothing that all Christians agree upon. Although this is a bold position that initially seems hard to defend, there is a logical rationale behind it. If taken in broad strokes, there are many things that arguably all Christians agree upon, such as the centrality of the historical Jesus in the Christian tradition. Few would claim Jesus as nonessential to Christianity. However, to claim agreement on what the centrality of Jesus in Christianity means is a very different proposition. In other words, even if all of Christianity can agree on essential content, they are not able to agree upon the meaning of this content. This principle could be applied to all major world religions.

A challenge to this supposition is that there is no one entity that retains the power to determine what Christianity is. Many who identify as Christians would define Christianity more narrowly, excluding others who would consider themselves Christians. Tanner states,
Social solidarity . . . can only be ensured through common concern for very vague, or one might say, very condensed, symbolic forms and acts. Just to the extent that they remain ambiguous, amenable to a variety of interpretations, are they able to unify a diverse membership, to coordinate their activities together in the relatively non-conflictual way necessary for a viable way of life.

Miracles can unite or divide faith traditions, and they can enhance or challenge individual faith. Thus, the role of miracles should be considered in terms of the practical consequences of miracles in the faith tradition as well as the theological necessity of miracles.

Tanner goes on to state that theological investigation into issues of shared concern can serve to unite, but the requirement of agreement divides. Faith traditions can agree upon the central concern of the role of miracles and this, arguably, could be considered essential to the faith communities. However, agreement on what miracles mean or what constitutes a miracle is nonessential and potentially divisive or destructive to the faith community.

THE ROLE OF MIRACLES IN FAITH

Throughout history, scientists, philosophers, and theologians have grappled with the elusive nature of miracles and their relation to myth. Debate over the occurrence, attribution, interpretation, and significance of these extraordinary events has been particularly evident within the Christian faith, where miracles are often considered central to belief. For this reason, we briefly discuss the role of miracle in other monotheistic faith traditions, but have chosen to concentrate primarily on the roles of miracle and myth and their impact on faith in the Christian tradition. Much, although not all, of what we discuss in terms of Christianity has parallels in other monotheistic traditions.

Defining and Explicating the Extraordinary

The word miracle is often bandied about in the vernacular and has come to mean anything in the normal course of events that causes astonishment. Earlier nuances of the term miracle, however, typically implied the intervention of a supernatural force in the natural world, the result of which was an extraordinary and seemingly unexplainable event. For purposes of our work, we define miracle as an anomalous event caused or influenced by some type of external metaphysical reality, such as God or an ultimate being. However, in order to understand better the authentic meaning of the word miracle, its relationship to myth and how the term miraculous is interpreted within monotheistic faith traditions, we should examine its roots.
The word miracle derives from the Latin *miraculum*, which means to wonder. Similarly, in the original Greek texts of the Bible, the most commonly used word for miracle was *terata*, meaning wonders. In the Christian faith, many of the wonders heralded through oral tradition and subsequently chronicled in the Bible were those extraordinary acts performed by Jesus that seemed to defy nature. One such act was Jesus’ transformation of ordinary water into wine at the wedding feast of Cana. The transformation was seen as extraordinary because it appeared to operate outside the realm of the natural world.

A miracle produces a sense of wonder precisely because its cause is hidden and unexplainable in natural terms. Appearing to operate outside the ordinary course of events, a miracle is often interpreted as a sign of the connection between the supernatural and our world. St. Thomas Aquinas defined a miracle as something outside the order of nature. He saw miracles as events that we admire with some astonishment because we observe the effect but do not know the cause. Specifying cause, the contemporary Christian writer, C. S. Lewis, also defines miracle as the interference with nature by supernatural power.

In examining the difference between the ordinary course of nature and the extraordinary occurrence of a miracle, it is helpful to examine the terms normally used by Christian theologians when describing miracles. These terms help to separate the miracle occurring in the broad sense, such as justification of the soul, from a miracle occurring in the strict sense, that is, an occurrence that is grasped by the senses. Three delineations for extraordinary miracles specify whether the events occur *above*, *outside*, or *contrary to* nature. A miracle is said to be *above nature* when the effect produced is above the native powers and forces in creatures for which the known laws of nature usually prevail. An example of a miracle occurring *above nature* would be raising a dead man to life. Other examples of this type of miracle involve human beings who levitate or demonstrate bilocation. Alternatively, a miracle is said to occur *outside of nature* when natural forces may have the power to produce the effect, but could not have by themselves produced it in the way it occurred. An example of this is the sudden healing of diseased tissue. Indeed, diseased tissue has the potential to heal over time; however, a sudden healing can sometimes defy scientific explanation. Lastly, a miracle is said to occur *contrary to nature* when the produced effect is contrary to the natural course of things.

**The Miracle within Monotheistic Faith Traditions**

Within Christianity it has been customary to chronicle miraculous events and equate them with proof for the existence of God and a divine power. In doing so, Christianity has laid claim to some of the most renowned miracles.
Nonetheless, the concept of miracle also exists within other faith traditions. People of all creeds, including agnosticism, experience miracles. In the Jewish tradition, believers distinguish between the so-called hidden miracle and the revealing miracle. In rabbinic thinking, a hidden miracle is an occurrence that is so mundane that its wondrous nature is overlooked. Hidden miracles may include the rising and setting sun and the beauty of creation. In Judaism, these ordinary miracles are more significant than revealing miracles that appear to occur outside nature, for through ordinary miracles, God is viewed as constantly renewing the miracle of his creation. While Judaism does not emphasize, as central to the faith, the miraculous in the sense of extraordinary intervention, it still does not discount the extraordinary, revealing miracle. Rather, while acknowledging that God can and does intervene in an extraordinary fashion, such as he often does in Old Testament (OT) stories, Judaism suggests these miracles are not the bedrock of Jewish belief.

Similar to the Jewish perspective, the Islamic stance on miracles does not view these extraordinary occurrences as central to the faith in the way that the miracles of Jesus are important to the Christian tradition. Nonetheless, the Qur'an is considered miraculous, per se, and miracles are also regarded as signs and wonders. The miraculous may include all of creation, much like the Jewish concept of the ordinary or hidden miracle, or it may include the wondrous workings of The Prophet, Muhammad. Interestingly, it is recorded that The Prophet declined to perform miracles whenever he was asked to do so. Nevertheless, many miraculous events are attributed to Muhammad. Some of these reported miracles include his miraculous feedings of large numbers of people when food supply was very scarce, the instantaneous creation of wells when there was no source of water available, and his uncanny ability to predict future events. These miracles of the revealing nature are not always woven into a consistent narrative of his life, but are simply listed in some texts as a way to show that The Prophet did perform miracles like other prophets before him. As opposed to the almost didactic manner of miracle reporting in the Bible, the Islamic referencing of miracles is not necessarily intended to illumine points of doctrine. Overall, the purpose of the miracle within the Islamic faith is to show how Muhammad was the agent for Allah, who allowed him to change the ordinary course of events. In this manner, the Muslim belief about miracles is similar to that held by most Jews and Christians: miracles occur because of interference by the supernatural, and in the case of an extraordinary miracle, such interference demonstrates a disruption in the ordinary course of nature.

Upon examining the different faith perspectives on miracles, we can correctly conclude that while various religions may disagree on their concept of God, they collectively attribute miracles to the working of a divine presence that intervenes in nature. Furthermore, in many faith traditions, miracles are viewed as symbols embodying a divine message. Protestant theologian Paul
Tillich views symbols as participating in the reality for which they stand. He distinguishes symbols from signs, stating signs bear no resemblance to that to which they point.\textsuperscript{11} Hence, miracles may function in a mode similar to that of myths, since both contain an element that we humans recognize individually and collectively to be true.

**Miracles as Producing and Enhancing Faith in God**

When writing of Christ’s miraculous ascent into heaven, St. Augustine said the books of the Bible record “not merely the attesting miracles, but the ultimate object of our faith which the miracles were meant to confirm. The miracles are made known to help men’s faith.”\textsuperscript{12} Miracles, therefore, can be thought not only to confirm the supernatural character of God, but also to enhance the faith of believers.

Miracles contribute to faith by providing tangible evidence for their human audience. The result is inevitably the provocation of awe, wonder, or a deeper belief in that which is unseen yet nonetheless believed. In this sense, miracles encountered through lived experience may initiate belief or strengthen the faith of believers. Likewise, miracles using others as conduits to enhance a deeper belief in the divine presence are also effective in this way. As an example of this, we will consider an apparition story of the Virgin Mary. While Catholics do not consider Mary as an equal to her son, she is still viewed as one through whom the power of God is revealed. In the miracle of Our Lady of Fatima, Mary appeared to three innocent Portuguese children in 1917. The children testified that during the apparitions, she appeared as a radiant woman standing among the leaves of a small oak tree. She instructed the children to pray for world peace and an end to war. Several prophecies the lady made to the children were realized. In her last appearances, a crowd of nearly seventy thousand onlookers, believers and skeptics alike, observed the dark and clouded sky suddenly clear and reveal the sun, which reportedly spun like a pinwheel, with yellow, blue and violet rays streaming from its rim. The three children to whom Mary had appeared earlier reported seeing Mary within the sun. The sun purportedly stopped whirling and appeared to zigzag toward the earth, while the crowd cowered in fear. Extraordinarily, the earth and the clothing of all present went from a state of dampness due to the rain, to instant and complete dryness. Was this truly a miraculous event? This question has been debated for nearly a century as skeptics employ astrophysics to explain the phenomena of the spinning sun, along with behavioral science to explain the collective perception by the nearly seventy thousand people, of an extraordinary event. Meanwhile, some believers accept the apparition simply on faith. While Marian apparitions are not considered central for belief in the Catholic faith, which takes a sober view of miracles, for some believers, the effect of the miracle provides a sense of wonder and awe.
at the possibility of divine presence and supernatural intervention in human affairs.

Miracles, whether directly experienced or passed on through word of mouth, become part of what Smith, in *The Meaning and End of Religion*, calls the cumulative traditions of religion. That is to say, past miracles become part of the myths and narratives that, along with other elements, inform and awaken present faith. Indeed, the miracles chronicled in the New Testament have served as evidence to bring some people to faith just as the miracles reportedly did during the life of Christ. In the New Testament (NT), there are numerous accounts of Christ’s direct intervention in the natural course of things. In the Gospel of John (11:1–44), for example, Jesus commands Lazarus to come out from the tomb and the dead man emerges, tied head and foot with burial bands. By biblical report, this caused many of the Jews who witnessed the event to believe in Christ and his divine power. Others, however, did not believe and turned Jesus in to the Pharisees.

**DISBELIEF**

In our entertainment of the miracle phenomena, we shall not presume that the possibility of miracles is accepted by all. Throughout history, some have remained so convinced of the uniformity and sovereignty of nature that they are compelled to deny the probability and even the possibility of miracles, or to explain them away. The skeptical view of extraordinary miracles, held by philosophers, behavioral scientists, and theologians alike, ultimately depends on the assumption that the material universe alone exists. As the eighteenth-century philosopher David Hume proffered in *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, “A miracle is a violation of the laws of nature, and as a firm and unalterable experience has established these laws, the proof against a miracle from the very nature of the fact, is as certain as any argument from experience can possibly be imagined.” Hume’s denial of miracles has been echoed by many others throughout the history of scientific and even theological thought.

Relying on the fundamental premise that whatever happens is natural and whatever is not natural simply does not happen, the controversial Protestant theologian, David Friedrich Strauss, introduced the concept of biblical miracle as myth in his 1835 work *The Life of Jesus: Critically Examined*. In disagreeing with the two warring factions of the nineteenth century, the rationalists and supernaturals, Strauss shocked his contemporaries by asserting that biblical miracles, such as the multiplication of the loaves and fish, are actually mythical in nature. According to Strauss, the miraculous feeding of nearly 5,000 people by Jesus should not be taken as a literal occurrence. That this astonishing multiplication of food may have taken place is, in Strauss’ view, not even the point. What was of more importance to him
was the figurative truth contained in the myth/miracle: Jesus is the Bread of Life who nurtures his followers. Strauss’s mythical sense of the Gospel stories, once considered highly controversial, has now become an accepted way of viewing the miracle stories for many contemporary Christian believers. Nevertheless, this is not to say that the occurrence of extraordinary events is always impossible.

Other more contemporary thinkers have totally discredited the notion of miracles, those occurring in the biblical context as well as those occurring in quotidian experience. Robert R. Funk, biblical scholar and founder of the very controversial Jesus Seminar and Weststar Institute, is one such scholar. Funk has stoutly maintained that the notion of God interfering with the order of nature from time to time, to aid or punish, is no longer credible. He states that “miracles are an affront to the justice and integrity of God, however understood.” He views miracles as conceivable only as the inexplicable; otherwise they contradict the regularity of the order in the physical universe.

In other disciplines, such as psychology, the miraculous event has been explained in various ways. Carl Jung’s explanation for visions and apparitions centers on his psychological theory, which posits that the unconscious psyche has “an indeterminable number of subliminal perceptions, and an immense fund of accumulated inheritance factors left by one generation of men after another.” According to Jung, these psychic inheritances, also called archetypes, are universal patterns and motifs, coming from the collective unconscious, and are often the basis for religions and myths. To Jung, individual apparitions, much like dreams, involve psychic content from the unconscious that is forced into our conscious life. The experienced vision is then interpreted in a religious context.

Other psychological theories explaining the causes of extraordinary events include mentalistic theories, which identify a specific mental state like stress, anxiety, despondency or mental illness, as being responsible for miracles like conversions, apparitions, stigmata, inedia, bilocation, and levitations. It must be noted however, that mentalistic theories cannot account for certain extraordinary occurrences taking place after death. Specifically, the state and functioning of the mind cannot possibly account for the extraordinary condition of Incorruptibles, those saintly people whose bodies remain totally preserved without human intervention, for years after their deaths.

Other relatively recent research in the field of psychology addresses the connection between attachment style and spirituality. This research suggests that some experiencing of extraordinary miracles, such as sudden religious conversion, which is often attributed to the intervention of the Holy Spirit, may be linked to the attachment style of the individual. Attachment style, first studied by psychiatrist John Bowlby and developmental psychologist, Mary Ainsworth, stems from the early interactions of a child with the
primary caregiver and is often determined by the feedback the child receives from the caregiver. These interactions are said to create an internal working model that can persist throughout an individual’s lifetime and deeply affect future relationships. Four identified attachment styles include: secure attachment, which is exhibited in those individuals who have received a caregiver’s true attention; avoidant attachment, which is apparent in those who have experienced coldness and rigidity from their caregivers; anxious-ambivalent attachment, which is often demonstrated by those who have experienced a highly inconsistent primary caregiver; and disorganized/disoriented attachment, which was differentiated by Main and Solomon and indicates an individual who tends to display very paradoxical, chaotic “come here/go away” behavior. These individuals have usually experienced “frightened, frightening or disoriented communication with their primary caregivers.”

According to Kirkpatrick, research on attachment styles and religious experience suggests that adult religiosity, particularly in the form of sudden religious conversions and highly emotional religious experiences, is associated with insecure childhood attachment. These results may imply that those with insecure attachment have a negative internal working model of attachment relationships and thereby seek to avoid intimacy, closeness, and love. Among those who do experience a religious conversion, however, something dramatic happens to cause a sudden change in perception. To someone with an insecure history of attachment, this sudden awareness of God as a warm, forgiving, and compassionate figure would undoubtedly lead to a more intense conversion or religious experience, something falling outside the realm of the normal experience. Indeed, we venture to say it may appear to be miraculous for the individual experiencing the conversion. In addition to conversion, there is some evidence that individuals with insecure attachments may also have a predisposition for other types of intense religious experience.

MIRACLES AS PRODUCTS OF FAITH

Thus far, our examination of miracles, believers, and skeptics raises interesting questions about the existence of God and the relationship between miracles and faith. Therefore, in our discourse on miracles, we would be remiss if we avoided a very obvious point, which is that faith is essential for belief in miracles, even if miracles are not essential for faith. C. S. Lewis wrote, “Unless there exists, in addition to Nature, something else we may call the supernatural, there can be no miracles.” Indeed, it is logical to assume that faith in a supernatural power must precede the acceptance of miracles.

Paradoxically, Christians would find it difficult to accept the tenets of their faith if they did not believe on some level in the miraculous, for Christianity is predicated on several pivotal and miraculous events: the virgin birth, the resurrection of Christ, and his ascension into heaven. For many, these
events are understood in the figurative rather than the literal sense. However, merely believing in that which is not seen (God) is a leap into the abyss of the unknown requiring suspension of natural disbelief. Faith, according to Hebrews 11:1, “is the realization of what is hoped for and evidence of things not seen.” Specifically, the very nature of faith implies that one makes the choice to believe in that which is not clearly revealed through the sensory intelligences. On the other hand, faith in the unseen does not necessarily entail the intervention of a miracle.

Throughout history, both believers and nonbelievers alike have posited the basic question: Does God exist? This question is fundamental to all of human existence; for even when one is uncertain or does not believe in God or a supernatural force that interfaces with human existence, the question still becomes unavoidable as an individual searches for the significance of his or her personal existence.

If we do suppose God exists, then how do we know this? Admittedly, our ways of knowing the existence of God are imperfect. In *Belief and Unbelief*, Michael Novak suggests that since God is basically incomprehensible to any human intellect, no creature can attain to a perfect way of knowing God. The age-old question then follows: Is it even possible to know anything beyond what we perceive with the senses? The history of humanity’s epistemological search for ultimate meaning or a creative force, like the Unmoved Mover, is well documented, and early philosophers, such as Aristotle, did not question that human knowledge is primarily derived from the senses. The theologian and mystic Theresa of Avila suggested that the miraculous event offered internal and external proof of the existence of God: “If God is a knowable object, He is such on the basis of man’s experience, both of the invisible world and interior world.”

General acknowledgement of extrasensory truths does not mean the existence of God has been readily accepted, in a literal or mythical sense. Despite the fight of church authorities in the eighteenth century to denigrate the rise of scientific knowledge, the positivist mentality that was initiated in the late eighteenth century has led to disbelief of unempirical matters; this mentality has largely prevailed. Positivism may be seen as a methodology or philosophy of suspicion wherein the concept of god has lost its prior meaning. Positivists question whether human beings are capable of knowing anything beyond what is perceived by the senses or quantified empirically. Therefore, human reason is completely subjected to scrutiny of the senses and to the laws of empirical validation. While this mentality has undoubtedly led to greater developments in technology, as well as in the natural and biological sciences, it has rendered the concept of god seemingly useless to many.

In spite of the pervading positivist mentality, the desire to know God or some supernatural force persists in modern times. Many still ask the question and seek for signs of a supreme being’s existence, which appears to indicate
an internal, existential motivation in the form of a search for meaning. Pascal provocatively offered, “We do not seek God nor attempt to prove Him if we have not already found him.” Pascal also asserted that either God exists, or He does not, and human beings would do well to make a wager in favor of God’s existence without the benefit of certainty. In the Pascalian sense, then, miracles are peripheral to whether God actually exists. On the other hand, if God does exist, anything is possible, including miracles.

Thomas Merton, the twentieth-century Trappist monk and social activist, also suggested that by our nature as intelligent beings, we tend to have a simple and natural awareness of the reality of God, without which the mere question of his existence could not arise in our minds. As this pertains to the question of miracles, Merton’s assertion supports the concept that faith in a supernatural force who intervenes in human affairs must logically precede one’s acceptance of the veracity of miracles. That is to say, faith in God or a supreme being, either realized or unrealized, is essential for sustaining belief in miracles. A noteworthy example of unrealized faith informed by miracle is the conversion of St. Paul of Tarsus. While on the road to Damascus with the express purpose of hunting down the disciples of Christ, he was struck by a light coming from the sky. The light knocked him off his horse and rendered him blind. At that same time, a voice with an unexplainable origin was reportedly heard by Saul and others. The voice, thereafter identified as Jesus, rebuked Saul and commanded him to cease persecution of Christians and do as he was instructed. While the conversion story of St. Paul illustrates the rapid trajectory from disbelief to belief, we do not wish to suggest this is the normal course of events for most believers. Miraculous conversion stories notwithstanding, the acceptance of miracles appears to be secondary to an initial belief in a supreme being.

LACK OF MIRACLES AS A BARRIER TO FAITH

For some, not experiencing miracles can be interpreted as not having faith, especially when the source attributed to miracles is a god-figure. The spirit of human competition and the quest to measure oneself against another are, arguably, natural human tendencies. Because the human relationship to a god-figure often metaphorically assumes the role of parent and child, we humans can sometimes feel like the overlooked offspring whose siblings are more favored by the father. This is especially true whenever we hear of another’s miraculous experience, but have yet to experience our own. On a very unconscious and insecure level, we may think, “If only I were a better son or daughter, I might win more favor with my father.” On a more conscious level, we may find ourselves saying, “Because I do not have enough faith, or I am not worthy enough, God does not choose me as an object for his revelation.” Sometimes, the lack of tangible proof of the existence of God
may render some persons so insecure about their relationship to God that they denigrate the very possibility of God’s existence. In this sense, the lack of experienced miracles becomes a barrier to faith.

In her work, the visionary St. Theresa of Avila leaves her readers under no illusions about the matter when she states that for most people, visions and direct intervention by God are deemed unnecessary to faith. She also states that there are many saintly people who never experience a single vision, while others receive these gifts and are not saintly. It follows, therefore, that visions and extraordinary events are not a secure basis for judging one’s position in the spiritual life.

Nevertheless, numerous theorists, from Freud to the present, suggest the phenomenon of an internalized God-image that helps to determine our security or insecurity over our relationship with God. God-image is determined by both self-concept and parent/child relationship and an individual’s personal image of God. Undoubtedly, images of God as wrathful, controlling, or uninvolved are associated with self-esteem, as are personal images of God as loving, close, and nurturing. Those individuals embracing the wrathful image of God undoubtedly feel more distanced from and disfavored by God. According to Rizzuto, belief in God or its absence depends upon the conscious identity that is established as a result of the God-representation of a given developmental stage, such as that of a parental figure, and its relationship to that person’s self-representation.

Based on research in the area of God image, we feel strongly that a person’s perceived experience of God, coupled with his or her self-image, impacts that individual’s perception of the miraculous, as well. Nevertheless, both believers and nonbelievers alike feel the power of a presence that they invent. In this way, faith is rather like myth. It is our human capacity for myth, faith in an “I believe” construct, perhaps regarding a supernatural force, that ultimately allows us to entertain the possibility of miracle.

**MIRACLES AND MYTH**

To speak of miracles is not without controversy; however, much of this controversy is more related to terminology than to the underlying ideas. The idea of myth has undergone a significant transformation since the earliest conceptions of this term. Today, most people speak of myth as a falsehood. However, as Rollo May states, “There can be no stronger proof of the impoverishment of our contemporary culture than the popular—though profoundly mistaken—definition of myth as falsehood.” When faith traditions that emphasize the importance of miracles interpret the label of miracles as myths as implying that they are false, they rightly become defensive. However, as we will illustrate, labeling miracles as myths does not discredit them, but rather has the potential to enhance the power of miracles.
As implicitly illustrated in May’s statement, definitions of certain terms, such as myth, are a product of culture that often reflects important aspects about the culture. Postmodernism reflected a shift in the understanding of language. In the modern period, language was often assumed to have a true or correct definition. It was seen as always being propositional and specifically denotive. However, in postmodern times, language is understood as socially constructed. Given this, the evolution of the definition of words often reflects important changes in cultural understandings. In the ancient Greek understanding, myths were intended to reflect meaning, but were not necessarily intended to be interpreted literally. However, through the modern period, truth came to be understood differently and the emphasis shifted to literal truths, or scientific truths. Myths, therefore, were either literally true or simply fantasy. The modernist epistemology, or theory on the nature of truth, shifted the meaning of myth to falsehood. In fact, myth is more true and more truth than empirical data. Myth is an “I believe” statement that conveys a core truth, together with the interpretation or claim regarding its meaning. These creedal statements of meaning, proximate and ultimate, are much more important to us as truth than is mere empirical or logical data.

May believed the shift in the understanding of myth in itself was dangerous and destructive. When science replaced myth, meaning changed with it. Meaning became head knowledge, whereas mythical knowledge is more holistic; myth grips the entirety of a person. As knowledge became more one-dimensional and concrete, meaning shrunk; the most powerful and productive meaning systems were devalued and miniaturized. But the definition is only the beginning of the story.

Rollo May and the Cry for Myth

A prophetic tone is evident in much of May’s writing. Scholars throughout history have always been drawn to making predictions about the future. What is remarkable about May’s predictions is the accuracy they prove to have over time. This was not due to any claimed psychic or miraculous abilities, but can be attributed to his being deeply aware of human nature and very observant of trends in culture.

May, writing during a time that represents the early transition from the modern to the postmodern period, was very aware of the costs of such a transition, even though he did not utilize the language of modernism or postmodernism very often. For May, it was not so much that postmodernism or modernism were good or bad, but rather, that the transition from one period to the next brought cultural upheaval. While others were discussing the intellectual validity of postmodernism and the new ideas reflected therein, May was observing how the transition impacted meaning systems. Here we can identify a second concern May had about myths in his time.
As noted earlier, May was concerned about the tendency for modernism to reinterpret myths as false. This was compounded by deconstruction of myths associated with the transition from modernism to postmodernism. May states,

I speak of the Cry for myths because I believe there is an urgency in the need for myth in our day. Many of the problems of our society, including cults and drug addiction, can be traced to the lack of myths which will give us as individuals the inner security we need in order to live adequately in our day. . . . This is especially urgent as we seek to give meaning to our lives; in our creativity, our loves, and our challenges; since we stand on the threshold of a new century. The approach of a new period in history stimulates us to take stock of our past and to ask the questions of the meaning we have made and are making in our lives.  

The transition from one period to the next requires a critiquing and deconstructing of the previous period, including the meaning systems of the previous period. In part, this occurred because the modernist project failed, and it failed in areas where it made its strongest promise: to end war, end disease, and offer opportunities at a utopian lifestyle. Although its failure opened the door to new opportunities in the postmodern period, it came with the cost of a loss of myths.

The Nature of Myth

May understood myths as belief or meaning systems that could not be proven to be true. Belief, in this sense, is contrasted with knowledge. Knowledge, regardless of its accuracy, tends to be one-dimensionally rational. It involves one part of our subjective experience. Conversely, myths, because there is always an element of uncertainty in them, includes anxiety. Belief takes courage because it is inclusive of anxiety; conversely, knowledge is easy. Many individuals seek the comfort of knowledge instead of the meaning of myth.

The power of myths lies in their connection to the innate existential drive for meaning. Speaking from the existential tradition, May argues that myths as meaning systems are more powerful and holistic than science or rationalism. This is not to say that science and rationalism are bad; they are just incomplete. Science and reason are reflective of a basic need for security, but security without meaning is rather dull. Anxiety, although often uncomfortable, requires courage and brings in the affective dimension of knowledge, therefore making it more holistic.

Mythic and Miracles

If miracles are understood as myth, their power lies not in their literal truth or validity, but in the truth of their meaning. Paul Tillich, one of May’s
influential mentors, connected miracles to a sense of wonderment or awe. Indeed, this sense of wonderment is closely connected to Tillich’s approach to identifying a genuine miracle:

A genuine miracle is first of all an event which is astonishing, unusual, shaking, without contradicting the rational structure of reality. In the second place, it is an event which points to the mystery of being, expressing its relation to us in a definite way. In the third place, it is an occurrence which is received as a sign-event in an ecstatic experience. Only if these three conditions are fulfilled can one speak of a genuine miracle.38

The reality of a miracle, as such, is measured at least in part by the response it is able to produce. Miracles, then, serve to connect us with the inscrutable, with the very mystery of being.

That miracles cannot be proved should not be seen as a threat to the nature or purpose of a miracle. Conversely, as Tillich illustrates, if a miracle were to enter into the realm of the known or explainable, it would lose part of the very essence of a miracle and would cease to be a miracle. In revisiting the basic question of this chapter, whether miracles are essential to faith traditions, we can provide a different answer in light of myths. If miracles serve the purpose of drawing one closer to God, the mystery of being, or the ground of being, then they are necessary insofar as they are the means to accomplish this purpose. Whether the miracles exist is not as relevant as the purpose that belief in them serves. The corollary to this asks if miracles remain essential if there are other means to draw people to God. The answer, it seems, is no.

A story from the NT illustrates this principle. In Luke 16:19–31, Jesus tells a parable about a rich man who neglected the suffering and needs of a poor man named Lazarus. When both had died, Lazarus was in heaven while the rich man was suffering in the fires of hell. The rich man begged for relief, even in the form of Lazarus dipping his finger in water and cooling his tongue. His requests were refused. Then the rich man asked to have Lazarus sent to warn his brothers so they would not end up in eternal suffering like the rich man. The response came stating, “If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead” (Luke 16:31, NIV). One interpretation of this story would be to state that the rich man requests a miracle, Lazarus returning from the dead, to warn his brothers. In response, God tells them that even a miracle would not create faith, so there is no need for it. In other words, miracles are intended to promote faith, but there are many other media to accomplish this same task. Furthermore, without the seeds of faith, miracles are not powerful enough to produce genuine faith.
MIRACLES AND COMMUNITY

Thus far, we have focused on the role of miracles in the lives of individuals. Now we shift the focus to miracles and community, or cultural, contexts.

Miracles and Myths in Culture

Miracles and myths are always interpreted in a cultural context and cannot be understood apart from this. Furthermore, myths tend to be more powerful when they are shared. There is an interesting paradox in this, however: Myths are always a product of culture, but belief in myths is a highly personal act. A reinterpretation of Tillich can provide a frame of reference for dealing with this paradox. In Tillich’s thought, myth can be understood as a special type of symbol, and the power of the symbol is that it allows people to participate in that toward which the symbol points. In other words, there is a transcendent element to symbols that help a person participate in something beyond his or her own personal boundaries.39 This could be expanded to state that myths help people transcend their personal boundaries to participate in community on a deeper, more transcendent level.

Several important applications emerge from this theme that are relevant for contemporary culture. When myths are understood as knowledge or as factual, they become divisive, often leading to conflict.40 Facts are not humble; faith contains greater space for a more modest perspective. In other words, by returning to an understanding of myth, many divisions, arguments, and even wars may be prevented. It is excessive confidence in what is believed, or too much faith, that is dangerous. When believing in miracles, or even recognizing more contemporary miracles, becomes part of the standard for considering oneself a member of a religious group, harm occurs. On a personal level, this may emerge in forms of spiritual abuse in which members are admonished for their lack of faith. On a broader social level, this can be used as a justification for manipulative, coercive, or even violent evangelism techniques. In other words, requiring a certain understanding of miracles in faith communities is not only nonessential, but it is potentially destructive. However, this does not mean miracles are not important.

Walter Truett Anderson, in conceptualizing the transition from modernism to postmodernism, states, “We are in the midst of a great, confusing, stressful and enormously promising historical transition, and it has to do with a change not so much in what we believe as in how we believe.”41 This is instructive in distinguishing between destructive and constructive usage of miracles. The distinction is not about the content of what is believed, but rather it is how the content is believed and utilized. When miracles are believed in as faith, they are constructive; when they are believed in as literal empirical truth, they are destructive.
Constructing Myths

For May, myths are a natural product that emerges from culture as part of a collective wrestling with the existential condition and the search for meaning. In a sense, cultures cannot help but create myths; they cannot survive without them. Communities spontaneously develop bodies of belief. However, at the same time, not all myths are healthy or sustaining. In *The Cry for Myth*, May explores a number of typical Western myths including Faust, *The Great Gatsby*, and the Frontier Myth in the United States. These stories reflect underlying meaning systems in our culture, and they represent examples of the way people live. Furthermore, they help people recognize meaning and bring meaning to their own personal stories.

Myths emerge from a cultural unconscious, so to speak. They often are best articulated in various forms of art, such as literature and movies. What artists do when they articulate myths is put forward an understanding or meaning that has been in the cultural unconscious but that has been unidentified. They bring the meaning into a symbolic format that people can interact around, even if they cannot clearly articulate it. By making the cultural unconscious into symbolic form, and potentially conscious meaning, they serve to unite people. Artists give communities a set of images and a language in which to realize and recognize their belief systems.

Miracles as Unifying

May stated, “Myths are our self-interpretation of our inner selves in relation to the outside world. They are narrations by which our society is unified.” We have discussed this idea several times already in the chapter, but it is worth restating. Although not intended to be an exhaustive list, two important, constructive roles of miracles have been identified: (1) increasing individual faith, and (2) uniting people with shared beliefs. Miracles, as important myth systems, provide solidarity among members of a faith tradition, as well as the broader culture. Several reviews of the literature have indicated that it is the relational or communal factor of being religious that has the most powerful benefits for physical and psychological health. Even if they are not literally true, miracles can serve the purpose of uniting and increasing psychological and spiritual health for the individual, the faith community, and the culture.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter we have tried to present a complex, multilayered answer to this question regarding whether miracles are essential to faith. There are many ways in which the requirement of a certain type of belief in miracles has been destructive. Because of this, we hesitate in stating that miracles are...
Are Miracles Essential or Peripheral to Faith Traditions?

essential. Yet, at the same time, miracles have historically served to unite and inspire members of a faith community. Therefore, we do not want to discount the value of miracles.

If forced to resolve the pros and cons of miracles we would say that miracles are necessary for most faith traditions, but that there remains a tremendous amount of ambiguity about what a miracle is and what constitutes belief in it. This ambiguity is good. Miracles can range from the process theology viewpoint that miracles are God working within and being limited by natural laws; to a more fundamentalist view that belief in the literal occurrence of all the miracles in the sacred scriptures is necessary to be beliefs as reported in these texts. In the former sense, they are not miracles at all according to some definitions; though nonetheless miraculous.

This is a complex issue deserving serious consideration for everyone. Each of us must come to terms with how the question of the apparently miraculous in life illumines our sense of meaning and ultimacy. The benefit of this quest for greater meaning is more helpful when carried out as a dialogue between persons, experiences, and insights; rather than in the desire to conjure, craft, or create dogma.

NOTES

2. Ibid., 122.
3. Ibid.
4. Note, however, that this does not necessitate working against the laws of nature. Although some definitions of miracles necessitate breaking, violating, or overpowering laws of nature, other viewpoints, such as process theology, understand miracles as working within the laws of nature. See David L. Wheeler (2000), Confessional Communities and Public Worldviews: A Case Study, in John B. Cobb, Jr., and Clark H. Pinnock, eds., Searching for an Adequate God: A Dialogue between Process and Freewill Theists, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 97–148.
8. Ibid.
10. Ibid.


25. Lewis (1952), *Miracles*.


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36. Ibid., 9–10.
37. Ibid.
40. This parallels Tanner’s ideas from the beginning of the paper.
42. By putting the cultural unconscious into myths, they are not necessarily making it conscious. Herein lies a difference with the traditional psychoanalytic idea of making the unconscious conscious as part of healing. From an existential perspective, making the unconscious conscious is one form of healing or growth. However, many deep meanings remain elusive to concrete understanding. By putting them in a symbolic or mythic form, people can interact with them and benefit from them experientially, even if they do not fully understand them.

REFERENCES


Tanner, Kathryn (1997), *Theories of Culture*, Minneapolis: Fortress


According to a 2006 survey by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, “29 percent of Americans say they have witnessed ‘divine healing.’” This is an increase from another poll three decades ago that found only 10 percent of Americans believed in divine healing. The belief in divine healing increases to 62 percent among Pentecostals and 46 percent among Charismatic Christians.¹ Contrast that with a 2006 Rice University Study of 750 professors of natural sciences where only about one-third believe in God. In the general population in America, only about one in 20 (5%) do not believe in God. A Virginia Commonwealth University study found that 87 percent think that scientific developments actually make society better. Among those respondents who believe that, 87 percent describe themselves as religious. In a Time magazine poll, 81 percent say that “recent discoveries and advances” in science have not significantly impacted their religious views. Only 4 percent have said that science has made them less religious.²

So, between the scientific community and the general population, including that of Evangelicals, exists a large gap in convictions about a core belief regarding the existence and behavior of God. The evangelical community has representatives that express reluctance to believe in miracles and the supernatural. Mainstream Evangelical writer Philip Yancey describes himself as a skeptic. He cites Christians who roll around in wheelchairs and others with stumps for amputated limbs, as people who are prayed for and yet are unhealed. For them, “divine healing feels like the cruelest joke of all.” He says he never read of a healing of pancreatic cancer, cystic fibrosis, or ALS. Nor
does he think there are verified instances of AIDS being healed. He says the "church has had to change its message from 'Simply believe you'll be healed' to a more difficult message of preaching against risky behavior, caring for the sick and dying, and looking after the millions of orphans resulting from the disease."³

So, we have the dilemma of scientists who do not believe in God, let alone miracles and the supernatural, and many Christians who have grown skeptical of miracles, healing, and supernatural experience; contrasting with many in the general public who say they have witnessed a divine healing.

PERSONAL INTRODUCTION TO THE QUESTION ABOUT RELIGIOUS AND SPIRITUAL MIRACLES

I come with a decided bias to this question of whether religious or spiritual miracle events are real in our experience. I believe I am one. So, for me, the matter of religious or spiritual miracle events being real in our experience is full of concrete meaning. I believe I have experienced many such events. I believe I know of many. When I say that I am one, I am not talking about the ordinary miracle of birth. I am talking about a number of things. First, my father at age 5 in the year 1915 had four various potentially fatal illnesses at once: brain fever, spinal meningitis, mastoiditis, and pneumonia. The doctors told my grandparents that if he lived, he'd be a vegetable. The nuns at the Pittsburg hospital prayed and the people at the Baptist Church prayed. My father, Lewis, was healed and recovered and referred to afterward by the nuns at the hospital as the "Miracle Boy."

A second event to which I refer is the improbability of my parents meeting or marrying even though they lived only 80 miles apart in Pennsylvania. Neither was an impulsive adult. Both were committed to major obligations. My father owned a printing shop and my mother had just finished a one-year commitment to look after her father following her mother’s death. She had been pre-enrolled at Juniata College. Both my parents came from different Protestant traditions and both, in unique circumstances, left home to attend Bryan University in Tennessee as soon as they heard of it instead of continuing with their original plans. There they met and married. I am the firstborn child of that marriage.

My mother had multiple sclerosis (MS), which required that she use a wheelchair by the time I was 19. She received many prayers for her healing from MS, including one in which a shorter leg from childhood polio was lengthened, but she received no cure from MS. She did, however, live until she was 86 years old, unusual for someone with MS. Could not her remission from increasing attacks of this disabling illness come as the result of prayer?
WHAT ARE RELIGIOUS OR SPIRITUAL MIRACLE EVENTS?

I will be using the term *miracle* to mean a supernatural event. Our culture often uses the term applied to nature, such as the miracle of conception or childbirth. Some natural phenomena are breathtaking and awesome and are so improbable in design as to suggest a creator. Any event, including physical events or natural phenomena, may be considered a miracle event because of the spiritual or religious meaning and interpretation of the person viewing the event. But these are not what I refer to as a miracle; I refer rather only to those things that would not occur within the natural order and laws of nature.

The difference between what is religious or spiritual has to do with the nature of the event and its interpretation. If it is religious in nature, it would fit within a person’s faith or belief system. These systems of belief or ritual are often organized as institutional religions. Something spiritual may be considered religious as well; but in our Western culture, people often distinguish themselves as spiritual but not religious. Spiritual means, of the spirit. The nature of the event deals with the spirit. To be spiritual may mean to be supernatural, or it may be natural, meaning of the human spirit or some other spirit in nature. Religious meaning comes from human interpretation of events, or the interpretation of those who have a role within religious systems to construe meaning. A religious miracle event is one that a person holding a particular religious faith position interprets as being a supernatural occurrence. Spiritual miracle events are those we are compelled by our faith position and experience to interpret as coming from a spiritual source or process. The spiritual source or process may be an energy. It is not materially substantial or physical.

If we say there is a possibility of spiritual or religious miracles, it’s because we have a set of assumptions about the nature of reality. We assume that there is a world of the spirit. We also assume that this spirit world can interact with our world of sensory experience and observation. The worldview of scientists may be either completely naturalist, or moderately naturalistic, but neither focusing upon nor excluding the supernatural, or supernaturalist, believing in the possibility of both natural and supernatural phenomena. Vitz argues that scientists should declare their supernaturalist or antisu-

Reality of Miracles in Our Experience

Throughout church history, there have been people who have experienced divine visions, supernatural experiences, visitations, miracles. Julian
Religious and Spiritual Events

of Norwich (c. 1342–1416) was thought to be lying on her deathbed as a young woman at age 30, but had a series of visions of Jesus and the meaning of the cross. In 1373 she recovered to write about these visions and the revelations she received and the meaning they had. The twentieth century has had numerous people who have identified themselves as Christian and have reported visions and revelations. Many of them have been healers who have left a legacy of evidence of divine power at work. Some known for healing are Smith Wigglesworth, John G. Lake, A. A. Allen, Maria Woodsworth-Etter, William Branham, Derek Prince, Kathryn Kuhlman, and Oral Roberts.

The twenty-first century has seen such prophetic people of stature as Bob Jones, Rick Joyner, James Goll, Cindy Jacobs, Nita Johnson, Chuck Pierce, and Graham Cooke. And it has seen healing evangelists like Reinhardt Bonke, Benny Hinn, Heidi Baker, and Todd Bentley. In addition, the Healing Rooms Ministries have prayer rooms around the world currently numbering 623. There have been many people who have reported visitations from Jesus, or experiences in which they visit heaven, such as Nita Johnson, Shawn Bolz, Kathie Walters, or Choo Thomas.

WHERE DO WE LOOK FOR DATA?

An antisupernaturalist scientific bias has made data collection difficult because it eliminates categories. The word miracle is not used in any of the journals we searched. Even though there are many healings that medical science cannot explain, the category of unexplained healings doesn’t exist in professional journals. Categories, constructs, and naming are necessary in order for data to be gathered and conclusions drawn.

What Are the Scientific Assumptions?

Christians who are scientists often have some different assumptions about the nature of reality and of God than do their secular counterparts. Religious or spiritual miracles have to do with the interpretation of observations or experience. In other words, it has to do with meaning. Scientific bias restricts data and skews results. Empirical science had skepticism built in as an assumption. Unless something is proved to be true, it is assumed not to be true. The scientific assumption is that something is assumed not to exist until it can be proven to exist.

In a scientific way, God can be neither proved nor disproved; but Christians and other theists begin with a set of assumptions that God exists and is knowable. Christians who are scientists do not denigrate secular science but are open to the option that phenomenological data and heuristic argument might well urge that the data confirms their assumption, when the search...
is conducted with that possibility in mind. Scientific measurements have mapped the ocean depths; but science has not been able to directly observe whether there is life at the bottom of the ocean or what its nature is. At every level where we have been able to get submersibles and take pictures, fish and other marine life exist, varieties and kinds that had not been seen before. It may be a reasonable conclusion to believe that life exists at the deepest levels of the oceans that we have not yet observed; but science does not conclude that hypothesis until it is tested and proven. What do people believe in the meantime? Do we believe that exists life at the bottom, or do we assert that it does not exist? We all believe it is highly probable though it has not yet been proven. The phenomenological data and heuristic perception militates in favor of its existence.

The Knowability of Reality

Science makes assumptions based on beliefs about the knowability of reality. This philosophic approach is called epistemology, how we can know what we know. There are different beliefs about whether human beings can know something outside themselves in a one-to-one correspondence, or whether we can know only approximately. Science has made assumptions about whether we can know—probability. The assumption is that we can know something only with a certain degree of certainty called probability. So our statistics, the mathematics in science, describe a degree of knowability of a certain reality as a probability: the higher the degree of probability, the higher the likelihood that something is true. Science by its nature approaches certainty and truth, but by the nature of its assumptions cannot arrive at an absolutely certain truth. Yet, we human beings build our lives on the degree of certainty we do have both from the conclusions we have made from science and from what we have concluded is true from other sources of experience and perception than science.

Science also makes assumptions about the difference between subjectivity and objectivity. It assumes that humans can assume an observer role in which there is a disinterested or detached interest in the outcome of scientific inquiry. Since all inquiry comes out of assumed positions about the nature of God and reality, one’s bias is always in the assumptions. Science has an inherent problem in handling subjective data that cannot be independently verified. For example, the process of thinking can be independently verified, but the content of the thought cannot. Thus, spiritual content that is a part of one’s consciousness and subjective awareness cannot be independently or scientifically verified. We are left with an objectifying of subjective content, calling it self-report. Because of the objective nature of science, it has limitations in dealing with all the data of reality, especially subjective data. Supernatural and spiritual data are often subjective.
The Mind-Brain Bias

Many scientists make the assumption that the mind cannot exist without the brain, that human consciousness is not possible without brain functioning. This is at heart a materialistic assumption and presupposition. Pim van Lommel, a retired cardiologist from the Rijnstate Hospital, followed 344 survivors of cardiac arrest; 18 percent reported having NDE’s (near death experiences) while their brains showed no wave activity. This observation conflicts with current assumptions which van Lommel states as: “according to our current medical concepts it’s impossible to experience consciousness during a period of clinical death.” I believe that one place where the mind-brain bias is most evident is in the understanding of the out-of-body experience. Some clinicians describe this as dissociation, giving no validity to this out-of-body viewpoint.

Supernaturalist or Naturalist Assumptions

Empirical science makes assumptions about the nature of reality and God as the cause of the worlds of nature and of the human and animal kingdoms. Secular science often holds the position that God is a possibility, but is unknown, or irrelevant. Deists think of him as unknowable or distant: God set the universe in motion according to certain laws and does not intervene in his creation. Christians who are scientists are likely to have a supernaturalist world view. To the Christian, God is the creator who can and does reveal himself in and to his creation. The Christian interpretation of the data of science affects the interpretation of meaning of spiritual experience. Christian do not usually have trouble with the data of scientific observation; but do have problems with the presupposition that truth is knowable only through empirical scientific inquiry. A Christian takes the position that “all truth is God’s truth,” whether delivered to us by secular or by faith-based science.

When scientists make the assumptions that God is nonexistent or irrelevant, they conclude that God is an imagined creation of human beings based on their needs; and that God is a human projection. Such assumptions in the construction of psychological personality inventories can lead scientists to conclude mistakenly that a person who believes that God communicates with him is necessarily psychotic. While that belief is a possible psychotic indicator, most Christians believe that God can and does ordinarily reveal himself to people. So one’s assumptions about God affect one’s interpretation of the data.

The mechanical or physical nature of the universe is now understood in terms of time and energy. Quantum physics posits that the largest part of the observable universe is not matter but energy. String theory asserts the possibility of other dimensions of reality than those observable to our senses. When we begin to think that other realities are possible, simultaneous with
our observable and measurable realities, we have the possibility of a spiritual world and reality that exists simultaneously with our contemporary observable, measurable, or sensory reality. The Christian worldview assumes that these spiritual realities are not only possible and probable, but that they are observable with another sensory capacity, a spiritual sensory capacity.

The Bible contains hundreds if not thousands of spiritual revelations including interpretations of natural events. The Christian believes that the Bible could not exist if it were not for the possibility of revelation, communication from God to human beings. The Bible explains that people are not only given spiritual sensory capacities that parallel the natural human sensory abilities. Here is an example from Matthew chapter 13: “Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand. In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah: ‘You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving. For this people’s heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them.’”

**PSYCHOLOGICAL OR PERSONAL EXPERIENCES CAN BE SPIRITUAL IN NATURE**

The Bible also teaches that spiritual maturity enables us to exercise sense organs of perception and train ourselves to distinguish between good and evil thereby (Hebrews 5:14). NT writers constantly invest the emotions people have with a spiritual meaning. For every sensory capacity, there is a corresponding spiritual sensory capacity. For every human emotion, there is a corresponding spiritual emotion. I believe that in our Western culture, spiritual has come to mean an attitude, value, belief system, or interpretation that someone holds. To the Christian, it is more than this. Spiritual is a dimension of reality that is different from natural reality, but exists simultaneously with natural reality. In biblical terms, the world of nature and the world of the spirit are different but overlapping worlds. The world of the spirit is the larger world, and includes the world of nature.

The derivation of the word *psychology* comes from the Greek word psyche, meaning *soul*. So the meaning of psychology was the study of the soul. The biblical teaching about soul, or our earthly human nature or personality, includes the spirit. “The soul is the temporal expression of the spirit. The soul deals with life in the physical body. The soul is the expression of the spirit in the physical and material world with its finite and temporal limitations. Our soul is the creative outworking of our spirit through our life in the world, blending the finite and the visible with the eternal and invisible.”

One of the areas of overlap between the soul or psyche and the spirit has to do with our worth or value, self-esteem or esteem by others, our honor.
A biblical perspective differentiates between the temporal and the eternal in this most important human and spiritual value.

By our living for God’s glory, a glory that is beyond this life, we receive a worth that is spiritual—of His Spirit—infinite and eternal. Our worth comes from the very heart of God’s love and Spirit, the infinite nature of God himself. Our soul is the container and translator of infinite worth, carrying the things of time and the material world into the world of the spirit, which by its very nature is eternal.

The destination of all things in time, including the soul, is eternity. The nature of being, in that place, is spirit. Both soul and spirit as the nonmaterial part of the self are eternal. At times, the Bible refers to the unseen part of the person as soul, and at other times as spirit. Depending on the author and the context, soul and spirit are sometimes used interchangeably. When that occurs, the likeness or similarity between them is being emphasized. At other times they are differentiated. God, for example, is often referred to in the Bible as Holy Spirit. Spirit describes the essence of God’s being and existence. Human beings are also described as having a spirit. The following Scripture talks about the human spirit: “For this is what the high and lofty One says—He Who lives forever, Whose name is holy: ‘I live in a high and holy place, but also with him who is contrite and lowly in spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite’” [Isa 57:15].

In this passage, heart and spirit are parallel words. Heart is used to mean the innermost being of the person, the sensitivity to what is most cherished and prized; it probably expresses the central emotional and affective meeting place of the person’s soul and spirit. To love God with our whole heart, mind and strength and our neighbors as ourselves is a union of both soul and spirit as one. One set of emotions the self has gives us a picture of the overlap that can occur between the soul and spirit. Some emotions occur simultaneously in both soul and spirit because they are both temporal and eternal. They belong to both soul and spirit, and are perceived in our spirits as well as with our soul through our bodily senses.

The example comes from the Apostle Paul who says: “These three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love” [1 Cor 13:13]. We may experience love in our hearts, the place through which our spirits flow ‘our innermost beings.’ Or we may experience love in our emotions, feeling loyalty, affection or solidarity with family, friends or other people—the way we feel in our souls. Or we may experience love in our passions experienced in and generated from our bodily feelings which may be expressed through a hug, a touch or a kiss. Or we may feel any combination of these feelings simultaneously, merging together spirit, soul, or body as one.

Let me use a metaphor of a house. If the house represents the body, the person living in the house represents the spirit. All that’s done while the person lives in the house represents the soul. In this metaphor, all the person does, good and bad, become the furnishings of the house. Human
consciousness, thoughts, and personal identity comprise part of our soul, just as do our emotions and actions. Think about the person in the house. He is spirit. He has a personality. All that happens to him, all he is, thinks, intends and does becomes a part of him, his soul. As he expresses himself, even his house takes on the character of his personality, his spirit. As long as the person is alive they all function together as one person: body, soul and spirit.¹¹

In human personality, many things are subject to the eternal and spiritual or the supernatural dimension of reality. Since the past is a part of eternity, it is not just past, but in eternal dimension is accessible as present. This has great potential impact in the transformation and healing of trauma from the past. The parallel notions of soul and spirit mean that the supernatural power that is available through God’s Spirit, not just the human spirit, can be available in the healing process. The human capacities of mind, will, emotion, and judgment can be subject to the eternal kingdom of God or the temporal kingdom of humankind. Roles and attitudes we take regarding ourselves can be expressions of our human nature acting either toward or against itself. This capacity to be for or against ourselves, God, or others I take to be an essential capacity of human beings and is the spiritual capacity for good or evil.

Some of the Kinds of Spiritual/Supernatural Events

**Dreams**

A Christian may believe that dreams (1) can be more than the processing of unconscious material, containing communication from spiritual beings, (2) can be information from God, (3) can give spiritual meaning to past experience, or (4) can be predictive of future events. People’s dreams can be accessed by spiritual beings from both God and Satan. One such dream came to Bilquis Sheikh, a Pakistani Muslim, a vivid dream of Jesus that became a revelation to her that led her on a journey to believe in Jesus as the Savior of the world.¹²

**Visions**

Spiritual visions are more than imagination or personal creativity. They can be revelations from a spiritual being. Phillip Wiebe did careful interviews of 28 people who had visions of Jesus, the Christ, which they thought were from God. He documents these in his book.¹³ Some of the kinds of spiritual and supernatural events include:

- Prophesies
- Knowing something that has not been naturally disclosed
- Angelic and demonic beings
- Answers to prayer
Many Christian people who are functional and not delusional have reported visitations from Jesus and being taken to heaven: Anna Roundtree, Todd Bentley, Shawn Bolz, Kathie Walters. One of the most extensive reports of visitations to heaven and conversations with Jesus comes from Choo Thomas.

I asked God many years ago, “Are you still doing miracles of healing today?” Within the week of my asking that question, three people told me about miracles that had happened in their lives. One was a good friend who had done a summer missions experience on one of the Alaskan islands when he was 19 years old. He and other teens were playing in a volleyball area when one of the girls tried to put ice down his shirt. In running away from her he tripped in a ditch. He thought he had broken his ankle because his foot was flopping around and it hurt badly. His ankle swelled. Because they did not have a hospital on the island he went on a ferry with a missionary to another island to have the injury treated. As they rode on the ferry, the missionary had her hand on his back and was praying for him and told him that he was going to be okay. He had felt more than natural heat on his back where she had her hand as she prayed. Before they arrived at the hospital, he thought that his ankle was healed and that he was better, except the swelling still took another hour or so to go down. X-rays determined that he did not have a fracture.

A dentist I know went to provide free dental work to the poor of Mexico. He did that in the day and at night met them for Christian teaching and prayer. During one of these prayer times, a woman came to him carrying a child with impetigo. He prayed for her and simply prayed a blessing prayer for her child. He did not even pray a healing prayer. Within the next 15 minutes, he saw the woman with a group of other women pointing at him saying something in Spanish like: “He did it.” My dentist friend did not know what she meant. She brought the child and showed him the change. The child no longer had runny eyes or a scabby chin. The impetigo had apparently been healed.

A patient recounted an experience with an abusive coach of a cheerleading team. She had been exercising as a part of her routines and had gotten shin splints. The coach pushed her to keep exercising as though she could work through it. It was so bad she ended up having to use a wheelchair. That night she had a prayer group pray for God to heal her. She was healed and able to walk away from that group without using the wheelchair and without pain.

Religious and Spiritual Miracle/Supernatural Events in the Bible

- Food multiplication (Matthew 14:15–21 and Mark 8:1–9)
- Being transported from one place to another (John 6:21, Acts 8:39)
- Being healed of an illness (Matthew 9:32, Mark 1:34)
- Being raised from the dead (John 11:44, John 20:1–17)
- Being healed of a spiritual affliction (Mark 2:5–11, Matthew 8:28–33)
Spiritual Feelings

When I was a young psychologist I had an experience in walking up the back hill above the garage on the farm where my mother grew up. I was walking to the little church on the hilltop, when in the middle of this cornfield I felt overcome with sadness without a known source. So I stopped and asked myself where it was coming from. Was it from me because of childhood nostalgia, having played and fished for crawdads in the creek below and having visited the farm during summers as a child? No. Was it about me from some other source? No. Was it feelings I was having for my mother? No. Was it feelings I was aware of which were my mother’s feelings? Yes. That was it.

Years later, I relayed this story to my mother who began to cry and said that she knew what it was. Because of her mother’s sudden death after her senior year in high school, and her mother’s burial in the cemetery at the church on the hill top, my mother said that she never crossed the gate into the cemetery again during all the times she went to church. It became clear as Mother talked that her trauma became symbolized by the cemetery and the gate became a phobic object. Crossing it would be opening a door to her pain. This is what my story opened up in her. I realized it was not my feelings I was aware of, but my mother’s, that overcame me. I was not feeling for my mother, nor having empathic feelings for my mother. I was suffering her pain. I believe this experience became the genesis for my developing the ability to feel another’s emotional pain if they come into my presence feeling it, whether they are expressing it or trying to hide it. I believe that this is a spiritual gift that is beyond empathy.

Prophetic Vision

As a psychologist and a Christian, my religious and psychological traditions did not include an awareness of current experiences of prophetic visions. So, I was unprepared to believe what I experienced as really happening. I had had words with a woman who was trying to claim a parking space that we had been awaiting for several minutes. So as we went into the art and wine festival, I had a picture in my mind of our car being keyed or scratched, beginning at the front right fender and along the right side and doors to the rear fender. I was unprepared to believe what I was seeing and put it out of my mind. I thought I spontaneously psychologized it, just imagining it, because of the unpleasant encounter with the woman. When I returned to the car I was surprised to find that it had been keyed along the exact panels I had envisioned.
I have had several of these kinds of occurrences. Another occurred while I was praying with a group of people at the church we attend. We were in a room, removed from the worship center, and did not have any video or audio feeds on while we were praying. As we were praying, I saw a picture in my mind of a toolbox. I interpreted this as a symbol, so I prayed for the symbolic meaning of the tools God would use and the spiritual construction God would do in people's lives, and the skills of the pastor in this work. When we went to the worship service the next hour, I was amazed to see that the pastor had brought an actual toolbox onstage with him as a prop for his sermon.

Spiritual Dreams

I had a dream about opening an office for my psychology practice in a major city to the south, so that with the other clinician in my practice we would have two locations. My dream referred to my plans to open a second office as though I were driving a car. According to the dream, opening another office "would be the long way around" in getting to where I was going. I discounted this dream as having no predictive or revelatory meaning at the time. But within five years, I closed that other office, having concluded that I was unable to be a psychotherapist, a director of a clinic, a supervisor of other clinicians, and write. Writing, I believed, was my unfulfilled calling. Moreover, I reduced my work to a solo practice so I could have the time and energy to write.

Results from Prayer

One of the first results of prayer in my practice that seemed supernatural in origin regarded a schizophrenic woman I treated. She was particularly susceptible to her husband's power over her and so seemed to become psychotic as a way to deal with her anger and rage toward him or herself. During these episodes, she became Satan, in her view, or he became Satan. This woman moved away from the area, still lived with her husband, and came back to visit with me. Her face looked radiant and she was in the best emotional condition that I had ever seen her. So I asked what had happened. She said she had been meeting with her pastor who prayed for her. This was my first encounter with the potentially powerful effects of prayer on a patient.

One of my DID (Dissociative Identity Disorder) patients had integrated several of her alternative personalities through her therapy work. But she had many alternates who remained unintegrated. When visiting her brother, a pastor, they spent about 15 minutes praying for her. The result was that all of her remaining alters integrated into her core personality. Sometimes she misses them and her ability to dissociate to handle stress or emotional pain but her stability has persisted over the years of her continued therapy.
Another DID patient was hospitalized for cutting herself so badly that the hospital staff did not want her to traumatize or influence other patients in group therapy. She was also suicidal at the time. She appeared to be acting out of one of her strongest alternate personalities, which was trying to be protective in a distorted way. Because of the threat, I resorted to a desperate measure: prayer. I asked her permission to involve this alternate personality in prayer. The patient was a Christian whose personal Christian faith, her spiritual and religious values, were consistent with my request. There was no overt active prayer done on behalf of this alternate. I simply invited this alternate personality to come into a room that in her imagination, inside herself, was filled with God’s light. As the alternate personality did that, the nature and character of that alternate shifted from being harsh and antagonistic to being cooperative and helpful. Subsequently, the patient reacted to this event as though the alternate had died. The patient grieved the loss of strength that she had relied on from this alternate for years afterward. I had interpreted to this patient that her alter had not really disappeared, but had integrated its strength into her core personality with positive traits.

RELIGIOUS AND SPIRITUAL MIRACLE/SUPERNATURAL EVENTS IN PSYCHOLOGICAL AND MEDICAL LITERATURE

After numerous searches in the medical and psychological literature, I am amazed to find so few topics related to spiritual life, recovery from death, NDEs (near-death experiences), and the like. In discussing these issues with physicians I know, I have concluded that a number of factors militate against reporting data in journals.

1. Supernaturalist language is excluded from scientific vocabulary as though such events do not exist or could not happen. Therefore science has not yet adopted words or terms to collect this kind of data.
2. An antisupernaturalist bias exists in healing communities of medical and related professionals. When we prayed for my daughter’s healing from a brain tumor, my wife’s physician was concerned that my wife was in denial about our daughter’s condition because such things as supernatural healings “do not occur.”
3. To deny the existence or occurrence of unexplained healings indicates a blind spot in one’s research. We do not usually report data we have not figured out or researched well enough to explain.
4. Peer review of articles means that issues that do not have a replicable scientific explanation will not be accepted for publication in journals.

I suggest that a language be developed for miracle events. NDEs (near-death experiences) is an example of medical bias in the naming the category.
With NDE, it’s not necessary to conclude that the person actually died, for presumably, that would be called ADE for after-death experience. NDE suggests that the person came close to dying, since they recovered and are currently alive to report their experience. I suggest a designation like FRAD for full recovery after death be made for people who are dead at least 15 minutes and are revived after death or are revived after a diagnosis of clinical death occurs and no functional impairment exists after coming back to life. The medical community understands that if coming back to life after death or a medical resuscitation does not occur within the first 10 minutes of loss of heartbeat or breathing, recovery without loss of functioning is not normally possible.

Perhaps a term like LAD for life after death could be adopted for any return to life after death. SNE might be a designation for a supernormal or supranormal experience that could refer to miracle, supernatural, or paranormal life experiences. SAB could refer to sighted after blindness. FAS could refer to functioning after a prolonged impairment from a stroke. I am sure the idea is clear. Healings and miracles occur and have not been recognized by the data categories of science. The scientific community needs diagnostic words as data catchers so that what happens can be categorized and commented on in medical and other scientific journals. I am not so concerned whether any of my ideas get picked up as categories, just that categories for healing, miracles, and the supernatural occurrences be adopted for the literature of medical and psychological research, reporting, and discussion.

RELIGIOUS AND SPIRITUAL MIRACLE/SUPERNATURAL EVENTS REPORTED BY OTHER VERIFIABLE SOURCES

Dr. Chauncey Crandall

Dr. Chauncey Crandall is a physician in the Cardiovascular Clinic in Palm Beach Gardens and has served as a university instructor in schools of medicine at a number of universities. He describes a 53-year-old man who came to the hospital emergency room with a massive heart attack. His heart had stopped. The medical team worked with him for over 40 minutes and declared him dead. Dr. Crandall had been called in to evaluate at the end of this time while a nurse was preparing the body for the morgue. He states: “There was no life in the man. His face and feet and arms were completely black with death.” He had felt compelled by the Holy Spirit to pray for this man so he went to the side of the stretcher where his body was being prepared and prayed. “Lord, Father, how am I going to pray for this man? He is dead. What can I do? All of a sudden these words came out of my mouth, ‘Father, God, I cry out for the soul of this man. If he does not know you as his Lord and Savior, please raise him from the dead right now in Jesus’ name.”
“It was amazing as a couple of minutes later, we were looking at the monitor and all of a sudden a heartbeat showed up. It was a perfect beat; a normal beat; and then after a couple more minutes, he started moving and then his fingers were moving and then his toes began moving and then he started mumbling words. There was a nurse in the room. She was not a believer. She screamed out and said, ‘Doctor Crandall, what have you done to this patient?’ And I said, ‘All I’ve done is cry out for his soul in Jesus’ name.’ We quickly rushed the gentleman down to the intensive care unit, and the hospital was by now buzzing about the fact that a dead man had been brought back to life. After a couple of days he woke up. He had an amazing story to tell after I had asked him, ‘Where have you been and where were you on that day that you had that massive heart attack? You were gone and we prayed you back to life in Jesus’ name.’” Dr. Crandall reports that he has seen three such people, who returned to life after death from cardiac arrest. 19

Dr. Raquel Burgos

In an interview with Dr. Raquel Burgos, she remarked that the topic of healing and miracles “honestly, does not come up” among physicians. She expressed surprise if more than one or two out of a hundred physicians believed in supernatural healing or miracles. Her own experience was that she had a birth defect in her legs, part of which meant that one leg was two inches shorter than normal. Her mother took her to Kathryn Kuhlman healing services and as a result, the short leg grew out to match the longer one within a few days of healing prayer. She was in treatment to correct her leg by an orthopedist and so retains her medical records of what happened. She and a group of physicians started a group called H.E.A.L., standing for His Energy And Love. This group met to pray for the healing of their patients.

Dr. Jeannie Lindquist

Dr. Jeannie Lindquist cited a case she and her husband, both orthopedic physicians, had many years ago. This was during the early years of antibiotics. A man had come for treatment because of a knee injury and the infection that resulted in blood poisoning, sepsis. In order to treat the sepsis, they had to use massive doses of antibiotics, which resulted in kidney failure. They were going to send him for dialysis. Since they both shared the same Christian faith background, they asked him if he would mind if they prayed for him. He was glad to have them pray for his healing. Some time before the dialysis referral and after the prayer, they sent a sample to the lab. The lab thought they must have made a mistake because it was showing up with no kidney problem, unlike the previous sample. So they sent another sample that morning with the same results. A sudden healing had occurred in answer to prayer.
Keith G

A group of people from our church prayed for Keith G while he was a teenager, because he had such severe migraines continuously that he could not attend high school. While we prayed, I felt that I received assurance in my spirit that he would be healed. He moved with his family to the state of Washington. Years later, he went to the Healing Rooms in Spokane for prayer. During the first prayer time, the migraines disappeared, but they came back within a few days. Had the prayer not worked? Would he not be healed permanently? Prayer had brought the only relief he had experienced from the migraines so he decided to go back to the Healing Rooms for more prayer. This time, through prayer he was healed in a way that lasted. His ability to function in a way that permitted him to attend school was restored.

Mark Weber

Mark Weber is a Christian man who engages in healing prayer for people. While he believes he has seen thousands of people who have experienced healing as a result of prayer, he cited one as an example of a documented healing. This man had color blindness and was a third-generation male with that problem. For this problem to exist genetically there is almost certainly an absence of color receptor cones in his retina. He only saw in shades of grey. After prayer he could distinguish colors. Mark has also reported seeing scars up and down both arms of a woman who had been hospitalized with self-inflicted injuries disappear before their eyes as she received prayer.

Dick Patterson

Dick Patterson is a pastor whose integrity I know, a man who has accompanied Todd Bentley, a healing evangelist, on some of his trips to Africa to preach and pray for healing. He has been a part of many healings for which he has prayed. On one occasion there was a blind lady who recovered her sight in four stages in which she progressively regained more of her sight. After she could see, they took photos of her family dancing happily, because “grandma can see.” Todd Bentley has documented many cases of people who regain their hearing after being deaf, and sight after being blind.

Lorraine

Lorraine is a woman who experienced significant abuse from her mother and as a middle-aged adult is still recovering from it. She has an easier time attaching to animals than to people and is beginning to make the transition to being able to love and trust people. She had pet guinea pigs, one of whom was dying. She took him to the veterinarian and discovered that he had kidney
failure. She was not ready to give up on her guinea pig, so she asked God to heal him. When she took him back to the veterinarian, the veterinarian was surprised and examined the pet twice to confirm that he no longer had kidney problems, was looking better, and had gained six ounces.

Gary Paltridge

Gary Paltridge is a layman who does pastoral and healing prayer work. A young man he worked with had an accident and was in chronic pain for which an implant was inserted to dispense morphine. After prayer, both Gary and the person he was praying for saw a mental picture of a demonic figure leaving the man’s body. Simultaneously his pain was completely healed, necessitating the removal of the implant.

Ben

Ben has in his possession both an ultrasound and x-rays from his medical records. These show a mass in one picture, the ultrasound. He received healing prayer as the only intervention between the time of the ultrasound and the x-ray. When the x-ray was taken, no mass appeared on the x-ray. The growth had disappeared.

John G. Lake

John G. Lake was a man who lived in the early 1900s and had himself been healed. He became a man of great healing gifts. He lived in Spokane, Washington. He had a scientific bent and so participated in healing experiments so that the results could be observed by scientific instruments. He said that he kept track of and documented over 100,000 miraculous healings. He founded the Healing Rooms Ministries, which has been revived today, so that now 623 healing rooms exist internationally, most of them in the United States of America, under the direction of Reverend Calvin Pierce. There are currently 710 healing testimonies recorded on that Web site. Those testimonies are organized in medical diagnostic categories, but they are written by lay people without attention to the kind of verification that would be helpful to researchers.

Ricky Roberts

Ricky Roberts was born severely retarded. At age 16, he weighed 300 pounds and was not able to do kindergarten work. The week of his healing from retardation, he went from kindergarten to tenth grade, and within that week was tutoring classmates in trigonometry. In a summary of her book,
A Walk Through Tears, his mother Dot Roberts writes: “In December 1977, a genuine modern-day miracle occurred... God completely and instantaneously healed sixteen-year-old Ricky Roberts of severe mental retardation, a disability that has plagued him since birth.” Today, Dr. Ricky Roberts has seven earned doctorate degrees, including two PhDs, and is the founder of True Light Ministries, a teaching and healing ministry based in Jacksonville, Florida. There appear to be hundreds of testimonies of healing on the True Light Web site.24

Harriet

In using prayer visualizations in psychotherapy with patients, I went from thinking that people were producing positive visions out of their imaginations, to believing that Jesus was actually communicating with them. Over many different people, patterns emerged in the manner in which Jesus communicated, sometimes saying things to the person about which the patient had an opposite position. I record the usage of prayer in psychotherapy in my paper presented at the convention of the Christian Association for Psychological Studies.25 I not only have found it helpful with some people who are gifted and able to visualize, but believe that it is superior to my telling someone or having them come to a conclusion themselves when Jesus tells or shows someone something. Here’s the background and the visioning experience of a woman I call Harriet in my book.

Her father was an angry man who picked fights with his family. She was the one who would stand up to him. She could not stand being around him. In fact, she hated him. As a teenager, she turned to athletics to douse the fire of her anger and bring calm. It brought order to her life, distanced her from disturbing and messy feelings, and kept her away from home. Liking herself seemed out of the question. Hating herself fit better.

She could tolerate all these angry feelings about herself and her father better if she just didn’t think about herself. Even now, as a wife and mother, she still didn’t like herself very well.

Instead of running away from her feelings, she was turning to face them. She didn’t like what she saw. Some of what she saw she despised in herself. Would she ever be able to like herself, feel clean and whole, or forgive herself? It took all the power of will she had to face herself and these issues about how unworthy she felt. The truth was, she did not want to feel hopeful. She thought she didn’t even deserve that much. She was, however, willing to open herself in prayer to what God might want to heal in her. While praying, she envisioned Jesus carrying his cross. She realized he was doing this for her. In her prayer picture, she walked alongside him, and as he looked at her his face became radiant and full of joy, because she was one of the people for whom he was doing this. She had trouble receiving the message of that radiance. She
told Jesus, “I wish You would not do this for me. I am not worth it.” She knew the anguished pain that lay ahead for him. She could see he was carrying a burden for her that she could not carry. She was glad He was doing something for her that she could not do. But she said, “Why are You doing that for me, when even my question is insignificant?” He looked lovingly at her and said, “It is the central point. It is the whole significance of what I am doing.”

John T. Dearborn, M.D.

John T. Dearborn, M.D., said:

A 63-year-old Asian woman who was otherwise healthy came to me for bilateral knee replacement surgery. I had no idea about her relationship with the Lord prior to operating on her. She had been exercising regularly to get ready for the surgery. Unfortunately, during the right knee surgery, her popliteal artery was injured. The injury was rapidly recognized and repaired by a vascular surgeon and within an hour her leg had normal blood flow restored. That should have been the end of the story. Unfortunately, the repair failed to maintain the blood flow through the vessel and she underwent a procedure in the angiography suite to reopen the vessel. That procedure also proved to be inadequate, and she subsequently went another full 12 hours with no documentable blood flow to her foot. Her foot and calf were ischemic and looked mummified when her leg was opened in the operating room by another vascular surgeon. Her blood pH was 7.1, not compatible with life for very long. The surgeon bypassed the clogged vessel and restored flow to what he, with 35 years of vascular surgery experience, felt was a lost cause.

He strongly felt over the subsequent hours that her leg should be amputated. Because I felt that amputation would be especially traumatic for this previously healthy patient and her family, I advocated that we wait. I agreed that if she began a downhill course or that if the limb became infected, amputation should be done immediately to save her life. In the meantime, I initiated a prayer chain with her family and our church family. It turned out that the patient and her family are also believers in Jesus. Her vascular repair held, blood flow returned, and despite the loss of much of the muscle in her calf, her skin remained viable and she kept her leg. The vascular surgeon called her course over the next several days “miraculous.” She never recovered sensation or motor function below the knee, but she now can walk unassisted on her own foot instead of on a prosthesis.

Leslie

A woman patient I will call Leslie attended a Christian women’s conference: Fragrant Oil. While there was no specific prayer for her, she knew she had been healed of lactose intolerance. So she is now able to eat milk products without supplements.
A man I know whom I will call Walter had a snowboarding accident and as a result had severe testicular pain. This pain was too much to consider marrying his girlfriend. He went to a healing prayer session with someone with healing gifts and as a result had the pain reduced by about 95 percent, enough to get married and have a child.

Some Personal Experiences

I had a weakening of my acid enzymes when I was in my late forties that meant that I did not digest proteins properly. I took HCL (hydrochloric acid) supplements for years when I ate meat. During one time of extended prayer time and fasting, I knew that God had healed that problem, even though I never prayed for its healing during that time of prayer and fasting. It has been about 20 years since that time, and I have not had any more problem with insufficient stomach acidity to break down proteins.

I have a friend who told me of an experience that puzzled him. He was walking to a pool where his daughter was floating. He was walking and about 20 feet from the pool, and in the next step, he found himself instantly at the pool. When he leaned over, his three-year-old daughter who should have been floating on her back had flipped and was face down in the water. He was able to right her immediately. His wife at the time who observed his instant trip to the pool asked him, “How did you do that?” Of course he had no explanation.

I had an experience in a prayer group while speaking in tongues that was an obvious spiritual experience. Glossalalia or speaking in tongues is usually a very private prayer language experience. Different people sound different when speaking in tongues. You could not match someone else if you tried to. More than seven years earlier I had heard a certain kind of speaking in tongues that was unusual. It was distinctive. I had never heard it before, nor had I ever spoken in that kind of prayer language. In one prayer meeting of many county leaders and people of prayer, we were praying, when I heard myself and three other people instantly and simultaneously speaking in that particularly distinctive tongue.

I was in a meeting with Paul Cox that dealt with discernment of spiritual beings. He has a higher level of spiritual discernment than most Christians I know, and he was aware not only of angelic beings and demons present, but of powers also. He believes that powers carry an electromagnetic charge. He pointed to one place in the room where he believed a power to be present and then brought a compass out of his pocket. Outside the area where he believed the power to be present, the compass had one reading for north. But the needle changed about five degrees when he put it in the center of where he believed the power was.
Trent Cox

I have veterinarian friends, the Doctors Cox. While they lived in my family cottage, they were considering becoming missionaries, but Trent had such severe back problems that his wife had to help him to dress for months at a time during outbreaks of the problem. No mission board would have accepted them with his back condition as it was. He believes that prayer was the treatment that changed his condition. By the time they moved from our cottage, Trent’s back was no longer incapacitating him.

Terry Burton

Pearl Burton’s son Terry was born with hydrocephalus. This was confirmed with both x-rays and a CT scan. The doctor said, “Your son is severely brain damaged. The x-rays show that his brain is only the size of a walnut. I am afraid he will be a vegetable for the rest of his life.” The doctor had said that the buildup of fluid in his head had severely damaged his brain cells. Pearl said, “I needed a miracle because medical science could give me no hope for my son.” As she began to consider how to pray, she heard the voice of the Lord say in her spirit, “Pray that Terry will have the mind of Christ.” Her prayer procedure was to pray in faith, laying her hands on him and confessing that he would have the mind of Christ and that he would receive the miracle of healing. She also got a developmental book that outlined normal growth in a baby. She began commanding in prayer that Terry’s body would start doing the things that are normal for his age. In Terry’s next visit to the neurologist, he couldn’t understand how Terry could be walking since he did not have a brain to tell his body what to do. Pearl decided to see another neurologist who took a new x-ray of his brain, which showed a completely normal brain. She says she left the doctor’s office rejoicing that “Jesus is the healer and is still in the healing business.” Terry was tested in third grade as above average on an intelligence test. Terry is now an adult attending college on an academic scholarship.²⁸

NOTES

9. This is from the 1996 edition of the New International Version of The Bible.
11. Ibid., 83–4.
22. The Healing Rooms (www.healingrooms.com) is a Web site of the International Association of Healing Rooms. Testimonies may be selected. Authors are individually noted for each testimony. Accessed on March 15, 2008.
27. John T. Dearborn, MD, Director, Center for Joint Replacement, Palo Alto and Fremont, California, author’s personal contact in August 19, 2007.
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How Religious or Spiritual Miracle Events Happen Today

William P. Wilson

A miracle is an extraordinary event manifesting divine intervention in human affairs. This definition is often contested by those who do not believe that there is a supernatural God or, if he exists, that he intervenes in human affairs. Most of the leaders of Israel did not accept the miracles of Jesus even though they were empirical evidence of his divinity. Because he was God, Jesus could perform miracles. When asked if he was the Messiah by the disciples of John the Baptist, Jesus told them that the miracles he performed accredited his messiahship (Matthew 11:4–6). Interestingly he cited mostly healings. He said, “Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor.” Miracles continued to occur after his death. Even as late as the fifth century after Jesus’ death, St. Augustine in his City of God cited 71 miracles occurring over a two-year period as testimony to the existence of God. Five of these were of raising of the dead. Because he called attention to them, one has to assume that most people in his day still did not believe miracles occurred.

EXPOSITION

Just as in Jesus’ lifetime and in the apostolic period, there have been those who have denied the work of the Holy Spirit and his dispensation of gifts (John 14:12). More recently those called cessationists have averred that miracles ceased at the end of the apostolic period because they were only for the apostolic age. It is said that Calvin and Warfield were the major proponents...
of the cessationist’s point of view. Miracles did not cease as they claimed. Throughout the centuries miracles have continued to be reported. Edward Gibbon, the historian, says that, “The Christian church, from the time of the Apostles and their disciples, has claimed an uninterrupted succession of miraculous powers, the gift of tongues, of visions and of prophecy, the power of expelling demons, of healing the sick and of raising the dead.”

There is no question, though, that there are many in theology, science, and philosophy who still dogmatically state that miracles cannot and do not occur. Two most vocal philosophical critics in the recent past were Spinoza and Hume. At the present time Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens have emphatically denied the existence of a creator God and the occurrence of miracles. Still there are continuing reports of documented miracles.

Before we attack the question posed by the title it is necessary to clarify the terms religious and spiritual. Many people use the terms synonymously, but they in reality have slightly different meanings. To be religious is to be devoted to religious beliefs and practices. The meaning of spiritual used here is the same, but we believe that miracles are empowered and thus effectuated by the Holy Spirit or by evil spirits. We will use the term spiritual as an etiologic descriptor of miracles since Paul in 1 Corinthians 12:10 states that one of the gifts of the Spirit is miraculous powers. Miracles happen by the power of the Spirit.

Others report miracles in our day. There are many books and articles relating to miracles in the medical literature. Many of them call some of the advances made in medical care miracles. A few report the occurrence of miracles in which God is purported to transcend nature and heal patients with diseases that are not treatable surgically or medically. The theological literature has many more references, but only a few report miracles in the world today. There is, however, one book entitled Megashifts by James Rutz that reports many miracles including the raising of the dead in 52 countries of the world. He states that these are documented miracles and provides the evidence to support his contention. Even so, we still have to ask if miracles occur in our society, and if have we seen them and thus are able to witness to their reality.

Miracles have never ceased because Jesus deputized and empowered his disciples to perform miracles (Luke 9:1, 2 and Luke 10:1–9). Later he told them that they would do greater things than he had done (John 14:12). His prophecy came true since his disciples were the instruments of many miracles during their ministry, but their greatest miracle was the Christianizing of the Roman Empire.

If we define a miracle as an event that is above nature and has no natural explanation, we must have testimony to its occurrence and a description of its relationship to God’s intervention if there is any. Thus the claim of a miracle has to have acceptable verification. It is for this reason that the Shrine at
Lourdes has a panel of 20 persons including physicians to evaluate and certify the occurrence of a miracle occurring there. The Catholic Church has officially recognized 68 miracles that have occurred. This is in light of the claim that over 4,000 cures have occurred. The miracles at Lourdes are said to have been examined and certified as authentic by the committee. For a cure to be recognized as a miracle, it must fulfill seven criteria. It is necessary to verify the illness, which must be serious, with an irrevocable prognosis. The illness must be organic or caused by injuries. There must be no treatment at the root of the cure. The latter must be sudden and instantaneous. Finally, the renewal of functions must be total and lasting, without convalescence. The certified miracles have occurred in the last 50 years. Their criteria are addressed to healing miracles.

Medicine has set criteria for healing with its treatments. It has used these to document its cures. Most cures are surgical. Medical treatments usually only control and ameliorate disease even though in the last 50 years we have cured infections. Modern medicine has developed what are called research protocols to document the effectiveness of a treatment or medicine. Most often they require two groups of patients. One of these is given the presumed active treatment, the other, a control group, is given a placebo. The data related to the effect of the treatment is collected and subjected to statistical analysis. To document the continuation of God’s intervention in illnesses many demand that we conduct experiments using standard research protocols. This would mean that investigators would use what is called the scientific method for investigation. This method is defined as follows: (1) observation and description of a phenomenon or group of phenomena; (2) formulation of a hypothesis to explain the phenomena. In physics, the hypothesis often takes the form of a causal mechanism or a mathematical relation; (3) use of the hypothesis to predict the existence of other phenomena, or to predict quantitatively the results of new observations; (4) performance of experimental tests of the predictions by several independent experimenters and properly performed experiments.

It is obvious that miracles cannot be investigated by usual scientific methods since we cannot control the variables and perform experiments. Other religious phenomena can be investigated when the person becomes his/her own control. Thus we see papers on behavioral change after salvation or after other religious experiences that do not need statistical analysis although when the data is subjected to statistical analysis the results are significant. Any research on miracles could only have an $n$ of one since they all differ. Even so, if the change is profound and instantaneous as a result of a spiritual intervention it is significant. In our reporting of miracles in the following paragraphs each person must have had a condition that had not responded to acceptable treatments or needed radical intervention, and there was a spiritual intervention that resulted in an immediate and dramatic healing or
beginning of healing of the condition. No medical or surgical treatment was administered, and the change had to persist for an observational period that was more than 24 hours. In the case of medical diseases, there had to be structural or functional change demonstrated either by technical methods or by examination.

EXAMINATION OF MIRACLES

As Gibbon said, there is more to miracles than physical healing. The miraculous changes that take place in persons with salvation experiences are rarely if ever seen in ordinary life. There are, of course, self-actualization experiences that result in changes in personality and behavioral changes, but they are only in direction and not in fundamental personality characteristics. Alcoholics become abstinent 35 percent of the time when they take part in the Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) program, but most of them continue to have serious neurotic problems. The AA program is religious (deistic) in content. In contrast, alcoholics who have an authentic conversion experience not only quit drinking and have no subsequent craving for alcohol, but their personality is also radically changed. They go from being selfish to being selfless. They become altruistic and are able to relate intimately in their relationships. The same is true for drug addicts.

William James in his epochal book entitled *The Varieties of Religious Experience* said that the following changes take place with conversion: (1) there is a happy mood; (2) there is a perception of truths not perceived before; (3) there is a feeling of cleanliness within and without; (4) there is a new sense of purpose; (5) the person is now able to love more intimately than before. All of these changes do not occur with secular interventions, and even if some of them do occur they never take place instantaneously. These extraordinary changes take place only by divine intervention and results for the most part are permanent. Indeed it is a rare event that persons turn their backs on God or revert to their previous behavior if their conversion has the results described by James.

I have noted that Gibbon classified speaking in tongues, visions, and prophecy as miraculous powers. Tongues are indeed of divine origin, but they are so common in the Christian world today that we can remove them from the classification of miracles. They can also be demonic in origin. There is no question that visions and prophecy are also miraculous but their frequent occurrence removes them from the extraordinary classification. They are part of our supernatural communication with God who chooses to use these means.

Prophecy is a gift of the Spirit, but much of what is considered prophecy is treacle and of no significance. There were false prophets in the days when Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel were prophesying. This is not to deny that
there are legitimate prophets in the Christian world today, but they are few in number. David Atkinson, in an excellent monograph written for the Anglican church, has defined prophecy as revealed in the Bible, and according to his criteria many of the "prophets" of today do not meet biblical criteria. Therefore, I will make no effort to cite prophetic utterances as evidence of miracles. I must add that one kind of prophecy described by Atkinson, the application of scripture to the condition of society today, is still being actively given.

The casting out of demons is a miraculous event. Satan has convinced most people in our society that he does not exist, so he is free to work his destructive influence on all who are susceptible to his influence. All unregenerated persons are susceptible as well as those regenerated who have weaknesses. Many Christians have areas of habitual thinking that are contrary to God’s laws, and are called strongholds. Using these, Satan infects them in three ways. They can become possessed, oppressed, and obsessed. The deliverance of persons from a possession state has been considered a miracle. Jesus gave his disciples the power to deliver infected people from possession.

Even though many claim that demon possession is explainable psychiatrically, the criteria for demon possession given by Nevius clearly set apart the demonically possessed persons from people with psychiatric disease. These criteria are: (1) there is the automatic presentation in the victim of a new personality both cognitively and behaviorally. They have names and attributes that harmonize with their names. Also facial expressions, bodily movements and postures harmonize with their names; (2) the personality possesses supernatural strength, knowledge, and/or intellectual power; (3) there is a complete change of moral character; (4) there is hatred to God and especially to Christ. In the light of these criteria it is obvious that many psychologically determined problems attributed to demons today are not really due to demonization. Even so there are many people in our world and especially in the Third World who are truly possessed and manifest the characteristics listed by Nevius. Oppression and obsession are more common in our society.

God is still in the business of healing miraculously. Jesus made it clear that not only were his disciples to proclaim the Gospel, but they were also to heal the sick. He healed individuals, as well as groups as large as three thousand. The blind saw, the deaf heard, the mute spoke, the lame walked, lepers were cleansed, infections of all kinds were healed, and the mentally ill were normalized. His disciples did the same although not in the same numbers. As I have noted above, God has continued this activity up to the present.

Then there are dead people restored to life. Jesus raised several to life. The most notable was Lazarus. He also raised to life the son of the widow of Nain, and the synagogue leader’s daughter. In Acts Paul raised up a boy who fell from a third-floor window. In this case it is not clear that he really was dead. Peter was responsible for the raising of Dorcas who was dead.
As I have previously noted, St. Augustine claimed to have seen five people raised from the dead. As reported by Rutz, Reinhard Bonnke, a German evangelist, was responsible for the resurrection of a man in Nigeria while he was preaching. Amazingly he did not know the corpse was in the building. This event along with interviews with the doctor and the mortician who attested to his resurrection was recorded on videotape. The event not only validated itself but also showed how God can heal in various ways.

God heals in five ways. He heals: (1) by divine intervention; (2) using modern medical interventions; (3) with time; (4) by giving a person the ability to bear his “thorn in the flesh”; and (5) he heals when a person dies and receives his or her resurrection body. Although many medical miracles occur as a result of human intervention, we will cite only cases where God intervened when prayer entreated him to heal.

Physical Healing

**Case 1**

A Methodist pastor in his forties had been very successful but felt led by God to leave a small Wesleyan denomination and join the United Methodist Church. He did, and in a few years he was again successful. He then began having heart attacks. These were not treatable by catheterization, but he continued his work and received medication. In time he had a total of five hospitalizations for severe angina. He was finally told that he could not continue, and since nothing could be done for him because of the involvement of all the major arteries of his heart in extensive lesions, he would in time die.

His bishop finally told him that he was going to transfer him to a small dying inner-city congregation, and when he died the church would be closed. The minister did not take the church to have it close, so he worked at helping it come alive and it thrived. Finally after several years, he had another heart attack and was hospitalized. His physician catheterized him and found that he had 75% occlusion of his major arteries. The degree of occlusion was so extensive that he could not have stents put in to open them up. He was told he was going to die in the near future.

After the initial examination, he was lying in bed in the hospital when three couples from his church came into his room. After exchanging pleasantries they announced that they were going to pray for him to be healed. He told them that he would be pleased if they did, so they came around the bed, laid hands on him and began to pray. They prayed for nearly 3 hours when all of a sudden his pain abated, his heart rate normalized, and his breathing became less labored. At that moment he knew he was healed.

The next morning his doctor came in and was amazed to find him with almost all signs of cardiac decompensation gone. The next day he took him to the catheterization lab, recatheterized him, and found that all three vessels were now completely patent. The physician, who was not a Christian, had to admit that what had happened was a miracle. He had x-ray evidence that proved it.
In recounting the story, my friend, whom I met after the miracle occurred, told me that he had an extraordinarily high cholesterol (500+ mgm/dl) so that 10 years later he had to have three bypasses, but treatment of his hypercholesterolemia has prevented any further occlusion of his arteries and he is well 20 years later. He is now in his eighties. Thus he experienced both a divine miracle and a medical miracle.

Case 2
I was attending a weekend renewal conference where we usually had a healing service on Saturday night. There were several thousand people there so we had a large number of teams praying for healing. The organization believes in the priesthood of all believers, so most of the teams were made up of lay persons (as am I and my wife). I do not know how many people we had prayed for but there was a fairly large number when a young woman who was obviously pregnant came up and told us she was depressed and wanted prayer for her depression. She did not mention any other problems. Because she was a nurse, I was particularly moved to pray for her a little more fervently than usual. We did pray for her and nothing happened. Others were waiting so she left. I did not hear from her after the meeting even though she could have contacted me through the organization.

The next year we met in another town and again my wife and I were praying in the healing service. As we prayed I noticed an older woman with a cute little red-headed baby lying on a blanket in front of me. She had moved there from another part of the auditorium while we were praying. Finally, when we had finished praying for the many who wanted prayer, the woman beckoned to me. I went over to where she was sitting and she told me that the baby’s mother wanted me to pray for her child. The mother was a nurse who was on duty and could not come. The child had asthmatic bronchitis from time to time and she hoped he could be healed.

I was tired so I told her that Dr. Francis MacNutt was still praying for people and she should take the baby down to where he was ministering. She very quickly said, “No, his mother wants you to pray for him!” “Why?” I asked. She responded by telling me that his mother had been at our meeting the year before and I had prayed for her depression. She was instantly healed of the depression and at the same time her asthma that she had for almost 30 years was healed too. Whereas she had regular attacks of asthma before the conference, she did not have any after and discontinued all her medications.

I did not wish to disappoint his mother. I picked up the baby and prayed for him as fervently as I could. I do not know what happened since I saw neither the mother, grandmother, nor baby again. There was no doubt in the mind of the nurse or her mother that an unexpected miracle had occurred that night when I had prayed for her depression.

The next two cases were provided by Larry Eddings, MDiv, who has had a healing ministry for over 30 years.
Case 3

Bill, a 55-year-old heavy equipment operator, came forward during a Sunday service of worship and asked for prayer as he was scheduled for heart bypass surgery the following Tuesday. I, along with the congregation, asked God how we should pray for Bill. We sensed that God said to ask him to give Bill a new heart. That was our prayer, “God, we ask you to give Bill a new heart. Amen.”

On Tuesday Bill phoned and asked to talk with me. I said, “Bill, aren’t you supposed to be in surgery today for the bypass surgery?” He replied, “Yes, I was scheduled for it, but when I came in they ran the whole battery of tests again to make sure that I was ready for surgery. In the process the physician said to me, ‘Bill, I don’t know what has happened, but you have a new heart. You don’t need surgery.’” Bill never did have to undergo bypass surgery and is still, several years later, strong and healthy.

An added note about Bill: He had received Jesus as his Savior two weeks prior to this event. He asked permission to stand in the pulpit the Sunday following his healing and share with the congregation what he “saw” when we were praying for him. He shared, “I saw Jesus standing before me. He reached into my chest, unhooked and removed my old heart. Then he reached toward heaven, took a new heart and placed it in my chest and hooked it up.” He witnessed God doing a divine heart transplant. That was his testimony to the congregation regarding his healing.

Case 4

Gretta was a 70-year-old woman who came from Tucson, Arizona, and attended a week-long Christian family camp in Hawai‘i. She came off the plane in a wheelchair. She wore a neck brace, shoulder braces, and a body brace, and walked with two canes. She had been in a car accident in which someone ran a stop sign and demolished her car and her spine. She was an Orthodox Jewish woman who had recently accepted Jesus as her Messiah and had become a Christian. In the process her husband divorced her, her children disowned her, and they all considered her dead. She harbored much bitterness and unforgiveness in her heart because of the treatment she had received from her family and also against the person who caused the accident.

As she worked through the process of forgiveness of those who had offended her and sought God’s forgiveness for her bitterness toward them, she began to experience healing and release within her body. After one day she was out of the wheelchair. On the second day she removed her neck and shoulder braces. On the third day she took off her body braces and put away her walking canes. On the fourth day she danced to the tune of a lively Israeli melody, giving praise to God for her physical and also emotional healing.

Added note on Gretta: When the camp was finished, she teamed up with a 25-year-old Jewish woman who had recently become Christian and the two of them went into Waikiki and witnessed to the Jewish business
community there about Yeshua, the Messiah, and his healing power as evidenced in her life. We were back in Hawaii two years later and she was still on the streets of Waikiki doing ministry.

Healing and a Miraculous Escape from Prison

Case 5
Charles Stanley in his *In Touch* magazine\(^\text{16}\) relates the story of Brother Yun, a Chinese house church leader who was imprisoned by the Chinese government for a third time. On this occasion his legs were beaten so badly that he could not walk. The bones were probably shattered. He was so crippled his friends had to carry him to the bathroom. One day he heard a voice telling him he must escape. He was, however, in the maximum security prison at Zhengzhou and any effort to escape would mean death. Still a voice in his mind said to him, “Go now, the God of Peter is with you.” When he was taken to the bathroom he decided to go, got up on his feet and started walking. “Receive my spirit when the guards shoot me,” he prayed as he walked out down the stairs and out a gate that was opened only long enough for him to get through. He walked by several guards who did not see him although they were looking at him. He continued to pray. He went through a large iron gate that was strangely unlocked, across an open courtyard to the main gate of the prison. It was open and unattended. He then disappeared in a yellow taxi that just happened to be standing there. The next day he was pedaling a bicycle to a shelter that a family had prepared for him after they were told in a dream he was coming.

Not only had Yun’s legs been healed in his escape but God had made it possible for him to escape. It was the same as he had done for Peter as described in Acts 12. This story has three miracles in it. They are that his legs were miraculously healed, he was able on his healed legs to walk out of a maximum security prison, and the family was informed of his coming and their task to care for him.

We do not have x-ray evidence that the bones in his legs were shattered, but the fact that he had not been able to walk on them is documentation of a healing miracle. There were many witnesses to Yun’s escape.

Case 6
I was speaking in a small church outside of Antananarivo, Madagascar. After the service I was asked to go to a nearby house to pray for a hopelessly crippled man. He could not leave the house even in a wheelchair, which he and his daughter could not afford. We drove the short distance to the red brick house where they lived and went inside. In a dark room on the north side of the house sat a man in a padded chair. Outside the open window was a pig pen with a pig inside. All through our stay, our conversation was punctuated by pig grunts. The man in the chair obviously had severe arthritis. It appeared to be ankylosing spondylitis. To confirm this diagnosis, I did a brief examination. I found that he had fixation of his
joints in his back, his elbows, wrists, knees, and ankles. His knees and elbows were fixed at 90 degrees. His head was bowed forward onto his chest and he could not lift it up. In all his joints he had limited mobility. He had severe, advanced ankylosing spondylitis!

My interpreter explained to him why we were there. After the initial interchange, I asked him if he was a Christian. He said he was not. I then told him that my prayers would be more effective if he was a Christian and asked him if he would like to become one. He said he would. After he made the transaction, I told him we were now going to pray for his healing. I did not expect anything to happen since he was so crippled, but in obedience to the Lord’s commandment to heal the sick, I prayed. As I did I visualized his joints being freed up. I could do this since I had worked with patients with his disease in the pain clinic at my hospital. It is difficult to chat through an interpreter, but we did the best we could to comfort him and departed. I thought no more about what we had done and in a few days came back to the United States.

Two years later I got an e-mail from the missionary I had worked with telling me that he had gone back to the church to preach. He noticed that there was a padded chair on the front row. Just before the service started the man we had prayed for walked in with his legs straightened and his arms swinging by his sides. He took his seat and participated enthusiastically in the worship service. It is a tradition in Madagascar to have prayers after the service with all the people in a circle holding hands. My missionary friend said that as they prayed the people began dancing. This is customary in their worship. He looked over to where our arthritic man was and noticed that he was dancing as enthusiastically as the other worshipers. He did not describe the position of his head. Curious, I wrote him back and asked him if he could lift up his head. He answered, “He lifted up his head!”

Conversion

Let us now turn to the miracles that occur with conversion. I am reluctant to cite these since they are so common. Yet I will describe the dramatic changes that occurred in two persons with whom I had professional contact and who were miraculously changed.

Case 7

A 29-year-old woman was a patient in the federal narcotics hospital in Lexington, Kentucky. I was conducting a research project on the family life of heroin addicts. I was interested in knowing what kind of homes they came from since I wanted to know if their parenting or lack of it in childhood was etiologic to their problem. At the end of my examination, I also had questions concerning any religious experiences or instruction they had and their hope for the future after their incarceration.

In my inquiry she told me that for five years she had been a prostitute supporting her pimp, her boyfriend, and herself. She also had come from
a profoundly dysfunctional home. She had been sexually abused as a child and had been promiscuous before becoming hooked on heroin and becoming a prostitute to support her addiction. When I came to the questions concerning religious instruction she said she had none. When I asked her about any religious experiences, she said she had. I asked when it occurred. She said, “Yesterday.” “In this place?” I asked surprised. “No not here,” was her retort. Curious, I asked her to tell me about it.

“Well, we have this secretary on our unit who is a pastor’s wife. She often would offer to take us to religious meetings. We would go just to get out of the place. Three days ago she asked us if we would like to go down to the Coliseum to hear a speaker. She could only take 11 of us so we had an election to see who could go and I got elected. It came time to go, and we got in the van and left. When we got there, the sign over the entrance said, ‘David Wilkerson Crusade Here This Week.’ I did not know who he was so I went in wondering what he was going to say.” He was the founder of Teen Challenge, a ministry to addicted teens.

“After we got seated we sang a couple of songs and this man came out with a big black Bible and prayed. Then he began to speak. He first of all began to ask questions. They were the same questions I had been asking myself. The only difference was that he had answers that came from the Bible. I began to get scared, so as he talked I felt I had to get out of there. Finally he came to the end of his talk, and as he did he asked all those who wanted to give their lives to Christ come to the front. I thought, now is my chance. I will leave and wait in the foyer for the rest of the group. I got up and walked to the end of the row expecting to turn right and go out. But you know what, Doc? I couldn’t turn right. I had to turn left and I didn’t walk. I ran to the front! Tears were streaming down my face and I could hardly see, but when I looked around the other 10 girls were there too.” She described her experience with tears again streaming down her face.

My next question was, “Do you have any hope for the future?” “You bet I do,” she said, “I have Jesus.”

“Where are you going when you get out?” “I don’t know, but I am not going back to the street! God has a safe place for me.” And she didn’t go back. She went first to a Teen Challenge center and then to a rehabilitation farm they operated in Pennsylvania and in time went to college. I lost track of her then.

I need to point out that the average amount of time a patient stayed off drugs after discharge from Lexington was less than 6 months. She was off 3 years. Earlier I met others who had gone through the Teen Challenge program and had been off for 7 to 10 years. In my professional experience, the recidivism rate for heroin addiction was nearly 100 percent, but for Teen Challenge it is only 25 percent.

Case 8

One of my students at the seminary was a young black man who was outstanding as a student. At the beginning of the semester I asked the students to give their personal witness to the class. He told us that he grew
up in a dysfunctional home and that in his late teen years he got addicted to marijuana and then to crack cocaine. He then became a street person, sleeping under bridges and eating out of dumpsters and garbage cans. He did this for three years when God sovereignly reached down and drew him to himself. He found shelter and in time got a job and a place to live. He joined a church where he was received with love. He then decided to go to college and enrolled in the top state university where he majored in sociology. After he got his degree he went to graduate school and got a master’s degree in the same subject. Not satisfied with what he had learned, he came to the seminary and took all the counseling courses we offered. His thesis for his MTh degree was focused on counseling in the black church. He was incensed when he found that none of 40 pastors he interviewed did any counseling.

Demonization and Deliverance

Case 9
A 19-year-old ethnic Malagasy woman was brought to me because she would be violently thrown to the floor, whereupon two male voices would come out of her claiming to be former kings of Madagascar. They spoke Malagasy. This was unusual since she had been raised in France and only spoke French. Her parents, who taught in a French university, were a witch and a warlock. She had been sent back to Madagascar because of her spells, with the idea that her grandmother could find some help for her. None was available in France. She had come to a healing community where it was recognized that she was demon possessed, but the local people including the chaplain and physician could not bring about deliverance. After her history was presented, I had the names of the two kings written on the blackboard that was in the room. I then had her brought in and after I was introduced, I asked the interpreter to have her say, “Jesus is Lord.”

She had barely begun to utter the sound of J when she was violently thrown to the floor, where she lay thrashing about. The locals got very excited and began yelling at the demons. I told them to stop since I knew demons were not deaf. I then called the demons by name and told them to come out and be taken away for disposition. I hardly got the words out of my mouth when she blinked her eyes and sat up. We helped her to her feet and had her sit in a chair next to me. I then, through my interpreter, told her that to maintain her freedom she needed to accept Christ as her Savior. She eagerly agreed and made the transaction. I brought her back the next day during my instruction period and had her say, “Jesus is Lord.” She said, “Jesus really is my Lord!” She had no further spells during a follow-up period of one year.

Case 10
I gave a lecture in a local church on demonization and deliverance. At the end I asked any persons who wanted deliverance to come forward and
I would pray for them. A young couple did come up and as I started to pray for the woman, she rested in the Spirit before I could do any deliverance. I had not discerned that she was demon possessed. I then prayed for her husband and he too rested. As I was preparing to pray for the next person, she suddenly burst out alternately speaking in demonic tongues and screaming. I had to attend to her and prayed that what I thought was one demon to come out of her. She got quiet for a few seconds and then began to scream again. I commanded a second demon to come out and again she quieted for a few seconds before she screamed a third time. I then commanded a third demon to come out and she quieted, sat up, and was freed. I did not have time to find out what the demons’ names were since she was screaming so loudly. I later found out that her father had sexually abused her when she was 15, and when she got pregnant, he forced her to have an abortion. She had lived a rebellious life since then. She was promiscuous, having had three illegitimate children and suffering from pseudologia fantastica (fantastic lying).

Since her deliverance she has been a different person, telling the truth and making an effort to learn how to be a good wife to her husband. She also had to give her life to Christ, and have her postabortion syndrome healed.

### Multiplication of Food

#### Case 11

Father Richard Thomas, Society of Jesus, was appointed to Our Lady’s Youth Center in El Paso, Texas. He had a professional staff of psychologists and social workers. His center was supported to a great extent by the United Fund. Shortly after he took over as director he returned to New Orleans, where he had graduated from seminary, to attend an alumni reunion. While there he attended a prayer meeting at the invitation of his classmate, Al Cohen. There they asked Father Thomas if they could pray for Mr. Cohen. He told them they could and they laid on hands and prayed. After they finished Father Thomas noted that he had a headache, so he went back to his room and went to bed. He awakened about 2:00 A.M. and the room was filled with a brilliant blue light. He also felt the presence of God so powerfully that he could hardly move. This finally left him and he went back to sleep. After the reunion he left for El Paso, but on the plane he had the impression that he was to terminate the employment of the psychologists and social workers and return any money from the United Fund that had not been spent. Back home he did this obediently.

Wondering what to do next, he felt compelled to go preach on the streets, although Catholic priests did not usually preach on the street. When he did, people got converted. His converts formed themselves into a group who met with him at the center as a small community. The community grew. When Christmas came his people wanted to do a project for
the poor, so at the suggestion of a U.S. mail carrier who was a member, they decided to go across the border and feed the scavengers in the Juarez, Mexico, garbage dump.

From their preliminary observations they estimated that there would be 150 people. They prepared enough food for the 150. They went to the dump and set up their tables and called the people to come get the meal. Three hundred fifty people showed up. Dismayed, Father Thomas’ people wondered what they were going to do. “Rick” (Father Richard) told them to feed the people until the food ran out. They began and they kept feeding until they had fed them all. When they looked at their remaining food supplies, they realized that they had as much food as they began with. The food had been multiplied. They then took the residuals and fed children in orphanages until the food really did run out.

This story is documented in a book called *Miracles in El Paso*. However, the version I have rendered was related to me by Rick and verified by some of his people. There were many other miracles that occurred in Our Lady’s Youth Center ministry, but this was the most dramatic.

**THE BLIND SAW AND THE LAME WALKED**

I belong to a group that sponsored major Holy Spirit conferences. We held one in New Orleans where about 25,000 people were in attendance. One of our plenary speakers was Reinhard Bonnke. On Saturday night things did not go well since one of the minor speakers spoke way beyond his allotted time and no one cut him off. Even so, Bonnke plunged in, giving a very evangelical teaching. At the end he asked for those who wanted healing to come forward. As we watched, four blind people were led forward and five wheelchairs were rolled up to the area in front of the stage. Bonnke went down to them and prayed for them and others. The blind saw and the lame got up out of their wheelchairs and walked. They all testified that they had indeed been blind and lame for years and that they now could see and walk. I was not able to examine these people before and after their healing, but their personal testimony and our witness of their healing verified God’s intervention.

The most miraculous of the responses to Bonnke’s presentation occurred earlier when he gave the attendees an invitation to accept Christ as their savior. It resulted in the positive response of over 2,000 Catholic nuns and priests. Bonnke thought that there had been a mistake. Surely they had misunderstood him. But no, it was no mistake, they really were seriously responding. The counselors were overwhelmed after the service by such a large group.

I can describe many other miracles such as visions and speaking in tongues, both real and unknown, but they are recorded elsewhere. The reader is referred to those resources that are readily available.
SUMMARY

The described miracles do not completely meet the criteria we set at the beginning. Some of these discrepancies have to do with our lack of knowledge concerning the course of the healing. For instance, we do not know how immediately the healing of the person with ankylosing spondylitis took place. We do know that no medical interventions were applied, so his healing had to be by God’s intervention. I also do not know the circumstances of my student’s healing from crack cocaine addiction since I was not a participant in his healing. I do know that there was no medical treatment. Also we have no knowledge of the amount of anatomical damage that the Jewish woman in Hawaii had. We do know that she had braces prescribed by her physicians, so they must have had evidence that she had anatomical damage.

The question, “Do religious or spiritual miracles occur today?” has been answered. Edward Gibbon has said that there is an unbroken succession of miraculous powers in the church throughout its history. In spite of the cessationist’s view that miracles ceased at the end of the apostolic era, St. Augustine’s report of miracles that he had witnessed gave the lie to that claim. Throughout time others have reported miracles in spite of constant denial of the verity of their claims. The author has reported a series of cases that he has personally been able to observe or verify by reliable witnesses. The answer to our question, then, is yes. Miracles do still happen today. Claims to the contrary are then based on passion or prejudice and are, therefore, not rational.

CONCLUSIONS

Miracles do occur in the world today. In spite of protestations by some scientists, documented events occur regularly both in this country and in the rest of the world. Most of the miracles are similar to if not replicas of the miracles Jesus did and those that have been reported through the entire history of the church. There is no reason why we should not expect them to continue.

NOTES

How Religious or Spiritual Miracle Events Happen Today


REFERENCES

Hume, David (1963), *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, LaSalle, IL: Open Court.
Warfield, Benjamin Breckenridge (1918), *Counterfeit Miracles*, New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons.
A common definition of miracles would be an event or condition produced by direct intervention of God. An example of a miracle in the New Testament is in the feeding of the 5,000. It occurred when Jesus was teaching a multitude of people. The disciples noted that it was late and suggested the people be dismissed so that they could find food. Jesus countered by asking them to share the food they had with the people. The amount they had to share was small. Yet after Jesus prayed over the food, not only was everyone fed but there were more baskets of food left over than they had when they started. This was impressive to the New Testament writers as it is reported multiple times in the New Testament (Mt 14:15–21, Mk 6:34–44, Lk 9:10–17, Jn 6:1–14).

The feeding of the 5,000 can be seen as a miracle of the heart. People saw Jesus and the disciples sharing, and so also shared their food. What food they did not absolutely need, they placed in the baskets for others to have. But how do we evaluate this event if we assume that (1) people did not have any significant amount of food to share, and (2) in his giving thanks for the food Jesus prayed that the food would multiply to feed all of the people? Could it have happened as a true miracle, that is, caused directly by God? To answer this question, we need to define further what is meant by natural laws that govern a causal chain of events and the limitations of that paradigm.

Supernatural intervention seems at variance with science, a prime source of truth in the contemporary world. When even the Templetons, who financially support research on religion, see the classical scientific experiment as the best method to establish truth, it would seem that the truth of miracles...
must be based in scientific experiments. Some experiments have been done on the efficacy of intercessory prayer. Do such studies prove or disprove miracles? Is there evidence that a supernatural force suspends natural laws to cause a miraculous outcome in answer to prayer? Is this the best way to phrase the question?

The purpose of this chapter is to evaluate whether science, and the natural laws that result, and miracles, to which history and experience seem to testify readily, are compatible paradigms. Are science and miracles both possible? If miracles are possible, then evaluating whether or when miracles have happened or are occurring is the task of scholars in the appropriate disciplines within the humanities.

THE NATURE OF SCIENCE

To understand how science may or may not be able to establish miracles, the nature of science needs to be understood. Is the nature of science such that it can examine miracles, or does its examining miracles remove the miraculous?

The nature of truth, even scientific truth, has been questioned in the current philosophical position of postmodernism (Murphy 1997). Postmodernism arises from the failure of modern philosophy to have found a basis on which truth can be logically built, that is, a secure base that no one can doubt. This skeptical analysis was found already in ancient Greek philosophy. It was dormant throughout the Middle Ages, which ignored the issue or assumed the foundation of all truth to be in divine revelation. Descartes (1701/1990) is the prototype for premodern philosophy in that he assumed God as the foundation of all truth, but he also raised the questions that led to postmodernism.

Descartes sought for a firm foundation for truth by seeking that which he could not doubt. He found that he could doubt virtually everything. Of course, it can be hard to doubt the existence of the chair on which one sits, but some doubt can always be suggested. For example, perhaps the chair is the result of a posthypnotic suggestion and an audience would see that he was just sitting on air. Obviously, this is unlikely but the quest for a firm foundation for knowledge is that it be completely unchallengeable at all levels.

Descartes found there was only one unchallengeable fact, and summarized it in his famous “Cogito, ergo sum.” This is generally translated as “I think, therefore I am.” The one undeniable fact was that he was thinking, for otherwise how could he challenge truths? I believe his equation as stated is too optimistic a position. It would be better translated as “thinking, therefore being,” for “I” has no unchallengeable referent. Descartes quickly dismissed his own skepticism with reference to God and built his philosophy despite his
skepticism, as had other medieval philosophers. Unlike Descartes, the postmodernists take this skepticism seriously. For the postmodernist all human intellectual enterprises are suspect because all conclusions can be doubted.

As postmodernism developed, Kuhn (1970) published his work on scientific revolutions. This is a historical treatise which suggests that paradigms—models of thought that attempt to describe reality—are important in science, and determine much of the field’s activity. Our paradigms arise from our culture and from the history of the science and its past paradigms. These interact with the facts identified or data collected, and shape the expression of the facts in theories, thus specifying the range of research seen as legitimate. And the paradigms of science itself change over time, with scientific revolutions arising from the replacement of one paradigm with another.

Combining the skepticism inherent in intellectual enterprises with Kuhn’s notion that science is determined in part by the intellectual enterprises of scientific paradigms raises a serious question about how we define science. Can it be defined sufficiently to encompass the most basic element of all scientific disciplines? What is it that distinctly separates it from nonscientific endeavors? Obviously, the distinction cannot lie in such characteristics as integrity, theory building, or paradigms, nor can it be in publishing scholarly articles. All academic disciplines share these.

I have suggested (Gorsuch 2002a, 2002/2007) that the identifying characteristic of science is seen in the research article. All disciplines that claim to be scientific have a distinctive element not found in papers in other disciplines: a methods section. The criterion for an adequate methods section is that it tells readers how they can replicate the study. Indeed, no finding is taken seriously until it is replicated. (In speaking tours at academic institutions, my audiences have always agreed that this is an essential characteristic of science.) Any conclusion is tentative until it has been replicated. For example, the Festinger, Riecken, and Schachter (1956) book, When Prophecy Fails, examined a group that had prophesied the end of the world. When that did not happen, the leaders decided it was because God had spared the world so that they could preach about a new era. However, others (Dein 2001) could not replicate this result with other such groups and so it has been dropped from many social psychology texts.

When sufficient replications occur, the consistency of the replicable data is referred to as a fact. It is then incorporated into theory, which is then tested in other experiments to see if results are consistent with the theory. Science finds that which can be replicated, and these are considered the norm for that phenomenon, natural laws. Gorsuch (2002a, 2002/2007) has labeled such truth as nomothetic. Only that which is nomothetic, that is, which is replicable and so law-like, is found by science. All nonreplicable events are considered unscientific, and unworthy of further scientific exploration. By the definition of miracles noted above, nomothetic science cannot address
miracles, for the latter are violations of the nomothetic. The feeding of the 5,000, as miracle, is a nonreplicable event and so science lacks the tools to investigate whether it was a miracle.

REDUCTIONISTIC SCIENCE

Many psychologists have argued that religion and miracles are a function of nomothetic natural forces. They have sought to explain religion as a function of other variables. Of course religion is impacted by many forces, from the simplest, "how can they be saved if they have not heard," to the impact of one’s family and community of origin. That is not the issue here. The issue is that of explaining away religion by attributing it to other variables having nothing to do with the truth of religion itself.

Freud is the most famous reductionist. It is questionable in what sense he should be called a scientist, in that he left us no explicit methods by which his work can be replicated. Such methods would need to control for alternative explanations, including, for example, post hoc interpretations. In the record of his work we do not have operational definitions to reduce the interpretation of just any data to support a complex theory. Nor does he give us the necessary checks against the problems of subjective evaluations. We need from him a methods section so there can be formal replication. However, he is accorded the status of a famous scientist by laypersons and professionals, alike.

Freud’s argument in *The Future of an Illusion* (1927/1964) is that religion is a result of infantile projection of the father figure. Therefore, religion, as the title suggests, an illusion. Faber (2002) has taken up Freud’s psychoanalytic approach and his purpose is to demonstrate that “the supernatural is a human fabrication with no basis in reality” (p. 7). He argues that it is rooted entirely in human subjectivity. Others have taken reductionistic positions, but with a scientific base. In multiple studies of motivation, Cattell and Child (1975) considered religion as an attitude based in motivational needs.

There are two major problems with positions such as Freud and Cattell. It is well stated in the introduction to Freud’s book. He assumes that religion is false (Freud 1927/1964), as does Cattell (Gorsuch 2002/2007). If it is false then it must be the function of wish fulfillment, anthropomorphizing, subjective motivation, or other such forces. That does not test the validity of religion. It merely rules it out of the arena of scientific investigations by assuming it to be unreality.

The second major problem with reductionism follows from the first: it fails to consider any evidence that religion is true. Nonetheless, for many of us, the truth of a religious proposition is of prime importance. Faber (2002) states that “The person who attempts to prove or disprove the naturalistic nature of religious experience in a manner similar to that which he would use
to prove or disprove the heliocentric theory of the solar system or the molecular theory of chemical bonding will fall flat on his face” (p. 3). Of course this follows when one assumes religion is false. Such lack of concern for the evidence of religions permits Faber to talk about religion as a single class, with only minor reference to variations in religions. The reductionism of Freud and Cattell makes their work irrelevant to the task of understanding how miracles and science relate. Thus Freud, Cattell, Farber, and others in a reductionistic mode are irrelevant to the present task.

**THE LIMITS OF SCIENCE**

As science is nomothetic and so addresses that which replicates, all nonreplicable events are not scientific. It is not that science rejects them but rather that they are outside the scope and paradigm of science so that science cannot even discuss them scientifically. To discuss them is to leave the area of replicable events. However, our question is, are there nonreplicate events? If there are, can they be studied? What would be the rules of evidence? Do they apply to miracles?

Gorsuch (2002a, 2002/2007) suggests that there are nonreplicable events. Consider any major event in a person’s life, such as graduation from high school. Can a person replicate that event? No, as the prior experience of graduating would make it a different event for that person. In like manner, one can not replicate reading this book because the first reading changes the nature of the experience. Nor can anyone replicate any major historical event. The experiences of George Washington and his contributions to the founding of the United States cannot be replicated. They are unique to him and his times. Therefore they are outside of science. Indeed it seems that, by the definition of science, many of the most important events in a person’s life are nonreplicable and so outside of the scope of scientific inquiry.

The humanities are disciplines that consider nonreplicable events (Gorsuch 2002). The most unique events are communicated by art and literature. The former communicates unique experiences in a nonverbal language form whereas the latter uses verbal language to communicate. History is the examination of nonreplicable events in other time periods.

Whereas science is referred to as nomothetic, nonreplicable events are referred to as ideothetic events (Gorsuch 2002a, 2002/2007). These include all the areas of the humanities, every discipline which does not use replication as its *modus operandum*.

Being ideothetic rather than nomothetic means that other evidence is used instead of replicable experiments. The courts are good examples of the search for truth in ideothetic situations. There is no way the crime can be replicated but truth is sought as to who committed the crime. Instead of replication, courts examine multiple sources of evidence, including credible witnesses,
physical evidence, and circumstantial evidence. The circumstantial evidence used in ideothetic analysis generally includes the results of nomothetic science. If the evidence supports the defendant having violated the law, then he or she is convicted. As this court example implies, the important decisions that are made about a person’s life may be primarily ideothetic. These include basic questions such as, “Does she or he love me?” “Shall I apply for this graduate school?” and “Am I ready to retire?”

ISSUES OF EVIDENCE

Circumstantial evidence is important in establishing ideothetic truth. Consider the case of the Old (OT) and New Testaments (NT). The life and times reported there are supported by considerable widely accepted circumstantial evidence. While the exact events are not recorded elsewhere, it is known that Jericho existed and had its walls destroyed on multiple occasions. The history of Jerusalem in other reports is consistent with the biblical record, as is the knowledge of Roman practices in the NT era. Jesus’ trial and crucifixion ring true to the historians’ expectation. The Dead Sea Scrolls are consistent with OT and NT. While circumstantial evidence is circumstantial, it is important evidence in building a case for the general accuracy of the Bible. This is in addition to the credible witnesses, those who told others of the events and of the many people involved.

Credible witnesses may include the many authors to whom books of the Bible are attributed. It may also include the canonization process, which involved many more people. While these were not witnesses to the original events, they could witness to the usage of these books as true in their own traditions. Since nothing can be completely proved beyond a doubt, some people accept and some reject the conclusions drawn by Christians from this evidence.

Contrasting with the circumstantial evidence for the Bible is the circumstantial evidence for the religion-like fervor of the German Nazis’ notion of the divine ordination of the Aryan race to establish the thousand-year Reich and bring order and its “true destiny” to the world. There was no phenomenological, heuristic, or circumstantial evidence to vindicate any element of that worldview: no evidence for the existence of Uhr Menschen, no evidence of a divine mandate for Nazi or Prussian conquest, and no evidence for Jews being the counterforce to this divine order or the source of social evil. Circumstantial evidence is important in the search for ideothetic truth.

Miracles fall within the ideothetic realm as they are by definition nonreplicable events, but that does not mean they cannot be studied. As with any ideothetic event, they can be studied through credible witnesses and circumstantial evidence. What makes a witness credible is the experience of the person and how we perceive that experience. Who are credible witnesses
for discussing miracles? That will vary depending on one’s paradigm. If one is a Christian, then the NT writings are credible witnesses. The feeding of the 5,000 is accepted as a miracle because credible witnesses have reported it. Note that the scriptures do not discriminate between the two types of miracles that may underlie the feeding of the 5,000. Whether it is a miracle of the heart or an actual physical miracle will depend upon the judgment of the reader and the reader’s religious paradigm.

Might there be conditions under which a nomothetic event has ideo-graphic underpinnings? Actually this is a major position of some who pray for miracles. Murphy (1997) formalizes this by means of a model in which God works at the quantum physics level. The quantum physics level is characterized by its lacking the property of any predictability. In her view, God’s intervention is at this level and it works its way up the causal chain to help the person. The observed cause is just the last step of the original divine action at the quantum level of the ideothetic event.

The view that God may work through nomothetic chains appears common. Casteel’s (1955) classical approach assumes God works through the chain of events: “Even the simplest of our requests may entail the changing of a great many very powerful factors before an answer can come” (p. 117). Perhaps the feeding of the 5,000 was a miracle both in that people had food to bring and that they shared it, and that God multiplied the total quantity to insure that it was more than adequate. In illness, people do pray for the physician and other factors in the perceived causal chain of events that may cure an illness. Ideothetic and nomothetic are not mutually exclusive.

**RESEARCH ON INTERCESSIONARY PRAYER**

Nomothetic research on miracles can study many facets of it. Who reports miracles? What kind of miracles do they report? What are the conditions under which miracles are reported? What are the antecedents of reported miracles? What is the impact of the reported miracle on that person and on others? Such questions have been raised in regards to prayer. Research on multiple aspects of prayer can be found in Brown (1994) and Frances and Astley (2001).

There are several systems to classify prayer that have been used in research. Some systems are concerned with types of prayer, as historically classified. Casteel discusses prayer as adoration, confession, thanksgiving, and prayer as asking and receiving. The last divides into petitions for oneself and intercession for others. This is similar to Poloma and Gallup’s (1991) division into ritual, petitionary, conversational, and meditative; or to Hood, Morris, and Harvey’s (1993) contemplative and liturgical. Their model includes two forms of petitionary prayer, in which the goal of one is blessings and the goal of the other, material things. Others categorize prayer as to what it is based
on and whether it is inward (self), outward (others), or upward (divine) oriented (Ladd and Spilka 2002, 2006).

While each of these systems is appropriate in its context, this current project needs a somewhat different perspective. It needs to categorize prayer in terms of the source of the effect, and whether that effect can be nomothetic or ideothetic. Only the latter would include miracles.

Prayer may have effects through two sources that would be replicable. Together these two have been referred to as subjective effects, although whether that refers to subject effects or effects only seen subjectively is open to interpretation. This category consists of two subcategories. First are the effects on the person who is being prayed for, the *personal effect* of prayer. Do they feel the prayer has been effective? This is the only criterion when the intercessory prayer is for inner healing of emotional and spiritual health.

If the conditions under which the person feels the prayer is helpful are replicated, then a personal effect has been found. This may be the placebo effect. The placebo effect is found in research on drugs, which finds that many people feel they are helped even when they are in a control group given a placebo, a physiologically inert substance resembling the pill being tested. These are rather large effects and are nontrivial, but they occur from the psychological impact of believing that one may be receiving a helping drug. In many research designs, these are not distinguished from spontaneous recovery; to separate them would require two control groups for which no one prayed, one believing someone is praying for them and another group who were not told the researchers would pray for them. These effects may occur with all types of prayer, including intercessory prayer.

In addition to personal effects, there may also be *social effects*. This effect would arise from the impact of the prayers on the person’s social network. Thus a congregation may be more supportive when they are all praying for a person, and that may lead to helpful communication or other support provided by the social network. The support could be psychological or physical. These effects would occur to the extent that the community knows about the praying.

There is one effect that is both social and personal: when a person knows that others are praying for him or her. The effect is social in that communication of the praying is necessary for the effect and personal in that it affects the person psychologically and is open to a placebo interpretation.

Personal and some social effects have been investigated by psychologists for a long time. Brown (1994) and Frances and Astley (2001) are appropriate introductions to that literature. Ladd (2007) has laid out a system for examining prayer psychologically. It encompasses the motivation to prayer, the qualities of prayer including physical postures, the experiential content of prayer, and the ramifications of prayer. While he recognizes a possible
supernatural efficacy of prayer, that is external to the psychological model. The psychological model is restricted to nomothetic processes.

With intercessory prayer, there need not be a personal or social effect. The effect may happen without the person knowing it and without involving the person’s social network. Such an effect would be objective. Some have tried to research intercessory prayer for such effects.

CURRENT INTERCESSIONARY PRAYER RESEARCH

The purpose of intercessory prayer research is to determine if prayer has an objective effect. It is researchable and several studies have been conducted. However these studies are not without their problems.

Research Design

The purpose of a research design to test for the effect of intercessory prayer is to eliminate alternative explanations for the effect if found. First, control must be made for other conditions that might affect the outcome. For example, Galton (1872/2001) concluded that prayer showed no effects because the sovereigns, who were prayed for by everyone in the nation, lived only 64 years, which is the shortest of 11 groups reported, who were not prayed for by everyone. Of course, there were other differences between the lives of sovereigns and other occupations of that time. It may be that the sovereigns, having often intermarried with each other, had a different genetic base. Or perhaps they ate only the best meats, which in that time would be the fatty meats. Of course, there are a host of other differences that could affect the health of one group compared to another. There are so many alternative explanations for Galton’s results that they cannot be informative. The study is only useful in showing the need for controlled studies.

The problems of Galton’s study are now answered by using randomly assigned intervention and control groups. The control group does not receive the intervention, in this case, intercessory prayer, but, because of the random assignment, will not on the average differ from the intervention group. The random assignment controls for all possible influences that need to be controlled regardless of our knowledge of them.

Other alternative explanations that must be addressed in prayer research concern the fact that research design must control for the alternative explanation of the placebo effect, in this case, an effect on the person from knowing that prayers are being offered for him or her. This can be controlled either by having a group that thinks they may be prayed for when no such prayers are being made or by not telling people in the intervention group that they are being prayed for. They are blind as to whether they are in the intervention group.
Research on intercessory prayer needs to control for someone, including physicians and nurses when health is the issue, treating the patient differently because prayers are being given for them. Hence people involved with the person must be blind as to whether they are in the experimental or control group. Evaluating the outcome also must be controlled. A person reading a file for outcome data may make different assumptions and mistakes if he or she knows which person is in which group. Hence the evaluations must also be blind.

Therefore a study needs to randomly assign participants to the intervention group and to at least one control group who believe they may be prayed for just as much as the intervention group. A second random control group would be useful to establish recovery rates for people who have not been told they may have someone praying for them. The study needs to be blind to the condition of the participants in three senses: the participants are blind, others who interact with the participants are blind, and those who enter and process the data are blind to the conditions of each participant.

The Criterion Problem

Prayer research has only investigated areas in which the outcomes would be generally viewed the same by all observers, such as survival of illness and quick recovery. If the research moves to other areas, then who is praying for what may matter. I succumbed to the temptation to pray that the Cowboys, in an important football game, would intercept the opponent’s pass on the next play. To my delight it happened! However, there may have been some mighty prayers on the other side for, a couple of plays later, the Cowboys fumbled the ball and the opponent recovered. Such trivial cases aside, the answer to one person’s prayer may be offset by another’s. An example would be of a prayer for speedy recovery of the patient that is offset by others praying for a nurse, a prayer that God could answer by having the patient stay in the hospital a few more days to help the nurse. These effects are countered by random assignment but may result in lower effect outcomes.

The answer to prayer is assumed in these studies to be a reduced death rate. It is used as the primary criterion in the studies of prayer noted below. However, is this criterion always the best? Consider the case of a child with major trauma to the brain followed by irreversible coma. It was obvious that doctors accepted that the boy would never recover most brain functions. What is the prayer in this case? My prayer was for either a healing miracle or that the boy would “go to be with God.” He died, and I believe that was an appropriate answer to prayer in this case. But prayer research finds that to be evidence against prayer.

The criterion of survival is problematic because Christians may not pray for life in times when others would expect them to do so. Consider Htu Htu
Lay, a Christian Karen leader against the oppression of his people by the Burmese military government (FreeBurmaRangers.org). Given that his life may often be in danger, we on the outside would expect him to pray for safety. That is not what he prays for. Instead he prays “not that I may live a long time, for we all must die. I pray that when I die I shall be doing God’s work.” Long life is not the criterion that is the most relevant to many Christians.

Gorsuch (2002/2007) notes that one Christian perspective is that God is less concerned with long life and more concerned with how that life is lived and with suffering. Jesus in the Garden (Luke 22) prayed for release from the task that led to the crucifixion, but added, “Your will be done.” Suffering on the cross was the result of that prayer. How would this be judged in research on intercessory prayer?

The NT has virtually no passages that tell us how to live longer. Nor does it address this topic at a length suggesting it is a major issue. Yet there are passages about comforting the afflicted and visiting the sick. Healing is a topic and a focus of Jesus’ miracles, but these were mostly with long-term infirmities and only occasionally about critical illness. Even Jesus lived a short life (33 years), and died with minimal suffering for a crucifixion. God seems more concerned with suffering than with long life. Perhaps some deaths should be put in the “God answered prayer” category.

Whether a prayer is answered is always open to the post hoc problem. One may consider a yes or a no to be the answer to a prayer. Such situations are common in ideothetic life. Numerous questions can be considered answered with either response. These include an application to graduate school, taking a driving license test, and proposing marriage. However, these are simple questions with relatively objective answers. For prayers with numerous possible answers, such as “God, what major should I study?” measuring the outcome of the prayer is probably too subjective and ideothetic to be able to use it as a criterion for research at this time.

Present Intercessory Prayer Research

Hodge (2007) has reported a meta-analysis of the literature testing intercessory prayer using 17 studies found through multiple searches of the literature. Meta-analysis is an excellent method of summarizing studies. Instead of subjectively comparing studies, meta-analysis summarizes studies statistically. Effect sizes are entered for each study, along with other information such as the number of participants. The studies are weighted by that number and an overall effect size is computed and tested.

Hodge (2007) reports a significant effect of $p < .02$. The effect size was .17. However this is based on the published studies. It is possible that studies of prayer are more likely to be published if there are significant results. Journal editors are more receptive to significant studies. Authors are
more likely to work to get significant studies published. Fortunately, meta-
analysis includes a procedure by which one can determine the number of
unpublished studies needed to reduce the observed effect size to nonsig-
nificance, assuming only nonsignificant studies go unreported. Hodges re-
ports that it would require 32 unreported nonsignificant studies to reduce
the effect size to nonsignificance.

Note the small effect size requires a large number of participants dis-
tributed equally between a prayed-for group and control group(s), in order
to be significant. If the number were just enough for a .17 to be significant,
half the studies would fall below this mean of .17. Therefore an even larger
number is needed. Details of the study would need to be examined in a power
analysis to estimate the number needed as well as the investigator’s tolerance
for Type II errors, but it would seem that at least 300 are needed to have a
chance of finding a significant effect with both Type I and Type II errors
held to the .05 level.

The small effect size may be a function of uncontrolled variables, such
as low reliability of measures or the impart of other events not reported in
the study. With some outcome criteria, the results may be heavily skewed in
that almost all may be healed and so the number not healed is small. This
also makes effect sizes smaller although meta-analysis can correct for such
restrictions of range. Other elements often found in a meta-analysis are not
reported by Hodge. Meta-analysis can also correct effect sizes for unreli-
ability, which means that Hodge’s effect sizes are smaller and less significant
than if they had been so weighted.

Another set of unreported analyses of considerable importance is that of
comparing different types of studies for whether they produced the same
results. Probably due to the limited number of empirical studies of interces-
sory prayer, Hodge did not evaluate whether triple blind studies, in which
neither the patient, those evaluating the outcome, nor the medical staff knew
who was in the prayer or control groups, found different results than single
blind or nonblind studies.

We can examine the results for studies that used at least double blind pro-
cedures and had a reasonable number of participants. Here they are:

• Benson, Duseck, Sherwood, Lam, Betha, Caperter, and others (2006), not
  significant (N = 1,201).
• Alves, Whelan, Hernke, Williams, Kenny, and O’Fallon (2001), not sig-
  nificant trend (N = 799).
• Harris, Thoresen, McCullough, and Larson (1999), significant. (N = 990).
• Byrd (1988), significant (N = 393).
• Leibovici (2001), significant (N = 3,393).

Hodge did not publish the effect sizes for these but each is large enough to
find significant a much smaller correlation than .17. It appears that when the
studies are limited to only the better ones, there is limited support for a positive, though small, prayer effect.

So far the effects, if any, are small. In fact they are so small, that giving the patients a drug placebo may be more effective. There could be some increase in effect size upon investigating parameters in which the studies differ. These include the number, type, and nature of the prayers as well as the characteristics of those who are praying.

A problem that future research in this area may wish to address is what other prayers are being offered. In a study with 1,000 patients, random assignment assures that there are few differences between the control and experimental groups. The other prayers by the patient and by those who know the patient will average out to be the same. But yet other prayers, which could be measured by asking the patients about their own prayers and those in their religious support system, could be measured and parceled out statistically. The result would be a more accurate effect size, possibly raising it above a trivial effect.

Another question not examined in Hodge’s meta-analysis was whether there were dosage effects. In medicine, strong doses of a medicine are generally found to have more powerful effects than weaker doses, additional evidence that the intervention is successful. In the studies, what was meant by a prayer varied widely, as did the characteristics of those praying. They were all religiously committed, but the number in Hodge’s (2007) summary of the studies varies from one person praying for the list of patients to 15 Christians praying for individuals, to rotation among a group of 40 that included multiple faiths such as Buddhists, Christians, shamans, and secular people praying. Such a diversity of interventions makes the overall test from the total set of studies difficult to interpret.

The research on prayer needs to consider each person’s religious motivation. That may be Intrinsic Religiosity (Allport and Ross 1967), in which the person prays as a part of his or her religious life, or Extrinsic and Personal (Gorsuch and McPherson 1989; Kirkpatrick 1989). The latter do not pray as a part of their religious life but pray because they have a problem. The problem leads to the prayer. Extrinsic religion generally relates to negatives about one’s life. On the other hand, Intrinsic motivation is associated with positives in one’s life. Just correlating prayer with other personal or social outcome measures is not meaningful, for the correlation will suggest negatives if the sample contains primarily Extrinsic or positives if the sample contains primary Intrinsic. With sizable proportions of each in the sample, they would offset so that the correlation would be zero. Measuring the type of religious motivation clarifies the situation, and one may well find both a positive and a negative correlation with a dependent variable from the two types of motivation.
The nomothetic research on prayer is not yet sufficient to decide whether there is an objective effect. The effect, if any, may be stronger if some of the considerations mentioned above are controlled in the study.

Nomothetic Considerations in Intercessory Prayer

The purpose of this chapter is broader than just whether research has or has not found intercessory prayer to be effective. Instead the purpose is to examine the possible meanings of such studies given the nomothetic and ideothetic distinction explained above. The following discussion uses the intercessory prayer research as a starting point for that discussion.

Casteel (1955) includes the following as problems with intercessory prayer: (1) It may be that God only acts through natural law. Then there is no ideothetic action and theology has become deistic with a creator who is no longer in charge of his creation. In this case, miracles as generally defined do not happen and so will not be found in nomothetic research. (2) It can be argued that God, loving his people, already knows and so provides for them, but this becomes a theological determinism taking people out of the decision making. No parent would always do the best for their child by making all the decisions without the child’s input, so why should God? (3) Then there is the criterion problem we noted above: what is an answer to a prayer? If the answer is yes, it is clearly identified. But the answer may be given in multiple ways. The answer could be “no,” “wait,” or “here is a better answer for your need than what you prayed for.” In the eyes of faith, all prayers have an answer even if the answer is, “no comment.” These are all problems for nomothetic intercessory research.

Another question can be raised about intercessory prayer. Does God wish to pay attention to the researcher’s prayers? Somehow adding one person or even a set of people to pray for a stranger seems less important than the many Christians already praying for that person who know them well. Moreover, there are the thousands of general prayers said each day, praying for all those who are sick. Only if one sees the research’s people as special mediators between the divine and the human would the effect be large enough to not be drowned in the sea of other prayers. The only other option is to assume that God just adds up the number of prayers and then helps those with the most so that adding the research team prayers would add sufficiently to all those being said for a few people that it would put them over the top. This is in keeping with theologies that sponsor prayer wheels so that the prayers are made sufficiently often to manipulate a spiritual force into doing what we desire, but this is a poor fit with Christian theology.

Brown (1994) raises the question of who is to blame if an action fails. If an experiment fails to find an established effect, then Brown suggests the
experimenter may be blamed, whether it be the fault of failed apparatus, the experimental design, too few subjects, or other such causes. The ineffectiveness of prayer research may be caused by experimenter-linked phenomena. There are answers that are too readily given for the perceived failure of prayer, “you did not have enough faith,” but Brown’s point is that this is a consideration from within a religious community and tradition.

There are those who hold that intercessory prayer is not testable but for other reasons than the nomothetic-ideothetic distinction of this chapter. Brown (1994) presents several of these from multiple sources. The most prominent argument is to suggest that the purpose of prayer is less petitions that treat prayer as magic, than prayer as a relationship with God. This, however, changes it from an intercessory prayer to another type of prayer.

Would establishing intercessory prayer on a nomothetic base place prayer in the realm of magic? “Any technology is magic to those whose culture does not understand the technology” is a phrase that could be used to illustrate the problem. How does magic differ from technology? General usage suggests several differences. First, magic is based in arbitrary words and movements, such as “abra cadabra” and waving a wand over a top hat. Another difference is the source of the power that underlies the action. Magic is considered to be a force that has powers over events that are not directly related to the words said or motions made. But these do not seem sufficient critiques, for there are devices such as computers that can be programmed to respond to verbal commands and motions. These devices can have considerable power, such as sending missiles with nuclear bombs.

For magic, other than the illusions of a magician, the difference appears to be having powers over a spiritual force, a spirit that understands and can hear language even though it shows no physical presence. So far, science has not needed spirits as an explanatory principle, and our paradigms are marked by action through a chain of physical events rather than the action of invisible spirits. This may change as more Third World people become involved in scholarship, for the nonbelief in spirits is not universal.

Inclusion of the Leibovici (2001) study along with other intercessory prayer research may be controversial because it was retrospective. A person gave a prayer for half the patients after treatment was completed but before the outcomes were examined. This is unusual because one of the conditions normally expected in assuming that an intervention caused the results is that the cause be prior to the outcome. Leibovici was following a different line of thought: God is outside of space and time, and so can act in prior times as well as current ones. The limitation is that God does not change an outcome after we have observed it.

Note that God could only perform a miracle post hoc before those praying know the results. Hence one can pray post hoc for events that are completed until one knows the outcome. This begins to feel like a good basis for
a science fiction story. What, for example, might happen if we pray for a completed event for which we already knew the outcome? If God is independent of time, he could change it; this would be an answer to the prayer. While God may be able to track parallel time lines, we cannot. So if he answered such a prayer, we would remember it as it has been changed, and have no memory of our prayer that changed it. Then there would be no prayer to influence God to change it, and so no answer to any prayer. It is best to go with Leibovici and keep the discussion to those results that we do not yet know.

Is retrospective intercessory prayer legitimate science? By the definition in this chapter that science examines that which replicates, the answer lies in others applying this easy methodology to more cases. If it replicates, science should take it seriously. Before we reject post hoc prayer, we need to realize that physics is not quite as certain about cause and effect, at least at the quantum level, as often implied. In quantum physics, Schroeder’s cat may not be said to be alive or dead until someone checks to see, which is after the quantum event. This is the same line of thinking as in Leibovici.

A nomothetic definition of science contains no assumption that a cause precedes an event. The only problem is the interpretation of cause when the cause comes after the event. But attempting to solve a problem before there is replication of the results, to assure that there is a problem, is not a good use of our time. Therefore judgment on the interpretation of post hoc prayer needs to await replication of Leibovici (2001).

Science normally accepts replicated data consistencies as facts when they fit within a paradigm providing a physical vector for action. Light produces action by the light streaming from the source, which can be followed and measured at any point. Of course, the major question about a replicable prayer effect is the interpretation of the causal agent. Religious people immediately say the cause is God, while nonreligious people posit a hidden unknown cause or something more general. James (1902/1985) posited an unknown force whereas Cattell (1938) laid out a theory of a theopsyche, a psychological force that operates as if there were a supernatural force. Not having a known vector for the action is not an unknown problem in science. Despite the discussions of graviton waves, there is no known physical vector by which gravity operates. In the last volume of his treatises, Newton makes exactly this point and suggests that it shows God acting (Simpson 1992). If there is a replicable nomothetic effect in prayer studies, then a search for a physical vector or action would be warranted. This would be part of the effect of the function of God as creator, and not a miracle as normally defined.

Nomothetic research can only establish replicable data consistencies and so prayer only as a natural phenomenon. This does not mean it is not, as in Christian theology, from God, but that it is a consistent effect. However, being natural, it would operate by some mechanism, which would be the
object of further research, and would not be considered a miracle by our standard definition.

**Ideothetic Considerations in Intercessory Prayer**

The traditional definition for a miracle is always open to a god-of-the-gaps effect. When little was known of the nomothetic principles of medicine, any healing could have been attributed to a unique event outside of natural law, and so a miracle. Thus a person’s not getting cholera in the medieval era may have been seen as an answer to prayer but might be explained today by that person following the custom of only drinking tea brewed the old-fashioned way, heat the water until it is at a rolling boil, which would have had the then-unknown effect of killing the cholera germs in the water.

On the other hand, few areas of medicine are so well developed that only the nomothetic seems to apply. People respond differently to illness and medications when physicians treat by general nomothetic principles. “The research shows successful results in 82 percent of the cases, so let’s try it,” which may leave God room to intervene in the other 18 percent. A conversation with any medical doctor will turn up many cases of unusual results. This may be interpreted as possible miracles by the religious or as variations on undocumented nomothetic principles in the case of the nonreligious, both of which are, of course, equally post hoc explanations. Whether there is an ideothetic event that can be labeled a miracle would need to be evaluated by ideothetic standards. These are set by the theologians of each faith that wishes to address the issue of miraculous answers to prayers.

**Interaction between Nomothetic and Ideographic**

There is no reason for an event being just nomothetic or just ideothetic. Joint events happen in everyday life. A unique event such as a successful birth has nomothetic aspects; the course of the pregnancy is well known for the average woman, as are the effects of medical interventions to control a wide range of possible problems. Yet, for that mother, the birth is a very ideographic event and may also be ideothetic for the physician if unusual situations arise. Events can be both nomothetic and ideothetic. Therefore it is possible to have miracles combining with nomothetic events. Every science-based clinical treatment, whether by physicians or psychologists, is based on bringing the nomothetic of science into the ideothetic of a person’s life. God may also bring the ideothetic into a nomothetic event.

If there is an obvious cause for the answer to the prayer, that may or may not be considered an answer to prayer. Some Christians consider a prayer for healing to be answered if the doctor changes the patient’s prescription and
the new one is more effective. Indeed, it is common for people to pray for
the doctor to make the best decisions for the patient. Few limit an answer to
prayer to just those events that cannot be explained any other way.

Interpreting normally nomothetic events to be answers for a prayer dis-
tinguishes between direct causation and sanctioning. Smith and Gorsuch (1987)
note that courts use this distinction. The physical cause is that which is the
direct physical agent. The sanctioning agent is that which guarantees the
outcome by this physical agent or, if that is not effective, by another physical
agent. When one prays for improved health, the physical cause may be from
the taking of a medicine, from a surgeon’s skill, or from a set of radiation
treatments. The sanctioning agent is the doctor who selects between these
physical causal agents. If the first physical causal agent selected by the doc-
tor is ineffective, the doctor selects another physical agent. The physician
may try several approaches until one works. Surely God can do the same.
The prayer is for God to sanction the healing by assuring that some physical
agent produces the healing. Is it any less of a miracle if God works through a
physician? Indeed, is that not the task of a Christian physician, to heal people
in response to God’s desires for all to be healed?

This approach means the ideothetic intervention can take place in any of
the events leading up to the answer to a prayer. It may be, as Murphy sug-
gests, in the randomness of quantum physics. Or it could be in helping a
physician recall a critical article at the most appropriate time. Or it could be
in having a cab handy to take a woman suddenly going into labor to the hos-
pital. All of these look nomothetic, only when we look just to the immediate
cause, and forget that God as a sanctioning agent may work through dozens
of physical agents.

From an ideothetic perspective, God can work miracles at all levels of
causal chains and outside of causal chains. This means that God can work
along with natural law, and that it may be difficult to separate the nomothetic
from ideothetic interventions.

CONCLUSION

Science only works with replicable events; and miracles, being nonrep-
licable, are outside the scope or domain of what have been called the exact
sciences. However, the normal definition of miracle makes the mistake of
creating a false dichotomy. It implies things must result from either an im-
mediate natural cause or a completely ideothetic intervention. With our
distinction between nomothetic and ideothetic, there is ample reason to
suggest that both are widely involved in our lives. Both scientific interven-
tions and God’s actions flowing from sanctioning a given result may well be
the correct understanding; and our definition of miracle may need to shift
to take that into account.
What happened at the feeding of the 5,000? God may have been a direct cause by multiplying the loaves and fish; or he may also been a sanctioning cause by reminding a number of the people at the start of the day to bring plenty of food, and motivating them to share it. Indeed, God may have done all those things at once. The appropriate disciplines need to define miracles so that both are recognized as acts of God, one by direct cause and one through sanctioning. Who of us is ready to limit God as to the natural and transcendental channels through which he can and may operate? This is his world and all the channels, presumably, are open to his action.

REFERENCES


Conclusion

J. Harold Ellens

The sixteen chapters in this volume represent the careful work of 17 scholars, representing a number of different countries in North America and Europe. Moreover, they present the perspectives of serious-minded analysts of both science and the Bible. These perspectives vary as widely as the continuum of human imagination and analysis can stretch. This work has been made urgently necessary because of the fact that inadequate cooperation has been achieved, so far, between the contribution that the empirical sciences and the biblical and theological sciences can bring to bear upon the study of miracles in the ancient world and in our own day. The exact sciences and the psychosocial sciences have tended to follow a trajectory of investigation in one direction and the biblical and theological or spiritual investigations have tended along a different track. The former, understandably, follows the avenue of the hermeneutic of suspicion, while the latter, also understandably, holds itself open to a hermeneutic of analytical but less suspicious and more affirming inquiry.

The virtual absence of pages or sections in professional and scientific journals devoted to religious, spiritual, or theological perspectives, on issues dealing with paranormal human experiences, is most unfortunate. The Journal for Psychology and Christianity and The Journal for Psychology and Theology are virtually alone in the American world, as sophisticated professional journals that regularly seek and publish empirical and clinical research on phenomena in the fields of psychosocial science and spirituality or religion. In the European Community the Journal of Empirical Theology has undertaken similar concerns. Division 36 of the American Psychological Association also deals continually with interests in these matters.
Of course, the function of peer-reviewed journals is to publish replicable research results. However, perhaps a section in each professional journal should be devoted to reporting incidents of the paranormal so that a universe of discourse and a vehicle for discussion could be developed for taking such data into consideration. At present it is not discussed in the scientific realm because no instrument is available for collecting and processing the data. It is important to create a culture of openness to the paranormal experiences humans have regularly and really, so that the frequency of such events can be understood more clearly, recorded, described, named, categorized, and analyzed.

We may discover, if we create such instruments for raising our consciousness level and increasing our information base, that there are eight things that strike us with surprising urgency. First, we may discover that the incidents of paranormal events are more frequent, should I say more normal, than we think. Second, we may discover that they fit into specific patterns that can be categorized and even analyzed more readily than we have imagined. Third, that may bring to the surface of our thought processes insights about the nature and sources of paranormal events that are currently ignored because we have not reduced our mystification about them, simply because we have not done the first and second steps above.

Fourth, we may find that the paranormal events are apparently more normal, in terms of the frequency and universality with which humans experience them, than are the normal. Fifth, we may discover that we can establish criteria for sorting out the real from the unreal in what we are now referring to as the mystifying paranormal. Sixth, we may discover that a solicitation of anecdotal reports will produce such a wealth of information as to give rise to an entirely new arena for productive research. If the spirit of God is communicating with our spirits by way of paranormal experiences, presumably it is because God thinks we can hear and interpret the content, making unmystifying sense of it if we study it carefully, just like we have of the stuff of this world that we have mastered by our science. Seventh, not all truth is empirical data. A great deal of our understanding of the truth about this mundane world we know from phenomenological investigations and heuristic interpretations. These seem to be trustworthy instruments of research that are particularly suited to investigation of the reported experiences humans have of the paranormal. We should be able by means of them to create useful theories, data collection and management systems, hypotheses, and laws regarding the human experiences of the paranormal.

Eighth, if one assumes the existence of God and God’s relationship with the material world, immediately a great deal of data is evident within the worldview of that hypothesis, suggesting a good deal of available knowledge about God. Much of this is derived from the nature of the universe itself. Much of the evidence for God’s nature and behavior, within that model of investigation, is replicable, predictable, testable, and the like. Why would we
not assume the same is true of the world of the paranormal, if we studied it thoroughly and systematically? We call it paranormal only because we have not yet discovered or created a framework of analysis by which its data can be collected and managed.

Some decades ago a great deal was made of chaos theory and entropy in interpreting the unknown aspects of the material world, particularly in the field of astrophysics and cosmology. It turned out that we always think that things just beyond our model and grasp are chaotic. That is only because we do not understand them, not because they are not coherent, lawful, and predictable. We think things just beyond our ken are chaotic because our paradigm is too limited to manage the data out there. Life is always a process of that kind of growth that requires constant expansion of our paradigms. When we cannot expand our paradigm to take in the next larger world that we are discovering, either because of our fear or blockheadedness, we shrink and wither, and our scientific systems go down.

At this very moment we stand upon a threshold demanding an expansion of our scientific paradigm to take in the data of the paranormal in a manner that it can be brought into new but coherent models of knowledge and understanding. William Wilson said in chapter 15 that part of the difficulty in studying the spiritual and related paranormal data lies in the fact that each event is intensely personal and unique. Each scientific exploration of that event must deal with an equation in which \( n \) is 1. That makes scientific extrapolations impossible. I suggest, however, that if we undertook the program I propose above, we might well discover that \( n \) is much more than 1, and in that case we would be off and running along a trajectory that would teach us how to expand our present limited scientific paradigms to take in the additional real data. We have attempted to begin that enterprise with this volume of scholarly investigation.
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About the Editor and Advisers

Editor

J. Harold Ellens is a research scholar at the University of Michigan, Department of Near Eastern Studies. He is a retired Presbyterian theologian and ordained minister, a retired U.S. Army colonel, and a retired professor of philosophy, theology, and psychology. He has authored, coauthored, or edited 165 books and 167 professional journal articles. He served 15 years as executive director of the Christian Association for Psychological Studies and as founding editor and editor-in-chief of the Journal of Psychology and Christianity. He holds a PhD from Wayne State University in the Psychology of Human Communication, a PhD from the University of Michigan in Biblical and Near Eastern Studies, and master’s degrees from Calvin Theological Seminary, Princeton Theological Seminary, and the University of Michigan. He was born in Michigan, grew up in a Dutch-German immigrant community, and determined at age seven to enter the Christian Ministry as a means to help his people with the great amount of suffering he perceived all around him. His life’s work has focused on the interface of psychology and religion.

Advisers


**Alfred John Eppens** was born and raised in Michigan. He attended Western Michigan University, studying history under Ernst A. Breisach, and received a BA (summa cum laude) and an MA. He continued his studies at the University of Michigan, were he was awarded a JD in 1981. He is an adjunct professor at Oakland University and at Oakland Community College, as well as an active church musician and director. He is a director and officer of the Michigan Center for Early Christian Studies, as well as a founding member of the New American Lyceum.

**Edmund S. Meltzer** was born in Brooklyn, New York. He attended the University of Chicago, where he received his BA in Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations. He pursued graduate studies at the University of Toronto, earning his MA and PhD in Near Eastern Studies. He worked in Egypt as a member of the Akhenaten Temple Project/East Karnak Excavation and as a Fellow of the American Research Center. Returning to the United States, he taught at the University of North Carolina—Chapel Hill and at The Claremont Graduate School (now University), where he served as associate chair of the Department of Religion. Meltzer taught at Northeast Normal University in Changchun from 1990 to 1996. He has been teaching German and Spanish in the Wisconsin public school system and English as a Second Language in summer programs of the University of Wisconsin. He has lectured extensively, published numerous articles and reviews in scholarly journals, and has contributed to and edited a number of books.

**Jack Miles** is the author of the 1996 Pulitzer Prize winner, *God: A Biography*. After publishing *Christ: A Crisis in the Life of God* in 2001, Miles was named a MacArthur Fellow in 2002. Now Senior Advisor to the President at J. Paul Getty Trust, he earned a PhD in Near Eastern languages from Harvard University in 1971 and has been a regents lecturer at the University of California, director of the Humanities Center at Claremont Graduate University, and visiting professor of humanities at the California Institute of Technology. He has authored articles that have appeared in numerous national publications, including the *Atlantic Monthly*, the *New York Times*, the *Boston Globe*, the *Washington Post*, and the *Los Angeles Times*, where he served for 10 years as literary editor and as a member of the newspaper’s editorial board.

Grant R. Shafer was educated at Wayne State University, Harvard University, and the University of Michigan, where he received his doctorate in Early Christianity. A summary of his dissertation, “St. Stephen and the Samaritans,” was published in the proceedings of the 1996 meeting of the Société d’Études Samaritaines. He has taught at Washtenaw Community College, Siena Heights University, and Eastern Michigan University. He is presently a visiting scholar at the University of Michigan.
About the Contributors

Benjamin Beit-Hallahmi is the author, coauthor, editor, or coeditor of 17 books and monographs on the psychology of religion, social identity, and personality development. Among his best-known publications are *The Psychology of Religious Behaviour, Belief and Experience*, *The Psychoanalytic Study of Religion*, and *Psychoanalysis, Identity, and Ideology*. In 1993 he was the recipient of the William James Award (Division 36 of the American Psychological Association) for his contributions to the psychology of religion.

Kamila Blessing has been an Episcopal priest for 25 years and has served a number of Episcopal parishes and 13 other denominations. She has been applying Murray Bowen’s Family Systems Theory to all kinds of organizations for over 20 years. Blessing holds a PhD in New Testament with a minor in Semitic studies from Duke University and further degrees in Systems Science from the University of Pittsburgh. She was licensed as a mediator by the Lombard Mennonite Peace Center and has become known as a “turnaround specialist.” She is the founder and president of Blessing Transitions Consultants (www.Mediate.com/Blessing), working to heal crises, transition problems, and conflicts for parishes, families, communities, and organizations. She has been involved in healing by prayer for 40 years and has had a national healing ministry for much of that time. Her book, *It Was a Miracle: Stories of Ordinary People and Extraordinary Healing* (Augsburg Fortress, 1999) demonstrates the essence of that ministry as well as the extraordinary relevance of the Bible for modern people.
Richard L. Gorsuch is senior professor of psychology at the Fuller Graduate School of Psychology and a prolific researcher, best known for his studies in the psychology of religion, substance abuse, social psychology, and statistics. A member of the School of Psychology faculty since 1979, he is known across the social sciences for his publication of *Factor Analysis* (1983), and is the developer of the statistical software program Unimult. Gorsuch is a licensed social psychologist, an active member of the Religious Research Association, and a fellow of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion and the American Psychological Association. He has served in editorial capacities for journals including *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion and Educational and Psychological Measurement* and has authored and contributed chapters to over 20 books. Current projects include *Integrating Psychology and Spirituality: An Introduction* and his next book is *Building Peace, the 3 Pillars Approach*. He has also been listed among the 2,000 Outstanding Scholars of the 21st Century by England’s International Biographical Centre.

Louis Hoffman is a core faculty member at the Colorado School of Professional Psychology, a college of the University of the Rockies, and an adjunct assistant professor of psychology at the Graduate School of Psychology at Fuller Theological Seminary. He serves on the editorial board of the *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* and *PsycCRITIQUES: APA Review of Books*, and is coauthor of *Spirituality and Psychological Health*, *The God Image Handbook for Spiritual Counseling and Psychotherapy: Theory, Research, and Practice*, and the forthcoming book *Brilliant Sanity: Buddhist Approaches to Psychotherapy*. Dr. Hoffman is active in writing and presenting on existential-integrative psychotherapy, religious and spiritual issues in therapy, theoretical and philosophical issues in psychology, and diversity issues.

Erkki Koskenniemi is adjunct professor at the Finnish universities of Helsinki, Joensuu, and Åbo Akademi. He has contributed to the research of Classical Antiquity and Theology (Early Judaism and New Testament). He is the author of many books.

Antti Laato is professor in Old Testament exegesis and Jewish Studies in Theological Faculty at Åbo Akademi University in Turku, Finland. He has written several books. His current research interests are Rewritten Bible, Jewish-Christian encounters, and the Children of Abraham.

Andre LaCocque is professor emeritus of Hebrew Scripture and former director of the Center for Jewish-Christian Studies at Chicago Theological Seminary. He is the coauthor (with Paul Ricoeur) of *Thinking Biblically: Exegetical and Hermeneutical Studies*; (with Pierre-Emmanuel LaCocque) of *Jonah:*
Russ Llewellyn received his biblical and theological training at Bryan College, Dallas Theological Seminary, for his ThM, as well as studying at Fuller Theological Seminary. He received his scientific training at Fuller Graduate School of psychology where he received his PhD degree in clinical psychology. He has been in practice as a clinical psychologist for 31 years now, until recently, full-time. He started a church when he was fresh out of seminary. His long-time professional memberships have been in the Christian Association for Psychological Studies, where he has been a presenter, and the American Association of Christian Counselors. He is a writer and has produced two books: Ultimate Worth, and Gaining Life’s Prize. Both deal with the issues of self-esteem from the standpoint of God’s eternal perspective. The second deals with how our glory is shaped by adversity.

Katherine McGuire studied at the University of Innsbruck, Austria, and the University of San Francisco, earning a BA in English. She also holds a diploma from the St. Ignatius Institute, a Great Books, philosophy, and theology program. She received her MS in Elementary Education and has taught at the elementary and college level, which included two years of teaching in Ankara, Turkey. She is currently a doctoral student pursuing a degree in clinical psychology at the Colorado School of Professional Psychology, a college of the University of the Rockies.

Patrick McNamara is director of the Evolutionary Neurobehavior Laboratory in the Department of Neurology at the Boston University School of Medicine and the VA New England Healthcare System. Upon graduating from the Behavioral Neuroscience Program at Boston University in 1991, he trained at the Aphasia Research Center at the Boston VA Medical Center in neurolinguistics and brain-cognitive correlation techniques. He then began developing an evolutionary approach to problems of brain and behavior and currently is studying the evolution of the frontal lobes, the evolution of the two mammalian sleep states (REM and NREM), and the evolution of religion in human cultures.

Petri Merenlahti received his PhD from the University of Helsinki, Finland, and is currently working as postdoctoral researcher in its Department of Biblical Studies. His fields of specialization include New Testament studies, narrative criticism, and psychological biblical criticism. His publications include...

John W. Miller is professor emeritus of Religious Studies at Conrad Grebel University College, University of Waterloo, Ontario, Canada. His ThD is from the University of Basel. His current fields of specialization are in the canon history of the Bible. He was cofounder and cochair of the Historical Jesus Section in the Society of Biblical Literature. He also served as director of Psychiatric Rehabilitation Services at Chicago State Hospital. His writings include Meet the Prophets: A Beginner’s Guide to the Books of the Biblical Prophets—Their Meaning Then and Now (1987); The Origins of the Bible: Rethinking Canon History (1994); Jesus at Thirty: A Psychological and Historical Portrait (1997); Calling God “Father”: Essays on the Bible, Fatherhood & Culture (1999); How the Bible Came to Be: Exploring the Narrative and Message (2004); and a commentary on Proverbs (2004). In publication is a Bible study program (The Ecumenical Bible Study) introducing the Bible in the light of the intentions of those who created it.

Stephen J. Pullum is professor of Communication Studies at the University of North Carolina, Wilmington, where he teaches courses in Communication Theory, Intercultural Communication, and the Rhetoric of Faith Healing, among others. He is the author of “Foul Demons, Come Out!": The Rhetoric of Twentieth-Century, American Faith Healers. Dr. Pullum has won UNCW’s Distinguished Teaching Professorship and the Chancellor’s Teaching Excellence Award.

Reka Szent-Imrey is a student in psychology at University of Massachusetts at Boston and a research associate at the Institute for the Biocultural Study of Religion in Boston, Massachusetts.

William P. Wilson is professor emeritus of Psychiatry at Duke University Medical Center and is currently distinguished professor of counseling at Carolina Evangelical Divinity School. He has been active in evangelical circles for the last 40 years. He has lectured in 31 countries in Africa, Asia, and Europe on Christian psychiatry. He has published numerous articles on the subject of neuroscience, psychopharmacology, psychopathology, and the psychology of the Christian religion. He is the author of *The Grace to Grow* and *The Nuts and Bolts of Discipleship*. 
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Series Foreword

The interface between psychology, religion, and spirituality has been of great interest to scholars for a century. In the last three decades a broad popular appetite has developed for books that make practical sense out of the sophisticated research on these three subjects. Freud expressed an essentially deconstructive perspective on this matter and indicated that he saw the relationship between human psychology and religion to be a destructive interaction. Jung, on the other hand, was quite sure that these three aspects of the human spirit: psychology, religion, and spirituality, were constructively and inextricably linked.

Anton Boisen and Seward Hiltner derived much insight from both Freud and Jung, as well as from Adler and Reik, while pressing the matter forward with ingenious skill and illumination. Boisen and Hiltner fashioned a framework within which the quest for a sound and sensible definition of the interface between psychology, religion, and spirituality might best be described or expressed.¹ We are in their debt.

This series of general interest books, so wisely urged by Praeger Publishers, and particularly by its editors, Deborah Carvalko and Suzanne I. Staszak-Silva, intends to define the terms and explore the interface of psychology, religion, and spirituality at the operational level of daily human experience. Each volume of the series identifies, analyzes, describes, and evaluates the full range of issues, of both popular and professional interest, that deal with the psychological factors at play (1) in the way religion takes shape and is expressed, (2) in the way spirituality functions within human persons and shapes both religious formation and expression, and (3) in the
ways that spirituality is shaped and expressed by religion. The interest is psychospiritual. In terms of the rubrics of the disciplines and the science of psychology and spirituality this series of volumes investigates the operational dynamics of religion and spirituality.

The verbs *shape* and *express* in the above paragraph refer to the forces that prompt and form religion in persons and communities, as well as to the manifestations of religious behavior (1) in personal forms of spirituality, (2) in acts of spiritually motivated care for society, and (3) in ritual behaviors such as liturgies of worship. In these various aspects of human function the psychological and/or spiritual drivers are identified, isolated, and described in terms of the way in which they unconsciously and consciously operate in religion, thought, and behavior.

The books in this series are written for the general reader, the local library, and the undergraduate university student. They are also of significant interest to the informed professional, particularly in fields corollary to his or her primary interest. The volumes in this series have great value for clinical settings and treatment models, as well.

This series editor has spent an entire professional lifetime focused specifically on research into the interface of psychology in religion and spirituality. This present set, *Miracles: God, Science, and Psychology in the Paranormal*, is an urgently needed and timely work, the motivation for which is surely endorsed enthusiastically by the entire religious world today, as the international community searches for strategies that will afford us better and deeper religious self-understanding as individuals and communities. This project addresses the deep psychosocial, psychospiritual, and biological sources of human nature that shape and drive our psychology and spirituality. Careful strategies of empirical, heuristic, and phenomenological research have been employed to give this work a solid scientific foundation and formation. Never before has such wise analysis been brought to bear upon the dynamic linkage between human physiology, psychology, and spirituality in an effort to understand the human mystification with apparent miraculous events in our experience and traditions.

For 50 years such organizations as the Christian Association for Psychological Studies and such graduate departments of psychology as those at Boston University, Fuller, Rosemead, Harvard, George Fox, Princeton, and the like, have been publishing important building blocks of research on issues dealing with religious behavior and psychospirituality. In this present project the insights generated by such patient and careful research are synthesized and integrated into a holistic psychospiritual worldview, which takes seriously the special aspect of religious tradition called miracle. This volume employs an objective and experience-based approach to discerning what happens in miracle stories, what that means, and in what ways that is an advantage or danger to our spiritual life and growth, as we pursue the ir- repressible human quest for meaning.
Some of the influences of religion upon persons and society, now and throughout history, have been negative. However, most of the impact of the great religions upon human life and culture has been profoundly redemptive and generative of great good. It is urgent, therefore, that we discover and understand better what the psychological and spiritual forces are that empower people of faith and genuine spirituality to open their lives to the transcendent connection and give themselves to all the creative and constructive enterprises that, throughout the centuries, have made of human life the humane, ordered, prosperous, and aesthetic experience it can be at its best. Surely the forces for good in both psychology and spirituality far exceed the powers and proclivities toward the evil.

This series of Praeger Publishers volumes is dedicated to the greater understanding of Psychology, Religion, and Spirituality, and thus to the profound understanding and empowerment of those psychospiritual drivers that can help us (1) transcend the malignancy of our earthly pilgrimage, (2) open our spirits to the divine spirit, (3) enhance the humaneness and majesty of the human spirit, and (4) empower our potential for magnificence in human life.

J. Harold Ellens  
Series Editor

NOTE

As I noted in the introduction to volume 1 of this three-volume set, miracle stories live forever. They appear in all religious traditions, and though the traditions change greatly over the centuries, the miracle stories stay the same. Krister Stendahl, professor of biblical studies at Harvard Divinity School and bishop of the Lutheran Church of Sweden, wrote the foreword to Anton Fridrichsen’s *The Problem of Miracle in Primitive Christianity*. In it he approved of Fridrichsen’s “theological conviction that genuine faith and vital religion is and will remain mythical, miraculous, and resistant to theological reductionism—orthodox, conservative, liberal, or radical.”1 Regardless of the perspective one takes on the faith tradition that holds one’s attention, the miracle stories remain the same kind of enigma from generation to generation.

The questions asked today by devoted believers and agnostic critics, by theological scientists and empirical scientists, by mythologists and rationalists, are the same questions as the ancient Greeks, Romans, and Christians were asking about the miracles reported and celebrated in their world 2,000 years ago. Numerous explanations of miracle stories have filled uncountable volumes over the centuries. None, so far, quite satisfies the hunger of the human mind and spirit for a final answer to the questions, Are miracles real, or a chimera of our imaginations? What really happened, and what does it mean?

Is it possible to devise thoroughly rational and naturalistic interpretations of this mystifying phenomenon, but then, when that is said and done, we have the sense that while the rationale holds up well enough, the intriguing center of the issue has not been exploded. Likewise, we may provide a
literal, psychological, or mythological explanation of the miracle stories and discover in the end that we have not quite understood the depth of the narrative that gives us the ultimate clue. We cannot escape the haunting suspicion that in the miracle stories, the transcendent world has somehow touched our mundane existence. That is true whether it is a biblical narrative or a newspaper report of some spontaneous remission of disease in the twenty-first century. Paul J. Achtemeier observed that, as regards our understanding or accounting for the biblical miracles, particularly those performed by Jesus and recorded in the Synoptic Gospels, in the end, we must face the fact that Jesus really did heal that demon-possessed boy in Mark 9, for example, and if our explanation does not reflect that forthrightly, we have distorted the forthright Gospel report.\(^2\)

The 18 scholars who have joined me in this volume present the perspectives of serious-minded analysts of both science and religion. These perspectives vary as widely as the continuum of human imagination and analysis can produce. Some are sure that psychodynamics explain all apparently miraculous phenomena. Others are sure that miracles can be accounted for only as direct spiritual interventions of God’s spirit and that they are enacted from the transcendent world. Still other scholars who have composed the chapters for this volume see clearly a more holistic view of the human organism and of history. Their chapters reflect ways in which God, science, psychology, and spirituality are profoundly interlinked and interactive and can be demonstrated empirically, phenomenologically, and heuristically as comporting with such a paradigm.

This quest for acquiring a more satisfying grasp of the meaning of miracles is popular and virtually universal among humankind. A recent journal article titled “Citizen, Heal Thyself” launched its investigation of spontaneous healings and other medically related paranormal phenomena in an intriguing manner. Speaking of people who had been diagnosed as terminally ill with such diseases as cancer and other advanced disorders, the author expostulated, “They should be dead. But a tiny number of people conquer lethal diseases. Are they just lucky—or can these rare self-healers teach us something?” After a careful and intriguing report on a number of miraculous healings, the author concludes her article by observing, “Although medical advances have dramatically improved outcomes in certain cancers—treatment of testicular cancer and childhood leukemia now routinely lead to cures—when it comes to many other cancers, modern medicine has yet to come close to nature’s handiwork in inexplicably producing spontaneous remission without apparent side effects,” such as those who have been miraculously healed, experiencing thus the “rarest hints of nature’s healing mysteries.”\(^3\)

It is the focused intent of this volume to explore the answer to that question as a central part of our open-ended scientific quest for truth in the world of materiality, mind, psyche, and spirit: human and divine.
NOTES


Today, nearly everyone knows the name and work of Richard Dawkins. He is busy proving that God does not exist. It is not clear from his work what kind of god it is that he is sure does not exist, but he is sure that science proves conclusively that there is no divine source, design, root, ground, or energy evident in the world as we are able to discern it. We need to take him seriously for a number of reasons. First, his professional pedigree is impressive: he is a professor of science at Oxford University in the United Kingdom. Second, his work is carefully reasoned and meticulous in attention to detail, so far as it goes. Third, he has published profusely and in a style that engages his readers, both laypersons and professionals. Fourth, his titles are winsome and intriguing and have drawn to his work a worldwide readership, indeed a surprising philosophical and scientific following.¹

A couple of years ago, Time magazine featured a remarkable article by David Van Biema, which addressed Dawkins’s case regarding God.² It posed Dawkins in dialogue with theist Francis Collins, which proved to be a stimulating and in some ways delightful debate about evolution and creation, particularly about the intelligent design (ID) argument. Collins is a genome scientist and pioneer. He perceives that the material outcomes of the genome project, thus far evident, point to God, and the God to whom the heuristic evidence points exists outside of space, time, and materiality. Collins is a straight-speaking Christian who was converted from atheism as an adult. His recent work on the evidence for theism, that is, for the belief that God is the source and sustainer of the material world, is titled The Language of God: A Scientist Presents Evidence for Belief.³ The dialogue between Dawkins
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and Collins took place on September 30, 2006, and the magazine article is a transcript of that exchange.

Dawkins’s essential claim is that all the evidence that the empirical sciences can provide regarding the origin and nature of the material world leads inevitably and exclusively to the conclusion that the world that we can study scientifically is a product of natural causes. This conclusion is reinforced, he believes, by the fact that everything in the material world can be explained by processes of cause and effect, which we have identified as within the material world: we have analyzed them, and we can understand them virtually completely, without reference to transcendent sources or forces. Collins, however, is sure that the cause-and-effect dynamics evident throughout this material world is not in tension with, and certainly does not rule out, the presence of a creator and sustainer of the universes. Indeed, he confidently asserts that Dawkins’s claim only explains our understanding of the causes and effects by which the material world functions and leaves out any reasonable accounting for its origin.

Moreover, Collins makes the telling point that humans experience a great deal of reality that is not material and not accountable in terms of what we know about material reality. He is referring to the real world of human experiences, which reflects much of the function of the human psyche, spirit, and parapsychological ways of knowing: intuition, ESP, prescience, and the like. While Collins does not say so specifically in his dialogue with Dawkins, it seems fair to say that if we concentrated on studying these dimensions of human experience more assiduously, we would be able to develop a more complete science of the psyche and the spirit. Such a science is likely to lead us to empirical perceptions of the action of the divine spirit in these areas of the psyche and the spirit. Surely such a science will also lead us to further understanding of the empirical facts of psychology and biochemistry at play in the experiences of the world of the psyche, the spirit, and the paranormal.

Such a science of the spiritual world has not developed because no energy has been given to a scientific examination of that world. Hence we have no language formulated for handling such empirical, phenomenological, and heuristic investigations of the world of the spirit. No universe of discourse has been developed for discussing it. No categories have been defined for managing the abundant data that seem available for its study. No comprehensive and systematic collection of the data of paranormal human experiences has been undertaken. If such a science were developed, as William James called for a century ago, undoubtedly we would be surprised how much hard data we would have with which to work and what precise categories of evidence we would be able to develop.* We revere faith and scientific progress, but at the same time we hunger for miracles. Van Biema’s point is to ask whether those two sides of the human quest are compatible.
The positions taken by Dawkins and Collins constitute the far ends of a continuum of potential notions about the relationship between the truth understood from a secular perspective and the truth understood from a theistic perspective. The late Stephen Jay Gould spent his entire professional life defending his position as a secular scientist, namely, a person who could explain all that is explainable about life and our world, without taking God into account. He spent his career as a famous paleontologist on the faculty of Harvard University and published a number of the most interesting books ever written in the field of science. Toward the end of his life, however, he reassessed the situation of his secular pursuit of knowledge, largely as a result of a running dialogue he had carried out with a close friend, a Jesuit scholar. Gould published his new perspective in a fine little volume titled *Rocks of Ages.*

In this volume, Gould floated the theory that both the conclusions of empirical science and of the science of theology are truth. The value and valence of their truth is equal since all truth, as truth, is equally true. Moreover, he asserted that both can be vindicated, even if they are verifiable in markedly different ways: empirical science by the hermeneutic of suspicion and theological science by the science of rational faith, phenomenology, and heuristic method. Gould made room for these widely differing sets of truth by asserting that the hard sciences and the theological sciences operate in two different worlds, within which each has developed a model of truth. He affirmed the right and truth of each by describing them as existing in separate, non-overlapping magisteria. This was a fascinating and ingenious way of handling the impasse. The difficulty with it was that it left one with a haunting sense that a slight of hand had been performed. Whatever truth we can access, as humans, one would expect that somewhere, somehow, truth is unitary.

**QUEST FOR A UNIFIED THEORY**

Van Biema tried to push the matter further back to a focal point of unity or integration of all truth, as he teased out the dialogue between Dawkins and Collins. He set the stage with the note that the debate about science versus God has really been double-faced in the last decade or two. On one hand are the Darwinian suggestions that natural law governs the forces of material development and that natural selection explains the unfolding of life forms. On the other hand has been the question whether the Darwinian theory of evolution can withstand the empirical evidence for ID in the structure and function of the material universe and the rise of life forms. Those who argue for ID offer the scientific challenge that the gaps in the evolutionary story “are more meaningful than its very convincing” total model.

Can creationism and ID stand up against Darwin? Can religion hold its own against the increasingly forceful, sometimes strident, claims and evidence
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of science? Van Biema points out that this is an age-old debate, but it is now getting more intense because both sides seem increasingly confident of the apparently incontrovertible evidence they bring to the table. Admittedly, the empirical sciences are becoming more able to

map, quantify and change the nature of human experience. Brain imaging illustrates—in color—the physical seat of the will and the passions, challenging the religious concept of a soul independent of glands and gristle. Brain chemists track imbalances that could account for the ecstatic states of visionary saints or, some suggest, of Jesus. Like Freudianism before it, the field of evolutionary psychology generates theories of altruism and even of religion that do not include God. Something called the multiverse hypothesis in cosmology speculates that ours may be but one in a cascade of universes, suddenly bettering the odds that life could have cropped up here accidentally, without divine intervention. 7

Besides Dawkins and Collins, Van Biema cites many other worthy authorities on both sides of the issue. Cardinal Schonborn dismisses the empirical scientists by calling their work scientism and evolutionism, as though it were a sect or a heresy. He argues that they are trying to claim that science is more than a measure and to make it a worldview and touchstone of truth that will replace religion. However, “Dawkins is riding the crest of an atheistic literary wave.” 8 Sam Harris’s The End of Faith 9 sold a half million copies since 2004. He followed it with the also very popular Letter to a Christian Nation, 10 attacking theism in general and ID in particular. Tufts University professor Daniel Dennett wrote Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon, 11 which has also appealed to a large audience of readers.

A summary of Van Biema’s narrative of the Dawkins-Collins dialogue describes articulately the history and nature of the current impasse regarding science and God. He cites many of the most interesting sources. Some of the more prominent figures are Victor Stenger, an astrophysicist, who wrote God, the Failed Hypothesis, 12 Carl Sagan, whose essays on science and God’s absence were posthumously published as The Varieties of Scientific Experience, 13 and Lewis Wolpert, who calls himself an “atheist-reductionist-materialist” and who says that “religion is one of those impossible things.” 14 Dawkins himself claimed that “if ever there was a slamming of the door in the face of constructive investigation, it is the word miracle. Once you buy into the position of faith, you [begin] losing your scientific credibility.” 15 Collins replies, “I would challenge the statement that my scientific instincts are any less rigorous than yours. But my presumption of God and thus the supernatural is not zero, and yours is.” 16

Joan Roughgarden of Stanford is a biologist who has written Evolution and Christian Faith, providing a strong defense of the desire of most of us for a model that takes seriously both the theological sciences and the hard
sciences and integrates them into a unified whole. This is the model for which Collins consistently argues. Van Biema notes that “Collins’ devotion to genetics is, if possible, greater than Dawkins’. Director of the National Human Genome Research Institute since 1993, Collins headed a multinational 2,400-scientist team that co-mapped the 3 billion biochemical letters of our genetic blueprint. . . . Collins continues to lead his institute in studying the genome and mining it for medical breakthroughs.” While Dawkins looks at the scientific data and says there is no evidence for God, Collins looks at the scientific data and says two things: first, God is not limited to time, space, or materiality, so scientific exploration of phenomena of time, space, and materiality is not going to be able to describe much of God; second, there are numerous loci in the scientific database that strongly suggest the presence and probability of a transcendental force behind and in the material world.

Ruling God In or Out of the Equation

Collins might have gone further with this line of thought. He might have said, as I think he implies, that because the above is true, a number of other facts cascade from it. First, it would be foolishly unscientific to rule out dogmatically the possibility of God’s presence and action behind and within the material universe. If science cannot study God because it is limited to the empirically material, it cannot rule God out. Second, therefore, it is an imperative of authentic science that we take seriously the heuristic and phenomenological data, scientifically available, for the probability of God’s presence and action in the material universe. Third, if one posits the assumption of theism, the hypothesis of divine presence and action in this world resolves many of those problems, which, in a secular perspective, prove to be large gaps in the model. Fourth, much more comprehensive data are required to rule God out of the equation than to rule in both the possibility and probability of God. This is particularly true, in view of the intimations and phenomenological evidence we have, from both the normal and paranormal arenas of identifiable human experience, which suggests the operation of a transcendent force and world that impinges on our material domain.

Collins’s line of thought and illustrations confirms this specifically. He argues that in our material world, six universal constants make possible the evolution of inorganic and organic existence. If any one of these had been off in the slightest degree, the entire experiment of creation of life as we know it would have been impossible. For example:

The gravitational constant, if it were off by one part in a hundred million million, then the expansion of the universe after the Big Bang would not have occurred in the fashion that was necessary for life to occur. When you look at the evidence, it is very difficult to adopt the view that this was just
chance. But if you are willing to consider the possibility of a designer, this becomes a rather plausible explanation for what is otherwise an exceedingly improbably event—namely, our existence.\(^\text{19}\)

Of course, Dawkins’s response is that with the multimillions or billions of universes, the odds are tolerable that somewhere out there, the conditions for life would have happened just as a result of the random experimentation of matter. What is mysterious in this response is that it assumes an origin of all those universes, without including in the model what the source of matter and energy was in the first place. That is a sizable gap, one would think. Collins’s response was that one must posit an infinite number of universes out there that we cannot observe, all experimenting with an infinite number of possible combinations, to strike just the lucky option for life; or one must say there was a plan. He concludes, “I actually find the argument of the existence of a God who did the planning more compelling than the bubbling of all these multiverses. So Occam’s razor—Occam says you should choose the explanation that is most simple and straightforward—leads me more to believe in God than in the multiverse, which seems quite a stretch of the imagination.”\(^\text{20}\)

Dawkins wished to claim that a God hypothesis impedes science and that faith is the opposite of and obstructs reason. Collins correctly clarifies that both of those propositions are egregious claims and specious untruths. Faith and reason are handmaidens of each other. Moreover, modern science and the enlightenment were launched mainly by men and women who were both towering religious figures and heroic scientists. The community of scientists is still, in the majority, made up of persons of faith. Dawkins tended to think of religious perspectives mainly in terms of an exaggerated notion based on extremely literalist fundamentalist Christians. That assumption or claim is, of course, naive, uninformed, and prejudicial to the discussion. Obviously, he does not know much about the general communities of healthy and reasonable believers.

In the end, the Dawkins-Collins dialogue led the former to declare, “My mind is not closed. . . . My mind is open to the most wonderful range of future possibilities, which I cannot even dream about. . . . When we started out and we were talking about the origins of the universe and the physical constants, I provided . . . cogent arguments against a supernatural intelligent designer. But it does seem to me to be a worthy idea . . . grand and . . . worthy of respect. . . . If there is a God, it’s going to be a whole lot bigger and a whole lot more incomprehensible than anything that any theologian of any religion has ever proposed.”\(^\text{21}\) Who would not say amen to that central truth?

Collins observed that after a quarter century of scientific work, he agreed with everything Dawkins said about the field of science but states that
“there are answers science isn’t able to provide about the natural world—the questions about why instead of the questions about how. I’m interested in the whys. I find many of those answers in the spiritual realm. That in no way compromises my ability to think rigorously as a scientist.”

It is the questions of the hows and whys that we are interested in as we prepare this volume on Miracles: God, Science, and Psychology in the Paranormal—Medical and Therapeutic Events.

WHERE GOD AND SCIENCE MEET

In 2006 a remarkable set of three volumes, titled Where God and Science Meet: How Brain and Evolutionary Studies Alter Our Understanding of Religion, was published in the Praeger series Psychology, Religion, and Spirituality. It was ably edited by Patrick McNamara, one of the contributors to the first volume of the present work. The titles of his three volumes indicate their relevance to this chapter. They are, in sequence, Evolution, Genes, and the Religious Brain; The Neurology of Religious Experience; and The Psychology of Religious Experience. It is self-evident that the underlying assumption in the scientific work of McNamara’s three volumes is the pervasive relevance of the interface and integration of research in religion, neurology, and biochemistry.

McNamara’s first volume reports at length the way in which genetics and environment affect our sense of values, authority, rigidity, and religiosity. It demonstrates the empirical evidence for the relationship between affective neuroscience and sacred emotions as well as the data for and against theories and models of religiosity as an evolutionary adaptive mechanism. One chapter articulates the relationship between religion, the evolution of the human mind, and the unique functions of the human brain. His second volume addresses a wide range of issues in neurochemistry and neuroelectronics, as they relate to religious experience and spiritual practices. These data are illustrated by some surprising empirical insights from parkinsonism studies and epilepsy. A remarkable chapter describes in surprising detail the interaction of the neurocognitions of meaning making, religious conversion, and spiritual transformation. The consistent conclusions of the various aspects of this volume indicate the scientific evidence for the intricate interface in humans of the brain, mind, biochemistry, electrical system, and religious experience.

Volume three, as one would guess from the title, deals with mind, brain, meaning making, psychodynamics, neuropharmacology, spirituality, mysticism, and religious practices. The chapter themes vary from the study of entheogens, daydreaming, and religion and intolerance to what we can learn from serious psychopathology about science and religion and the cross-cultural consistency of their useful connection. Forty noted scholarly
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scientists joined McNamara in producing these erudite volumes, analytically assessing the interface of the hard sciences and the psychosocial sciences in our understanding of the relationship of science and religion. The phenomenal amount of vital new science generated in and by McNamara’s three volumes gives the lie to the notion that religion and science cannot meet. The truth is that they cannot get on with their own business, except in their necessarily cooperative mutual quest for the whole truth in all its facets. They need each other if they care to be authentically comprehensive in the pursuit of their respective disciplines.

Exploring the Limits

Similar exploration of the frontiers of the brain sciences and religion was undertaken in 2003 by five scientific researchers, including Richard Dawkins. The God Experiments were reported, by John Horgan, in Discover: Science, Technology, and the Future. The God Experiments, briefly described, were laboratory analyses by means of electronic machines for measuring brain activity, which endeavored to stimulate and measure specific areas of the brain that the experimental scientists who designed the process believed were the areas which incited religious experience. The experiments were launched on the assumption that religious experiences were generated by natural processes of brain stimulation resulting from environmental influences such as ingesting specific chemicals in food or drink or being exposed to environmental conditions that incited such experiences. The scientists assumed that inducing apparent religious experiences by specific brain stimulation would rule out any notion of God or the divine spirit causing the religious experiences reported by numerous humans throughout history. Dawkins offered to be the experimental subject for Michael Persinger’s empirical attempt to induce “religious experiences in subjects by stimulating specific regions of their brains with electromagnetic pulses.” Dawkins said he was very disappointed that he did not experience any transcendental experiences like “communing with the universe or some other spiritual sensation.” He said he had always been curious to explore mystical experiences from the inside, so to speak. Horgan reports,

Many researchers, like Persinger, view the brain as the key to understanding religion. Others focus on psychological, genetic, and biochemical origins. The science of religion has historical precedents, with Sigmund Freud and William James addressing the topic early in the last century. Now modern researchers are applying brain scans, genetic probes, and other potent instruments as they attempt to locate the physiological causes of religious experience, characterize its effects, perhaps replicate it, and perhaps even begin to explain its abiding influence.
Horgan declares that religion is the most complex indication of the most complex subject of human exploration: the human mind. He notes that scientists study religious experience for a wide variety of motives and assumptions, stating, “Some of them hope their studies will inform and enrich faith.” Some are embarrassed by religion as a relic of our past and want to be rid of it. I would like to summarize Horgan’s article in terms of how it relates to one theme: is religion a matter of ritual behaviors or of beliefs? “Is it best studied as a set of experiences, such as the inchoate feelings of connection to the rest of nature that can occur during prayer or meditation?”

Horgan reports a number of analytic experiments in the relationship between religion and science. In *Faces in the Clouds*, the Fordham anthropologist Stewart Guthrie, with the back of his hand, dispenses religion to the ash heap of human fantasy. Humans are inclined, he thinks, to project human qualities on the universe, and so we create the illusion of gods out there. The absurdity of this enterprise, he claims, is evident in the multiplicity and multiformity of the gods humans have projected over time, all of which represent a systematic religious anthropomorphism. This inclination to anthropomorphic projection is an adaptive evolutionary trait, Guthrie is certain, and while it is an illusion, it nonetheless assisted primitive humans to survive the trauma of life and loss and the fear of the unknown of time and eternity. He concludes,

> Over millennia, as natural selection bolstered our unconscious anthropomorphic tendencies, they reached beyond specific objects and events to encompass all of nature . . . until we persuaded ourselves that “the entire world of our experience is merely a show staged by some master dramatist.”

Guthrie humorfully cites Darwin to the effect that this adaptive trait is not limited to humans but is also true of other higher mammals. Apparently, a dog can imagine that a natural object is animated by spirits since Darwin’s dog growled at a parasol lifted off the ground by a slight breeze. I find claims like those of Guthrie, in this case, and Darwin, in his psychoanalysis of his dog, to be immensely humorful and quite absurd. This is not because I think their challenge of theism is misplaced, but because their argumentation is so naive and trivial. Obviously, Guthrie is projecting on religion and on human spiritual experience a model that most theists would not recognize as their view of God or spirituality. He seems to have some trivial memory of a bad Sunday school lesson, to which he paid little attention in the first place. He thinks that is spirituality or true religion.

Apparently Guthrie is enormously ignorant of the mainstream of healthy spirituality on the part of massive communities of us who are more prepared to explore honestly the human quest of and encounter with the paranormal
and the divine in our experience than we are prepared to superficially write off that facet of demonstrable human reality. Moreover, apparently, Guthrie has never developed a model for conceptualizing this facet of his own personal nature and experience so as to be able to note, recognize, name, and remember his own spiritual experiences. One does need to have the eyes to see and the ears to hear, or no reality can impose on us firmly enough to register as reality. That is true in any field and of any facet of our growth, development, and scientific exploration. Major scientific breakthroughs, for example, usually impress the scientists who make the surprising discoveries as having been amply evident right there before their noses all along. It just required a certain new perspective to grasp what was right there in front of their faces.

As regards Darwin’s assessment of his dog’s growl, it would be interesting if he would explain to us more clearly what he thinks that dog was thinking and why he thinks that. I notice that dogs are smart. I watch my golden retriever observe a squirrel and then think over whether, at her age, chasing the squirrel is worth the trouble. Lately, she usually decides to live and let live, and lies down instead by our warm hearth. She is 13.5 years old, the human equivalent, they tell me, of about 100 years. Considering how I feel at three fourths that age, I can readily understand her decision to leave that squirrel alone. So it seems clear that higher mammals have some reflective and decision-making ability that goes far beyond mere instinctual reaction. However, how Darwin can determine that his dog has a spiritual response or religious ritual reaction to the mysteriously moving umbrella is beyond my comprehension. Fear of the unknown, or of the unimaginable or unusual, is not inherently and inevitably a religious dynamic or a spiritual function of the human or canine creature.

A somewhat different approach to human experiences of spirituality, religion, mysticism, and the paranormal is evident in the excellent work of Andrew Newberg, a neuroscientist from the University of Pennsylvania. Horgan treats Newberg’s perspective extensively in the God Experiments. Newberg notes that people from almost all religious traditions report very similar mystical and paranormal experiences, suggesting to him that a common neural pathway is active in the human brain and psyche in all these cases of spiritual perception. Such brain activity has been scanned by positron emission tomography for decades. Newberg goes a step further, employing single-photon emission-computed tomography technology. He has discerned that in deep meditation or contemplation, the posterior superior parietal lobe of the brain, which orients us in time and space, markedly decreases its neural activity. Persons with damage in that part of the brain have difficulty sensing where they are and at what point their bodies end and the rest of the material world begins. The decrease in neural activity in the posterior superior parietal lobe during meditation increases a
person’s sense of unity with the rest of the material universe, diminishing one’s sense of the boundaries between the self and the external world. One of Newberg’s subjects described her meditation experience as “dissolving into Christ-consciousness.”

Horgan’s report on Newberg continues:

Intriguingly, Newberg has found some overlap between the neural activity of self-transcendence and of sexual pleasure. . . . Just as orgasms are triggered by a rhythmic activity, so religious experiences can be induced by dancing, chanting, or repeating a mantra. And both orgasms and religious experiences produce sensations of bliss, self-transcendence, and unity; that may be why mystics such as Saint Teresa so often employed romantic and even sexual language to describe their raptures.

The overlap between rapture and orgasm isn’t total. The hypothalamus, which regulates both arousal and quiescence, seems to play a larger role in orgasms, while the brain’s frontal lobes, the seat of higher cognitive functions, are apparently more active during spiritual practices. Nevertheless, Newberg concludes, an “evolutionary perspective suggests that the neurobiology of mystical experience arose, at least in part, from the mechanism of the sexual response.”

Newberg may be making a larger leap of illogic than necessary in suggesting that mystical neurobiology arose from sexual response, but surely he is correct in demonstrating that they are related and, in many crucial ways, similar. Humans have been aware of this at some intuitive level, of course, for a long time. It has long been the case that only in sexuality and spirituality does the use of the language sequence we apply to both make sense: contact, communication, connection, communion, union, arousal, ecstasy, and eternity or transcendence. The crescendo is not accidental, but rather primal and comprehensively descriptive of both sexual play and spiritual practice.

It is probably the case that the life force at the center of the human self is the driver of both sexuality and spirituality, the two being different languages or universes of discourse for that central force when it reaches out for union with another human and when it reaches out for the transcendent or for God. Horgan notes that electroencephalography and magnetic resonance imaging indicate that the neurobiology of both sexuality and spirituality are just as Newberg suggests, though considerably more complex than his technology was able to indicate.

As implied earlier, Persinger explains religious experience as pathology. He contends that the independent functions of the right and left hemisphere of our brains are responsible for many mystical experiences. Our sense of self is maintained in our left hemisphere, and it may sense the notions of self resident in our right brain hemisphere as another self. This would explain experiences of a sensed self within our purview. “Depending upon our circumstances and background, we may perceive a sensed presence as a ghost,
angel, demon, extraterrestrial, or God. Religion (or at least the experience of God), Persinger’s research suggests, might be a cerebral mistake." Persinger holds that his testing results confirm the work of Wilder Penfield in the 1950s.

The God Gene

Horgan next presents the work of Dean Hamer, director of genetic research at the National Cancer Institute. Hamer’s research is directed toward identifying a gene that makes religious behavior and spiritual experience meaningful for humans. Hamer defines intrinsic religiousness as the desire to pray often and to feel the presence of God. He focuses on monoamines and chemical neurotransmitters, and identifies an allele (variant) of the gene, vesicular monoamine transporter (VMAT), that corresponds to higher scores for what he has defined as spirituality. Francis Collins says that Hamer’s claims for the VMAT variant are exaggerated.

Horgan then observes that “Rick Strassman has proposed a theory even more reductionist and far-fetched than Hamer’s, yet one that has empirical support.” Strassman is a psychiatrist, and in his book The Spirit Molecule, he claims that spirituality is prompted by dimethyltryptamine. This single chemical, according to Strassman, is naturally generated by our brains and “plays a profound role in human consciousness,” triggering “mystical visions, psychotic hallucinations, alien-abduction experiences, near-death experiences, and other exotic cognitive phenomena.”

In authorized human-subject research with volunteers at the University of New Mexico, Strassman administered this psychedelic chemical. His report on subject experience included the following: “Many . . . subjects reported quasi-religious sensations of bliss, ineffability, timelessness, and reconciliation of opposites; a certainty that consciousness continues after death of the body; and contact with ‘a supremely powerful, wise, and loving presence.’” However, his results were not uniformly positive for the subjects, and so he discontinued that research. This type of research is very interesting but has two limitations: first, it is not possible to certify that the positive experiences of the test subjects is the same phenomenon as that experienced in nonchemically induced experiences of a religious, spiritual, or paranormal nature; second, however we are to understand or interpret all this research, the data do not definitively rule God in or out of the scientific equation or of the equation of human experience. A broader range of data, a better model of critical categories, and a sensible universe of discourse for this kind of paranormal human experience are required to construct a science of the spiritual or paranormal world of human events.

Horgan concludes sensibly by acknowledging that neither the exact sciences nor the social sciences, in their present state, can assure us whether God exists out there objectively in a transcendent sphere beyond the boundaries
of time, space, and materiality, or only in our perceptions of what our para-normal experiences mean. As my grandmother lay dying, she joked with the family about many things, including her husband, whom she affectionately called “Pa” and who had preceded her in death. In the middle of a sentence, she suddenly looked up toward the corner of the room, stopped talking, and then, with an enormous expression of delight on her face, reached out her hand and said, “Oh, Pa!” Then she was gone. Was that the mystical imagination of a dying brain, or did she know what she saw and what she meant? Sometimes a cigar really is a cigar!

To put it in Horgan’s closing words:

Why do some scientists continue the search for the roots of religious experience? Shouldn’t such claims of oneness with God be judged by their fruits, rather than their roots, as William James wrote in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*? Researchers may persist at these efforts because such studies offer the potential to alter our lives. In principle, these findings could lead to methods—call them “mystical technologies”—that reliably induce the state of spiritual insight that Christians call grace and Buddhists, enlightenment . . . Suppose scientists found a way to give us permanent, blissful, mystical self-transcendence. Would we want that power?41

Of course we would, if it gave us the psychospiritual skills to heal our bodies of dreadful diseases or relieve suffering and prolong life. As I write this, my friend is dying at age 68. Cancer is killing him. He has successfully fought it, leukemia and pancreatic cancer, for 25 years, but now it is finally taking him down. He is getting very thin. The cancer is eating his nutrition intake faster than his body can get to it. He will die today or tomorrow. I would welcome the power around the edges of which the scientists are working, if I could go into that hospital room this afternoon and provide Charlie the power to win this long fight after all.

John Matzke played football for Dartmouth. He got malignant melanoma in a lump in his armpit at age 30. They said he had 18 months to live. Ten years later, it had spread to his lung. They said the inevitable outcome was death within months. John took a month off, decided to delay standard treatment, and began long walks in the mountains. He improved his diet and began to meditate. In his meditation, John visualized himself healthy, with good, strong blood cells destroying the cancer.

After his month off, he returned to the Veterans Administration Hospital for further evaluation regarding a treatment regimen. Dr. “O’Donnell repeated the chest X rays to document the size and location of the tumor before starting treatment. But instead of the large cancerous lesion in Matzke’s lung, he saw . . . nothing. O’Donnell recalls, ‘When John came back a month later, it was remarkable—the tumor on his chest X-ray was gone. Gone, gone, gone.’ . . . Doctors would like to understand cases like Matzke’s.”42 So would we all.
Such cures intrigue us all, physicians, research scientists, patients, and friends of the suffering. This volume is about pressing on in that quest for an understanding of new psychospiritual ways we can improve the medical and therapeutic events that so dominate our tragic human adventure. We want and need to understand what is really going on in those moments when we experience miracles, when God, science, and psychology combine in the paranormal and all the rules seem, for a blessed moment, to be redemptively changed. This work is for that end.

NOTES


7. Ibid., 50.

8. Ibid.


15. Ibid., 52.
16. Ibid., 53.
19. Ibid, 52.
20. Ibid., 53.
21. Ibid., 55.
22. Ibid.
25. Ibid., 52.
27. Ibid.
28. Ibid.
29. Ibid., 54.
31. Horgan, God Experiments, 54.
32. Ibid.
33. Horgan, God Experiments, 54.
34. Ibid.
35. Ibid., 55.
37. Ibid., 56.
39. Ibid., 56.
40. Ibid., 57.
41. Horgan, God Experiments, 57.

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On June 28, 2005, someone pointed out to the partially blind Catholic Julio “Sly” Dones that a plaster statue of Jesus he had found in a dumpster in Hoboken, New Jersey, had miraculously opened its eyes. Soon the media was flooded with stories about the statue blinking its right eye, turning its head, and streaming tears (Arne 2005; Schapiro 2005; Associated Press 2005). The natural explanation is that the statue had embedded blue eyes made of glass and that the eyelids of the right eye had been partially broken off (Nickell 2006). Yet it was the news about a miracle that became widespread, not the natural explanation. This is true of nearly all reports of supposedly miraculous events. They have an enormous power to spread among people, while natural explanations of the same events are for the most part ignored or actively contested. What makes miracles so attention grabbing?

MIRACLES AND FOLK INTUITIONS

It is usually thought that miracles are events that take place against the laws of nature, with laws of nature here understood in a scientific sense. Theologian Calvin Miller, for example, writes (2003, 25), “But a single praying passenger may abrogate the force of physics and chemistry and order the world back to honoring God’s interruption of natural law.” Such a view cannot help us explain how and why persons identify certain events as miraculous. People classify certain types of events as miraculous quite irrespective of whether they know anything about natural laws. There were miracles in this sense long before there was science (see Pyysiäinen 2002, 2004b).
Thus, when we wish to explain human thinking and behavior, we must conceptualize miracles in such a way that contrasts them with our everyday expectations, not with science. Only then can we try to explain why certain types of events are regarded as miraculous. Miracles are phenomena that violate our intuitive expectations about such basic categories as solid objects, living things, and personal agents (Pyysiäinen 2002). The ways we think about objects that fall in these categories has been intensively studied in recent cognitive and developmental psychology and cognitive science (e.g., Atran 1987, 1990; Rosengren, Johnson, and Harris 2000; Bloom 2005; Geary 2005).

Let me first explain what I mean by categories (Bloom 2005, 39–63). Categorization means that we group concepts and ideas into classes. All apples, for example, belong to the class or category of apples. Every individual apple is not a totally unique entity because an individual apple shares many features with other apples. It is one instance of the general category of apples. Once we realize that an entity is an apple, we know many things about it just because we have accumulated knowledge of the category of apples. In this way, membership in a category always helps us understand what a given entity is like. We need not evaluate time and again whether this particular apple is edible, what it tastes like, and so forth. Once we know that it is an apple, we know many other things about it as well.

We have many kinds of intuitive expectations about the behavior of various types of entities because we have implicit knowledge of basic ontological categories. We automatically infer many things on the basis of membership in a specific category (Boyer 1994). Categories form hierarchies in the sense that apples, for example, is a subcategory of the higher-order category of fruit. The classical biological taxonomy consists of the hierarchy of species, genus, family, order, class, phylum (division), and kingdom. More recent, so-called cladistic taxonomies differ somewhat from this classical model, but the basic principle of categorization is the same (see Christoffersen 1995; Härlin and Sundberg 1998). An organism always belongs to only one species, genus, and so on. We humans, for instance, belong to the species sapiens, genus Homo, family Hominids, order Primates, class Mammals, phylumVertebrates, and kingdom Animals. There are also similar folk-biological taxonomies composed of essence-based, species-like groups and the ranking of species into lower-order and higher-order groups, with humans everywhere thinking about plants and animals in similar, highly structured ways (Atran 1987, 1990, 1998).

Such basic categories as solid objects, living things, and personal agents appear so early in the cognitive development of the infant that they seem to be genetically encoded (Keil 1979, 1989; Boyer 1994, 2001; Geary 2005). Pascal Boyer, citing Frank Keil, thinks that we have an intuitive ontology consisting of such categories as abstract object, living thing, animal, event,
and so on (Boyer, 1994, 101). We intuitively, spontaneously, and automatically categorize entities in these categories and apply folk-mechanical, -biological, and -psychological explanations as relevant in each category (Boyer 1994, 2001).

Intuitive ontology served us well as long as our species was not able to explore and manipulate the environment using advanced technology. Evolution shaped our minds to process things that were important for our ancestors to perceive to survive and reproduce. Our ancestors did not care about atoms or galaxies. Therefore new advances in technology, such as cameras, firearms, or the telegraph, appeared as miraculous to those who saw them for the first time. These inventions violated the intuitive expectations that characterize folk mechanics. Only new, accumulated experience and reflective thinking can help persons to become routinized in dealing with phenomena for the understanding of which we do not have a spontaneous capacity (Wolpert 1992; Keil and Wilson 2000).

This may never have been possible without new cognitive development that made our ancestors capable of detaching ideas from their immediate reference to the perceived world (see Cosmides and Tooby 2000; Geary 2005). This decoupling made it possible to think about absent conspecifics as though they were present, to lie, create art and fiction, and also form superstitious and religious ideas. In this perspective, miracles are phenomena that violate our intuitive expectations related to basic ontological categories (Pyysiäinen 2002). Boyer (1994) calls concepts involving such violations counterintuitive. Counterintuitiveness does not mean the same as “funny” or “not true”; it simply refers to the fact that a concept or mental representation contradicts human intuitive expectations about basic ontological categories.

Minimally counterintuitive representations contain only one violation of expectations (Barrett 2000, 2004; Boyer 2001; Atran 2002; Atran and Norenzayan 2004). There is evidence that such representations are better recalled than intuitive or maximally counterintuitive ones and that they might therefore be widespread in and across cultures (Barrett and Nyhof 2001; Boyer and Ramble 2001). The context in which counterintuitive concepts appear seems to be important, however. When subjects are presented mere lists of concepts, without a narrative context, they recall intuitive representations better than minimally counterintuitive ones. Minimally counterintuitive representations are better recalled only when the narrative context creates an expectation for counterintuitive concepts, which persons thus may actually interpret to be intuitive. As different types of discourses activate different kinds of background knowledge, persons can, for instance, expect the attack of aliens in a science fiction movie but not in the radio news (Norenzayan and Atran 2004; Upal 2005; Gonce et al. 2006; Upal et al. 2007; Tweney et al. 2006).
Yet treating a counterintuitive representation as though it were intuitive does not mean the breakdown of intuitive ontology altogether. Becoming routinized in using the concept of a bodiless mind (gods, spirits, angels) in one context does not override the general expectation that minds are embodied. Therefore the religious beliefs in traditions other than one’s own have often been considered to be superstitions (Martin 2004). Although miracles are events that, in principle, contradict intuitive expectations about basic ontological categories, it is possible to become routinized in regarding some such events as natural in the sense that they are something to be expected, although they cannot be predicted. If, for example, praying seems to heal a sick person, this is something a believer might expect, although she cannot foresee or predict in which cases it will be that God decides to heal a sick person because of the prayers of others.

Two things are important here. First, becoming routinized in expecting miracles to happen does not reduce the salience of miracles and make them purely ordinary events. On the contrary, supposed miracles are attention grabbing and memorable events because they are unpredictable, often relate to important things in life, and thus trigger highly emotional responses (see Pyysiäinen 2001, 97–139). Second, believing that God can work miracles does not mean that one has an explanation of the mechanism through which God acts. It is precisely for this reason that supposed miracles are unpredictable. As soon as one can point out a mechanism that produces a supposedly miraculous outcome, the miracle ceases to be a miracle, just as has happened in the case of firearms and cameras.

This means that it might be advisable to reserve the word *miracle* for counterintuitive events that violate intuitive expectations and have no scientific, mechanistic explanation. Moreover, miracles in the strong sense of the word are typically attributed to some supernatural agent; mere unexplained events are miracles only in the weak sense of the word (Pyysiäinen 2002).

It is possible, in principle, to violate intuitive expectations either by transferring agency to an artifact or to a natural object or by stripping an agent from a biological body (Boyer 1994). Similarly, the ontological boundary between mere things and living kinds can be transgressed in both ways, making stones alive or plants and animals mere dead matter. Transference of agentive properties gives us such representations as bleeding effigies and statues that hear prayers (see Nickell 1993, 19–100), while the denial of a biological body to an agent results in representations such as spirits or gods. It seems that most miracle beliefs are constructed by transferring agentive properties to a thing or a living kind or by transferring biological properties to a thing (see Thompson 1934, 4–200). This is reflected in, for example, the miracles Jesus is reported to have performed.
FOLK BELIEFS AND THEOLOGY

The following are among the miracles attributed to Jesus in the Epistles:

1. Matthew 17:27 (*New International Version* [NIV]): Jesus predicts that the first fish the disciples catch will have a four-drachma coin in its mouth.
2. Mark 8:22–26: Jesus heals a blind man by rubbing spit in his eyes.
6. Matthew 21:19; Mark 11:14: Jesus commands the fig tree never to bear fruit again.
7. Mark 16:19: Jesus is taken up into heaven.
8. John 20:19: Dead Jesus appears to his disciples through locked doors.

These miracles fit well in Stith Thompson’s scheme for classifying marvels in his *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature* (1934, 4–200). Thompson’s following seven main categories are derived from literate sources documenting folk beliefs:

1. otherworldly journeys
2. marvelous creatures
3. spirits and demons
4. remarkable persons
5. persons with extraordinary powers
6. extraordinary places and things
7. extraordinary occurrences

The eight biblical miracles listed previously correspond to the following eight subtypes in Thompson’s seven categories, respectively:

1. extraordinary swallowings (F910–23)
2. marvelous cures (F950–56)
3. extraordinary occurrences concerning seas or waters (F930–33)
4. extraordinary occurrences concerning seas or waters (F930–33); compare other marvelous powers (marvelous runners F681–81.5)
5. extraordinary trees, plants, fruit, etc. (F810–17)
6. journey to heaven (F11–17)
7. phantoms (F585)

Biblical narratives are naturally in the background of many folktales in Christian cultures (e.g., Loomis 1948); conversely, also, the biblical motifs have been influenced by the folk traditions of their time. Folk narratives come in various genres; not all beliefs are the object of serious belief. Types of folk narratives have been classified by sorting them according to the
criteria of factual versus fabulous and secular versus sacred (e.g., Littleton 1965). Myths, for example, are “extremely sacred and patently fabulous,” (Littleton 1965) while history is both factual and secular. Folktales (Märchen), for their part, are fabulous but secular, while sacred histories are sacred but factual. Legends, or sagas, are in the middle of both continua (Littleton 1965; see Pyysiäinen 2001, 223–25).

Whether persons actually believe in a specific miracle thus is not a simple yes or no question. Doubt is not part of intuitive judgment in everyday life (Kahneman 2003), and obvious facts are not regarded as objects of belief. Our everyday certainties are held true only in the implicit sense that we make inferences on their basis, not in the sense that we would consciously think that we have such and such beliefs (see Pyysiäinen forthcoming ). We do not usually decide whether a given belief is true before we start to employ it as a premise in reasoning (see Boyer 2001, 298–306). Persons do not believe in miracles because they somehow relax their otherwise strict criteria for evidence; rather, they relax these criteria because some counterintuitive claims about miracles have become plausible to them (Boyer 2001).

Theology, in contrast to everyday religion, is based on reflective thinking and a philosophical analysis and elaboration of the motifs in folk traditions (Wiebe 1991; Boyer 2001; Pyysiäinen 2004a). A theological view of miracles thus is more sophisticated (e.g., Brown 1984; Swinburne 1989). There is, however, experimental evidence to the effect that persons have difficulties in using theologically correct concepts in everyday reasoning (Barret and Keil 1996; Barrett 1998). Theology thus mostly lives in reflective contexts and in a book–mind interaction, being transferred to everyday contexts only with great difficulty, if at all (Boyer 2001; Pyysiäinen 2004a). Thus theological beliefs are not easily distributed in populations.

In folklore studies, it has been a matter of dispute whether given narrative motifs become widespread because of the psychic unity of humankind or because of cultural contacts and borrowing. The first alternative was represented by ethnologist Adolf Bastian (1826–1905), while the second one was made popular by geographer Friedrich Ratzel (1844–1904; see Koepping 1983). One formulation of the contact hypothesis was the so-called Finnish method of the folklore scholars Julius (1835–1888) and Kaarle Krohn (1863–1933; Krohn 1971).

The cognitive perspective here endorsed is a weak version of the psychic unity thesis. Although there may be no truly universal contents, there are cross-culturally recurrent patterns in beliefs and narratives about miracles. This is because the intuitive ontologies are valid cross culturally. Whether due to the cognitive evolution of our species or to learning, they bring along intuitive expectations, the violation of which makes certain beliefs attention grabbing and memorable. The beliefs are contagious and thus widespread because they are easy to adopt and to remember.
Mere memory effects are not enough to explain the natural appeal of miracles, however. Belief and disbelief are strongly emotional attitudes (Pyysiäinen 2001, 77–139; Thagard 2005); beliefs about miracles are also used for various purposes, serving oppression and liberation alike. Alleged power to perform miracles can also be used as proof of authority and that the performer has some special capacities. This involves the paradox that as soon as miracles become routine, they lose the aura of magic and can no longer be used as signs of special power and authority. Miracles are attention grabbing precisely because they are exceptional.

This might explain the fact that in religious traditions, miracles are often reported to have happened, although actively seeking them is strongly discouraged. Matthew (12:38–39, NIV), for example, relates Jesus to have replied to the Pharisees who wanted to see a miraculous sign, “A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a miraculous sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah.” Likewise, the monastic rules of Buddhist monks (the third Parajika Pārā rule) include the prohibition to vaunt one’s spiritual accomplishments (Vinayapitakam; see Sharf 1995, 236).

This tension between interest in and suspicion toward miracles manifests at least partly the tension between persons’ actual beliefs and theologically correct beliefs. Yet certain skepticism towards miracles is found also in folk religion. Pascal Boyer (2001, 76) provides the following example from his fieldwork among the Fang of Cameroon. When someone had insisted that he had seen a shaman stick a finger in the ground, with the consequence that it reemerged in another village, others said that he could not have seen this because he could not have been in two places at once. The man then confessed that he had only seen the shaman stick the finger in the ground; he had only heard about the reemerging of the finger from a very reliable source. After this confession, he then walked off in a sulk.

It seems that disputes like this can only arise with regard to counterintuitive claims or when there is insufficient information about intuitive claims. In the case of counterintuitive claims, our information is, in principle, never sufficient. Whereas a dispute about the number of cars in the parking lot, for example, can be settled by counting the cars, a disagreement over an alleged miracle cannot be settled by a similar gathering of new information. Miracles are considered to be exceptional phenomena, and thus no generalized information can help decide whether a miracle has happened. Even if no one has ever seen a finger stuck in the ground reemerge in another village, maybe such a thing did happen on one specific occasion? This line of reasoning typifies folk psychology. If a miracle cannot be conclusively disproved, this is then regarded as proof of its factuality (see Esptein et al. 1992; Denes-Raj and Epstein 1994).

Scientists, however, know that you cannot prove the negative and that this is not any kind of proof of existence. One cannot prove that Santa Claus does
not exist, but this is not proof for the existence of Santa Claus. There are often good reasons for a scientist not to believe a given claim, although it cannot be directly shown to be false (see Pyysiäinen 2004b, 85–87). Everyday thinking works differently, for better or worse. Our disposition toward emotional coherence (Thagard 2005) often makes claims about miracles plausible, or at least attention grabbing, to us. In times of various kinds of crisis, miracles may then serve as a means of retaining a positive outlook on life and survival.

Shared belief in the incredible can also be a costly and hard-to-fake signal of commitment to a group and its values and beliefs (see Atran 2002, 133–40, 264–69). For example, those who publicly express their belief in the claim that a virgin gave birth to a child take the risk of being ridiculed by outsiders, while gaining the benefits of a good reputation among insiders. A believer in miracles is somebody who can be trusted because he or she obviously has invested time and resources in shared religion. In this way, beliefs about miracles spread in populations because they are cognitively salient, are linked with positive emotions, and can serve as a sort of secret handshake, by which believers recognize their fellow believers. Cognitive structures, such as intuitive ontology, canalize the cultural transmission of miracle beliefs, which may then become an integral part of everyday thinking.

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Miracles . . . are events which have a particular significance to the person who experiences them. That is the one fundamental statement. Miracles are subjective-objective, subject-object-oriented, always in correlation, and never comprehensible in any other way. Not merely subjective, they are not merely objective, either.

—Paul Tillich (1963, 111)

What is the meaning of the term miracle, and what does a psychology of miracles look like? Is a miracle an objective or subjective reality, and how can we analyze it? Psychologically speaking, miracles can only be understood within the life context of individual persons. They are the experience of the divine intervening in one’s life for the purpose of allaying anxiety and restoring security to a self, in such a manner that the very self and its patterns of relating may be transformed in the process. I wish to analyze miracles from a phenomenological and psychodynamic perspective and define miracles as experiences of meaning making.

HUME’S PARADIGM OF MIRACLES

In An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding, Hume (1777, sec. 10.1.90) defines a miracle as a violation of the laws of nature. A wise person, he argues, shapes his or her belief in accordance with the available evidence of personal experience. A miracle, defined as a violation of natural law for Hume, is a violation of everyday human experience. If one’s everyday experience, which establishes the epistemic basis for our belief in natural law, militates against
miracles, Hume (1777, sec. 10.1.90) advises us to tread the path of wisdom and reject such singular events in disbelief: “The proof against a miracle . . . is as entire as any argument from experience can possibly be imagined.” Miracles, thus, are events without any strong evidence for us to believe in them. Only the unlearned and unwise would believe in such things, which, according to Hume (1777, sec. 10.2.94), “are observed chiefly to abound among ignorant and barbarous nations.”

Under Hume’s influence, an image of miracles arose and is rather popular in both contemporary mainstream and academic parlance: miracles are violations of natural laws, impossible events, events without evidence, and events that a rational person would not believe in.¹ What would a psychology of miracles look like when informed by Hume’s perspective? Since his argument rests on experience that leads to an a priori denial of the possibility of miracles, what is psychologically wrong with those who believe in them? Hume (1777) argues that people who are sufficiently wise as not to be deluded, whose integrity places them beyond suspicion, do not report miracles. So those who tell miracle stories are deluded or live in fantasy and illusion.

Hume (1777, sec. 10.2.93) claims that religion deprives people of common sense, and so religion is the usual source of miracle stories. The dreamlike feelings of awe that miracles produce may overcome one’s capacity to reason. According to Hume, a believer (1777, sec. 10.2.93) “may know his narrative to be false, and yet persevere in it, with the best intentions in the world,” as a result of the wishes and passions that feed the delusion. Furthermore, the delusion of belief in miracles might arise from a lack of enlightened education, as in the case of Hume’s “ignorant and barbarous nations,” or as a result of a misleading education of civilized people by their ignorant and barbarous ancestors (Hume 1777, sec. 10.2.94).

Hume argues that people believe in or experience miracles, despite the lack of evidence from experience,² because of the positive affect miracle illusions inspire. The feelings of wonder aroused when one hears the story of Jesus healing the sick and the blind, or when one has the impression that God has saved him from sheer catastrophe, are an anesthetic to cognition and reason, leading to what may be rightly referred to in psychological terms as a neurosis. This emotional neurosis hampers the capacity to effectively perceive the external world. With reason impaired, the possibility to believe in miracles becomes available. One is either ignorant and deluded, or lying in an attempt to exploit the ignorant and deluded.

If we were to craft a psychology of miracles using Hume’s paradigm, we would find a friend in Freud (1961). In the same way that Freud spoke of religion in general, he might have reflected on Hume’s words regarding miracles and defined them psychologically as wishful illusions, interwoven with a disavowal of reality (Freud 1961). For Freud, religion is grounded in the need to fulfill infantile wishes. Instead of actively seeking to understand
and be in the external world, religion drives us to seek illusions that satisfy our narcissistic desires and dependency needs. Among these is the desire to find personal meaning and security with which to exorcize the terrors of nature (Freud 1961). Before the dangers of earthquakes, typhoons, hurricanes, floods, fires, and wild beasts, “man’s helplessness remains, and along with it his longing for his father, and the gods” (Freud 1961, 22), who are seen as sources of protection and salvation.

Under the lens of this psychology, miracles seem to express the wish for an omnipotent parent, God, who will do away with humanity’s hardship by intervening in the physical world of time and space. There is a price to pay, however, for the wonder and security such events provided. Freud wrote that (1965, 206) “miracles . . . contradicted everything that sober observation had taught, and betrayed all too clearly the influence of human imagination” (cf. Freud 1965, 42). From his scant comments on the topic, one can discern that Freud believed our wishes for providential intervention diverted energies from the ego, which housed the rational and cognitive capacities, shifting them to the id, the source of pleasure seeking, narcissistic desire, and illusion. Thus, dovetailing with Hume’s argument, Freud might have concluded that those who believe in miracles are experiencing a dysfunction in their capacity for reality testing, their ability to understand external reality and the experience it yields. Instead, they land in distortion of or projection on reality (Freud 1961, 54–57). Miracles are an illusion in which humans project on the world their needs for safety from the natural elements and warmth from a cold, unresponsive world. For Freud, this bore the stamp of serious mental illness.

It is my judgment that the Hume-Freud equation does not provide a sound basis for a psychology of miracles. Hume assumes that his view of the world is the correct one and that of believers in miracles is ignorant and barbarous, misinterpreting the nature of this world. Hume holds his experience as normative, and any counterclaims are rejecting of practical experience altogether. Is it not likely, however, that the experience of Hume, the Scottish Enlightenment scholar, would be markedly different from that of a Caribbean shaman or a first-century healer? Could it be that the difference between one who believes in miracles and one who does not has more to do with his or her particular perspective and experience, rather than with ignorant and barbarous interpretation? Hume leaves no room for intercultural discussion or for the understanding of differing worldviews. As a background paradigm for a psychology of miracles, it is deficient, for it is unashamedly ethnocentric and does not allow for a consideration of the data experienced by those who believe in miracles.

In the Hume-Freud equation, a psychologist’s research agenda would be to find out what psychological dysfunction is taking place in the person who believes in miracles. It is presupposed that something is wrong. Such an
agenda would be an epistemological and ontological polemic in psychological drag, and not objective psychological research. The project would not be interested in why one would believe in miracles or what factors contributed to the formation of such beliefs, but in constructing arguments that consider such artifacts as illusions and the believers as delusional. This would also lead to a one-sided pseudopsychology, for much of its analysis would rest in matters outside psychology. It would be only after deciding what the one true reality is and the one correct approach is that one would begin the research to account for the neurosis that was preventing the proper perception of reality. That overlooks any attempt to understand the contexts, experiences, data, phenomenological evidence, and heuristic rationale driving a person’s belief that a miracle took place.

A sound psychology of miracles must be objective and not interested in proving or disproving the appropriateness of belief in miracles. Moreover, it must begin with a motivation for understanding from the inside why believers hold that miracles are real. Thus exclusivist views that only one’s own worldview reflects reality, or that only one’s own religion has authentic miracles, must be avoided in a sound psychology of miracles. A sound psychology must be grounded in psychology, not in philosophy or politics.

AN ALTERNATIVE: A RELATIONAL PARADIGM OF MIRACLES

I wish to discuss a relational paradigm. This paradigm would suggest an interest not in debates between science and religion or God and natural law, but in the embeddedness of miracles within one’s experience of mundane reality and one’s relationship with what is considered ultimate and absolute. The relational philosophical tradition understands religious processes, symbols, concepts of the divine, rituals, dogmas, spirituality, and the miraculous as emerging from within the context of human interpersonal relations. For example, the particular elements of any one person’s experience of God, as existing or not existing, of providential warmth or divine cruelty, are seen as arising from one’s experience of closeness or distance, love or control, with other human beings (Macmurray 1957, 1961; Niebuhr 1960; see also Fowler 1974).

Through this unconscious process of depending on human experience for the construction of religious experience, one is developing a foundation for one’s personality, a ground of being, with the purpose of integrating one’s self and one’s experiences (Niebuhr 1960; Buber 1970; Tillich 1958, 1963). Our relationship with God reverberates with all other close relationships, and all those intimate relationships connect to inform our relationship with God. Buber wrote (1970, 123), “Extended, the lines of relationships intersect in the eternal You.” Tillich (1958, 1963) would have agreed. Although we
may discuss the differences between these authors, for our purposes here, the ties that bind them together within this paradigm are their understanding of religious matters as intrinsically rooted in human relationship.

“Faith,” wrote Tillich (1958, 1), “is the state of being ultimately concerned.” To be ultimately concerned is to cultivate a relationship between one’s subjective capacity for seeking meaning and significance and an object that is perceived as the self “expressed in symbols of the divine” (Tillich 1958, 10). What we consider to be ultimate demands our full attention and the fullness of our capacities (Tillich 1958) as “an act of the total personality” (Tillich 1958, 5). Tillich claims that faith cannot be pigeonholed into any single category of our subjectivity. It is not “an act of knowledge that has a low degree of evidence” (Tillich 1958, 31), nor can it “be restricted to the subjectivity of mere feeling” (Tillich 1958, 39).

Faith is not the inability to line up one’s belief with the available experience, but the ability to relate to an object experienced, as though it is profoundly meaningful. Faith is not the state of being blinded by childish, overeager emotion, but the ecstasy of attaining a coherence that makes sense of one’s life experience. Not irrationality or delusion, but meaning making is what propels faith within the individual, for it “gives depth, direction and unity to all other concerns and, with them, to the whole personality. A personal life which has these qualities is integrated, and the power of a personality’s integration is his faith” (Tillich 1958, 106).

In the process of integration of one’s life experience, faith could be said to operate through certain capacities of reason that enable us to grasp and shape reality (Tillich 1963, 75). While we experience our world subjectively, our reception of that data and reaction to it fashions our relationship to our world (Tillich 1963, 76). That data will be physical, psychological, cultural, religious, and spiritual. We use it to construct our sense of our world. Cultural norms and prohibitions, common beliefs and community values, and our own tastes and preferences spice this data and influence our worldview. In this sense, our world is perceived objectively and created subjectively, a consideration that leads Tillich to suggest that when we perceive (1963, 76), “an act of shaping is involved,” and when we respond, “an act of grasping is involved.” Our reality is transformed in accordance with our perception, and reality is perceived “according to the way we transform it” (Tillich 1963, 76).

As indicated in his Systematic Theology, Tillich considers the popular concept of a miracle as violation of natural law to be a (1963, 115) “term misleading and dangerous for theological use”, however, he cannot find a substitute that will express what he thinks may be a genuine experience of the miraculous. So he settles for the Greek term semeion, “sign,” to emphasize the religious nature of the meaning that miracles afford one. Tillich deemphasizes the (1963, 115) “bad connotation of a supranatural interference which
destroys the natural structure of events.” Tillich is interested in salvaging
the role of miracles as revelatory events fraught with deep religious sig-
nificance. They are awe-inspiring events that provide new revelations of the
state of one’s being, while at the same time shaking the core of one’s being.

Tillich writes (1963, 116), “The sign-event which gives the mystery of
revelation [to a miracle] does not destroy the rational structure of the re-
ality in which it [the miracle] appears.” The sign-event/miracle does not
violate the rational structure of reality in the sense that a miraculous event
can only be (or not be) in the context of a subject’s grasping and shaping of
the experience. D. W. Winnicott (1971) says that we discern reality in ac-
cordance with our experience of our sociocultural environment. We experience
and believe in miracles if they are present in the epistemological and experi-
tential economy of our psychosocial or spiritual context.

For a member of a charismatic evangelical Christian community, miracles
are perceived to take place in the life of others or of oneself. Miracles are
celebrated, rehearsed, and reenacted through the reading of the biblical texts
that reinforce the person’s or community’s awareness of them. Someone so-
cialized in an opposite type of community would likely have an opposite ex-
perience of reality, in which miracles are neither expected nor experienced.
Tillich’s argument that miracles do not violate “the rational structure of re-
ality in which they appear” means that they do not violate the perceived reality
of those to whom miracles appear. Turning back to Hume for a moment, one
can see the sense in his argument that miracles would violate his reality if
they indeed took place. It is unreasonable, however, for Hume to extrapolate
from his arbitrary philosophical claim that miracles would violate the reality
of a first-century leper who was healed and believed it was done by a deity or
healing shaman with transcendental power.6

While miracles do not violate the reality of those who perceive them, they
do, nonetheless, convey religious meaning that is life changing. Reflecting on
the diverse miraculous stories handed down from religious tradition, Tillich
finds it (1963, 116) “striking that in many miracle stories there is a descrip-
tion of the ‘numinous’ dread which grasps those who participate in the mi-
raculous events. There is the feeling that the solid ground of reality is taken
‘out from under’ their feet.” The experience of the miraculous upsets the
self’s sense of security, leaving it vulnerable but also receptive to the rev-
elation to which the miracle is serving as a sign-event. This revelation re-
ffects the state of one’s relation to the meaning of life and the experience
of the transcendent world. This unsettles the life one had before. It both
challenges the self’s conception of its ground of being and invites a reas-
essment of that being and a reshaping of that self.

Our relational paradigm suggests that a sound psychology of miracles
must seek to contextualize them within the realm of a person’s religious,
cultural, and interpersonal experience, realizing that the experience of the
miraculous emanates from a broad conception of the divine. The person’s image of the divine is seen as acting in his or her life to restore a sense of security lost amid the challenges of daily life. The resolution of this loss of security is the experience of the divine intervention that restores the self. How this functions in a given person’s life will be influenced by the communal context. Accordingly, a psychology of miracles must discover the meanings and emotions in a person’s culture and the interpersonal world that are being reenacted in the person’s experience of God and of God’s intervention in that person’s world. That set of experiences defines what the person sees as miracles.

Toward a Psychology of Miracles

Although relational psychoanalysis and attachment theory at times seem to be in conflict in the psychology of religion, as regards method, epistemology, and empirical validity (Granqvist 2006; Rizzuto 1979; Wulff 1991), there is much to be gained for a psychology of religion from a theoretical integration of the two. In her landmark study of human development of the God-image, Rizzuto suggests that (1979, 123) “properly investigated, under detailed and careful historical reconstruction, God’s representational characteristics can be traced to experiences in reality, wish, or fantasy with primary caretakers in the course of development.” Experiences of empathy, compassion, rejection, or neglect by one’s caregivers lay the groundwork for the formation of our image of God. The impact of the parent/caregiver’s behavior on the God-image is such that even his or her very physical characteristics may be melded on a physical image of God. Such was the case of one of Rizzuto’s patients, who, after finishing a drawing of her image of God, remarked about how she forgot to draw his whiskers.

Although Rizzuto gives much attention to the influence of parental behavior on the child’s image of God, she also discusses other relationships and life patterns that are established in the child. Not only is the parent reimagined in the image of God, but so is the sense of self experienced within that object-relationship. It is a two-way dynamic. The God-image will shape one’s life, but one’s life experience will revise the God-image:

Defenses begin working to protect the individual from anxiety and pain. If the relevant objects of everyday life are a source of pain, God may be used, through complex modifications of his representation, to comfort and supply hope. If they are accepting and supportive, God may be used to displace ambivalence and angry feelings, or as a target for disturbing and forbidden libidinal longings. (Rizzuto 1979, 89)

In this sense, Rizzuto argues that God is a transitional object (Winnicott 1971) unconsciously crafted from the representational fragments of one’s
inner world for the purpose of establishing a cohesive sense of self. As a transitional object, the God-image may be used for ego-synthesis or rejected when it fails to keep up with a developing self. Like the transitional object, God is both a product of the subjective world of the person and of the objective world of culture and of personal experience. It is in that sense that Rizzuto, using Winnicott’s terminology, remarks that God is (1979, 87) “a psychically created object who is also ‘found.’”

According to Rizzuto, God becomes both a carrier of the individual’s parental object-relations as well as a point of reference for the interpretation of events in the world. Any and all events affecting a person will fall under the lens of his or her life history as well as under the eyes of his or her image of God. A natural catastrophe, such as a massive flood or earthquake, may lead one to seek comfort in one’s image of God, using it to explain the event as a test or a punishment for ill deeds. God may provide new meaning with which to cope with adversity, meaning that may be reinterpreted and reworked in accordance with the surrounding environment. But it is not only a matter of external events being interpreted from the viewpoint of the individual and his or her God-image, for even

so-called actions of God in the realities of our lives (his responses to our prayers, his punishments, his indication of what we should do) rest upon our interpretation of events and realities to accord with our state of inner harmony, conflict, or ambivalence with the God we have. (Rizzuto 1979, 87)

Jones (1991, 1996, 1997, 2002) has also expanded the psychodynamic study of religion by introducing post-Freudian and object-relations theories. Jones (1991) reviews the movement within psychoanalysis from Newtonian-Galilean, classical psychoanalysis to post-modern relational models of psychoanalysis and applies this new paradigm to religion. Drawing together insights from British object-relations theory, self-psychology, and inter-subjectivity theory, he employs a post-Freudian understanding of transference as his main tool of analysis of the function of religion. Instead of being a projection of childish wishes, transference is understood as the person’s “basic patterns of relating and making sense of experience” (Jones 1991, 84). It is the unconscious process by which those patterns of behavior, affect, and experience with the world around us are internalized, leading to the construction of organizing themes, which help guide behavior as well as interpret and organize future experience.

Jones posits that these (1991, 110) “internalized affective relationships” lie at the heart of a person’s image of God. Following Rizzuto, Jones argues that children’s experience of comfort or neglect with the primary caregivers forms a crucial part of their image of God; however, he makes an important distinction between his understanding of the dynamic and that of Rizzuto.
Jones writes (1991, 47), “Although it is clear that the internalization of objects cannot be separated from our relationship with them, Rizutto tends to focus more on the internalized objects themselves and less on the internalized relationships.” Rizzuto’s focus is on the objects relevant to the development of a self—parents, caretakers, peers—and the way those objects are internalized as crystallized entities in the psyche. Jones, on the other hand, acknowledges the impact of objects, while focusing on how the relationship with the object is internalized and becomes a pattern of behavior throughout life.

In essence, it could be said that Rizzuto’s theory involves the analysis of the object-relation (characteristics of certain objects internalized), while Jones’ theory emphasizes the object-relation (life themes experienced in a relationship). Without pushing this point too far, it is necessary to point out their theoretical differences for the sake of also delineating the ways in which their works form two sides of the same relational psychoanalytic coin. Their works are complementary.

Under the lens of a post-Freudian understanding of transference, religion is defined “not primarily as a defense against instincts or a manifestation of internalized objects,” Jones (1991, 63) argues, “but rather as a relationship (with God, the sacred, the cosmos, or some reality beyond the phenomenal world of space and time).” This relational paradigm focuses the psychoanalysis of religion on the affective bond with the sacred and how that object relation serves as the transferential ground of the self. Such an analysis seeks to uncover the ways in which that relationship resonates to those internalized relationships that constitute the sense of self. . . . Our relationship to the transcendental reality, or lack of it, enacts and reenacts the relational patterns present throughout our life. (Jones 1996, 44–45)

Thus a person of low self-esteem may ground that sense of self in a critical, judgmental God. Or alternatively, such a person may develop an image of God that is patient, tender, and forgiving, developing an object-relation that sustains that sense of self. No matter how much one falters, God will always be there, ready to forgive and accept one as is. Such a perceived relationship with God serves as a point of reference to the invariant themes in a person’s life, organizing the affectivity generated in his or her experiential world. For Winnicott, transitional objects are, in the end, outgrown, after they have served their purpose in the infant’s psychological development; however, while transitional objects are set aside, the capacities for meaning making that spawned them are not. As Jones explains, the creativity and imagination of playful infants do not simply disappear, but instead “become spread out over the whole intermediate territory between ‘inner psychic reality’ and ‘the external world as perceived by two persons in common,’ that is to say, over the whole cultural field” (Winnicott, as quoted in Jones 1991, 60).
This capacity to create symbols allows the developing person transitional experiences “of artistic creativity and appreciation, and of religious feeling, and of dreaming” (Winnicott, as quoted in Jones 1991, 60). From this viewpoint, Jones’ understanding of the God-image, and other aspects of religion, is rooted in its development from a transitional object into a transitional experience able to (1997, 120) “allow entrance again and again into that transforming psychological space from which renewal and creativity emerge.” Psychologically speaking, religious practice and spiritual experience “reverberate with the affects of past object relations and are pregnant with the possibility of future forms of intuition and transformation” (Jones 1997, 120).

Kirkpatrick introduces Bowlby’s attachment theory, which (1997, 115) “postulates a primary, biosocial behavioral system in the infant that evolved to maintain proximity of the infant to its primary caregiver, thereby protecting the infant from predation and other dangers” (cf. Kirkpatrick 2005, 28). Under normal circumstances, “the infant develops a secure attachment to the mother in which she is perceived as a reliable source of protection and security, . . . an important influence on behavior ‘from the cradle to the grave’” (Kirkpatrick 1997, 115–16). Kirkpatrick indicates that Bowlby specifically intimated that the child’s internal working models (IWM) of attachment developed early on and (2005, 39) “were carried forward into adulthood as models of close relationships.”

Kirkpatrick believes that among the kind of relations that are affected by such IWM in ongoing life are those that are perceived to exist with God, angels, Mary, or any other supernatural being. He considers the analogy between the attachment relationship with a caregiver and a relationship with a divine being to be striking . . . The religious person proceeds with faith that God (or another figure) will be available for protection and will comfort him or her when danger threatens; at other times, the mere knowledge of God’s presence and accessibility allows a person to approach the problems and difficulties of daily life with confidence. (Kirkpatrick 1997, 117; cf. Kirkpatrick 2005, 52)

Of course, Kirkpatrick believes that the relationship with God is not like an attachment relationship, but really is an attachment relationship. To support this contention, he argues that a person’s image of God serves many important functions, which attachment figures normally fulfill.

Attachment theory posits three conditions under which the attachment system is activated: “(1) frightening or alarming environmental events, that is, stimuli that evoke fear and distress; (2) illness, injury, or fatigue; and (3) separation or threat of separation from attachment figures” (Kirkpatrick 2005, 61). In the face of death, crisis, catastrophe, and illness, people turn to God for protection, support, and healing. Even in circumstances of familial
rift with one’s own parents, one may seek comfort from God as one’s ever-loving caregiver, invoking Psalm 27:10: “Though my father and mother forsake me, the Lord will receive me.” Thus, when Kirkpatrick applies these hypotheses to religious experience, he concludes with the fact that (2005, 62) “people primarily turn to God . . . when severely distressed is thus consistent with an attachment interpretation.” God acts as an attachment figure in the way in which he serves as a haven of safety, to allay anxiety and restore security to the person. God also acts as a secure base, serving as a foundation from which one may push forward against the adversities of life. Like a child whose supportive relationship with parents has led to a secure and able self, a person of faith goes forward with the understanding that God provides the support needed to overcome difficulties (Kirkpatrick 2005, 66).

With regard to individual differences in images of God, the two primary dimensions identified by Benson and Spilka (1973) as loving God versus controlling God, Kirkpatrick notes that they (2005, 83) “appear to map neatly onto the two primary dimensions of parenting that have been widely studied in the developmental psychology literature.” This is usually conceptualized as either warmth versus control, responsiveness versus demandingness, or care versus overprotection (see Kirkpatrick 2005, 83). These parallels between images of God and images of primary caregivers “would be expected if thinking about God is guided by the psychological mechanisms designed to process information about parental care giving” (Kirkpatrick 2005, 83–84).

This consideration is particularly relevant to Kirkpatrick’s hypothesis on the positive relation between images of God and of one’s parents, which he terms the correspondence hypothesis (2005, 108): “Children who perceive their attachment figures as loving and caring tend to see themselves as worthy of love and care.” If, through his or her human attachments, a person sees himself or herself as worthy of love and care, then his or her generalized IWM would suggest that God is also loving and caring. The opposite is also true.

Apart from the positive correspondence between IWM of parents and God, Kirkpatrick also formulates an alternative hypothesis that is designed to study the negative relation between human and divine attachments. From the perspective of this compensation hypothesis, “the importance of God as an attachment figure might be greatest among those people, in those situations, in which human attachments are perceived to be unavailable or inadequate” (Kirkpatrick 2005, 127). An environment that is perceived to be chaotic, offering no safety or security, might predispose the self to find that security, order, and affection “in a God who is, in important ways, unlike one’s human attachment figures” (Kirkpatrick 2005, 127). One interesting example of this possibility is some research suggesting that people with insecure relationships with their parents are more prone to sudden religious conversions (see Kirkpatrick 2005, 130). Through these religious conversions, the new believers may find in God the perfect, loving parent they never had. Their attachment relationship to a
loving God may help a particular self recuperate from an environment fraught with conflict and ambivalence, compensating for the much needed security that was never provided.

Granqvist (1998, 2002; see also Granqvist 2006) proposed a rereading of Kirkpatrick’s data, in which he argued that attachment to one’s parents does not moderate the image of God developed, but that attachment makes the socialization to their beliefs more feasible when it is secure, but not when attachment is insecure. Granqvist (2002) defined his version of Kirkpatrick’s hypotheses as socialized correspondence and emotional compensation. Socialized correspondence, in this case, meant “the parallel between one’s religious beliefs and one’s parents’ beliefs, rather than, as in [Kirkpatrick’s] interpretation, between one’s religious beliefs and the security of one’s own attachment style (or prior attachment experience)” (Kirkpatrick 2005, 114–15). Granqvist used the phrase emotional compensation to refer to individuals who were not able to have secure relationships with their caregivers and hence could not internalize their religious beliefs. Instead, they develop alternate religious beliefs and an attachment to God that regulates experience in such a way as to help foster a more secure self in spite of problematic parental relations.

**TAKING STOCK: WHAT COULD A RELATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY SAY ABOUT MIRACLES?**

The relational paradigm would suggest that the psychologist should focus on miracles as expressions of a relationship, or a matrix of relationships. On the other side of the miracle perceived by the individual is an image of the sacred, or more specifically, an image of God. Rizzuto might advise us to take a closer look at that God-image and attempt to reconstruct what object-representations lie behind it. A father who grants all the desires of his children? A mother who would help her child at the very last moment of his or her struggle? Perhaps a mixture of parental elements? From a strictly object-relations approach, one would have to ask, What is the nature of the God at the other end of that miracle, and what parental object-representations unconsciously pull its strings in performing that miracle?

Jones would point us in a parallel direction, focusing on what affective bond with the sacred a miracle might reflect. In tandem with an analysis of the possible parental images behind the God-image, Jones would also have us look at what life patterns or organizing principles are reflected in the miraculous event itself. What kind of experience might be revisited in the feeling that God spared one from an imminent death in a car crash? What meaning and affect are evoked when one is declared healed of a disease or cleansed of ritual impurity? One would have to contextualize the miraculous experience within a person’s overall experience of the divine, understanding the role it
plays within one’s experience of God. In studying the meaning of that miraculous experience in the context of that relation to God, the psychologist must also contextualize both the miracle and the relation within the person’s life narrative. Laying both side by side, the presence of common principles of experience, organizing principles, are bound to emerge: patterns of behavior or experience that govern interactions with others and with the world in general, drawn in part from interactions with the caregivers, but following one through life.

Jones would also point out that miracles and miraculous experiences are not just repetitions of one’s past, but can also be transformative. In his use of Winnicott, it is especially apparent that when one unconsciously uses past relational and schematic scripts of interaction, one opens up the possibility for the transformation of those scripts and the creation of new ways of being-in-the-world (a Heideggerian term). In that transformative sense, we would do well to refer to miracles conceptually as transitional phenomena, following Tillich’s discussion of miracles as events that renovate present conceptions of one’s self and reveal new opportunities or ways of being.

Another sense of Winnicott’s terminology employed heavily by Rizutto that is relevant for our discussion of miracles is in the transitional experience between the subjective world of the person and the external objective world. A psychology employing Winnicott for the study of miracles could also define them as transitional experiences in the sense that they do not belong entirely to the objective world of rocks and chairs, but at the same time, they do not belong completely to the subjective, psychospiritual world of a given person. Miracles belong in a transitional space that is between subjective and objective and involves both in mutual interaction. Tillich’s understanding that one shapes reality, while, at the same time, is grasping it certainly finds much agreement with Winnicott’s contention that transitional phenomena are both created and found.

The relational paradigm as sampled in Tillich also speaks of the numinous dread experienced when the miraculous shakes up a person’s world and the “ground of reality is taken ‘out from under’ ” his or her feet. In other words, miracles as transitional experiences render asunder the self’s sense of security, broken down to be brought back up in a new way. A new determination may be produced and security reestablished in a new way of relating to God and the world. Some relationships and ways of relating may be severed, with new relations and ways of relating instituted. The resonance with the themes of attachment, safety, and security in attachment theory here is unmistakable.

So an important theme in miraculous experience is the issue of security and attachment. I see a parallel between the triggering of the attachment system in times of stress and the miraculous experience, depicting a setting for safety and security in divine intervention. Some crises upset a person’s
state of being, leading the attachment system to be activated. As discussed via Kirkpatrick, a person's relation with God is itself an attachment relationship, meaning that under times of adversity, God's protective or alleviating capacities are activated, lending support to the person in coping with the problem at hand. This also provides a heuristic interpretation and resolution of the suffering. IWM of the self in turmoil and of the self overcoming the turmoil are involved. What IWM could also be activated that would aid the self in regulating its emotions and in resolving conflict? Certainly those of the self being soothed by one's caregivers to endure difficulty, and even of caregivers helping resolve problems when one's resources have reached their limit.

Considering that IWM of God's behavior are regulated in part by higher-level IWM based on experiences with one's caregivers, we can expect to find a similar dynamic. The experience of miracles, then, must be drawn from IWM of the self's loss of security and present helplessness, followed by IWM of the restoration of security by the intervention of a divine caregiver. As alluded to in the previous paragraph, it is certainly a possibility that a miraculous experience corresponds to past experiences of protection with one's caregivers. Another consideration involves the ways in which a person's experience of a miracle compensates for the lack of consistent security from parents and the experienced world. If an image of God who can provide that security serves to compensate for the lack of it from a nonresponsive parent, one may explore how a person's experience of miracles extends from that compensation. Another consideration that can be drawn from attachment theory involves Granqvist's contribution highlighting the importance of socialization in the development of IWM of the miraculous and of the way these affect our experience of them.11

CASE STUDIES: APPLICATIONS OF A RELATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY OF MIRACLES

The following two cases illustrate how some of the psychological dynamics we have discussed actually operate. Notice the psychological nature of the person's image of the divine, the organizing principles or relational patterns reflected in the miraculous, the role of themes of security in the modulation of the experience, and the continuity or discontinuity between the experience and previous IWM. The sociocultural contexts in which the experiences took place are also important. The cases are drawn from interviews with Christians from two different ethnocultural communities. They were asked about their miraculous experiences, their feelings and images of God before and after the experiences, and their life histories leading up to and after the miraculous experiences. The names have been changed to ensure privacy.

John, age 21, was driving to his father's house one evening, when his car was suddenly struck from the side by another vehicle. His car spun around,
flipped over, and was totally destroyed. John crawled out from the wreckage dazed, suffering only minor cuts and bruises. In the aftermath of the accident, John emphatically thanked God for having saved his life. When questioned regarding this assertion, he claimed that in the moment between being hit by the other vehicle and his car flipping over, he initially felt that he was going to die. “I just froze when the other car lights appeared. When I felt the car hit me, I just thought, ‘Oh my God, I’m going to die!’” He relates how in that moment, when his car was flipping in the air, he suddenly felt a presence, as if someone was holding him tightly inside his car, cushioning him from the effects of the crash. When he crawled out of the car and turned around to witness the extent of the damage, he explained, “Like the two men on the road to Emmaus [Luke 24:13–34], I didn’t recognize that it was Jesus saving me inside that car until afterward!”

It is most enlightening from a psychological perspective to see this event within the context of John’s life. He was raised as a Protestant Evangelical, receiving much of his instruction from his father since John’s mother had died at his birth. John described a very affectionate relationship with his father, who had balanced his work with the demands of raising a child as a widowed parent. It appeared that one way John’s father had coped with his mother’s death was to engross himself in his religion, always invoking Jesus Christ to protect him and his remaining family, his only son. The language of salvation and Jesus Christ as an ever watching parent was quite pervasive, not just in John’s father’s devotional life, but also in the Evangelical church they attended. One particular theme reinforced in the church’s theological rhetoric was that of the helplessness of human beings in a hostile world and their necessity of an omnipotent, ever present God to protect and love them in the midst of that world.

One incident that held deep significance for John was when, at the age of eight, he was almost run over by a car at a birthday party. At one point, the dog of the birthday girl had gotten out of the house and run across the street. When John tried to catch the dog, he heard the loud honk of a car coming right at him. In the moment that he faced the oncoming car, he froze, when suddenly, he was swooped up from the ground by his father, who was praying and sobbing, thanking Jesus for saving his son.

John’s life entered a new chapter as he left home to attend college. He dealt with the demands of school and work, while balancing new friendships and a girlfriend; however, his religious beliefs prevented him from engaging in certain practices commonly enjoyed by some college students, such as drinking and leisure sex. This lifestyle was met with some rejection from his friends and strained his relationship with his girlfriend. Things became even more complicated when he found out that his girlfriend was having an affair with one of his friends, effectively ending the relationship for him and estranging him from his friend. Because his girlfriend and his friend both belonged to the same peer group, John became even more distant from those he knew at school. The feeling of isolation led him into a depression. To cope with the recent events, John decided to visit his father after work one evening. It was then that the auto accident took place.
From an attachment perspective, we can see a correspondence, then, between the image of Jesus protecting John and holding him tightly in the midst of the accident and his father pulling him away from an oncoming car and holding him tightly as he thanked Jesus for protecting him. The loss of relationships in college had threatened his sense of security as he became more isolated, with this car crash threatening his very life. The attachment system became activated, leading John to reexperience that feeling of being held tightly in the face of danger. Speaking psychoanalytically, we can also see the resurgence of an organizing principle, which stressed the dependence of a helpless son on an omnipotent father, who offered unconditional protection and acceptance.

This object-representation of an omnipotent, loving father, reinforced both by the parental relation and the theological language of a particular community, stood behind John’s image of Jesus. The accident and the perceived miraculous intervention reinvigorated John during a time when he faced alienation and rejection from the peers he had once trusted. He felt that even in the midst of his suffering in a world hostile to him and his beliefs, Jesus still loved, cared for, and protected him. This expression reminded him of his relationship to Jesus as a meaningful source of empowerment for coping with his problems.

Naomi, age 32, was on the verge of a painful divorce, fearing for the well-being of her two children. Financial problems and her husband’s increasing alcoholism had eaten away at their marriage, with heated arguments placing more and more distance between them. One day, after another argument, her husband left her and the children, promising divorce. Although their troubles and her husband’s behavior angered her deeply, she actually loved him and blamed herself for everything: their financial troubles, her husband’s increasing desperation, the marital disputes, and his eventual desertion of the family. Their separation beset her with fear for her children since they had to live with only her income. She began to feel completely hopeless. She believed that God was punishing her for her dishonoring behavior toward her husband. A month later, her husband returned, having found a new, higher-paying job, and asked for her forgiveness. Naomi and her husband were reconciled, resolved their financial situation, and have been able to form a stable family with their children. “When my husband showed up at my doorstep,” she explains, “talking about a new job and wanting to reconcile, I just couldn’t believe it! It was a miracle of God!”

Following the theories discussed above, we turn to the context of Naomi’s life to shed light on the psychodynamics of her miraculous experience. Her earliest memories involve the image of a happy family: a loving father, who doted on her every want, and a mother who cared for her every need. She was especially fond of her father, who often played with her after returning from a hard day’s work, while her mother prepared their dinner. Unfortunately, when Naomi was around the age of six, her father mysteriously left the household. She never understood why her father had left, and her mother was never willing to speak about the matter. Rumors
around her community circulated, however, that he had gone to live with another woman. As Naomi grew, her mother became more demanding of her around the household and in her daily life, often invoking God’s wrath on a child who would not honor her parent whenever she would not do as she was told and whenever she failed to carry out a task with perfection. Her mother was especially imposing on Naomi when she began to date in high school.

Naomi was confused as to why her loving father had left the family so suddenly and without reason. The idea that her good and loving father had left her, coupled with her mother’s now ever present emotional punishment, led Naomi to conclude that he had left because she “was a bad girl, why else would my dad have gone away? Why else would my mother punish me so?” This self-image was certainly reinforced by her mother’s use of God to validate her righteousness, while reminding Naomi of her badness: as a bad daughter and later as a bad girlfriend and as a bad wife. God was an almighty judge with a watchful eye set on Naomi’s “rebelliousness” toward her mother and her “wickedness” in her relations with men. He took stock of whenever she disobeyed her mother or could not perform a task efficiently.

The experience of overbearing demandingness from her mother and perceived demandingness from God led Naomi herself to become increasingly demanding and critical in her personal relationships. Her mother would often disapprove of the men Naomi dated, pointing out supposed economic and moral shortcomings. Naomi, in turn, became very demanding of her suitors, as she sought to make them “good men, good enough for my mother.” The twofold pressure from a possible mother-in-law and then from Naomi herself often turned these men away, leading Naomi to turn on herself, dwelling on how her attitude had not only cost her the relationship, but on how her own moral failings shamed her mother and her God.

The man Naomi eventually married was described as a wonderful man, a family man who worked hard to please her and their two growing children. They lived well financially until the birth of their second child, when it became necessary for Naomi to take a job to help supplement the family income. This led to criticism from her mother, who shared the views of the church Naomi had grown up attending. Her church, which she had attended from her childhood to her marriage, presented the image of a wrathful and condemning God. This included very stern teachings about a man’s role as the head of the household, the breadwinner, and the ultimate provider. Women who held a working job, thus, were frowned on.

This greatly upset Naomi, who in turn began to criticize her husband for his financial failings in providing for the family without her income. In the long term, she began to see this as moral failing as well. The pressure from his financial and familial situation began to take its toll, and so the husband began to take up some casual drinking after work. “Although he never really became a drunk,” Naomi clarified, “the very fact that he had begun to drink angered me.” She became more critical of his behavior, which pushed him to the point of wanting to leave the marriage. After a
heated argument, he left the home, and with his leaving, once again, Naomi turned her anger against herself, blaming herself for everything.

When her husband returned a month later, asking for forgiveness for having left her and the children, and explaining that he had found a new job that would help cover all of their needs, something changed inside Naomi. “That he would come back with this new job, wanting to make it work with me and the kids . . . it was a miracle!” God had brought her husband back and restored her family, “but that felt different,” she claimed, “because God was always taking things away from me for being bad. Here he was giving my family back. Did that mean I was good enough to have them?” The question struck a chord with Naomi, as the miracle she experienced challenged her notion of who God was.

The understanding that God loved her enough to intervene and bring her husband back led her to think of herself not as a bad person, but as one less than perfect who was more than deserving of love. God, for Naomi, became more forgiving and empathic, aiding her in her time of need, instead of criticizing her in the face of her failures. This was reflected in her reaction to her husband, whom she forgave for leaving, and in turn asked him for forgiveness for the difficulties she herself had caused. She could acknowledge her failings and those of her husband without demonizing either, gaining peace with herself and learning how to deal more effectively with interpersonal conflict. Her new understanding of God helped her keep a certain emotional distance from her mother’s disapproving tone, as she reconciled with her husband. She even continued to keep her job without any guilt of transgressing religiocultural norms or because of her mother’s thoughts of how a woman should behave.

The confusion over the loss of her father, together with her mother’s overly critical stance toward her as she grew into teenhood, and even adulthood, led Naomi to conclude that she was a bad person who could not do anything right. She had internalized not only the feeling of badness, but also the behavioral pattern of demandingness, which she continued to act out in her relationships with others, particularly her romantic relations. Her mother would disapprove of them, Naomi would in turn become more critical of them, and they would leave her without ever coming back. Then she would berate herself for being so demanding, for being a bad daughter, a bad girlfriend, and finally, a bad wife. This dynamic also played out in her image of God, who was a jealous judge looking down to condemn human weakness and frailty: Naomi’s failure to honor her mother, to be a good Christian woman, or to be a good Christian wife.

When her husband left, and she assumed he would never return, the stress caused her sick attachment system to be activated, with its attending IWM of self and others. This led to the same self-denigrating behaviors, with the image of God looking down on her with contempt. When her husband returned wishing to reconcile, he went against her IWM, her organizing principles, challenging the structure of her beliefs and patterns of behavior. She saw the incident as a miracle: God had intervened in her life to return what was lost and restore what had crumbled. With the
crumbling of her family, there was also a crumbling in her sense of security and selfhood. With the restoration of her family, there was a restoration of her sense of security and selfhood. The new security, invoked by this miraculous experience, gave Naomi a new understanding of God, who had changed from a critical judge to a more benevolent and tolerant father. Indeed, she reckoned that she “had found the father once lost.” We can see in this dynamic also a compensation process, whereby this new image of a God of tolerance and empathy acted inversely to her old God-image of intolerance and control. One might also argue for the resurgence of Naomi’s image of her affectionate human father, and the positive affection she held for him, as an influence on her new image of God.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have carved out a psychology of miracles using a relational paradigm and employing key insights from relational psychoanalysis and attachment theory. What, then, is a crisp psychological definition of miracles that respects the conceptions of philosophical and theological discourse, without becoming subject to them? A miracle is a transitional experience, in which an emotional, social, or physical stress threatens the sense of security of an individual by confronting him or her with a striking counterintuitive event. This stress triggers the individual’s attachment system and patterns of relating, the purpose of which is to allay anxiety and restore security. This focuses the system’s activation on the IWM and object-representations of the self in relation to what it considers divine (God, Jesus, angels).

Depending on the particular subject-object correlation within the transitional experience, the person perceives that the divine attachment figure has intervened in the resolution of the crisis on his or her behalf, restoring a sense of safety. This perceived divine intervention then presents the person with a revelation, a new meaning that either reflects and upholds the person’s IWM or leads to their transformation. Another, more simplified way of defining a miracle from a psychological perspective is as an expression of a person’s relationship with what he or she deems to be the divine, in which the divine intervenes to allay anxiety, restore security, and provide a new meaning to an individual’s life context.

Although great care has been taken here to define miracles within the bounds of an interactive subject-object relation (Winnicott 1971), the emphasis is on a subject’s perceiving the world in a psychological mode. The impetus for this chapter has been the shift from discussing miracles solely within Hume’s paradigm to studying them within a framework that relocates them from the world of natural law to the world of dynamic interaction between a subject and its contextual experience. This relational framework asks us to reanalyze miracles using the lens of psychodynamic psychology, instead of philosophical epistemology or ontology. The considerations raised
by this alternate paradigm, in the end, lead us to redefine miracles, seeing them no longer as violations of natural law, but rather as reflections of the deepest meanings of a person’s subjectivity.

NOTES

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1. As an example of the diverse and varied arguments pressed on both sides of these issues, see Larmer (1996).

2. Although one might argue that this is a clumsy circumlocution on my behalf, I actually have chosen this phrase to foreshadow some of the problems with the Humean paradigm for a psychology of miracles. I will detail the ways that the classical model is lacking subsequently.

3. One could trace the origin of Freud’s (1952) argument of God as a substitute father figure to his work on totemism in Totem and Taboo.

4. A clarification is in order regarding my critique of the Humean conception of miracles. An important philosophical distinction, and one certainly employed by Hume, is the differentiation between direct sensory experience of the world and of one’s analytic experience or analysis of that sensory experience. Within the psychological paradigm from which I am operating, I will discuss the term experience in a manner that incorporates both types, employing them at the same time. When I use the term experience, I imply both the reception of sensory experience of the world and the analysis of that sensory experience.

5. One might ask in passing how it is that one might turn from arguing that those who believe in miracles are epistemologically mistaken to contending that they are mentally ill. If one takes a look at Freud, it can be argued that his concept of a “reality principle” is in part a philosophical concept reified into a psychological category. Thus, for Freud, a person who believes in miracles is not just philosophically unnuanced and uneducated, but also suffers from neurosis.

6. Support for this interpretation of Tillich’s discussion was also drawn from the Seventh Dialogue of Ultimate Concern—Tillich in Dialogue by D. Mackenzie Brown (n.d.). One comment of Tillich is most illustrative of his perspective: “miracles . . . are events which have a particular significance to the person who experiences them. That is the one fundamental statement. Miracles are subjective-objective, subject-object-oriented, always in correlation, and never comprehensible in any other way. Not merely subjective, they are not merely objective, either.”

7. Indeed, similar attempts at integration between psychoanalysis and attachment theory have been taking place in regard to child and adult development, personality theory, and psychotherapy (e.g., see Fonagy 2001; Silverman 1991, 1994, 1998).

8. Although I cite Granqvist’s publications here for reference, I will be relying more strongly on Kirkpatrick’s presentation of his work.
9. Rizzuto writes, regarding this case (1979, 93), “When Fiorella Domenico was asked to draw a picture of God, she looked at me with mild surprise, accepted my request, and dutifully tried to draw. But she could not think of anything in my presence. She felt stupid, frustrated that she could not do it now. She asked my permission to go to her room, feeling certain she could draw there. She could, and did so without difficulty, returning later to give me the picture she had drawn. . . . The following day she laughed with her therapist about the incident, saying: ‘Oh, wasn’t that awful? I couldn’t draw in front of her. I don’t know . . . I didn’t even put whiskers on him.’” It was very interesting to read Fiorella’s comment in light of her therapist’s report that she had described her father “as a mustachioed man” (Rizzuto 1979, 101).

10. Jones writes, concerning Winnicott’s notion of transitional objects and transitional space (1996, 140), “The term *transitional* has two rather different referents: (1) those objects, like blankets and teddy bears, that are, as Winnicott says, ‘neither inside nor outside,’ and (2) a state of consciousness or mode of experience, a ‘transitional space,’ which transcends the dualism of inner and outer, subjective and objective.” He argues that Rizzuto emphasizes the first sense of transitional as being neither subjective nor objective, while he emphasizes the second sense as a space of experience and transformation of the subjective and objective worlds.

11. For clarification purposes, if a factor in the development of a person’s concept of God/miracles is the person’s having learned it from his or her parents through socialization, then looking at this factor, I must acknowledge that it points to the fact that the concept existed in the person’s broader social milieu.

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Whether an event that people have deemed a miracle was actually caused by a supernatural agent or some other sacred act or thing, the process by which people come to conclude that an event was a miracle is psychological. It depends on what the event means to the person in light of the context and as learned from the past, from others, and from social groups and institutions, for example, from a religion whose history claims miracles. Our goal here is to understand the processes through which the mind attributes miraculous properties to events. To get there, namely, to learn how humans make miraculous meaning, let us (1) explore what constitutes the miraculous, for example, is an event deemed to be a miracle necessarily religious?, (2) elaborate the model of global meaning systems and its underpinnings from social and clinical psychology (Park 2005a, 2005b; Park and Folkman 1997; Silberman 2005), (3) situate the attribution process within a meaning system framework, (4) integrate the results, aided by the operation of related processes such as schemas, expectancies, and perceptual sets, and (e) incorporate some recent knowledge from neuropsychology that may shed light on how attribution processes might be mediated within meaning systems as information is processed within the brain.

Given this psychological approach to understanding miracles, the concern is not so much to find out whether they actually happened in the raw historical past or actually happen today. It is instead to learn how the human mind is able to construct and sustain the perception and abstraction of the miraculous, that is, how human mental processes work to make an inference that special, unique events that are different from those by which nature normally
operates cause a certain event to happen. It may turn out that what is miraculous, like what is true, is in the meaning system of the beholder (Paloutzian 2006). In the end, we hope that we can move one step toward the goal of an integrated, multilevel, interdisciplinary paradigm (Emmons and Paloutzian 2003) for understanding how people construct a perception of a miracle and the broader capacity of the mind to abstract, imagine, and infer causality.

MIRACLE ATTRIBUTIONS

A miracle is an event to which special, nonobvious causal processes, which are presumed to operate differently from ordinary natural processes, are attributed. Such an event is often considered a sign of something else (Woodward 2000). Events deemed miraculous may be of either an everyday, common sort or rare and unusual. Let us explore the scope of phenomena called miraculous.

Narrow or Broad?

Miracle Attributions to the Ordinary

Before explaining the two technically useful meanings of the term, let us illustrate the colloquial usage of miracle, the effect of which renders the term technically useless but psychologically revealing. This occurs when the concept is used to apply to everything such as when a minister or priest, while giving a weekly sermon or homily to the congregation, says that it is obvious that God performs miracles. The growth of plants, the appearance of the sun, the force of gravity that keeps us on the ground, the cry of a newborn baby are all miracles; everything is a miracle! This may or may not be so in light of whatever may be the true ultimate ontology, but categorizing all events as miraculous gets us nowhere as far as psychological understanding of how people come to think that an event is a miracle is concerned.

Extending this point means that colloquial uses of miracle—such as a religious person saying that every day is full of miracles, or an unemployed job seeker who receives a job saying that it was a miracle, or a person whose home was saved from a California fire saying that it was a miracle—are set aside in any technical sense because they cannot be said to be due to a fundamentally different process. But many people, nevertheless, attribute miraculous properties to ordinary events anyway. This is powerful evidence that humans have a need for meaning and that if a clear meaning is not present on grounds of logic or evidence, people will invent one (Park and McNamara 2006). If the capacity of the mind to read miraculous meaning into ordinary events is so strong, the ability of the human mind must be both strong and compelling to dogmatically insist on unique, supernatural, or other special processes to confirm the truth of purported past and future events deemed
miracles, though nonobvious, counterintuitive, and extraordinary. Whatever else humans are, they are meaning-constructing creatures. Our job is to learn how they do this in the context of attributions of the miraculous.

**Miracle Attributions to the Unusual: Type N and Type I**

While recognizing the concerns with the colloquial, religious, and spiritualistic uses of the term *miracle* in everyday speech, we highlight that there seem to be only two connotations of the term that are technically useful in setting apart from other events reports of experiences that are purportedly due to unique processes. Let us call them events deemed to be miracles of type N and of type I.

Type N includes those miracles that seem to conform to natural processes and are therefore explainable by known naturalistic means, although they may be accented or heightened versions of them. They seem to be prominent in major religions as an indication of the deity at work. For example, when the book of Exodus relates that God parted the Red Sea, it also says that a wind blew, the sea parted, and the children of Israel went across on dry ground. The parting of the sea was a type N event, and the attribution of the miraculous process goes to God plus wind, with wind as the natural part of the process. The book of Exodus also describes 10 plagues, most of which involved natural processes, including a red-colored form of algae or bacteria capable of making rivers look like they turned to blood, swarms of flies, hail, frogs, boils on human skin, and locusts in swarms sufficient to destroy vast crops.

In these cases, it seems that natural processes were at work as part of whatever other processes humans might invoke to explain the events. Similar examples of special type N events, often considered to be signs, are reported to have occurred at every major turning point in the life of Buddha (Woodward 2000). These include the synchronous appearance of swans, peacocks, parrots and other birds, trees and bushes that bloom out of season, lotus blossoms of very large size, and the spontaneous multiplication of supplies of honey, oil, and sugar. Analogously, Muhammad was said to have invoked Allah for rain, and it then started to rain heavily (Woodward 2000), an event of type N that followers deemed a miracle.

In contrast, type I seems inexplicable and instead requires supernatural or other special accounts; it includes those miracles that do not seem to conform to natural processes and are devoid of scientifically established explanations. For example, Jesus turning water into wine, for which there is no known chemical process; Jesus walking on water, for which there is no known anti-gravitational force; and a corpse dead and buried in the ground for several days resuscitating to ordinary life, for which there is no known biological process. These would be examples of type I. Similarly, Muhammad is said to have multiplied food and to have blinded an opposing army with a handful of
dust, and Buddha is said to have risen in the air, divided his body, and then re-joined the pieces (Woodward 2000). Events of this sort can perhaps be called “zap” or “presto” miracles, namely, the sort of event that a superhuman agent could presumably do by a snap of the finger or by merely speaking the event into existence out of nothing. The best common term that we can think of for the process behind events purported to have occurred this way is magic. People who believe in type I miracles believe in magic, as far as knowledge of natural processes is concerned.

Universal or Necessarily Religious?

Given that miracle attributions are made to both ordinary and unusual events, that they are purported to have occurred across cultures and time (cf. Waida 2005), and that they are especially prominent features of the world’s great religions (Woodward 2000), it is easy to conclude that they are universal and uniquely religious and always attributed to the operation of a god or other agent, whose existence and function are counterintuitive; however, while reports of miracles seem to be made across cultures, they do not seem to be made by all individuals. Some people claim them and some people do not. Also, by observation of people’s behavior, it seems clear that not all miracle attributions depend on a claimed religious base or postulate of an active counterintuitive agent, although from a scholarly point of view, such a base or postulate may be implied. For example, whereas the process that produced an experience deemed religious can be inferred to be of two sorts, namely, (1) from a counterintuitive agent or (2) a thing set apart, whether that thing is an object, idea, taboo, or ritual (Taves, forthcoming), the cause of an event deemed miraculous seems to require attribution to an agent of some kind, whose existence and function is counterintuitive, regardless of whether it is construed to be religious by people experiencing it.

Yet, although miracle attributions seem to be neither universal at the individual level nor necessarily religious, they are purported to occur today with such routine frequency that we are tempted to say that the claim of the unique is, paradoxically, ordinary. Without belaboring the point with endless news reports, suffice it to say that apparitions of the Virgin Mary, faith healings, and myriad other miracles are claimed. Moreover, the belief in a future miracle can prompt present extreme behavior. For example, some of the young men and women who have given their lives in the jihad against the West did so with the belief that they would be miraculously rewarded in heaven for having martyred themselves for Allah. In fact, one hypothesis could be that a human tendency to make miracle attributions is evident cross culturally in a fashion analogous to other phenomena (Rogers and Paloutzian 2006), suggesting that the tendency to make such inferences may have come about along with the tendency to imagine, in the early stages of the development
of human beings (Boyer 2007). But the ability to infer and imagine hinges on the ability to think in a way that enables the ideas about something to take on some other meaning.

Miracle Attributions and Meaning

It is obvious that an event that is called a miracle carries special meaning to those who so label it. Given the breadth of phenomena to which miracle attributions can be made, it seems clear that the inference that an event was caused by a miraculous process hinges not narrowly on the properties of the event, but on what the person perceives it to mean; that is, it does not hinge on the frequency, familiarity, or intensity of such events, although such factors might be taken into account. Specifically, a miracle attribution requires that a special meaning be ascribed to an event, instead of a mundane one. Thus a miracle attribution takes place within the larger system of meaning that the person uses to negotiate the world. Meaning systems are multi-level and include aspects from at least the social to the neurological levels of analysis (Park and Folkman 1997; Silberman 2005). Let us therefore examine the meaning system framework in which the deeming and attributing to nonordinary, nonobvious, or counterintuitive causal processes are made. We will then be in a position to explore possible neuropsychological substrates for such processes. People make miracle attributions in and through their meaning systems.

Meaning Systems

It has long been known that people need a sense of meaning and purpose (Baumeister 1991; Frankl 1963; Wong and Fry 1998) and that they use a variety of cognitive strategies to arrive at attributions about the causes of events (Malle 2004), including those most suggestive of miraculous processes; that is, humans are inclined to make supernatural attributions (Spilka, Shaver, and Kirkpatrick 1985). What needs to be assembled is a picture of the processes through which people arrive at miracle attributions based on the principle that a person has to fit new information that comes in through the perceptual system into the person’s already existing global meaning system (Park 2005a, 2005b; Park and Folkman 1997). Teasing apart the components of a meaning system will help us understand how they interact in enabling people to make sense of life’s events and how they work when attributions of miraculous processes are made.

Components

The components of meaning systems have been presented in different ways (Park 2005a, 2005b; Park and Folkman 1997; Paloutzian 2005; Silberman
Briefly stated, global meaning refers to individuals’ general orienting systems (Pargament 1997) and consists of beliefs, goals, and subjective feelings (Park and Folkman 1997; Reker and Wong 1988). People have a global definition of meaning that is partly captured by identifying beliefs and overall goals. This definition could be either explicit and clearly identifiable or implicit and less precisely seen. That the meaning is expressed in the beliefs and overall goals suggests that the person will have some sense of meaningfulness in life. Each of these, respectively, is translated into (1) interpretations of incoming information in light of the beliefs, (2) strivings for short-term project objectives, and (3) a daily or short-term sense of satisfaction and positive feeling.

**Beliefs**

When information enters a person’s system, it is immediately perceived with the person’s global meaning lens. The beliefs that guide the perception and interpretation of incoming information are central to how the person defines himself or herself and to whether the person fundamentally sees the world as safe versus unsafe, fair versus unfair, predictable versus random, just versus unjust, and loving versus hostile (Silberman 2005). Beliefs may or may not be cognitively optimal and include such assumptions as whether there is an ultimate being and, if so, what the nature of that ultimate being is, whether it supersedes all else about life, and whether it can be or is active in causing events to happen. Thus global beliefs, such as whether or not there is a god, justice, predictability, coherence, fairness, and responsibility, cluster to form the basic mental eyeglasses through which people interpret whatever experiences come to them (Janoff-Bulman and Frantz 1997; Park, Edmondson, and Mills, forthcoming). When people encounter discrepancies or situations that could challenge or stress their global meaning, they appraise the situations and assign a new meaning to them (Park 2005a, 2005b). Also, when people have a clear and global meaning system through which they see the world, they are preset to interpret new information to mean something consistent with that already-in-place system. The implication is that just as meaning shapes seeing (Koivisto and Revonsuo 2007), meaning also shapes inferences about what is seen, namely, about the processes that produce the events that one observes. This can include the attribution of miraculous process as the cause of events.

**Goals, Attitudes, and Values**

The aspect of meaning systems subsumed by the concept of goals can be thought of in both short-term and long-term senses (Emmons 1999; Paloutzian 2005). Long-term, generalized goals might better be called overarching purposes that define a general orientation for attitudes and actions over the
long haul. Specific goals might better be understood as near-term targets, places that a person wants to be within a realistic time frame. For example, an overall purpose might be “doing whatever God wants with my life,” whereas a near-term goal might be something like “tell my wife and children each day this week that I love them.” The adoption of a specific set of long-term purposes or near-term goals both feeds and is a reflection of three other aspects of meaning systems, attitudes, values, and self-identity-worldview (Paloutzian 2005), each of which is at an increasing level of abstraction relative to the others. But each one confronts and is confronted by the new information that enters the mental system, and these elements assess that information among themselves and against those aspects of the system that are superordinate such as global beliefs or a locus of ultimate concern. This constitutes an appraisal process through which the new information is either allowed to stand as is or must be altered to fit the system (Park and Folkman 1997). Thus the goals, attitudes, and value components of people’s meaning systems can facilitate miracle attributions for those whose global beliefs prepare them to do so.

**Meaning Making and Attributions**

When the incoming stimuli do not fit with the existing global meaning, a person can process the information either by assimilating it or accommodating to it (Joseph and Linley 2005). If the information can straightforwardly fit the existing meaning system, it is assimilated, and if beliefs about supernatural agency are already in place, then the event can be perceived as miraculous (Parkes 1975, 1993; Joseph and Linley 2005). For example, if someone’s meaning system includes the notion of an active, powerful, and good God who will do what you ask, and if that person’s loved one gets well from a disease after God was asked for a cure, then the event can be assimilated into the existing system and be attributed miraculous properties: “God performed a miracle in curing my loved one when I asked God to do so.” What greater confirmation of the truth of one’s faith could one ask for?

However, the incoming information may be too discrepant from a person’s global meaning, making assimilation impossible (Janoff-Bulman 1992). In these instances, the event or stimuli is so incongruent with one’s beliefs that a radical overhaul of one’s meaning system occurs. This type of meaning making, in which people change their global beliefs or goals, has been termed accommodation (Parkes 1975, 1993; Joseph and Linley 2005). For example, someone who claims no religious beliefs may see the spontaneous remission (cure) of an advanced cancer and, as a consequence, overhaul his or her global beliefs and account for this event as a miracle performed by God.

The preceding illustrations show that when a person perceives an event as a miracle, he or she is attributing the event to a special nonordinary, counterintuitive causal process. For most day-to-day events, it is not necessary
to invoke such attributions because on most days, people do not encounter the unusual sorts of events that would prompt them. Thus it seems that attributions of miraculous processes are most likely to occur when (1) a person comes preset to interpret events and the world in that way or (2) the event one encounters is sufficiently discrepant with what one ordinarily expects that one is pressed to arrive at a miracle attribution.

**NEUROPSYCHOLOGY**

Much of this attributional process can be traced to a neurological level, where there are neural substrates and operations that lead individuals to construct meaning and miracle attributions out of counterintuitive information. Currently there is no unifying, neuropsychological theory for miracle attributions, largely because they are difficult to operationalize and because very few empirical studies have looked at miracle attributions per se; rather, there are converging lines of evidence from related fields that make it reasonable to implicate similar neural processes in the process of making meaning out of events that are deemed miraculous. For example, neurophysiological studies show increased activity of specific regions of the brain during meditation and other spiritual practices (Azari et al. 2001a, 2001b; Newberg et al. 2001). Granted, meditation and spiritual practices are different than ascribing an event to the category of a miracle. But there are likely attributional processes involved in these activities, which suggests that similar studies may help point to preexisting cognitive structures that mediate our interpretation or attribution of events as miraculous.

In a sense, miracle attributions are not a dramatic departure from, but a predictable by-product of, ordinary cognitive function (Boyer 2003). Interpretations of what we perceive as unordinary may therefore be mediated by relatively ordinary mental and neural mechanisms. One of the particular mechanisms involved seems to be an agency-detection and multilevel attribution processing model for making miraculous meaning of an event. More directly, counterintuitive information likely triggers an innate and naturally selected single agency-detection system (Barrett 2004), which is trip-wired to respond to fragmentary information, inciting inferences of miraculous processes (Atran and Norenzayan 2004).

A quick overview may help before unpacking the details of the model. When the brain is confronted with counterintuitive information, it experiences a state of arousal. This hyperalertness activates the prefrontal cortex (PFC), which distributes the release of the excitatory neurotransmitter glutamate, which in turn stimulates the thalamus. Stimulation of the thalamus, however, inhibits or blocks communication with the posterior superior parietal lobule (PSPL), so that the brain cannot analyze and integrate higher-order sensory information (Newberg and d’Aquili 1998, 2000). The brain is
left to interpret the information according to preexisting schemas that likely reside in the memory systems of the temporal lobe. For those with schemas that lean toward miracle attributions, the brain may make meaning out of the counterintuitive information by ascribing miraculous properties to it. Notably, this is only one potential model that does not likely encapsulate every method or approach by which events are interpreted as miraculous; however, it may help to focus on each stage of this neuropsychological model as a way of understanding some of the potential mechanisms involved in imparting events with meaning through miracle attribution.

Detection of Counterintuitive Information

As this synopsis suggests, the first stage in the neurological model involves detecting and responding to ambiguous and counterfactual information. By its nature, miraculous meaning is counterintuitive. It does not immediately make sense given one’s knowledge of natural processes and what one expects under normal conditions. As Leif Enger (2001, 3) says in his best-selling book, *Peace Like a River,*

Miracles bother people, like strange sudden pains unknown in medical literature. It’s true: they rebut every rule all we good citizens take comfort in. Lazarus obeying orders and climbing up out of the grave, now there’s a miracle, and you can bet it upset a lot of folks who were standing around at the time. When a person dies, the earth is generally unwilling to cough him back up. A miracle contradicts the will of the earth.

Unusual events, therefore, do not pass by unnoticed, but rather arrest our attention at a perceptual level: visual, auditory, or tactile. The increased attention garnered by such counterintuitive information leads to some elevation in arousal. This hyperarousal stimulates the autonomic nervous system (ANS), the portion of the nervous system that elevates heart rate, blood pressure, respiration, and oxygen metabolism when confronted with unusual or arousing stimuli. When something enters the mind through the senses that is not rational or logical, whether this is because it violates the law of nature (Hume, as cited in Pojman 2001) or because we expect all things to operate according to certain rules or sequential orderings (Atran and Norenzayan 2004), neural signals are sent off to activate the ANS. This may happen particularly when the left-sided and rational side of the brain becomes frustrated and triggers a limbic response (Johnstone and Glass, forthcoming).

Studies have found this to be true with many kinds of counterintuitive information, and it may apply to miracle attributions. We have emotional and physiological arousal to shadows, to rivulets and clouds that form distinct patterns, and to things that appear to occur via magic. The mere exposure to death scenes can activate adrenaline and lead to an increased belief in
God’s existence and miraculous intervention (Atran and Norenzayan 2004). Even babies who are shown unexpected phenomena in which universal assumptions are violated display surprise by looking at the stimuli longer than at something more commonplace (Spelke 1991; Spelke, Phillips, and Woodward 1995). Perhaps this is why the ANS is so heavily involved in religious rituals and spiritual meditation (Newberg, d’Aquili, and Rause 2001). Each of these spiritual or religious events elicits changes in heart rate, blood pressure, and breathing. It is not exactly clear why this happens, although Newberg, d’Aquili, and Rause (2001) suggest that it may have something to do with an alteration between the sympathetic and parasympathetic branches of the ANS, with the former being the arousal system that surges in situations of intense readiness, and the latter designed to maintain homeostasis and balance. They normally operate in antagonistic fashion, but in cases of spiritual hyperarousal, the resulting excitement may overwhelm this antagonistic reaction and result in altered states of consciousness. The same may be true in some cases of events and stimuli that we interpret to be miracles.

There is also a strong emotional tone to the sensations and perceptions that we call miracles, which reflects involvement of the limbic system. Events that are deemed to be miraculous can arouse emotions of joy, shock, relief, or fear. This may partially explain why psychedelic drugs, or entheogens, result in spiritually based perceptual alterations of actual objects. These drugs may activate limbic structures involved in signaling the significance and emotional tone of events, thereby facilitating religious types of experiences (Hood 2005). Perhaps the limbic system and the ANS work together to create a salient emotional experience in response to counterintuitive information. In a way, miracle attributions may in part arise from a greater or lesser degree of anxiety and activate mechanisms that automatically respond to situations of uncertainty.

**Sensory Interpretation**

One of the particular mechanisms by which we respond to this arousal and deal with this counterintuitive information is by imposing agency and causality. When the brain detects sensory information, it engages in a process of interpretation to understand and assign meaning to that information. According to Atran and Norenzayan (2004), the brain is wired with an agency-detection mechanism that is ready to be triggered by ambiguous information as a way of imputing causality to events. This agency-detection mechanism is likely to be dependent on the neurocognitive networks in the frontal lobes, particularly the PFC (McNamara 2001). In addition to mediating planning, goal-directed behavior, social inhibition, and insight, the PFC is responsible for agency detection and attributing independent mental states to oneself and
others. Its dense interconnection with several limbic sites and its diffuse projections throughout the brain allow it to regulate emotions and output to other cortical regions, and global cortical arousal levels. As the last region to develop in the brain, both in terms of brain evolution and human development, the frontal networks house our intentionality detector, enabling us to assign intentional states to animate objects. These networks also control our theory of mind, namely, the process by which we attribute complex mental representations of intentional mental states (thinking and believing) to other agents and persons.

This is readily apparent among those with frontal lobe deficits, in which damage or perseveration of agency is readily apparent. For example, those afflicted with Capgras syndrome erroneously cling to beliefs regardless of evidence to the contrary, like a patient believing his wife has been duplicated and is an imposter, despite all contradictory testimony. Similarly, those with temporal lobe epilepsy often report spiritual experiences that are related to increased cerebral blood flow in the frontal regions that control how we attribute mental states to self and others (Azari et al. 2001a, 2001b; Newberg et al. 2001). Even among those without frontal syndromes, activation of the frontal lobes has been implicated in religious events (Azari et al. 2005). During meditation, there appears to be increased frontal activity on positron emission tomography imaging (Herzog et al. 1990–1991), and single-photon emission-computed tomography imaging with Franciscan nuns and Tibetan monks has revealed increased activity and blood flow in the dorsolateral and dorsomedial prefrontal cortex (Newberg et al. 2001, 2003). Therefore the increased activity of the frontal lobe during spiritual experiences, paired with its role in agency detection and causal attribution, suggests a role in the attribution of miraculous processes. Perhaps the perception and interpretation of an event as miraculous is partially an artifact of the frontal lobe tendency to anthropomorphize novel events or objects.

However, other areas besides the frontal networks may also be involved. One possibility is that miracle attribution occurs along a frontal-parietal-temporal circuit. In addition to increased frontal activation, the preceding imaging studies also demonstrated decreased activation of certain regions of the parietal lobe such as the right posterior superior parietal region (Herzog et al. 1990–1991; Newberg et al. 2001, 2003). The posterior superior parietal lobe (PSPL) is involved in the analysis and integration of higher-order visual, auditory, and somaesthetic sensory information. Decreased activity in this area may allow for more transcendental experiences by minimizing the abilities of the PSPL such as decreasing one’s awareness of the self relative to other objects (Johnstone and Glass, forthcoming). There may be a softening of the sense of self and absorption into a larger sense of reality, so that one is better able to view counterintuitive information through a whole or gestalt. Maybe, as Newberg and d’Aquili (1994) suggest, miracles are based on a
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process that involves increased physiologic activity of the prefrontal cortex and decreased activity of the posterior superior parietal regions.

The precise mechanism by which these areas get activated or inactivated is less clear. Based on the work of Newberg and d’Aquili (1998) as well as Johnstone and Glass (forthcoming), one possibility is that for those making miracle attributions, the hyperalertness that follows from arousing information may activate the PFC. The PFC may then distribute the release of the excitatory neurotransmitter glutamate, which in turn stimulates the thalamus. The thalamus governs the flow of sensory information to cortical processing areas and provides the PSPL with sensory information.

When this sensory information is counterintuitive, however, the reticular nucleus of the thalamus may release the inhibitory neurotransmitter gamma-aminobutyric acid (GABA), which inhibits neuronal communication with the PSPL, so less sensory input is received by the PSPL (Destexhe, Contreras, and Steriade 1998). In a sense, there is deafferentation, or blocking, of the PSPL via GABAergic effects (Newberg and d’Aquili 1998), so that the brain regions that are active in the usual processing of sensory interpretation are in fact inhibited. Because the PSPL is deafferented, the brain is left to interpret the information according to preexisting schemas that impose meaning. Put differently, the brain must rely on previously used methods of interpretation to create a meaningful explanation. It is at this point that the temporal lobes may be activated to provide archetypes and templates for meaning.

This is similar to what happens with visual hallucinations. Often, as in the case of those with Parkinson’s or Lewy Body dementia, there are structural abnormalities in the primary visual pathway that prevent the inhibition of visual events (Atran and Norenzayan 2004). When these visual areas are deafferented, the brain is forced to interpret any random neural activity in the visual pathway, resulting in visual hallucinations. Typically, the final image blends internal and external elements from fantasy and memory, which likely reflects temporal involvement in the final stage of forming a miracle attribution.

Miracle Attribution

As this suggests, when the natural process of interpreting sensory information has been inhibited, the brain must rely on other things, such as schemas and context-dependent memory, to make meaning out of the counterintuitive information. With the minimization of right parietal functions, there may be increased activity of left temporal regions that house universal religious archetypes and schemas. These schemas are template-like representations of highly complex cognitive systems of knowledge. The particular cluster of schemas that exist in a person’s mind can influence the nature and
sensitivity of the perceptual sets that a person is capable of having. To reconcile and explain all sensory information, we engage in a process of schema-fitting, which involves actively searching through all our schemas to find the most appropriate template or lens for understanding the sensory information in question.

Although it would be an error to say that religion is a schema (Paloutzian and Smith 1995), there are many specific religious schemas that shape our response to everyday events, for example, an Evangelical Christian schema, an Orthodox Jewish schema, a Muslim schema, a Buddhist schema, and so on. Likewise, someone whose schema allows for a predisposition to see special, unique meaning whenever an unexpected event occurs is more apt to make an attribution to the miraculous. This type of schema for miracles is influenced by culture and religious belief systems, typically emerging as children age and form templates for detecting supernatural agency (Boyer and Walker 2000). These schemas may also be adaptive because they allow us to better anticipate outcomes and develop predictable responses (Brown and Caetano 1992). In a sense, because miracles challenge our knowledge of natural processes, the ability to refer to supernatural intervention and agency may offer the emotional benefits of conferring meaning and predictability on the apparently miraculous event.

On a neural level, the activation of these schemas may partially reflect increased temporal lobe activity. In particular, the left temporal lobe may be the primary location for the generation or experience of religious archetypes (Johnstone and Glass, forthcoming; Newberg and d’Aquili 1994). The left temporal lobe system has been implicated in cases of spiritual phenomena such as increased left temporal blood flow in religious delusions (Puri et al. 2001) and hyperreligiosity and religious conversions among those with temporal lobe epilepsy (Bear and Fedio 1977). This increased left temporal activity may activate universal religious archetypes that are shaped by one’s culture, particularly when explanations are needed for counterintuitive information. Considering the link between the temporal lobes and memory, it also ensures stronger recall of counterintuitive events as well as a greater likelihood for relying on similar attributions and archetypes in the future. We recall and recognize counterintuitive information better than other events due to their attention-grabbing quality (Barrett 2004; Boyer and Walker 2000), and it may be that people who readily attribute an event as a miracle have learned contextual cues for doing so, therefore increasing the likelihood of seeing a miracle (Richardson-Klavehn and Bjork 1988).

Put simply, the brain appears to have particular ways of dealing with information that violates natural laws. An attribution to miracles may be a heuristic or mental shortcut that is a by-product of a hair-triggered agency-detection mechanism. The vision of Mother Theresa in a cinnamon bun, for example, may represent culturally conditioned priming in anticipation of
agency (Atran and Norenzayan 2004). In a sense, we may conjure up the miraculous due to a trip-wired cognitive schema for agency detection when we are confronted with uncertainty.

**Putting It into Context**

Perhaps an example would be helpful to illustrate this model. Let’s say that someone becomes lost while driving in a winter storm. Suddenly, she sees the taillights of a vehicle ahead of her. She immediately experiences relief and is able to safely follow the taillights to her precise destination. But when she gets to her destination, the vehicle suddenly disappears. One possible explanation, depending on her selection of schemas, might be miraculous intervention. On a neural level, when she reached her destination and did not see the other vehicle, she experienced arousal of the ANS and limbic system due to the counterintuitive nature of the information. Her heart rate, respiration, and blood pressure most likely elevated, and adrenaline was released to the temporal lobe, heightening recall. Her frontal lobe, particularly the PFC, was then activated as a way of trying to determine agency and causal attribution. Although her PFC likely stimulated her thalamus, the counterintuitive nature of the information may have blocked the supply of GABA to the PSPL, thus inhibiting her normal methods of sensory interpretation. Forced to rely on schemas and contextual cues for understanding, she may have made meaning out of the event by attributing it as a miracle.

Again, this says nothing about the veridicality or truthfulness of her attribution and interpretation, but instead demonstrates some of the possible neuropsychological substrates underlying miraculous perception and attribution. As with all working models, it is undoubtedly insufficient to explain every case where meaning is made out of events we deem as miraculous. Many of the aforementioned scientific studies were based on a circumscribed number of individuals, with research questions that were not explicitly intended to be ascribed to the neuropsychological process of miracle attribution. This model is also based on certain assumptions such as the arousing nature of counterintuitive events and the immediacy of the attributional process. It may best apply to those situations when counterintuitive information incites arousal and emotional excitement as well as those cases when there is relatively close timing between the experience of the events and the actual interpretation of the events as miraculous. The elements and sequence of neurological activity may not adequately capture those occasions when events are initially experienced and only interpreted as a miracle years later. Regardless, it seems clear that an integrative approach that combines the knowledge bases of social and clinical psychology, cognitive psychology, and neuropsychology helps us to understand more fully how the human
perceptual system makes miracles out of events by attributing those events to the operation of miraculous processes. Perhaps this can open greater dialogue about what is ordinary in our interpretation of the extraordinary.

**NOTE**

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1. See Park (2005b, 297) for an excellent diagram that summarizes the basic processes by which incoming information is assessed and, if necessary, reconstructed.

**REFERENCES**


Miracles defy the odds, the imagination, and the laws of nature. Medical and therapeutic miracles have been documented since the earliest history of humankind. The biblical records are replete with miraculous events in both the Old Testament (OT) and New Testament (NT). Furthermore, they are still happening today, even within the context of modern medicine. Miracles have not disappeared.

Miracles are extraordinary occurrences that surpass all known human powers or natural forces and are ascribed to a divine or supernatural cause. According to John T. Driscoll, as written in his article for *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, miracles are said to be (1911, para. 12) “supernatural, that is, above or apart from, the order usually observed in nature.” C. S. Lewis, in his book *Miracles*, described miracles as (1947, 5) “an interference with nature by supernatural power.” Miracles are a language of powerful literal and symbolic communication that one understands but that cause one to feel a sense of wonder. Just as the cosmos speaks its own language, so do miracles. Psalm 19:1–4 speaks to us concerning the voice of the heavens: “The heavens declare the glory of God, the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech, night after night they display knowledge. There is no speech or language where their voice is not heard. Their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world” (NIV). Miracles and nature alike speak to the character and the nature of God. Sometimes they shout in a loud voice; at other times they murmur softly. At all times and in each circumstance, they speak to us, calling us to listen to something that God has to say. Miracles are vivid word pictures of
God’s intentions, love, and interaction in our lives. They also speak the doctrine of Christ. Miracles testify to the truth of Christ’s ministry. They are all about life and redemption, as the ministry of Christ was all about life and redemption. For example, the miracles of Christ raising three dead people are graphic representations of Christ’s raising of millions of those dead in sin, of new life in Christ. Miracles are also prophetic; that is, they speak about events of the future.

Miracles are somewhat like a state of genesis. Whenever we experience a medical miracle, we are, to some extent, experiencing genesis, that original state where everything is new and fresh. This is not ex nihilo creation, that is, something created out of nothing, but it is creative in the sense that something is revealed that was previously unknown to us. That something is the phenomenon of miracles. The miracle itself is the *noumenon*, or the actual event or experience. This may or may not be recognized by observers. The effect of the event or experience is what others may see, hear, feel, or in some other way understand or experience. This is the *phenomenon* of the miracle. Jesus spoke of this when he was instructing Nicodemus of the spiritual things. He used the analogy of the wind and its effects. He said, “The wind blows wherever it pleases, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going” (Jn 3:8, NIV). In other words, you can tell where the wind is blowing because you can see the trees bending, but you cannot see the wind itself. This is true with miracles as well: we can see the results, but we do not usually see the actual miracle itself.

When miracles do occur, there is fresh creative power at work, bringing us back to our roots of origin, renewing and refreshing our souls. Miracles take us back to a time when we knew more and were closer to that other world of the spirit, which surrounds us, but of which we are only vaguely aware. We do sense that there is something more to our existence than this life only, if we could just break through the curtain, the veil that obscures our view. We dimly understand that there is an otherworld, but it is difficult to access. Access is possible only through the spirit.

We experience the otherworld through a shimmer, an undulation of energy, matter, time, and space. This otherworld is a living, active, and interactive thing, intruding at times into our side of reality. This otherworld tantalizes us with its promises and occasional glimpses of what awaits us on the other side. Miracles are a part of that otherworld. It is as though there is a slight rupture or a parting of the curtain that serves as a boundary into this spiritual realm. They are temporary protrusions of eternity poking through to our side. Miracles are God’s way of telling us, “I see you, I care about you, I am with you.” Miracles are divine attention, usually happening at a time when we are in a desperate situation or extremely ill. It is at those times when we are most vulnerable to the actions of that otherworld that we experience what we call miracles.
While medicine operates at the cellular, chemical, physiological, and neurological levels, miracles appear to bypass these processes with ease. It is as though built-in rules coded into the pattern of creation are held in abeyance, or perhaps nature comes with an override on them. A medical miracle, then, is an event that, on the natural face of it, ought not to have occurred. The biological and natural schematics that govern our behavior, development, operation, and sustaining actions are modified or set aside, either temporarily or permanently, in an action that runs counter to both expectation and training. Medical miracles stop us in our tracks, they bring us up short, and they cause us to reconsider what we know and think.

Medical miracles then, are specific events that take place in the lives of individuals and that fall outside the realm of the normal; that is, they do not conform to regular patterns of behavior, or understanding, of natural law. The teaching of the Catholic Church regarding the purpose of miracles is that they are the “manifestations of God’s glory and the good of men” and that they “confirm the truth of a mission, a doctrine of faith and morals, to attest the sanctity of God’s servants, to confer benefits and vindicate Divine justice” (Driscoll, 1911, para. 19). Miracles are designed and intended specifically to bring glory to God.

Miracles can occur in any area of medicine and have been documented as occurring in numerous medical venues. Medical miracles have been experienced in ophthalmology, dermatology, internal medicine, trauma, and obstetrics, to name just a few, and we see miracles of transplantation and resurrection.

In what context do miracles occur? Miracles do not happen in a vacuum. There seem to be some prerequisites for a miracle to occur. First, there needs to be a situation where helplessness and hopelessness prevail. The recipient faces an obviously overwhelming situation and is incapable of getting through it unaided. In other words, there is a real need for some sort of intervention from outside the normal range. Miracles are sometimes accompanied by the presence of angels; other times, they are not. At this time, the recipient is open to previously undiscovered resources both inside and outside himself or herself. The recipient may become aware of some kind of spiritual activity on his or her behalf. This is an opportunity for God to intervene in the recipient’s life. Miracles are gifts from God and must be received, and not demanded. However, they can be, and often are, solicited by prayer. Often, miracles happen after a clear cry for help directed to God.

There is a certain aura of mystery surrounding miracles. They seem to fall under the larger umbrella of spiritual and intellectual mysteries that reach far back into the ancient past. Now, we all love a good mystery. A mystery is something to solve, to understand, to unravel, to get to the bottom of; it has intrigue. We sometimes approach miracles in much the same way. We desire to know the details, the who, what, how, where, when, and most of all, the
why of miracles. We are curious about them, but at the same time, we also tend to want to demystify them, to defrock them, or to explain them away. Some people seem to have a primeval fear of miracles at some deep, unconscious level, perhaps because we do not understand them and because they are outside of our control.

Miracles call us back to another time and place, where we have no collective recollection of such things as the creation of the universe, the Garden of Eden, man’s original sin, or events that happened millennia ago. These feel like only dark shadows to us. These enduring mystical concepts drive our deep attraction for, and our accompanying underlying fear of, miracles.

Miracles are far outside the boundaries of our power and control and thus may feel dangerous and somehow suspect. They remind us of our limitations and boundaries. They push us over the abyss of known reality into the depths of faith and mysticism. These are places where we feel intellectually, spiritually, and emotionally uncomfortable. With the rise of modern medicine and its rapidly advancing technology and emphasis on research, testing, pharmacology, and predetermined results, we have become insensitive to the supernatural and have lost our sense of wonder and awe in the presence of what might be genuine miracles. Miracles have a long history of subjection to examination, dissection, review, reductionism, and even outright denial and ridicule.

The rise of humanism brought about a movement to discredit miracles and the supernatural. Philosophers such as Spinoza, Hume, and Kant have postulated that miracles cannot and do not happen (Geisler 2002). They cite theories of evolution and logic, and they use unsupported evidence from the distant past to shore up their claims. However, their arguments are long on speculation and short on convincing evidence that miracles do not happen. Most of their arguments center on the premise that miracles are nonrepeatable events and therefore cannot be either duplicated or authenticated. The philosophical framework that undergirds their ideas is called uniformitarianism, that is, the idea that natural processes in the present were also in operation in the distant past and that nothing has changed in the meantime.

This premise is central to the whole concept that science acknowledges only what is repeatable and verifiable. This is a weak argument at best. Many events in the distant past are not repeatable, nor are they verifiable, such as the creation of the universe or the origin of humans on earth—not to mention the ancient catastrophic events on this planet, which, according to Whitcomb and Morris (1961), would account for phenomenal changes in the appearance of the earth and the manner in which it responds to those changes. This would include changes in the way in which geochronology information, including radioactive disintegration, is recorded and understood.

According to the argument of the naturalist, the universe is the result of a gigantic explosion, which set all things into motion. Science has pretty much
demonstrated the grounds for this big bang theory, yet we are still struggling to verify the founding principles of the theory and its consequences. The problem arises from the origin of the gas, dust, and unique particles needed to form the universe. No one can say with certainty where this primordial material came from. This event is unlikely to be repeated, and we certainly have not experienced anything like it since. Nonetheless, many deny the possibility of miracles because, by their very nature, they are elusive and difficult to verify, except to those who have experienced them.

Because of our modern critical methods, we are more skeptical of miracles and less inclined to accept them as real than did earlier generations. While we struggle with the question of whether miracles are real, sturdy work continues to be done on understanding the dynamics at work in the miracles of Jesus. What made it possible for Jesus to perform his miracles? Brock Gill and Andrew Kale, both of whom are magicians and illusionists, tried to duplicate Christ’s walking on water, feeding of the 5,000, and raising of the dead. They did a fair amount of research as to how the miracles could have been done. They visited the sites where all three miracles took place. They went to the village of Nain, located close by the Golan Heights, somewhat south and west of Nazareth, where Jesus raised the dead son of a widow. They also went to the site, not far from the Sea of Galilee, where Jesus fed more than 5,000 people. In addition, they visited the area where, it is believed, Jesus walked on water.

Some scholars, such as Larry Hurtado, thought Jesus might have performed the miracles through the medium of mass hysteria. However, according to Archie Horst, another biblical scholar, only 10 percent of any group of people are susceptible to this phenomenon, and he felt that it would not be possible because there were too many distractions such as children at play and demanding care from parents and friends. The conditions would not have been right for mass hysteria (BBC Worldwide Americas 2006).

They were unable to explain the miracle of Jesus raising the dead man and Christ’s walking on water. Perhaps the man was only in a deathlike coma? There are, in the region, substances (scopalamine and atropine) extracted from the mandrake plant that can put a person into a coma. These agents are used today in surgery to anesthetize patients. There were no antidotes for the poison at that time (Mandrake Officinaris 2005). This excluded any possible explanation for this miracle. Simon Gaither says there are no rational explanations for the miracles of Jesus. He states that they cannot be duplicated. He believes they are not hysterical, nor were they an illusion, a fake, or magic. He says they are ministries of divine purpose (BBC Worldwide Americas 2006).

Medicine, especially conventional Western medicine, is, by its very nature, limited in scope and depth and by the specifically and narrowly focused science that drives it. Medical miracles operate outside the limits,
understanding, and capabilities or scope of either the ancient or modern medical models governing conventional medical procedures, controls, and outcomes. Miracles demonstrate their presence in the realm of the seeable, doable, and knowable, coming apparently from another realm—that of experience and faith—that is difficult to describe and document.

Some of the opposition to miracles may stem from the philosophical differences that saturated Old World values of what constituted a life worth living. In the ancient world, the perception of life was somewhat unlike the quality-of-life values we practice today. To illustrate, in his Republic, Plato remarked, regarding setting up the ideal state, that “you will establish in your state physicians and judges such as we have discussed. They will look after the citizens whose bodies and souls are constitutionally sound. The physically unsound they will leave to die: and they will actually put to death those who are incurable or corrupt in mind” (Book IV, lines 1–5).

While this fatalistic view of life was widespread, another, more recent camp has emerged that embraces not only the possibilities of miracles, but that claims to have seen, and continues to see, miracles occur routinely. This is the charismatic movement, which has exploded in both Protestant and Roman Catholic churches within the last 100 years. In fact, this charismatic movement has caused the breakdown of some barriers between the two movements. In the last quarter of the twentieth century, there was more communication between the Catholics and Protestants than ever before. This reflected positive changes in philosophical paradigms within these major religious groups (Prather 1996).

In the Bible, supernatural events are reported throughout. Both OT and NT describe in vivid detail the miraculous events that took place over millennia. Prophets, such as Elijah, performed miracles like the raising of the dead (1 Kings 17:17–24). Miracles were almost everyday occurrences in the lives of some of these holy men. Elijah’s successor, Elisha, performed similar miracles over his lifetime such as the raising of the dead (2 Kings 4:32–35) as well as healing Naaman, the military general of Aram, of leprosy (2 Kings 5:14).

This chain of miracle-working prophets worked down through time, until the appearance of Christ, who was, some believe, the greatest miracle worker of all time. Miracles of healing, such as curing blindness (Mt 21:29), curing leprosy (Mt 8:1), resurrection (Mt 9:18–26), and the casting out of demons (Mt 15:21–28, 17:14–21), were commonplace for Jesus. It is said that multitudes sought him out and were healed of diseases of all kinds (Mk 1:29–34). It is interesting that even those who considered themselves enemies of Jesus did not deny that he worked miracles. In fact, one of the charges brought against him by the Jewish religious leaders to the Roman courts was that he performed miracles every time he was in public. These charges contributed to his death by crucifixion. It was a stunning medical miracle when Jesus resurrected from the dead three days later. His miraculous resurrection
resulted in the frustration of the Jewish and Roman authorities alike. Once God had empowered the remaining core of believers at Pentecost, not only did his disciples go on to do many of the same miracles that Jesus did, but those who call themselves believers are authorized to do the same today (Lk 9:2).

If we understand and acknowledge that the same supernatural precepts are still in operation today, we would not only accept miracles as a natural part of our lives, but we would expect them to happen. In the case of miracles, natural laws are set aside, while new supernatural laws are inserted in their place. This does not mean that old laws have been set aside for all, but only on a case-by-case basis. People survive trauma when they ought not. Live tissue grows where there are only dead cells. Nerves regenerate in an environment that is unresponsive or nonexistent. Infections that persist in the presence of antibiotics are unexpectedly reversed. Sometimes body parts are regenerated out of bone and skin (Wilson 2002), and people are still being raised from the dead (Tari 1971). Evangelist Smith Wigglesworth (1999) was well known for the miracles he performed all over the world. He performed the same kinds of miracles one reads about in the scriptures. Healings, deliverances, resurrections, transplantation, and other miraculous events were common in his ministry for many years. He is acknowledged as one of the pioneers of the modern-day Pentecostal movement, and his ministry is well documented. In London, Wigglesworth prayed for a 26-year-old man who had never walked. After the prayer, the man leaped to his feet and ran around the room. He was completely healed (Wilson 2002). Wigglesworth did not believe in partial healings. One was either totally healed, or he was not healed at all.

Wigglesworth viewed sickness as the result of evil spirits torturing people. He was uneducated and virtually illiterate. His wife, Polly, taught him to read in his mid-twenties, and he never read anything but the Bible. He was a man of unusual faith, whose message consisted of only three topics: salvation, faith, and healing.

Many people have performed remarkable healings and miracles over the past 100 years. This list includes not only Wigglesworth, but also Aimee Simple McPherson, Kathryn Kuhlman, and others. The list grows exponentially when one considers the miracles that have taken place at Lourdes, France, Medjugorje in old Czechoslovakia, and other sites such as Guadalupe, Mexico, where miracles have occurred in the past and, some say, are still occurring today.

A huge proponent of miracles and healing was Oral Roberts, who established a notable medical school in Tulsa, Oklahoma—the site, as well, of the alternative healing Cancer Center of America (see Cancer Treatment Centers of America 2007; ED Ref College Search Directory 2007). It uses state-of-the-art medical techniques, combined with natural and complementary medicine, along with the practice of faith and miracles.
Out of almost nothing but miracles, Mark Buntain built a hospital with a nursing program in the poorest part of Calcutta, which is now a large medical facility with advanced technology and modern medical services for the entire city. It is a medical haven for rich and poor alike. Here they also feed and educate the thousands of poor children of Calcutta daily. Miracles take place on a daily basis in this place. The ministry could not survive apart from miracles. Mark was the most humble man I had ever met. He was in constant communication with God, weeping over those in distress and praying for healing and deliverance. I observed a number of medical healings take place in Denver, Colorado, at Calvary Temple, when he came from Calcutta to attend a conference there.

I had the pleasure of meeting one of the recipients of Mark’s ministry a few years ago. I attended a writing seminar in Phoenix and sat beside the speaker and his wife at lunch. We were discussing his childhood, and, as he was telling the story of how his pastor prayed for and received the land for the church, hospital, and schools, I asked, “We are discussing Mark Buntain, are we not?” His jaw dropped, and I explained to him that I had supported the ministry of Mark Buntain for many years. I remarked that it was very uplifting for me personally to meet someone whom he had directly helped.

I have had the unique pleasure of meeting Demos Sharkarian, a man of unusual humility and founder of the Full Gospel Business Men’s Fellowship International. He crossed the country, holding meetings to which many people came for healing. I have seen a number of people healed of various kinds of disabilities and sickness at these meetings.

During the 1970s, a revival swept across Indonesia. It began in Timor, a small island in the chain of islands that make up the country. Mel Tari (1971) recounts how that revival changed his land. The people of Timor were simple, mostly uneducated people. However, they had a unique quality: they believed the Bible quite literally. They went about performing miracle after miracle, turning Communion water into wine. In the Amfoang district, a local team of evangelists attended the funeral of a man who had been dead for two days. Over 1,000 people came to his funeral. The team gathered around him and prayed for his recovery. The dead man sat up and began to tell the people at his funeral all about heaven and hell. The entire village became believers.

One of the most recent and most well documented miracles is that of Duane Miller, who suffered a total loss of his voice due to a virus. Duane was the pastor of First Baptist Church in Brenham, Texas. He was also a soloist, having sung for many years. His doctors recorded his journey from the beginning to the end. There are pictures, chart notes, X rays, and other records. His voice box was completely rigid due to extensive scarring. For three years, he could not speak. Then, at last, he was able to use a microphone to increase his whisper of a voice. One Sunday, he was teaching as a substitute in a Sunday school class. The class was recorded. One moment,
he was struggling to make himself heard and understood, and the next, he was speaking in a normal voice. There has never been an explanation for his spontaneous recovery (Anderson 1998).

Science and religion intersect at many points in our quest to understand medical miracles. They are not completely opposing forces or concepts, even though many people seem to choose sides, staking their claims in one or the other of these equally powerful paradigms. Science has its roots embedded deep within religion. Religion is the mother of all the sciences. In the past, most physicians were also clerics or philosophers by nature and training. It has been only within the last 200 years or so that science and religion have diverged. Happily, both sides are showing hopeful signs that they are in the beginning stages of coming back together once again. Science is now beginning to embrace some previously discarded portions of itself such as the integration of faith and prayer into medicine. Those who are ill are going to reap the benefits of this new marriage, and many already have done so.

In ancient times, every culture was shaped largely on the basis of oral tradition, and miracles were part of the warp and woof of those cultures. Children learned about them in infancy. They became an accepted part of a people’s history. Each culture had its miracle workers, and some of them, like the magicians Pharaoh employed, were able to duplicate most of the minor miracles that Moses performed (Ex 7:10–11). Magic and sorcery were important components of life then. It was not until the time of the NT that there developed a clear distinction between sorcery or magic and the miracles of the early church. In fact, some people thought that Jesus performed miracles through magic or sorcery (Mt 9:34). It became a very real step of faith for them to believe and acknowledge that those miracles were from God alone.

Science, as we know it, is dedicated to knowing all about natural laws. Scientific thought seeks to align itself with what it can observe, duplicate, and document. Natural laws, then, become the primary driving force for the practice of medicine in its various forms. Medical advancement is constructed on the foundation of natural laws. This does not mean that medicine is static, for it is not. It is in a continual state of flux. New information is constantly emerging from, and entering into, research and development of science. It is not a closed system. Change is both expected and accepted. What we knew 30 years ago about a procedure, drugs, or how the body operates is old news now. The practice of medicine is rapidly evolving, not only from year to year, but also from hour to hour. My husband went to medical school in the late 1960s and early 1970s. He practiced medicine under harsh conditions and used equipment and techniques that are obsolete and outdated today. In every generation, medical education, scientific advances, technology, and pharmacology outpace the practitioner quickly.
Forty years ago, diabetes was a death sentence. Today, diabetics can live normal lives. Hemodialysis was a primitive and complicated chore, requiring one to follow exact directions to build a single-use artificial kidney, which then required the greater part of an entire day to process blood and remove toxins. Today, dialysis takes place in the home, or even on vacation, using a fraction of the time and space of old, outdated equipment and procedures. Better yet, if one can locate a matching organ, a kidney or liver transplant is almost commonplace today, as are heart-lung, or even multiple-organ, transplants. Almost any body part can be transplanted using technology and techniques that were unheard of a few years ago.

Truly advanced medical marvels are available to treat many diseases and conditions that would have meant certain death even a decade ago. Costs, of course, sometimes prevent the treatment or research to reach the neediest patients. I recall a case where a young man with whom I was acquainted had an astrocytoma brain tumor. In Denver, a pilot program employed an advanced new tool, called a gamma ray gun, to treat these very difficult tumors with some success. His insurance company refused to approve this new procedure, and the young man died. Today, this procedure is done routinely and paid for by insurance companies.

The role of religion in the healing arts has been redefined by the rapid advancement of modern science. This has led to a sense that miracles are obsolete. Who needs a miracle, when we can take a drug or have surgery to correct a defect or problem? There is some logic for that line of reasoning. Could it be that God has allowed modern medicine to replace the need for miracles? Surely it is a gift of God in answer to the prayers of God’s people in all the anguished, endless ages of human suffering, calling out to God for deliverance. It makes a difference what one means by miracle.

The rapid advancements in pharmacology, surgical techniques, genetics, and the understanding of how organisms operate have changed the way we approach the practice of medicine. New fields of medicine are being developed every day. Oakley Ray (2004) of Vanderbilt University is an expert on how the brain influences health and behavior. He claims that knowing how the brain influences people’s health and susceptibility to illness can bring important changes to the health care system. Understanding how the mind, the endocrine system, the nervous system, and the immune system interact is crucial in helping people conquer the stress and illness in their lives.

To this end, and addressed by Gaztambide in volume 2, chapter 7 of this book, neuropsychology has married immunology and has given birth to a child called neuropsychoimmunology (Ray 2004). This field, although fairly young, brings various disciplines together that are geared toward understanding the mind-body connection that results in a strengthened immune system. It employs techniques that were formerly part of the field of psychology and moves
them into a new arena of medicine. Techniques such as biofeedback, massage therapy, hypnosis, and self-hypnosis as well as guided imagery have gained new acceptance in mainline medicine.

In addition, other, more hands-on areas, which in the past were treated more like stepchildren, are now embraced by modern medicine. Some of these newly accepted schools of thought are chiropractic, alternative medical treatments such as vitamin therapy, essential oil therapy for relaxation and mood enhancement, the use of oxygen therapy for intractable wound healings, energy such as that championed by the Barbara Brennan School of Healing, and much more.

With the combination of these old and new techniques, one might project that miracles are no longer needed or valid. This is not the case. In the presence of such a flurry of wonderful and helpful marvels, miracles are still very much at home. Just because a modern technique or new medicine might be available and used, we should not forget that regardless of whether the person recovers because he or she was given a drug that helped or a new surgery that corrected a defect or proved to be a life-saving procedure, God is the one who truly heals damaged tissue. Whether the forces for healing are channeled through natural cause-and-effect processes that we understand well, or through what are for us just now paranormal processes, the forces and the healing is God acting in these processes. God acts in what is for us the normal and what is for us the paranormal. We call things paranormal only because we do not yet understand the structure and paradigm for what happens in that arena, but all truth in this universe is God’s truth, and all healing is God’s healing since God created and empowers it all. Doctors cannot and do not actually heal anything. What they can do is provide the right environment in which healing can take place (Siegal 1986). The real miracle is the divine origin of healing, not the result of human manipulation, nor even the techniques utilized.

Growing ranks of medical doctors are discovering that medical miracles and the practice of medicine go hand in hand. Dr. Bernie Siegel has a thriving surgical practice at Yale University. He is a firm believer that people receive medical cures and that they experience miraculous self-healing all the time. He documented many of his experiences in his book *Love, Medicine and Miracles*, in which he cites the case of a patient who suffered from metastatic pancreatic cancer. Siegel had given this patient only a short time to live, then forgot all about the patient. The patient’s son came to him after 10 years and said his father had just celebrated his 85th birthday. He had experienced a miraculous recovery on his own.

Until recent years, the usual training of medical doctors was lacking in adequate exposure to concepts that are available through sound psychology or responsible theology. Today, these sciences are becoming more and more
integrated into the curriculum of medical schools. In fact, when I was doing graduate work at Denver Seminary, I met several physicians who were getting counseling degrees so they could relate better to and understand their patients. To have this kind of concern and caring for people is a credit to their commitment and integrity. This caring translates into the ability to offer hope to all patients. It is important for professionals at all levels to be able to instill hope in others. In my role as a psychotherapist, I have worked with many people who were seriously ill. I can say that those who had a positive attitude, and demonstrated a desire to recover, usually did. The opposite is equally true. I recall a sad case in which an elderly client wanted nothing more than to die. After numerous suicide attempts, he finally succeeded. He was determined to die, while others were determined to live. Because of his deteriorating medical and mental conditions, he was not able to receive or operate within a framework of hope. Even though hope was continually being held out to him by his family, friends, and caregivers, he was unable to internalize it. Siegel states that (1986, 29; italics added) “refusal to hope is nothing less than a decision to die.”

The notion that a person has the ability to recover from cancer, tuberculosis, or other serious illness is not a usual part of the curriculum in medical schools, although there are some who are beginning to understand that the human body has a role to play in its own healing. Medical students are sometimes still encouraged to believe that healing results from their personal skill and training. For many years, Siegel thought his designation as an MD meant “major deity.” He later learned that the mind is the place where healing first takes place, followed by the body.

Today, there is renewed interest in the mind-body connection. Recent studies at Duke University have included the component of faith and prayer in their repertoire. In a 1988 study at San Francisco General Hospital, an identified group of patients received prayer and a control group did not. This random double-blind study showed that those patients who were prayed for were five times more likely to recover and needed fewer antibiotics. They died less frequently than did the group for whom concerted prayer was not offered (Prather 1996). The Templeton Foundation has funded a project in conjunction with the Southern Medical Association for research in the area of mind-body relationship. This project may hold great promise and could reveal the mechanisms through which faith and medicine can work together as a team (Hamdy 2005). The University of Arizona Medical Center in Tucson, where I live, offers an ongoing seminar to all patients on the mind-body role in recovery from cancer and other serious illness.

The inclusion of hope is one of the great determiners of outcome. If a patient has hope, regardless of where that hope originates, that patient will get well quicker than the patient with no hope. Siegel (1986) has stated that there is no such thing as false hope. Hope is hope, and it is healing. Faith, prayer,
and hope are essential ingredients in recovery, and they seem to be an integral part of medical miracles. They act synergistically to assist the dying, ill, or injured person in participating in his or her own healing and recovery.

I recall that when I was injured in a serious auto crash last year, I sustained severe damage to my right hand, wrist, and arm. Everything (flesh, veins, arteries, muscle, tendons, nerves, etc.) was stripped from my fingers up to my elbow—degloved, as it were—and I experienced extreme blood loss. It took more than five hours of surgery to repair the damage.

I had a talented and dedicated trauma team, which included my hand surgeon, himself a believer. Everyone thought recovery would take several years and would involve reconstructive surgery, skin grafts, and plastic surgery to allow my limb to function. However, to the amazement of the team, I was dismissed from care in my 10th week. I could do all the things my recovery team said I would not be able to do such as make a fist, straighten my fingers upright, and rotate my hand and arm. I have had no reconstructive surgery, skin grafts, or plastic surgeries, nor do I anticipate any additional surgery. Everyone was fearful that I would have some horrible infection, either in the open wounds or in the bone, that would necessitate the amputation of my arm since I am a serious diabetic. None of their fears came true. At my dismissal, my surgeon said to me, with tears in his eyes, “Do you know that you have had a miraculous healing here?”

I replied that indeed, I was very much aware of this, and then I shared with him an additional part of the story. I explained to him that I had never felt alone or abandoned by God, even during the accident, nor while waiting for the paramedics, which took an abnormally long time. I experienced no fear during that time, although I realized I was seriously injured and was feeling extremely weak because of blood loss. I also shared the best part of my experience. I explained that I had been assisted by an angel, who appeared at the scene of the crash. This angelic being held my hand and arm together in his two hands for a long time, until paramedics arrived. Without the intervention of this angel, I would likely have expired due to the blood loss. In fact, during the surgery, they had to stop the operation because my blood pressure dropped so low that I had to have a significant transfusion.

I actually talked with this personage, and I have no doubt that he was an angel. He was huge, the largest person I have ever seen, and his voice had the most unusual qualities. I had never heard such melodious sounds before. While waiting for the paramedics to arrive, we engaged in conversation. I do not remember everything we discussed, although I do remember that I asked him what his name was. He told me he was called George. George sounded like such a perfect name for this angel. No one else on the scene saw this wonderful personage. I believe God loves to do things like this for us. I received a constant flow of prayers from many sources, and I had faith in God that I would recover. I also had strong feelings of hope during the whole
process. I was reminded once again of my own rhetoric, which I have offered to many of my clients. I took my own advice to heart: Life is a process, God is in the process; therefore we can trust the process.

One of the most confusing concepts concerning miracles is the question, Do I just accept miracles unconditionally by blind faith, or does my faith need something to anchor it, and if so, what is that something else? Some believe that simply exercising faith is enough to understand and accept the presence of miracles. This seems shallow and pretentious. It is true that we experience miracles through some sort of faith system; however, nowhere are believers expected to accept without question concepts and ideas that have been presented in the Holy Scriptures. The writers of the NT urged us to accept their teachings based on good evidence for whatever they were teaching. They spent considerable time and effort to educate and help their readers understand just what it was they were to believe, do, perform, or change in their lives, and why.

These writers always presented their ideas, thoughts, actions, and even the miracles they performed within the context of social, political, or spiritual concepts that people understood. They were adamant about readers having a solid basis for believing what they believed. We are encouraged to think deeply and logically about our faith and to be able to give good reasons for why it is real for us (2 Tim 2:15). The apostle Paul was a very educated and logical person, grounded in facts and reality. His theology was rock solid. He urged us to “think on these things” (Phil 4:8). In John’s first epistle to believers everywhere, we are encouraged to put people and their ideas under scrutiny to see if they are real or not (1 Jn 4:1–3). After we have carefully examined the teachings, and the consistency of their teachers, we can come to some conclusion as to their credibility.

The confusing picture that we have concerning miracles seems to come from an all-or-nothing mentality. In psychology, this rigid outlook is called black-and-white thinking. Many people approach their world through the lens of this dysfunctional view. We need to be aware of what our faith rests on before we accept without reservation, or categorically deny, the content of faith. We need to think through and know what we are to believe. In this hectic world, where we hear a cacophony of voices, we owe it to ourselves and others to have a clear reason to believe what it is that we believe.

What do miracles mean for the future of the believing communities? Will they have a role to play in the faith of tomorrow? What might that role be? Will miracles become irrelevant in the age of modern medical technology? These questions have great import to faith communities in general, but even more to persons who experience miracles in their lives.

We have had many generations of the experience of miracles. Throughout history, God has taken an interest in us, helping us in ways we have not understood. Miracles are one of those benchmarks that we recognize when
we assess the progress of the human journey. On the basis of the past, we can look to the future and say with confidence that God does not change, and therefore we can trust God to provide for us. Miracles are one of God’s ways of letting us know that he cares about our suffering and that he will make it possible for us to keep on keeping on.

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During the early part of the twentieth century, three important scientific and cultural movements emerged that set the stage for their subsequent convergence: first, the emergence of psychological functionalism and an expanded interest in applied psychology, which translated into a growing interest in the psychology of religion; second, the recognition of the connection between the mind and the body; and third, the rapid growth of the Pentecostal movement, with its emphasis on religious experience, including the experience of divine healing. These movements represented very different and often conflicting intellectual traditions, yet they converged in the middle to late twentieth century, as we developed increasing empirical research on the relationship between faith, prayer, and nonmedical healing.

Functional psychology was primarily an American intellectual movement. It expanded scientific psychology, which observed psychological phenomena and asked what? and how? Functional psychology added the question, why? By asking why, the functionalist sought to identify human potentials, capabilities, and aptitudes behind observable psychological phenomena. This approach, in turn, enabled psychology to be applied to “success in living, with the adaptation of the organism to its environment, and with the organism’s adaptation of its environment to itself.” It set the stage to enable researchers to ask how divine healing might be explained as an adaptive mechanism—as an individual seeking to adapt to the environment or changing the environment to better suit the individual.

The emergence of functionalism as the dominant school in American psychology found compatibility with the second movement: the connection
between the mind and the physical health of the body. The psychosomatic medicine movement sought to identify the relationship between emotions and disease, recognizing the mind’s power to influence physical health. The work of Walter Cannon and Hans Selye exemplified this movement, with an emphasis on the pathogenic effects of stress.\(^2\) Highlights of the psychosocial aspects of the pathogenesis of disease included the development of the Social Readjustment and Hassle scales, which sought to link both significant life events and daily frustrations with the onset of disease. Some personality traits, such as the type A behavior pattern first observed by two cardiologists in 1959, are believed to enhance the development of stress-related illness.\(^3\)

Although functionalism and psychosomatic medicine were intellectually compatible, they both approached the study of psychological phenomena with an essentially naturalistic framework. Extensions of American functionalism into radical behaviorism and evolutionary psychology underscored this naturalism, leaving little room for mystical model as an explanation for experienced phenomena. Hence the emergence of Pentecostalism, with its emphasis on signs and wonders such as divine healing, was antithetical to the skepticism of functional psychology. Both movements as intellectual and cultural forces grew in ascendancy in their separate and very different spheres. It was the mid-twentieth century before attempts at subjecting these miraculous outcomes to empirical scrutiny were undertaken. More significantly, inasmuch as divine healing seemed confined to a specific milieu that remained on the fringes of mainstream religiosity, researchers also explored what role religion itself had on health and illness.

In the March 2002 volume of the *Journal of Religion and Health*, Thomas St. James O’Connor published an article that asks the question, Is evidence-based spiritual care an oxymoron?\(^4\) The tension between the empirical and the spiritual is eloquently reflected in O’Connor’s question and recalls Hamlet’s caution to Horatio as they confronted the ghost of Hamlet’s father: “There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.”

Hamlet’s caution against an overly narrow metaphysic has not deterred researchers from attempting to explore the relationship between religion and psychological phenomena. Two seminal works that no respectable chapter on the psychology of religion would omit are Sigmund Freud’s *The Future of an Illusion* (1928) and William James’ *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902).

Freud’s book certifies science as the ultimate victor over religious dogma. He notes that the scientific spirit will encourage a process that replaces ignorance with rational enlightenment, with no room left for religion: “The more the fruits of knowledge become accessible to men, the more widespread is the decline of religious belief, at first only of the obsolete and objectionable expressions of the same, then of its fundamental assumptions also.”\(^5\)
also dismisses pragmatism as an argument for religion’s maintenance. He argues that while religion may have made beneficial contributions by engendering happiness and consolation and restraining antisocial behavior, it has not kept humankind from wanting to escape its influences as repressive of primal instincts. It is only through scientific rationalism, and more specifically, psychoanalysis, that humanity will escape the confines of the religion that both comforted and enslaved their ancestors.

Freud’s dismissal of so-called medical miracles would no doubt reflect his belief in the development of hysterical symptoms as a means of repressing unwanted impulses, a perspective he cultivated in his work with the hypnotist Charcot and his older colleague Breuer. In short, religion itself was, for Freud, a manifestation of pathology and incongruent with the notion of healing reflected in Freud’s system of psychoanalysis. While Freud was unwavering in his rejection of the spiritual, however, many of his followers were unwilling to accept a purely naturalistic explanation for some phenomena. They attempted a rapprochement between psychoanalysis and religion. In A History of the Cure of Souls, John T. McNeill notes that Otto Rank, Oskar Pfister, and Carl Jung made notable efforts to return some aspects of the soul to the curative potential of psychoanalysis.

In 1902, William James published a landmark study of religion titled The Varieties of Religious Experience. Consistent with his philosophy of pragmatism, James was not concerned with staking out a position about the veracity of a religious worldview; instead, he addressed the question as to whether religion is beneficial or harmful. He identified the positive aspects of religion in his discourse about healthy-mindedness and the mind-cure movements. James chronicled successful resolutions of mental anguish and also physical ailments, such as sprained ankles and influenza, through mind-cure, that is, psychospiritual healings. In contradistinction to Freud’s disdain for religion, James argued that the religion of healthy-mindedness is as successful as science in alleviating suffering. He asserted that healthy-mindedness “gives to some of us serenity, moral poise, and happiness, and prevents certain forms of disease as well as science does, or even better in a certain class of persons.” To support his observations of the effectiveness of psychospiritual cures, James appealed to an article written by H. H. Goddard of Clark University, who asserted that mind-cures are indeed cures, but “are in no respect different from those now officially recognized in medicine as cures by suggestion.”

Some 60 years later, Jerome Frank expanded on James’ notion of healthy-mindedness in his book Persuasion and Healing. Frank expanded on the curative power of suggestion through his exploration of the placebo effect. Amanda Porterfield noted that Frank’s book offered a “full-fledged theory about the relationship between the placebo effect and religious healing.” Frank’s book was an attempt to critique various forms of psychotherapy, with an eye toward identifying common themes and characteristics. He
emphasized that illness is not necessarily divorced from the mind and that healing is as much a psychosocial phenomenon as it is a biological one.

In his chapter on nonmedical healing, Frank noted that those who practice it tend to view “illness as a disorder of the total person, involving not only his body, but his image of himself and his relations to his group; instead of emphasizing conquest of the disease, they focus on stimulating or strengthening the patient’s natural healing powers.” He summarized his chronicle of nonmedical healing in primitive cultures by noting the power of emotions on health. Converging with much of the current and past literature on the physiological damage of stress, Frank asserted “that anxiety and despair can be lethal; confidence and hope, life-giving.” Thomas Csordas lists Frank’s “persuasive hypothesis” as one of the compelling anthropological hypotheses for the efficacy of ritual healing, noting that if the supplicant is persuaded that his or her ailment will be relieved by the culturally sanctioned healer, then relief is likely to occur.

Frank also identified common characteristics of phenomena like Communist thought reform, religious revivalism, and nonmedical healing. They all include a sufferer and a persuader: the former is distressed, demoralized, and alienated from the support community; the latter represents the power of the overarching worldview that governs the commonly accepted views of illness and health, despair and hope. He summarized the empirical research on the placebo effect, wherein “the administration of inert medications by physicians demonstrate that the alleviation of anxiety and arousal of hope through this means commonly produces considerable symptomatic relief and may promote healing of some types of tissue damage.” Frank’s work on persuasion and the placebo effect provided a psychological explanation for the medical miracles that occurred during the Pentecostal revival movements in the mid-twentieth century.

The study of religion as psychological phenomena was occurring together with a reemerging emphasis on the miraculous in Christianity. Popular images of evangelists surrounded by clouds of suspicion have been fueled by cinema works like Elmer Gantry and the more recent Steve Martin film, Leap of Faith. Financial and sexual scandals involving televangelists have added credence to these negative impressions. David Harrell Jr. chronicles the history of the healing revival movement in his book All Things Are Possible: The Healing and Charismatic Revivals in Modern America. Harrell notes that prayer for the sick and healing miracles became part of the overall revivalism experience growing out of the nascent Pentecostalism of the early twentieth century, with its surge of divine healing revivals in the 1950s.

Pentecostalism was characterized by ecstatic religious experiences, the sign gifts of the Holy Spirit, and divine healing. The healing revival movement that blossomed into the charismatic movement solidified the Pentecostal doctrine of divine healing. Pentecostal revivalists preached that good
health was a benefit of Christ’s atonement but that the supplicant must have the requisite level of faith for the healing to occur; in fact, the supplicant was held responsible whenever a miraculous healing did not occur. The evangelists claimed themselves to be conduits of divine healing, with varying degrees of proximity to the afflicted. Healing was not only conveyed through the laying on of hands, but also through anointed prayer cloths, praying from prayer cards, and through media like radio and television.

Of course, skeptics also arose to challenge the authenticity of medical healing. To support the validity of their healing ministries, many of the Pentecostal evangelists encouraged participants who had been healed to provide testimonials, particularly with medical evidence. Unfortunately, such evidence was often of poor quality, and evangelists were compelled to publish disclaimers to protect themselves against legal action.

The Pentecostal movement was not the only Christian movement to appropriate the healing power of God. Anthropologist Jeannette Henney conducted field observations of Fundamentalist Shaker sects and a Dutch healing cult called “Streams of Power” in the Caribbean island nation of St. Vincent. Henney reports witnessing a healing session after a Streams of Power service, in which the afflicted awaited the laying on of hands by the evangelist. Unlike the highly charged emotional level of some Pentecostal healing services, Henney reports that there was no “trembling or excitement evident on the part of either the evangelist or the patient.” Similar to Pentecostal practice, healing could occur at remote distances, with a handkerchief blessed by the evangelist functioning as the vehicle through which God’s healing power was conveyed.

Sociologist Meredith McGuire reports on alternative healing practices among suburban New Jersey residents in America in her book *Ritual Healing in Suburban America*. McGuire not only reports alternative healing practices among Christian groups, but also New Age and secular healing therapies as well. McGuire notes that among the Christian groups she observed, the healing power of God was appropriated through laying on of hands, prayers of faith in tongues (glossolalia), prayer with fasting, visualization, and claiming of healing. McGuire also witnessed the phenomenon known as *slaying in the Spirit* among traditional Pentecostals. The supplicant responds to the healing touch of the minister by falling to the floor. Reflecting the demand characteristic of this particular healing phenomenon among Pentecostals, McGuire notes that the “process is sufficiently common and ritualized in some prayer groups that persons who request healing stand in line and, as they are touched, fall into the waiting arms of an usher, who lays them on the floor gently while another usher covers their legs for modesty. In such a context, the ‘slaying in the Spirit’ is expected; not to fall is deviant and disturbing to the rest of the group.” McGuire reports that the Christian healing groups she studied shared similarities with other non-Christian
healing groups regarding the role of the healer, the role of the supplicant, and the use of rituals. Differences centered on the centrality of the healing power emanating from God, the role of Satan in sickness and suffering, and the necessity of the supplicant’s faith in God.

Deborah Glik also conducted research with participants in healing rituals in Baltimore in the mid-1980s. Glik surveyed participants in Christian charismatic healing groups, metaphysical or New Age healing groups, and a comparison group of medical patients on variables related to religiosity and psychosocial distress. In her analysis of the results, Glik notes that the relationship between religiosity and distress may be accounted for by social selection and social causation. For the former, individuals who are less emotionally stable are attracted to charismatic healing groups that stress orchestrated rituals and scripted experiences; for the latter, the intensity of the small-group experience may induce a dissociative state in supplicants seeking alleviation of symptoms.

In a separate study, Glik analyzed survey data from 160 Baltimore participants in spiritual healing groups. She found that a majority of participants engaged in a “health problem redefinition” that was more congruent with the expectations of spiritual healing than their original problem formulations. Furthermore, those participants who did redefine their health problems were also more likely to claim that they had been healed. In essence, Glik hypothesized that the healing was a product of the interaction between the social context and cognitive receptivity.

Much of the empirical research on prayer and healing seeks to quantify the relationship between faith and health. The earliest empirical research was an 1872 study by Francis Galton on whether there was a statistical relationship between prayer and longevity—both for the ones who pray and for the subjects of prayer. Galton’s review of actuarial tables published at the time led him to conclude that no such relationship existed. Although Galton’s conclusions were based on flawed design methodology, his research was seminal in its supposition that prayer can be studied empirically. Carl Thoresen, Alex Harris, and Doug Oman note that initial modern empirical studies on the relationship between religious variables and health did not get started until the late 1960s and initially focused on specific denominations. These studies investigated the relationship between religious affiliation, denominational membership, regularity of church attendance, and health variables like coronary disease and cancer. The results suggested that “there is something about being involved in a religious organization, activity, or group that relates to better health status, including reduced risk of mortality.”

Margaret Poloma and Brian Pendleton focused more specifically on the religious activity of prayer and its relationship to quality of life. After conducting a factor analysis on 15 survey items related to prayer activities, Poloma and Pendleton found four discrete types of prayer: (1) meditative, (2) ritualist,
(3) petitionary, and (4) colloquial. Their hypothesis that prayer would associate with measures of quality of life was supported; meditative prayer was moderately predictive of existential well-being and religious satisfaction, and colloquial prayer was predictive of happiness. Conversely, individuals who engage exclusively in ritualistic prayer are more likely to be depressed and tense.

Michael McCullough conducted a comprehensive review of the empirical research literature on prayer and health. He divided the research into four categories: (1) prayer and subjective well-being, (2) prayer as a form of coping, (3) prayer and psychiatric symptoms, and (4) intercessory prayer. The research on intercessory prayer is of particular interest to the relationship between prayer and healing. McCullough cites Byrd’s double-blind study of intercessory prayer for cardiac patients as a well-designed empirical study. One group of cardiac patients was the subject of intercessory prayer, while the other group was not. Those patients who were the subject of intercession had fewer cardiac events, required less medication, and reported a lower overall severity of symptoms than those patients in the control group. Thoresen, Harris, and Oman note that W. S. Harris and his colleagues replicated Byrd’s research. They, too, found that cardiac patients that were the subjects of intercessory prayer did better on objective outcome measures of cardiac health than patients who were not the subject of prayer.

The January 2003 volume of the American Psychologist set aside a section for studies on spirituality, religion, and health. William Miller and Carl Thoresen began the section by providing an overview of the state of the research and addressed three methodological issues related to the empirical study of religion and health: operational definitions, methods of statistical control, and criteria for judgment of evidence in support of specific research hypotheses. Lynda Powell, Leila Shahabi, and Carl Thoresen reviewed nine hypotheses related to the links between religion and physical health. The authors reviewed relevant research articles specific to the individual hypotheses, including or excluding research on the basis of a levels-of-evidence approach encouraged by Miller and Thoresen in the same volume. Their analysis of the research found persuasive evidence for the hypothesis that church attendance protects against death. Some evidence was found to support the hypotheses that religion protects against cardiovascular illness and that being prayed for improves recovery from acute illness. Some evidence was also found to support the hypothesis that religious belief actually impedes recovery from acute illness. Hypotheses that were unsupported by the research included protection against cancer mortality, cancer progression, disability, and longevity.

In the same volume of the American Psychologist, Teresa Seeman, Linda Fagin Dublin, and Melvin Seeman reviewed research literature on the possibility of biological pathways linking religiosity and health. The authors found some support for the hypothesis that Judeo-Christian religious practices are related to lower blood pressure levels, though the research designs
employed in these studies were reason for caution in generalizing the research. Similarly, the authors found modest support for the hypothesis that Judeo-Christian religious practices are related to better immune functioning. Research associating cholesterol levels with religiosity was not supported; comparison studies among groups did not control for the affect of diet and genetic heritage on the participants. In a review of the research associated with the practice of yoga or meditation, empirical research appeared to support a relationship between these practices and lower blood pressure, lower cholesterol, lower stress hormone levels, variations in patterns of brain activity, and better health outcomes for clinical patients.

The final article in this section of the *American Psychologist* reviewed advances in the measurement of religion and spirituality and its implications for health-related research. Peter Hill and Kenneth Pargament noted the problems with common measures of religiosity such as the tendency to bifurcate spirituality and religiosity or assess global variables like church attendance. Such difficulties allow for inclusion of valid alternative hypotheses and make the linkage between spirituality/religiosity and health tenuous. The authors recommended several constructs that should be considered in the more precise assessment of religion and spirituality, including measures with greater sensitivity to cultural context that assess spiritual well-being and growth. They emphasized the importance of the use of alternatives to self-report measures.

These authors’ concerns reflect earlier concerns expressed by Thoresen, Harris, and Oman regarding greater specificity in identifying and exploring religious variables. They cite three exemplary studies that reflect greater precision in the relationship between religion and health: a study linking certain religious coping styles with mental health outcomes, a study examining the relationship of religious coping to adjustment after kidney transplant surgery, and a study examining religious and spiritual factors related to mood management and pain management among arthritis patients. The authors also recommend the wider employment of additional research designs and methods, including case studies, interviews, and daily monitoring methods.

It may appear that the empirical examination of faith is indeed an oxymoron. However, the link between the abstraction of faith and the very real outcome of physical healing does lend itself to a careful examination of the relationship between the two. Moreover, the apparent oxymoron is likely due to an artificial dichotomy between faith and the natural world that is a vestige of a Kantian dualism between the knowable and unknowable. An approach to the empirical examination of the relationship between faith and health must begin with an identification of the epistemological framework on which the research is based. If the researcher assumes an epistemological framework based on naturalism, the treatment of faith and health will be necessarily confined to naturalistic explanations for observed outcomes. Conversely, if
the researcher assumes an epistemological framework that provides for the existence of a God who acts in the affairs of human beings, explanations may include divine intervention as bona fide.

It is, in any case, incumbent on the researcher to exercise adequate controls and employ responsible research designs in the investigation of health-related phenomena. In fact, it may be argued that the researcher whose epistemological framework provides for divine intervention must exercise greater stringency and accept a higher level of probability for outcomes indicating the positive role of faith on health. More important, it is the responsibility of all researchers, regardless of their epistemological framework, to acknowledge the potential for error and the limits of human knowledge, allowing us then to embark on our exploration with a requisite degree of humility.

NOTES

8. Ibid., 122.
9. Ibid., 96.
13. Ibid., 76.
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid.

20. Goodman et al., *Trance*, 44.


22. Ibid., 65.


27. Ibid., 21.


31. Thoresen et al., “Spirituality.”


37. Thoresen et al., “Spirituality.”


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Words were originally magic and to this day words have retained much of their ancient magical power. By words one person can make another blissfully happy or drive him to despair. . . . Words call forth emotions. —Sigmund Freud (quoted in Capps 2000, 191)

You cannot write a prescription without the element of placebo. A prayer to Jupiter starts the prescription. It carries weight, the weight of two or three thousand years of medicine. —Eugene DuBois (quoted in Sternberg 2000, 164)

Faith heals, and that’s a fact. —John Dominic Crossan (1998, 297)

Was the historical Jesus able to cure individuals’ physical ailments by transforming their faith and beliefs? Is the miracle tradition in the Gospels historically reliable? By employing the fields of historical Jesus studies, medical anthropology, and psychology, I hope to provide some answers to these pressing questions.1 I first discuss recent scholars’ opinions concerning the healing miracle tradition and its historicity, followed by a consideration of recent advances in the study of emotions, belief, and physical health.

In this exploratory study, I concentrate on employing the interdisciplinary field of psychoneuroimmunology, the study of how our thoughts and beliefs affect our brains’ and bodies’ health, as a lens through which to interpret the healing tradition. Through it I develop a general framework from which to study and understand Jesus’ healing activity. I then illustrate the
interpretive capacity of this general framework in terms of a specific case from the Gospel of Mark and attempt to concretize our theoretical propositions. Finally, I outline my preliminary conclusions and point out some future lines of research.

RECENT HISTORIANS DISCUSS HEALING MIRACLES AND THE HISTORICAL JESUS

Can miracles actually happen? If defined as something that defies the normal function of nature and all probability, Ehrman (1999, 2000) argues that it would be impossible for a historian to show that they happen. From Ehrman’s perspective, a historian cannot measure or test the action or inaction of an event that defies all probability. For Ehrman, it is of importance that we (2000, 199) “realize that in the ancient world miracles were not understood in the quasi-scientific terms that we use today.” People in the ancient world did not understand miracles as violations of the natural order of things, for in most cases, the natural world was not perceived as separate from a supernatural realm (Ehrman 2000).

The question for people of the ancient world was not if miracles could happen, but rather “(a) who was able to perform these deeds and (b) what was the source of their power? Was a person like Jesus, for example, empowered by a god or by black magic?” (Ehrman 2000, 199). Considering the inability to properly test whether miracles can happen with any probability, coupled with the distance in ideology between the ancient and modern worlds, Ehrman concludes that the historian would (2000, 202) “not be able to confirm or deny the miracles that he [Jesus] is reported to have done.”

It is where Ehrman fears to tread that Meier (1994; see also Powell 1998; Capps 2000) steps in. Meier accepts as irrefutable fact that Jesus did perform deeds of great repute “that were deemed by himself, his supporters, and his enemies to be miracles” (Powell 1998, 140; see also Capps 2000, 16). He critiques those who reject the miracle tradition altogether as imposing a naturalistic philosophy on the evidence, but cautions that he is not proposing that Jesus actually did miracles. His argument is rather more nuanced. Like Ehrman, he argues that people in the ancient world believed that miracles were a part of the daily interaction between the human and the divine. Thus it fits the context of Jesus’ era, so that the attribution of miracle working to him fits the environment.

Furthermore, the miracle tradition has multiple attestations in the Gospel documents, meaning that the tradition that Jesus performed spectacular deeds was probably not the invention of the early church. On the basis of this evidence, Meier argues that Jesus performed acts that he and his contemporaries interpreted as miracles, and that this was probably the aspect of his ministry that “contributed the most to [Jesus’] prominence and popularity.
on the public scene—as well as to the enmity he stirred up in high places” (Capps 2000, 17; see also Powell 1998, 140). Meier contends that if, in spite of the available evidence, the miracle tradition is to be rejected as unhistorical, then (1994, 509–34, particularly 512) so should every other Gospel tradition about him (see also Powell 1998, 140; Capps 2000, 16) since it has equal or stronger historical reliability than other facts commonly accepted within historical Jesus scholarship, such as Jesus’ use of the phrase the Kingdom of God, his use of the term Abba in his prayers, or that he was a carpenter (Powell 1998, 140).

Although his boldness is appreciated, Meier nevertheless leaves open the question of whether those deeds of Jesus interpreted as healing miracles involved any actual healings. This is a questioned tackled by models drawn from medical anthropology, popularized in the works of Crossan (1992, 1998) and Pilch (2000). Like Ehrman and Meier, Pilch and Crossan also make the distinction between miracles as conceived by moderns and as understood in the ancient world. They also extend the discussion in making a distinction between modern and ancient conceptions of healing and health (Crossan 1998, 293; Pilch 2000, 19–38), criticizing past uses of modern medicine in interpreting ancient health systems. Both scholars adopt a hermeneutical distinction provided in medical anthropology between healing illness and curing disease. Disease is defined as the actual biological malady in a person’s body, while illness is defined as the social and interpersonal meanings constructed and attributed to that malady (Crossan 1992, 336–37, 1998, 295–96; Pilch 2000, 19–38; see also McGuire 1988, 6). Hence a person with leprosy would not only suffer from a biological condition (the disease), but also from the social taboos of their culture (the illness). Crossan and Pilch argue that by providing alternative social support and alternative meanings to the conditions of those who suffered, Jesus was able to heal their illness.

By removing social stigma (via declaring the unclean to be clean, for example), Jesus could make life more bearable for those who suffered from disease. Jesus then could heal illness as defined by medical anthropology, but could he cure disease? Pilch and Crossan answer with a resounding no (Crossan 1998, 297–303; Pilch 2000, 142). Pilch, in particular, goes to great length to make the argument that asking whether Jesus actually cured people’s diseases imposes Western medical notions on the ancient mind. He argues that Western medicine is generally focused on treating disease, while ancient medical systems were more concerned with treating illness (Pilch 2000, 60). Theoretically, then, lepers and other ill individuals would have perceived Jesus as having healed them, although their physical symptoms remained (Powell 1998, 89).

Is it valid to refer to these so-called healings as miracles? Crossan defines miracles not as an actual intrusion of the supernatural on the natural, but rather as (1998, 303)”a marvel that someone interprets as a transcendental action
or manifestation.” By defining miracles within the realm of subjective experience, Crossan seems to state that miracles are in the eye of the beholder. This definition has some problems, to which we shall return later on. For now, we will focus on critiques of Pilch’s and Crossan’s medical anthropology models.

The division between healing illness and curing disease, in particular, has evoked some strong criticisms. Borg, in his review of Crossan’s work, writes (1994, 43), “Can ‘healing illness’ without ‘curing disease’ make much sense in a peasant society? Are peasants (or anybody else, for that matter) likely to be impressed with the statement ‘your illness is healed’ while the physical condition of disease remains?” (see also Capps 2000, 25). This sentiment is also shared by Capps, who adds that (2000, 34) “illness (as socially defined) and physical disease are interactive,” hence such a dichotomy is drawn too rigidly. Just, in an article for the Review of Biblical Literature, conveys a similar attitude toward the medical anthropology employed by Pilch:

Did the woman with the flow of blood continue bleeding, and merely find new meaning and social acceptance for her physical condition? Are not the Gospels claiming that there was also some type of physical transformation? It seems too little to explain Jesus’ entire “healing” activity merely in terms of hermeneutical transformation or social acceptance, even if the nature of the biblical texts do not allow precise diagnoses of people’s physical “diseases,” nor provide bio-medical explanations of how Jesus “cured” them. (Just 2001, 4)

Although Just is in agreement with Pilch’s critique of the ethnocentrism of past biblical scholarship (which relied too heavily on Western biomedical models), he also critiques Pilch’s assumption that “Western biomedical approaches had absolutely nothing to contribute to our understanding of biblical texts” (Just 2001, 3). A combination of both medical anthropology and modern medicine, Just pleads, would probably enhance our understanding of healing in the ancient world.

Borg (1994), however, is more critical about the use of modern medical science in studying the healing-miracle tradition. Not unlike scholars reviewed previously, Borg regards the miracle tradition as indisputably historical and cites multiple attestations in the Gospel sources as evidence. Although miracles may be a difficult concept for moderns, Borg argues that in the ancient world, they were considered to be common events. Even Jesus’ enemies did not deny that he could do such things, but rather questioned under what power they were performed—did he heal via the power of God or of an evil spirit (see Powell 1998, 105–6)? It is this commonality with the historical context that makes the miracle tradition credible. But how does one understand these extraordinary healings? Borg contends that a scientific explanation (1994, 66) “that stretches but does not break the limits of our
modern worldview” would fail to account for—or understand—the fact that healings were experienced as acts of an “otherworldly power.” Here we can discern Borg’s fear that modern scientific evaluations of the miracle tradition would be reductionistic in nature, reducing the healings to some simple physiological phenomenon and devaluing the ancients’ experience of divine intervention.

The last scholar to be considered in this review is the psychologist Donald Capps (2000; see also Capps 2004). Concurring with Borg and Just in their critique of the sharp distinction between illness and disease and the assertion that Jesus could heal one but not cure the other, Capps goes on to present his thesis that many of the diseases Jesus treated were produced by socially and interpersonally produced anxieties. He argues that by changing the socially constructed meanings that produced anxiety (i.e., the illness), Jesus could have actually cured disease—defined as the somatization and internalization of those meanings in the body as biological symptoms (Capps 2000, 34).

Capps draws on Sigmund Freud’s contention that anxiety is accompanied by physical maladies that affect the body and argues that (2000, 170) “both disease and illness have psychological causes and explanation.” Both take place within and are affected by societal and personal relations as well as the subjective perception of the individual. One interesting insight of Capps’ study is that one of the most effective components of Jesus’ healings (2000, 217) “was his [Jesus’] recognition that he could not heal without a true attitude of trust by those who were beneficiaries of the healing,” remarking on the necessity of faith on behalf of the individual for the healing of the disease to take place and on Jesus’ repeated acknowledgment posthealing that it was the person’s faith that had enacted the miracle.

An analysis of these six scholars reveals at least four themes that their discussions share in common. First, there is a nearly unanimous consensus that in the ancient world, miracles were considered part and parcel of the natural order of things, which makes Jesus’ healing ministry fall within the environment of the first century. Second, there is the recognition that in terms of multiple attestations of sources, the miracle tradition has a stronger presence than many other traditions that are usually considered as factual (such as Jesus’ use of the term Abba in prayer or his career as a carpenter).

Unlike the first two themes, which seem to have a general consensus, the later two are fraught with greater diversity and debate. The third theme is that of process: how was it that Jesus healed? Here we can discern the debate between the use of medical anthropology and other modern medicine interpretations. Could Jesus remove anxiety and heal illness without curing disease, or could he heal illness and, in doing so, treat or even cure disease? The fourth theme involves epistemological, ontological, and ethical problems (Crossan 1998, 303–4): regardless of which interpretive model is used to understand the healings Jesus purportedly performed, there is the question
over whether those acts can or should be considered miracles. If miracles are defined as a purely subjective interpretation of a seemingly marvelous event (like Crossan), should Jesus’ healings be considered as miracles? If miracles are defined as the experience of an intrusion of an otherworldly power (as Borg), how should one classify Jesus’ deeds?

By employing the tools of neuroscience, psychoneuroimmunology, and psychoanalytic psychology, we hope to provide some answers to the second set of questions discussed. First, we will try to answer if it is possible for Jesus to cure disease by healing illness. Second, we will attempt to elaborate a definition of the miracle experience that takes into account both the subjective and objective factors involved.

**CONNECTIONS BETWEEN EMOTIONS, STRESS, AND HEALTH: A CRASH COURSE ON PSYCHONEUROIMMUNOLOGY**

An authority on the emerging field of psychoneuroimmunology, Sternberg (2000, 21–32) reveals some of the latest research connecting emotions and health. The empirical evidence shows that emotions are not just ethereal concepts floating around in the mind, but are tied to specific physiological conditions in the body. Each emotion (love, fear, sadness, etc.) is most easily recognizable by the physical effects of which it is a part such as the balance of certain chemicals in different areas of the body, the tension or relaxation of muscle fibers, heart rate, or blood pressure (see also Flaherty 2003, 149–68).

One of the leading neuroscientists promoting the recognition of the physical effects of emotion, Antonio Damasio (2003), has constructed a model that not only accounts for the emotional states of the body, but also those perceptions of emotional states—usually referred to as feelings. An emotional state involves a certain physiological state of the body, which is then mapped in certain areas of the brain. These body maps are where feelings actually take place. So Damasio writes (2003, 88), “The substrate of feelings is the set of neural patterns that map the body state and from which a mental image of body state can emerge” (see also Flaherty 2003, 141–48).

For example, when we perceive an object that irritates us—that makes us angry—there is a delicate feedback process between the external object and our internal world. Anger begins with the actual physiological changes that take place during the emotion: the tension of the muscles, an increase in blood pressure and heart rate, and increases in cortisol (which we will discuss shortly). This state of the body is then mapped in the brain via a variety of neural patterns that come together to constitute an image of what the body looks like during the emotion anger. These body maps provide the experience of feeling, the mental idea of what is going on in the body. The emotion anger leads to the feeling of anger: we thus become aware that we are
angry. Along with emotion and feeling also come thoughts and memories: “This really angers me,” or “I ought to punch him in the nose.” Emotion in the body leads to feeling in the brain, which leads to thoughts and memories. Damasio (2003, 71) makes it clear that this process can also work in reverse: thoughts and memories can also lead to emotions and feelings in a complex, two-way network.

As just discussed, one of the ways in which the brain and the body are connected is by the feedback mechanism underlying emotions and feelings. Physical states in the body (emotions) affect the neural mapping of the brain (feelings and thoughts), and the mapping of experiences on the brain (thoughts and feelings) affect the physical states of the body (emotions). We will now take a closer look, via the discerned biological pathways between brain and body, at how this discussion relates to health and, subsequently, healing.

In the presence of a bodily infection, the body’s stress response is activated. Immune cells begin to reproduce to deal with the insult to the body, producing substances called interleukins (Sternberg 2000, 53–54). These interleukins then travel to the hypothalamus in the brain and stimulate it to release cortico-tropic-releasing-hormone (CRH) into the pituitary, which in turn releases adreno-cortico-tropic-hormone into the adrenal glands above the kidneys. The adrenal glands then release a hormone called cortisol. Cortisol serves a crucial role, for it not only shuts down the production of immune cells—so that they do not turn on the body once the infection is gone—but also shuts down the production of CRH in the hypothalamus (Sternberg 2000, 57–58). It is cortisol’s “negative-feedback mechanism . . . [that] prevents the stress response from spiraling out of control” (Sternberg 2000, 58). This process is triggered not only by a physical infection of the body—such as a virus or a bacteria—but also by the presence of a stimulus that is deemed threatening to the organism (such as a predator or a stressful social situation). According to Sternberg (2000, 93), this observation leads the endocrinologist Alan Munk to theorize that the stress response, with its release of cortisol, “was there to ready the organism for a fight and to protect it from injury. He proposed that the dampening effect of steroids on the stress response formed a logical, built-in brake to the system to keep it from overshooting once the stimulus was gone.”

During a stressful event, the immune system is momentarily toned down so that other aspects of ourselves may receive an extra boost in energy: our attention becomes focused, our muscles prepare for fight or flight, or our ability to make quick decisions under drastic situations becomes heightened. Some of these dose effects of stress are “good, [but] too much [stress] is bad” (Sternberg 2000, 110). Our bodies have the capacity to undergo short-term amounts of stress without incurring any long-term deleterious effects. “However,” Sternberg (2000, 111) writes, “when the stress turns chronic,
immune defenses begin to be impaired.” In fact, chronic stress results in increased cortisol, which can devastate the immune system to such an extent that one becomes more susceptible to disease. This can be quite deadly since an individual whose immune system has become flattened could easily die from septic shock when even the simplest bacteria penetrate the body. After a while, the body’s reserves of cortisol would become depleted, so that in the face of anxiety and stress, the immune system would overshoot itself. Without cortisol to tone down the production of immune cells, the body would soon turn on itself and instigate autoimmune diseases. Anxiety, fear, or depression could upset the balance of the body’s stress response—in the direction of susceptibility to infection or to the proliferation of autoimmune diseases, devouring the host.

In talking about stress, we are not merely referring to vivid, physical threats, but also to mythical or socially constructed threats (one thinks of the medical anthropological definition of illness). The perception that one is a social outcast, or that one will not be able to succeed in life, is a stressor that can be just as powerful as a physical threat of bodily harm (Sternberg 2000, 122; see also Flaherty 2003, 176–81). Hence illness—defined within medical anthropology as a socially constructed narrative—can heighten one’s biological susceptibility to disease. If illness or socially constructed narratives can serve as stressors that can worsen or even trigger disease (see Sternberg 2000, 117–18), then could healing illness play a role in curing disease? If the belief that we are worthless or in a state of constant damnation can harm our bodies, could the belief that we are delivered from such a state heal them as well?

Conditioning, Expectation, and Placebo: The Power of Faith

We learn, psychologically as well as physiologically, through conditioning—the repeated exposure to a certain stimulus in the context of a certain response. Learning, and the expectation that comes with it, is also a crucial aspect of belief. Such faith, as it turns out, is not limited to the field of religious experience. Sternberg (2000, 164) writes that

there is an element of this sort of learning in every prescription we take: we have learned that medicines can make us better. We believe it. That amount of actual improvement in illness that comes from this learned expectation is called the placebo effect. It is the psychological component of that cure. About one-third of the therapeutic effect of every pill comes from the placebo effect. . . . In the first half of the twentieth century, physicians recognized that the placebo effect was a powerful healer, and they used placebo sugar pills to treat illness, not just to test a drug’s effects. (emphasis added)

The placebo effect is a phenomenon in which a drug that is supposed to have no actual physiological effect actually stimulates some measurable
change in a person’s physical health, simply because the person believes the drug will have an effect. This response has been found not only when inert drugs are used on an unsuspecting patient, but also in a variety of other settings. For example, patients suffering from angina pectoris (a type of severe chronic chest pain) were given fake operations (usually resulting in a surgical incision that was not supposed to have any actual effect) under the guise that they were being given a medical procedure that would eliminate their ailment. It was found that the belief that these sham surgeries would have an effect was the causal agent that produced the intended result of curing the patient’s angina pectoris (Hurley 1991).

Some further studies would help illustrate the point. A qualitative study reported by Dr. Bruno Klopfer is most illuminating. A patient of his who suffered from severe cancer demanded that he be given a new drug, which had been promoted as a so-called miracle cure in a scientific journal. After a single dose, Klopfer reports that the man’s cancer “melted like snowballs on a hot stove” (Hurley 1991, 30). The man was healed of his cancer and returned to life as normal. Unfortunately, the patient became aware of studies that attacked the efficacy of the miracle drug, and suddenly, his cancer began spreading again. He returned to Dr. Klopfer, who (acting from a hunch) told him not to believe those studies and gave him another dose of the drug, claiming that they were an “improved” dose. The patient’s cancer once again receded, and he began to recover, until he read another scientific journal in which the miracle drug had been conclusively proven as ineffective on cancer. Several days later, the patient passed away (Hurley 1991, 29–30).

Another study at a hospital found the following remarkable results: a ward of pregnant women was selected for a study testing the effectiveness of the placebo effect. Pregnant women, as some may know from hearsay or personal experience, are prone to bouts of morning sickness, nausea, and vomiting. They were told by the experimenters that they were going to be given a medicine that would help deal with morning sickness, but were instead given syrup of ipecac, which is one of the most powerful substances used to induce vomiting in humans. Thus women predisposed to nausea were given a nausea-inducing agent but were told that it was actually an antinausea medicine. The experimenters fortunately found out that the belief that syrup of ipecac would counter morning sickness overcame the actual physical effect the substance was supposed to evoke (James Jones, personal communication).

If belief not only contributes to the biological effect of a pill, but can also counter the purpose of a substance, while creating another effect altogether, what can be said of belief itself? This question ties in more directly with our concerns regarding religion and the healing experiences reported in the Gospels. Sternberg writes that at least some of the effects on health of religious activities, such as prayer or faith, must come from the placebo effect. In other words, “however the placebo effect is brought into action, whether by
making a prayer or by believing in a pill, once in play, it acts through well-defined nerve pathways and molecules—molecules that can have profound effects on how immune cells function. A part of prayer’s effect might come from removing stress—reversing that burst of hormones that can suppress the immune cell function” (Sternberg 2000, 169).

Here we find a theme that relates to Capps’s (2000, 2004, 59–70) contention that one of the key elements in Jesus’ healings was the creation of a transformative narrative that removed anxiety and stress from the lives of the afflicted. Bringing together his psychoanalytic theory with this psychoneuroimmunology research, it becomes highly probable that healing illness by removing anxiety and stress can have a curative effect on disease. By removing stress and anxiety, it is possible for the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal connection to relax its creation of immune-suppressive hormones and allow for the immune system—and the whole person—to return to a stable biological balance.

There is further evidence that elaborates on the effects of belief and prayer. Not only has it been shown that they have a balancing effect on the body by removing stress and returning it to homeostasis, but there is also evidence that argues for what might be termed the positive effects of faith. It is now generally understood that there is a physiological phenomenon that is a mirror image to the stress response. While the stress response is a negative feedback mechanism that keeps the immune system from devouring itself, Benson’s “‘relaxation response’ is a stereotypical physiological response made up of a cascade of nerve chemicals and hormones” that deliver a variety of “soothing molecules [that play] a role in healing” (Sternberg 2000, 171). Essentially, faith and prayer have the capacity to trigger this relaxation response, which serves a role not only in counterbalancing the biological effects of stress, but also in negating its long-term effects.

This research is not without controversy, however, as to how the placebo effect interacts with the various physiological pathways between belief and health. Although from the perspective of this study, healing illness can treat or even cure disease, there still remain questions regarding the specific ways in which the placebo effect functions and what is needed to trigger it. Although some pathways, such as those related to pain and endorphins, have been mapped out, there are still many processes that remain generally unknown (Hurley 1991, 29, 31). Although the stress and relaxation responses are thought to play a role in belief and its effect on disease, little is known on how—for example—believing that taking a pill or performing a prayer can treat or cure a patient of cancer.

One of the theories formulated to help explain some of the conditions necessary for the placebo effect is the conditioning theory. The conditioning theory asserts that an important factor affecting whether the placebo effect takes place is the extent to which a person has learned to have faith—the
expectation that an effect will take place if it is believed to take place (Stewart-Williams and Podd 2004). In discussing conditioning, this theory posits that the meanings learned from cultural, social, and religious environments are crucial to the placebo effect (Barrett et al. 2006).

Consider the case mentioned earlier of the cancer patient who believed in the miracle cure. Because of cultural and social factors, the patient must have believed that if scientists, who are generally idealized in modern Western society, said that a particular drug was the perfect cure for his cancer, then it must be true. The patient may have been *conditioned to expect* the medicine to elicit a certain result—to cure him of his cancer. Conditioning, then, may have been crucial to the formation of his worldview: he must have learned that scientists strive to find real cures that actually work. Thus, although the drug was proved in the end to be inert, his belief that it would help him initially cured him. Unfortunately, when that belief was violated, and his worldview and so-called faith were challenged, the cancer returned and took his life.

If, through faith, an individual in the modern era can be healed by a pill that was biologically useless, what can we say about individuals in the ancient world who had learned—who had been conditioned to believe—that holy men, prophets, charismatic leaders, or messiahs had the power to heal their bodies? Considering the environmental cues discussed earlier through the works of historical Jesus scholars, would the conditioning present in the first century have made the ancients more prone to experience the placebo effect? Healing of mind and body . . . through faith? Can we call these healings miracles?

**THE QUESTION OF SUBJECTIVITY AND OBJECTIVITY AND A SOLUTION VIA DAMASIO AND D. W. WINNICOTT**

If it is true that healing illness can cure disease, and that Jesus’ words and deeds could have had the effect of producing psychophysiological relief on those around him, then what should we term these acts? Healings? Miracles? Crossan’s argument that a miracle is a spectacular event or deed that is interpreted (1998, 303) “as a transcendental action” seems to place it within the realm of personal interpretation and subjective experience. Borg’s argument, that we must recognize that individuals like Jesus or Apollonius portrayed themselves and were experienced to be people through whom otherworldly power operated, seems to express a desire to validate the reported experiences as real and not reduce them to simple subjective interpretation. One is concerned as to what extent Borg may concede these experiences of miracles a place in the realm of the objective. It is at this juncture that I intend to bring together the neuroscience research of Damasio (2003) and the psychoanalytic
theory of Winnicott (as cited in Jones 1991) to discern a solution that may take us beyond this subjective-objective impasse regarding miracles.

For Damasio, feelings are perceptions comparable to other perceptions such as the visual system. Light comes in from an external object into our retinas and forms an image on our sensory maps. Likewise, feelings also have an object at the origin of the process: the body. As argued earlier, an aspect of emotions lies in their physical correlates in the state of the body. The state of the body is then represented in the brain as neural mappings of the different emotional states. These body maps are crucial in the experience of feelings, which are the perceptions of those bodily states. Apart from being linked to the internal state of the body (emotions), feelings are also connected to what Damasio calls the (2003, 91) “emotionally competent object” that initiates the “emotion-feeling cycle.” An emotionally competent object could be the sight of a breathtaking panorama (such as a seascape or delicate forest) or a loving partner, or even belief in a person or institution. These emotionally competent objects can lead one to experience emotion, which is then mapped in the brain to produce the experience of feeling. Unlike other perceptions, such as sight, feeling plays a powerful role in the transformation of both the internal body state and the external emotionally competent object.

Damasio writes (2003, 92), “You can look at Picasso’s Guernica as intensely as you wish, for as long as you wish, and as emotionally as you wish, but nothing will happen to the painting itself. Your thoughts about it change, of course, but the object remains intact, one hopes. In the case of feeling, the object itself can be changed radically. In some instances the changes may be akin to taking a brush and fresh paint and modifying the painting.”

In modifying the emotionally competent object—in this case, by painting over parts of a Picasso—one also modifies the emotions and physical states existing within the body. After our masterpiece has been modified, our emotion may change from dissatisfaction to satisfaction with the finished work, which is then experienced as the feeling of completeness and renewal. In this sense, then, by transforming the external, the internal is also transformed. Damasio writes that we perceive (2003, 92) “a series of transitions. We sense an interplay, a give and take” between the subjective internal experience and the objective external world.

We find a similar discussion on the interaction and transformation of the internal and external worlds in the work of the psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott (as cited in Jones 1991; see also Jones 1996, 106–26, 2002, 82–85; Winnicott 1971). Winnicott (as quoted in Jones 1991, 57), whose work has proved pivotal in the contemporary psychology of religion, opposes the rigid dichotomy of the subjective and the objective worlds, arguing for “an intermediate area of experiencing, to which inner reality and external life both contribute . . . [an area that serves in] keeping inner and outer reality separate yet interrelated.” Winnicott names this area the transitional space, which
gives an individual the capacity to engage in what he calls *transitional experiences*. These experiences, he argues, are “always on the theoretical line between the subjective and that which is objectively perceived” (Winnicott, as quoted in Jones 1991, 59). This area of play is “outside the individual, but it is not the external world.” It is where a person “gathers objects or phenomena from external reality and uses these in the service of some sample derived from inner or personal reality” (Winnicott, as quoted in Jones 1991, 59), which inevitably transforms the external phenomena by infusing them with a plethora of meanings, feelings, and affects. Winnicott (as quoted in Jones 1991, 59) notes that there is a type of precariousness in the transitional experience in “the interplay of personal psychic reality and the experience of control of actual objects. This is the precariousness of magic itself, magic that arises in intimacy, in a relationship that is found to be reliable.”

Bringing Damasio and Winnicott together, I would argue that a miracle is a certain type of transitional experience, where the subjective and the objective are entangled in an ongoing drama of mutual transformation. This definition of miracles and our use of Damasio’s research are especially relevant to the discussion of the healing miracles present in the Gospels (as well as in other ancient writings). As we have shown with the work of Sternberg, emotions and beliefs can play a powerful role in health and disease. The logical result, as we have shown, is that healing illness (defined as the *subjective*, psychological, and social interpretations of disease) can cure disease (defined as the *objective*, empirical physical condition).

It seems salient, then, to argue that the healings reported in the Gospels involve the manipulation and transformations of the subjective meanings that were attributed to disease (healing illness, as Pilch and Crossan posit) as well as the transformation of the objective physical ailment and the body’s condition (curing disease). Hence we notice an interplay between the objective and subjective spheres, which, for Damasio, forms part of the emotion-feeling cycle and, for Winnicott, forms the building blocks of the transitional experience. Our conclusion, then, is that a miracle is a particular type of transitional experience, where subjective internal worlds and objective external worlds both contribute.

**AN ILLUSTRATION: JESUS AND THE CAPEernaUM PARALYTIC**

We will now more concretely illustrate our model for the study of the healing miracles in the New Testament Gospels. We will use the story of Jesus’ healing of a paralytic as a test case. I present the following narrative from the book of Mark:

> A few days later, when Jesus again entered Capernaum, the people heard that he had come home. So many gathered that there was no room left, not
even outside the door, and he preached the word to them. Some men came, bringing to him a paralytic, carried by four of them. Since they could not get him to Jesus because of the crowd, they made an opening in the roof above Jesus and, after digging through it, lowered the mat the paralyzed man was lying on.

When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, “Son, your sins are forgiven.” Now some teachers of the law were sitting there, thinking to themselves, “Why does this fellow talk like that? He’s blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?” Immediately Jesus knew in his spirit that this was what they were thinking in their hearts, and he said to them, “Why are you thinking these things? Which is easier: to say to the paralytic, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Get up, take your mat and walk’? But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins. . . .” He said to the paralytic, “I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home.” He got up, took his mat and walked out in full view of them all. This amazed everyone and they praised God, saying, “We have never seen anything like this!” (Mk 2:1–11, NIV)

The first observation that might be taken from the vantage point of our model involves a conjunction of the historical and environmental considerations discussed previously and the theories of conditioning relevant to the placebo effect. Since we are discussing the era of first-century Palestine, we are speaking of a time when it was commonly believed that certain persons (sorcerers, prophets, magicians, priests, etc.) could work great wonders of miraculous healing. This Weltanschauung implies that the people of this time were conditioned to perceive the world in such a way. In this story, the people actively seek Jesus; some seek to hear his message, while others (like the paralytic and his friends) seek healing. The paralytic in this story, then, must have had faith in Jesus, believing that he could cure him of his malady. The most obvious proof of this conviction is how persistent and ingenious the paralytic and his companions were in getting through to see Jesus—by point of digging a hole in the roof of the house and lowering him toward Jesus.

The second observation also involves historical context but also aspects of the illness–disease continuum of medical anthropology. Jesus notices the great faith that the paralytic and his companions must have had as they lowered him into the house. Jesus also noticed that the paralytic was suffering from a physical malady, which, like many diseases of the day, was probably correlated with the person’s cultic and religious failure. It was a commonly accepted theology in the ancient Near East that God (or the gods) punished sinners with catastrophe and disease and uplifted the righteous with good health and just rewards. Hence, instead of simply proclaiming that the paralytic is cured, he declares, “Your sins are forgiven.”

To single-handedly transform the meaning of the person’s condition from one of sinfulness (and disease) to one of redemption (and hence good health)
by forgiving sins was probably not what was expected from Jesus. If there were a natural remission of the paralytic’s condition, one might have assumed that God had forgiven his sins. In this scenario, the remission of the disease would have led to the remission of the illness. But what we have in this passage is Jesus treating the illness directly, which would have been assumed to have an effect on the person’s physical condition.

This act on Jesus’ behalf leads to a debate with the scholars of the Jewish law present, and also to our third observation. It is perhaps not unlikely that the scholars’ doubts would have affected the paralytic, if he himself did not question Jesus’ authority. “How indeed,” the paralytic might have thought, “could Jesus declare my sins forgiven if only God could do such a thing?” Jesus critiques the presumption of the scholars concerning his authority in declaring the paralytic’s sins forgiven. By standing up to their critiques, Jesus portrays himself as someone with competency and authority; hence “the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins.” It is after asserting his authority that he turns to the paralytic and tells him to “take your mat and go home.” At once, the paralytic “got up, took his mat and walked out in full view of them all.”

The issue of authority here is relevant because of Jesus’ role as a healer. It has been found that one’s trust in a physician’s (certainly a type of healer) authority and ability is a mediating variable of the placebo effect (see note 6). Also, trust is a crucial factor that is necessary to engage in the transitional experience (Winnicott 1971). By asserting his authority, Jesus—as Borg notes—presents himself as someone who could be trusted to operate such otherworldly authority (Borg 1994). It was then that the healing as a whole was probably complete.

By transforming the meaning-state of the person through the forgiveness of sins, and by asserting his authority as a healer, Jesus cured him of his paralysis. This transformation of meaning and healing of illness, we argue, triggered a placebo effect, which produced the curing of the disease and transformation of the person’s self. The specific biological pathways through which such a process took place are probably related to the psycho-neuroimmunological factors of anxiety and the functional aspects of belief discussed previously. Within the model put forth in this chapter, the ex-paralytic had indeed experienced a miracle, defined as a particular type of transitional experience, where the subjective and objective both played a role in the healing.  

CONCLUSIONS

This chapter has sought to bring the tools of neuroscience, psycho-neuroimmunology, and psychoanalysis as interpretive lenses, read one atop another, to bear on the questions related to the healing miracles in the New
Testament Gospels. Historical Jesus scholarship as well as insight from medical anthropology and psychology have been brought together to conclude that (1) emotions and beliefs can play a powerful role in the triggering and healing of disease and that (2) the evidence from the New Testament reports that Jesus healed individuals’ physical bodies as well as their psychological states, which leads to the integration of both conclusions to argue that (3) the historical Jesus probably did trigger such healings in those around him. Subsequently, we have argued that these healings should be understood as miracles, insofar as miracles are understood under the lens of Winnicott’s concept of the transitional experience, where both inner and outer worlds interact.

Future venues of research should consider new studies from psychology as well as anthropology and set forth to reexamine or outright reject aspects of this chapter’s arguments on account of new evidence, insofar as their conclusions on issues such as the placebo effect or the research on the interaction of belief and health prove contrary to those reviewed here.

Here I have sought to outline a general framework from which to understand the healing miracles in the New Testament. Future studies, then, might profit by using this general framework in a more specific inquiry on the nature of Jesus’ healing ministry such as the types of meanings of illness that were transformed and the reported effect on a person’s physical condition, or how healing others had an effect on Jesus’ own personality and beliefs.

The personal hope of the author, and his greatest desire as far as future research is concerned, is that the discussion of psychology and medical anthropology presented here be extended in further studies. Another proposal for further study is that the psychological models and arguments presented here be used in the study of other healing figures of the ancient world such as Apollonius of Tyana or the Buddha. I think it would be profitable to discern exactly how much of the healing miracle traditions of other figures in the ancient world may be read under the lens of this chapter. Of course, this would naturally extend beyond biblical studies and into classical studies as well as all sorts of enterprises of history, particularly in relation to religion.

What would be the purpose of such psychohistorical research on religion be? What would we gain intellectually, aesthetically, and scientifically from such an endeavor? In discussing the apparent gap between the ancient and modern worlds in regard to disease and health, Crossan (1998, 293) writes,

I speak of Jesus and his companions as healing others. What exactly did that mean for them, and what does it mean for us in engagement with them? I am not satisfied with explanations that say something like this: those ancient people had strange or even weird ideas, but we must just accept and describe them. Or this: they have a right to their superstitions and we must not disparage them. When explained like that, no ancient ideas can challenge us.
They simply confirm our superiority and our more adequate knowledge of how the world works... They talked about evil spirits and demonic forces responsible for sickness and death. We speak of sanitation and nutrition, of bacteria and germs, of microbes and viruses. How are they not wrong if we are right, and vice versa?

Although Crossan’s language here seems more reified (either they are totally wrong and we are right, or they are totally right and we are wrong), I agree with his general sentiment. Our systems of health generally do not speak in terms of spiritual forces, and the ancients’ systems of health did not generally speak in terms of biological forces. Sometimes this fact leads us to bat aside the ancients’ views on health as the preposterous products of illusions. In rejecting their views outright, however, we may become guilty of medical ethnocentrism. Perhaps, in the past, this attitude may have been permissible due to lack of research, but with more studies revealing the regulatory role of beliefs and behavior in disease, it has now become untenable, highly uncritical, and unscientific.

By assessing the effectiveness and function of ancient medicine, we challenge ourselves to move beyond our modern hubris and better understand the ways of our ancestors. By challenging ourselves to do this, we also challenge them by asking, What is the nature of your cure, and what is the meaning of your disease? How did you survive without our science, and how did you suffer without it? This process is also reciprocal since by challenging the wisdom of the ancients, we also invite them to challenge us. How far has our science led us away from their ways? How has this new knowledge changed the way we view health? In what ways have we made progress toward bettering society? In what ways has our progress proved detrimental to society’s mental and physical health?

These are difficult but wonderfully intriguing issues, and one suspects that the best way to answer them is by looking back through history with all our available scientific tools and data and emphatically ask these questions. By challenging our ancestors as well as ourselves, we may yet stir up resources for the development of more holistic, comprehensive, and pragmatic models of human health.

NOTES

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1. By expanding the repertoire of our hermeneutical tools to include not only anthropology, but also psychology, we follow Rollins (1999). See also Kille’s work titled *Psychological Biblical Criticism*, in which he declares that it is his (2001, 92) “fundamental premise” that “the Bible is to be seen as part and product, not only of a historical, literary, and socio-anthropological process, but also of a psychological process.” Ellens warns that biblical studies cannot afford to ignore the use of psychology as an interpretive tool, or else (Ellens and Rollins, 2004, Vol. 1, 284) “it is not adequately serious about itself.”

2. For a review of historical Jesus research in general, see Borg (1994), Powell (1998), and Tatum (1999).

3. A seminal volume on psychoneuroimmunology and the positive effects of religion on health can be found in Koenig and Cohen (2002). In regards to religion’s capability to counter the harmful effects of stress, Ellens provides a psychologically and theologically informed discussion of the history of religion as the (1982, 59) “history of the human endeavor to devise functional anxiety-reduction mechanisms capable of managing situational and systemic angst.”

4. A pharmacological treatment of the conditioning theory of the placebo effect can be found in Ader and Cohen (1975). Moerman (2002) argues that a better understanding of the placebo effect (which he terms the *meaning response*) is to see it as a manifestation of people’s meaning-making capabilities, and how that ability to make meaning relates to the biological processes involved in healing via placebo.

5. Shapiro and Shapiro (1997) write concerning the relationship between a patient’s expectation about treatment outcomes, the patient’s attitude toward the attending physician, and the probability of a placebo effect. Their research has shown that “positive placebo responses are likely if patients have positive expectations about treatment, as reflected by their guessing that the placebo stimulus is a relevant, active drug for their symptoms, and not a placebo. . . . Positive placebo response is also related to a general positive attitude to the physician, who is seen as likeable, attractive, and competent, reflecting positive expectations that he or she would be helpful” (Shapiro and Shapiro 1997, 226). They have also noted an interesting cultural phenomenon, in which susceptibility to the placebo effect increases when patients are offered “a pleasant atmosphere at a prestigious psychiatric clinic” (Shapiro and Shapiro 1997, 227). This may imply a certain degree of idealization concerning health facilities and their perceived efficacy and authority. In other words, one may presume that better treatment will be received at the Harvard Medical School than if one attended the local health center. This perception and expectation could be seen as a mediating factor in placebo effects.

6. It is important to note that this passage was used solely for illustrative purposes. Although this psycho-bio-social-spiritual midrash did take into account the two-source hypothesis by employing Mark’s version of the story instead of Matthew’s or Luke’s, which are seen as derivative of Mark’s, it is limited concerning its historical reliability since it did not take into account textual-critical problems such as the issue of textual redaction.
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Chapter 8

The Phenomenology of Transformation and Healing: The Disciples as Miracle Workers and Other Biblical Examples

Anthony R. De Orio

There are several needs within the field of psychology that, potentially, can be fulfilled by a psychology of healing and transformation. Our understanding of pathology and how it begins, sustains, and links with other comorbid issues is immense. However, an in-depth understanding of what the markers are for healing and transformation is significantly lacking. How do people get better? What brings about a new horizon and transformation? Who is involved? How deep can transformational change go? What is so healing about healing? When is healing miraculous in the popular sense? When is healing a miracle in a scientific sense? The phenomenology of healing, of why/how people turn the corner from brokenness to wholeness, can be demonstrated, giving light to the process of how humans change.

Second, the field of psychology must take seriously healthy change processes that include the dynamics of religion and the humanities. These subjective domains of faith are an inescapable part of human existence. Understanding psychologically healthy healing experiences, including religious ones, can broaden our concept of wholeness both psychologically and spiritually. Religious experiences are, in part, humans (and God) helping other humans to change. The inescapable fact that we help create change with each other is universally noted in virtually every field of literature. The human mind is unmistakably interpersonal. In addition, we impact each other through the use of symbols, self-reflection, and human emotionality. Change comes about through affect, how we relate to each other, and our personal values. Thus any model of the phenomenology of healing must take seriously how religion and spiritual experiences can transform people (Mahoney 1991, 263).
Moreover, a model of transformation lays the groundwork for discernment when people go off course in their religious beliefs and practices. Is religion pathological, stultifying, or compassionate, grace giving, and inclusive? Third, a robust model of transformation is needed to bring together the objective domains of science and the subjective domains of human knowing under one roof (Siegel 2006; Gould 1998). What keeps us from being able to do this? On the negative side, according to Gould, the two domains of science and humanity under one roof is a hard sell for a number of reasons. First, he was correct in his notion that dichotomous thinking has been a bad habit; namely, there has been a false fear that by advancing science along with its reductionism and materialism, the entire range of disciplines called the humanities would be undermined.

Furthermore, this dichotomous thinking has generated a judgmental and rigid ranking of deadly metaphors, for example, good versus evil, male versus female, or culture (and nurture) versus nature. With these acidic metaphors on the skin of the scholarly landscape, there has been much potential for dissonance as well as the reality of false battle lines being drawn between various camps of the sciences and the humanities. In addition, much of the false warfare between science and theology exists precisely because of this bad habit of dichotomous thinking and rigid metaphors, for example, God as creator versus evolution. Both sides on the intellectual landscape distrust each other.

However, on the positive side, transformation and healing where nothing is ever the same again in a person’s life can be understood more clearly when all spheres of a person’s life are taken into consideration. The model of healing presented subsequently does this in several ways. First, the emphasis on meaningful, secure, and compassionate attachment with someone else who is empathic and not dismissive will aid the change process. Second, the natural sciences, the humanities, and religion are allowed full voice in the transformative process. Third, the objective domains of science and the subjective domains of human knowing under one roof means understanding what types of processing may be peculiar to the different hemispheres of the brain. The left hemisphere (objective domain of science) and the right hemisphere (subjective domains of human knowing—including religion) and their integration within the individual are critical for health and transformation.

The emphasis on not discounting the brain’s right hemisphere mode of processing—the nonlinear, visiospatial-analogic, and holistic (autobiographical information, emotional history, mind sight, intense and raw emotions, sending and perceiving of nonverbal signals, awareness, regulation, and integrated map of the body)—coupled with the brain’s left hemisphere mode of processing—linear, logical, and linguistic-digital (syllogistic reasoning, linguistic analysis, right vs. wrong thinking)—creates new windows for understanding the phenomenology of healing (Siegel 2003, 22; Siegel and Hartzell...
The phenomenology of healing that will be explicated shortly emphasizes the brain’s right hemisphere and the explicit contribution it makes to transformation. Moreover, the brain’s left hemisphere and its contribution are implied in the model that will be presented in this study.

The cohabitation of the objective sciences and the natural sciences, illustrates a consilient movement that ignites the possibility of both integration and mutual enlightenment between them. This consilient approach across various fields of knowledge and scholarly disciplines is long overdue and is now taking place (Mahoney 1991, 2003).5 The model of psychological transformation presented here is a framework of the phenomenology of healing that joins various fields of scholarly disciplines. The schema summarized here is accelerated experiential-dynamic psychotherapy (AEDP; Fosha 2000). This model describes the process and experience of healing and transformation. The aim of this affect-centered therapy is to harness the patient’s own ability and resources to heal within a supportive interpersonal environment. An explanation and summary of Fosha’s work follows, which includes supportive bodies of theory and research on affective change processes, the experience of transformation itself, and core state and truth sense (Fosha 2000, 2004, 2005, 2006; Fosha and Yeung 2006).6

RIVERS OF RESEARCH FOR TRANSFORMATIONAL TREATMENT

Several domains of scholarly research generated a psychology of transformation and healing. These four main areas and bodies of research are substantive and vast. First, affective neuroscience and emotion theory offered how our core emotional life creates change. This research demonstrated how these core emotions, or more accurately, categorical emotions, constitute biological universal phenomena initiating from within different regions of the brain. These categorical emotions are marked by an empowerment for change, transformation, and being able to adapt to what life may throw at us. This empowerment is launched when these categorical emotions are given full expression and are experienced not just in one’s head, but in one’s physical body.

Second, the scholarly domain of attachment theory and moment-to-moment mother-infant interaction from the hard work of clinical developmentalists demonstrated how resilient and wholesome development originated between caregiver and child. The experiences of being in touch with, on the same page with, understanding the child’s feelings led to transformation. This emotional coordination between mother and child created healthy change and brain states of optimal growth and learning.

Third, somatic (body)-focused and emotion-focused experiential traditions demonstrated how one is changed through a shift from the head (cognition) to in-the-body sensing and feeling. This shift releases natural healing processes
rooted in the body’s self-righting adaptive tendencies. In simpler words, there is a built-in disposition to heal. Not a deterministic biological reality, but wired-in capacities that yield a range of choices for the individual that ignite transformation.

Fourth, taking seriously and exploring natural history proved to be a rich mine of diamonds for understanding the phenomenology of healing and creating AEDP. The intense emotional experiences of spirituality and religious conversion, romantic love, authentic I-thou connections, and emotional surrender aided the understanding of transformation. This body of research proved to be insightful as to how individuals repair ruptures. Thus these processes of sudden and surprising emotional experiences can generate solid as well as lifelong changes.

**Transformation and Affective Change Processes**

The research areas previously discussed demonstrated empirical evidence of some of the pathways through which healing processes involving emotion, connection with others, and the experience of emotion in one’s physical body led to deep, transformational change. The central assumption of AEDP is that the ability to process experience, together with an understanding other, will generate change, healing, and transformation. This process of healing transforms the experience, the self, and the other person.

Furthermore, AEDP considers change within three major themes. First, change can happen not just gradually, but also in a sudden, rapid, and discontinuous sense. If bad trauma is able to generate a quantum change where nothing is ever the same again, then transformational processes for healing can generate quantum leaps for the good. Second, the line between trauma and healing is a thin one. On one side of the line, there is fear and disruption of one’s expectations, and on the other side, there is growth enhancement, curiosity, and excitement. How we respond and deal with intense emotions from life’s crises—as rigidly closed or eventually as open and growth enhancing—makes all the difference. One major factor of how one will be able to feel and deal with overwhelming emotion is determined by the presence or absence of a trusted other. If I am alone or with a trusted other in the midst of an emotional tornado, my response can tilt toward constriction and withdrawal or expansion, healing, and learning. Third, AEDP seeks to explore the *experience* of change as a change process itself. As a person is able to self-reflect on experience and the experience of change, this reflection can become a transformational process of its own. Through the waves of experience and reflection, this process is transformational, if it occurs within the confines of a secure attachment with a trusted other, if it is monitored how the process of change manifests itself in a person’s body, and if it is worked through to a place of fulfillment and completion.
Self-at-Worst and Self-at-Best: Two Representational Schemas of Accelerated Experiential-Dynamic Psychotherapy

Chronic rupture or timely repair indicates whether a person will move toward psychopathology or transformation, respectively. When the emotional environment fails to provide support, psychic development goes off the road. Attachment bonds, the way we connect with others, can hinder or help regulate overwhelming emotional experience. If the caregiver’s emotional competence is compromised, another wave of intense emotions with pathogenic affects of fear, shame, and distress are generated. The attachment bond is disrupted, generating a third wave of affects: the unbearable emotional state of aloneness. This third wave is a bottomless pit of trauma—feeling helpless, worthless, empty, and broken—where the individual will go to great lengths to avoid ever having these feelings. This is the self-at-worst, where procedural learning activates so-called red-signal affects. The individual will exclude defensively any direct experience of basic emotions. Defenses are used to avoid the chaos wreaked by emotions that cannot be managed or regulated and to maintain the attachment bond with the other person at all costs. Short term, this helps the person survive. Long-term, dependence on these defense mechanisms exhibits personality distortion, phobias, depression of all sorts, poor and compromised functioning, and eventual emergence of psychopathology.

For example, the parable of the lost son (Lk 15:11–32, New International Version [NIV]) illustrates the self-at-worst and the self-at-best functioning (Fitzmeyer, 1981). The two sons in the story exhibited pathological behaviors. The younger brother was out of control, and the older brother was overly controlled. They depicted either high-risk behaviors or a cemented rigidity, respectively. Both sons highlighted the red-signal affects against authentic relationships, whereas the waiting father exemplified openness and compassion in the midst of life’s turbulent times, which generated an environment of healing. He demonstrated boundaries that were appropriately adaptable and flexible.

The self-at-worst and the self-at-best functioning (see figures 8.1 and 8.2) illustrate and summarize the main concepts of being closed or open, stuck or growth enhancing. AEDP understands that there are, side by side, both psychopathology and healing processes existing within each individual. The emotional environment of interpersonal relationships can contribute to one or the other. Emotionally thwarting or facilitating conditions will activate the respective condition. Both of these figures will aid a conceptual look into the phenomenology of transformation as it is described subsequently.
Dynamic Sequence of Categories of Experience Leading to the Triangle of Defensive Response

Core Affective Experiences (Primary Affective Reactions) > (grief, joy, longing, rage, love, sexual desire, experiences of intimacy and closeness, attachment strivings, true-self states, vulnerability, in sync states of affective resonance, core state of relaxation, openness, and clarity about one’s own subjective truth)

Negative Receptive Experiences > (feeling hated, dismissed, criticized, or abandoned; experiencing oneself and one’s affects as objects of contempt, discomfort, revulsion, pain)

Aversive Affects (Secondary Affective Reactions) > (fear, shame, emotional pain, feeling alone, primary depressive reaction: helplessness, hopelessness, and despair)

Red-Signal Affects > (anxiety, shame, fears [of loss, helplessness, loss of love], affect phobia, pain phobia)

Defenses > (formal defenses, tactical defenses, nonverbal defenses, defensive affects)

Consequences of Triangle of Defensive Response Functioning > (symptom formation: e.g., phobia, depression, panic attacks; character pathology: feeling and not dealing, dealing and not feeling; isolation, dependency, feelings of inadequacy, depression, despair)

Figure 8.2 Self-at-Best Functioning

The Dynamic Sequence of Categories of Experience Leading to the Triangle of Expressive Response

**Core Affective Experiences (Primary Affective Reactions)** > (grief, joy, longing, rage, love, sexual desire, experiences of intimacy and closeness, attachment strivings, true-self states, vulnerability, in sync states of affective resonance, core state of relaxation, openness, and clarity about one’s own subjective truth)

**Positive Receptive Experiences** > (feeling held, understood, appreciated, supported, loved, encouraged, helped; experiencing oneself and one’s affects as acceptable, welcomed, and responded to)

**Facilitating Affects (Secondary Affective Reactions)** > (feeling of safety, trust, in sync states, intimacy and closeness, curiosity, excitement)

**Green-Signal Affects** > (hope, anticipation of pleasurable consequences, curiosity, excitement, trust, self-confidence)

**Soft Defenses** > (coping strategies; social manner; defenses that can be bypassed)

**Consequences of Triangle of Expressive Response Functioning** > (affective competence, resilience, capacity to feel and deal, capacity to postpone)

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**THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF HEALING AND TRANSFORMING PROCESSES**

There are three states and two state transformations that demonstrate the process of healing and the experience of healing (see figure 8.3). Under ideal therapy conditions, the therapist as caregiver can navigate and facili-
The Phenomenology of Transformation and Healing

Figure 8.3 Three States and Two State Transformations of the Healing Process (See Fosha 2006, 571, under “Quantum Transformation”)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State 1: Defense</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>One chronically relies on defenses against emotional experience due to a failure of the emotional environment (the true other) to provide support. This chronic reliance on one’s defenses decreases anxiety and shame. However, aloneness in the face of overwhelming affective experience = psychopathology, i.e., against the experience of emotion and/or relatedness.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Transitional affects:
- Intrapsychic crisis

Heralding affects:
- Announcing openness to core affect

1st State Transformation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State 2: Core Affect</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>–this is an experience where the self feels true, real</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>–the relational affective phenomena is one of closeness, being in sync</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>–the categorical emotions are experiences of fear, disgust, anger, joy, sadness, which are primary, in a class by themselves, universal, wired-in organismic responses, bodily responses, visceral; in sum, core affect is categorical emotions, coordinated relational experiences, intersubjective experiences of pleasure, authentic self states, ego states, receptive affective experiences; there is a turbulence of intense emotions, as compared to the calm in State 3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Transformational affects:
1. Mastery affects (pride, joy, competence) 
2. Mourning-the-self affects (emotional pain) 
3. Healing affects associated with recognition and affirmation (gratitude, tenderness, feeling moved) 
4. Tremulous affects associated with the changing self (fear/excitement, positive vulnerability, startle/surprise/curiosity)

2nd State Transformation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State 3: Core State</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acting adaptively and naturally; calm; flow, vitality, ease, well-being, openness; relational experiences of closeness and intimacy; energy; confidence; creativity; bodily states of relaxation; empathy and self-empathy; wisdom, generosity; clarity about the subjective truth of one’s own emotional experience; the sense of things feeling right; the truth sense</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

tate with the patient all three states and both state transformations. In the first state, the patient can utilize unconsciously various cognitive, affective, and behavioral strategies to exclude emotional experience. The therapist, as an unwavering, protecting, nurturing other, acts collaboratively with the patient to bypass this defensive wall. This will provoke an intrapsychic crisis (first state transformation) and heralding affects, which announces the entrance into state 2.
The signal of state 2 is the visceral experience and expression of core affective experiences. The therapist is a safe base, where the patient can experience intense emotions and not be alone. This therapeutic dyad is able to repair the disruption in attunement, which further deepens the therapeutic process. What is important is the effectiveness of the repair. Disruptions are short-lived, and the achievement of restoration creates a movement toward state transformation.

Repair and movement within state 2 releases a second state transformation of adaptive action tendencies. Authentic relief from intense negative experiences, rather than mere defensive avoidance and going in circles, is demonstrated by a deep sense of joy and life. The patient feels cared for and understood, which gives rise to more healing affects. From core affect (state 2) to core state (state 3) is the next wave. In state 3, the person feels authentic: “I am at home with myself,” “I feel like myself.” The patient experiences closeness, intimacy, compassion, and often deep spiritual experiences of being in touch with ultimate realities and eternal truths. Here AEDP crosses a boundary and integrates psychology with the roots of spirituality and aesthetic experience. At this juncture, the therapist can act as a validator, being present, or an active participant.

The True Self—and its counterpart, the True Other—as articulated in the transforming process of AEDP is not an idealization. AEDP theory believes that there is no such thing as a True Self. However, there is an experience of the True Self, along with—for that moment—a True Other. When a person feels known and understood, seen and helped, and not interpreted or dismissed, the True Self is experienced. The other person, in the lived moment, responding in just the right way to a person’s need, becomes, on that occasion, a True Other:

The True Other is an external presence who facilitates our being who we believe ourselves to be, who we are meant to be, someone who is instrumental in helping to actualize a sense of True Self. (Fosha 2005, 530)

This does not mean a just-in-your-head or cognitive conclusion on the part of the one who feels understood. The experiencer knows this from a sense of something (truth sense) that comes from deep within his or her heart and soul. The True Other is deemed so by the experiencer because of the responsiveness to a need, not because the True Other is perfect or unchanging, but an imperfect human being. True Self and True Other experiencing takes place in a state of deep emotional and interpersonal contact. Figure 8.3 captures the emotional change process and the experience of the change process to completion.

The summary of Fosha’s work is complete. To utilize her title, the transforming power of affect is a model that holds promise as a lens through
The Phenomenology of Transformation and Healing

which the powers of religion as healing and transformative can be observed. These observations will lead inevitably to greater depths of discernment to ascertain when religion is rigid and chaotic or generating movement toward wholeness and grace. But what exactly is the bridge that will connect AEDP’s phenomenology of transformation and healing with the biblical texts on healing, transformation, and miracles? The answer, in part, is contained within our understanding of miracle and the parallels between these two systems.

THE COMING OF THE KINGDOM NOW AND HEALING


For Jesus and his disciples, (Rengstorf 1963) the coming of the Kingdom of God was a present reality. The door is opened for the realization that the grace of God, the forgiveness of sins, and the joy of salvation is here. Jesus’ power (Grundmann 1964) is here to overcome evil, to heal all types of diseases, to create a new people and a new community. Visibly, miracles are part and parcel of this transformational process.

There are several main trajectories within the reality of miracles that create a bridge between the two worlds of the New Testament biblical tradition of transformation and the present postmodern tradition of healing contained in AEDP. The first trajectory is that miracles are intensely emotional, personal, intimate, and interpersonal. Miracles are God’s concrete love actions in people’s lives through others. These miracles through the disciples are fundamentally an expression of a transformative, helpful, safe, and supportive relationship. They signal the reality of a love relationship with and from God and with and from others, that is, an environmentally supportive dyadic environment. Miracles create and symbolize the transforming, healing power of and with the True Self and of and with the True Other. Likewise, AEDP is an intensely emotional, personal, intimate, interpersonal, and compassionate organic system. A second trajectory is that miracles are new and surprising. They are the new and surprising mode of God’s activity, that is, wonders, powers, and mighty acts. AEDP explores the new ways and the surprising self-righting tendencies within the human heart when an individual comes in contact with an understanding other. Finally, Jesus and the disciples did not split their experience of the world between what can be explained through science and what was miraculous. Miracles are not ignorance about nature or insufficient enlightenment about life and science. They are not just extraordinary events in the ordinary affairs of life. Miracles are not an interference of natural law, as if miracle means something God did in
opposition to nature. God’s sustaining activity and mighty power is one with nature at all times. The sustaining of the universe is the totality of God’s activity. There is no dichotomy for God between the personal/intimate, new and surprising versus the sustaining of his universe according to the laws he has set (Robinson 2005, 160–61; Berkouwer 1952, 188–231). In the same manner, AEDP does not dichotomize the objective world of science and the subjective world of knowing. Both in the biblical world and the present one, God’s personal love and surprises, along with his sustaining power, are two sides of the same coin in the phenomenology of transformation. God’s person, power, and love are made manifest both then and now. Miracles for Jesus and his disciples were a reality, not a potentiality. They are God’s concrete love actions in peoples’ lives through others. Miracles served the new reality of the present Kingdom of God as signs indicating that guilt is removed and a new personal intimacy with God can be realized. Comfort, mercy, grace, transformation, and intimacy are the new realities for the young community with God and with each other.

The Process and Experience of Transformation
Applied to the Biblical Context

State 1: Defense and First State Transformation

Within the larger context of the disciples’ and people’s lives, there was a deep failure of their emotional environment to provide relief of their chronic anxiety and shame. This anxiety and shame schema was exhibited through legalistic religious and social traditions that choked true relatedness to God and to others from the heart. These individuals and communities could not be themselves. Chronic reliance on one’s defenses of rationalization, projection and religious intellectualization, to name a few, to cope with the unbearable shame and anxiety led to rigidity and emotional chaos. People needed a safe place, a safe other to experience and express their overwhelming feelings of guilt, shame, brokenness, loss, and pain. The religious traditions were ossified and fossilized toward a dogmatic and strict prescriptive theological calculus that left people’s emotional landscape starved for nurturance, guidance, and protection. The soil was ripe for crisis, both personal and societal. Change, generated through compassion, care, and healing, was coming like a locomotive and could not be stopped.

State 2: Core Affect and Second State Transformation

The disciples defined themselves through their mission to be a safe place to find grace with God, forgiveness, and openness to new ways of being, thinking, and obeying God. They demonstrated a healing power, where they would give to others and receive them without precondition. People would
not be summarily dismissed or reinterpreted to fit rigid religious tradition at the expense of their own hearts. This healing message created an intra-psychic crisis of massive proportions. There could now be an opportunity for people to experience and communicate their categorical emotions such as fears, angers, disgusts, sadness, and joys of life. These wired-in organismic, visceral, bodily (somatic tracking) responses, through the love and power of the disciples, created a turbulence of intense emotions. People could authentically experience themselves and feel understood and received by God and the disciples. God, the disciples, and the homes they entered experienced a closeness, healing, and connection that had been previously closed out from their experience in life.

The unconditional love of God, the grace and forgiveness of sins, and the healing of diseases, infirmities, and mental and emotional pain engendered transforming affects with a cascading effect. People could authentically mourn their losses and failures; they could feel moved, tender, and grateful. As people found themselves changing, they experienced the positive vulnerability, fear and excitement, startle, and surprise and curiosity that are part and parcel of these tremulous affects. A person, through a trusted other—the disciples—could experience a healthy pride, competence, and joy. The disciples’ mission created transformational affects in the villages.

**State 3: Core State**

Anxiety, guilt, shame, or defensiveness is absent. Burdens of disease, social ostracism, and emotional trauma and spiritual dead-end roads are lifted and relieved. There is calm (peace), ease, flow, and clarity about the subjective truth of one’s own emotional experience. The truth sense—the sense of things feeling right—is evident. The True Self—“I feel like myself”—exhibited love, compassion, resilience, closeness, and openness. The people who opened their homes to the disciples felt understood, received by a True Other. As a result, they demonstrated their own generosity, empathy, and wisdom, understanding themselves at their deepest identity. They were with the disciples and the Lord, who had sent them out.

**Acts 3:1–16, the Crippled Beggar Healed**

**State 1: Defense and First State Transformation**

The daily burden of survival with severe infirmities—such as for those crippled from birth—generates some degree of fear, powerlessness, and shame. A chronic dependence on others to give as one begs in a helpless state is a lonely existence. The physical and emotional environments surrounding the beggar in Acts 3:1–16 were extremely and chronically limited. Peter, as a True Other, announces a new connection to alleviate a chronic, unrelenting ailment.
State 2: Core Affect and Second State Transformation

As Peter and John are about to enter the temple courts, they announce God’s powers to a crippled man and order him to get up and walk. Peter heals in the name of Christ. This pronouncement opens the man to his core affect of pure, wired-in organismic joy. Obviously, the man’s body responds not only by walking, but also by holding on to Peter and John. This visceral somatic tracking of one’s healing affects is part and parcel of feeling whole. Some of the man’s transformational affects included mastery affects of pride and joy, healing affects of gratitude and feeling moved, and the tremulous affects associated with the changed self, where there is startle, surprise, curiosity, and positive vulnerability to hearing the new message of forgiveness and the resurrected life from Peter and John. A new day has dawned for the receiver.

State 3: Core State

The phenomenology of well-being, of openness with new relational experiences of closeness and intimacy, is evident in the healed man. He praises God and embraces the disciples. There is clarity from deep within about the subjective truth of his experience. He knows that his sense of life feels right—the truth sense. There is an energy and vitality that are unmistakable.

Biblical Religious Affections and Transformation

Jonathan Edwards (1834; hereafter JE) attempted to present a phenomenology of religious affects from the biblical data. A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections attempted to demonstrate what were authentic, transforming, and true religious affects within the individual. But why is this work particularly relevant to our discussion on the phenomenology of healing? There are several reasons for choosing this work. First, JE’s analysis is unique. There is really nothing quite like his discussion about biblical transformation for its time. The “theological conceptual home base” that generated his model stemmed from a presupposition of God’s grace. Obviously, this does not mean that one would have to agree with all of the finer points and conclusions within his rationalistic Calvinism. Second, the author excavated the biblical data about authentic transformation through autobiographical and biographical portraits. These sketches about religious affects were illustrative of bottom-up processing as well as the brain’s right hemisphere processing (Neurologism Tree 2007, 35). This, within the biblical context itself, within the life situation analysis of this context and sphere, was where authentic healing took place, or at a minimum, where transformation began.

JE was not just an in-your-head or a cognitive theologian, but a theologian of the heart. Taken as a whole, the insufficient and sufficient (inadequate/adequate) signs of transformation/religious affections were a biblical
psychology of transformation. JE’s analysis was taken from within the bibli-
cal world and its players as a systematic whole. This model was a rare and
matchless portrait of transformation. Third, the phenomenology of healing,
whether Puritan or postmodern, contains some timeless truths. Some of the
miraculous healings in the biblical, Puritan, and present world demonstrated
realities that will always be life giving. What does this look like exactly?

The presentation given subsequently excavates and compares JE’s data
with the markers of transformation from AEDP based on a thorough read-
ing. This comparison is not a rigid, one-to-one correspondence between the
two systems; rather, it is a general and yet specific enough rendering to dem-
onstrate a psychology/theology of transformation. Furthermore, JE’s data
will be presented parsimoniously due to his exhaustive review and present
space limitations.

1. JE

• Affections are supernatural, divine, spiritual—the indwelling of God came to
an individual as a permanent, relational, secure, and stable personal reality
(Jn 14:16–17; I Cor 3:16; Rom 8:9–11).

  • God imparted and communicated aspects of his nature to another individ-
ual in his or her heart. He becomes a True Other at the time of a person’s
need or desire.

  • This presence of God came out of a complete and thorough framework of
grace—an unconditional love and compassion.

  • God, as a person, gives himself to another person. He has them in his
mind’s eye.

• Religious feelings are grounded in love of God, not just for oneself and for
one’s profit (1 Jn 4:19).

• An individual enjoys God for his beauty, faithfulness, goodness, and moral
excellence (Rev 4:8; Isa 6:3). There is not a secondary gain or manipulation
on the part of the receiver’s response. The receiver enjoys the newfound pres-
ence of the other not for what he can get out of it. The individual embraces
God, not because God has touched the individual where his self-interests lie,
but out of the unconditional love and grace the person has received. This is
a heartfelt mirror response.

AEDP

• Secure attachment bonds are associated with optimal functioning. This attach-
ment bond of unconditional love between the True Other and its object regu-
lates and coordinates affective states. The True Other generates a relational
bond, through which the affective competence of the True Other, over time, is
internalized by the person. The attachment bond is able to repair where there
is rupture. Furthermore, the True Other is attuned to the person’s needs
and ups and downs of life so as to help when the person is overwhelmed.
There is a dyadic relatedness handling the emotional communication and the
regulation of categorical emotions with their narrative history. Moreover, the
“True Other is an external presence who facilitates our being who we believe ourselves to be, who we are meant to be, someone who is instrumental in helping to actualize the sense of True Self” (Fosha 2005, 531).

2. JE

• The heart and mind of the person knows God (1 Jn 2:20; 2 Cor 2:14). A person has a sense of what is holy and good. He has a taste, a disposition, or a relish of that which is good and holy.

• The person is certain and not doubtful of knowing God. There is an authentic sense of rightness and truth sense (Lk 24:31–32; 2 Cor 4:6). An individual’s sense of God is indisputable. God is self-authenticating to the person’s heart, and the person knows it. The individual is not compelled to prove it to be certain. The reality of God, the True Other, is all-pervasive, authenticating, and yet does not obliterate the receiver’s identity. The individual is embraced, intact, and yet enlarged by the experience of the True Other, namely, God.

• Humility means an individual freely embraces God, moves away from his own failures and brokenness, and embraces the True Self (Lk 15:8–10). Transformation is generated and experienced by the receiver through a genuine and free embrace of his or her condition within the environment of a caring other, who has sought the individual out from an unconditional love and grace.

AEDP

• As this dyadic state of attunement is created, a state of consciousness is co-created. This means that the individual integrates essential elements of the True Other; the person knows the True Other’s state of mind (implicit and explicit); and the person can experience a power of becoming larger than himself or herself. The person being with the True Other can experience his or her True Self.

3. JE

• Our nature, at its core, is transformed by unconditional and unrelenting love and grace. There is a change, a conversion experience (2 Cor 3:18). An entirely new reality that is indelible has settled within the individual. The reality of the True Other and its effects on the receiver cannot be erased.

• Religious affections generate a heart of love, compassion, forgiveness, and mercy (Gal 5:22–23). The transformation of the receiver is a model and a mirror of the True Other he or she has been experiencing. For JE, this does not mean a loss of identity or the uniqueness of the individual, but instead a wholeness that is exhibited distinctively.

• Religious affections exhibit a tender heart (Jn 11:35).

AEDP

• Nothing is ever the same again. The present state of healing is discontinuous with the past. A whole new reality has now been ushered into the person’s life. When a fostering True Other plays a role in the transformation of the person, healing affects include feelings of gratitude, love, tenderness, and appreciation toward the affirming other. In the crisis of change,
there are tumultuous emotions. It is not unusual for a person to experience a deeper psychic integration of opposing qualities, for example, knowing joy from deep pain or experiencing light after long periods of darkness, feeling understood after having felt misunderstood. As one encounters a new or transforming experience, this is a homecoming. A hallmark of core state is that an individual encounters a new home address, and yet he or she has always lived there.

4. JE

- Religious affections possess a sense of balance and proportion (Jn 1:14, 16).
- The transforming grace of religious affections desires more of the same. The more an individual grows in the unconditional love of God, the more eager he or she is to press forward to grow (Phil 3:13–16).
- Transformation or authentic religious affections always translate into action: good works. The unconditional love and grace of God exhibits a connection between profession and practice.

AEDP

- The capacity to change or revise oneself is at the heart of adaptation. Core state is a dispositional tendency that is wired in, that is, a part of organismic, somatic, and whole-person dynamics. A disposition drives one to experience the truth with respect to his or her own experience of the self, the other, and emotional reality. We are motivated to heal, to grow, and to know ourselves and others. The truth sense is affectively marked by peace, clarity, compassion, and generosity. Moreover, these healing processes cascade. In the midst of the great complexities of life, we become increasingly clearer to ourselves.

Although both systems presented come from three different worldviews, that is, the biblical environment, JE’s interpretive rationalistic-Calvinism of the biblical environment, and AEDP’s postmodern environment, the alignment and parallel markers indicating transformation are enlightening. Perhaps the parallels of healing and transformation demonstrate some timeless truths about human transformation that are evident within the human prospect in any era. It is important to note that well-being contains the two elements of integration and complexity. Well-being, or transformation, is defined as a system that connects differentiated elements into a functional whole, that is, integration. This system, as it moves toward integration, achieves maximizing complexity (Siegel 2006). The previously articulated systems of transformation, the biblical context, JE’s biblical psychology, and AEDP illustrate that differentiated elements can connect into a functional whole—integration—thereby maximizing complexity. Transformational systems generate a complexity that demonstrates individuals feeling a different sense of connection within themselves and the larger world beyond, and a connection to a larger whole beyond their immediate lives.
CONCLUSION

Fosha's work of AEDP demonstrated a phenomenology of transformation and healing. This wide-angle lens viewing the human condition offered some new and old insights into and markers of the psychodynamics of the human heart’s healing processes. In other words, it answered the question: what is so healing about healing? The one critique of AEDP that comes to the foreground stems from the idea that there is no such thing as a True Self (see earlier discussion). It is true, theological dogmatics notwithstanding, that a perfect or idealized True Other does not exist. However, there does need to be a working definition of the core True Self and True Other. Without this baseline, the foundation on which an individual builds his or her connective self experientially, moment-to-moment in a supportive dyadic environment, can become a moving target, without a compass or center. What is imbedded implicitly in AEDP and stated explicitly within the previous biblical examples, including JE, is that a core True Self and True Other can be defined. Not surprisingly, AEDP expresses the phenomenology and language of a compassionate, caring, clear, creative, connective True Other. But the core values of this True Self/True Other are permanent; yet, they are also flexible and adaptive traits that meet the receiver where he or she is.

The permanency of this core self is not based on conditional behaviors, but on an unconditional love relationship and compassion. This permanence and these values are the elements of the definition of the core True Self/True Other. In other words, the True Self/True Other as compassionate, creative, empowered, and respected is a person’s nonnegotiable, indestructible home address. A person can become disconnected from his or her compassionate and empowered True Self. However, reconnection is possible. This is what the biblical examples and JE demonstrate and uniquely plead for us to grasp, whereas AEDP can only highlight the experience of and illustrate this core value of the True Self/True Other, without being able to define the permanent inner nature of the core self. Declaring this foundation of the True Self/True Other, which was so aptly demonstrated and embedded in the phenomenology, AEDP would have been a great aid to the discussion.

To be fair, the psychology of AEDP and its metatherapeutics is not a catch-all explanation or a theory from a scientism (Gould 1996b). AEDP sought to capture, utilizing the limits of language from various disciplines, the complexity of how people get better. In addition, the ideas, beliefs, and values—what is called truth—of AEDP passes a nuts-and-bolts working test, that is, a call to action, a call to heal. The earthiness of these ideas poses a challenge to move away from the reification of ideas and the stuff
of secular idolatry and toward how to get through an ordinary day. Most important, AEDP does not hint at turning religion into the swamp of a reductionist or condescending psychology (James 1997). We are called on to understand the phenomenology of transformation in all of its complexities and simplicity, no matter what scholarly domains are brought together to explain it. Why? So the objective domains of science and the subjective domains of knowing can live in one home to bring about greater insight and transformation.

NOTES

2. Siegel presents another macro model of healing through the neurobiology of interpersonal relationships and how they aid psychotherapy. Fosha’s model, although different, illustrates this same consilient approach. For Siegel, mental well-being means a trajectory of FACES—flexible, adaptive, coherent, energized and stable—generating the vital feeling of harmony and coherence. Coherence in this model can be seen as containing the following features: compassion, openness, healing/harmony, empathy, receptivity/resonance, engagement, noesis (understanding, perceiving), clarity/coalescence, and emerging enlightenment. The mind is a complex, nonlinear system that achieves states of self-organization by balancing two opposing processes of differentiation and linkage. When different areas of the brain are allowed to specialize in their functions, integration happens when they become linked together. Integration is a functioning of the whole, as illustrated through the acronym FACES. Integration follows nine major domains: consciousness, vertical, bilateral, memory, narrative, self-state, temporal, interpersonal/mirror neuron system, and transpirational. When a system moves toward integration, it is achieving a movement toward maximizing complexity. Compromised mental health means rigidity and chaos.
3. But most important, as we attempt to move toward living under one roof between the objective and subjective sciences, the twenty-first century must stay away from a biological and/or a neurobiological determinism. This boundary will become more important as we launch further into the families of the biological sciences in the new millennium. Gould (1996a, 1996b) is correct in this warning. This warning is also applicable to theological discussions as they center on the values of neurotheology.
4. These categories of right and left brain functioning may be generally true; however, these categories must not be maintained rigidly. See entire chapter for further discussion.
5. Mahoney (2003) gives a clear demonstration of this consilient approach and its application.
6. The entire summary presented is a conglomeration of these five works.
7. All biblical references are from the New International Version (NIV), 1986, Nashville: Holman Publishers.
8. Notice the playful portrayal and portent through the neurologism tree. *Neurotheology* is part of a growing classification and vocabulary. See Neurologism Tree bibliographic entry for further investigation of the trends you need to know now.
9. See Siegel (2006) for his carefully thought out application of this definition.
10. See Gould (1996b, chap. 7) for a thorough discussion.

**REFERENCES**


Mahoney, Michael J. (2003), *Constructive Psychotherapy*, New York: Guilford Press.


The human race has witnessed miracles for as long as it has existed. Reports of miraculous occurrences have been as varied as the experiences that brought them about and have come from all racial, ethnic, sociocultural, and religious groups the world over. This diversity of reports of miracles also mirrors the extent to which different people and different groups of peoples believe and interpret events and occurrences as miraculous. While some experiences may pass as daily routine for many, some others judge them as indeed miraculous. In essence, people’s judgment as to whether an event is miraculous depends on a number of factors, which do not exclude their racial, ethnic, sociocultural, and religious backgrounds. Hence miraculous events, as perceived and experienced by different peoples, may range very widely, for example, from sleeping and waking to rising up after being dead for several days.

Although miracles may vary as widely as their judgments, the history of this phenomenon situates some events as indeed being world acclaimed, with the majority of peoples across continents judging them as miraculous. The miracle of the holy fire, which occurs every year on the Saturday before Easter Sunday, Holy Saturday, at the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem, drawing huge crowds of Christians from many parts of the world, is a good example. According to Hvidt (2007), a blue, indefinable light emanates from the core of the stone on which Christ is believed to have been laid after his death, as soon as a patriarch of the Orthodox Church kneels in front of this stone and says certain prayers on this very special day. The miracle is said to proceed with the mysterious kindling of the closed oil lamps as well
as the two candles of the patriarch, climaxing in the spontaneous kindling of the lamps and candles of some of the people inside the church and within its vicinity.

Another extant, seemingly world-renowned site that, over the years, has generated reports of miracles, or is believed to bestow miracles on people from some different parts of the world, is the tomb of La Milagrosa, the “Miraculous One,” a Cuban woman named Amelia Goyri de Adot, who died during childbirth, along with her infant, on May 3, 1901. According to John Rivera (1998), the frequent trooping of crowds from different parts of Cuba and the world over to the site is due to the fact that Amelia’s body and her baby’s were found neither contaminated nor decomposed, coupled with the fact that the baby, who was laid at her feet at burial, was found wrapped in her arms, when her body was exhumed a few years after. As this mysterious story spread, her hitherto grief-stricken husband, who alone visited the grave many times every day, was joined by other visitors, whose numbers continue to increase. This arises from the testimonies of miraculous answers to prayers and solutions to problems rendered for the people who said those prayers or presented those problems during their visits to the site.

Although it is clearly mysterious that a human corpse was found neither decomposed nor contaminated years after burial, it is possible, or even likely, that the miracles reported by the pilgrims to the grave of Amelia result from other causes than people believe. For example, that crowds of people congregate there to offer prayers that are answered by God does not suggest that God would not answer the same prayers for the same crowds if said elsewhere. Besides, one’s awareness of the occurrence or discovery of similar mysteries in 1988 and 1997 in the city of Ibadan and the town of Iwo, in Nigeria, makes it evident that this kind of mystery is somewhat commonplace, these few discoveries, so far, having been made by accident. However, neither of the sites of the two cases cited from Nigeria has generated as much effect on the peoples of Nigeria as has Amelia’s grave in Cuba, though this may well be due to the fact that the Nigerian sites did not receive wide publicity.

While it could be understood that miraculous events in general, and sites of famous miracles in particular, have strong potential for drawing crowds in intensely populated settings, miracles also take place and are widely reported in nondensely populated regions, without attracting much attention. Why more miracles are usually observed and reported to take place amid dense populations, compared to noncrowded atmospheres, remains a puzzle, and this puzzle seems to cut across religions and cultures. The Bible is replete with records of individuals who experienced miracles alone, amid a few people, or in a tumultuous crowd, or as part of a gathering or a crowd that collectively experienced the miracle.

Other religious books also contain accounts of miraculous occurrences. In the mythologies of the African traditional religion, the gods and goddesses
who held sway in the region before the arrival of Christianity, Islam, and other religions were said to emerge from their shrines only when sacrifices were made to them during their festivals. These were held at specific times of the year, and during such festivities, some people among their crowds of worshippers usually reported having miraculously received solutions to their problems. Mythology has it that the goddess of the Osun River, in Osun State, southwestern Nigeria, stopped making her emergence from the Osun River during the annual Osun-Oshogbo festival many years ago. This happened after she was forced to make an emergency return dive into the Osun River because a foreign tourist, witnessing her manifestation, attempted to capture her. Nevertheless, her mammoth crowd of worshippers, both in Nigeria and abroad, who besiege the shrine annually during the festival still report miraculous experiences.

Also peculiar to southwestern Nigeria is the myth of the emission of fire through the mouth by Alaafin Sango, who was reputed to have set things and places on fire merely by releasing real flames through his mouth. That Sango actually existed is largely reflected in legends or oral and written tradition as well as in films done on the old Oyo Empire. In two such films, namely, Oba Koso and Ose Sango, Sango was depicted as a descendant of Oduduwa, the progenitor of the Yoruba ethnic group. He ascended to the coveted throne of the Alaafin of Oyo town. Alaafin Sango was said to have helped the Oyo Empire to conquer her neighbors and rival kingdoms with his invincible strength, especially his ability to emit real flames from his mouth. With these he was able to destroy the armies, camps, dwellings, and farms of the enemies, a feat that his subjects and enemies found miraculous. This is the reason why some people worship the Legendary Sango still today.

What, therefore, is a miracle and a crowd, and in what ways, if any, can being in a crowd facilitate the occurrence of a miracle? To answer these important questions, this chapter explores the definitions and meanings of miracles and crowds and analyzes the psychological processes that underlie the behavior of individuals in a crowd and the crowd dynamics that can induce miracles, rendering the experience infectious.

WHAT IS A MIRACLE?

The word miracle was coined from a Latin word meaning “to wonder at.” Miracles are events, that seem to transcend human powers and the laws of nature, resulting from a special divine intervention or to supernatural forces. The Encarta dictionary offers three related definitions of a miracle. First and accordingly, a miracle is an event that appears to be contrary to the laws of nature and is regarded as an act of God. Second, a miracle is an event or action that is amazing, extraordinary, or unexpected. Third, a miracle is something admired as a marvelous creation or example of a particular type
of science or skill. David Hume defined a miracle in a more generic light, seeing it as (1963, 127) “a transgression of a law of nature by a particular volition of the Deity, or by the interposition of some invisible agent.” Here Hume uses the word deity to refer to God or any other non-God or ungodly supernatural forces or their agents. If we use Hume’s definition, all magic and sorceries would qualify as miracles. Thus, to the extent that those who believe in the other-than-God sources of supernatural feats define them as miraculous, these feats are indeed miracles in the reckoning of those people. The implication of this is that any “event apparently transcending human powers and the laws of nature, that is attributed to a special divine intervention or to supernatural forces” (Hume 1963, 127), across cultural and religious beliefs, is a miracle.

I define a miracle as a desirable, admired, and amazing event, whose occurrence apparently violates the laws of nature and is thus attributable only to God or to an apparently transcendental force other than God. This definition suggests that no miracle can occur or be experienced without God or an other-than-God force mediating between the laws of nature and the occurrence of that miracle. Miracles occur or are performed in all religions, religious denominations, cultures, and societies. The differences between them lie only in whether they are caused by God or a force other than God. This discrimination has implications for the types, quality, and lifespan of the miracles, as reported by those experiencing them.

Saliba stresses that (2005) “stories of miracles are a common feature of practically all religions.” He points out that many religious leaders and founders, including Zoroaster, Confucius, Laozi (Lao-tzu), and Buddha, have been credited with miraculous powers and actions. Likewise, Moses and the prophets of Israel were said to have performed miraculous acts at God’s bidding. Saliba stresses that (2005) “the Muslim tradition includes accounts of the miracles of Muhammad, such as his extraordinary healings, but did not fail to acknowledge, however, that more attention has been given to miracles in Christianity than in any other religion.” For this reason, this discussion will more prominently feature miracles believed to originate from God, especially as recorded in the Bible and as experienced in contemporary Christianity. How, then, do the Bible and Christian literature define a miracle?

The American Tract Society Dictionary defines miracle as “a work so superseding in its higher forms the established laws of nature as to evince the special interposition of God” (Miracle, 2006a). The Easton’s 1897 Bible Dictionary defines miracle as “an event in the external world brought about by the immediate agency or the simple volition of God, operating without the use of means capable of being discerned by the senses, and designed to authenticate the divine commission of a religious teacher and the truth of his message”; as “an occurrence at once above nature and above man”; and as an occurrence that “shows the intervention of a power that is not limited by the laws either
of matter or of mind, a power interrupting the fixed laws which govern their movements, a supernatural power” (Miracle 2006b)

WHAT IS A CROWD?

Rod Plotnik (1993) refers to a crowd as a large group of persons, most of whom are strangers to each other and unacquainted. While this definition appears to depict what a crowd is, it leaves out a seemingly important characteristic of large groups of people who constitute crowds. This characteristic appears to have been identified by Donelson Forsyth (2005), who defines a crowd as an aggregate of individuals sharing a common focus and concentrated in a single location. The major difference between the two definitions is that the latter, unlike the former, depicts members of a crowd as people who share a common focus. An important and almost synonymous terminology, used by both, is collective or aggregate and group. By virtue of sharing a common focus, a crowd is a group, and a collective or aggregate is a large number of persons in social interaction.

Against this background and for the purpose of this discussion, a crowd is a large collection of people, most of whom share a common purpose, focus, belief, sentiment, or goal, for which reason they all are concentrated in the same single location. The commonalities of purpose shared by a typical crowd, which are the basis for the dynamism in their behavior, may well explain why miracles tend to generate in crowds and, in turn, generate crowds. Crowd behavior, coupled with those of the individuals who make them up, appear to have potential for facilitating the occurrences of miracles among individuals in the crowd.

Consciousness-Unconsciousness in Individuals and Crowds

The idea or category of consciousness-unconsciousness is popular in medicine, philosophy, and psychology. Rooted in psychoanalytic psychology, consciousness and unconsciousness are quite broad in scope. While consciousness in psychology shares the same meaning as physical or neurological consciousness, the same cannot be said of unconsciousness; rather, unconsciousness in psychology is viewed in a narrower sense, specifically as something that has to do exclusively with the mind. Arlow and Herma (2005), in a treatise on psychoanalysis, stressed that the concept of the unconscious was first developed in the period from 1895 to 1900 by Sigmund Freud. He situated it as the hypothetical region of the mind containing wishes, memories, fears, feelings, and ideas that are prevented from expression in conscious awareness. They manifest themselves, instead, by their influence on conscious processes and, most strikingly, by such anomalous phenomena as dreams and neurotic symptoms.
If Freud’s theory can be trusted, the wishes, memories, fears, feelings, and ideas that are held by the unconscious part of the human mind are not available to the holder’s conscious awareness. They are known to exist only because their impacts are seen or felt through the conscious processes that take place in daily human activities. Since it is simply traditional, in psychoanalysis, to attribute all conscious human processes to the controlling influence of the unconscious, the structure of the human mind portrays the mind as shaped like an iceberg, with the unconscious part being larger than the conscious part, and the conscious part being typically described as just a tip of the iceberg.

A figure of an iceberg in the ocean depicts the structure of the human mind as proposed by Freudian psychoanalysis. The id, ego, and superego are shown as the components of the human personality. Among Freud’s three basic personality components, only the id is totally unconscious, that is, below the waterline. Most of the superego and some of the ego are also below the waterline. The water represents the unconscious mind, and the air and land above the waterline represent the conscious mind. Therefore the term unconscious is particularly relevant to psychoanalysis and refers to thoughts and feelings that have purposefully been forgotten as well as to experiences or impulses to which we neither pay nor wish to pay attention but which influence us nevertheless.

Carl Jung (1925), a psychoanalyst and student of Freud, disagreed with Freud’s analysis of the unconscious as the source of all human psychic energies. Jung, instead, expanded the realm of the unconscious to two parts, the personal and the collective unconscious. In his extensive analysis, Jung (1925) defined consciousness as the ability to focus attention and, more specifically, as that which we are aware of at any given moment. This implies that consciousness is our awareness of things and events in our environments. The personal unconscious contains an individual’s complexes, attitudes, and entire world of experiences, including forgotten and repressed memories, as Freud’s claimed. A good example of this, according to Howard Kendler (1987), is that of a girl with repressed hostilities toward her father developing a father complex that interferes with establishing a satisfactory relationship with her husband.

The collective unconscious, on the other hand, contains the archetypes or primitive patterns of ancestral images associated with significant cultural phenomena, such as birth, death, power, and deity, predisposing persons to feel, think, and act in the same manner as countless generations of ancestors before them. Essentially, the collective unconscious or archetypes are the reservoir of the experience of the human race as accumulated through history and passed from generation to generation. This amounts to the constantly repeated experiences of humanity that are common to the entire human race, whatever our race or culture (Jung 1925).
The personal and the collective unconscious are said to be related in that the ideas that constitute the personal unconscious develop out of the archetypes of the collective unconscious. By virtue of this relationship and the seemingly overreaching influence of the collective unconscious, all individuals in the same society would be expected to react to certain phenomena in similar ways. However, individual human beings may still retain their personal unconscious complexes, thoughts, and feelings about every phenomenon or experience. This may sometimes make them act in very peculiar or uniquely different ways, the collective unconscious notwithstanding. Thus their relationship lies in the fact that the personal unconscious is a subset of the collective unconscious, so that the former is an individual peculiarity, and the latter, a societal commonality (Jung, 1925).

In furtherance of his theory of the unconscious, Jung (1925) depicted awareness as a product of consciousness by stressing that the more aware we are, the more conscious we are. To the extent that this type of awareness is a personal one, it is referred to as self-awareness. What, then, is self-awareness? Self-awareness, according to Forsyth (2005), is the psychological state in which one’s attention is focused on the self, personal standards, or inner experiences: “Reductions in self-awareness may lead to cognitive and emotional changes, including disturbances in concentration and judgment, the feeling that time is moving slowly or rapidly, extreme emotions, a sense of unreality, and perceptual distortions, all of which constitute an altered experiential state that may even be intensely pleasant” (Forsyth, 2005, 46). Thus self-awareness can be regarded as an individual’s consciousness of, and ability to regulate his or her, cognitions and emotions.

Typically, an individual in a crowd is believed to experience reduced self-awareness. This means that most individuals share this reduced self-awareness when in a collective setting. Why do persons in crowds experience reduced self-awareness? How similar or variable are these levels of individual self-awareness for people in the same crowd? Drawing on Le Bon’s (1896) conceptualization of the crowd, Jung (1925) reasoned first that the crowd is essentially a psychological phenomenon amid which people behave differently compared to when isolated, and second, that the unconscious has something to do with crowd thinking and acting.

Diener (1980) employs the theory of objective self-awareness, proposed by Duval and Wicklund (1972), shedding light on the foci of attention of individuals in a crowd compared to their counterparts who are alone. The thrust of the theory is that among other things, perceptual immersion in a group impacts self-awareness in that it overloads the information-processing capacities of the individual, hence blocking the possibility of self-directed attention. The consequence of this is a state of lowered objective self-awareness, with individuals being unable to retrieve internal standards, thus becoming increasingly influenced by environmental stimuli. This theory is said to identify cohesion and enhanced arousal as factors present in some crowd situations,
which lead to people directing their attention outward and correspondingly less on themselves or on private standards. The result is that individual behavior becomes less self-regulated and more controlled by immediate cues and norms in the environment.

As stressed by Forsyth (2005), studies of self-awareness suggest that individuals can focus their attention outward, onto other members of the crowd or objects in the environment, or inward, on the self. When this focus is on the self, people become more self-aware and are more likely to attend to their emotional and cognitive states, carefully consider their behavioral options, and monitor their actions closely. Conversely, when the focus is on features of the situation that are external to the person, whereby people fail to monitor their actions, they will be more inclined to follow the focus, emotion, and attention of the crowd.

One major implication of reduction in individual self-awareness amid a crowd is deindividuation. Festinger, Pepitone, and Newcomb (1952) define deindividuation as the increased tendency for individuals to become so submerged in their group that they feel as though they no longer stand out as individuals. More specifically, Forsyth characterizes deindividuation as “an experiential state, caused by input factors such as group membership or crowd membership, that is characterized by the loss of self-awareness, altered experiencing, and atypical behaviour” (2005, 56).

While the latter definition suggests that deindividuation is a state representing a complete loss of self-awareness, both definitions suggest the existence of another state that is diametrically opposed to deindividuation. This opposite state is known as individuation. In furtherance of his explanations, Forsyth (2005) depicts individuals who have become deindividuated as those who feel lost in the group or crowd and will try to establish their individual identities. Forsyth stresses further that people in large crowds may act very differently, sometimes oddly, to regain their sense of individuality. It is thus clear that while individuals immersed in a crowd are subjected to deindividuation, they may try to get out of this state themselves by actively seeking individuation.

In his biography on Jung, Boeree (2006) focuses extensively on the collective unconscious and its adherents. Citing Jung, Boeree situates individuation as the process of changing an individual’s relationship to the unconscious. Boeree submits that “once an individuation process is successfully initiated, the individual’s identification with the collective herd will slowly be terminated” and “such individuals will discover traits in themselves which will make them stand out from the crowd” (Boeree 2006).

In a crowd, an individual’s unconscious wishes, memories, fears, feelings, and ideas have high potential for momentarily and speedily migrating to the conscious. Furthermore, this implies that certain types and levels of consciousness or unconsciousness are crucially precursory to an eventual migration of wishes, memories, fears, feelings, and ideas from the realm of the
unconscious to the conscious, while still being in the crowd. What are these types and levels of consciousness or unconsciousness, and how do they influence the experience of miracles among individuals in crowds?

**Miracle as a Product of Entrancement, Conscious-Unconscious State, Individuation, Synchronicity, Transcendence, and Contagion**

Day-to-day testimonies and personal observations at Christian crusades seem to suggest not only that people’s states of consciousness are largely altered while in a crowd, but that more miracles occur and are reported at such gatherings. The dynamism of the psychological processes that take place is not a monopoly for Christianity; however, with the manner in which they take place among crowds, they seem to contrive a highly conducive atmosphere for a more effective movement of the Holy Spirit of God among individuals in a crowd. Hence more and greater miracles occur in crowds than in noncrowded gatherings. The psychological states of the conscious, the unconscious, entrainment, individuation, synchronicity, transcendence, and contagion, among others, are identifiable keys to the quicker and surer move of the Holy Spirit among individuals in a crowd. How do these combine to influence the move of the Divine Spirit and hence immediate or later occurrence of miracles?

Entrainment is a concept that explains the attraction, binding force, or synergy among people who make up a crowd. Jung (1925) defined it as an alignment of matching energies and expectations at one of the deepest levels of human experience. These constitute attraction, resonance, and union between thematically similar and congruent persons, similar in thinking and believing, at many levels of their life experiences such as images, feelings, characters, fantasies, and chemistry. He suggests that this increases the likelihood of a trance-like state and eclipses analytical thought. We lose our minds and surrender ourselves to some fantasy or ideal way of living. That involves selective attention, which filters out incompatible information.

Edwards and Jacobs (2003) cite Jung, speaking of synchronicity as a principle whereby apparently separate external events might be connected through an underlying meaningful association in the timeless world of archetypes. Jung spoke further of synchronicity as being an experience occurring in a moment when inner and outer force intersect on an *acausal principle*, that is, an intersection in which one force does not cause the other. Jung believed that many experiences perceived as coincidences were not merely due to chance, but instead reflected the creation of an event or circumstance by the coinciding or alignment of such forces. The process of becoming intuitively aware and acting in harmony with these forces is what Jung labeled individuation. He stressed that individuated persons would actually shape
events around them through the communication of their consciousness with
the collective unconscious.

Thus, according to Jung, individuation is brought about in large part by
the synchronistic intersection of the personal conscious and the collective
unconscious. This means that individuals in a crowd experience individuate
when the subjects of their collective unconscious, or archetypes, suddenly
coincide with what they are experiencing in reality, while still being in the
crowd.

The process through which the unconscious meaning of archetypes is re-
vealed to the conscious mind, ensuring a bridge between consciousness and
unconsciousness, is referred to as transcendence. The transcendent function,
according to Jung (1925), is understood to be mainly that of compensating
for the tension between the spiritual and material worlds by facilitating a
transition from one unbalanced psychological state to another that is bal-
anced. Jung thought that transcendence was produced by the tension of po-
larity in our experience or psyche. In his research on transcendence, titled
“Signs of Transcendence,” Leskovar (2005) drew on Jung’s views to describe
the experiences of people undergoing transcendence. Leskovar thought that
people who experience transcendence tend to feel calm, surrounded by love,
gratified with a sense of fulfillment, and touched by healing, sometimes of
fatal diseases. In the light of the previous discussion, individuation can be
seen as a construct that entails two processes: synchronicity and transcen-
dence. Synchronicity here can be understood as the process through which
the actions, cognitions, and feelings of an individual in a crowd, who is pre-
sumed to be under the influence of the collective unconscious, coincide with
that individual’s real or conscious experience. A good example can be that
of a blind individual who sings, dances, and prays with a crowd of Christian
worshippers at a healing crusade and earnestly hopes to be healed of his or
her blindness. In that supposedly unconscious state, the extent to which the
individual believes or fantasizes that God, to whom the prayers, dancing, and
singing are being offered, can and will perform the miracle determines that
individual’s chances of being cured of the blindness.

In synchronistic terms, the chances that such an individual will be cured
of the blindness depends on the extent to which he or she holds and ex-
presses beliefs about being healed. Christians call this faith. Moreover, it de-
pends on the extent to which such an expression coincides with or happens
by chance alongside signs of or the actual onset of the miracle, which in this
case is receiving of sight.

Transcendence can be regarded as a stage through which individuation
is completed. It may be understood as the point at which an individual sud-
denly realizes that his or her physical and realistic experience of a miracle
has completely replaced the beliefs or fantasies that took place in his or her
unconscious. Essentially, transcendence is the state at which it dawns on the
individual that some or all of his or her hitherto expressions of wishes, longings, and yearnings in the unconscious have been transformed into conscious realities. A major point of distinction between synchronicity and transcendence is that unlike in synchronicity, an individual is said to experience transcendence only when he or she has attained full consciousness. This requires having been emancipated from the state of collective unconscious to that of conscious, or, as the previous example suggests, a state of believing in receiving a miracle of sight to that of actually receiving sight.

As Jung felt that as we become more individualized in our development, we deal with our shadow side more directly than when we are children, and then we tend to have a more direct reaction to it in the form of conscious or unconscious resolve to overcome it. Physical ailments can disappear and long standing problems can be resolved. Thus individuation can be identified as an avenue through which individuals in a crowd experience miracles.

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF SOME MIRACULOUS EVENTS IN AND OUTSIDE OF THE BIBLE

From the Old Testament (OT) to the New Testament (NT), the Bible is replete with accounts of miraculous events. The focus of this section is on some of the miracles that, reportedly, occurred to individuals or a few people amid huge crowds or that were experienced by the crowd as a whole.

The Bible, in Exodus 14:21 (King James Version, KJV), tells of how God provided the miracle that the children of Israel needed very urgently to escape from the Egyptians, who were chasing them. This need cut across the entire population of Israelites, which saw them thinking, imagining, reasoning, feeling, and acting in very similar ways. This similarity of cognitions, affects, and behaviors, which manifested more when the people congregated to share the same plight, as they did, were products of their collective unconscious. In the light of the analysis in the foregoing sections, it is instructive to imagine that most of these people were experiencing lowered self-awareness and deindividuation, the result of which the KJV of the Bible summarizes as follows: “And Moses stretched out his hand over the sea; and the LORD caused the sea to go back by a strong east wind all that night, and made the sea dry land, and the waters were divided.” While one can only imagine how deep Moses’ experience of these psychological states could have been, compared to those of his followers, everybody in that crowd can be said to have experienced individuation through synchronicity and transcendence, both of which ushered them into the ecstatic experience of the miracle.

The felling of the walls of Jericho is another miracle that can be said not only to have occurred to a crowd as a whole, but also to have been facilitated,
made faster, and made more certain by the collective attributes of all the individuals making up this crowd. Perhaps the Israelites who were involved in this big miracle were not as populous as those who experienced the parting of the Red Sea; the fact that these people wanted the same thing to happen and demonstrated their belief in God’s ability to make it happen is enough to suggest that all these constituted their collective unconscious, under the manifestation of which they were all subject to the lowering of their individual self-awareness to the point that they became deindividuated. The Bible states, in Joshua 6:20 (New Revised Standard Version [NRSV]), that “the people shouted when the priests blew the trumpets. And it happened when the people heard the sound of the trumpet, and the people shouted with a great shout, that the wall fell down flat. Then the people went up into the city, every man straight before him, and they took the city.”

As it is not unexpected for incredulity to follow miraculous occurrences, skeptics and scientists who would make desperate attempts to explain the felling of the wall of Jericho as an event resulting from natural or physical causes, that is, the blowing of the trumpet and shouting, are right on one hand but wrong on the other. They are right, albeit unknowingly, in the sense that the crowd’s entire actions were borne out of their collective unconscious, owing largely to the fact that the individuals making it up found themselves expressing the same wish and pursuing this wish in the same manner. But they are wrong in that they try to attribute the felling of the wall to the physical impact of the Israelites’ shouting and trumpet blowing.

The shouting and trumpet blowing, which was a practical demonstration by the people of their belief in God’s ability to fell the wall, served the purpose of galvanizing the crowd into a state of lowered self-awareness and, later, deindividuation, which were crucial to a state of individuation during which such a miracle could have happened. Therefore, because the entire crowd of the nation of Israel needed the miracle at that time and demonstrably believed they would get it, it was delivered to them collectively, the joy of which they shared both individually and collectively.

The story is also told in Luke 7:11–15 of a young man, the only child of a widow, whom Jesus raised from the dead amid a huge crowd of people who followed Jesus up to that location. This includes the role of several mourners and those who were carrying the man’s body out to the site of burial outside the city called Nain. The World English Bible relates the story as follows:

It happened soon afterwards, that he went to a city called Nain. Many of his disciples, along with a great multitude, went with him. Now when he drew near to the gate of the city, behold, one who was dead was carried out, the only son of his mother, and she was a widow. Many people of the city were with her. When the Lord saw her, he had compassion on her, and said to her, “Don’t cry.” He came near and touched the coffin, and the bearers
stood still. He said, “Young man, I tell you, arise!” He who was dead sat up, and began to speak. And he gave him to his mother.

Similar to this is the story of how a man called Lazarus arose, at the command of Jesus, in the presence of a crowd of friends, relations, and mourners, after being dead for four days. The American Standard Version of the Bible in John 11:41–45 relates the story as follows:

So they took away the stone. And Jesus lifted up his eyes, and said, “Father, I thank thee that thou hearest me. And I knew that thou hearest me always: but because of the multitude that standeth around I said it, that they may believe that thou didst send me.” And when he had thus spoken, he cried with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come forth.” He that was dead came forth, bound hand and foot with grave-clothes; and his face was bound about with a napkin. Jesus saith unto them, “Loose him, and let him go.” Many therefore of the Jews, who came to Mary and beheld that which he did, believed on him.

The two miracles share the same progression in at least three specific ways. First, they both present cases of people who were already dead and thus could not have wished for any miracle again. Given their circumstances, only Jesus, who performed the miracles, and the crowd present could have had the faith and sought the miracles on behalf of the dead persons. The implication of this is that although the dead were the immediate beneficiaries of the miracles, they were not part of the crowd from whose collective unconscious and altered experiential states they had benefited.

Second, in both instances, to execute the miracle, Jesus directly addressed the dead persons, telling them to arise. One may wonder here what business the crowd had with the miracle if Jesus addressed the dead directly for the miracle to take place. This will simply mean that the crowd’s collective unconscious notwithstanding, the miracle would still have taken place. On one hand, the purpose that the relevant altered experiential states of lowered self-awareness, deindividuation, and individuation play in the occurrence of a miracle, especially a mass or crowd-type of miracle, is to prepare the recipient’s consciousness and state of mind to receive it, given the obvious fact that in most faiths, especially Christianity, a very strong belief on the part of the would-be recipient that he or she will receive or partake of a miracle is crucial to a miracle taking place. It is therefore instructive to assert and emphasize what has been implied so far: that the phenomenon of faith is related to the issues of self-awareness, deindividuation, and individuation. It is no surprise, then, to read, regarding his many miracles, that Jesus made specific reference to the faith of the recipients.

On the other hand, because the dead unconscious cannot possibly share in the collective unconscious of people around them who may be interceding on
their behalf, communicating with these physically unconscious may require a high degree of immersion into the collective unconscious. While this depth is certainly either unfathomable or definitely not necessary at all in Jesus, it appears to be a *prima facie* precursor for this kind of miracle among humans who believe in Jesus and seek miracles from God in Jesus’ name. This implies that the physically unconscious and the dead, who are not privileged to share in the collective unconscious of a group interceding on their behalf, may need to be directly addressed for the intercession by fellow Christians to be effectual.

Alternatively, as implied previously, a high degree of immersion of the intercessors into the collective unconscious may be required for such a miracle to take place. This degree of immersion appears to be what was demonstrated in a story told by the general overseer of the Redeemed Christian Church of God, Pastor Eunuch Adeboye, during a sermon at one of the monthly Holy Ghost services that I attended at the Redemption Camp, Lagos-Ibadan Expressway, in Nigeria. According to him, a bridegroom suddenly slumped and died during the signing of the marriage register in the vestry of the church where he was being wedded to his bride. This, of course, threw the officiating ministers, relations, and friends who witnessed the occurrence into utter confusion. The bride and immediate family members were stunned. In the midst of this confusion, however, the officiating ministers tried to manage the situation such that news of the incident was kept carefully away from the rest of the congregation, who continued to sing praises in enthusiastic expectation of the newest couple.

After praying in the vestry with the dead turning colder and colder, the ministers switched to praises. After a good 35 minutes of intense praise and worship to Almighty God, the dead man pleasantly shocked everybody present in the vestry with a loud sneeze! Behold, he came back from the dead! A pertinent question here is whether the people in the congregation, who were not aware of the incident until it became a testimony, also shared in the collective unconscious that facilitated the miracle. My ready answer is yes. Just as several people in the crowds in the two Bible stories referred to previously might not have looked forward to any miracle, as their mission or expectations were simply to join the bereaved in mourning their dead, that they were present in that crowd was more than enough to predispose them to sharing the same outcome with other members of the crowds, albeit unconsciously.

The convergence theories help explain some psychological underpinnings of the collective behaviors. The central thrust of these theories, as pointed out by Forsyth (2005), is the assumption that individuals with similar or compatible needs, desires, values, motivations, emotions, or goals tend to converge to form a single group; that is, individuals join collectives because they possess particular personal characteristics that, though they may be merely latent or virtually unrecognizable, are the true causes of the formation of both
large and small collectives and contribute to their consequences. According to Forsyth, by joining such a collective, the individual makes possible the satisfaction of these needs, and the crowd situation serves as a trigger for the spontaneous release of previously controlled behaviors.

Those particular personal characteristics, as stressed previously, are what constitute the crowd’s collective unconscious. That thrust, in fact, captures the idea of collective unconscious quite accurately as it suggests that the characteristics may be latent or virtually unrecognizable. The idea is that all persons who turn up to form a collective share certain things in common that pertain more to these characteristics than anything else but of which they themselves may be unaware. This defines no other phenomenon than the collective unconscious. To corroborate this is Eric Hoffer’s assertion that (2002, xi) “all movements, however different in doctrine and aspiration, draw their early adherents from the same types of humanity; they all appeal to the same types of mind.” With this assertion, what appears to be crucial to the amazingly faster and more effective move of the Holy Spirit of God in Christian crowds is the commonality of cognitions, affect, and actions shared by most, if not all, the members.

Next is Jesus’ miraculous feeding of 5,000 men, in addition to women and children, doing it with just five loaves of bread and two fish. This miracle is reported in Mark 6:35–42 (Revised Standard Version, RSV):

And when it grew late, his disciples came to him and said, “This is a lonely place, and the hour is now late; send them away, to go into the country and villages round about and buy themselves something to eat.” But he answered them, “You give them something to eat.” And they said to him, “Shall we go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread, and give it to them to eat?” And he said to them, “How many loaves have you? Go and see.” And when they had found out, they said, “Five, and two fish.” Then he commanded them all to sit down by companies upon the green grass. So they sat down in groups, by hundreds and by fifties. And taking the five loaves and the two fish he looked up to heaven, and blessed, and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples to set before the people; and he divided the two fish among them all. And they all ate and were satisfied. And they took up twelve baskets full of broken pieces and of the fish.

A pertinent question here is whether the crowd imagined that another groundbreaking miracle was on the way for them. The answer is yes. Matthew 14:14 (Montgomery’s New Testament) tells of what happened before the miraculous feeding of the crowd: “So when he landed he saw a great multitude, and felt compassion for them, and healed their sick.” Therefore, as people who had been under Jesus’ tutelage at least for that day, and whose illnesses he had healed, most of them already knew that Jesus was capable of any miracle. Besides, having gathered together all day to listen to Jesus teach
and having had him heal their various infirmities, the people can be said to have shared enough in common as to muster the requisite synergy and faith needed to facilitate this kind of collective miracle. Nevertheless, as stated earlier, irrespective of the consciousness of the crowd, Jesus could still perform miracles as he is the custodian of these miracles.

Apart from these explanations, and as strongly implied in the story of the feeding of the crowd, it was already late to go out and get food, and the people, having been there for long hours, were hungry. So they, in addition to their similar spiritual and psychological needs, also shared the physiological need for food, which if not satisfied, according to Abraham Maslow (1970), will not allow any other kind of need to become immediate in human beings.

The itinerant healer that Jesus was can best be appreciated with close reference to the fourfold Gospels. But a couple of instances of this shall be examined here. Apart from the account of Matthew 14:14, the same Gospel in 15:29–31 (Weymouth’s New Testament [WNT]) also relates Jesus’ healing of many sick people amid a crowd:

Again, moving thence, Jesus went along by the Lake of Galilee; and ascending the hill, He sat down there. Soon great crowds came to Him, bringing with them those who were crippled in feet or hands, blind or dumb, and many besides, and they fastened to lay them at His feet. And He cured them, so that the people were amazed to see the dumb speaking, the maimed with their hands perfect, the lame walking, and the blind seeing; and they gave the glory to the God of Israel.

Again, the conscious among the sick who were brought to Jesus, their conscious bearers, and the spectators were all part of the crowd in this particular context. By virtue of this, their needs, thoughts, emotions, actions, motives, and belief or unbelief constituted the collective unconscious in this particular context. These were the factors that paved the way for the onset of other pertinent psychological states to which they were subjected, preparing their psyches for the miracle. The fact that people openly expressed their amazement at these wondrous healings by praising God makes it evident that though Jesus was in charge, the people attained individuation through synchronicity and transcendence, thus creating the conditions for the miracle.

Acts 5:14–16 (RSV) relates quite a dramatic miracle occurring after Jesus’ death, resurrection, and ascension to heaven. The story goes as follows:

And more than ever believers were added to the Lord, multitudes both of men and women, so that they even carried out the sick into the streets, and laid them on beds and pallets, that as Peter came by at least his shadow might fall on some of them. The people also gathered from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing the sick and those afflicted with unclean spirits, and they were all healed.
In this story, several people suffering from either physical or spiritual infirmities were laid along the street that Peter, an ardent disciple of Jesus, was to pass. Thus, when he was passing, his shadow would be cast on them and they would be healed by this shadow. True to their expectations, Peter’s shadow actually healed all these people. The fact that Jesus Christ was not physically present in this location, although he was spiritually, brings to the fore the role that faith, defined as the trust in an individual that what he or she desires, and is working and praying toward or expecting, will be done for him or her by God, plays in miracles. Being an avenue for multiple miracles to happen, the chances that an individual with $x$ amount of faith, in a crowded gathering, will receive miracle(s) appears to be greater than those of his or her lone counterpart with the same $x$ amount of faith.

Similar to the case of Peter, the Bible, in Acts 19:11–12 (RSV), also tells of mass miracles that God enabled the apostle Paul to perform, as follows: “God did extraordinary miracles by the hands of Paul, so that handkerchiefs or aprons were carried away from his body to the sick, and diseases left them and the evil spirits came out of them.” In this account, God performed so many miracles through Paul that his personal effects taken to the sick were healing as effectively as his very hands. The recipients of the miracles, those who took them to the venues of the miracles, and the spectators can be said to have witnessed a new dimension to Jesus’ kind of miracles, especially with Jesus not being physically present.

Yet Philip, another disciple of Jesus, is said in Acts 8:6–8 (World English Bible [WEB]) to have performed all kinds of miracles in his ministry after the ascension of Jesus to heaven. The biblical account says, “The multitudes listened with one accord to the things that were spoken by Philip, when they heard and saw the signs which he did. For unclean spirits came out of many of those who had them. They came out, crying with a loud voice. Many who had been paralyzed and lame were healed. There was great joy in that city.” This undoubtedly is another series of multiple miracles among a multitude.

The kind of miracles performed by Peter, Paul, Philip, and other apostles, especially amid multitudes, are being reenacted in the contemporary world. Testimonies abound, here in Nigeria alone, of grand and mass miracles taking place in churches and crusade grounds amid crowds. In the televised, weekly program of Christ Embassy, a Pentecostal church in Lagos, Nigeria, tagged “Atmosphere of Miracles,” it is usual to watch people not only becoming physically healed, but also rendering testimonies of other miracles that they had previously received. Also televised are the occurrence and testimonies of miracles, especially of physical healing, at the Synagogue Church of Nations in Lagos, Nigeria. This particular church is so popular for its miracles that it has continued to attract people from many parts of the world. For example, although the church is located in Nigeria, it is usual to see many white people worshipping there regularly.
On the strength of the visible evidence, the fact that these miracles are actually taking place is not in doubt. However, mixed reactions trail the occurrence of these miracles. While many skeptics agree that there is a supernatural power behind the miracles, they also insist that in many of the churches, the supernatural powers derive from the occult, voodoo, or sorcery. Several, for reasons of not being able to deny the evidence of their own eyes, simply insist that there must have been some arrangements behind the scene and that the testifiers must be confederates of the prophet or miracle worker. As alluded to in the beginning of this chapter, though miracles are not a monopoly of Christianity, there are different types of miracles, and miracles are actually in the eyes of the beholder; but if the manner in which Aaron’s rod-turned-serpent swallowed Pharaoh’s sorcerer’s-rod-turned-serpents (Exodus 7:10–12) is anything to go by, miracles caused by Almighty God are the only genuine miracles. Nevertheless, the psychological processes that galvanize humans into states that are compatible with the occurrence of mass or multiple miracles can occur in all crowded gatherings.

Apart from watching or reading about miracles, real life witnessing of multiple miracles in Christian crusades further convinces one of the potential for enhancement that crowd psychology may lend to the probability of miracles. As a regular attendee of the monthly Holy Ghost service of the Redeemed Christian Church of God at the Redemption Camp, near Lagos, Nigeria, it is quite usual for me to see many people getting physically healed and many others testifying to other breakthroughs that they are convinced they got at previous Holy Ghost services.

Lee Grady’s (2002) report on the Holy Ghost Congress 2001 goes a long way to corroborate this. Grady estimated the crowd on one of the days of a weeklong festival of faith to be in excess of 2 million people. He also vividly described how a shout that followed a prayer session shook the ground, a million fists raised into the air, and another million voices shouted the name of Jesus. Grady reported the events that led to a subsequent occurrence of mass miracles as follows (2002, 14): “The prayers continued, followed by more preaching, then more deafening music. When the next altar call was given at 3 AM, hundreds of men, women and children walked to the stage area to seek physical healing. Some of them left their crutches at the altar when they returned to their seats. They had found their miracle.”

CONCLUSION

With Jesus’ death, resurrection, and ascension to heaven, the Holy Spirit is the force through which God alters the course of nature to pave the way for the occurrence of miracles in the name of Jesus. For Christians, who discern that miracles come from God, the Holy Spirit underlies all the psychological processes to which people are subjected while immersed in a crowd,
ushering them into states that are compatible with receiving miracles from God. Specifically, from immersion in a crowd, through reduction in self-awareness, to deindividuation, contagion, and then to individuation through synchronicity and transcendence, the Holy Spirit mediates, while the entire process, complex as it may seem, is all an expression of faith.

This chapter set out to implicitly provide support to the proposal that people in crowds receive more and grander miracles than people who are alone. Although there is no empirical evidence to support this assertion, theoretical and conceptual analyses seem to provide some forms of support and ways of understanding this apparent reality. Besides, instances drawn from both the Bible and present-day events appear to converge at the same point, lending heuristic weight to the thesis. Against this background, it can be concluded that a higher realm of miraculous experiences characterizes crowds because their psychospirituality produces the altered states of consciousness that individuals in the crowd undergo. Theoretical and conceptual analyses have suggested that these products of crowd psychology are highly compatible with the states of mind that are best suited for receiving miracles.

NOTES

1. In Ibadan, a 1988 local newspaper’s report of road repair efforts, which accidentally exhumed the fresh, undecomposed body of a man in Popo Yemoja, Ibadan, whose children later said he had died in the 1970s. In Iwo, my father’s narration to me of the partial exhumation in 1997 of the fresh, undecomposed body of a family member, who had died as a very old woman in 1992.

2. This is my father’s report to me in the 1980s of the story he was told at one of the annual Osun-Oshogbo festivals, which he attended as an invitee.

3. Two major Yoruba films on Sango that I watched: Oba Koso (1983) and Ose Sango (2002).

4. Story told in a sermon on prayer and praise by Pastor E. A. Adeboye during one of the monthly Holy Ghost services that I attended at the Redemption Camp near Lagos, Nigeria, in 2007.


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Besides imagining the uncanny experience itself, what is likely captivating about stigmata, and accounts of most alleged miracles, for that matter, is that they open the possibility of an actual portal to divinity (Harper 1908). Stigmata are a peculiar phenomenon in that they are the most radical confirmation of the uniquely Christian experience and concept of liturgical time, which is “due to the fact that Christianity affirms the historicity of the person of Christ” and “unfolds in a historical time sanctified by the incarnation of the son of God” (Eliade 1991, 72). Without the figure of Christ and the rupture in profane time that he represents, stigmata would be nothing more than a morbid aberration, requiring nothing more than a purely physical, and even pathological, examination. However, stigmata occupy a complicated space in our imagination, one that demands empirical as well as mythical/structural investigation. In this chapter, our purpose will be to give a historical and empirical overview of the phenomenon through one purported case, while also looking for its contemporary implications.

This chapter takes two simultaneous vectors of approach to the phenomenon of stigmata. The first is one of causation, rooted in a venture to grasp how such phenomena as stigmata, which seems to resist conventional or naturalistic explanation, can make sense, either as the result of invisible psychological or anomalous forces or the equally hidden movements of deception. The other is an encounter with meaning that finds, in stigmata, a kind of

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religious language, whose iterations are essential to the viability of spiritual experience. In the former case, our intention is to determine whether one can even take seriously the suggestion that stigmata have ever been more than sophisticated legerdemain or superstition buried in an impenetrable history of repeated references and accounts. In the latter, we try to identify how such an exceptional reenactment of the crucifixion, rather than challenging religious structures, syntagmatically reinforces greater religious belief. This relies on a type of participation that is not merely an evangelical invocation of personal faith as a belief against empirical proof, but the affirmation of a whole history of beliefs that creates a structure and therefore allows such phenomena as alleged miracles to be comprehensible and, moreover, meaningful.

In the case of Amyr Amiden, the Muslim man with whom Stanley Krippner met in Brazil in 1993, and who underwent a number of stigmata-like experiences, the question is again twofold. Was Amiden’s condition genuine, and if so, was it psychogenic, or was it attributable to something beyond ordinary powers of explanation? Assuming that it was more than trickery, the events only achieve significance through access to either a psychological framework or religious history. Satisfaction with a psychogenic explanation implies that while extremely uncommon, the conditions responsible for such phenomena are isolated to the individual case. In other words, there are no eternal verities to divine from the experience, and the events are not connected to a history greater than themselves. Reported miracles, such as nonpsychogenic stigmata, if they occur at all, are just the opposite, in that they create a connection between the single event and an immutable religious truth, or what Eliade (1959) would have called sacred and profane time. The structure of the religious belief gives the incidence of stigmata meaning, and in turn, stigmata reinforce belief in the crucifixion. As Karl Barth (1949, 28) noted,

This decree of God was carried out in time, once for all, in the work and in the word of Jesus Christ, to which Article II of the Confession bears concrete testimony, “who suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried. . . .” Faith is man’s answer to this historical existence and nature and action of God. Faith has to do with the God who is Himself historical and has fashioned a decree whose goal is history, and has set this history going and completed it.

Stigmata thus function to adduce and create a living Christian history as both temporal and eternal. The belief in stigmata is a belief in the historical Jesus, who believers allege and the gospels claim to have died on the cross.

The notion that Amiden’s case can access the established religious meaning structures that allow us to call it stigmata is problematic in that, strictly speaking, he is not a part of the Christian history, and therefore what his affirmation of Jesus’ suffering might mean is not clear. It could be that in
keeping with the global erosion of religious and cultural boundaries, Amiden represents a kind of religious poststructuralism. Or it could likewise be that he falls into an ar eligious space that merely parodies religious meaning or expresses some more profound forms of spirituality that operate above and outside of the forms of institutional religion.

THE HISTORY OF EVIDENCE: ST. FRANCIS TO PADRE PIO

*Stigmata* is the plural form of the noun *stigma*, a term derived from the Greek word for “mark” or “marking.” As a religious phenomenon, it refers to physical markings on, or bleeding from, areas of the body corresponding to the alleged crucifixion wounds of Jesus Christ (Kelly et al. 2006). This includes the hands or wrists; feet; the side of the body, where Jesus is supposed to have been wounded by a Roman spear; the back and shoulders, from his carrying of the cross; and the forehead, where Jesus is believed to have worn a mock crown made of thorns. Its importance to religion is that stigmata reproduce the crucifixion in the present and can be seen as evidence of the religious reality created by that original event.

From the sixth century BCE to the fourth century CE, when crucifixion ended in Rome, it was a form of punishment inflicted on captives, criminals, pirates, and troublemakers.1 Berger and Berger (1991, 408) claimed, “It is an enigmatic fact that no manifestations have ever been reported on the bodies of non-Christians.” This makes sense, however, as the significance of Jesus’ death does not reside in crucifixion as a method of punishment, but in the fact that Christians believe that Jesus was the son of God and the ultimate redeemer of humanity. Stigmata only become loaded events by way of reference to this fact, which is the source of all meaning in mainstream Christianity.

Although the first generally accepted instance of stigmata dates back to Francis of Assisi in 1224, Berger and Berger (1991, 408) suggest that they may have informed St. Paul’s address to the Galatians, “I bear on my body the marks of the Lord Jesus” (Gal 6:17, Revised Standard Version [RSV]).2 Whether Francis of Assisi was actually the first person to have experienced stigmata, he monopolizes religious and artistic memory of the phenomenon. Since then, there have been some 330 Roman Catholics, and a few Protestants, characterized as stigmatics, among them the German nun Anne Catherine Emmerich, the German saint Lidwina of Schiedam, the German mystic Theresa Neumann, and the Italian priest Padre Pio (Berger and Berger 1991, 408; Nickell 2000; Ratnoff 1969).

Thurston notes that the Roman Catholic church takes a cautious position regarding Padre Pio’s stigmata, remaining (1952, 96) “wisely disdainful of abnormal favors of the psychophysical order in which hysterical and other
pathological causes, or even fraudulent simulation, may at any time play a part.” The church’s wariness is understandable if one considers the effect of allowing entrance to the power of the Son of God not moderated by the church:

For many, Francis was not simply a model of pious humility, but a dangerously transgressive radical whose direct communion with God seemed to render the Church and its hierarchy superfluous. In receiving the wounds of Christ into his own flesh, he transgressed the boundaries of reason and nature. As the *alter Christus* (the other Christ), he went where even his closest companions could not follow him. (Kiely 1999, 35)

Nickell (2000) has produced several scenarios by which a person could simulate stigmata, namely, inflicting wounds on one’s body which are hidden with cosmetics until the bleeding is expected to occur, and has even demonstrated one of them himself. As a result, the use of the term *stigmatics* in this report takes no position as to the etiology of the wounds. The caution of the church may be right, but it does not affect the power over Christian imagination held by St. Francis and some other stigmatics.

Most typically, visible stigmata have consisted of bruises, welts, and bleeding wounds on the hands, wrists, feet, head, back, and sides. Some experients bleed every day; some bleed every Friday or on particular Fridays. Their skin texture varies, from reddened epidermis and blood blisters to wounds that require bandaging. A few stigmatics have had 9 or 10 such marks on their body at once, but most have had less (Murphy 1992, 484). According to the Roman Catholic Church, to qualify as a stigmatic, the wounds need to be accompanied by feelings of ecstasy, or rapture, which, by his own account, Amyr Amiden experienced. Demanding that the wounds be paired with a feeling of ecstasy is the equivalent of demanding that the symbolic event be embedded in the greater history of Christianity—that the single instance be linked to an eternal truth.

These two conditions have been present in a number of relatively recent cases. Marie Rose Ferron, who moved from Canada to Rhode Island in 1925, was bedridden and partially paralyzed for the last decade of her life. In 1926, marks representing the wounds of Christ’s flagellation appeared on her arms; in 1927, stigmata formed on her hands and feet; in 1928, punctures began to bleed on her forehead. She spent much of her time in prayer, and a number of devotees were attracted by her deep spirituality, despite her afflictions (Murphy 1992, 496).

Arthur Otto Moock, a resident of Hamburg, Germany, exhibited wounds on his hands, feet, and side that bled profusely every four weeks or so from 1933 to 1956. Not a Roman Catholic, and not particularly religious, he asked several physicians to cure him, but they had no success (Murphy 1992, 496). This may have been a case of what some observers have described as
hysterical stigmata, which appear in highly suggestible people, but without reports of ecstasy and other mystical phenomena.

Some psychoanalysts have provided psychodynamic explanations for these phenomena. For example, the psychiatrist Ernest Hadley (1930) described a patient who bled from his left armpit during at least seven regular monthly cycles. Hadley believed the bleeding represented his patient’s identification with females. This pseudo-menstruation was conjectured to symbolize both a defense against sexual assault and female innocence; his patient had identified the armpit with the vagina since childhood. Lord (1957) added such motives as the desire to avoid menstruation by suffering periodic wounding, an urge to punish oneself for masturbatory impulses, and a longing to identify with a nonsexual lover. Most female experiencers are stigmatized between the ages of 15 and 50, the years during which women menstruate; stigmata, like periods, are usually cyclical.

In addition to these psychoanalytic explanations, Thurston (1952) believed that stigmata are of hysterical origin, and Wilson (1989) linked them to dissociative identity disorders. The case for the anomalous foundations of stigmata has been made by Summers (1950), while Nickell (1996, 1999, 2000) held they are self-induced. Nickell (1996) and other scoffers have often pointed to the case of Magdelena de la Cruz, who lived from 1487 to 1560. Her religious ecstasies and stigmata impressed the Spanish nobility for years, but eventually, she confessed that they were fraudulent. Maria de la Visitacion, born in 1556, was exposed by a fellow nun, who caught her painting a stigmatic wound onto her hand. Her physicians defended her, but the Inquisition’s examiners scrubbed away her wounds to reveal unblemished flesh (Nickell 1996; Wilson 1989).

Nickell pointed out that a contemporary stigmatic, Katya Rivas from Bolivia, was filmed in her bed where (1999, 61) “the covers provided ample means for concealment of an object that might cut her skin.” He even asserted that Francis of Assisi’s stigmata may have been deceptions motivated by the saint’s zealous imitation of Jesus Christ. However, Francis withheld news of the stigmata, and they were not revealed until after his death. Francis’ confidants, Brother Elias and Brother Leo, attested to their appearance (Murphy 1992, 485), and since the early nineteenth century, many kinds of stigmata have been carefully documented, some by skeptical medical researchers (Murphy 1992, 486).

Kiely (1999) noted that since its inception as a religious concept, stigmata have been a vehicle for doubt. In his study of the appearance of Brother Leo in medieval and renaissance literary and artistic representation, Kiely underscored the notion that Leo was not a simple witness who testified to the reality of the event, but also of a changing representation of general social postures toward miracles, and possibly a symbolic manifestation of the
burden of faith. As Kiely framed it, Leo’s relationship with Francis was its own kind of burden, one that did not involve the ecstasy of stigmata, nor the actual experience:

Francis’s “cross” may have been, among others, an extreme literal mindedness (some would call it zeal, others fanaticism) that led him to the agony of becoming an *alter Christus*. Leo’s cross, more familiar to most of us—his nosiness, his need for proof, his restless conscience, his ambivalence, his spiritual timidity—apparently seemed to Francis heavy enough for one person. (Kiely 1999, 37)

Just as Leo did not serve as an impeccable confirmation of Francis’ stigmata, the prominence of his depiction in works of art, and therefore reception as the bearer of the report’s truth, is not simple. Leo was the “historical and symbolic figure of the flawed witness,” at the center of the interplay between faith and doubt, and, as such, is as important as Francis himself (Kiely 1999, 38).

Louise Lateau and Eva McIsaac

Wilson (1989) has presented two case histories, Louise Lateau and Eva McIsaac, that argue against trickery as the sole explanation of stigmata. Lateau reported ecstatic experiences that accompanied her bleeding from points on her hands, feet, forehead, and side. These manifestations occurred with clockwork regularity every Friday up to her death in 1883 at the age of 33, resulting in a total of roughly 800 occurrences (Wilson 1989; Myers 1903, 493). At the age of 18, the first year in which her stigmata occurred, Lateau visited a physician specializing in so-called nervous disorders, who examined her and observed her condition. According to Wilson (1989, 40), “these scientific tests on Louise Lateau went as far as any at the present time. They indicate that in the case of Louise, at least, something genuinely spontaneous and free from physical contrivance was responsible for her bleedings.”

A more recent case was that of Eva McIsaac, a Canadian housewife. Her wounds included a side wound manifesting and becoming particularly deep and painful. The wounds in her hands penetrated deeper “until they seemed to reach through to her palms, and those in her feet to the soles” (Wilson 1989, 54–55). Eva’s wounds “remained visible but dry and pain-free during the rest of the week, but on Friday evenings between six and nine they flared up with such intensity that some witnesses are said to have fainted” (Wilson 1989, 54–55).

McIsaac freely made herself available for intensive medical examinations. One of these, in 1945, lasted for three weeks; another, in 1946, lasted for two weeks. “Such was the thoroughness and intensity of these that she was not
left alone for a single moment day or night” (Wilson, 1989, 55). A Protestant physician, one of McIsaac’s observers, described the scene:

Gradually the hands and the other wounds began to bleed. The wounds on the back bled only a few drops. . . . The others bled a good deal. . . . By nine o’clock her face was covered in blood from the head wounds and her hair was matted with it. (Wilson 1989, 56–57)

Wilson concluded (1989, 57), “Here we have a direct attestation of stigmatic wounds manifesting spontaneously under controlled conditions.”

Most cases of stigmata were not subjected to such exhaustive examinations, and the scientific rigor that would satisfy contemporary skeptics did not exist at the time when many of the events transpired. Even granting thorough, unbiased observation and the absence of any intervention by a magician or sleight-of-hand expert, there are many ways to produce the appearance of wounds, ranging from layers of false skin to hidden vials of blood.

**Amyr Amiden and the Expanding Vocabulary of Stigmata**

Stanley Krippner’s first meeting with the alleged stigmatic Amyr Amiden was on February 17, 1993, when a Brazilian psychologist, Margarida de Carvalho, and Krippner led a tour group of 20 people through Brazil. This trip was sponsored by the Institute of Noetic Sciences and included four days in Brasilia, where they spent an afternoon at the Foundation of the City of Peace. Amiden had agreed to meet with the group, through the invitation of Pierre Weil, director of the foundation.

Amiden told the group that he was born on July 5, 1941, and that he worked as an importer and also as a government workers’ union secretary. At that time, he lived in Brasilia, the capital city of Brazil. Of Syrian and Iranian descent, Amiden had been raised in the Muslim faith but claimed to have found inspiration in all religions. A member of the group later wrote,

I was sitting in the lunchroom about four feet behind Amyr at the City of Peace. I heard Dr. Weil say, “Here it goes again.” His statement was in response to hearing something drop and bounce inside the room. Shortly thereafter, Stanley Krippner . . . walked over and retrieved a small polished black stone encased in mud from the floor. I watched with interest as they discussed it. At that moment, no one in our group, except Dr. Krippner, knew that Amyr seemingly manifested apports, i.e., appeared to be able to produce physical objects through mediumistic abilities. Dr. Krippner asked Amyr if he felt that the phenomena happened through the work of some spiritual force or entity operating in him. Dr. Krippner mentioned the name “Christ” in this dialogue. Instantly, Amyr began to bleed from his palms and the backs of his hands. A dark red mark also appeared on his
forehead. This phenomenon, called stigmata, allegedly indicates that an individual so heavily identifies with Christ that they express the marks of the crucifixion. Interestingly, Amyr is a Muslim although he was ecumenical in presenting his beliefs.

Another group member remembered,

After arriving, we were conducted to the restaurant and had an excellent vegetarian lunch. Lunch was almost over and I was standing close to where Stan Krippner and a stranger were sitting. Suddenly, something fell to the ground with a slight noise. It looked like a small piece of mud about 2" by 1" by 1". I paid no attention, but Stan picked it up and found a smooth stone . . . inside, about 1/2" in diameter. . . . Whilst talking at lunch with Stan, the conversation with the stranger shifted to Jesus Christ. At this mention of Jesus, red spots appeared on the backs of each hand of the stranger and on the palms. We were invited to look at this manifestation of the stigmata. The stranger was introduced as Amyr Amiden. He is of medium height and has a grey beard. He was born in Brazil into an Islamic family, although all religions are the same to him now.

A third member of the group observed that “it first appeared to be a bruise on both hands, and then blood appeared on both surfaces of the hands and forehead,” a recollection very similar to other members of the group.

Krippner recalled that beet salad had been served at lunch and speculated whether the red fluid that appeared on Amiden’s body could have been beet juice; however, he was reluctant to ask permission to taste the fluid. After asking Amiden’s permission, he invited the group to file past Amiden to observe the phenomenon.

Asked to reflect on an interview with Amiden, a member of the group recounted,

Apparently, his father and grandfather were “sensitive.” . . . All his siblings were “sensitive,” but only he and his grandfather manifested “apports”—the anomalous appearance of objects with no easily discernible source. Amyr claims he “astral travels” and can travel at will and return with information which can be checked later. He says there have been reports of his bilocation, but he has no control or awareness when this occurs. He has healing abilities and has healed a few lepers in the early stages of their illness but not in later stages. Lights are often seen in his presence when apports occur.

In another among a series of unusual events with Amiden, Pierre Weil passed around a Communion chalice that had been resting on a table in the lecture room. One of the members present averred that “water was in the cup when I held it in the circle.” Another remembered that
several people claim that there was no water in the cup when they inspected it. However, they claim to have smelled blood and to have observed what they took to be dried blood in the chalice, as well as on the fabric that covered the table.

Typically, blood has no discernable smell, so this sensation may have been imaginary or was made on the basis of other contents of the chalice.

Another group member noted that Weil showed us a chalice that Amyr held shortly before we arrived. What appeared to be blood covered a cross on one side of the chalice. Dr. Weil explained that when Amyr picked up the chalice, the blood exuded from the cross. I picked it up for a closer inspection and, after looking closely at the marks inside and out, I passed it around to the rest of our group. When it returned, created within it were several communion wafers that had not been there when it left my hands. To the best of my knowledge, the chalice was in the hands, or within plain sight, of our group the entire time.

In these accounts, there are two possible discrepancies. One person reported that there was dried blood “in the chalice,” while another recalled blood “on one side of the chalice.” One observer reported the anomalous appearance of “water” in the chalice, but another recalled the appearance of “communion wafers.”

This session with Amiden was neither videotaped nor audiotaped, yet there was a general agreement regarding most of the anomalous events that occurred. There was not, however, a complete consensus about all of the relevant details of the experience.

In the evening after the chalice incident, Amiden accepted an invitation to have dinner at the visiting group’s hotel. On this occasion, one participant audiotaped the conversation, and another videotaped it. The former later recalled,

When the tape picked up the conversation, Amyr was relating an incident that had taken place at this hotel some time before—at the time of the inauguration of [Fernando Collor] the President of Brazil.

At that time, in Amyr’s presence, blood had appeared on a crystal. At that time, someone had inquired as to the significance of this occurrence. Amyr had replied, at the time when the event occurred, that he believed it to be symbolic of the suffering that the Brazilian people would experience. Amyr further related to us that, as if to verify the precognitive impression, the very next day, the people of Brazil had their bank accounts impounded and began to suffer.
Several members of the group had questions for Amiden, whose answers were translated by de Carvalho and are excerpted here:

**QUESTIONER:** What was the meaning of this blood?

**AMIDEN:** I think it was the blood of the Brazilian people. . . . The ex-president . . . did a terrible, crazed thing with our money. He held all the money of every Brazilian. . . . I saw the suffering. . . . It was bleeding, blood.

**QUESTIONER:** How did you know this?

**AMIDEN:** Whenever I have information about something, I hear a feminine voice. I never see her, but it’s a feminine voice that talks to me.

**QUESTIONER:** This is the process?

**AMIDEN:** That’s right. And this feminine voice told me that this whole thing in Brazil is a process of purification for the country.

**QUESTIONER:** Is it the same feminine voice each time?

**AMIDEN:** Yes, it is.

**QUESTIONER:** Are you conscious when you hear this?

**AMIDEN:** Yes, I am conscious. I always follow the voice. It’s always a message for me. . . . I feed the poor people every 15 days. So I go to a very poor and violent neighborhood every 15 days and make soup for 300 people. And there was a time when the authorities wouldn’t let me do this because they said I was bringing a violent crowd together and that was dangerous. And they said I was bringing criminals and prostitutes to this place. But perhaps one of the prostitutes was my sister in a former life. Yes, it’s very difficult to help people. My father had told me to help feed people because with an empty stomach you can’t hear words of wisdom.

**QUESTIONER:** What do you do to grow spiritually?

**AMIDEN:** I live alone, so I have time to read the Bible, and [I read] about the Muslims and the Jews. They fight so much in the Middle East. But the suffering is for their development.

**QUESTIONER:** They don’t seem to be learning anything.

**AMIDEN:** It’s a process they have to go through.

On the following day, several of the group remarked on Amiden’s wearied appearance, an observation that accorded with Krippner’s notes on Amiden’s episodic experience:

Every month something like this happens. . . . Before the phenomena occur the saliva tastes acidic. . . . He drinks much water, strong tea and coffee, loses weight, and takes many baths and showers. . . . The signs that phenomena would happen started a week ago Wednesday and lasted for 10 days. Blood will come in spots on his legs, then will disappear. He does considerable healing during this time.
Were these anomalous events what parapsychologists would refer to as \textit{psi phenomena}? Parapsychology is the scientific study of psi phenomena—those interactions between organisms and their environment (including other organisms) that appear to bypass mainstream Western science’s understanding of time, space, and energy. But a particular phenomenon can only be considered psi when it is performed under psi task conditions, those that rule out any ordinary explanation. Hence the events surrounding Amiden on February 17, 1993, were certainly puzzling, even anomalous. But they could not be classified as psi because they occurred under informal conditions that did not rule out alternative explanations. There are many psychic claimants who, on closer inspection, have turned out to be sleight-of-hand specialists.

What remains to investigate is what possible meaning Amiden’s liberal appropriation of culturally and religiously specific vocabulary could mean. By \textit{vocabulary}, we are referring to the landscape of symbols associated with and, in turn, defining a tradition. So, for instance, the bleeding of the Communion chalice and the appearance of wafers enters the province of religion by way of the Eucharist, which is the symbolic invocation of the Last Supper. In the absence of the Eucharist, the chalice is merely a cup, and the alleged miracle is not more than a convincing instance of conjuring.

Wilson (1989) reported a case similar to Amiden’s in a Dominican nun known as Blessed Helen. She lived in a convent in Hungary and was observed repeatedly by her sister nuns to manifest “wounds in both hands, and in her feet, and her breast was wounded” (Wilson 1989, 21) and in whose presence flowers and other objects were said to have appeared. Needless to say, if a bouquet of flowers were to suddenly appear in the presence of a magician, the phenomenon would be conceptualized as legerdemain. Like Amiden, whose performance included a number of weighted symbols tied to Christianity, the presence of the nun and Helen’s participation in a monastic order can be said to render the events a divine manifestation.

Return to Brasilia

In March 1994, Krippner returned to Brasilia to work with a seven-person team studying the anomalous phenomena occurring in the presence of Amyr Amiden, events over which he claimed to have little conscious control. They spent several hours a day with Amiden, who joined them after work (Krippner et al. 1994).

The settings for their meetings varied, but most of them were in Weil’s office, where they sat in comfortable chairs around a table. Amiden drove to the foundation, was met in the lobby by one or more team members, and was escorted to the office so that there could be no occasion on which Amiden entered the room prior to the session. Several sessions were held in the campus Meditation House; Krippner investigated this site each morning to
be sure it contained no unusual objects that could later be labeled “materializations.” When a restaurant was the setting, Amiden entered and left with other group members. From the time that he arrived at the foundation to the time that he departed, Amiden was in the presence of one or more members of the group.

When one or more team members felt that an unusual event had indeed occurred, three members of the team rated each of them on a 5-point Anomaly Observation Scale constructed by Krippner. It ranged from 1 (no apparent anomaly) to 5 (extraordinary degree of apparent anomaly). The mean of each set of ratings was used for comparative purposes; the research design stated that an event would have to have a mean rating of 2.1 or higher to be considered an “apparent anomaly,” a nonordinal number selected to divide events that were felt to be easily understandable from those that were ambiguous or difficult to explain.

For example, four black marks on Weil’s bedroom door were observed by another member of the team; this event was given a mean rating of 1.0 because Weil recalled that a poster had been taped on his door a week earlier. While the group was seated in Weil’s office, a religious medallion appeared to drop onto the floor from the ceiling; this event received a mean rating of 5.0, as did the similar appearance of another medallion a few minutes later. A mean rating of 3.7 was given to a series of static-like blips heard when a radio was tuned between two bands, blips which answered questions given in both Portuguese and English (one blip for yes, two blips for no).

Over a span of eight days, a total of 20 sessions were held with Amiden; using the 5-point evaluation scale, 91 events were judged to have been apparently anomalous, while 6 events failed to meet the predetermined criteria. One of the anomalous events was the appearance of stigmata, which were observed on March 14 and 15.

The field notes Krippner made on those days stated, “Red, blood-like liquid is seen on the front and back of Amiden’s right and left hands.” Ruth Kelson’s notes were similar; this physician’s personal examination of Amiden’s hands convinced her that the fluid was, indeed, blood. Krippner noted a beatific smile on Amiden’s face when he presented his hands to exhibit the markings.

One day, Weil took a metal chalice from his bookcase and began to tell the group how small drops of blood and a Communion wafer had appeared in the chalice under anomalous conditions some months prior to the meeting. On the March 1994 occasion, Amiden asked a member of the group to allow the silver-colored chalice to balance itself on the palm of his hand, while he placed both of his hands at a one-inch to two-inch distance from the top of the object. This took about 15 seconds, at which time Weil asked someone to place the object on the table. Amiden asked everyone to place their hands around the chalice without touching the metal. Amiden placed his own hands
at a one-inch to two-inch distance from members whose hands were in closer proximity to the object. This lasted for 15 to 20 seconds, after which time Amiden suggested that everyone remove his or her hands.

Then Amiden placed his hands near the chalice without touching it. Weil picked up the chalice and observed that an oil-like liquid formation had appeared, which had a distinct perfume smell. Then the chalice was passed around so that everyone could see and smell the oil.

The group also had the opportunity to inspect a large photograph of Gandhi that Weil had brought from his bookcase. Weil reported that when Amiden had first seen it, he remarked that the man in the picture had been killed. This statement is not remarkable, given the widespread knowledge of Gandhi’s assassination. However, the following event was quite remarkable; Weil then observed the appearance of two blotches of a blood-like substance on the picture, which were also observed by the group.

The results of these investigations were so provocative that plans were made for a more formal investigation utilizing sophisticated psychophysiological monitoring equipment and the assistance of a Brazilian magician trained in sleight-of-hand effects. Unfortunately, Amiden’s physician, who had observed the complication in Amiden’s cardiovascular and gastrointestinal problems following the March 1994 visit, deemed his health unsuitable for additional research purposes.

**A PSYCHOPHYSIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE**

Barber (1984, 118), who studied self-regulation of blood flow, introduced an example of how cognition, imagination, and emotions affect blood supply to the genital areas during sexual fantasizing. If these thoughts, images, and feelings can produce variations in blood supply, Barber proposed, it is likely that the blood flow to other parts of the body is continually affected by what people are thinking, imagining, and experiencing. By being deeply absorbed in imagining a physiological change, some individuals can evoke the same thoughts and feelings that are present when an actual physiological change occurs, hence stimulating the cells to produce the desired physiological change.

During the spontaneous disappearance of warts, some investigators (Samek 1931) have reported an inflammatory reaction in the dermis consisting of dilation of blood vessels, hyperemia (increased blood supply), edema, and perivascular infiltration of white blood cells. Hypnotic treatment of so-called fish-skin diseases may involve stimulation of the affected area’s vascular bed, countering its disturbed metabolism (Kidd 1966). Changes in blood supply have also been implicated in rapid recovery from burns (Barber 1984, 87–93). Hypnotized individuals are able to reduce or eliminate bleeding in cases of upper gastrointestinal hemorrhage, and self-hypnosis has been found to be effective in patients with hemophilia (Spiegel and Vermutten
1994, 199–200). In addition, there is an extensive literature on individuals who can shift more blood to a specific area of the skin through biofeedback or other forms of self-regulation (Silverman and McGough 1971; Snyder and Nobel 1968). Murphy (1992, 545) observed that in biofeedback training, there is a transition from the largely dissociative processes that produce hysterical stigmata to a more self-reliant process. Cultivating the self-regulation skills (kinesthetic awareness and deliberate control of autonomic processes) that are basic human capacities, most people can learn to raise or lower their blood pressure, change their brain wave patterns, alter the flow of gastric acid, or modify other physiological functions.

Murphy (1992, 498) noted that the behavior and experiences of mystics are shaped by their respective cultures. Indian yogis, he pointed out, do not exhibit stigmata, nor do Eastern Orthodox monks. However, he also commented that the battle wounds of Mohammed have appeared on devout Islamic men. Interpreting stigmata within a psychophysiological framework suggests that it could occur to members of any faith who somatize, and who are deeply involved in the crucifixion story (or, in the case of Muslims, in the battles involving Mohammed), given the proper circumstances. For example, in 1972, a young African American Baptist girl living in Oakland, California, manifested the stigmata from the palm of the left hand two to six times daily during a three-week period preceding Easter Sunday. Physiological and psychological tests did not detect serious pathology, and close scrutiny ruled out self-inflicted wounds. Her dreams frequently included biblical events; in the week before her bleeding began, she had read a book and had watched a television movie about the crucifixion (Early and Lifschutz 1974). She and her family professed to be religious, attending a Baptist church near their home; interview data revealed that the girl was preoccupied with Christ’s suffering (Early and Lifschutz 1974, 200). In addition, there are three known Anglican stigmatics (Harrison 1994). Hence stigmatic phenomena are not limited to Roman Catholic adepts.

Spontaneous hemorrhages known as psychogenic purpura occur with no corresponding physical trauma both as a result of hypnosis and unconscious self-suggestion. Purpura refers to a dark, reddened area of the skin. The examiners of the girl in Oakland, California, observed that she had always been in excellent health and had never had a serious illness or accident. They concluded that profound, intense religious and emotional forces could have caused the stigmatic bleeding. Eventually, she also bled from both feet, from her right palm, from her right thorax, and from her forehead. Once the Easter season had passed, there was no recurrence of the stigmata.

One might also place considerable emphasis on the impact of artistic renditions of the crucifixion, almost all of which depict nails driven into the palms of Jesus’ hands. In actuality, nails were probably driven into victims’ wrists, where the bony structure would provide enough support to hold a
body on a cross for the time required for death to occur. Even so, nails were not depicted in representations of the crucifixion until the fifth century; the more common Roman practice was to bind the victim to the wood with thongs (Ratnoff 1969).

The historical origin of the phenomenon of stigmata is curiously coincidental with the manufacture of crosses bearing lifelike statues of Christ in his suffering; heretofore, the crosses had been bare. By the thirteenth century, the Christ who hung on a cross was drenched in red blood, and in the same century, Christian mystics began to experience the stigmata (Panati 1996, 123, 512). By the same token, stigmatic wounds in the wrists have become more common since media coverage has cast doubt on the historical veracity of palm wounds (Nickell 2000).

In addition, the experient’s chest wound typically has been found to match the location portrayed in the local church; the wounds of one woman matched in position and size those shown on the crucifix before which she prayed (Thurston 1952). The Τ-shaped cross on the breast of Anne Emmerich resembled a prominent cross before which she had prayed as a child (Murphy 1992, 501–2). These observations lend more forceful support to the explanation of stigmata as self-inflicted injuries or a psychogenic origin to bleeding than any type of purported supernatural intervention.

Hypnotically Suggested Stigmata

The work of a German physician, Alfred Lechler (1933), supports this perspective. Lechler experimentally induced bleeding stigmata by hypnotic suggestions in a 29-year-old peasant woman who demonstrated high hypnotic susceptibility. Somewhat earlier, she had seen a film about Christ’s crucifixion that left her with pains in her hands and feet. Lecher hypnotized the woman and suggested that she had been pierced by nails in the manner of the crucifixion. After several sessions, the peasant woman produced the markings of a crown of thorns on her forehead, an inflamed shoulder condition related to her imaginary carrying of the cross, and bloody tears similar to those shed by the celebrated mystic Theresa Neumann. Lechler photographed these manifestations (Lechler 1933). The crown of thorns was not a customary part of Roman crucifixion practices, and if the account is accurate, it might have been produced for Jesus, mocking his appellation as “King of the Jews.”

The woman responded that she could feel the nails being driven into her hands and feet. Lechler and at least one nurse carefully observed her prior to, during, and after she received the suggestions. Wilson (1989, 97) comments, the significance of all this is profound. Effectively, Lechler can be said to have established more authoritatively than anyone, before or since, that
spontaneous bleedings of the type attributed to stigmatics during the last seven centuries really do happen, and that these can be demonstrated under properly controlled conditions. He can also be said to have established that a fundamental key to the phenomena is hypnosis, and that the stigmatic, even without having been formally hypnotized seems to be, during his or her bleedings, in a mental and physical state effectively indistinguishable from hypnosis.

Wilson (1989, 126) continues,

A really riveting feature is the extraordinary precision of the mechanism’s conformity to the visualization that triggered it. Stigmata have been precisely positioned to conform with the wounds of a stigmatic’s favorite crucifix. Or a wound may have taken on an exact shape such as a cross. Most dramatic of all, the mechanism seems able to mould the flesh into a feature resembling the head and bent-over point of an iron nail. It is as if something within the body has re-programmed it into a new form.

Psychogenic and Posttraumatic Bleeding

Reports of psychogenic bleeding, wounds that are linked to psychological reactions to accidents or surgery, support this perspective. When psychogenic bleeding has been recorded, the principal manifestation has been ecchymosis, rather than bleeding through the skin. A study of 27 cases of psychogenic bleeding at Case Western Reserve University observed that all cases were in women, that the bleeding began after injury or surgery, and that the attendant bruises were different from those brought on by trauma. However, among the 27 cases, there was frequent mention of headaches, seizures, cutaneous anesthesia, transient paresthesias, nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, chest pains, and hyperventilation. Several women had a history of childhood or recent trauma (Ratnoff and Agle 1968), and a larger number had been bedridden for long periods of time (Nickell 2000).

Following such traumas as automobile accidents, there can be syndromes of spontaneous bleeding from body orifices as well as internal bleeding and painful spontaneous ecchymosis (passage of blood from ruptured blood vessels into skin tissue), often several months after the trauma. Gardner and Diamond (1955) have hypothesized that these individuals become sensitive to their own extravasated blood (i.e., blood that has flowed into surrounding tissues) at the time of the accident, and bleeding then occurred later due to internal sensitization. This posttraumatic syndrome appears to be more common among women than men.

In cutaneous anesthesia, there is no sense of touch in the skin; a severe diabetic who has no circulation in the toes will cut the toe but feel no pain. Transient paresthesias (i.e., impaired skin sensations) are brief, episodic prickly sensations; sciatica can produce them as well.
THE STRUCTURAL APPROACH TO STIGMATA

The cases just described are helpful etiologically, but the bleeding was not interpreted as sacred or as stigmata. Cases that are studied as stigmata share four commonalities according to Lord (1957) and Ratnoff (1969):

1. The stigmatic has a history of somatization (see Wickramasekera 1995).
2. The stigmatic demonstrates a high degree of identification with a religious figure.
3. The bleeding occurs periodically during times of high affect.
4. There is considerable secondary gain derived from the stigmata.

All four of these commonalities (Lord 1957; Ratnoff 1969) can be said to have characterized Amyr Amiden. He had a history of somatic complaints. He demonstrated a high degree of identification with Jesus Christ and other religious figures. The bleeding occurred when he was deeply moved by a social situation or conversation. And as a result of the stigmata, he received attention and praise from a group of his supporters as well as from inquisitive outsiders.

Even so, Krippner and his team (1996) could not draw a definite conclusion as to whether this claimant’s stigmata were parapsychological, of somatic origin, or the result of highly sophisticated legerdemain—much less anything that could be considered miraculous. Indeed, this claimant’s phenomena are typical of the problems that exist in this area of study. Amiden’s cancellation of a follow-up session, with a Brazilian magician present, could have been due to health problems, as alleged. Or it could have been motivated by a fear of exposure by an expert in sleight-of-hand effects. However, it provided Krippner and his associates an opportunity to survey the pertinent literature and to propose mechanisms that would lead to a naturalistic (rather than a supernatural) explanation of stigmata.

These four commonalities provide formal criteria for what may already be an intuition, namely, that certain activities qualify as stigmata and others do not. The impulse to establish criteria rests with the expectation that stigmata convey, or at least adduce, something in a fixed tradition. For stigmata, it is the most profound truth in Christian mythology. The internal/external distinction of stigmata is not so much a problem of verification, but of a type of semantics that guides our understanding of it. And “we must remind ourselves that, for Christianity, time is real because it has a meaning—the Redemption” (Eliade 1991, 143). In the same way, stigmata have a meaning because they are identifiable as the reincarnation of the historical event that organizes the religion. The crucifixion confers on stigmata a meaning that unifies the whole Christian historical community and operates like a grammatical force for determining what is and is not correct.
In his analysis of the Sandwich Islands and the sacrificial rituals that infamously claimed the life of Captain Cook, Marshall Sahlins (2004, 16) remarked,

The genealogical tradition provides an invariant frame for all of these permutations, articulating the latest of the human heroes with the greatest of the gods—and allowing the possibility that the latter will reappear in the persons of the former.

What is important here is that the religious structures that prevail over the course of history allow the islanders to transform a man or woman of the present into an eternal figure and therefore confirm now what the myth invariably proves true. In Christianity, as stated before, faith is not a blind spot in reason, nor a grave leap into the impossible, as much as it is a willingness to recognize and participate in the historicity of Christ as a figure who inaugurated the time of redemption. The empirical likeness of a stigmatic to Jesus as a mythological figure is not as crucial as his or her situation in the history that allows for faith. Even the stigmata or ecstatic visions themselves must, as de Certeau notes, be relativized as “signs that would become a mirage if one were to stop there” (Brammer 1992, 29). The wounds only become stigmata by being expressible in the paradigmatic Christian language of the crucifixion that “radically historicize[s] each moment” (Brammer 1992, 35). In turn, the halo of scientific uncertainties surrounding Amiden’s case misses some more essential difficulties about how his experience could possibly be comprehended as an embedded sign employing a religious grammar.

It appears as if Amiden’s case straddles the line between being meaningful and simply fascinating. We immediately recognize in his wounds and the presence of Christian artifacts a wealth of explicit references to a long history of Christian experience that is not limited to Christ, but also includes medieval mysticism and the Eucharist. Amiden’s own deep identification with the figure of Jesus offers a foundation for interpreting the events and leads us to speculate that it is an instance of stigmata. However, if we view stigmata as a structural device defining a narrow space in the history of Christianity, it is hard to know what it would mean at a deeper, more profound level.

Unlike Sahlins, who treats ritual paradigms as “invariant,” it is possible, and even obvious, that the structures that confer meaning on an event evolve. Otherwise, the Roman Catholic Church’s initial resistance to the Franciscan order would have left stigmata forever beyond the margins of the Christian faith. Instead, subtle variations in the manifestation of stigmata have the cumulative effect of altering its conceptual boundaries. But this does not occur so abruptly as to explode the structure altogether, which is how we can still comfortably refer to such phenomena as the four commonalities. What is missing in the manifestations of Amiden is a unitary framework to make
them comprehensible. Is he channeling the suffering of the Brazilian people as a Christ-like conduit? Or does he represent the convergence of monotheistic religions? The pantheistic and vaguely political invocations presented in these manifestations seem at odds with the use of potent Christian traditions. A rabid cynic might claim that he empties dense and familiar emotionally and historically charged symbols of their original content to use them as a vehicle for a confused message of world peace. No doubt, given the powerful possibility of psychosomatic phenomena, this could occur unconsciously. But the fact remains that it is nearly impossible to locate Amiden’s experience as one that falls within the bounds of a single religious tradition. Moreover, his comments in the interview lead us to question whether his stigmatic-like experiences can communicate shared meanings for the purpose of reinforcing existing religious structures and reasserting eternal verities in everyday life, or if they are just confined to a fantastic version of everyday life. There is also the possibility that Amiden is an exemplar of a poststructural or postmodern movement that immanently unhinges long-standing beliefs and traditions, while still remaining sincere.

In his discussion of postmodernity, Gergen speaks of the (1991, 7) “plurality of voices vying for the right to reality.” Some visitors to Florence panic before a Raphael masterpiece; others go into a frenzy when confronted with a Caravaggio painting; still others collapse at the feet of Michelangelo’s statue of David. At least once a month, a foreign tourist is rushed to the psychiatric ward of Florence’s Santa Maria Nuova Hospital, suffering from an acute mental dysfunction brought on by an encounter with the city’s art treasures (Kroker, Kroker, and Cook 1989, 150). Mother Ann, the founder of the Shakers, experienced an episode of stigmata when, during a religious ecstasy, blood allegedly seeped through the pores of her skin (Ratnoff 1969). In 1972 (as noted previously), a young Baptist girl was observed to manifest the stigmata (Early and Lifschutz 1974). In 1980, a medical journal told of a woman who manifested the stigmata while singing in a Pentecostal choir; she gave birth to a child who subsequently exhibited stigmata as well (Fisher and Kollar 1980). In 1993, Krippner and his group observed a man raised as a Muslim manifest stigmata-like phenomena. This crossing of denominational lines, for the sake of extraordinary occurrences, may be a characteristic of the postmodern age. It is surely no accident that Amiden’s unbridled association of Christian icons with the Brazilian national plight, an awareness of contemporary Middle Eastern politics, and the acknowledgment of Gandhi coalesce in a series of spiritual manifestations.

Postmodernism questions voices of authority as well as extant models of the human being. As Wilson (1989, 100) commented,

The truly significant feature is that the flesh really does change, in an extraordinarily dramatic way, in response to mental activity, and that the
power of mind over matter is phenomenally more powerful than previously thought possible. . . .

If the mind really can spontaneously produce wounds in this way, can it also be persuaded to do the reverse? Can it stem the bleeding of a hemophiliac, or shrink a malignant tumor?

Stigmata are not merely a relic of an era when superstition reigned. These phenomena may be reframed in terms of recent advances in mind-body medicine (e.g., Dienstfrey 1991) and applied psychophysiology (e.g., Wickramasekera 1995), providing clues for the alleviation of human suffering. And in the spirit of postmodernism, it is imperative to locate the mythic, structural, and narrative intersections that allow for humans to reinforce old meanings and generate new ones.

NOTES

1. Persians, Assyrians, Carthaginians, and Greeks were among the other early civilizations that practiced crucifixion. But for about 800 years, the Romans surpassed them all, crucifying some 500 people per day following the Jewish revolt ending in 70 CE, with the conquest of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Second Temple.

2. All biblical references are from the Revised Standard Version.

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Kongo religious history provides cases useful for evaluating hypotheses derived from the ritual healing theory. This theory argues that, over many millennia, groups of genes (genotypes) governing dissociative and hypnotic capacities reduced the psychological effects of trauma. These genotypes ultimately provided the basis for human religiosity. The genotypes, allowing dissociation and hypnosis, provided greater benefits to hominids/humans participating in therapeutic rituals based on dissociative/hypnotic processes. The selected genes facilitated anomalous and visionary experiences, labeled within some cultures as miraculous. Apparitions, visions, waking extrasensory perceptions, paranormal dreams, out-of-body and near-death experiences, and psychokinesis (unexplained movement of objects) generated beliefs in spirits, souls, life after death, and magical abilities—the foundations of shamanism, humankind’s first religious form. This theory is evaluated through analysis of Kongo religious history. Kongo history describes recurring cycles of dissociative religious practitioners performing rituals benefiting those with hypnotic/dissociative ability. These practitioners and their followers report miraculous/anomalous perceptions whose forms coincide with those found all over the world. These correspondences support the argument that such perceptions have physiological basis. Consequently, findings support the ritual healing theory.

English dictionaries define miracles as events surpassing known human or natural powers. Such events are often ascribed to supernatural causes, most typically to God. Yet various cultures do not distinguish natural from supernatural causes, and some do not conceive of a single god as intervening.
in human affairs. Some definitions of the miraculous use scientific evaluation as a standard—events thought to exceed scientific explanation are labeled as miraculous or paranormal. Such definitions are not fully adequate as questions regarding the authenticity of individual miracles, or of miracles in general, have not been resolved (McClenon 1984). As a result, scientists and theologians do not agree regarding the incidence and nature of miracles.

This chapter uses a cross-cultural perspective to argue that particular experiences have physiological bases, indicated by universal features, and that such experiences shape folk religious beliefs (McClenon 1994, 1997a, 1997b, 2002a, 2002b, 2006a, 2006b). Although scientists disagree regarding explanations of these experiences, they can test hypotheses regarding their incidence and impact. Much evidence indicates that visions, apparitions, waking extrasensory perception, paranormal dreams, psychokinesis (unexplained movement of objects), and out-of-body and near-death experiences have shaped beliefs regarding spirits, souls, life after death, and magical abilities (McClenon 1994). Issues regarding the degree to which scientific theories explain these perceptions are beyond the scope of this chapter. For the sake of convenience, these experiential forms will be referred to as anomalous, even though some researchers regard certain experiential forms to be explained within present scientific paradigms; apparitions and out-of-body experiences, for example, are attributed to activation of cholinergic processes in the brain.

This chapter reviews cases from Kongo religious history to evaluate a theory explaining how propensities for anomalous experience have evolved through evolutionary processes. Within this evolutionary paradigm, religiosity is a phenotype, an existing behavioral trait associated with physiological structures, derived from a genotype, a corresponding collection of genes. Religiosity can be measured through questionnaire scales—but the exact number of genes affecting the various dimensions of religiosity has yet to be determined. Within this paradigm, genes for religiosity are thought to be switched on or off as a result of an organism’s experience. As a result, genotypes do not govern behavior, but provide patterns within which traits are shaped by environment. Religious phenotypes vary among individuals, taking different forms in response to corresponding genotypes affected by environment.

Much evidence indicates that religious genotypes exist. Twin studies demonstrate that religious attitudes, interests, practices, and associated hypnotic processes have genetic bases (Waller et al. 1990; D’Onofrio et al. 1999; Koenig et al. 2005; Duke 1969; Morgan 1973; Morgan, Hilgard, and Davert 1970). It would be surprising if a universal practice, such as religion, did not have a genetic basis. Researchers find that all other universal characteristics, such as psychological variables, have genetic bases (Carey 2003).
Some theorists argue that so-called religious genes provide survival advantages to groups, allowing more religious groups to replace groups lacking the group religion genes (Wilson 2002). Evolutionists refer to this as a group selection theory, an orientation that often appeals to social scientists focusing on culture. Most evolutionists reject this position, arguing that selection occurs at the gene, rather than group, level (Dawkins 1999; Parker 1978; Wright 1994). For a gene to be selected at the group level, mechanisms must prevent those lacking the gene from gaining equivalent advantages merely by being in the group. If individuals pass from group to group (as is observed among primates), group selection models are improbable since those lacking the specific gene would not be penalized.

Religiosity genes, assumed to generate cohesiveness, would not become prevalent if those lacking them benefited from being in the cohesive group. Second, religion is not the only mechanism creating cohesiveness. Primates, lacking religiosity, have other genetic propensities that cause them to remain in groups. Those lacking cohesiveness genes tend to wander off, are exposed to predators, and die without progeny. The hypothesized religiosity genes, whose major function involves creating cohesiveness, would need to be more powerful in fulfilling this function than existing nonreligious genes in order to replace them. If group religiosity genes exist, we would expect to find example cases (phenotypes) of religious groups replacing other groups within the histories of all societies. Although it is possible that historical analysis is unable to detect group selection processes, an inability to find example cases renders group selection theory less plausible.

The frequency and nature of genes associated with perception illustrate evolutionary selection at the gene level. Hominid olfactory capacity, for example, declined as hand dexterity increased, even though detection of odors provides survival benefits. The brain structures governing perception are limited by skull space, and as one capacity increases, another declines. Better hand coordination meant a reduction of other phenotypes. Group selection theorists must provide evidence that religious groups replaced less religious groups—merely pointing out functions of religion is inadequate.

An alternate position, the ritual healing theory, argues that selection tends to occur at the genotype, rather than group, level. Hominid rituals, involving dissociation and altered states of consciousness, provided benefits due to hypnotic and placebo processes. As a result, hominids with genes allowing hypnotic response had survival advantages. Over the millennia, healing rituals shaped the human propensity to go into trance and to perceive anomalous experiences such as apparitions, waking extrasensory perceptions, paranormal dreams, psychokinesis, and out-of-body and near-death experiences. The theory argues that these experiences generate beliefs in spirits, souls, life after death, and magical abilities.
This theory can be evaluated:

1. The folklore and religious history of any ethnic group can be analyzed. All groups should report ritual healing based on dissociative processes. The theory specifies that patterns within history reflect hypothesized evolutionary processes—certain people tend to be more dissociative, and these people are more likely to become spiritual healers, particularly aiding those suffering from disorders derived from dissociative propensity. The theory argues that such healers continually emerge but are particularly prevalent during social crisis.

2. Anomalous experience accounts collected from any ethnic group can be analyzed. All societies should provide folklore with similar forms of anomalous experience since the theory hypothesizes that these experiences have physiological basis.

3. Survey research should find that hypothesized variables related to ritual healing are significantly correlated. These variables include childhood trauma, dissociative and hypnotic experience, propensity for anomalous experience and belief, and propensity to respond to ritual/hypnotic suggestion. Such studies would allow development of questionnaire scales identifying those high in the hypothesized capacities—and these scales would be valuable to clinicians treating mental problems and psychosomatic disorders. Geneticists could use such scales to identify genes providing the basis for factors related to spirituality, the individualized form of religiosity.

This chapter focuses on the first and second strategies. Previous studies provide a foundation for the overall research program. Residents of northeastern North Carolina (McClenon 2002b), anthropologists doing fieldwork (McClennon and Nooney 2002), elite U.S. scientists (McClenon 1984), and students at three colleges in the United States, three colleges in China, and one college in Japan (McClenon 2000, 2002a, 2002b) report common, recurring anomalous experiences. These experiential forms include apparitions, waking extrasensory perception, paranormal dreams, out-of-body and near-death experience, and psychokinesis. The cross-cultural consistency of these forms implies physiological bases. The ritual healing theory predicts that these experiential forms can be found in the folklore and religious history of any ethnic group. Studies of spiritual healers in Korea, the Philippines, Okinawa, Sri Lanka, Taiwan, Thailand, and the United States show common elements within their biographies (McClenon 1994). Healers report that spontaneous experiences created profound beliefs in spirits, souls, life after death, and magical abilities—elements in the ideologies they use for healing. Anthropologists have noted common elements within spiritual healing practices all over the world, elements associated with hypnosis and placebo effects (McClenon 2002b).
Ritual healing processes could occur concurrently with group selection processes. The evolution of genotypes allowing human culture affected selection of religiosity genotypes. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to discuss the complexities of cultural evolution. These complexities are so great that conclusions drawn from historical analysis of any one ethnic group must be tentative. The present study is presented as a contribution to the discussion of the relationship between genes and culture, with the recognition that genes and culture evolve together (Richerson and Boyd 2005).

KONGO RELIGIOUS HISTORY: AN EXAMPLE CASE

This chapter evaluates the ritual healing theory through content analysis of cases drawn from Kongo religious history. Kongo refers to ethnic groups (the BaKongo or Kongo people) prevalent within an area divided since 1895 among the Republic of Congo (formerly French Congo), the Democratic Republic of the Congo (formerly Zaire, formerly Belgian Congo), and Angola (with Cabinda, formerly a Portuguese colony). This history contains multiple generations experiencing high mortality rates, of interest due to potential for evolutionary change. Precolonial BaKongo were plagued by recurring draughts, often one per generation, producing migration and reduction of populations by over 50 percent. These climatic cycles contributed to hierarchical slavery systems (Miller 1988). Encounters with the Portuguese, beginning in 1482, led to a merchant capitalist era and destabilizing, exploitative slave trade (Edgerton 2002; Miller 1988). Later, King Leopold II of Belgium created and ruled the Free Congo State (1885–1908), resulting in the death of about 10 million people—half the population. Belgian and French colonial rule led to continued social instability, exploitation, and economic underdevelopment (Edgerton 2002; Forbath 1977; Hochschild 1998). Independence in 1960 meant tyranny, corruption, police brutality, hunger, malnutrition, civil wars, and an ever shorter life expectancy (Edgerton 2000, 246).

Ritual Healing Theory Hypotheses

The ritual healing theory provides hypotheses regarding patterns robust enough to be detected in historical accounts:

1. Dissociative propensity is more prevalent during generations subject to severe stress since trauma triggers dissociative genotypes to manifest as phenotypes.
2. Dissociative individuals tend to suffer from psychologically based disorders, to be healed through ritual processes, to experience anomalous perceptions generating belief in spirits, souls, life after death, and magical abilities, and to devise, accept, and practice rituals beneficial due to hypnotic and placebo effects.
3. The most common forms of anomalous and visionary experience have universal features, derived from physiological bases. These experiences are apparitions, waking extrasensory perceptions, paranormal dreams, out-of-body and near-death experiences, psychokinesis, and spiritual healing. These experiential forms are hypothesized to exist in the folklore of all societies.

4. Therapeutic rituals devised by dissociative individuals are evaluated in the religious marketplace. Successful practices attract many followers, some of whom experience hypnotic and placebo benefits. Historical analysis of any ethnic group should reveal examples of these processes.

Historical Analysis

Few historical analyses have been applied to theories regarding religion. One study, an analysis of Iceland’s religious history, refutes arguments regarding religion’s social glue (Swatos and Gissurarson 1997). Rather than religious beliefs evolving from collective needs, as Durkheim (1995) and group selection theorists suppose, Iceland’s history portrays experiential processes generating innovative ideologies. For example, an important spiritualist medium, Indriði Indriðason, captured the attention of Icelandic audiences in the early 1900s. He and other performers were sufficiently compelling that Spiritualist beliefs became an important element in Iceland’s religious heritage. Swatos and Gissurarson (1997) portray how anomalous perceptions shaped cultural processes in a manner not predicted by group selection models. People adopted specific beliefs because they perceived events that implied spirits, souls, life after death, and magical abilities, not because their religion provided a social glue inducing unity.

Kongo religious history provides an alternate arena for analysis. Cases are derived from (1) indigenous Kongo religion, (2) the introduction of Christianity after 1482, (3) the Christian prophet Dona Beatriz (1686–1706), (4) Simon Kimbangu and the Kimbanguist Church (1921–1960), and (5) modern Kongo prophets (1960 to present). Although there is much cultural variation among the BaKongo, analysis of the literature pertaining to this ethnic group allows evaluation of ritual healing hypotheses.

Indigenous Kongo Religion

Pre-European Kongo religions included a variety of cosmologies based on a “process of continuous revelation . . . that characterized African religion in general” (Thornton 2002, 73–74). Certain practitioners went into trance, communicated with spirits, and gained information valuable for their community.

This pattern seemingly evolved from the same physiological processes allowing shamanism, the foundation of all later religions (Winkelman 1992,
Anthropological studies indicate that all hunter-gatherer societies have shamans, individuals who go into trance, gain information about the spirit world, and use this information for healing. Anthropologists argue that as hunter-gatherer societies devised more complex technologies and become sedentary, their religious healing systems changed correspondingly, reflecting increased social complexity (Winkelman 1992, 2000). The ritual healing theory argues that religion’s physiological basis continued to shape spiritual healing practices, producing religious-medical systems still based on hypnotic and placebo effects.

Kongo religions, encountered by the Portuguese in 1482, reflected the Congo Kingdom’s hierarchical social structure. Its cosmology included four basic domains: (1) a powerful, but distant, god (Nzambi Mpungu), whose actions and healing powers were influenced by (2) the king (mfumu), who had the power to authorize executions; (3) ritual experts (singular: nganga), who practiced beneficial magic; and (4) sorcerers/witches (nkoki), who practiced harmful magic. Ritual experts included a variety of practitioners engaging in healing, divination, and protection. These experts, and the king, were expected to control magical powers for the common good. Sorcerers and witches, on the other hand, used magical skills to create discord and illness. Activities and roles on the earthly plane were associated with equivalent activities and roles on the spiritual plane.

Although Kongo ritual practices varied widely among localities, recurring patterns included healing, spiritual protection, and negative magic. A prevalent belief was that sorcerers/witches caused problems. In some areas, ancestral spirits might also create afflictions. Victims gained relief or protection by having a magical specialist construct a statue carved in human likeness or made out of basketwork (MacGaffey 1986). Missionaries condemned these charms as fetishes. Alternate methods included identifying a living sorcerer and subjecting this individual to ritual trial—requiring the accused to drink poison, for example, with survival indicating innocence. Kongo religion, transported by slaves to the Americas, contributed to rootlore, voodoo, and other Africa-based traditions in the New World (McClendon 2005b).

Although witchcraft systems fulfill social functions, it seems doubtful that Durkheim would have formulated his religion-as-society theory if he had used Kongo history as his single example case. Sorcery/witchcraft systems focus on labeling deviance, rather than worshiping the collectivity. Although Durkheim had much to say about the functions of labeling deviance, he was not concerned with the evolutionary mechanisms by which such systems evolved. Examples of the dysfunctions of witchcraft abound, even among modern BaKongo. In 2001, for example, 394 northeastern Kongolese were killed in a hunt for suspected witches, and 89 people were arrested for these murders (Edgerton 2002, 236). Witchcraft systems may be functional when deviants “deserve” to be labeled as witches and when discussions of cases are
psychologically perceptive (MacGaffey 1986, 161). Evaluations of costs and benefits are unclear. Historians provide no example case of a group practicing witchcraft replacing one lacking such beliefs.

Historical analysis allows insights regarding the degree that gene flow occurred among competing groups. Precolonial central Africa varied enormously in terms of topography, soils, rainfall, vegetation, and resources. Population pressure, coupled with recurring droughts, resulted in major, periodic immigrations. Desperate people were forced into dependency, contributing to lordship, tribute, and slavery systems. Rulers’ wealth and power were measured in numbers of subservient humans. Historical data imply that gene flow within hierarchical systems was prevalent. Rather than genocide being common (portraying group selection), slavery systems were the norm (Miller 1988). Such observations reduce faith in group selection models.

Discussions of precontact BaKongo support the ritual healing theory. Magical practitioners provided rituals generating hypnotic and placebo effects. Historical and anthropological documents describe certain people having greater propensity for trance, anomalous experience, and performance ability (MacGaffey 1986). Charms (fetishes) seemingly derived their power from hypnotic and placebo processes. Dissociative people, better able to suspend critical functions, gained greater psychological protection.

As predicted by the ritual healing theory, historians (and their informants) describe anomalous experiences as foundations for religious belief. Thornton (2002, 75) mentions two near-death experiences as supporting belief in life after death. In one case, “a woman who had been sacrificed . . . returned from the dead to report that her services in the Other World were not needed.” These stories have narrative structures equivalent to near-death experiences found all over the world and throughout all eras. Although we cannot determine the degree that such accounts reflect spiritual realities, it is logical to assume that brain structures and common physiological processes contribute to recurring features. In parallel fashion, Laman (1962) describes apparitions as central to indigenous belief. BaKongo perceived deceased relatives in manners equivalent to those of other societies, generating similar beliefs in spirits, souls, and life after death.

The Introduction of Christianity

When the first Portuguese missionaries arrived in 1491, they found basic correspondence between Kongo and Christian religious concepts (finding of similar concepts regarding spirits, souls, life after death, and magical abilities supports the ritual healing theory). Among the early rulers attracted to Christianity was King Mbemba Nzinge, who took on the name Alfonso (ruling 1506–1543). The scarcity of Portuguese priests, and the equivalency of doctrinal elements, resulted in a blending of Christian and pagan practices.
Terms for magical practitioners, for example, were applied to Catholic priests, and baptism became merely another magical ritual (MacGaffey 1986). Over time, the impact of Christian beliefs declined. One traveler noted, in 1857, that “crosses were to be seen everywhere but ... for the Congolese people they were simply another of their many fetishes and had no Christian significance” (Edgerton 2002, 28). As during precontact eras, Christian rituals would have provided greater benefits to those more open to suggestion.

Historians do not portray early Kongo Christianity as social glue. The slave trade, supported and practiced by many Portuguese priests, destabilized the Congo Kingdom, resulting in social and environmental disaster. “At least once each century during the slaving era ecological and epidemiological crises reaches intensities sufficient to eliminate perhaps a third to a half or more of local populations” (Miller 1988, 156). Although some might argue that Christianity was functional in that it justified oppression, thereby contributing to social cohesiveness, the evolutionary effect is unclear. Many elements within Congo history support the argument that there are sick societies and that not all long-lasting elements within a culture are functional (Edgerton 1992).

Descriptions of military conflicts do not support group selection models. For example, in the mid-1500s, the Yakas, a cannibalistic warrior army, “focused their entire social structure around their fighting men. . . . They killed their own babies, burying them alive at birth, so as not to be hindered on their relentless march, and . . . adopted the children of the peoples they conquered and made them warriors in their army” (Forbath 1977, 125). The Congo Kingdom, weakened by the slave trade, was helpless against these people. The king, his courts, and the entire Portuguese settlement were forced to flee. As a result, hundreds of thousands of homeless people perished from famine and bubonic plague. Because the slavery trade was disrupted by this slaughter, the king of Portugal, in 1571, sent an army of 600 soldiers, slavers, and adventurers to aid the remnants of the Kongo army. This force drove back the Yakas—who were defeated but not destroyed, and they remained a force of chaos and turmoil in the Congo River basin for years. The countryside was stricken by plague and famine and torn apart by wars; every chief and province lord was in open revolt, and slavers, traders, soldiers of fortune, and adventurers of every ilk infested the realm. (Forbath 1977, 132)

This case, and many other accounts of Kongo military conflicts, do not provide clear examples supporting group selection theory; there is no mention of religious groups replacing less religious groups. Proponents of this theory might argue that there is no need to find clear examples of actual selection for the theory to be valid—that religion’s social glue genotypes are so evenly distributed in modern populations that group replacement
cannot be detected during historical times. Future geneticists might test this hypothesis by determining the nature and antiquity of these social glue genotypes.

On the other hand, Kongo history includes many elements illustrating the ritual healing theory. As during all eras, anomalous experiences, particularly spiritual healing, supported religious beliefs. During the first great battle between Alfonso’s army and his native foes, enemy troops retreated after seeing a white cross and armored horsemen in the sky, apparitions thought to prove the validity of Christianity (Thornton 1998, 33). Similar stories of apparitions are part of the folklore in all societies, and the fact that stories emerge collectively does not negate their power. Christianity itself is based on a series of apparitional accounts justifying belief in life after death. Among the BaKongo, Christianity was accepted, in part, because of its perceived magical power, and such stories were believed because they were parallel to spontaneous individual visionary and apparitional experiences.

The ritual healing theory does not deny that social processes affect conversion. Horton (1971, 1975), for example, argues that world religions provide universalistic means for overcoming the boundaries of local communities. His theory explains the prevalence of Christian and Moslem faiths in Africa. Yet this theory fails to portray the dynamics of individual belief. As with many social theories, it tends to ignore the stories people tell explaining why they believe as they do. As a consequence, many believers find such social explanations offensive. Most BaKongo did not perceive themselves as converting to Christianity to gain universalistic perspectives but because Christianity seemed more effective for healing, magic, and solving real problems. People more open to the magical suggestions of Christianity benefited most.

**The Christian Prophet Dona Beatriz Kimpa Vita**

Dona Beatriz Kimpa Vita (1684–1706) experienced visions at an early age. “To her family and friends these visions were a sign that she was spiritually gifted, and people paid attention to her and treated her as a special person” (Thornton 1998, 10). Her biography fits that of a *nganga*, a dissociative possessor of spiritual power who contacts beings from the Other World and can be possessed by them:

A possessed *nganga*, such as *nganga ngombo*, would go into a trance . . . commonly through various forms of hypnosis induced by drumming, dancing, or simply rhythmic chanting and hand clapping. Once this state was achieved, some being from the Other World would enter the *nganga*’s head, and then use his or her vocal cords to speak. (Thornton 1998, 54)

While an adolescent, Dona Beatriz was initiated into the Kimpasi society. Initiates were tied up and carried to a special compound, where they
remained for some time. They learned a special religious language, swore an oath of secrecy, and gained the ability to go into trance in order to address both individual and social problems (Thornton 1998, 56–58).

Dona Beatriz was one of various Christians during her era reporting visions. The size of a visionary’s audience was determined by trance performance, magical skills, and capacity to generate stories regarding miraculous cures. An old woman, Mafuta, for example, attracted crowds after she reported visions and discovered a curious stone, shaped like a man’s head, thought to be that of Jesus. She healed people and told of her visions of the Virgin Mary, who counseled repentance (Thornton 1998, 108).

In 1704, Dona Beatriz fell ill and experienced a vision of Saint Anthony. Her continuing visions led her to believe that Jesus and Saint Anthony were born in the Congo and that, through her preaching, she could resolve the political divisions which eventually led to civil war. Her healing ability attracted large crowds, and many people practiced the innovative rituals she prescribed. Her opposition to church corruption stimulated official alarm, and in 1706, a local king arrested her. Soon afterward, with the support of Christian missionaries, she was burned at the stake. Her movement is regarded as the first documented example of Africanized Christianity.

Dona Beatriz’s biography does not portray religion as social glue. Although some people may have been unified by their attraction to her doctrines, the net result was social turmoil. On the other hand, her story illustrates how dissociative people react to difficult environments. They suffer illnesses (often psychosomatic), experience visions providing innovative doctrines, and, if socially skillful, launch prophetic movements. Their ritual performances benefit dissociative people exposed to their suggestions. The history of Dona Beatriz illustrates the recurring elements specified by the ritual healing theory: dissociative people in all eras report anomalous experiences and engage in spiritual healing, benefiting those open to therapeutic suggestion. Although established religions often oppose these movements, recurring patterns imply a physiological basis.

**Simon Kimbangu**

Like Dona Beatriz, Simon Kimbangu (1889–1951) grew up during an era of social turmoil. The agents of King Leopold II plundered the Congo’s ivory and rubber, contributing to the death of half the Kongo population between 1885 and 1908 (Hochschild 1998). In 1918, a major flu epidemic killed thousands, while forced labor extended the BaKongo’s ordeal. Kimbangu, a teacher in a mission school, came to believe that European missionaries had omitted important elements from Christ’s teachings. As did most BaKongo, he observed that missionary hospitals were unable to cure African forms of illness and that European Christianity could not end the evils of colonialism. Many
BaKongo perceived that Christianity failed to prevent witches from causing the unemployment, accidents, and psychological distress they experienced.

In March 1921, Kimbangu heard a voice telling him to preach a more appropriate Gospel. As a Kimbanguist document stated, it appeared that the missionaries only enriched themselves and cared not for the sheep (Janzen and MacGaffey 1974, 131). Soon afterward, the Holy Spirit compelled Kimbangu to go to a sick child’s house, where “he laid hands on it and prayed, whereupon he was subjected to violent convulsions. The child, however, was cured of its sickness and put to its mother’s breast” (Andersson 1958, 51). Church traditions state that he then performed many other miracles such as raising a child from the dead. Rumors spread of his success, and in April and May, he attracted huge crowds, among whom he healed the sick and raised the dead using spirit possession, quoting from the Bible, and shouting, “Be healed in the name of Jesus Christ” (Anstey 1966, 125). Eyewitnesses reported that he “tossed his head, rolled his eyes, and jumped into the air, while his body twitched all over” (Andersson 1958, 58).

Stories of Kimbangu reveal the nature of his healing. Many observers saw no miraculous events (Andersson 1958; and see Janzen and MacGaffey 1974, 62, for a skeptical example case involving a later prophet). Yet Andersson (1958) provides eight healing stories illustrating why people were attracted to this, and later, movements. These accounts reveal patterns found in spiritual healing all over the world, both ancient and modern (McClenon 2002a, 2002b). Ritual performances contain hypnotic inductions, generating hypnotic and placebo benefits. Those most often healed complained of disorders with a psychological basis, of the same types amenable to treatment by hypnosis. Many of the blind, paralyzed, and deaf probably suffered from conversion, anxiety, and dissociation disorders—problems prevalent in societies exposed to severe stress. Recurring elements in miracle healing stories, such as temporary reduction of symptoms and differential response to suggestion, infer hypnotic processes. For example, a respondent described bringing two blind men to Kimbangu for healing. He noted that one did not benefit. The second man, Yankala,

rose at once at the prophet’s command and started in route for his home. When they met him later in a village on the way he gaily answered their queries as to whether he could see, replying “When we came here before, I could not walk, and you carried me, now I see clearly and can walk by myself.” (Andersson 1958, 55)

The narrator reported that Yankala had been commanded by Kimbangu not to sin again, but when Yankala resumed drinking alcohol, his blindness returned. This type of reversion is found among all large collections of miracle healing stories—even on the ancient Greek stone steles of Asclepius at Epidaurus (McClenon 2002b, 41–43).
Example cases also illustrate direct evolutionary impacts of spiritual healing. As in all societies, Kongo healers facilitated conception:

[Babutunu Jean] had two wives, both of whom deserted him, because of his sterility, and now his third was about to follow the example of her predecessors, for the same reason. When Babutunu Jean came to the prophet he said: “I am sterile. I wish to beget children.” Kimbangu merely replied: “Beget children, in the name of Jesus Christ.” Within a few days of his return his wife became pregnant. The child was a boy. (Andersson 1958, 55)

Given the strong links between human sexuality and psychology, it seems likely that ritual processes selected for specific genotypes since some people derive greater benefits than others.

The Belgian administration, concerned with the possibility that the colonial regime would be overthrown, sought Kimbangu’s arrest, and in September 1921, obedient to a message from God, he gave himself up. He was whipped and sentenced to death—a sentence later commuted to life imprisonment. Kimbanguists were forced to worship in secret, and Kimbangu died in prison in 1951, after 30 years of incarceration. “Despite Kimbangu’s imprisonment, his movement flourished as huge congregations of true believers, many of them sick, came together to enter hypnotic trances . . . New prophets arose to continue Kimbangu’s mission, becoming possessed, speaking in tongues, and finding their health restored” (Edgerton 2002, 174). Andersson (1958, 136) describes later prophetic movements, noting their success in curing sterility, a problem of great importance among the BaKongo.

In 1957, the Kimbanguists began a campaign of passive resistance, and on the eve of national independence, in 1959, the Church of Jesus Christ on Earth through the Prophet Simon Kimbangu was legally recognized by the government. Spiritual healing continued to be an important activity:

In Kimbanguist theology, Kimbangu’s success as healer guarantees the promise of salvation. In June 1960, the newspaper *Kimbanguisme* reported that 10,050 persons had been healed in the preceding two months: 4 people rose from the dead; 4,789 lame persons walked; 3,568 of the blind saw, and 902 lepers were cleansed. (MacGaffey 1983, 118)

MacGaffey (1983, 186) portrays Kimbangu as equivalent, in many respects, to traditional magical healers. His analysis describes how Kimbanguists constructed new ideologies from existing concepts; innovative ideas were framed within the basic Kongo paradigm. Kimbanguism had political aspects, becoming aligned with anticolonial ideologies. In this case, the ideology unified its members, providing a form of social glue; this evidence points to social processes within religion that must be included in evolutionary explanations. Group selection and ritual healing are not mutually exclusive.
Modern Kimbanguism, one of many Kongo prophetic religions, has over a million members. Its history illustrates how religion works, and this example implies that group selection processes occur, to some degree, since Kimbanguists benefited from membership. Yet this history more directly supports the ritual healing theory. Kimbangu’s biography fits the shamanic pattern. He reported visions and other anomalous experiences. His performances attracted followers through creating stories of miraculous healings. People with dissociative propensities had greater probability of benefiting from this movement.

Modern Kongo Prophets

After independence in 1960, political repression of innovative religions declined. Numerous prophets arose, established churches, and introduced new religious concepts. MacGaffey (1983, 5) portrays how “successive generations of prophets offered different social analyses and recommendations, all framed in the same set of categories, the ideological structure of Kongo religion.” As would be predicted by the ritual healing theory, the Kongo ideological structure reflects, in part, the physiological basis for religion. Prophets describe anomalous experiences, supporting belief in spirits, souls, life after death, and magical abilities—with witchcraft beliefs prevalent. They provide hypnotic and placebo benefits to those more open to suggestion. Although specifics vary over time, recurring elements are translated from one era to the next.

Prophets’ revelations typically take the form of a spiritual journey, coinciding with shamanic visions. For example, a prophet reports,

In 1966, I fell into a coma, and people brought blankets for my funeral; but then I saw a bright, dazzling light, heard a heavenly choir singing No. 461 [“Many troubles here on earth, we suffer from sicknesses, our tears pour down O Spirit, come to help us!”], and I awoke to find that I had acquired exceptional intelligence, so that no witch could get past me. (MacGaffey 1983, 211)

This story exemplifies a near-death experience. Near-death experiences often include perceptions of leaving one’s body, traveling to a spiritual realm, and gaining information about life after death during a life-threatening event.

Content analyses of near-death experience collections reveal their equivalence to shamanic visions. Fox (2003, 247) analyzed 91 British accounts, classifying crisis experiences, in which the event involved the possibility of death (near-death experience), and noncrisis experiences, in which that possibility was not present (visionary experience). Comparing the two groups, he found virtually equivalent frequency of Moody’s “core near-death experience features” (Fox 2003, 247). McClenon (2005a, 2006a) conducted parallel
analyses of 28 near-death experience accounts collected in North Carolina, United States. He also found equivalent frequencies of near-death experience elements within crisis and noncrisis accounts. The Kongo literature provides two visionary narratives and five near-death experience accounts. Visionary narratives and near-death experience accounts contain equivalent near-death experience core features. These findings imply that near-death experiences are not generated by mechanisms related to a dying brain, but through visionary processes. This is not to say that near-death experiences are invalid, but that they are equivalent to visions, something recognized within spiritual traditions. Shamans, prophets, and dying people are thought able to visit spiritual realms. Using a social scientific paradigm, the data imply that humans, during unusual cognitive states, have a propensity to perceive cognitions contributing to belief in life after death.

CONTENT ANALYSIS OF KONGO EXPERIENTIAL ACCOUNTS

Table 11.1 compares 56 Kongo anomalous experience accounts to 1,578 cases collected in North Carolina (McClenon 2000, 2002a, 2002b) and 40 cases reported by professional anthropologists (McClenon and Nooney 2002). Kongo cases were found in texts pertaining to religious history (Andersson 1958; Bockie 1993; de Vesme 1931; Janzen 1978; Janzen and MacGaffey 1974; Laman 1962; MacGaffey 1983; McClenon 2006c, Thornton 1998). The coding system for classifying these accounts was tested for reliability using multiple judges over various studies (McClenon 2000, 2002a, 2002b; McClenon and Nooney 2002). Experiential forms included apparitions, waking extrasensory perception, spiritual healing, paranormal dreams, normal dreams, occult events, psychokinesis/poltergeists (unexplained movement of objects), and near-death experience/out-of-body experiences. Previous anomalous experience collections gathered in Great Britain, the United States, Germany, Finland, and Hong Kong were compared to these data sets (McClenon 1994, 2002a). Although incidence of reports varies among societies, much evidence indicates that these forms have universal features, implying a physiological basis.

Variations in frequencies of reporting of experiential forms might be attributed to a number of factors. Cultural differences probably contribute to variations in reporting. Different methods of collection also affect frequencies. The North Carolina sample was gathered through college students conducting oral interviews of relatives, friends, and neighbors (McClenon 2000, 2002a, 2002b). The anthropological collection was created by assembling accounts published in the literature by anthropologists describing field experiences (McClenon and Nooney 2002). Previous cross-cultural comparisons
As predicted by the ritual healing theory, most Kongo anomalous accounts have the same forms as those reported in other societies. MacGaffey’s (1983) text on Kongo prophets includes a near-death experience, two spiritual healings, and an occult performance (a rain-making prayer). Janzen and MacGaffey’s (1974) translation of Kongo religious texts includes five healing accounts (dating from Kimbangu to modern prophets). Laman (1962), a missionary in the Congo between 1891–1919, provides 19 anomalous experience narratives: 7 apparitions, 7 haunting/poltergeists, 3 occult performance accounts, and 2 anomalous animal accounts. Andersson’s (1958) discussion of Kimbanguism and later prophetic movements includes eight spiritual healings, one extrasensory perception account, and two occult performances (fire immunity feats). Bockie (1993) describes three apparitions, two paranormal dreams, three normal dreams (considered extraordinary), and three near-death experiences. De Vesme (1931) provides a psychokinesis/poltergeist account attributed to Central Africa, included even though the witness does not mention a specific ethnic group.

Respondents often describe their experiences as compelling belief and argue that miraculous effects can be verified empirically. For example, two

Table 11.1 Distribution of Anomalous Narrative Type within Collections

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>North Carolina (N = 1,578)</th>
<th>Anthropologists (N = 40)</th>
<th>Kongo (N = 56)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No.</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>No.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apparition</td>
<td>642</td>
<td>40.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Waking ESP</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>5.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spiritual healing</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>7.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paranormal dreams</td>
<td>175</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Normal dreams</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>5.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occult events</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>2.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychokinesis/poltergeist</td>
<td>169</td>
<td>10.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NDE/OBE</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>246</td>
<td>15.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1,578</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: ESP, extrasensory perception; NDE, near-death experience; OBE, out-of-body experience.
prophets describe healing experiments, in which they found that rituals resulted in healing, while failure to conduct the ritual resulted in deterioration of health (Janzen and MacGaffey 1974, 66, 67). Several speakers at a prophet conference in Leopoldville (Kinshasa) in 1961 maintained that “the government should conduct a test of candidates for the leadership of the new organization [of prophets], in which the winner would be the one who most successfully performed the required miracles” (MacGaffey 1983, 58, 59).

Biographies of Kongo healers often describe potential practitioners’ sickness, healing, and resulting faith. This socialization pattern, observed by anthropologists all over the world, is termed the wounded healer syndrome (Halifax 1982). Faith healings inspire profound belief, enhancing the ritual performer’s ability to inspire faith in others.

Surveys indicate that the experiential forms listed in table 11.1 are reported with surprising frequency in U.S. and European national surveys. Over half of U.S. respondents report at least one extrasensory perception episode (McClenon 1994). Of U.S. national survey respondents in 1990, 9 percent reported having seen or been in the presence of a ghost, and 14 percent said that they have been in a house they felt was haunted (Gallup and Newport 1991). Collections of narrative accounts from Finland, Germany, Great Britain, China, Japan, and the United States indicate that people from all these countries report similar forms of apparitions, waking extrasensory perception, paranormal dreams, psychokinesis, out-of-body experience, and synchronicity (McClenon 1994). Analyses of survey responses from Japan, China, Europe, and the United States reveal that all cultures contain many individuals reporting frequent experiences (McClenon 1994). Studies also indicate that waking extrasensory perceptions, paranormal dreams, and apparitions have inherent structural features, consistent among cultures (McClenon 2000). Waking extrasensory perception, for example, tends to pertain to present events, while paranormal dreams more often predict future events. All over the world, paranormal experiences are likely to pertain to family members and to death.

As with other collections, the Kongo literature contains culturally unique stories. Two BaKongo described anomalous animals, killed by local people and thought to have magical characteristics. Since most accounts coincide with universal experiences, the data, in general, support the argument that the major experiential forms have physiological bases (McClenon 2002b). Specific stories illustrate how anomalous experiences generate folk belief. Laman (1962) describes how apparitions and psychokinesis affect faith:

One day, when Nambulu died, they dressed her in her skin with dog-bells that she had been wearing while dancing. At night, when the people were lying down, she went about with her skin and the bells all over the village. Everybody then understood that the dead live and that they go about in the same shape as they had on earth. (Laman 1962, 27)
This story illustrates how “everyone” came to believe in life after death, even though not everyone perceived the apparition. As with the horsemen in the sky story told by early Kongo Christians, the account’s acceptance depends, in part, on listeners’ acceptance of the storyteller’s sincerity. Because people tend to know each other, telling the story sustains folk religious beliefs.

Many accounts contain elements designed to refute skeptical arguments: simultaneous experiences by multiple witnesses, status and honesty of witnesses, and witnesses’ attempts to preclude normal explanations through investigation. Although scholarly discussions of such stories are restricted by academic norms, on the folk level, many reports have compelling qualities. Folklore implies that anyone could see a ghost, have a paranormal dream, or perceive spiritual effects—with some people having greater propensity than others. A unifying theme is that experience compels belief. For example, the missionary Karl Laman quotes an informant’s extensive poltergeist experiences, in which the poltergeist is labeled as “that one.” He concludes his account by describing his own investigation:

Finally, the women got together, terrified, in one house. But that one came there and banged on it vehemently, so that in great fear all went out through the door. When that one came, it was like a rushing strong blast.

As this took place in the village of Mukimbungu mission station, we called the whites to come and see and let us understand what it could be. Among these was taata Laman and two others.

I, Laman, hereby confirm these phenomena. One evening we went down to have a look, and it was then that the terrified women gathered in a big grass house. While we went about there one of the long walls of the house was pounded with heavy blows, so that the house shook, so that maize etc. hung up in the house tumbled down. We had a lantern with us to investigate, but we saw nothing. It was, moreover, entirely out of the question that a human being should have been able to do it. The following day we tried to bang on the wall as hard as we could. But neither the sound of the blows nor the violence of them was anything like those of the previous evening. The owner of the house had earlier been out hunting and been gored to death by a buffalo, so everyone thought that it was his ghost. We tore down the brick house and built a store with the bricks, after which everything seems to have stopped. (Laman 1962, 25–26)

This account has the same structure as haunting/poltergeist narratives all over the world: speakers portray themselves as logical investigators, seek authorities to verify their authenticity, report attempts to preclude normal explanation, and infer occult explanations. As is common in such stories, an action, such as in this case, tearing down the house, affects the phenomenon’s incidence. In parallel fashion, culturally prescribed rituals, exorcism, prayer, medium’s communications, and so on, may reduce or eliminate unwanted effects, and as a result, the phenomenon, and associated rituals, seem verified empirically.
Certain people have a propensity for anomalous experience, and social factors are known to trigger this propensity. Social scientists have long noted relationships between deprivation and religious movements. Relationships between stress and visionary experience coincide with the psychotherapy literature. It is almost axiomatic within psychotherapy literature that dissociative processes have therapeutic qualities—the mind compartmentalizes traumatic memories, enhancing mental health. This system breaks down when conflicts are severe—abused children develop dissociative identity and posttraumatic stress disorders. In parallel fashion, visionary and anomalous experiences seem more prevalent during times of social trauma. MacGaffey (1983, 118) notes that prophets “come from the elements of the population that suffered most . . . from status discrimination” and that visions reflect “the contradictions of the society in which they lived” (MacGaffey 1983, 236). Dona Beatriz, Simon Kimbangu, and many modern prophets are example cases. Similar patterns exist all over the world. Surveys of Chinese college students, raised during the turmoil of the Cultural Revolution, revealed higher rates of anomalous experience (41% reported many experiences) than found among other groups (McClenon 1994, 30). Human physiology seems to have evolved in a manner that causes dissociative capacity to be switched on by childhood trauma.

CONCLUSIONS

Although Kongo history includes examples of the social functions of religion, it provides no case of a religious group replacing a less religious group. As a result, the Kongo history analysis grants little insight into how genes associated with social functions increased in prevalence, beyond the capacity for some groups to experience increased unity. Although group selection processes may be so subtle that historical analysis does not detect them, the lack of a single example case is surprising, given the prevalence of social scientific belief in this paradigm.

On the other hand, historical analysis supports the ritual healing theory. Kongo religious history portrays recurring cycles, noted all over the world. The literature provides many examples of social trauma seeming to contribute to the emergence of magical practitioners. Dissociative people experience anomalous perceptions and become healers using hypnotic and placebo processes. Cases derived from the history of indigenous Kongo religions, early Kongo Christianity, Dona Beatriz, Simon Kimbangu, and modern Kongo prophets reveal patterns implying dissociative and hypnotic processes. Kongo anomalous experiences coincide with categories found in societies all over the world, suggesting physiological bases. Audience members more open to suggestion gain greater benefits, illustrating a process that, over the millennia, selected for genotypes related to dissociation and religiosity. The ritual
healing theory argues that these patterns can be found through analysis of the history of any ethnic group.

NOTE

The author wishes to thank Joseph C. Miller, University of Virginia, and participants in the 2005 NIH summer seminar “Roots: African Dimensions of the Early History and Cultures of the Americas” as well as Jennifer Nooney, Associate Director of Research, Florida Center of Nursing, who provided comments on earlier versions of this chapter. Texts of near-death experiences noted in this chapter can be found in McClenon, J. (2006) “Kongo Near Death Experiences: Cross-cultural Patterns.” *Journal of Near-Death Studies, 25*, 21–34. Reprinted with permission.

REFERENCES


At what point do we stop expecting modern medicine to do its job and start hoping and praying for a miracle? Is there a beginning or an ending to the question? Is it a valid question to begin with? It would seem that it is valid since it invites us to struggle with the question to form some conclusions. Questions that cause us to struggle and process ideas are helpful and beneficial to us. When we are brought to the place of intellectual and emotional testing and growth, it usually is a good thing. We are then able to come to conclusions that express our own selves. This is part of what we call critical thinking. This is important to developing our own unique identities.

The question of just when and where we start and stop understanding difficult concepts like medical miracles can stretch us greatly. It is not clear where the beginning or ending of the line between the two lies. Perhaps it is more of a continuum than an actual point. Since we are all on continuums of various sorts, emotionally, mentally, economically, spiritually, and physically, this might be a helpful way of looking at the whole idea. Circumstances will dictate where we put our boat into the stream of decision. It could be that there are no clear-cut indicators or guidelines, and we might need to leap into the unsettled waters of medical miracles during a time of crisis.

Some would point out that it is not possible to separate miracles from technology today, and they could be right. In the last 10 years, the field of medical technology has exploded with new and bold treatments and devices to deal with sickness and disease. One of the most important advances ever made by science has been the development of the Human Genome Project (Drell and Adamson 2000). The Human Genome Project is a by-product
of the discovery of the genetics code in the mid-1950s. For the first time, a magic doorway has opened, allowing us to see the basic units from which we are constructed. Science has used the intervening time wisely. In the last 50 years, more has been discovered about how the body works, or does not work, and how to understand the processes of disease, than in the entire previous span of human history.

The Human Genome Project began in 1990, and it has heavily influenced most fields of research and development since then. The importance of this project lies in the fact that the origin of all diseases and disorders is genetic. Genes determine all that we know of who we are as individuals and as a species. The mapping of the human genome has already uncovered many culprits in disease processes. Identification of defective genes is showing how specific diseases or certain conditions come about. Understanding this critical information ought to lead researchers to know how to test for specific genes such as those genetic anomalies that cause Huntington’s disease, a fatal neurological disorder that kills slowly, but in a horrific manner. As a result of this genetic specificity, gene therapy, in the form of stem cell transplantation, may well be the answer to many chronic diseases such as diabetes or scleroderma, an autoimmune disorder of the connecting tissue and skin, with nearly always fatal consequences. Studies are under way to explore treatments for this rare disorder (Sullivan 2006).

Following hard on the heels of the Human Genome Project is the exciting field of organ transplantation. We would normally think of heart or kidney transplants when we consider this field, but it is much larger than that. Today, almost any organ in the human body can be, and has been, transplanted. Today, in some cases, multiple organs can be and now are transplanted, even into children. At the University of Pittsburgh, Thomas Starzl has built what is arguably the largest transplant center in the world, the Thomas E. Starzl Transplantation Institute. The research and development of new procedures and new equipment is astounding. They have even built a children’s hospital that specializes in nothing but transplantation for children (Children’s Hospital of Pittsburgh 2007).

Some of the transplantation specialties are heart, lung, intestine, kidney, liver, pancreas, and bone marrow as well as bone, tendon, and cornea. A few of the multiple transplants consist of blood and marrow, heart and lung, or liver and intestine. In addition to human organ transplantation, much advancement has been made in the field of artificial heart devices, which either take over the work of the heart completely, while a human donor’s heart is searched for, or allow the heart to rest, while it heals. Such a device is the Berlin heart, which has been designed to fit inside the smaller-sized bodies of children. This is still an experimental device that, when used in the United States, requires a single-use permit. Developed in Germany, it is expected that this device might become a standard in the future for children who need transplants.
Not only can we transplant human donor hearts as well as artificial hearts to prolong life, but now, through the use of stem cells, we can also transplant cells that will do the work of whatever organ needs them, as in the case of the myocardium. *Cellular cardiomypasty* is the name of the new process, and practitioners have high hope for its success. Clinical trials are promising, but they are also slow (Taylor 2003).

Within the field of organ transplantation, there is new research, not only about how to preserve donor organs for a longer time, but also about how to keep them healthier at the same time. Part of the answer to these questions is a new organ preservation solution that does both. This new solution works for livers, kidneys, and hearts and is less expensive than old solutions (Eghtesad 2003).

Some transplantation challenges of the future include, but are not limited to, xenotransplantation as well as developing an implantable artificial lung (DiSesa et al. 2002). *Xenotransplantation* refers to the process of implanting certain human genes into a recipient, such as a fetal pig, for example, which would then develop desirable human organs, such as an ear, or traits, such as overcoming rejection when implanted into a human body (White 2003). One of the major challenges in the field of xenotransplantation is taking on the job of trying to develop a transgenic pig that would yield a usable and profitable human lung (Davis et al. 1999). If a transgenic lung or an artificial implantable lung can be developed, it would serve in the same way the artificial heart now operates; that is, it would keep the patient alive long enough to obtain a suitable human lung transplant, according to Bartley P. Griffith (2003) of the University of Maryland in Baltimore.

This technology, advanced as it is, still does not begin to touch the tip of the iceberg of organ transplantation. The statistics are grim. The latest numbers send a poignant message. Today, there are 9,948 people on a transplant waiting list. The total number of transplants done in the United States through April 2007 was 9,217. The donor list through April 2007 was 4,662. The odds are not good that you would receive an organ if you needed one, regardless of where you went for treatment.

At an international symposium on the future of organ replacement, in 2003, Dr. David M. Briscoe put it into perspective. Briscoe stated, concerning the future of organ replacement (Medscape 2003), “Almost every advance in medicine leads to a greater need for organ replacement.” According to Charles G. Orosz of Ohio State University Medical Center in Columbus (Medscape 2003), “Transplantation could be considered as an entity that has successfully survived its birth, grown impressively throughout its childhood, and now enters adolescence. It has the potential to be highly productive as an adult.”

Another bright light in the technological heavens is the field of nanotechnology. This emerging field of research has to do with inserting into the
body very small machines. It holds a great deal of promise for the future. Nanotechnology is currently being developed in at least 75 different venues around the country. It will have the potential for changing the way medicine accesses hard-to-reach body parts and will have the capability of monitoring various processes, such as blood pressure, when cruising throughout the body. This technology is extremely small and can go through tight places previously inaccessible to larger instruments or medicines.

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration has already approved nanocapsules for endoscopic purposes. One just swallows a nanocapsule, and it takes a picture of your intestines. It is a great help in clinical diagnostics. One of the uses currently being developed for this technology is as a so-called lab on a stick. One would be able to get multiple results from dipping the nanobiochip in a measure of blood to get instant readings.

When we consider miracles and technology, nowhere has the dual concept merged as in the field of obstetrics, especially the exciting venue of multiple births. Here is where miracles and technology seem to be ideal for each other. Multiple births are not new. In Genesis 3:16 (NKJV), God told Eve, “I will greatly multiply your conception.” According to the biblical record, one of the reasons that Pharaoh was so fearful of the Hebrew people was that they were so prolific (Exodus 1:10; NIV). He actually ordered the death of all male infants at birth because the mothers were having so many babies. He felt these boys would grow up into disgruntled young men, who might someday turn on him in time of war (Exodus 1:10). It is taught in Hebrew lore that each Hebrew woman might have had up to six babies at a time (Exodus Rabbah 2000, 258).

Today, we could call six babies at a time a miracle, and it is. Most multiple births today are the result of great advances in the field of genetics and obstetrics. Called *in vitro fertilization*, eggs and sperm are combined in a laboratory, then implanted in the mother and brought as close to term as possible. This sounds easy, but a tremendous amount of time, effort, and money goes into each pregnancy, and the technology needed to make it happen is amazing. Once the mother is pregnant, the technology kicks into high gear, trying to assess how many babies there are, how many will survive, what kind of defects, if any, they will develop, and how long the doctors can keep the babies inside the mother. Each step is fraught with danger, and the latest technology is necessary to bring these fragile little lives to term. While I was doing one of my clinical internships, I went through a very difficult pregnancy with a young client, who was pregnant with triplets, and I was able to see firsthand the complicated steps it took to deliver the little girls and keep them healthy.

Assuming there are anywhere from three to six babies inside the womb, they usually come anywhere from six months on. Rarely are these tiny babies carried to full term. When they are born, they are immediately transferred to
a specialized neonatal intensive care unit and are then hooked up to so many monitors and diagnostic devices that it is sometimes difficult to see where the babies are under all those wires and tubes. They have their eyes taped shut and catheters inserted into lungs, bladders, veins, arteries, and stomachs. They nearly always wear little heart monitors and breathing apparatus. It is not unusual for these tiny infants to weigh in at less than one pound each. Today, it is possible to keep most of these infants alive, then bring them up to birth weight and see those same infants thrive at home. Modern technology has allowed these living miracles to achieve, and even remake, history. In the case of in vitro fertilization, we have placed a high value on life, and nowhere does the concept that life is worth saving come into play as it does at the very beginning.

For all the wonderful advancements in medical technology and knowledge, there is a dark side. Some feel that the advances extract too high a price from the consuming public. Unrealistic expectations are the result of rapid and unremitting wonders. Today, everyone expects, and feels that they deserve, the newest medical marvels and innovations that might either save or prolong their lives, and certainly make it easier to live with their unique medical problems. According to Michael E. Chernow (1998), an economist who specializes in public health at the University of Michigan, new technology is responsible for the continuing rise in health care costs today. He says, “The reason why health care costs are higher now than they have been is because of new medical technology. It’s not increased waste, it’s not fraud, it’s not increased law suits, it’s not the fact that people on average are older, all of that may contribute, but the predominant factor relates to the development and utilization of new medical techniques, of which there are an enormous number” (Chernow 1998, 259–88).

Some physicians advocate controlling new technology as a means of containing health care costs. This includes rationing access to new or high-cost equipment, procedures, or technology. Other options include a nationalized health care system and changing the way medical progress is currently accessed. Some physicians feel that it is morally wrong to raise the hopes and expectations of patients that everything that can be done, actually should be done, to prolong life (Deyo and Patrick 2005). Part of the love affair of this country with the embrace of new technological advances is our great desire for instant gratification. We have bred into every generation since the end of World War II a sense of entitlement: baby boomers, in particular, want everything, and they want it now. Not ones to suffer unnecessarily, they demand the best the world has to offer, and they consume everything they can obtain from the resources they command. They expect the newest, the most complicated, and the most expensive health care in the world, and they are getting it. This preoccupation with beating the odds of dying was reflected in the comments of L. M. Fisher of Human Genome Sciences, when he quipped,
“Death is a series of preventable diseases” (2000). However, C.S. Lewis said, “Death is total in every generation” (qtd. in Graham 1975, 71). It is true that we can postpone death, but we cannot hold it at bay indefinitely—at least, not at the present time, using today’s technology. One cannot ignore the greed factor here. There are enormous profits linked to each medical advance. The marketplace of needs and preferences must and will dictate what miraculous innovations will emerge and survive into the future. The most prominent factor, however, driving the quest for more medical technology is the original and eminently worthy American spirit of intriguing inquiry into and the mastery of the unknown.

One might ask where all of this energy and creativity came from. What sets people apart in their ability to dream, create, and bring to fruition ideas and plans? This ability to conceive new ideas and carry them out is a product of humankind being created in the image of God. Theologians call this the *imago dei,* and it means that we are very much like God. We are not God, but we do possess a number of the characteristics of God. For example, God is inherently a creator, and we are creators as well. We do not create *ex nihilo,* like God did, but we take what has already been made and use it to make something else. We do this on a grand and nearly miraculous scale.

From pitchforks to space buggies, we dream, conceive, plan, design, and engineer all sorts of items that are beneficial to people. We also design instruments and items that are not beneficial, but actually harmful, to people. Our capabilities move in both directions in this regard. Sometimes our creative ideas go nowhere; at other times they accomplish great things. What does the *imago Dei* mean to us when we consider medical miracles? Where did this *imago Dei* come from? What does it consist of, and what purpose does it serve? Genesis 1:26 describes the creation of humankind. God said, “Let us make man in our image.” Genesis 1:27 describes the action taken by God: “So God made man in his own image, in the image of God he created him.” Genesis 2:7 reiterates the details of that creation: “The Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living being.” It is clear that we are created in the image of God. This means that God made us with many of the same qualities that reflect who he is.

What are some of those important qualities we possess that are like God? For one thing, we are immortal beings. There are some important parts of us that will never really die, but will endure beyond our own demise. Just as God is a triune being, so, too, we are triune beings. We are composed of a physical part that is carbon based; a soul, made up of the mind, emotions, and the will; and a spiritual part. The physical part is what relates to our earthly life. We are embodied spirits, and the spirit and the soul must have a place to live. We provide a home for the soul and spirit with the body. It is the flesh, the human body, that will die, but the other parts of us will go on living. This
is somewhat like God, except he does not need a body, although Jesus had a body like ours when he was here on earth.

We are also like God in other ways. We are created with characteristics such as the ability to love ourselves, others, and God. We care for others, as God cares for us. We are able to respond to the needs of others and forgive them, even when we have been injured or wounded at the hand of others. We desire relationships above all else, and will do anything to have them, even if unhealthy relationships. We think, we make plans and carry them out, we grieve and mourn our losses. We honor our dead and show them respect by burying them. We use the gift of free will to make choices, both good and bad. These aspects of who we are as human beings are also like God.

The fruit of the spirit, described by the apostle Paul in his letter to the Galatians, namely, love, joy, patience, kindness, long-suffering, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control, are all parts of the *imago Dei*. The spirit mentioned here is the Holy Spirit, who is God present to us in our day. These desirable qualities are some of the ways in which God shows the world who he is through us, although they are not the only ways.

Examining the complex issue of medical miracles and the implications for society, the believing communities, and individuals, we need to look at where miracles and healing come from. We have discussed the emerging role of modern technology and how it relates to our perception of miracles. We now turn our attention to the source of healing itself. Technology cannot, and does not, heal. There are no inherent healing properties within it. Technology merely assists in the healing process, which remains the sole realm of God. Healing takes place in the tissues, cells, and organs of the body. Life is such a nebulous and elusive thing: we cannot see it, feel it, or handle it. Where does life come from? We know where death comes from. Death is the cessation of life. Science has struggled with this concept of the origin of life for generations. Researchers have attempted to create life in the laboratory but have never succeeded. Science can only take created elements and recombine them to manipulate them.

For a long time, researchers believed that life came from spontaneous generation. This is “the belief that living things can arise from non-living material” (DeWitt 2002). The scientific concept for this idea was known as *abiogenesis* and was accepted within the natural sciences, until Louis Pasteur disproved it (Demick 2000). Pasteur and his colleague Rudolf Virchow postulated the idea that life does not come from nonliving matter, but can only come from previous life. They called this concept the *law of biogenesis* (DeWitt 2002). According to Jason Lisle, who is an astrophysicist at the University of Colorado in Boulder writing on God and Natural Law (2006, 75), “There is one well-known law of life: the law of biogenesis. This law states simply that life always comes from life. This is what observational science tells us: organisms reproduce other organisms after their own kind.
cally, Louis Pasteur disproved one alleged case of spontaneous generation: he showed that life comes from previous life. Since then, we have seen that this law is universal, with no known exceptions.” Virchow, who had held to the idea of abiogenesis for some time, abandoned the concept and joined Pasteur in the laboratory to prove the construct that life comes from life. He coined the phrase *omni cellules e cellules* (all cells come from other cells; Demick 2000).

How does the idea that life comes only from life affect miracles? The answer lies in the chain of life. Life has to have an origin, or a starting point, and a material and physical receptacle in which to reside. First, there is a source of life power; second, there is the actual life power itself; and third, there is a receptacle for the power of life to reside in. God is the source of that life power, Jesus Christ is the life power, and our bodies are the receptacles for that life power. Our premise is that life can only come from life, never from death or nonexistence. A corpse contains no life within and cannot sustain life. When host cells die due to disease, injury, or adverse conditions, they do not regenerate apart from the genetic code built into them. Miracles override this code and allow the power of life free access to cells, tissues, and organs. Healing at this level is under the direct control of God. When a miracle occurs, power flows from the divine source into the smallest units of life, restoring and energizing them. Damage to, or death of, the cells can be repaired or reversed, and many times, any disease processes that are in place are actually replaced by new and healthy cells. This explains the longevity of medical miracles.

While surgery, machinery, and medicines assist in the healing process, healing is dependent on cells receiving the life power itself from the divine source. This is true regardless of how high tech or low tech the treatments are. There is a connection deep within human beings that eagerly responds to this life source. It is as though something inside recognizes and instinctively answers to this gentle, but powerful, touch. The *imago Dei* in people responds to another part of itself. As the sunflower follows the rays of the sun for the power to bloom, so we, too, look to the healing life force of God to regenerate damage to our bodies through his healing caress.

The idea that humans carry the essence of God around with us is heart stopping. That part of us that was designed to be directly responsive to God is still present, although it is sometimes difficult to see. We do see it, to some extent, in the area of human creativity. Because we have this flame within, God listens to us and empowers us for living life well. God takes an interest in us and our activities. He is responsive to our needs. We can have a relationship with the God of the universe. God is in the business of redemption, and one of the things he wants to redeem about us is his own image, the *imago Dei*. It is this image within us that is important to the one who made it and freely gave it to us.
Miracles, whether they are modern medical miracles or any other kind, keep us connected to God. They are a point of contact. The *imago Dei* allows us to form complicated ideas and understand concepts such as miracles. How does the *imago Dei* help us form a worldview that includes the miraculous and the unexplained? How do we recognize when medicine reaches the end of itself and a miracle begins?

The characteristics that are reflected in benefits to others, those good qualities that distinguish humans from other created orders, have their roots in the character of God. Our worldview is shaped by what we know and believe about ourselves and others, including God. When we allow those qualities that make us like God to shape our ideas of who we are, we will be more open to ideas such as miracles than if we give God no place in our thoughts and behavior.

The *imago Dei* has generosity to others at its heart. This is the reason that nearly every advanced social and civil institution has reached its peak since the introduction of Christianity. Benevolence and caregiving are a result of taking Christianity around the world. Hospitals and modern medicine are reflections of those qualities that Christ demonstrated. Healing is second nature to God and to those who believe in God. This plows the ground and renders it fertile so that miracles can flourish. Because God cares for us, he performs miracles on our behalf. Because we love God and others, we, too, perform miracles on their behalf.

Jesus was well known for his healing powers in the New Testament, but his role as a healer goes back much further than that. The Old Testament literature was rich with references to the great physician, long before he appeared in the pages of the New Testament. In ancient history, God is reported to have appeared to people in his preincarnate form, called *theophanies*. This form is mentioned in a number of appearances, to Abraham (Genesis 12:1–2), Isaac (Genesis 26:2–4), and Jacob (Genesis 32:24–30). He is also involved in healing people. In Exodus 15:26, God is referred to as *Yahweh Rapha*, meaning “I am the Lord who heals you.” It was said of Jesus, as God with us, that he is the one “who is and who was and who is to come” (Revelation 1:4), revealing his activity not only in the past, but in the present, and in the future as well. The psalmist lovingly proclaimed, “In the beginning you laid the foundations of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands” (Ps 102:25). He is also mentioned as being the sun of righteousness having “healing in its wings” (Mal 4:6), obviously a reference to his unique healing powers.

John, the beloved apostle, began his Gospel with the following description of Jesus: “Through Him all things were made that has been made. In Him was life, and that life was the light of men” (Jn 1:3). Certainly Jesus needs no introduction to his prolific healing ministry in the Gospels. Almost every page describes numerous miracles of healing that took place at his command.
Jesus is at once the source of the life power and the healer of all disease and conditions. Not only is God the source of miracles and the source of healing, but he is also the designer of the human body itself. He understands every function and operation of the human body. We are told that there is nothing in the universe, or on the earth, including humankind, that he himself did not design or make (John 1:3; Colossians 1:16–17).

Since God is not only the source of life itself, but the actual power as well, it is reasonable and true to say that no miracle has ever taken place with which he was not intimately involved. That there is a transaction that takes place when miracles occur is obvious. There is a transference of power from the source, Jesus, to the recipient cells, tissues, or organs, and nowhere is this transference principle more apparent than at the crucifixion of Christ.

At the time of the crucifixion, when the life left his body, a powerful surge of life energy emanated from his corpse, and it rippled through the cemetery ground itself for some distance. It actually caused an earthquake. Wherever this residual life force traveled within the cemetery, it contacted other dead bodies. These dead bodies received his life force and came to life, according to the Gospel narratives. They were catapulted from their graves by the force and went all over Jerusalem, telling people about Jesus. The drama is played out for us in Matthew 27:52: “The tombs broke open and the bodies of many holy people who had died were raised to life. They came out of the tombs, and after Jesus’ resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many people.”

This was the most powerful medical miracle ever to have taken place. There has been nothing like it since. Jesus contained the life force within himself, but it could not be constrained for long. When the life force left his dead body, many others benefited from the residual power. We rarely, if ever, hear this taught, but nevertheless, it is an important part of the crucifixion and resurrection story. We see, then, that all miracles are a flow of energy from God, through Jesus, to the receptor. Often this flow of energy is in the form of technology. Not that technology itself contains any life force, but it represents the gift of the genius of those who have developed their God-given gifts of intelligence and creativity. This is as much a part of miracles as the direct infusion of power we associate with the stories of miracles.

Looking at the issues regarding miracles and how they operate, and especially examining the role of Jesus in the details of life, power, and the healing of cells and tissue, we find that there are other, newer, and more long range issues that emerge. Today, it is not enough to understand the relationship between God, life, Jesus, and technology. We must examine some underlying issues that affect our participation in miraculous events. Perhaps the most important issue affecting medicine as we know it today, or even as we hope to experience it in the future, is the field of bioethics. Bioethics came about as a result of the Nuremberg war trials of the 1950s.
During World War II, many truly horrific medical and psychological experiments were arbitrarily performed by German physicians on helpless prisoners of war, mostly Jewish men and women as well as those who were considered mentally or physically defective or disabled. There was no regard for their health, lives, or consequences. The effort to correct this injustice was summed up in the doctrine of informed consent. It was believed that no person ought to be tested or experimented on without express consent. This fundamental premise of human rights soon gave way to deeper questions of ethical behavior in the practice of medicine.

Today, the field of bioethics dominates every area of medicine and psychology, including research and development. In every area, bioethics leads the way in deciding if a product, treatment, procedure, or technological advance will violate someone’s morals, conscience, or religion. Each year, enormous amounts of money are spent by research and development companies to determine what is acceptable or not acceptable to the consuming public. In theory, the emerging guidelines and protocols are designed to safeguard the intents and desires of everyone.

However, in nearly every case where ethics of any given situation are concerned, the wishes of proponents or developers of technology, procedures, and practice have taken precedence over the wishes of the public at large. As a case in point, many people today feel that the practice of partial birth abortion ought to cease. Yet in almost every case where it comes before the court, each state’s ban on the procedure has been struck down. The driving force behind this is, of course, money. The abortion industry is a growth industry with revenues in the billions of dollars.

Because the scientific development of new products is built on the foundation of ideas, needs, and creativity, that development is dependent on the flow of money to sustain it and bring those ideas to market. It costs the industry a great deal of money and time to bring a product to market, and the odds of that product being financially successful are not always good. Ethics often trail behind in the efforts to fund a project that has the potential to earn large profits for investors. This is evident in the area of genomics and the tremendous financial gains this field offers to those who have the vision for future developments.

We have looked at how medicine and technology have already changed the practice of obstetrics, especially in the area of in vitro fertilization. Consider this scenario: it is now possible to recover the ovaries of an unborn aborted female fetus and use them commercially. Someone can extract her eggs, fertilize them, implant them in a prospective mother, and bring that fetus to term. This child will be the product of a genetic mother who was dead before she was ever born. How will the field of ethics, which is still struggling with so many new ideas, handle this situation in the future? The need for healthy human eggs is in demand for a number of uses. Among these uses are the
fertilizing of the eggs, then using the fertilized eggs in stem cell research. Although the government has banned the use of aborted stem cells in research, there is no such ban in the private sector. Private laboratories are free to purchase as many eggs as they can find, at market prices.

It will also be possible to use the potential siblings of that same child for experimental purposes (Hyde and Setaro 2001). This is morally reprehensible to those who hold a pro-life perspective. This is only one of a multitude of issues that have resulted from rapid advances in the sciences. Other questions arise: What happens to the rest of the fertilized embryos that remain from the in vitro process? Most of them are in a freezer somewhere, in limbo. A number of these frozen embryos have become the focal point for lawsuits, disputes, and hard feelings. This is an ethical dilemma for many people. Genetic engineering is an up-and-coming field of research. We can now test for many genetic abnormalities and defects. If something untoward comes along in an embryo today, we can simply dispose of it and use another one.

Organ transplantation is another fertile field of ethical dispute. Conflict sometimes arises over just when the donor is pronounced dead. Some organ recovery teams anxiously wait over a immediately terminal person, counting the seconds until the person is pronounced dead, as the window of time is critical in recovering organs for transplantation. Legal issues can either speed up or reduce the time in which an organ can be recovered from the donor and then be safely transplanted into someone else. This places prospective organ donor recipients in a difficult situation as well as those who are on standby to assist in the recovery and critical transplantation efforts.

My family faced this dilemma when my cousin was scheduled for a kidney transplant. It was 12 hours over the recommended time limit when he finally received the new kidney. The kidney proved to be nonviable and died. As a result, he went through several surgeries and severe complications, which caused him to die far earlier than was expected. He was unable to obtain another kidney.

Some of the implications of informed consent with regard to genetic testing and the huge conflicts that are expected to arise in this emerging field loom large for the future. Does consent imply ownership in some way, especially when there is the potential for money to be involved? This is a problem with egg donors and recipients. What will be the final determination of the legal and moral issues that may arise as a result of all the knowledge that is already on the scene, and what will surely come from genetic testing? Privacy issues come quickly to mind. Who should profit from the research already going on? Would clinical test subjects be able to profit from their own problems?

Today, we are shadowed through every medical treatment or procedure via the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996. This is supposed to grant us privacy against having our personal medical
information used against us in any way. It is interesting to note that the same documents that protect our privacy also provide for our personal medical information to be shared by the medical community for their express benefit. It is likely that legal, ethical, and moral issues will continue to emerge and will seek answers in every aspect of medicine as well as impact how science and individuals look at and understand miracles—and indeed, it should. One of those issues has to do with the competing rights of the individual to have all the information he or she needs or wants about what his or her options are for treatment, and the need to sign necessary consent for that treatment. These are two opposite issues, and they come together regularly (Drell and Adamson 2000).

Fortunately, agencies such as the U.S. Department of Energy and the National Institutes of Health (n.d.), which jointly govern the entire Human Genome Project, have included in their budget a substantial amount of money to fund various programs that relate to these issues. They have established a division called Ethical, Social, and Legal Issues (ESLI), which deals with ethical, social, and legal issues.

It is projected that within the next 20 years or so, your medical records will contain all of your DNA codes (Drell and Adamson 2000). This is good news and bad news. The good news is that health care professionals will have access to your entire genetic makeup and will be able to design drugs and techniques that will help you much better than they can do today. The bad news is that it raises huge privacy issues that might affect your job, credit, or even your marriage value. As with every issue, there is always an upside and a downside.

In the future, we will have to learn how to cope with our considerable privacy losses as well as learn how to profit from the benefits of this brave new world of information. Our children and grandchildren will no doubt handle these issues much easier that their parents and grandparents. After all, they have grown up in the computer generation and have already proven themselves to be information-adaptable.

The future is exciting. Miracles will continue to happen, when they are necessary. God will give up none of his power to the mere machinery of modern medicine, advanced technology, or scientific knowledge, but will continue to work his miracles through them and over and above them. In fact, these good things come about because of God’s desire to give us and reveal to us important parts of who he is. Behind every forward step in science, God is there, applauding and urging us onward—but he will not be limited by our progress. The force of the miraculous is a vast reservoir out there beyond our best achievements. History will be rewritten again and again in the next 20 years, and it will look very different beyond that. This is neither good nor bad; it is simply what it is. We rightly call it progress.

We, as human beings, are a work still in progress. Miracles are a part of that progress. We have come a long way on our journey to maturity as a
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species, but there is still a long way to go. We need the guidance and presence of God to make the journey, both as individuals and as a society. God clearly wants to accompany us on this journey. It is, after all, a process. The best miracle is that we are still here and jogging forward. God is with us! Life is a process. God is in the process. Therefore, we can trust the process.

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When I was a child, every week, on television, people broadcasted a religious meeting, a so-called healing service conducted by Oral Roberts. It was so vivid, startling, and compelling. It was on a black-and-white television screen. Oral Roberts was up on a stage, in the center of it, but in front of the stage, there was a ramp leading up to him from one side and leading down and away from him on the other. As Roberts preached loudly about God, crippled people on crutches and those in wheelchairs approached the stage. He leaned down, put his hands on them, and yelled authoritatively, “Be healed!” Then they stood up or stood alone, having thrown down their crutches, and walked away. The audience, meanwhile, wept, moaned, and waved their hands.

In later years, as an adult working in ministry, I occasionally watched on color television programs in which people were once more yelling and weeping, waving their hands, and all the while focused on healing. The makeup seemed more vibrant. This time, people were also being “slain” in the Spirit and falling down uncontrollably. The ministers made fantastic claims, including that they had raised the dead. Once again, I was amazed and baffled; however, by that time, I had some theological armor and immediately began to pass judgment on what I was seeing.

I have never found a satisfying answer to the experience of the miraculous as seen in such Christian media. In the face of that, I have wondered about Jesus’s statements (Mk 5:34; Mt 21:21; Lk 17:19, 18:42)\(^1\) that it is faith that opens the door to miracles, and it is a lack of faith keeping that door closed (Mt 13:53–58; cf. Mk 6:1–6). If faith is the door through which so much opens up in life, it seems fitting to explore faith in its own right, and not simply as a means to an end.
What is faith? Are there differing kinds of faith? Is faith just a religious construct? Early in the twentieth century, psychology conceived of a continuum between belief and certainty, all built on the objective evidence that either did, or did not, compel one to believe. At one end of this continuum, a person had enough objective reason to assert with reservations something as fact. At the other end was the superlative sense of belief taken to its utmost and resolved in certainty. However, altogether different was faith, conceived as a subjective attitude that did not consider objective evidence observed, but supplied whatever was needed to set uncertainty aside in favor of cognitive certitude (Ward 1920). Thus faith has been denigrated and suspect. It has been compartmentalized and marginalized as not belonging to the enterprise of normal and pragmatic living, let alone the naturalistic process known as science.

What follows is an existential, phenomenological, and biblical exploration of faith. Although existentialism and phenomenology overlap somewhat in mid-twentieth-century psychological literature (Maslow 1962; Sonneman 1954; May, Angel, and Ellenberger 1958; Pervin 1960), some of their relative features will be considered separately for the sake of clarity. This is not an exhaustive exploration, as that would take an entire volume or more. It is more of an integrative look at faith, using these various perspectives to create a more robust comprehension of some of the factors involved. As will be seen, that integration comes together tangibly in the clinical use of contemporary gestalt theory of psychotherapy.

AN EXISTENTIAL PERSPECTIVE ON FAITH

Some people consider existentialism to be more of an antiphilosophy (Dreyfus 2006) than a coherent philosophical system of its own. As such, it is seen as a rebellion against the prevailing, and stifling, philosophical systems of the times in which it arose. Others maintain that existentialism is simply a very practical way of doing philosophy and is as old as philosophy itself (Flynn 2006). Søren Kierkegaard is the prototypical existentialist, and he marks the start of existentialism. While there are precursors to Kierkegaard in Pascal (Dreyfus 2006) and Schleiermacher (Crouter 2005), it is Kierkegaard’s work that strongly identifies the paramount concern in existentialism: the individual, Gerkin’s living human document.

Kierkegaard lived in a time similar in some ways to our own. He objected to a prevailing contempt for the individual. He observed a search for science and objectivity motivated by Kant and Hegel, but in place of that, Kierkegaard substituted subjective truth, choice, and passion, and he turned attention back to the individual, away from the idea of the collective (Solomon 2004). His ground was his own Christianity and his rejection of Hegel and the church as burdens imposed on free people. He lived as an existing
individual, and he propagated both the concept and the lived experience of existence in a way that directly influenced Brentano, Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, and Jaspers. With this pervasive influence, his thought became the ground and wellspring for European existentialism (Gaffney 2006).

Faith, for Kierkegaard, was the most important work to be achieved in a person because only on the basis of faith can one become a True Self (McDonald 2006). Being a True Self, furthermore, means being true to oneself; thus authenticity and so-called bad faith (see subsequent discussion) were linked with choice and responsibility. For existentialist thinkers, a person is free, and that has tremendous bearing on existence, which can be understood as the individual-in-situation. What does individual-in-situation actually mean? It is a field-theoretical construct, for freedom and choice are experienced as a function of the person in contact with whatever is other in various spheres of interpenetrating influence. Self emerges from such interaction (Philippson 2003). As such,

there is no unique “core” to the individual. There is a person, who actively chooses, but he or she chooses among alternatives that are shaped by social processes in which he or she is an active participant. In making these choices, he or she defines a self that is specific to that situation. (Richert 2002, 82)

Thus both human behavior and one’s identity can only be understood through such concrete circumstances of living. Since all living requires an environmental setting in which contact, the interaction between the person and his or her contexts, takes place, existential faith is the mechanism supporting identification with self-experience, freedom, choice, responsibility, and authenticity (Crocker, forthcoming) in the risky navigating of one’s physical and interpersonal contexts. All this is wrapped up in the concept of an individual-in-situation, or existence. As Kurt Goldstein (1963, 201) told the assembled Harvard students during the 1938–1939 William James lectures:

Our observation of our patients shows that they cannot actualize themselves without respect to their surroundings in some degree, especially to other persons. The sick man is exposed to catastrophic reactions to a higher degree than the normal man; he can perform only if he finds a milieu which allows him to avoid catastrophic reactions. This implies that his behavior has to presume definite environmental conditions, in particular the existence of other men. The patient must develop an adjustment to others and limit himself according to the social actuality of others.

With this understanding, one is ready to consider the affirmation of the freedom of the individual. Paul Tillich claimed that a person is free in the sense of being able to determine himself or herself through decisions that
reside at the core of that person’s being (Pervin 1960; Salzberg 2002). In dealing with doubt, for instance, he asserted that doubt is not overcome by merely repressing it, but by the courage that does not deny doubt, taking doubt “into itself as an expression of its own finitude” (Tillich 1957, 101) and affirming the content of an ultimate concern:

The offering of one’s heart happens in stages, with shadings of hesitation and bursts of freedom. Faith evolves from the first intoxicating blush of bright faith to a faith that is verified through our doubting, questioning, and sincere effort to see the truth for ourselves. Bright faith steeps us in a sense of possibility; verified faith confirms our ability to make that possibility real. Then, as we come to deeply know the underlying truths of who we are and what our lives are about, abiding faith, or unwavering faith as it is traditionally called, arises. (Salzberg 2002, 153)

This becomes a practical aspect of living in a world filled with ambiguity and uncertainty (Guinness 1976; Taylor 1992). Thus faith—the affirmation in question—is also an existential decision completed in some kind of action. Kierkegaard (1954, 31–37) expressed that when he wrote,

> Each became great in proportion to his expectation. One became great by expecting the possible, another by expecting the eternal, but he who expected the impossible became greater than all. . . . By faith Abraham went out from the land of his fathers and became a sojourner in the land of promise. . . . He will never forget that thou hadst need of a hundred years to obtain a son of old age against expectation, that thou didst have to draw the knife before retaining Isaac; he will never forget that in a hundred and thirty years thou didst not get further than to faith.

**Authenticity and Bad Faith**

“Authenticity involves a radical openness to the world, to others, and to one’s own experience; it involves honest and direct confrontation with the givens of existence toward the end of living in conscious harmony with them” (Walsh and MacElwain 2002, 257). Thus Abraham, Kierkegaard’s exemplar of faith, chose against the moral absolute, suspending the ethical to follow his faith in God. Abraham’s motives were “opaque to any outside observer” (Carman 2006, 231), and his behavior defied reasonable ethical interpretation. It is this radically individual and subjective faith that transcends external ethical commandments and standards, demanding that, come what may, a person must be congruent with himself or herself.

Authenticity is a matter of living the truth about oneself, which presupposes that a person actually knows oneself. People have wondered for centuries if there might be a self inside us somewhere that can be discovered. The classic statement of the midlife crisis is, “I’ve got to find myself,” but where can one find that? There is no outward trip, no spa, no guru outside
oneself that can lead the way; rather, it’s a matter of settling down into the
daily process of experiencing, in which one finds such things as attraction or
revulsion, interest or boredom.

My wife and I have very different appreciations of color and style. When
we first got married, she liked to shop for me, and she would bring home
shirts, pants, and shoes. The experience was disappointing for her because
I did not appreciate the look and the feel of those clothes; so she ended up
bringing back most of what she bought. One might say, “How rude. Why
didn’t you just go along with it?”

The answer is because those things had the feel of “not me.” As my ther-
apist once said, “It is one thing not to do what you want, but it is another
thing not to even know what you want.” Knowing oneself is a matter of ego.
The Greek word for “I” is ego, and the strength of a person’s ego is not re-
ally just a matter of excessive self-importance. Karl Jaspers stated that ego
strength was composed of ego-vitality (awareness of existence), ego-activity
(awareness of one’s own performance), ego-consistency (unity of the self),
ego-demarcation (self as distinct from the outside world), and ego-identity
(identity of the self). A lack in ego-performance, for instance, results in dis-
turbances of self-regulation, self-determined acting, feeling, thinking, and
perceiving, while lack of self-identity results in weakening of the subjective
gestalt (Kircher and David 2003). Perls, Herfferline, and Goodman (1951,
379–80) described the ego as the system of identifications that takes deliber-
ate sensory-motor action as if isolated from its situation:

Organic need is restricted to the goal, perception is controlled, and the
environment is not contacted as the pole of one’s existence but is held at a
distance as “external world,” to which oneself is an extrinsic agent. What
is felt as close is the unity of goal, orientation, meaning, control, etc., and
this is precisely the actor itself, the ego.

Had I merely smiled and thanked my wife for purchasing clothes that had
the feel of “not me,” all the while wondering what I was going to do with
them, then I would have been acting out of bad faith. To act in bad faith is
to avoid the risk that faith requires, for faith always comes as the bridge
across uncertainty (Taylor 1992), and often, the anxiety of any given situ-
tation comes from the uncertainty over what might happen to oneself if one is
authentic at any given moment. To remain true to oneself, to speak and act
on one’s truth, is to manifest good faith, but to pull back, interrupting con-
tact as an authentic, existing self, is to display bad faith. Thus Emily Dickin-
son remained true to herself, acted in good faith, and rejected God, writing
(see Lockerbie 1998, 34–35),

Those—dying then
Knew where they went—
They went to God’s Right Hand—
That Hand is amputated now
And God cannot be found—
The Abdication of Belief
Makes Behavior small—
Better an ignus fatuu
Than no illumine at all.

Choice and Responsibility

What comes linked intrinsically to the issues of authenticity and bad faith are those of choice and responsibility. That is because the existentialist emphasis on the individual requires a consideration of such concepts as autonomy, responsibility, choice, self-creation, and self-identity (Maslow 1962). Existential psychotherapists and writers, for instance, have stressed the importance of “the client’s free choice as essential to both the process and the outcome of psychotherapy. These traditions have rooted this process of choice in a well-articulated, highly individualized concept of self” (Richert 2002, 77).

While embracing these elements in an understanding of faith, one must keep in mind that such an individual exercises choice and experiences responsibility for such choice as properties of an emergent self, and the emergent self exerts a downward, causal influence over the brain, as the entire person is stimulated through contact in the environment (Murphy 1998; Gregersen 2000). The mind, the soul, and the self are constructs that overlap and point to the same thing, a dimension of human experience that “arises out of personal relatedness” (W.S. Brown 1998, 100). Thus to say that a person is an individual, and that the self is autonomous in making such choices, does not contradict assertions that people come into existence through relationship, are never actually apart from some kind of relation with others, are never set apart from the field in which they live, and are not able to thrive without it (Wheeler 2002; McConville 2001). Existential faith involves as much trust in oneself, something unseen and only experienced through contact and relationship with others, as in anything.

According to Kierkegaard, God places human beings in situations in which choices cannot be made rationally using moral categories and logic. These choices must be navigated without such criteria, and they are “essential to the life of faith. This is the brutal situation of human life and draws our attention to the fundamental character of decision: one’s very soul depends upon it” (Wildman and Brothers 2002, 362).

Since no individual is truly alone, such choices are always made with a measure of accountability to others, and this is known as responsibility: “The speech of the other provokes a response in me and my response is at the same time my responsibility” (Moran 2000, 349).

Philip Yancey (2003) described the life of prisoners of war who had to work on the Burma-Siam railway during the Second World War. That was the group about which the movie The Bridge on the River Kwai had been made.
Yancey described how the men had started out stealing from one another, fending just for themselves, and how life had become gruesome, until one day, a guard was about to shoot someone because the group would not divulge who had stolen a shovel. That’s when the speech of that guard, and the need of that other prisoner, prompted a different kind of response. One of the men stepped forward to confess having taken the shovel, and he was brutally beaten to death. Later that day, it became apparent that the shovel had never been stolen at all. His response, and the burden of responsibility that he took on himself, cost him his life. From that day forward, the character of the camp changed, and people began to look after one another. They nursed the sick and infirm, and they shared with one another their strengths and resources. The actions of that one man became a powerful speech that could not be forgotten; it demanded a response that was more than just skimming over the superficialities of life; it called forth accountability and responsibility.

People speak in one form or another. It could be about something big or something small. It’s obvious sometimes, but other times, it’s like they are speaking to someone else, or not really speaking at all. It’s possible to skim past them, as if they were a rack of unwanted clothes, but they really are not. If one sees them, if one hears them, then they have spoken to those who have perceived it. It is as if they called out, “I am here.” And the response to that is at once a responsibility:

“I am here,” said the homeless person.
“I am here,” said the abused child in a family too ashamed to tell the nasty secret.
“I am here,” said the neglected wife of an alcoholic.
“I am here.”

A second meaning in the concept of responsibility denotes the subject whose experience it is. If, for instance, something is my experience, then it is not someone else’s fault. I own it. I take responsibility for my own experience, and I do not externalize it by blaming others. Thus responsibility can also be seen as a form of authenticity.

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE ON FAITH

Faith is an experience, a part of living, and a phenomenon. In so-called biblical faith, one has the proof of things hoped for and the conviction of things unseen; that is, a person is presented with a concept, a potential, or a precept, and the fullness of it, the reality of it—the Presence of it—is experienced in the absence of the physical perception or appropriation of the object of faith in question. As such, faith becomes the principle by which noemata (the intentional objects of one’s phenomenology) are experienced phenomenologically.
What is it like to experience faith? For that matter, what is it like to experience anything? Personal experience is the realm of phenomenology and has been explored more fully in volume 3, chapter 11. What remains is to examine various typologies of faith and the phenomenology of perceptual faith.

Typologies in the Phenomenology of Faith

There are many ways to conceptualize faith—what it is and how it plays out in the lives of people. Before considering two elements in phenomenology (intentionality and perception) that bear directly on faith, it is helpful to take note of several important typologies of faith. They overlap one another somewhat, but another way of understanding that is to admit that there are some commonalities involved.

Paul Tillich suggested two different types of faith: ontological and moral. Ontological faith calls forth a response to encounter with God, and moral faith calls for obedience to the laws and precepts present in God’s standards.

Every individual is the “bearer of a special experience and content of faith. The subjective state of the faithful changes in correlation to the change in the symbols of faith” (Tillich 1957, 55). Ontological and moral faith each make demands of absolute truth on the limits of a relative existence. Symbols of faith are those elements of reality that serve to point toward the transcendent value of what Tillich called the ultimate.

To understand ontological faith, one must first understand the idea of the holy (Otto 1958). It is mysterious, daunting, and full of awe. It is also irresistibly fascinating, and so there are two aspects of the numinous experience of the holy: a fear that causes dread and makes the hair stand up (tremendum), and attraction that draws one toward it (fascinans). “It is the first element which impresses upon us the holy ‘apartness’ of God, His greatness and His glory, His might and His majesty, so that we bow down before His presence and humble ourselves” (Martin 1974, 14). This is what happened for Moses as he drew near to the burning bush. This is Isaiah’s experience of the vision of God in Isaiah 6:5. This is John’s attitude during the revelation on Patmos.

The experience of the holy is what calls forth a response of faithful worship. It invades the mind mightily in Christian worship with the words,

Holy, holy, holy.

It breaks forth from the hymn of Tersteegen:

God Himself is present:

Heart, be still before Him:

Prostrate inwardly adore Him.

The “shudder” has here lost its crazy and bewildering note, but not the ineffable something that holds the mind. It has become a mystical awe,
and sets free as its accompaniment, reflected in self-consciousness, that “creature-feeling” that has already been described as the feeling of personal nothingness and submergence before the awe-inspiring object directly experienced. (Otto 1958, 17)

Tillich (1957, 58–59) described the way the holy is perceived and operational in the community of faith as follows:

The holy is first of all experienced as present. It is here and now, and this means it encounters us in a thing, in a person, in an event. Faith sees us in a concrete piece of reality the ultimate ground and meaning of all reality. . . . There is no criterion by which faith can be judged from outside the correlation of faith. But something else can happen: The faithful can ask himself or be asked by someone else whether the medium through which he experiences ultimate concern expresses real ultimacy.

The law in the moral type of faith demands obedience. This is a statement, or codification, of the way life ought to be. It is not so much faith in the encounter with a divine person as it is faith in the value of divine structure:

The divine law is of ultimate concern in both old and new Judaism. It is the central content of faith. It gives rules for a continuous actualization of the ultimate concern with the preliminary concerns of the daily life. The ultimate shall always be present and remembered even in the smallest activities of the ordinary life. On the other hand, all this is worth nothing if it is not united with obedience to the moral law, the law of justice and righteousness. The final criterion for the relation of man to God is subjection to the law of justice. It is the greatness of Old Testament prophetism that it undercut again and again the desire of the people and, even more, of its leaders, to rely on the sacramental element of the law and to neglect the moral element—the “ought to be” as the criterion of the “being.” (Tillich 1957, 67–68)

James Fowler (1996) presented a developmental taxonomy of faith stages in his book *Faithful Change*. He claimed that faith is a multidimensional construct that is “foundational to social relations, to personal identity, and to the making of personal and cultural meanings” (Fowler 1996, 55). As such, Fowler claimed that faith is generic to all human beings. He offered seven stages in faith development, summarized in Table 13.1.

John Mabry (2006) offered a taxonomy of ways in which people live faithfully in the world. It illustrates that faith is something people do, and not just something people have. A complete explication of his model is beyond the scope of this chapter. It consists of a consideration of eight features of the faith in question: (1) how the Divine is imaged, (2) the nature of one’s relationship with the Divine, (3) how one constructs meaning in the world,
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Primal faith</td>
<td>Infancy</td>
<td>A prelinguistic disposition of trust develops in the mutuality between infant and primary caregivers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intuitive-projective</td>
<td>Early childhood</td>
<td>Based on meaning making from emotional-perceptual ordering of experience; children’s experiences of power and powerlessness orient to existential concerns of security and safety; early cognitive limitations result in potent emotional and imaginal orientations toward good and evil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mythical-literal faith</td>
<td>Middle childhood and beyond</td>
<td>Concrete operational thinking makes possible more stable forms of conscious interpretation of experience; cause and effect and simple perspective taking emerge and influence faith development. This stage structures the ultimate environment along the lines of simple fairness and moral reciprocity: goodness is rewarded and badness is punished.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Synthetic-conventional faith</td>
<td>Adolescence and beyond</td>
<td>Early formal operational thinking influences interpretation of experience; mutual interpersonal perspective taking becomes more complex; identity and personal interiority loom large. The worldview is lived and asserted rather than asserted with critical reflection.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individuative-reflective faith</td>
<td>Young adulthood and beyond</td>
<td>Examination of the previous stage’s tacit beliefs, values, and commitments; the self as previously defined and identified must also reorient, and the person assumes the responsibility for locating authority for beliefs. A third-person perspective taking facility influences reflection on the processes and objects of faith.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conjunctive faith</td>
<td>Early midlife and beyond</td>
<td>Boundaries of self and faith in the previous stage are dissolved; the executive ego admits inadequate understanding/information or illusion; faith maintains the tension among multiple perspectives, paradoxes, mysteries, etc. Epistemological humility becomes prominent.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Universalizing faith</td>
<td>Midlife and beyond</td>
<td>Faith moves beyond paradoxical awareneses and defensiveness, embraces polar opposites that are hallmarks of the conjunctive stage, and exhibits openness, being grounded in love and regard for God.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
(4) what sources of spiritual wisdom are accepted, (5) how spiritual growth is assessed, (6) what spiritual disciplines and practices are honored, (7) what the advantages of any particular way might be, and (8) what its disadvantages might be. He used the illustration of a six-pointed star, composed of two overlapping triangles, and each point in each triangle corresponded to a different way of manifesting faith. These are listed and described in Table 13.2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Triangle</th>
<th>Faith Styles</th>
<th>Descriptionsa</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Primary triangle</td>
<td>Traditional believers</td>
<td>Hierarchical cosmology, clear delineation of authority; related to God as a sovereign and beneficent Divinity; meaning found in Divine will for one’s life; source of spiritual wisdom is in sacred texts and tradition.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Spiritual eclectics</td>
<td>The Divine is a spiritual force animating all of nature; no distinction between nature and God; meaning found in protecting the biosphere and promoting greater consciousness; source of spiritual wisdom found in all spiritual traditions, one’s own experience, and in the body.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ethical humanists</td>
<td>The Divine is all life itself; one is related to God by being related to all of life; meaning is made through compassionate action on behalf of all life; wisdom is sourced in the natural world and the scientific method.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary triangle</td>
<td>Liberal believers</td>
<td>Divine seen as friend, lover, or coworker; the nature of the relationship with God is familial and idiosyncratic; meaning is found in showing mercy, doing justice, and walking humbly; sources of spiritual wisdom are tradition, sacred texts, reason, and experience.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Religious agnostics</td>
<td>Divine imaged as unknowable mystery; relationship mediated by intellectual pursuit and philanthropic activity; meaning patched together idiosyncratically; sources of spiritual wisdom are found in personal experience and reason.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Jack believers</td>
<td>Divine seen as an angry judge, and one’s basic relationship with God is characterized by estrangement; meaning is constructed only in negative terms, and the sources of spiritual wisdom are in tradition and Scripture, but these are not appropriated, as they are rejected.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

aDescriptions here are limited to some of descriptors of the Divine image, relationship with the Divine, and sources of spiritual wisdom because of space limitations.
Avery Dulles (1994) also identified several models of faith. Although he had much to say about these models, it is instructive to see the short, summary descriptions he offered to identify these respective versions (given in Table 13.3). They offer a quick grasp of some of the various ways in which people conceptualize their exercise of faith.

**Intentionality and Perception**

Underlying all these types, stages, styles, and models of faith are two phenomenological considerations that are more mundane, yet deserve attention. They arise from contemplating intentionality and perception, and they provide a simple ground for contemplating a biblical explication of faith and belief in miracles.

Intentionality is a central concept in phenomenological philosophy. It refers to the power of a mind to be about or to hold as figure, to represent, or to stand for, things, properties, and states of affairs (Jacob 2003). Franz Brentano claimed that in every mental act, something is included as object within itself. For instance, in presentation, something is presented; in wanting, something is wanted; in faith, something is “faithed” (i.e., something is believed and/or trusted, expected, or counted on). Central to any such experience is its intentionality because all experience is directed toward something by its content or its meaning (Smith 2002).

The intentional object can be present to the senses or absent. It may be a little of both. For instance, consider a box. Viewed from one concrete

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 13.3 Models of Faith</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Model</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Propositional model</td>
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<tr>
<td>Transcendental model</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fiducial model</td>
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<tr>
<td>Affective-experiential model</td>
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<tr>
<td>Obediential model</td>
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<tr>
<td>Praxis model</td>
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<tr>
<td>Personalist model</td>
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</table>
position, a person can only have one perspective at a time on such a box, and in that experience, a person can only see one side of the box at a time; however, the entire box is presented phenomenologically. One does not contemplate a two-dimensional picture of a box (or else that is what the experience would be about—a picture of a box); one contemplates the entire box, the real box, including those sides that cannot be seen fully, or seen at all. Thus what is not seen is believed to exist because those unseen parts are aspects of the holistic gestalt.

In a similar way, intentional objects that are not actually physically present can still be aspects of experience. Indication signs point toward an absent object, but a real object nonetheless. A hat reminds someone of a best friend. A picture brings to mind a remembrance, stimulates an imagination, or promotes an anticipation. These can all be experiences of intentional objects that cannot be seen, but are of actual objects, places, events, or people, not present to the senses but presented to the mind. Categorial intending, on the other hand, presents “states of affairs and propositions, the kind that functions when we predicate, relate, collect, and introduce logical operations into what we experience” (Sokolowski 2000, 88). Thus, when we read a newspaper headline and suddenly contemplate the construct of justice, we are experiencing categorical intentionality.

All these features of intentionality, in which one involuntarily comprehends something through a partial perception, a symbolic indication, or logical implication of reason, can be considered automatic (Moors and De Houwer 2006); they are examples of intentional faith. Why? Because they are held in the mind as real, even if only for the purposes of contemplation. They are not held in the mind as false positives unless presented as false positives.

One of the mind games people learn somewhere in a usual education is to ponder the question, “If a tree falls in the forest, and no one hears it, does it make a sound?” The solipsist would say that there would be no sound because it takes a hearer to constitute a sound—humans being the measure of all things and such. To that, representationalists claim that we do not have actual contact in our surroundings, but that our brains reconstruct the perceptual stimuli so as to make them manageable, understandable to us. Thus we might actually hear a tree fall, but we cannot know if the sound we hear is actually the sound that that tree makes because everyone’s ears convert the sound waves in their own manner of hearing. The philosopher and phenomenological thinker Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1968) coined a term, perceptual faith, to indicate that some things must be taken, in a modified realism, to be what we perceive them to be.

I hear what sounds like a tree falling in the forest. It does not sound to me like a jet plane, a bird singing, or a cat calling in the night air. I think, “A tree fell out there somewhere in the forest,” and my question is not what
happened, but exactly where it happened. I instinctively know that a tree fell because I have immediate trust in my perception—it is suitable to me on the basis of perceptual faith.

For psychologists, this issue might be covered under the term *validity*. In reference to perceptual faith, it might be refined to refer to phenomenological validity. How accurate are the perceptions in question, and thus is any given occasion of perceptual faith well founded? Good perceptual faith would be trust well founded, but bad perceptual faith would be trust ill founded. Why? Faith that is founded on something that is not true, that is not actual, leads to mistakes. Thus issues of philosophical or logical validity stand behind the construct of perceptual faith.

I used to go round and round on these issues of faith, trust, validity, and truth with a friend of mine, Sylvia Fleming Crocker. Sylvia is a gestalt therapist living in Wyoming, who wrote a good book a few years back (Crocker 1999), and she believed that there is a difference between religious faith and mundane faith. She believed these two were actually diverse categories. I contended that faith is faith, but that the objects of faith might change, giving the appearance that religious faith was one thing and mundane faith was something else.

The Bible defines *faith* as the conviction of things unseen, the proof of things hoped for, and the trust it takes to act on what one holds to be true (see subsequent discussion). Without that last part, action based on what one holds to be true, Jesus’ brother James asserted that faith is dead. Is this any different from perceptual faith? Certainly we trust in our perceptions. In fact, this is Merleau-Ponty’s point, that we trust so much in what we perceive that it is rather automatic and leads to a holistic, lived-body response. We act in accord with our perceptions. We see the kitchen knife, we reach to pick it up and cut the onions, and we do so without questioning if we are actually seeing a real knife, or if the knife is actually there. The only people who do question such things are those who have lost their perceptual faith because they have suffered some neurological or psychological disorder that interrupted the normal flow of their perceptual experience:

The methods of proof and cognition invented by a thought already established in the world, the concepts of object and subject it introduces, do not enable us to understand what the perceptual faith is, precisely because it is a faith, that is, an adherence that knows itself to be beyond proofs, not necessary, interwoven with incredulity, at each instant menaced by non-belief. Belief and incredulity are here so closely bound up that we always find the one in the other, and in particular a germ of non-truth in the truth: the certitude I have of being connected up with the world by my look already promises me a pseudo-world of phantasms if I let it wander. . . . It is therefore the greatest degree of belief that our vision goes to the things themselves. (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 28)
Thus, to me, faith is not a tremendous leap, some kind of fanatical loss of reason that makes a person trust in Jesus Christ, for instance, but a specific application of a dynamic principle of life so common to human experience that we could not live without it.

A BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE ON FAITH

Alister McGrath (1993) described the Christian community’s understanding of the word faith as comprising belief that something is true, trust in that veracity, and entrance into the substance of whatever issues are involved with actions based on such faith. He used the illustration of having a disease and having a bottle of antibiotics. One believes that, in truth, the antibiotics can heal the disease, but one does not trust and enter into the benefits of faith until one actually acts on that belief and takes the medicine.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1963) championed biblical faith as expensive; it was not merely intellectual assent because it cost a person something to act on what he or she believed. That could be the risk of the loss of life, but it could also be the risk of the loss of esteem and respect in the eyes of significant others. Cheap grace, by contrast, would be the love of God and faith taught as mere conceptions—an intellectual exercise as part of an academic conversation that could be enjoyed by all without loss of respect because devotion, allegiance, and investment in the truth of concepts discussed would never be tested. Dallas Willard, quoting Luther, claimed that such faith, such cheap grace, was never conceived to be biblical faith because faith in its nature is busy and powerful. It cannot cease doing what is good; so the person who does not actually do good is a person who lacks real faith. That person feels around looking to find faith and good works but can’t find them because he or she does not know them deep inside and cannot recognize them in others. By contrast, Luther held that faith is well-founded confidence in the grace of God that is so precious, so strong, that it would never surrender its conviction (Willard 1991). Such faith is transforming; it stimulates a person to tell others of the great impact such faith has had (Jackson and Jackson 2005; Yancey 2003; Monroe 1996).

Sixteenth-century thinkers identified three levels of biblical faith: notitia, assensus, and fiducia (Sproul 2003). Notitia is the content one is poised to believe. Assensus is the intellectual assent to a proposition. In terms of a biblical faith, it is the belief that something is or is not factual. Fiducia is personal trust and reliance on such facts; it is the belief in the propositions or persons in question:

Upon reading or hearing a given teaching—a given item from the great things of the gospel—the Holy Spirit teaches us, causes us to believe that that teaching is both true and from God. . . . But faith is also “the evidence of things not seen.” By faith—the whole process, involving the internal
instigation of the Holy Spirit—something becomes evident (i.e., acquires warrant, has what it takes to be knowledge). And what thus becomes evident or warranted is indeed not seen. This doesn’t mean that it is indistinct, blurred, uncertain, or a matter of guesswork; what it means is that the belief in question isn’t made evident by way of the workings of the ordinary cognitive faculties with which we were originally created. (Plantinga 2000, 260–65)

In the Bible, two words account for most of the references to such faith. One is a Hebrew word and the other is a Greek word. The Hebrew word is *aman*, and the Greek word is *pistis*.

The Hebrew word is related to the English word *amen*, which is often said at the close of prayers to express certainty. That is the essential significance of the Hebrew word in the context of the Old Testament as well: “The basic root idea is firmness or certainty” (Scott 1980, 51). It is sometimes conveyed in the figures of the strong arms of a parent upholding a child or the pillars of support on a building. At other times, a causal nuance is understood, so that it means to cause to be certain or sure. In the Hiphil conjugation of the Hebrew verb, the meaning becomes “to believe,” indicating that biblical faith is “an assurance, a certainty, in contrast with modern concepts of faith as something possible, hopefully true, but not certain” (Scott 1980, 51).

The word *pistis* can be traced to the classical Greek period, at which time it referred to the trust that a person might place in other people or the gods, credibility, credit in business, guarantee, proof, or something entrusted (Michel 1975). The concept took on religious overtones at an early date; in Homer the gods vouched for the validity of an alliance or treaty, and the trustworthiness of an oracle could be applied directly to divinity. The power of the gods to save in times of trouble was something addressed by *pistis*. During the Hellenistic period, which was characterized by increased skepticism, *pistis* acquired the sense of conviction as to the existence and activity of the gods, and a didactic element emerged as the basic meaning: *pistis* as faith in God indicated a theoretical conviction. Stress was, nevertheless, placed on how one might live, given such a conviction. The Stoic perspective accepted a divine ordering of the world, with the individual as the center as an autonomous, moral being. A person’s fidelity to his moral destiny led to fidelity toward other people. In the mystery religions, one abandoned oneself to the deity by following the deity’s instructions and teachings and by putting oneself under the deity’s protection. In secular Greek, then, *pistis*

represents a broad spectrum of ideas. It is used to express relationship between man and man, and also to express relationship with the divine. The particular meaning is determined by the prevailing philosophical and religious influences. Originally it had to do with binding and obligations. But Stoicism made out of it a theoretically based law of life which brought
the individual man into harmony with the cosmos. There was also a dangerous development in which *pistis* was demanded in response to a claim of revelation which was not subject to any control. (Michel 1975, 595)

The Septuagint (LXX) translates the Hebrew *aman* in the niphil conjugation to mean “to be true, reliable, or faithful.” An emphasis is made on the word of God preserving dependability and being confirmed subsequently by some kind of action (1 Kgs 8:26; 1 Chron 17:23ff.). In addition, Gen 15:6 is important for the connection between the Old Testament and the New Testament (cf. Rom 4:3, 9, 22ff.; Gal 3:6; Jas 2:23). Abraham’s faith is his readiness to adhere to the promises of God, finding security and grounding in the word of God; in turn, God responded to this trust as “behavior appropriate to the covenant relationship” (Michel 1975, 596).

In the New Testament, *pistis* means “faith” and “trust” (Arndt and Gingrich 1957). This can refer to things that stimulate trust and faith in others such as the reliable work of a servant (Tit 2:10) or the example of someone else’s enduring faith (2 Thess 1:4); it can also refer to trust, confidence, and faith in the active sense (Rom 4:5, 9, 11–13, 16; Eph 2:8; Col 2:12; Heb 11:4–33, 39). More pointedly, it can refer directly to that which is believed—the object(s) of faith (Gal 1:23; 1 Tim 1:19, 4:1, 6, 6:10; 2 Tim 4:7).

In one of the classic assertions of the New Testament, faith celebrates “the reality of the blessings for which we hope, the demonstration of events not seen” (Lane 1991, 328).

**A CLINICAL INTEGRATION**

Kierkegaard claimed that to take a leap of faith was to risk losing one’s footing, but not to take it was to risk losing one’s self (Gaffney 2006). Perls, Hefferline, and Goodman, the founders of gestalt therapy, said (1951, 343), “Faith is knowing, beyond awareness, that if one takes a step there will be ground underfoot; one gives oneself unhesitatingly to the act, one has faith that the background will produce the means.”

Thus faith becomes the instrument of knowing and an essential principle of contact. In a gestalt therapy training group, for instance, when a student takes that first step of working as therapist, the student entrusts himself or herself to the other people present and to the process of training, and that faith becomes supportive. No matter what, it will turn out for the good because even if the trainee does his or her worst work, the training group will make good use of it. Such faith is one of the means by which the student learns and comes to know the experience of working as a therapist, of taking risks and of experimenting. Without such faith, one would not likely take those steps and find ground underneath.
Just so in the spiritual realm: one steps out believing God for something, and there is further experience; the ground really does show up under the foot, so to speak. One pushes back, toward God, trusting in the relationship, and there is confirming experience; it is a response only those who engage God through dialogical encounter can understand. This is at the core of Martin Buber’s thinking on dialogue.

Kierkegaard’s individualistic, passionate, and decisive faith, Goodman’s ground of faith, and Buber’s encounter with divinity are all at the heart of both existentialism and gestalt therapy. Indeed, gestalt therapy is an existential-phenomenological system that is built solidly on faith. One cannot be present unless one is present authentically and responsible for one’s own experience, but that is risky, and it requires trust in the process. One cannot practice a phenomenological method without exercising perceptual faith, trusting that what one observes of the client and what one experiences in the presence of the client is contact within a real context, forming intentional figures of interest in a natural cycle of formation and destruction.

Indeed, the bracketing involved with such a process is for the purpose of attending to the data themselves, the about-ness of it all, presented to the therapist through the presence of the client. That is perception in the lived-world through the lived-body. Gestalt therapy is also a phenomenological field theory, meaning that the individual experiences of therapist and client meet and form an intersubjective sphere of influence; however, bibli-cally speaking, they are not alone. Instead of a two-person field, it is a three-person field—a meeting of therapist, client, and divinity:

Someone who has learned to yield to the world of “Holy Spirit consciousness” has tapped another reality outside the province of language and rationality. This shifts from the normal analytical arena, where things occur in sequence and on a line, to a more holistic gestaltic perception. It is not enough for someone simply to have had “mystical” experience for this ability to accrue. Indeed, the Scriptures clearly talk of “walking in the Spirit” and “being led by the Spirit” (Rom. 8:1,14; Gal. 5:16). This denotes duration and a learning process, as God the Holy Spirit seeks to teach us to become like Christ. Spirit-directed living has as its result not a separation from humanity, but deep involvement in interpersonal relationships. (Tarr 1985, 13)

By faith, a gestalt therapist can open himself or herself up to the presence of God, seeking God’s help in understanding and working with any given client situation. This is more than a mere cognitive gimmick to shift the thinking of the therapist; by faith, the believing therapist engages in a dialogical relationship with divinity, practicing a partnership with divinity that allows the therapist to ask God’s help to remain present to the client, to risk self-disclosure and authenticity as appropriate, to abide the anxiety of the safe emergency that might not always feel so safe, and thus not to hold so tight to
the therapeutic process. By faith, the therapist can choose to shift the emphasis in how he or she is working, moving from a phenomenological emphasis to a dialogical, or to the freedom of an experiment, or to a field theoretical strategy—all mainstays of gestalt therapeutic process (Brownell in press).

CONCLUSION

Existential faith requires freedom, choice, and authenticity. It takes responsibility for one’s experience. Phenomenological faith includes the automaticity of holistic gestalts in intentional objects of perception and categorial intentionality. It also includes the basic elements of perceptual faith. Biblical faith celebrates the reality, the certainty of things hoped for and the evidence of things unseen. By biblical faith, one enters into dialogical relationship with God and can practice the presence of God in every aspect of life, including that of therapeutic process. Through faith, a person can remain present to contact in the midst of otherwise challenging situations and relationships. Faith is a basic condition and supportive principal of contact by which people come into being and sustain life. Belief in miracles calls on all of these dynamics and thus is not an unexpected phenomenon in a moment or experience of perceived unconventional experience.

NOTES

2. Intentionality is an important construct in phenomenological philosophy and consequently it also pertains to qualitative or phenomenological methods of research in science, as well as to the more phenomenological approaches to psychotherapy such as the Gestalt therapy model described in this chapter.
3. Here, the use of the word intention or the implication of intentionality is to denote purpose or goal. That is in contrast to the phenomenological use of the word, which people often find confusing. Intentionality, in its phenomenological sense, will be defined subsequently in this chapter as well as in this author’s other chapter in this overall work (“Personal Experience, Self-Reporting, and Hyperbole,” volume 3, chapter 11).
4. As already seen, phenomenologists understand differing types of intentionality, sometimes acknowledging a relatively more narrow sense, as in object-directedness, while at other times referring to an openness to the world or “what is ‘other’ (‘alterity’)” (Thompson 2007, 22).

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Faith


One way of understanding the underlying aspects of healing can come from an exploration of specific psychoanalytic concepts regarding the will to live and the will to die. Of particular relevance are the theories of Sigmund Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis, and the more current psychoanalytic theories of the British object relations theorists, especially Melanie Klein. The will to live is articulated psychoanalytically by the theory of *Eros* (life instinct) and the will to die by the theory of *Thanatos* (death instinct), both of which shed light on the process of healing. If one recognizes the mind/body/spirit as whole and indivisible, then the significance of emotional factors in healing is clear. Healing is thus associated with integration and growth and the will to die with disintegration both emotionally and physically. The highlight of this work gives emphasis to the emotional aspects of the healing process.

This chapter explores the concepts of the life and death instincts first conceived by Freud, then further developed by Melanie Klein and her followers. Connections between these theories and the process of healing/integration are identified. An understanding of the early developmental stages of growth is also included, along with a description of factors that inhibit growth. The will to live is a powerful force that can overcome the sabotaging influence of the will to die. The life instinct is viewed as an impetus toward growth, ultimately leading to care and concern for the self as well as others. As such, it may also be seen as a spiritual force consistent with Judeo-Christian religious teachings.
FREUDIAN CONCEPTS OF EROS AND THANATOS

In the early twentieth century, Sigmund Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis, hypothesized two basic instincts inherent in the human condition: the life instinct (the will to live) and the death instinct (the will to die). Eros, the life instinct, includes the contrasting instincts of self-preservation (hunger instincts) and the preservation of the species (love instincts), both of which serve as unifying and binding forces. The life instincts are constructive and are directed toward progress and higher development. Civilization is basically the work of Eros libidinally binding humans to one another in an attempt to preserve life for the human species.¹

Sexuality, an important aspect of Eros, was initially viewed by Freud in the narrow, genital sense of the term but was later expanded to include bodily pleasure, which may or may not serve a reproductive function. Freud used the term libido to refer to the energy of the sexual or love instinct. The aim of the love instinct is to strive after objects and ultimately to preserve the species. Eros also includes the contrasting instincts of ego-love and object-love as Eros can be directed inwardly toward the self or outwardly toward others.

Thanatos (the death instinct) works in opposition to Eros and is a destructive force. It can operate internally and can be largely silently self-destructive, or it can be diverted outwardly and be destructive toward others. Freud posited that unexamined aggression is unhealthy and can lead to physical illness.²

Initially, Freud viewed hate or aggressiveness as closely connected to the instinct of self-preservation and mastery. He viewed hate as older than love and stated that hate is a result of the “narcissistic ego’s primordial repudiation of the external world with its outpouring of stimuli.”³ He noted that the ego develops hate, pursuant to any object that is a source of unpleasurable feelings, and can result in aggressive and destructive inclinations toward the object. He later went on to hypothesize a separate death instinct that seeks to bring about death as a return to an earlier state of being. Aggression and cruelty toward others are now seen in a Freudian perspective as secondary and are derived from the death instinct, which is primarily self-destructive. Freud viewed the constancy principle, the tendency to reduce tension due to stimuli (also termed Nirvana), as a strong support for his hypothesis of the death instinct.⁴

According to Freud, Eros and Thanatos are in constant conflict. However, the death instinct can be neutralized through its fusion with the life instinct. It can also be diverted toward external objects through the destructive or aggressive impulses, or a large extent of the death instinct may remain inside the individual, working in a silent, but self-destructive, manner. Eros attempts to render the death instinct innocuous by diverting the destructiveness or aggression outwardly, where it may be viewed as destructive or as an instinct for mastery or the will to power.
In *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud theorized that the portion of the death instinct that was directed toward the external world could be used to service the life instinct because the individual would be destroying something animate or inanimate in the external world, rather than destroying itself. In other words, self-destruction would increase when there was a restriction of outward aggression. Freud viewed the inclination to aggression as the greatest threat to civilization. Thus civilization is built up at the sacrifice of the individual’s need to express his or her aggressive instincts and results in some unhappiness in the ego at having to sacrifice for the needs of society and in having some of the aggressiveness directed at the self.

Bruno Bettelheim, a psychoanalyst and one of Freud’s followers, argues that much of Freud’s theories are misunderstood due to mistranslation in the English versions of Freud’s writings. He states that the word *instincts* should be translated as *impulses* or *drives*. For example, we may say someone is driven by ambition or fear. Destructive or self-destructive actions may have been provoked by a mostly unconscious death drive or impulse. There is a constant internal struggle between the two contrary impulses, leading to suffering and conflict. As humans, we need to find a way to manage these inner contradictions.

Bettelheim agrees with Freud’s assumption that there are strong destructive impulses within our psyche (soul). Our task is to help the life drive from the potential damage of the darker, more destructive impulses. He advocates psychoanalysis as a way of gaining greater awareness of the darker aspects of life, which can help us to have love and concern, leading to a better life both for ourselves and future generations. Psychoanalysis is “an introspective psychology that tries to elucidate the darkest recesses of our soul—the forces least accessible to our observation.”

Eros, an equally powerful force within, assists us in making relationships better. Bettelheim sums up Freud’s view of the good life as being able to have positive, mutually gratifying, loving relationships and satisfying, meaningful work. This necessitates facing painful realities and difficulties, while maintaining a sense of optimism. Bettelheim ends his book with the following inspirational sentence: “We owe much to those before us and around us who created our humanity through the elevating insights and cultural achievements that are our pride, and make life worth all its pains; and we must recognize, with Freud, what those creators of our humanity did not deny but accepted and endured in the realization that only in conflict with itself can the human heart (as Faulkner said), or the human soul (as Freud would have said) attain what is best in life.” Thus, for Freud, the will to live is strong within us even as we struggle inside with the will to die. Healing comes from the life instinct, as we confront the darker aspects of life, modifying the potential destructiveness within and without.
KLEIN’S CONTRIBUTIONS

Melanie Klein, a psychoanalyst following in the footsteps of Freud, used her clinical work and observations of children to understand and elucidate early emotional development. She became one of the leading British object relations theorists and therapists, helping us to understand the importance of psychic reality and the inner world, not just in childhood, but in adult life as well. In her work, she accepted and expanded Freud’s concepts of the life and death instincts, emphasizing the importance of our relations to objects (others).

From the time of birth, the infant experiences the internal conflict between the life instinct and the death instinct, in addition to experiencing the pains and pleasures of external reality. Much of emotional life can be seen as an interaction between self-preservation, pleasure, love, and hate. To live pleasurably and securely, one needs to manage the destructive forces within. Love is a manifestation of the integrating life force, while hate and cruelty emanate from the more destructive death instinct. Klein posited inherent life and death instincts that immediately give rise to conflicts. The death instinct creates a fear of annihilation and is experienced with anxiety by the infant. The destructive hating feelings are intolerable to the infant as they are felt to be a threat to existence and thus dangerous. He or she deals with these unbearable feelings by projecting aggression out onto an external object, initially, the mother.

The infant is relieved from the fear of annihilation from within but is now in the situation in which the outside world is experienced as dangerous. In particular, the mother is experienced as bad and threatening, resulting in feelings of persecutory anxiety on the part of the infant. The life instinct is also present, creating loving impulses and a need for self-preservation. The infant has an experience with a good mother that is infused with projected libido from the life instincts. The infant experiences gratification, as it feels pleasure and has its needs met. Early objects for the infant are experienced as part objects, which are split into good or bad, ideal or persecutory. The infant attempts to keep in or introject the good object and keep out or project the bad object. Splitting (keeping the good and bad apart) is used as a defense mechanism to keep the good objects safe from the destructive impulses of the death instinct.

Klein’s concept of splitting can be illustrated quite well by children’s literature and play. Superheroes are all good and all powerful and are in conflict with evil figures needing to be conquered. Children prefer endings where good triumphs over evil. There is a clear division between good and evil, with the good representing the loving impulses and the bad representing destructive impulses. Ron Britton, another Kleinian analyst, posits that the arts and literature are attempts to represent externally that which is profoundly internal.
It is interesting to note the constant interplay between internal forces and external reality. External reality, for the infant, is a mix of gratifying experiences, like the warmth, nurturing, and love from the mother, and painful, frustrating experiences of unmet needs. Internally, because of the need to deflect inner hatred and destructiveness, bad objects may be created even if not bad in and of themselves. Unfortunately for the child, a vicious circle may be created if the external environment contains a lack of love and understanding. This may accentuate his or her expectation of a bad world and increase his or her destructive impulses. Similarly, gratifying experiences facilitate the life instinct, fostering growth and integration, leading to a healthy desire to explore reality and further cognitive development.

At this time in the infant's development, the infant perceives and relates to two part objects: the ideal, loving breast and the persecutory, frustrating breast. The infant's wish is to keep the good inside and deflect the bad outside. Klein calls this phase of development the paranoid-schizoid position as it is characterized by splitting (schizoid) and by paranoid persecutory anxiety that is fearful of annihilation. Both loving and destructive impulses are projected and introjected to preserve the good from being destroyed by the bad. The infant's fear of annihilation (from the death instinct) creates anxiety that is defended against by a projection into the external object, making it persecutory, and by aggression directed against this external object. A projection of the life instinct also occurs, resulting in an idealized external object.

At this point, the good and the bad are kept separate or split, and both self and object are split into good and bad parts. The good self and objects are separated from the bad to protect the good from the contamination of destructiveness. Fortunately, as the baby takes in nourishment and love, which support life, he or she takes in loving feelings of the life instinct, which are used to neutralize the destructiveness of the death instinct. As the baby introjects good experiences, he or she internalizes good internal objects, facilitating healthy development. As love predominates, persecutory anxiety decreases, and ego integration and synthesis increase. Positive stimuli in the infant's environment reinforce trust, while negative environmental stimuli, such as lack of love and nurturance, reinforce splitting, disintegration, and persecutory anxiety. In addition, Klein noted that in some infants, aggression is innately strong, leading to difficulty tolerating frustration and anxiety.

There is a constant interplay between environmental factors and constitutional factors in the emotional growth of the baby.

As the infant continues to develop normally, at about six months of age, he or she gradually enters what Klein termed the depressive position. The child begins to become aware that there are good aspects to the bad or frustrating objects, and bad aspects of the good or ideal objects, and that indeed, they are really one whole object with good and bad parts. The experience of love and
hatred become closer together, resulting in feelings of ambivalence toward the mother and others important to the infant. As a good object becomes introjected, there is a feeling of a good internal object that reduces persecutory anxiety. The ego becomes more integrated and synthesized. The baby also becomes more aware and tolerant of his or her own aggressive impulses and has less need to project the bad outwardly.

Along with this process of decreasing projection and splitting, there is consequently less need to fear the persecution of others. The infant’s anxiety in the depressive position is no longer persecutory, but is of a fear of causing harm to his or her objects, upon which he or she pours love and depends. This creates feelings of depressive anxiety and guilt. “The depressive conflict is a constant struggle between the infant’s destructiveness and his love and reparative impulses. Failure of reparation leads to despair, its success to renewed hope.”

Normally, the infant is able to work through these feelings, and reality testing increases; that is, there is a better capacity to differentiate unrealistic phantasy (inner psychic reality) and external reality. There is an inhibition of aggressive impulses, and efforts at reparation are made when he or she experiences feelings of guilt for hurting his or her loved object. As this developmental process occurs, he or she becomes more aware of self as separate from love objects. The child feels concern for others and is aware of his or her own impulses of love and hate.

Klein called the paranoid schizoid and depressive processes positions, rather than stages, to emphasize that they both recur throughout life and that the anxieties associated with each position are never fully worked through. Initially, the baby alternates between experiences of disintegration and integration and then gradually develops more integration and a greater capacity to relate to a whole object or person toward whom he or she has ambivalent feelings. The healthy object relation is neither all bad (persecutory object) nor all good (idealized object), but rather is a whole, with both gratifying and frustrating aspects.

When development is healthy, the death instinct is in service of the life instinct, resulting in healthy aggression. If the death instinct is predominant, perversions may occur. It is hoped that the depressive position will have sufficient resolution and that the infant will have a strong capacity to retain good objects internally. The child will need these good internal objects to help him or her later, as he or she experiences the realities of life that always include situations of loss and feelings of anxieties related to guilt and ambivalence.

John Steiner emphasizes Klein’s view of normal splitting as important for healthy development. Splitting is a way of helping the infant organize the chaos of postnatal experience. If there are sufficient good experiences, the infant can grow in a healthy way, and splitting is decreased. When the environment does not provide sufficient nurturing, the infant’s persecutory anxieties and fear of annihilation are not allayed, and the splitting becomes
pathological. In this situation, the infant relies on splitting as its main strategy for survival, and growth is impeded. In healthy development, integration of self and object occurs, and the infant’s focus is no longer on self-survival. Instead, he or she is able to tolerate his or her dependence on the object and have feelings of love and concern.

Envy was viewed by Klein as a derivative of the death instinct and as a hostile, life-destroying force. Along with the experience and recognition of needs, there is a painful awareness of dependence and a hatred of needy feelings and the needed good object. Envy is aroused by feelings of gratification experienced from the object and because of the goodness of the object. Awareness of separateness and the value of the object also stimulate envy. Envy begins as a destructive spoiling function, when it is realized that one cannot possess the needed other. The infant spoils the object to rid himself or herself of the painful, envious feelings. Unfortunately, envy hinders healthy development in light of the fact that when the good object is turned bad, there is no longer a good object to internalize. If the envy is not too powerful, it can become integrated, and healthy feelings of love and admiration will occur. Feelings of gratitude can overcome and modify feelings of envy.17

One of Klein’s major theoretical contributions was her understanding of manic defenses. As the infant develops, he or she experiences painful feelings of dependence on a valued object (mother), ambivalence, fear of loss, separation, and guilt. Manic defenses are erected to protect the ego from psychic pain and feelings of despair. They are used as a way to defend against the reality of the vulnerability of the human experience, including the limitations of the self and others. When manic defenses are operating, objects are treated with feelings of contempt, control, and triumph. The object is devalued, controlled, defeated, and attacked, eliminating the need for painful feelings of dependence, loss, concern, and guilt.18

Herbert Rosenfeld, one of Klein’s followers, expanded on Klein’s theories by exploring the destructive aspects of narcissistic object relationships and the importance of understanding these dynamics in psychoanalysis.19 He describes the prominent role that omnipotence plays in narcissistic object relations and states that objects are treated as the baby’s possession and are used as containers for undesirable parts of the self to rid the self of pain and anxiety. Defenses are used to avoid any recognition of separateness between self and object to avoid painful feelings of dependence and the anxieties that result from the inevitable frustrations inherent in a dependent relationship. By omnipotently identifying with the object, the narcissist avoids the painful awareness of envy and the aggressive feelings caused by the frustrations associated with dependence on an object.

Rosenfeld goes on to say that in severe narcissistic disorders, rigid defenses are erected against any awareness of psychic reality. In these disorders, the anxiety that results from any conflicts between parts of the self or between the self and reality is intolerable and thus evacuated into the object.
In analysis, the patient desires a lavatory mother, into whom he or she can discharge everything unpleasant and relieve himself or herself. Progress in the analysis is made only when the patient is able to acknowledge the feeding function of the analyst, to recognize the analyst as separate, and to accept the attendant depressive anxieties and frustrations.

In a later paper, Rosenfeld further elaborates this process by saying that the narcissistic patient would like to believe that he or she has given life to himself or herself, and can certainly look after self, not needing anyone. He or she reacts destructively to evidence that he or she is dependent on the analyst and may act out in self-destructive ways. This dynamic parallels how the young child was unable to accept dependency on the mother earlier in life. At times, these patients may devalue the analyst's work. “In this way they assert their superiority over the analyst representing life and creativity by wasting or destroying his work, understanding, and satisfaction. They feel superior in being able to control and withhold those parts of themselves which want to depend on the analyst as a helpful person.”

The conflict between the destructive and libidinal parts is resolved by getting rid of the loving, dependent part of the self, being left with only the destructive, narcissistic part. The patient is then able to feel superior and avoid the envy, conflict, and anxieties that accompany awareness of the dependent self.

Rosenfeld also links the destructive, narcissistic parts of self, in some cases, to psychotic structures or organizations that are split off from the rest of the personality. This psychotic structure may be dominated by an omnipotent notion that there can be complete painlessness within the delusional object, which may provide the patient with a false sense of security by promising quick, painless solutions to all conflicts and problems. Clearly this is quite seductive and can lure any sane parts into the delusional structure. This part of the personality perceives progress as quite dangerous, which may lead to a severe negative therapeutic reaction.

When this occurs, the patient may lose contact with his or her capacity for thinking and sense of reality. The patient may withdraw from the world and often feels drugged. This may be accompanied by a desire to stay in bed, missed sessions, and complaints of feeling trapped and claustrophobic. When this occurs, the sane, dependent part of the self has become completely dominated by the destructive, omnipotent, narcissistic self and must be recovered through analysis.

The analyst must also work to uncover and expose the destructive, omnipotent parts of the self. “In other words, the patient becomes gradually aware that he is dominated by an omnipotent infantile part of himself which not only pulls him away towards death but infantilizes him and prevents him from growing up, by keeping him away from objects who could help him to achieve growth and development.”
Rosenfeld also discusses a clinical approach to the theory of the life and death instincts, describing the difference between the libidinal and destructive aspects of narcissism. According to Rosenfeld, the violence of the destructive impulses can vary from person to person and can oscillate within the same individual. In other words, there may be times when the libidinal, life-generating aspects predominate, and other times when the destructive aspects are dominant. When the libidinal aspects are dominant, the person is able to recognize the separateness and the value of a needed object—the analyst, for example—and to experience conscious envy of the object’s good qualities.

In contrast, there are times when the destructive aspects are dominant and manifest as a wish to destroy the object as the source of goodness, and also destroy the self. There may be a wish to die, and death may be viewed as a solution to the problems of life. The most dangerous situation is that in which there is a severe split, making the destructive aspects completely defused from the libidinal, caring self. So the life instinct allows the individual to be in contact with a loving self who needs and is concerned for others, while the destructiveness of the death instinct despises this loving, dependent self and attempts to eliminate these feelings.

Instead, the destructive self retreats into narcissism, admiring the self, devaluing others, and feeling superior. There is a sense of self-sufficiency and a denial of need for relationships with others. Clearly this interferes with healthy development since it prevents the person from turning to others, who could help him grow. A positive, libidinal, dependent self is important in establishing healthy object relations and neutralizing the destructive narcissism.

Hanna Segal and David Bell indicate that narcissistic object relations are a result of splitting of good and bad objects internally and are characteristic of the paranoid/schizoid position. The aim is to protect the good self and objects from the murderous objects that contain the split-off aggression. Like Rosenfeld, they indicate that the person with narcissistic object relations is not able to bear the anxieties of the depressive position, which include anxieties about separation, the fear of loss, and the guilt and concern about damaging good objects. The person is also not able to bear the envy that comes with recognizing the goodness of the object.

As these anxieties become more tolerable, the person will develop a greater capacity for differentiating self and object and a firmer relation to internal and external reality. The person with narcissistic object relations uses projective identification to omnipotently deny and project aspects of the self. The object then becomes identified with those projected aspects, and its real properties are obscured. Narcissistic patients are thought to be equally prone either to idealize or denigrate their objects and have a profound incapacity to see objects as they really are.
According to Segal and Bell, the ego of the narcissistic person is weakened through the excessive use of denial and projection. He or she can also be quite paranoid and become preoccupied with the state of his or her objects. In analysis, he or she may be quite attentive in terms of what the analyst’s interpretations suggest about the state of mind of the analyst. Klein’s 1946 paper is cited, in which she referred to schizoid object relations, which is the term used by Klein for these clinical phenomena. In this paper, Klein aptly described the relationships of these patients to be either detached, due to the fear of the objects, felt to contain the terrifying projected aspects of themselves, or to be clinging and compulsive, due to a fear that losing the object means the annihilation of parts of themselves.

Segal and Bell also explain the role of envy in narcissistic disorders. Since the narcissist hates the very goodness of his or her objects, he or she is unable to acknowledge the objects’ worth and separateness, and thus enviously attacks and devalues them. The child then feels persecuted because he or she has turned the objects into persecutors through the process of projection. Segal and Bell believe that ultimately, more normal object relations can only be achieved when the depressive position has been established. It is only in this position that there is a differentiation of self from object. This allows the object to be out of the subject’s control and allows the person to negotiate the oedipal conflicts of the object’s relations to other objects.

To grow and develop, there needs to be a sane awareness of the need for nourishment and dependence on an external object that is not under the control of the self. The narcissistic aspects of the person violently object to this reality, preferring to exist in a superior state of narcissistic self-sufficiency. There may become a hatred of life and an idealization of death, which is then viewed as a state in which the patient is free of need and frustration. The life and death instincts are seen as in constant conflict with the feelings of love and gratitude being pitted against feelings of hatred and envy.

EMOTIONAL HEALING AND INTEGRATION

In the context of this chapter, emotional healing is conceptualized as emotional growth and development, leading to a healthier state of mind. Although beyond the scope of this chapter, it is generally well accepted that psychological health also improves physical health and well-being. One avenue of potential healing comes from psychoanalysis, which, if successful, results in increased psychological integration and psychic change. Previously split off or repressed feelings may be experienced; relationships are more valued, and people are seen as separate, more whole people, toward whom we have ambivalent feelings. The individual grows in his or her capacity to take responsibility for loving and hating impulses, consistent with the Klein’s depressive position. As Betty Joseph, another Kleinian analyst, states, “It means
developing beyond feelings of omnipotence and narcissistic illusions into a world of real people, towards whom guilt and loss can be experienced and overcome and inner confidence built up.”

These are several of the kinds of changes that are seen as desirable for a healthier life.

In psychoanalysis, the analyst observes and interprets the shifts between the anxieties and defenses of the paranoid-schizoid position and the anxieties and defenses of the depressive position. These processes, previously unknown and unconscious to the patient, become conscious with the help of the analyst. The strengthening of the ego and the insight gained in analysis help the individual to work through conflicts, as opposed to denial or acting out. The analysis, over time, gradually leads to a decrease in splitting, allowing an internalization of a good object. “This mitigates the destructiveness of the early superego, helps the integration of the ego, and increases its strength.” This process parallels the growth of the child in early development, as there is a gradual withdrawal of projections and a more integrated self and object.

Segal views narcissism as a result of envy and the death instincts, which attack healthy self-love and the life-giving relationships of others. In contrast, the life instinct creates the capacity to love the self, while at the same time loving others. In other words, self-love is not at the expense of others, nor is the love of others at the expense of the self. Analysis supports the life instinct, helping one tolerate feelings of dependency and love of the needed other.

In addition, there is a greater self-love and inner confidence of the good inside. Growth occurs as the patient acknowledges the internal conflict of the constructive and destructive impulses, including unwanted feelings of neediness, envy, and aggression. The patient begins to understand that his or her feelings are rooted in the inherent frustrations of the early maternal relationship and is able to take responsibility for his or her feelings and actions. Greater understanding and insight lead to a stronger capacity for integration, love, and gratitude. There is a hope that loving impulses and the will to live predominates over hatred and the destructive impulses.

Catalina Bronstein, in her book on Kleinian theory, reiterates Klein’s emphasis on the importance of the integration of the destructive impulses with the more benign impulses. In clinical work, this may be seen as the patient develops a less severe superego (conscience) and a greater capacity for repairing the damage done to his or her objects. The patient also feels more trust in his or her inner goodness, a stronger capacity to tolerate anxiety, more feelings of love and peace, and consequently, improved relationships with others.

These ideas pertaining to the healing power of the will to live hopefully overcoming the inner destructive impulses (the will to die) are viewed as quite consistent with Judeo-Christian teachings. Mature religions view envy
and omnipotence (pride) as destructive (evil), having negative consequences. Redemption and reparation are needed to repair the damage done to human-kind. Spiritual healing is needed to transform the destructiveness into constructiveness.

Neville Symington makes a distinction between primitive religions, which are more concerned with external appearances and placative acts, and mature religions, which have as their aim an actual transformation of the mind and the heart. “Mature religion is concerned with how we should live and act toward our neighbor and toward ourselves.” Amos and Isaiah, Jewish prophets in the Old Testament, and Jesus of the New Testament proclaimed this as their central message. Transformation of the heart, leading to acts of goodness, social justice, and helping the oppressed, are valued over external rituals and sacrifices.

Symington views this goal of transformation as a shared goal of psychoanalysis and mature religion. The self-knowledge gained from psychoanalysis is viewed as inseparable from acts of virtue, particularly as one relates emotionally to others in close relationships. In psychoanalysis, this transformation occurs as a natural result of increased integration and decreased narcissism and omnipotence. In the Christian faith, compassion for others is one of the fruits of the divine spirit in us.

NOTES

5. Freud, Civilization.
7. Ibid., 108.
8. Ibid., 112.
14. Segal, Introduction, 73.
21. Ibid., 174–75.
29. For a more complete discussion of recent thought regarding similarities and differences in psychoanalysis and religion, the reader is referred to David Black, *Psychoanalysis and Religion in the 21st Century: Competitors or Collaborators?* (London: Routledge, 2006). The contributors of this interesting and engaging book offer various perspectives on highly controversial issues, including the issue of religious truth, psychological truths in religious stories, the nature of religious experience, and the interplay between psychoanalysis and specific religious traditions.

REFERENCES

For many Christians, prayers for healing and the sick emanate directly from the Bible. The Bible discusses many cases of divinely inspired healing (e.g., Matthew 15:29–31: New American Standard Version [NASV]),¹ and approximately 72 percent of Americans believe that praying to God can cure someone, even if science says the person does not stand a chance (Newsweek Poll 2003). Earlier, a 1996 Gallup poll found that 82 percent of Americans believe in the healing power of personal prayer and 77 percent agreed with the statement that God sometimes intervenes to cure people who have a serious illness (Poloma and Gallup 1991). Thus it is safe to say that prayer is biblically founded and believed to have a healing effect by a majority of Americans.

But what is prayer? Are there different types of prayer? Has prayer been scientifically proven to ameliorate physical problems and facilitate healing? What are some of the difficulties and limitations in the study of prayer and physical healing? This chapter is designed to address these questions and is organized in the following way. First, different types of prayer found in the research literature will be defined to provide the foundation for later discussion on prayer and healing. The chapter then moves on to outline selected empirical findings from both quantitative and qualitative research paradigms regarding prayer and physical healing. Finally, some of the difficulties associated with the study of prayer will be addressed. The chapter concludes with several summary statements regarding what we do know about prayer and physical healing, along with suggestions for future research.

Researchers in the area have identified up to 21 different types of prayer (McCullough and Larson 1999). Indeed, there is a prayer for physicians and...
healers that first appeared in print in 1793. The Maimonides’s daily prayer of a physician is said to have been written by a twelfth-century philosopher named Moses Maimonides and is often recited by newly graduated medical students. Later writers indicate that the prayer was likely written by Marcus Herz, who was a German physician and pupil of Immanual Kant. The Maimonides Prayer reads, in part, as follows:

In Thine Eternal Providence Thou hast chosen me to watch over the life and health of Thy creatures. I am now about to apply myself to the duties of my profession. Support me, Almighty God, in these great labors that they may benefit mankind, for without Thy help not even the least thing will succeed.

More recently, and out of the 21 identified types of prayer, empirical studies have made a distinction between the broad categories of ritual, conversational, meditative, and petitionary prayer (Poloma and Gallup 1991). Ritual prayer is that kind of prayer commonly found at formal religious services and is often found in liturgical church services. Conversational prayer involves talking with God in a small group in a normal tone of voice and in an informal, conversational style. It is thought to produce a greater awareness of God’s presence and be useful in teaching others how to pray. Meditative prayer has a variety of connotations; however, it is characterized by a relaxing and “being with God” that is thought to reduce expectations that people should be doing something in prayer. A common meditative prayer may start with relaxation and thankfulness, combined with openness to hearing God’s word. When it comes to prayers directed toward healing, petitionary prayers are those that ask for divine intervention into sickness and life-threatening illnesses. It is primarily this type of prayer that is the focus of this chapter.

It is noteworthy that there are many terms used in the literature that refer to prayer-like behavior. These terms are not necessarily interchangeable. Terms such as psychic healing, nonmedical healing, spiritual healing, miracle healing, and laying on of hands have been used in published studies. Hence there is no agreement on language or on definitions when referring to prayer, prayer-like behavior, and physical healing.

In terms of healing, petitionary prayers may be further distinguished according to who is praying for whom or whether there is physical distance involved (distant intercessory prayer). Furthermore, the frequency and intensity of prayer and formal versus private versions of prayer have not been adequately addressed as variables that may or may not be important (Krause 2000) in studying possible links between prayer and physical health. There has also been little empirical attention addressing other aspects of prayer such as how many people are praying, or their faith traditions, or whether the person being prayed for has a religious or nonreligious worldview.
Empirical study of prayer and physical health has yielded inconsistent findings. Indeed, some authors have questioned whether it is even appropriate, both theoretically and methodologically, to claim to study the effects of prayer (Masters 2005). In terms of inconsistent empirical findings, McCullough and Larson (1999) have suggested that failure to consistently relate frequency of prayer to measures of health likely results from methodological problems. Some common design problems include use of single-item measurement of constructs, different and uncontrolled sample characteristics, and choice of outcomes. Furthermore, authors typically have failed to include appropriate design or statistical control of extraneous variables such as baseline health, religious commitment, personality, and ethnicity (McCullough and Larson 1999). Because of this, many extant studies of the relation between prayer and health may not be comparable, and there is also an absence of replication of findings in the literature. Limitations of research designs and criticisms of this field of study will be more fully discussed subsequently.

**EMPIRICAL FINDINGS**

By far, the most researched form of prayer directed toward healing is distance intercessory prayer (IP), defined as prayer offered for the healing benefit of another person (Tlocynski and Fritzsch 2002). This prayer is directed toward the well-being of others and may be performed by strangers, family members, acquaintances, or service providers. The one being prayed for may or may not be aware of the prayer on his or her behalf. IP is directed toward God or a transcendent being, and the person praying believes that this may effect change and promote healing in another person.

From a historical perspective, perhaps one of the most famous studies of IP was published by Byrd in 1988, and this set the stage for a firestorm of controversy that continues to the present. In essence, this study used a randomized double-blind trial of 393 coronary care unit (CCU) patients, who were prayed for by Christian prayer groups (intercessors). The patients who were prayed for demonstrated fewer instances of congestive heart failure, pneumonia, and cardiopulmonary arrest. Furthermore, they exhibited less need for antibiotics, intubation, and diuretics. Byrd (1988) concluded that IP had a beneficial effect on CCU patients; however, later authors have noted that the Byrd (1988) study examined 29 outcome variables and only established six positive outcomes for the prayed-for group (Sloan, Bagiella, and Powell 2001). This fact, combined with the failure to control for multiple comparisons, calls into question whether IP truly had an effect on these six outcomes (Sloan, Bagiella, and Powell 2001).

Since this early study, there have been many empirical and quantitative studies reported in the research literature. As noted earlier, findings are
often contradictory. For example, Harris et al. (1999) reported on a randomized trial of distant IP on various outcomes with coronary care patients. These authors randomly assigned coronary care patients into two groups. The control group received the usual medical care, and the treatment group received distant prayer from interdenominational Christians for outcomes such as faster recovery or no complications. The group that received prayer demonstrated significantly better progress on such things as speed of recovery; however, Chibnall, Jeral, and Cerullo (2001) note that there have been similarly designed studies that have not produced conclusive findings.

For example, a long-awaited study that used state-of-the-art scientific procedures found no effect for IP (Benson et al. 2006). More specifically, distant IP had no effect on whether cardiac bypass surgery patients experienced complications. In this study, patients were randomly assigned into three groups: group 1 received IP after being told they may or may not receive prayer; group 2 did not receive IP, after being told they may or may not be prayed for; and group 3 received IP after being told they would receive it. The patients in group 2, the group not receiving prayer, fared slightly better than the patients in group 1, who did receive IP. A provocative finding was that patients in group 3, who knew they were being prayed for, fared the worst. Complications within 30 days of surgery occurred as follows: group 1, 52 percent; group 2, 51 percent; and group 3, 59 percent. One of the cardiologists who participated in this study observed that one possible reason that group 3 had a poorer outcome was that knowledge of being prayed for may have had an unexpected side effect of frightening the patients—hence accounting for greater complications; however, this remains to be seen. It is noteworthy that this particular study involved IP, not prayer for self or prayer from close friends and relatives.

Since single studies do vary by research design, participant sample, and procedures, it is often difficult to draw a singular conclusion to the question of whether IP affects healing. One way to attempt to summarize studies is through meta-analysis, which is when the researcher combines the findings from a number of studies by statistically integrating the various sets of results (Sprinthall 2007). Thus the researcher collects a number of studies focused on prayer and healing and reviews them. Statistics are used for estimating the effect size to predict the actual population effects. An effect size of zero indicates that the independent variable (IP) had no effect on the dependent variable (various healing outcomes such as need for surgery or time to recovery). An estimated effect size of 0.8 would indicate a very strong effect for IP on healing outcomes such as surgical complications.

In meta-analysis, which uses a number of different studies, an effect size of 0.8 would be very strong evidence for the effect of prayer on healing insofar as the effect of prayer has cut across different research settings, participants, and methods (Sprinthall, Schmutte, and Sirois 1990). Hence a better understanding
can be achieved regarding the effect of prayer on healing through use of meta-analysis. This is particularly the case when different studies yield different findings regarding this relationship.

There have been two recent meta-analyses on the effect of IP on healing outcomes. Masters, Spielmans, and Goodson (2006) included 14 studies in their meta-analysis. To be included, the studies (1) used IP as an intervention in either physical or mental health disorders, (2) were sufficiently empirical to provide data to be used in the meta-analysis, (3) used a control or comparison group, and (4) had participants who were blind as to whether they were in the IP versus the control group. Medical/healing outcomes ranged from events within cardiac patients (Aviles et al. 2001) to complications related to dialysis (Matthews, Conti, and Sireci 2001). Masters, Spielmans, and Goodson (2006) also examined whether certain aspects of study participants and particular research designs had an impact on overall findings. Specifically, the impact of types of participants, frequency and duration of prayer intervention, and assignment of participants to experimental conditions was assessed to establish whether these factors had an influence on IP and outcome variables.

The meta-analytic findings from the Masters, Spielmans, and Goodson (2006) study were not positive. These authors found no support for any effect of IP on medical/health outcomes. Furthermore, study design characteristics, such as types of participants and their assignment to groups and frequency of prayer, did not moderate or influence any potential effect of IP on outcome variables. They concluded, “There is no scientifically discernable effect for IP as assessed in controlled studies. Given that the IP literature lacks a theoretical or theological base and has failed to produce significant findings in controlled trials, we recommend that further resources not be allocated to this line of research” (Masters, Spielmans, and Goodson 2006, 21). Hence this meta-analytic review found such a notable lack of support for IP on influencing medical/health outcomes that the authors could find no justification for further study on the topic.

A more recent meta-analysis was a bit more positive. Hodge (2007) examined 17 studies on IP and health. Inclusion criteria for these studies were as follows: (1) studies used IP as an intervention that was (2) used with a population of clients or patients for healing. Furthermore, included studies were designed to examine the efficacy of the intervention (prayer) using double-blind randomized control trial methodology (RCT). In RCT, research participants and the researcher are kept blind, or uninformed, about who is receiving the IP. Participants are randomly assigned to either a prayed-for group (the experimental or treatment group) or a group not receiving prayer (the control group). Single case studies and studies using personal prayer (as opposed to IP) were excluded from Hodge’s (2007) study. Across the 17 studies, outcomes varied from mortality, complications, and major events within
recovering cardiac bypass patients (Benson et al. 2006) to abstinence from alcohol abuse (Walker et al. 1997).

Hodge’s (2007) meta-analysis indicated significant, but small effect sizes for IP across the 17 reviewed studies. Although this is generally a positive finding, it is interesting to briefly consider these studies when grouped into significant versus nonsignificant findings.

Five of the 17 studies did not find significant effects for IP on various healing outcomes with diverse medical ailments. Prayer was not found to have a significant effect on patients receiving treatment for cardiac bypass surgery (Benson et al. 2006), alcohol abuse (Walker et al. 1997), kidney dialysis (Mathews, Conti, and Sireci 2001), or psychiatric disorders (Mathai and Bourne 2004) and on patients receiving heart surgery (Seskevich et al. 2004).

Three of the 17 studies found significant effects for IP with cardiac patients (Byrd 1988; Harris et al. 1999; Furlow and O’Quinn 2002). Three additional studies found significant effects for IP with AIDS (Sicher et al. 1998), bloodstream infections (Leibovici 2001), and women receiving treatment for infertility (Cha and Wirth 2001). One study found significance for in-person IP but not for distance prayer for women with arthritis (Matthews, Marlowe, and MacNutt 2000).

Finally, five of the studies found a favorable trend for a positive effect of IP on health outcomes, despite lack of statistical significance. Three of these studies examined the effect of IP on cardiac patients with heart disease (Aviles et al. 2001) and those receiving heart surgery (Krucoff et al. 2001, 2005). Two older studies found a positive trend with patients with rheumatic disease (Joyce and Welldon 1965) and children with leukemia (Collipp 1969).

It is important to note that both the Masters, Spielmans, and Goodson (2006) and Hodge (2007) meta-analyses only included quantitative studies involving between-group comparisons and use of inferential statistics to gauge the effectiveness of IP. By its nature, meta-analysis does not include qualitative studies or single case studies, where an individual’s subjective experiences regarding prayer and healing can be examined. This being noted, the quantitative research paradigm underlying techniques such as meta-analysis is inconclusive with respect to IP. Along these lines, Hodge concluded (2007, 185), “Indeed, perhaps the most certain result stemming from this study is the following: The findings are unlikely to satisfy either proponents or opponents of intercessory prayer.”

**QUALITATIVE FINDINGS**

Although the above two meta-analytic studies exemplify quantitative work studying the effect of prayer on medical healing, it is important to note that nonexperimental studies on prayer generally provide favorable outcomes (Koenig, McCullough, and Larson 2001). Furthermore, qualitative
and anecdotal reports of prayer and healing abound. These studies range from single case studies to small group studies, with anecdotal reports from patients with a variety of diseases and medical problems. As noted earlier, there are compelling arguments from both theologic and scientific perspectives against the wisdom of subjecting prayer and healing to empirical study (Masters 2005). Hence first-person reports of healing provide a different perspective on the relation between prayer and healing.

Single case studies are reported in many different venues. For example, an Internet Google search for “prayer and healing” found close to 3 million hits, with articles ranging from newspaper reports to publications such as the U.S. Catholic. Anecdotal reports of healing are numerous and often dramatic. For example, there are reports of cancerous tumors that miraculously disappear and healing from terminal illnesses. Reports from both patients and their treating physicians are found.

It is of interest to note that there are entire books devoted to this subject, such as Dr. Larry Dossey’s Healing Words (1993) and Prayer Is Good Medicine (1996). Since there are so many individual reports of (miraculous?) healing, for the purposes of this chapter, one exemplar will be described (Dubois 1997). Oncology nurse Cindy Thomas took a parish-based class on healing in 1984 and subsequently added prayer for her patients as she tended to them. She noted immediate results, when patients told her they felt better or slept better than before. She then started praying for guidance as she drove to work as well as individually praying for her patients. Some patients began to ask her to pray with them, and most slept peacefully through the night. Thomas tells a particularly compelling story about a young woman admitted to Providence Hospital in Everett, Washington, who had a deadly form of cancer in the lining of her heart. Thomas worked with the family and learned they had already experienced the tragic deaths of two children. According to a report,

Thomas took the woman’s hands and said, “You’ve had enough tragedy. It’s time to pray for a miracle. You’re due for one.” At 1 a.m. the next morning, the pathologist called the nurses’ station. He sounded confused. “This is a weird thing,” he told Thomas. “Something made me go back to the lab and look at the slides (with the fluid specimen taken from the woman’s heart lining). And they’re completely negative.” “That sounds like a miracle,” Thomas said. “I, I guess it does,” stammered the pathologist. An ultrasound the next morning confirmed the new test results. (Dubois 1997, 3)

Individual reports of healing through prayer are difficult to verify through the scientific method, which typically relies on larger group studies. They are also difficult to examine since they often may involve errors within the diagnostic or prognostic processes, and health professionals are understandably reluctant to divulge such information. Perhaps it is safe to say that many do believe in and report medical miracles and that this is sufficient to conclude
that they do occur. Indeed, valid criticisms of the scientific study of prayer and healing are so strong that qualitative reports may have more veracity than scientific studies.

**DOCTRINAL DIFFERENCES IN BELIEFS ABOUT HEALING PRAYER**

It is significant to note that within various Christian denominations, there are many different views on praying for the sick. Different faith traditions tend to argue that certain forms of prayer are more effective than others, and these discrepancies are often based on a doctrinal emphasis on specific scriptures. For example, some Christians believe that when dealing with sickness, it is important to use the prayer of Jesus for the will of God to be done that he modeled while praying in the garden of Gethsemane in Matthew 26:39–44. Other Christians may argue that when trying to alleviate sickness, it is important to follow Christ’s sage advice that “this kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting” (Mt 17:21). Another group of Christians believes that Satan has significant power to cause sickness, and only by engaging in spiritual warfare can someone be healed of a serious illness.

Certain faith traditions believe that prayer for healing requires a certain level of faith to work, while others believe that “faith like a mustard seed” can accomplish miracles, including the healing of the sick (Lk 17:6). Some Christians believe that God heals who he will and has predestined all of the ways of a man, while others believe that it is possible to change God’s mind on a number of issues that could encompass healing. With such a diversity of theological beliefs in regard to prayer for healing, it is clear that major difficulties would exist in standardizing the form and content of prayer that is offered for healing. There is not room to completely explain all of the theological implications encountered when trying to conduct this type of research, but these examples suffice to illustrate the diversity of prayer practices encountered when evaluating prayers for the sick in the Christian community.

**Practical Problems with Prayer Research Based on Doctrinal Differences**

Differences in Christian doctrines of praying for the sick could play out in scientific studies. For instance, consider an intercessor who believes that a so-called healer or someone with a gift of healing must touch or lay hands on a sick person so that he or she can be healed. If this person were asked to engage in distant IP, he or she would likely experience cognitive dissonance because this is not how the person has been taught that prayer is supposed to work—or at least be the most effective. The argument could be made that when asked to do distant IP for a research study, intercessors who practice
any different rituals for praying than those required by the study might doubt the efficacy of the prayer and thus not have faith that it will work.

Benson et al. (2006) note that many intercessors felt constrained by the limits or methodological controls that were used to ensure a good empirical design. Rather than pray from a distance, the intercessors were accustomed to having personal contact with the families and individuals for whom they were interceding. Perhaps this is a confound to the research, and typical in-person IP could be more beneficial to a person’s health, if simply for the increased social support that patients receive during this time. In fact, this is consistent with the empirical study of Matthews, Marlowe, and MacNutt (2000) mentioned earlier, who found an effect for in-person prayer but not for distant IP. Of course, this type of finding would not prove that there is a God or that prayer works. However, in an indirect way, this conceivably shows that the way God’s people function when a member of their faith group becomes sick does actually have beneficial health effects.

David Myers (2000), an author of introductory psychology textbooks and an outspoken critic of the empirical investigation of prayer, still commends a multiplicity of research studies on people of faith. Some of these studies have found that people with an active faith are healthier on a variety of health and mental health domains. Myers points out, for example, that after controlling for other pertinent variables, people of faith cope better with life events and report more happiness, while actually living longer as well. This latter finding remains salient even when healthy lifestyle choices are controlled for.

FURTHER CHALLENGES IN THE STUDY OF PRAYER AND HEALTH

As noted earlier, there have been critics of the theoretical, theological, and scientific fallacy of subjecting IP to empirical study. Masters (2005) provides an excellent treatise on this issue. Although the reader is referred to Masters’ publication, it is worthwhile to briefly outline some of his concerns. First, many quantitative studies of IP and health are not properly grounded in theory, perhaps because there is no theory that is applicable or appropriate. If a group that is prayed for does better than one that is not (the control group), why would this be the case? Masters notes that God would not be preferential toward one group versus the other simply because an individual who needed healing ended up in a control group. Similarly, many studies do not examine whether those in the control group were prayed for by those close to them, which leads to another troubling theoretical conundrum: Why would prayer by a stranger (intercessor) be more effective than prayer from loved ones? Similarly, if IP does not have an effect, does this mean that God did not want to help or that prayer is useless? There are no theologically sound answers to these questions.
This lack of answers to theory-driven questions confounds the ability of the research to provide meaningful findings. Masters (2005) also notes that methodological choices of instruments used and samples chosen are similarly hampered by the lack of a cogent theory to guide the study of IP and health. The choice of outcome measures often lacks a rationale. Similarly, there is no theory to guide the choice of patient samples or of the intercessors themselves.

Masters (2005) presents convincing arguments that empirical studies are not appropriate to the study of IP and advocates that research resources be allocated to other, more appropriate religious/spiritual topics that can be studied scientifically. Masters concludes (2005, 268), “It is further argued that the experimental methods of science are based on important assumptions that render them ill-equipped to study divine intervention. As a result IP studies are seen as a distraction from more appropriate work that should be done in the areas of religion and health.”

Along these lines, some writers have identified potential ethical problems associated with concluding that IP has a positive effect on health variables, when it actually does not, and strongly caution that prayer as an adjunct to medical interventions should not be prescribed. Although directed toward physicians, Sloan, Bagiella, and Powell (2001) note that issues of coercion, privacy, doing harm, and discrimination may arise should a physician suggest prayer or religious/spiritual activities to a patient, particularly in the absence of a sound body of research literature validating the effect of prayer on healing. The reader is referred to this work for a more in-depth discussion of these ethical considerations.

It is clear that some of the criticisms of the methodology for the studies that do exist on prayer and healing include significant problems operationalizing constructs like prayer, faith, and intercessory. It is also very difficult to reduce error variance among those praying. For instance, do some people pray longer than others? Are there some who pray outside of the appointed times to pray for the suffering victim? If someone has a gift of compassion and is in close communion with God, is it difficult for that person to stop “praying without ceasing”? Some researchers have made significant efforts to control for these factors, but these efforts beg the question whether a scripted prayer can truly be considered intercessory.

**SUMMARY**

Given the conclusions of the two meta-analyses provided by Masters, Spielmans, and Goodson (2006) and Hodge (2007), it is difficult to conclude that IP has an effect on healing. However, this conclusion must be tempered by the limitations of the quantitative research tradition and whether quantitative group studies of distant intercessory prayer are even an appropriate tool to study prayer, faith, and health. Furthermore, there is a lack of theological
rationale and integrated theory guiding the empirical research to date (Masters 2005). This lack may well explain the absence of sound and replicable empirical findings.

Perhaps researchers should listen to the advice of both Myers (2000) and Masters (2005), suggesting that it is time to put resources toward more measurable and clear domains than the effect of IP on health; however, this suggestion does not preclude the consideration of prayer as a predictive factor for many other positive outcomes. For instance, Butler, Stout, and Gardner (2002) found that married couples who prayed together had attitudes that enhanced conflict-resolution skills and more productive problem-solving skills. They suggest that further research should be conducted to determine whether prayer could be used as an effective intervention for religious couples in therapy. Case and McMinn (2001) found that spiritual practices, such as prayer, serve to mediate anxiety for religious psychologists, and these psychologists also perceive prayer to be one of the practices important to healthy functioning in their professional roles. So, clearly, it is possible to use empirical research to demonstrate that prayer, or at least the ritual of prayer, can have positive effects on mental and psychological health outcomes. The difference is the consideration of the ritual of prayer as an effective coping mechanism or practice within a constellation of other religious and spiritual variables versus an attempt to prove that the content of a prayer is directly responsible for an outcome such as better health. The latter approach approximates testing God and/or prayer to deliver a predetermined outcome, while the former allows for the act of prayer to be a helpful practice, without relying solely on the prayer’s content.

Although IP has been the dominant area for research into prayer and health outcomes, it may well be that directions for future research should include more emphasis on qualitative research such as single case studies. This will not negate the criticisms put forth by several authors, particularly those criticisms aimed at the lack of theological or theoretical rationale. However, single case studies that are subjected to verification processes may continue to be descriptive of individual experiences and be heuristic for future researchers.

**NOTE**

1. Please note that all bible quotations in this chapter are taken from the New American Standard Version [NASV].

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Conclusion

J. Harold Ellens

The 15 chapters in this volume represent the careful work of 18 scholars, representing a number of different countries in Africa, North America, and Europe. This work has been made urgently necessary because of the fact that inadequate cooperation has been achieved, so far, between the contribution that the empirical sciences and the biblical and theological sciences can bring to bear on the study of miracles in the ancient world and in our own day. The exact sciences and the psychosocial sciences have tended to follow a trajectory of investigation in one direction, and the biblical and theological or spiritual investigations have tended along a different track. The former, understandably, follow the avenue of the hermeneutic of suspicion, while the latter, also understandably, hold themselves open to a hermeneutic of analytical but less suspicious and more affirming inquiry.

The virtual absence of pages or sections in professional and scientific journals devoted to religious, spiritual, or theological perspectives on issues dealing with paranormal human experiences is most unfortunate. The Journal for Psychology and Christianity and the Journal for Psychology and Theology are virtually alone in the American world as sophisticated, professional journals that regularly seek and publish empirical and clinical research on phenomena in the fields of psychosocial science and spirituality or religion. In the European community, the Journal of Empirical Theology has undertaken similar concerns. Division 36 of the American Psychological Association also deals continually with interests in these matters.

Of course, the function of peer-reviewed journals is to publish replicable research results. However, perhaps a section in each professional journal
should be devoted to reporting incidents of the paranormal so that a universe of discourse and a vehicle for discussion could be developed for taking such data into consideration. At present, such a move is not discussed in the scientific realm because no instrument is available for collecting and processing the data. It is important to create a culture of openness to the paranormal experiences humans have regularly so that the frequency of such events can be understood more clearly, recorded, described, named, categorized, and analyzed.

We may discover, if we create such instruments for raising our consciousness level and increasing our information base, that there are eight things that strike us with surprising urgency. First, we may discover that the incidents of paranormal events are more frequent, or should I say, more normal, than we think. Second, we may discover that they fit into specific patterns that can be categorized and even analyzed more readily than we have imagined. Third, creation of a vehicle for discussion of paranormal data may bring to the surface of our thought processes insights about the nature and sources of paranormal events that are currently ignored because we have not reduced our mystification about them, simply because we have not done the first and second steps above.

Fourth, we may find that the paranormal events are apparently more normal, in terms of the frequency and universality with which humans experience them, than are the normal. Fifth, we may discover that we can establish criteria for sorting out the real from the unreal in what we are now referring to as the mystifying paranormal. Sixth, we may discover that a solicitation of anecdotal reports will produce such a wealth of information as to give rise to an entirely new arena for productive research. If the spirit of God is communicating with our spirits by way of paranormal experiences, presumably it is because God thinks we can hear and interpret the content, making unmystifying sense of it if we study it carefully, just like we have the stuff of this world that we have mastered by our science. Seventh, not all truth is empirical data. A great deal of our understanding of the truth about this mundane world we know from phenomenological investigations and heuristic interpretations. These seem to be trustworthy instruments of research that are particularly suited to investigation of the reported experiences humans have of the paranormal. We should be able, by means of them, to create useful theories, data collections and management systems, hypotheses, and laws regarding the human experiences of the paranormal.

Eighth, if one assumes the existence of God and God’s relationship with the material world, immediately, a great deal of data is evident within the worldview of that hypothesis, suggesting a good deal of available knowledge about God. Much of this is derived from the nature of the universe itself. Much of the evidence for God’s nature and behavior, within that model of investigation, is replicable, predictable, testable, and the like. Why would we
not assume the same is true of the world of the paranormal, if we studied it thoroughly and systematically? We call it paranormal only because we have not yet discovered or created a framework of analysis by which its data can be collected and managed.

Some decades ago, a great deal was made of chaos theory and entropy in interpreting the unknown aspects of the material world, particularly in the field of astrophysics and cosmology. It turned out that we always think things just beyond our model and grasp are chaotic. That is only because we do not understand them, not because they are not coherent, lawful, and predictable. We think things just beyond our ken are chaotic because our paradigm is too limited to manage the data out there. Life is always a process of that kind of growth that requires constant expansion of our paradigms. When we cannot expand our paradigm to take in the next larger world we are discovering, whether because of our fear or blockheadedness, we shrink and wither, and our scientific systems go down.

At this very moment, we stand on a threshold demanding an expansion of our scientific paradigm to take in the data of the paranormal in a manner that it can be brought into new but coherent models of knowledge and understanding. In the first volume of this set, William Wilson said, in chapter 15, that part of the difficulty in studying the spiritual and related paranormal data lies in the fact that each event is intensely personal and unique. Each scientific exploration of that event must deal with an equation in which \( n = 1 \). That makes scientific extrapolations impossible. I suggest, however, that if we undertook the program I proposed earlier, we might well discover that \( n \) equals much more than 1, and in that case, we would be off and running along a trajectory that would teach us how to expand our present limited scientific paradigms to take in the additional real data. We have attempted to begin that enterprise with the first volume and continue in here in this second volume of careful scholarly investigation.
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About the Editor and Advisers

Editor

J. Harold Ellens is a research scholar at the University of Michigan, Department of Near Eastern Studies. He is a retired Presbyterian theologian and ordained minister, a retired U.S. Army colonel, and a retired professor of philosophy, theology, and psychology. He has authored, coauthored, or edited 165 books and 167 professional journal articles. He served 15 years as executive director of the Christian Association for Psychological Studies and as founding editor and editor-in-chief of the Journal of Psychology and Christianity. He holds a PhD from Wayne State University in the Psychology of Human Communication, a PhD from the University of Michigan in Biblical and Near Eastern Studies, and master’s degrees from Calvin Theological Seminary, Princeton Theological Seminary, and the University of Michigan. He was born in Michigan, grew up in a Dutch-German immigrant community, and determined at age seven to enter the Christian Ministry as a means to help his people with the great amount of suffering he perceived all around him. His life’s work has focused on the interface of psychology and religion.

Advisers


**Alfred John Eppens** was born and raised in Michigan. He attended Western Michigan University, studying history under Ernst A. Breisach, and received a BA (summa cum laude) and an MA. He continued his studies at the University of Michigan, where he was awarded a JD in 1981. He is an adjunct professor at Oakland University and at Oakland Community College, as well as an active church musician and director. He is a director and officer of the Michigan Center for Early Christian Studies, as well as a founding member of the New American Lyceum.

**Edmund S. Meltzer** was born in Brooklyn, New York. He attended the University of Chicago, where he received his BA in Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations. He pursued graduate studies at the University of Toronto, earning his MA and PhD in Near Eastern Studies. He worked in Egypt as a member of the Akhenaten Temple Project/East Karnak Excavation and as a Fellow of the American Research Center. Returning to the United States, he taught at the University of North Carolina—Chapel Hill and at The Claremont Graduate School (now University), where he served as associate chair of the Department of Religion. Meltzer taught at Northeast Normal University in Changchun from 1990 to 1996. He has been teaching German and Spanish in the Wisconsin public school system and English as a Second Language in summer programs of the University of Wisconsin. He has lectured extensively, published numerous articles and reviews in scholarly journals, and has contributed to and edited a number of books.

**Jack Miles** is the author of the 1996 Pulitzer Prize winner, *God: A Biography*. After publishing *Christ: A Crisis in the Life of God* in 2001, Miles was named a MacArthur Fellow in 2002. Now Senior Advisor to the President at J. Paul Getty Trust, he earned a PhD in Near Eastern languages from Harvard University in 1971 and has been a regents lecturer at the University of California, director of the Humanities Center at Claremont Graduate University, and visiting professor of humanities at the California Institute of Technology. He has authored articles that have appeared in numerous national publications, including the *Atlantic Monthly*, the *New York Times*, the *Boston Globe*, the *Washington Post*, and the *Los Angeles Times*, where he served for 10 years as literary editor and as a member of the newspaper’s editorial board.

Grant R. Shafer was educated at Wayne State University, Harvard University, and the University of Michigan, where he received his doctorate in Early Christianity. A summary of his dissertation, “St. Stephen and the Samaritans,” was published in the proceedings of the 1996 meeting of the Société d’Études Samaritaines. He has taught at Washtenaw Community College, Siena Heights University, and Eastern Michigan University. He is presently a visiting scholar at the University of Michigan.
About the Contributors

Philip Brownell, MDiv, PsyD, is a graduate of the doctoral program at George Fox University and a registered clinical psychologist, organizational consultant, and coach, living and practicing in Bermuda. He is also a licensed clinical psychologist in Oregon and North Carolina. He has over 30 years of experience working as staff in residential settings, clergy in full-time Christian ministry, as well as psychotherapist and psychologist in outpatient community mental health, senior psychologist for an adolescent sex offender treatment program, and as organizational consultant to international law firms and corporations. He is on the core faculty at the Gestalt Training Institute of Bermuda (http://www.gtib.org) and is senior editor of the online journal *Gestalt!*, consulting editor of the *European Journal for Qualitative Research in Psychotherapy*, and a member of the editorial, production, and marketing board for *Studies-in-Gestalt Therapy—Dialogical Bridges*. He is also the founder and facilitator of Gstalt-L, an e-community started in 1996 for gestalt therapists, trainers, trainees, theorists, and writers, and he serves as information technology officer on the board of directors of the Association for the Advancement of Gestalt Therapy—an international community.

Nathan D. Butzen is a doctoral candidate in clinical psychology at Regent University who obtained his B.A. in Psychology and Spanish at Berry College. He has presented at several conferences on the relationship between forgiveness and personality among graduate students and incarcerated males. He is currently completing his dissertation entitled, “NEO-PI-R Five-Factor Model Facets as Differential Predictors of Forgiveness.”
Anthony R. De Orio was born and raised in Cleveland, Ohio. He attended the University of Cincinnati, where he received his bachelor of arts degree in sociology. He pursued graduate studies at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, receiving a master’s of divinity and a doctorate of ministry (with distinction). In addition, he attended Eastern Michigan University, receiving a master of science degree in clinical psychology. He has lectured extensively, is ordained in the Presbyterians Church (USA), was adjunct faculty at Madonna University, and is now a full-time clinical psychologist. Dr. De Orio is an experienced pastor and clinician.

Kevin J. Eames is director of institutional research at Covenant College in Lookout Mountain, Georgia. He received his PhD in counseling psychology from Georgia State University in 1999. His teaching load includes Cross-Cultural Psychology, Quantitative Methods in Field Settings, Organizational Leadership, and the Psychology of Workplace Stress. Research interests include faith and identity development, psychology of obesity, and biopsychosocial aspects of stress. Dr. Eames and his family are members of St. Elmo Presbyterian Church, PCA, in Chattanooga, Tennessee.

Daniel J. Gatzambide received his BA in 2006 from Rutgers University as a Henry Rutgers Scholar, where he double-majored in psychology and religion, studying under psychologist of religion James W. Jones and intersubjective psychoanalyst George Atwood. Under the supervision of Jesus Seminar fellow Mahlon H. Smith, he authored the Henry Rutgers Thesis “The Birth of a Dying Savior: Simon Peter on the Couch,” in which he developed a psychobiographical analysis of the historical Simon Peter and his relationship to the historical Jesus. The project was awarded Highest Honors and was invited to be presented at Rutgers’s undergraduate research symposia. After graduating, he worked as a behavioral assistant with the mental health agency Supreme Consultants, providing in-home mental health services to underserved communities. In 2007 he was accepted to Union Theological Seminary’s MA program in psychiatry and religion under a full scholarship, where he continues to study and produce research on psychology and the miraculous and on the intersection of liberation theology and relational psychoanalysis.

Joanne Hedgespeth, PhD, is professor of psychology at the Graduate School of Education and Psychology, Pepperdine University. She has a certificate of psychoanalysis from the Psychoanalytic Center of California and is a contributing editor for the Journal of Psychology and Theology. Her interests are in psychoanalysis and the integration of psychoanalysis and religion.

Judith L. Johnson is professor of psychology and director of clinical training for an APA-accredited program in clinical psychology at Regent University.
She received her Ph.D. in counseling psychology from Loyola University of Chicago. Her research interests include personality and forgiveness, trauma and forgiveness, and program evaluation.

**Jeffrey Kirkwood** is a graduate student at the University of Chicago and a graduate research assistant at the University of Chicago Cultural Policy Center. Most recently, his research attends to the ethical dimensions of German photomodernism and the possible contribution thinkers like Ernst Bloch and Emmanuel Levinas might offer in viewing art as an essentially ethical enterprise. He wrote the introduction to Daryl S. Paulson and Stanley Krippner’s *Haunted by Combat: Understanding PTSD in War Veterans Including Women, Reservists, and Those Coming Back from Iraq* (Praeger, 2007) and has written a number of articles and chapters on trauma theory, ethics, structuralism, and aesthetics.

**Stanley Krippner,** PhD, is professor of psychology at Saybrook Graduate School and Research Center in San Francisco. He was the 2002 recipient of the American Psychological Association’s Award for Distinguished Contributions to the International Advancement of Psychology as well as of the association’s 2002 Award for Distinguished Contributions to Professional Hypnosis. He is the past president of the Association for Humanistic Psychology, the International Association for the Study of Dreams, and the Parapsychological Association. He is the editor of nine volumes of *Advances in Parapsychological Research* (1977–1997), the coeditor of *Varieties of Anomalous Experience: Examining the Scientific Evidence* (with Etzel Cardeña and Steven Jay Lynn, 2000), and the coauthor of *Dream Telepathy: Scientific Experiments in Nocturnal Extrasensory Perception* (with Montague Ullman, 2001), *The Mythic Path: Discovering the Guiding Stories of Your Past—Creating a Vision of Your Future* (with David Feinstein, 1997), and *Extraordinary Dreams and How to Work with Them* (with Fariba Bogzaran and André Pércia de Carvalho, 2002). He is a fellow of the Association for the Scientific Study of Religion, the Society for the Scientific Study of Sexuality, and the American Psychological Association. He is the 2003 recipient of the Ashley Montague Peace Award.

**Olufemi A. Lawal** holds bachelor and master of science degrees from the Universities of Lagos and Ibadan, both in Nigeria, respectively. He is a former recipient of the Graduate Fellowship Award of the University of Lagos and is currently a PhD in psychology candidate in the same university. A faculty member of the Olabisi Onabanjo University’s Department of Psychology, he has been an instructor in wide-ranging psychology courses, including Group Psychological Processes, Psychology of Learning, Statistical Methods in Psychology, and Ergonomics, among others. His knack for academic research and writing is evident in his publications, including his contributed chapter
Deborah A. Lowe received her bachelor’s degree summa cum laude from Biola University in 2006. She is currently a research assistant at the psychology department of Westmont College, with an emphasis on neuropsychology.


Raymond F. Paloutzian received his PhD from Claremont Graduate School in 1972 and has been a professor of experimental and social psychology at Westmont College, Santa Barbara, California, since 1981 and guest professor at Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, Belgium. He wrote Invitation to the Psychology of Religion, 2nd ed. (1996) and coedited, with Crystal Park, Handbook of the Psychology of Religion and Spirituality (2005). He edits the International Journal for the Psychology of Religion.

Myrna M. Pugh holds a masters degree from Denver Seminary in Counseling Psychology. She was in private practice and is now retired. Her ministry involves writing, doing workshops, mentoring, Stephen Ministry Leadership, and working with single mothers. She is passionate about the process of becoming conformed to the Image of Christ through suffering. She also is a speaker in the area of Biblical Gender Equality. She lives in Tucson Arizona with her husband Pat, who is a retired physician.

Ilkka Pyysiäinen is deputy director, ThD, Academy Research Fellow (Academ y of Finland), and docent in the Department of Comparative Religion, Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies, University of Helsinki, Finland. He was educated in theology and comparative religion at the University of Helsinki. He earned his PhD in 1993 with a thesis on Buddhist mysticism. Since then, he has dedicated himself to the exploration of cognition and religion. He has published numerous scholarly papers in various journals and edited collections. Among his books are How Religion Works: Towards a New Cognitive Science of Religion (2001) and Magic, Miracles, and Religion: A Scientist’s Perspective (2004). Together with Veikko Anttonen, he edited Current Approaches in the Cognitive Science of Religion (2002). Pyysiäinen is director of a research project titled “Mind and Society in the Transmis-
sion of Religion,” funded by the Academy of Finland. The project has produced a number of articles and books on the cognitive underpinnings of the cultural transmission of religious traditions. Pyysiäinen currently works at the Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies, exploring supernatural agent representations in the world’s religious traditions.

Steven A. Rogers received his PhD from Fuller Graduate School of Psychology and completed a postdoctoral fellowship in neuropsychology at the University of California, Los Angeles’s Department of Neurology. He is assistant professor of psychology at Westmont College, Santa Barbara, California. With Karen Miller, he coauthored *The Estrogen-Depression Connection: The Hidden Link between Hormones and Women’s Depression* (2007).

Erica L. Swenson received her bachelor’s degree summa cum laude from Westmont College in 2005 and has coauthored several chapters. In 2006, she was a visiting fellow at the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, Belgium. She is currently a clinical psychology PhD student at the University of Connecticut, with interests in the psychology of meaning, religion, and spirituality.
Miracles
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MIRACLES

God, Science, and Psychology in the Paranormal

VOLUME 3
Parapsychological Perspectives

Edited by J. Harold Ellens

Psychology, Religion, and Spirituality
This work on miracles is dedicated
To Rebecca and Brenda
Because they work miracles of healing
Every day.
I wish to express intense gratitude and high esteem for the meticulous and devoted labor of Beuna C. Carlson who read all the proofs with a sharp eye and sturdy hand for ferreting out errors. Surely the devil is in the details and she has mastered the devil.
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The interface between psychology, religion, and spirituality has been of great interest to scholars for a century. In the last three decades a broad popular appetite has developed for books that make practical sense out of the sophisticated research on these three subjects. Freud expressed an essentially deconstructive perspective on this matter and indicated that he saw the relationship between human psychology and religion to be a destructive interaction. Jung, on the other hand, was quite sure that these three aspects of the human spirit: psychology, religion, and spirituality, were constructively and inextricably linked.

Anton Boisen and Seward Hiltner derived much insight from both Freud and Jung, as well as from Adler and Reik, while pressing the matter forward with ingenious skill and illumination. Boisen and Hiltner fashioned a framework within which the quest for a sound and sensible definition of the interface between psychology, religion, and spirituality might best be described or expressed. We are in their debt.

This series of general interest books, so wisely urged by Praeger Publishers, and particularly by its editors, Deborah Carvalko and Suzanne I. Staszak-Silva, intends to define the terms and explore the interface of psychology, religion, and spirituality at the operational level of daily human experience. Each volume of the series identifies, analyzes, describes, and evaluates the full range of issues, of both popular and professional interest, that deal with the psychological factors at play (1) in the way religion takes shape and is expressed, (2) in the way spirituality functions within human persons and shapes both religious formation and expression, and (3) in the
ways that spirituality is shaped and expressed by religion. The interest is psychospiritual. In terms of the rubrics of the disciplines and the science of psychology and spirituality this series of volumes investigates the operational dynamics of religion and spirituality.

The verbs shape and express in the above paragraph refer to the forces that prompt and form religion in persons and communities, as well as to the manifestations of religious behavior (1) in personal forms of spirituality, (2) in acts of spiritually motivated care for society, and (3) in ritual behaviors such as liturgies of worship. In these various aspects of human function the psychological and/or spiritual drivers are identified, isolated, and described in terms of the way in which they unconsciously and consciously operate in religion, thought, and behavior.

The books in this series are written for the general reader, the local library, and the undergraduate university student. They are also of significant interest to the informed professional, particularly in fields corollary to his or her primary interest. The volumes in this series have great value for clinical settings and treatment models, as well.

This series editor has spent an entire professional lifetime focused specifically on research into the interface of psychology in religion and spirituality. This present set, Miracles: God, Science, and Psychology in the Paranormal, is an urgently needed and timely work, the motivation for which is surely endorsed enthusiastically by the entire religious world today, as the international community searches for strategies that will afford us better and deeper religious self-understanding as individuals and communities. This project addresses the deep psychosocial, psychospiritual, and biological sources of human nature that shape and drive our psychology and spirituality. Careful strategies of empirical, heuristic, and phenomenological research have been employed to give this work a solid scientific foundation and formation. Never before has such wise analysis been brought to bear upon the dynamic linkage between human physiology, psychology, and spirituality in an effort to understand the human mystification with apparent miraculous events in our experience and traditions.

For 50 years such organizations as the Christian Association for Psychological Studies and such graduate departments of psychology as those at Boston University, Fuller, Rosemead, Harvard, George Fox, Princeton, and the like, have been publishing important building blocks of research on issues dealing with religious behavior and psychospirituality. In this present project the insights generated by such patient and careful research are synthesized and integrated into a holistic psychospiritual worldview, which takes seriously the special aspect of religious tradition called miracle. This volume employs an objective and experience-based approach to discerning what happens in miracle stories, what that means, and in what ways that is an advantage or danger to our spiritual life and growth, as we pursue the ir-repressible human quest for meaning.
Some of the influences of religion upon persons and society, now and throughout history, have been negative. However, most of the impact of the great religions upon human life and culture has been profoundly redemptive and generative of great good. It is urgent, therefore, that we discover and understand better what the psychological and spiritual forces are that empower people of faith and genuine spirituality to open their lives to the transcendent connection and give themselves to all the creative and constructive enterprises that, throughout the centuries, have made of human life the humane, ordered, prosperous, and aesthetic experience it can be at its best. Surely the forces for good in both psychology and spirituality far exceed the powers and proclivities toward the evil.

This series of Praeger Publishers volumes is dedicated to the greater understanding of Psychology, Religion, and Spirituality, and thus to the profound understanding and empowerment of those psychospiritual drivers that can help us (1) transcend the malignancy of our earthly pilgrimage, (2) open our spirits to the divine spirit, (3) enhance the humaneness and majesty of the human spirit, and (4) empower our potential for magnificence in human life.

J. Harold Ellens
Series Editor

NOTE

Introduction

J. Harold Ellens

The important reason to include a volume on parapsychological perspectives in this three-volume set on miracles is that the parapsychological world of human experience is real. Whether one focuses upon the world of internal parapsychological perceptions or the world of objective paranormal experiences, it is an important part of human reality. It must be addressed in our quest for understanding and it must be reckoned with. As indicated throughout this volume, the parapsychological world is remarkably multiform, ranging from introspective altered states of consciousness and revelatory vision, to experiences of visitation by transcendental or divine spirit, and to events in the material world of unaccountable beneficial changes, such as healings and miraculous interventions.

This volume has a broad scope in its treatment of the widely varying parapsychological perspectives on the paranormal. It addresses human experiences of the presence of salvific transcendental visitors, and of accessing the paranormal or transcendent world of revelation through prayer or through entheogenic experiments. It describes the empirical science of neuropsychological brain process in paranormal events, as well as miracles and crowd psychology, and the biochemistry of experiences of miracles.

As I noted in the introduction to the first volume, miracle stories live forever. They appear in all religious traditions, and though the traditions change greatly over the centuries, the miracle stories stay the same. Krister Stendahl, professor of biblical studies at Harvard Divinity School and bishop of the Lutheran Church of Sweden, wrote the foreword to Anton Fridrichsen’s The Problem of Miracle in Primitive Christianity. In it he approved of Fridrichsen’s
“theological conviction that genuine faith and vital religion is and will remain mythical, miraculous, and resistant to theological reductionism—orthodox, conservative, liberal, or radical.”

Regardless of the perspective one takes on the faith tradition that holds one’s attention, the miracle stories remain the same kind of enigma from generation to generation.

The questions asked today by devoted believers and agnostic critics, by theological scientists and empirical scientists, by mythologists and rationalists, are the same questions that the ancient Greeks, Romans, and Christians were asking about the miracles reported and celebrated in their world 2,000 years ago. Numerous explanations of miracle stories have filled uncountable volumes over the centuries. None, so far, quite satisfies the hunger of the human mind and spirit for a final answer to the question, “Are miracles real or a chimera of our imaginations? What really happened and what does it mean?”

It is possible to devise thoroughly rational and naturalistic interpretations of this mystifying phenomenon, but then when that is said and done we have the sense that while the rationale holds up well enough, the intriguing center of the issue has not been thoroughly explored or explained. Likewise, we may provide a literal, psychological, or mythological explanation of the miracle stories and discover in the end that we have not quite understood the depth of the narrative that gives us the ultimate clue. We cannot escape the haunting suspicion that in the miracle stories the transcendent world has somehow touched our mundane existence. That is true whether it is a biblical narrative or a newspaper report of some spontaneous remission of disease in the twenty-first century. Paul J. Achtemeier observed that, as regards our understanding of or accounting for the biblical miracles, particularly those performed by Jesus and recorded in the Synoptic Gospels, in the end we must face the fact that Jesus really did heal that demon-possessed boy in Mark 9, for example, and if our explanation does not reflect that forthrightly we have distorted the forthright gospel report.

The 16 scholars who have joined me in this volume present the perspectives of serious-minded analysts of both science and religion. These perspectives vary as widely as the continuum of human imagination and analysis can produce. Some are sure that psychodynamics explain all apparently miraculous phenomena. Others are sure that miracles can be accounted for only as direct spiritual interventions of God’s spirit and that they are enacted from the transcendent world. Still other scholars who have composed the chapters for this volume see clearly a more holistic view of the human organism and of history, understanding the paranormal as a function of our brain chemistry and creative psychology. Their chapters reflect ways in which God, science, psychology, and spirituality are profoundly interlinked and interactive, and can be demonstrated empirically, phenomenologically, and heuristically as comporting with such a paradigm.

This quest for acquiring a more satisfying grasp of the meaning of miracles is popular and virtually universal among humankind. A recent journal article...
titled “Citizen, Heal Thyself” launched its investigation of spontaneous heal-
ings, and other medically related paranormal phenomena, in an intriguing
manner. Speaking of people who had been diagnosed as terminally ill with
such diseases as cancer and other advanced disorders, the author expostu-
lated, “They should be dead. But a tiny number of people conquer lethal dis-
eases. Are they just lucky—or can these rare self-healers teach us something?”
After a careful and intriguing report on a number of miraculous healings, the
author concludes her article by observing, “Although medical advances have
dramatically improved outcomes in certain cancers—treatment of testicular
cancer and childhood leukemia now routinely lead to cures—when it comes
to many other cancers, modern medicine has yet to come close to nature’s
handiwork in inexplicably producing spontaneous remission without appar-
ent side effects,” such as those who have been miraculously healed, thus expe-
riencing the “rarest hints of nature’s healing mysteries.”

This volume on parapsychological perspectives is developed around the
assumption or claim that the boundary between what we call the normal
and the paranormal is a thin veil that is highly permeable from both the
mundane and the transcendent side. For this reason it is to be assumed that
paranormal visitations or revelations from the transcendental world can be
expected readily, and access to the world of God and the spirit of God by
humans is an open opportunity. Moreover, it is assumed here that whether
the illuminations humans experience from the world of the paranormal come
to us through standard psychological processes, projections, and perceptions;
or take the form of direct revelations from the transcendent or paranormal
world, the channel of their delivery is a normal part of the world created by
God and operating within his domain. Thus, of whatever sort the paranor-
mal experience may be, natural or supernatural, it is simply one of God’s
normal ways of interacting with humankind.

It is the focused intent of this volume to explore the answer to the ques-
tions implied in such a perspective, as a central part of our open-ended sci-
entific quest for truth in the worlds of materiality, the mind, the psyche, and
the spirit: human and divine.

NOTES

1. Krister Stendahl (1972), Foreword to Anton Fridrichsen, The Problem of Mir-
acle in Primitive Christianity, Minneapolis: Augsburg, 8. This work was originally pub-
lished in 1925 as Le Probleme du Miracle Dans Le Christianisme Primitif by the Faculty
of Protestant Theology at the University of Strasbourg.

2. Paul J. Achtemeier (October 1975), Miracles and the Historical Jesus: Mark

3. Jeanne Lenzer (September 2007), Citizen, Heal Thyself, Discover: Science, Tech-
nology, and the Future, 54–59, 73.
People sometimes sense, see, or hear another being in situations in which the actual presence of another being is highly improbable, if not impossible. Psychologists refer to this as the “sensed presence experience.” Sensed presence experiences occur in a wide variety of situations, to a wide variety of people; and the presences themselves vary in appearance, identity, and behavior. There are many kinds of sensed presence phenomena. They include psychotic, feverish, and drug-induced hallucinations; angelic and other religious visitations, ghosts, “corner of the eye” glimpses of someone almost seen or almost heard, quite common among recently bereaved persons; vivid dreams and daydreams, hypnagogic images in the “twilight” state between sleep and full awakening; and misinterpretations of actual percepts, as when the shadow of a tree or the rustling of a bush is perceived as a human being or an animal. This chapter will not deal with such percepts. Rather, we address experiences that are reported by people in extreme and unusual environments (EUEs), which are of interest to psychologists because no obvious explanation presents itself.

Sensed presences in EUEs may be seen, heard, and sometimes touched; but commonly, they are, literally, sensed. Their identity may be unknown to the perceiver, although even in such cases people usually do know whether the being is male or female. Sometimes a presence is recognized as a religious figure, friend, acquaintance, or relative. They often appear when the person is weakened by exhaustion or illness; on the verge of death from cold, thirst, or starvation; lost and alone; or in an unusually stimulus-poor environment. Most surprisingly, they do not just serve as companions: they actually help
the person in trouble, sometimes by offering useful information or advice and at other times by seeming to take a hand in whatever needs to be done to improve the chances of survival. This chapter will describe episodes in which such apparitions were reported, analyze the causal conditions, and review the theoretical explanations that have been advanced for the phenomenon.

SENSED PRESENCE EXPERIENCES IN EUES

The sensed presence often occurs in the wilderness: mountains, ice fields, jungles, and the ocean. The experience has also been encountered underwater by divers and aloft by pilots and astronauts. Other cases have been reported by survivors of man-made conflagrations, such as the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center, and by prisoners of war. There are several environmental factors that are common to such situations, despite their obvious differences. One characteristic is a relatively unchanging and homogeneous physical and social stimulus environment. Other relevant factors can include physical privation, such as hunger, thirst, illness, or injury; psychological stress; unusual temperatures (very hot, very cold, or alternating between the two); and a perception of danger.

A survey of 58 recorded cases of sensed presence experiences in EUEs found examples among explorers in tropical jungles, pilots and astronauts, and divers (Geiger, in press). Man-made EUEs have also produced cases involving prisoners of war, concentration camp inmates, and other survivors. But all of these sources represent a relatively small number of the total cases studied (Geiger, in press). The greatest number, almost half, occurred in mountainous settings, both at extreme elevation and at lower altitudes. The next most common grouping involved the oceans: solo sailors, crewmen on racing yachts, and shipwreck survivors. That category is followed by polar explorers (see Table 1.1).

Examples of sensed presence experiences illustrating the three most common categories of EUEs follow.

Mountain Climbers

Climbing a mountain represents the most common context for a sensed presence in EUEs. A recent study of 33 Spanish climbers involved in high-altitude climbs found that one-third had experienced hallucinatory episodes, the most common being “the sensation of an imaginary accompanying presence behind one’s own body” (Garrido, Javierre, Ventura, & Segura, 2000, p. 148). Dr. Griffith Pugh, an expert on the physiology of cold and altitude, acknowledged that many climbers have encountered sensed presences and attributed them to a “decay of brain functions” caused by high altitude (Hellier, 1971, p. 10).
An early example was recorded by British climber Frank Smythe, who in 1933 came to within about 300 meters of the summit of Mount Everest during a solo ascent. Smythe had been struggling against the effects of extreme altitude when he decided he had reached the limit and must turn back. Smythe felt as if an unseen companion was aiding him throughout his arduous climb. “This feeling was so strong that it completely eliminated all loneliness I might otherwise have felt. It even seemed that I was tied to my ‘companion’ by a rope, and that if I slipped ‘he’ would hold me” (Ruttledge, 1934, p. 164). At one point, Smythe stopped to rest and pulled out a Kendal mint cake. He broke off a piece and turned to share it with his “companion,” and it was “almost a shock” to find there was no one to give it to. Only when he descended to a camp where another, flesh and blood, member of the expedition was waiting for him did his unseen friend depart. “I suddenly felt alone,” wrote Smythe (Ruttledge, 1934, p. 165).

Smythe was not the first climber to report the phenomenon, and he was certainly not the last. Maurice Wilson, a British climber with a mystical bent, was on Everest within a year of Smythe, and he too recorded a sensed presence. Wilson’s was a singularly ill-planned and ill-equipped expedition. He had no climbing experience and felt that his religious faith would be sufficient to see him to the top of the world’s tallest mountain. He did not survive his 1934 climb, but his diary was found. In it, he recorded the feeling, as he lay partially snow-blind and suffering from the elevation, that someone was with him: “Strange but I feel that there is somebody with me in the tent all the time” (Roberts, 1957, p. 146).

The sensed presence is a common visitor on climbs, including some of the most famous ascents in history. In 1950, in a reconnaissance in preparation

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<td>Prisoners (incl. POWs, concentration camp survivors)</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Air/Space</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (divers, jungle explorers, trekkers)</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Total is more than 100% because of rounding. The table includes only those cases in which the person experiencing the sensed presence phenomenon is identified (named).


Table 1.1 Public Reports of Sensed Presence Experiences
for the conquest of the Himalayan peak Annapurna, the world’s 10th highest, a climber on the French team led by Maurice Herzog described to his climbing partner a sensed presence: “I thought I heard someone else behind me . . . a third man. He was following us. I wanted to call out to you. I could not. I glanced behind me rather furtively, to set my mind at rest. But like an obsession, the feeling of someone else there kept coming back to me” (Herzog, 1952, p. 52).

On September 24, 1975, British climbers Doug Scott and Dougal Haston completed the ascent of the South West Face of Everest. They arrived at the summit at 6 p.m., after a 14-hour climb. After a rest they started down, but thick clouds obscured the moonlight. Only 48 meters (428 feet) in elevation below the summit, they were forced to spend the night. They dug a hole in the snow but by 8 p.m. had exhausted their supplementary oxygen supply and were without food. A small propane-butane stove helped stave off the bitter, –30 degree temperature, but fuel ran out at midnight and they were forced to endure intense cold. The expedition’s medical officer, Charles Clarke, subsequently reported that both Scott and Haston “told of a curious sensation that a third person had been sharing the snow hole during the night” (Clarke, 1976, pp. 92–93).

Reinhold Messner, perhaps the greatest of all climbers, encountered a sensed presence on both Nanga Parbat and Everest. He felt the companions provided “psychological help to stem the loneliness” and that his body was “inventing ways to provide company” (R. Messner, interview with John Geiger, January 13, 2004). Messner recorded one of the experiences during his 1978 solo conquest of Nanga Parbat: “I am holding a conversation with someone who is sitting at my side. Is it human? It seems there is another presence besides my own. That is all I can say. It isn’t just a voice I hear, I actually sense a physical presence” (Messner, 1980, p. 160).

The Polish climber Jerzy Kukuczka was competing with Reinhold Messner to become the first person to reach the summit of all 14 of the world’s 8,000-meter (28,000-feet) peaks. In October 1981, Kukuczka opted to tackle Makalu, the fifth highest mountain in the world, located 22 kilometers (14 miles) east of Everest. Kukuczka, climbing with two others, initially attempted an assault on Makalu’s West Face but was forced to turn back. He then determined to try again by another route, up the North-West Ridge. Unable to convince the others to join him, he proceeded alone and did reach the summit. He later described how, at 8,000 meters, he dug out a platform and pitched his tent with difficulty during a hard wind. Once inside the tent, Kukuczka, who was exhausted, started to brew some tea. He then realized he had company: “Just then I experienced a quite inexplicable feeling that I was not on my own, that I was cooking for two people. I had such a strong feeling that someone else was present that I felt an overpowering need to talk to him” The next day weather conditions continued to deteriorate and he came
across deep, collapsing snow. As he fought on, he became conscious that he was “standing still waiting for the other one,” and he said, “From time to time I let him pass, so that he could go ahead.” (Kukuczka, 1992, p. 40).

The Australian climber Michael Groom described a particularly vivid encounter he experienced while under great distress, spending the night at high altitude on Kangchenjunga in 1987. “I felt the presence of someone in the tent next to me. He knelt close by my right side, placed a firm hand in the middle of my back and lifted me into an upright position. My breathing now became easier as I rested my dizzy head between my knees but I still felt the presence of someone watching over me” (Groom, 1997, p. 97).

American Steve Swenson, during a 1994 climb of Everest, was forced to spend two nights at 27,000 feet. During the second night, he had three separate sensed presence experiences. One involved a woman who urged him to stay awake through the night, when sleep would have risked death; a second he felt was a jolly Sikh man who implored him in the morning to continue his descent; and finally a third, unidentified being accompanied him on the way down to safety. “These characters were very real, and I was taking their advice. . . . Everything, every piece of advice I was getting, was exactly what I needed to do” (S. Swenson, interview with John Geiger, October 10, 2005).

Paul Firth, a South African climber who is an anesthesiologist by profession, experienced a sensed presence on Aconcagua, in Argentina. When confronted with an awareness of acute danger, he “suddenly felt like there was somebody behind” him. This unseen being accompanied him down the slope, always behind him, slightly over his left shoulder, encouraging him along. When he felt stronger, further down the mountain, the companion disappeared just as suddenly. Firth wrote of his experience, “Whatever the physiological details of these experiences . . . who can say why these helpful ghosts wander in the penumbral world of the edges of our perception?” (P. Firth, 2003).

Solo Sailors, Racing Yacht Crewmen, and Shipwreck Survivors

Joshua Slocum in 1895 embarked on his 40-foot sloop to attempt what would become the first solo circumnavigation of the world. He succeeded, and also provided the first modern description of the sensed presence experience. Several times over the course of the voyage, Slocum was joined by a sensed presence. The initial encounter occurred during the first leg of the journey when, off the Azores, he was hit by fierce winds. To make matters worse, Slocum fell seriously ill, apparently from food poisoning, and was collapsed in the cabin, near the wheel, when a “strange guest” visited him. The visitor told Slocum that he was there to “aid” him, saying, “Lie quiet . . . and I will guide your ship to-night” (Slocum, 1900/2003, p. 24). Before his illness,
Slocum had been reading Washington Irving’s *Life of Columbus*, and he convinced himself that the presence was the pilot of the *Pinta*. When Slocum finally recovered, after 48 hours, he found the sloop on its correct course for Gibraltar. He felt, he said, that he had been “in the presence of a friend and a seaman of vast experience.” This “friend” reappeared later in Slocum’s journey.

In 1953, two deserters from the French Foreign Legion, one a Finn and the other a Swede, jumped ship en route to Vietnam and found themselves adrift on a small raft in the Strait of Malacca. They had hoped to be picked up in a matter of a few hours in the busy shipping lane, but they failed to attract the attention of the commercial vessels that passed, and they soon drifted into the Indian Ocean, without provisions, starving, dehydrated, exposed to the elements, and pursued by sharks. The Swede died during the 32-day ordeal, but the Finn, a 24-year-old named Ensio Tiira, survived. He later wrote, “For the whole voyage I’d had the strange feeling that someone else was with me, watching over me, and keeping me safe from harm” (Tiira, 1954, p. 141).

Another solo sailor to have experienced a sensed presence was the German doctor Hannes Lindemann, who made a remarkable solo Atlantic crossing in a 17-foot rubberized canvas folding boat in 1956. Lindemann wanted to test a theory that self-mastery, through hypnotic and autogenic meditation techniques, would aid his psychological state during the voyage. He sensed that he was joined by an African companion who would speak to him and provide reassurance. It was a common sensation during the journey: “Often, as I awoke, I looked around for my companion, not realizing at once there was nobody else with me” (Lindemann, 1958, p. 144).

Dr. David Lewis came from the Lindemann tradition, and entered the 1960 Single-handed Transatlantic Sailing Race in order to conduct medical research, keeping a daily log of his mental and physical responses to danger and exhaustion. Nearing the Grand Banks, he recorded experiencing the feeling that he was “not alone.” He previously had a vivid sense “that another person was at the helm” (Lewis, 1961, pp. 48–49).

In another solo Atlantic crossing, American Robert Manry, exhausted from 48 hours without sleep, and popping “stay awake” pills because of sailing conditions, became aware that he was “not alone”; he said, “Someone, a man, was on Tinkerbelle with me. . . . He was friendly.” Manry never spoke aloud to his new friend, but says, “We did converse in a miraculous, soundless way.” At some point the man took over the tiller from the exhausted Manry, who “became the passenger” (Manry, 1967, pp. 91–93).

There are numerous other accounts of experiences with sensed presence during ocean travel. Some of these, unlike our previous examples, were by survivors of shipwreck. After surviving a torpedoing during World War II, 14 merchant sailors drifted on the Atlantic Ocean for 50 days before the only
2 survivors were rescued. One, Kenneth Cooke, reported that a young crew-mate who had died on the 25th day had afterward repeatedly spoken to him and had said that some of the men would survive. These messages kept him alive—in one instance, as he was contemplating throwing himself over the side to end his ordeal (Cooke, 1960).

In another case, a woman drifting in a dinghy on the Pacific Ocean told her five companions that during a heavy storm, she had counted seven people in the boat and that a presence behind her had helped them to fight the storm (Robertson, 1973). In their study of survival at sea, E.C.B. Lee and Kenneth Lee (1980) wrote of the experience as being common: “There are many instances where survivors have felt an Unseen Presence, helping and comforting them” (Lee & Lee, 1980, p. 203).

**Polar Explorers**

The best-known sensed presence incident was reported by the famous polar explorer Sir Ernest Shackleton during his ill-fated 1914–17 Imperial Trans-Antarctic Expedition. Shackleton and two companions, Thomas Crean and Frank Worsley, who had already survived a harrowing Antarctic shipwreck and a long journey in an open boat, undertook a trek across the mountains of South Georgia Island to reach potential rescuers for the remainder of their original party. Dehydrated, wet, cold, tired, and poorly equipped—and with Shackleton perhaps experiencing the first symptoms of his later heart trouble—they climbed and slid for 36 hours, stopping only for meals. Shackleton later mentioned that during the march, all three men had had a feeling that there was another person with them; a feeling that occurred independently and was mentioned by them only afterward (Huntford, 1985/1998; Shackleton, 1970). This feeling, which Shackleton interpreted as a mystical experience, was eventually made famous by its representation in T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, with its haunting question, “Who is the third who walks always beside you?” (Eliot, 1980, p. 65, lines 359–65).

During the same era of exploration, but in the Arctic, a sensed presence was encountered repeatedly by another explorer whose ship was also trapped, and later crushed, by ice. This was followed by a period of cold and starvation, during which 11 of the 23 non-Inuit crew and scientists died. A passenger and 7 Inuit in the party, the latter including 2 children, all survived (McKinlay, 1977). In this case, the sensed presence was also imbued with religious significance.

In March 1968, Alan Parker, a carpenter working for the Australian Antarctic Division on Macquarie Island, a sub-Antarctic possession of Australia, was alone, building field huts on the island’s plateau. He became disoriented during a storm that saw severe winds blow rain and sleet horizontally into his face (A. Parker, interview with John Geiger, January 19, 2005). Staggering
under the full force of the gale, Parker realized he had virtually zero visibility and knew he was in immediate danger. He had his hood pulled down and a balaclava covering his face. He could not establish his orientation in relation to the main camp, and a sense of helplessness overtook him. He then became aware that he had been joined by the presence of another being. “I had the feeling that someone was there with me, saying, ‘Don’t worry, keep going.’” Parker realized it was not a colleague, but something out of ordinary experience. He was not frightened and knew that it was “there to help.” The sense lasted for an hour and a half and receded only when the fierce winds and whiteout conditions abated.

A number of recent examples have also been described, although in contrast to Shackleton and McKinlay, modern explorers tend to attribute the experience to physiological or psychological mechanisms. During his 1998 South Polar expedition, Peter Hillary encountered a sensed presence that he recognized as his deceased mother (Hillary & Elder, 2003). He felt the experience was created by the brain as a coping mechanism: “I didn’t think ‘Where did you come from?’ because I believed it was a projection of what was happening inside my mind” (P. Hillary, interview with John Geiger, October 31, 2005). Sensed presences have also been reported by winter-over parties at Antarctic stations (Suedfeld & Mocellin, 1987).

It should also be noted that the Arctic produced what may be the only malevolent sensed presence experience on record. A dogsled racer participating in a long-distance race, the Yukon Quest, met a colleague on the trail who invited him to rest for a while in a warm and comfortable hotel room. Exhausted, he entered the hotel and went to bed. The next musher on the trail noticed his abandoned sled and dog team, found him sleeping in the snow, and woke him before he died of hypothermia (J. Firth, 1998).

Although mountains, oceans, and the polar regions were the loci of concentrations of sensed presence reports, other dangerous places also evoked reports of helpful and sometimes life-saving apparitions. Three examples will suffice; one is included because it involved a very famous man, a second because it is one of the most harrowing and amazing wilderness survival stories of recent decades, and the third because it involves a man-made disaster, the collapse of the towers of the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001.

Charles Lindbergh, on his history-making solo flight across the Atlantic, sensed “ghostly presences” that passed through the walls of his plane. Although he did not see them, they did speak to him. They kept him company and conversed with him, but also gave him navigational advice and reassurance (Lindbergh, 1953, p. 389).

The second example was that of Aron Ralston. Ralston was hiking through a desert canyon in Utah when a falling boulder trapped his right arm. An experienced mountaineer, he tried everything he could think of to survive and to free his arm, but he was unable to shift or break the rock. Finally, he
twisted and broke his arm against the rock so that he could cut it off with the only tool available, a small, dull knife. He then made a makeshift sling for the stump and hiked 10 kilometers (6.25 miles) through the desert before stumbling on some other hikers. He later said that during his worst hours, when he had resigned himself to death, a young boy appeared whom he not only saw but could touch and lift upon his shoulder; a boy whom he identified as his future son, a vision that gave him a reason to survive (Marshall, 2005).

Finally, there is the case of Will Jimeno, a New York Port Authority police officer buried in the concourse level of the World Trade Center when the first of the twin towers collapsed. Ten hours into his ordeal, Jimeno was in poor condition, suffering from injuries and dehydration, when he became aware of a powerful presence with him: “I looked up and saw Jesus coming toward me. He was carrying a bottle of clear, cold water. That moment, I knew we were going to make it out.” Jimeno’s spirits lifted and he felt he would survive; eventually, he was found alive in the rubble (Ellam, 2006).

**THEORETICAL EXPLANATIONS**

Explanations of the sensed presence phenomenon abound, which is paradoxical, given the paucity of systematic research on the topic. Perhaps it is the life-and-death drama and the drastic departure from the more mundane paths of experimental and even clinical psychology that intrigues theorists. At any rate, the theories range from the mystical to the psychodynamic, the situational, and the neurological (see Table 1.2).

### Table 1.2 Explanations of the Sensed Presence Phenomenon

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Traditional Theories</th>
<th>Stress Theories</th>
<th>Neurological Theories</th>
<th>Other Theories</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Supernatural interventions (traditional mystical/religious theory)</td>
<td>High physiological stress, ergotropic tuning (D. Joralemon)</td>
<td>Neural resonance (L. M. Ward)</td>
<td>Stimulus monotony, reduction, or deprivation (e.g., L. Zusne &amp; W. Jones)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schizophrenia or other (perhaps temporary) psycho-pathology (traditional psychiatric theory)</td>
<td>Regression, abreaction (psychoanalytic theories)</td>
<td>Electromagnetic stimulation (S. Arzy et al., M. A. Persinger)</td>
<td>Evolutionary Process (J. A. Cheyne)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Posttraumatic stress (S. Simon-Buller &amp; colleagues)</td>
<td>Parasympathetic dominance, slow wave EEG from limbic system (M. Winkelman)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Bicameral mind (J. Jaynes)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
We will not attempt to discuss all of these propositions but will sample from each general category.

Perhaps the simplest and most direct explanation is that sensation of a presence is veridical: the sensed entity is actually there. One of the authors, at the end of a presentation about the phenomenon, was challenged by a member of the audience who described herself as one of a large group of people whose astral bodies responded to emergencies around the world, helping those in dire need. In a recent book, Emma Heathcote James (2002) collected stories about sensed presences that were interpreted as guardian angels who saved their beneficiaries from a variety of disasters and misfortunes. Heathcote James leaves open the question as to whether these angels are real, but does admit the possibility that “other realities” exist. Our answer to angels and traveling astral bodies is the same as that made to the woman whose astral body participated in rescue activities: this is a level of explanation outside the realm of science, and therefore outside our considerations.

Explanations based on psychotic or feverish hallucinations, dreams, and hypnagogic imagery miss some of the crucial aspects of the EUE sensed presence phenomenon. Few, if any, of the perceivers are schizophrenic or in any other way mentally disturbed; there is no evidence of fever in most cases; and most are wide awake at the time of the experience. The temporal aspects of the phenomenon also argue against such theories: it does not last long enough to justify a diagnosis of schizophrenia or any other psychosis. Helpful “lucid dreams” have been reported, but their actual contribution to the person’s physical health or survival is doubtful—unlike the contribution of the great majority of EUE sensed presences.

Concepts involving traumatic or posttraumatic stress have the advantage that the phenomenon certainly appears mostly under conditions that are highly stressful, even when they cannot be justly described as traumatic, for example, Charles Lindbergh’s flight. But the mechanism through which stress results in a sensed presence is not clear, nor is there a good explanation of why some individuals in EUEs experience such a presence while others, perhaps most, in very similar situations do not; and, as usual, the helpfulness of the sensed presence entity is not addressed.

The stimulus monotony–stimulus reduction argument can be formulated as follows. Human beings are evolved for, and through life experiences become accustomed to, a “normal” range of stimulus input and variety. Admittedly, this range is very wide; however, when the level of input is either far below or far above this optimal zone, the information processing system takes steps to move it back into the accustomed range. If there is too much stimulation, there are strategies for ignoring some of it, chunking some of it into fewer units, or masking it in some way; if there is too little, stimulation is generated endogenously through physical and/or mental strategies. In the former, the individual may make noise by singing, humming, whistling, or talking aloud;
increase visual stimulation by rapid visual search or, in the dark, pressing one's fingers against one's eyelids to evoke retinal firing; increase tactile stimulation through exercise, biting one's fingernails, stimulating the skin, and so on. To increase stimulation mentally, one may mount an intense memory search, set mental problems and puzzles, make detailed plans for the future, or engage in flights of imagination (Suedfeld, 1980).

The last of these strategies may result in very vivid images that—the theory goes—are sometimes interpreted as being real and existing in the outside environment (Zubek, 1969). The sensed presence may be one form of such externalized imagery. It must be said, however, that even in a profoundly restricted environmental stimulation (REST) situation such as exists in a laboratory, where imagery of various degrees of complexity and in different sensory modalities is common, the images are rarely if ever experienced as prolonged “out-there” percepts. Rather, they are usually quite fleeting and the subject recognizes them as products of his or her own creation (Suedfeld, 1980). Furthermore, there is no recorded example of such images providing any sort of instruction or help to the subject.

Neurological theories come in a variety of interesting forms. Perhaps the most straightforward is the idea that under extreme stress and stimulus reduction, the normally dominant left cortical hemisphere becomes less dominant, reducing the preponderance of logical, linear, reality-oriented thinking. The right hemisphere, which, to put it simplistically, governs creative, imaginative, nonlinear cognition, assumes a greater role than usual; and its products, which may include the perception of an imagined “other,” enter consciousness. REST experiments have supported the hypothesis of a shift in hemispheric dominance (Suedfeld et al., 1994), but, as mentioned above, sensed presences as we have discussed them do not appear in the laboratory. It may be that prolonged high levels of stress, which are contraindicated by the very relaxing laboratory REST environment, are a necessary component for the occurrence of a sensed presence.

A somewhat different hemispheric-shift explanation has been offered by Michael A. Persinger (e.g., 1987, 2001). He stipulated that the sense of self is located in the left hemisphere temporal cortex. Normally, the activity of this area is coordinated with that of the right hemisphere. However, during a seizure or other major event, the two systems may operate in a disjunctive fashion. When that happens, the left hemisphere may interpret signals as “another self,” an out-of-body experience, a near-death experience, an angel, God, or other religious visions, or in our terms, a sensed presence. Which kind of anomalous experience occurs is influenced by the specific circumstances and the individual’s culturally derived and personal belief systems.

Persinger implicates the amygdala as the critical area for such phenomena to occur. According to him, electromagnetic currents, induced or naturally
occurring, can alter the neural firing of that organ. When that happens, hemispheric dominance changes as described above, possibly leading to unusual and unexplained experiences, including the sensed presence. Such changes can occur in excessively stimulating environments and those of abnormally repressed stimulation, in agreement with theories based in stimulus impoverishment (e.g., REST). Experimentally stimulating the temporal lobes of the brain with a magnetic field generated in what he calls a “God helmet,” Persinger reported that many subjects sensed “an ethereal presence in the room” (Persinger, 2001, p. 521).

Unlike most theorists in this area, Persinger also acknowledges individual differences in the susceptibility to such phenomena. He suggests that some people’s temporal lobes are more responsive to naturally occurring electromagnetic fields than those of others, explaining why under very similar circumstances some people have the experience while others do not (Selick, 2007).

An experiment in which a specific area of the brain was stimulated with a mild electric current produced unusual phenomena, including something that resembles a partial sensed presence experience (Arzy, Seeck, Ortigue, Spinelli, & Blanke, 2006). In one of two subjects, stimulation of the angular gyrus reportedly led to a feeling that someone behind her was “interfering” with her, lying beneath her on the bed, and hugging her. Most importantly, the sensation disappeared when the current was turned off and reappeared when it was turned back on again. This, of course, is evidence of a causal link that can be obtained only in a laboratory. Because the bodily movements and position of the presence mimicked her own, the researchers concluded that the woman was experiencing a distorted sensation of her own body without realizing it.

This phenomenon did not have all of the hallmarks of the authentic sensed presence experience as we have described it, although some of the latter have been reported to move in conformity to the perceiver’s movements. However, an interesting theory did emerge. According to the researchers, inputs from the sensory receptors and primary sensory regions are integrated to form the full multimodal percept, including feedback from one’s own body. This finding supports one of Persinger’s hypotheses: the integrity of one’s body image can be disturbed if an electric current stimulates the integrative “multisensory” regions of the brain. The question as to whether this is what happens in nonlaboratory sensed presence, and other anomalous experiences, still remains open, however.

Another theory, which is compatible with that of Arzy et al., raises the possibility that “the neurological mechanism underlying the illusion seems to be a projection of postural and kinaesthetic parts of the body scheme into extracorporal space” (Brugger, Regard, & Landis, 1996, p. 114). A more general conclusion is drawn in another paper that suggests, “The hallucination
of a ‘sense of presence’ is an example of a broad range of perceptual dysfunctions of personal space and self-position” (Firth & Bolay, 2004, p. 72). How these hypotheses explain the repeated and/or prolonged appearance of a helpful “other” is not clear.

One theory implies an evolutionary origin and purpose for the sensed presence phenomenon (Cheyne, 2001). The argument is that the phenomenon tends to occur during the transition between wakefulness and sleep: hypnagogic (while falling asleep) and hypnopompic (while waking up) hallucinations of a threatening predator. This comes about because a normal state of vigilance aimed at responding adaptively to signs of threat from the environment becomes activated during REM sleep, when the body is paralyzed. This activation may be interpreted as a response to an actual threat, a presence that may be evil or even demonic. However, hypnagogic and hypnopompic states do not last as long as the sensed presence experience frequently does, and usually occur when the person is neither asleep nor paralyzed, for example, during strenuous conscious effort. Even more importantly, the sensed presences of our consideration are almost always benevolent.

A theory that uniquely melds history (and prehistory) with psychology and neurology is the concept of the bicameral mind (Jaynes, 1982). According to Jaynes, prehistoric humans experienced the products of the right cortical hemisphere as external events in the real world. Images and ideas generated by that hemisphere were interpreted as the presence and communication of a god, a spirit, or some other entity; what all of these had in common was access to knowledge and wisdom beyond that of the perceiver. Thus, in works such as *The Iliad*, advice from friendly gods could save a hero’s life in battle; advice that to us may seem to be common sense, such as Apollo’s recommendation that Hector try to avoid Achilles in single combat.

The bicamerality of the mind diminished and vanished as cultural forces, especially the spread of literacy and, consequently, linear thinking, led us to perceive the processes of both hemispheres as fully belonging to the person, not to outside sources. However, under some conditions, the bicameral interpretation of mental processes can reemerge. Such conditions include early childhood, when not fully literate and acculturated human beings see and hear imaginary playmates; some psychotic states with their visual and auditory hallucinations; fever, when delirium can produce such hallucinations; and situations of extreme stress, when, as we have shown, sensed presence experiences may occur.

**CONCLUSION**

Four facts about sensed presences are indisputable: (1) they occur to otherwise mentally normal, physically healthy individuals, many of them adventurous and of outstanding achievement; (2) they occur in stressful situations,
prominently including environments of very low temperature and impoverished stimulus input; (3) in almost every case, they serve as a coping resource in that they aid the individual’s efforts to survive; and (4) despite a proliferation of theoretical explanations, the critical studies that would enable us to choose among these remain to be conducted.

Because the phenomenon is so striking, and because some of its aspects are not adequately explained by any of the theories, it is clear that the sensed presence experience will continue to intrigue both mass audiences and scientists for the foreseeable future. Above all, perhaps, is the need to understand the dramatic helpfulness of the sensed presence, which includes not only encouragement but also factual information such as navigational directions and, on occasion, physical intervention. The only theory that has anything to say about this is Julian Jaynes’s; but the mechanism through which bicamerality emerges in modern human beings to serve as a resource, as it did in antiquity, needs empirical testing and more detailed explanation.

REFERENCES


Mysticism and the paranormal are two concepts that have been avoided by mainstream science for both conceptual and empirical reasons. These reasons are linked, in that mainstream science has tended to demand sense perception as a criterion of reality. Thus, claims to a nonsensuous transcendent experience are conceptually suspect in science. Likewise, mainstream science finds little conceptual satisfaction with empirical evidence for paranormal phenomena that apparently violate established laws of physics. Paralleling the rejection by mainstream science are the faith traditions that have always had an uneasy relationship to their mystics, who often seemed to border on heretical claims (Katz, 1983). Likewise, paranormal powers chronicled in oral traditions and in sacred texts are often uneasily accepted as powers to be cultivated in the faithful (Hollenback, 1996). Not surprisingly then, both mysticism and the paranormal have typically been rather casually dismissed and explained in reductionistic terms by American psychologists of religion (Hood, 2000).

In this chapter I will avoid defending mysticism or the paranormal as being in some ultimate ontological sense true. However, neither will we dismiss them in terms of reductionistic explanations. In the broadest sense our approach will be phenomenological. We will accept what Blackmore (1988) has termed the new paradigm for parapsychology that applies equally to mysticism. Blackmore urges a focus upon the psychological, social, and cultural correlates of the report of paranormal experiences, much as I have for mystical experiences (Hood, 1997). Our first task then is to document the commonality of correlated reports of both mystical and paranormal experiences with reference to survey data.


SURVEY RESEARCH: REPORTS OF MYSTICAL EXPERIENCES

Survey results are easily quantified and allow correlations with a wide variety of demographic variables to provide a distinctive empirical base that complements merely conceptual discussions of these experiences. Here we shall simply indicate the commonality of the report of both mystical and paranormal experiences using a limited number of examples.

The most widely used survey question is associated with the work of Greeley (1974). It has been administered as part of the General Social Survey (GSS). The GSS is a series of independent cross-sectional probability samples of persons in the continental United States, living in noninstitutional homes, who are at least 18 years of age (Davis & Smith, 1994). In a sample of 1,468 persons, 35 percent of the respondents answered “Yes” to the question, “Have you ever felt as though you were close to a powerful spiritual force that seemed to lift you out of yourself?” (Greeley, 1974, p. 149). Greeley (1975, p. 65) found that a very high percentage (29%) of those who positively answered his question agreed with “a sense of unity and my own part in it” as a descriptor of their experience. Thus most of the 35 percent answering “Yes” to the Greeley question also appeared to accept a mystical description of unity as applying to the experience.

Hay and Morisy (1978) administered Greeley’s question to a sample of 1,865 in Great Britain and found that 36 percent answered in the affirmative. Yamane and Polzer (1994) analyzed all affirmative responses from the GSS to the Greeley question in the years 1983, 1984, 1988, and 1989. A total of 5,420 individuals were included in their review. Using an ordinal scale where respondents who answered affirmatively could select from three options (once or twice, several times, or often) yielded a range from 0 (negative response) to 3 (often). Using this 4-point range across all individuals who responded to the Greeley question yielded a mean score of 0.79 ($SD = 0.89$). Converting these to a percentage of “Yes” as a nominal category, regardless of frequency, yielded 2,183 affirmative responses. The overall affirmative response rate was 40 percent of the total sample that reported ever having had the experience. Independent assessment of affirmative responses for each year suggested a slight but steady decline. The figures were 39 percent for 1983–1984 combined ($n = 3,072$), 31 percent for 1988 ($n = 1,481$), and 31 percent for 1989 ($n = 936$).

Our discussion of the Greeley question allows us to conclude that at least one-third of persons sampled affirmed a mystical experience. This percentage corresponds to our more exhaustive analysis of survey studies reviewed elsewhere (Spilka, Hood, Hunsberger, & Gorsuch, 2003, pp. 307–314). Since most survey studies include demographic variables, we can use Blackmore’s new paradigm to characterize who reports mystical experiences. The major
consistent findings are easily summarized: women report more such experiences than men; the experiences tend to be age-related, increasing with age; they are characteristic of educated and affluent people; and they are more likely to be associated with indices of psychological health and well-being than with those of pathology or social dysfunction. The most sampled countries have been the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia, with similar percentages holding for each country.

SURVEY RESEARCH: REPORTS OF PARANORMAL PHENOMENA

Since its inception, North American psychology has been linked in the popular mind with the paranormal. As Coon (1992) has documented, many founding North American psychologists fought hard to separate the emerging science of psychology from spiritualism and the psychic, to which it was connected in the popular mind. Then as now, psychologists sought to focus upon reductive explanations of things spiritual and paranormal (Hood, 2000).

Yet within research on mysticism, several empirical facts emerge that are problematic. First, key theoreticians and empirical researchers have explicitly linked mysticism to parapsychology, with varying degrees of sympathy to both. These include Greeley (1975), Hardy (1965, 1966), Hollenback (1996), and myself (Hood, 1989). Historians have also documented the relationship of paranormal phenomena to the history of religious experience in North American Protestantism (Coon, 1992; Taves, 1999). Second, in classifications of open-ended responses to single item questions to measure mysticism, one of the common code categories is called “the paranormal.” (Thomas & Cooper, 1978, 1980). Thus many persons who affirm what the researcher assumes to be a mystical experience are in fact reporting paranormal experiences, such as telepathy, clairvoyance, or contact with the dead. Third, survey studies of mysticism commonly include items to assess paranormal experiences. For instance, paranormal experiences were included in the 1984, 1988, and 1989 GSS data and have been reported by Fox (1992). We cite this study here because it included the Greeley question to assess mysticism and three additional questions to assess paranormal experience: extrasensory perception, contact with the dead, and clairvoyance. The numbers sampled varied by year with slightly under 1,000 for 1989 and slightly more than 14,000 for both 1988 and 1984. There were minor changes across the years on the percentages reporting various experiences, but the relative stability of the percentages is what is most impressive. Overall, mysticism was reported by about one-third of the samples (overall average 34%); the figure we have suggested is stable across numerous survey studies using variously worded questions to assess mysticism. However, far more persons
In virtually every survey, when both paranormal and mystical experiences are assessed they are positively correlated and reported in similar frequencies in that at least one-third of persons sampled respond positively to both mysticism and paranormal questions. Some paranormal experiences, such as ESP, are reported at percentages almost doubling the rate for mystical experience. Thus, persons who report paranormal experiences often report mystical experiences as well, and vice versa. The question to be addressed now is, why are these experiences linked?

**MAINTREAM RELIGION AND SCIENCE**

We think that survey studies revealing correlated reports of mystical and paranormal experiences are tapping into experiences that reflect a reality different from that postulated by mainstream science and to mystical experiences often relegated to disdain by mainstream religion.

Researches, myself included have recently championed an article by a sociologist, Porpora (2006), in which he praises an edited volume published by the American Psychological Association. This edited work explores anomalous experiences such as alien abductions, and paranormal (psi) and mystical experiences (Cardeña, Lynn, & Krippner, 2000). Careful attention is paid to the phenomenology of the anomalous experiences. It is not assumed that the experiences are exhaustedly explained by a social constructionist perspective that denies the possible ontological reality of what is experienced. As I noted in response to Porpora’s article (Hood, 2007), to accept the possible veridicality of even what seems absurd, such as claim of alien abduction, allows for the possibility of falsification. However, I do not presuppose an exhaustive scientific worldview. So in this chapter I engage Blackmore’s new paradigm for parapsychology by retreating to a consideration of the reality of both mystical and paranormal claims as forms of human experiencing, as phenomena in a Kantian sense. I also note that it is an egregious error to assume falsification applies to phenomenological descriptions of experience.

Another reason that reports of mysticism and paranormal experiences are correlated is that they are more likely to be reported by persons who identify themselves as spiritual but not religious. Not only are these people not religious, they are often antireligious. These persons have the highest rates of reporting both mystical and paranormal experiences (Hood, 2000; Spilka et al., 2003, pp. 331–340).

A review of open-ended responses to questions aimed at eliciting reports of mystical experience yields a wide range of experiences, some of which

reported extrasensory perception (overall average 63%), while clairvoyance was least frequently reported (overall average 27%). Contact with the dead was reported by an overall average of 39 percent of the sample (Fox 1992, p. 422).
appear to be not mystical (Spilka et al., 2003, pp. 300–307). Part of this is likely linked to many spiritual but not religious persons rejecting both mainstream religion and mainstream science. It is likely that some respondents simply want to affirm experiences that offer evidential support for alternative beliefs. Persons believe their experiences to be veridical and do not want them dismissed as purely subjective at best or pathological at worst (Hollenback, 1996, pp. 607–615). Some empirical evidence is apparent in methodologies that attempt to tease apart various correlated experiences. For instance, two studies (Thomas & Cooper, 1978, 1980) analyzed in detail positive responses to Greeley’s survey question. They found many more of the responses were better classified as paranormal than mystical; the most common paranormal experiences identified were out-of-body experiences, telepathy, and extrasensory experiences. For now it is sufficient to note that many individuals define paranormal experiences to be mystical experiences, as do some scholars of mysticism such as Hollenback (1996). However, we will develop an argument to differentiate paranormal experiences from mystical experiences shortly.

When samples are carefully selected for their religious identification, paranormal experiences are infrequently cited (if at all) as instances of religious experiences. Margolis and Elifson (1979) carefully solicited a sample of persons who were willing to affirm that they had had a religious experience that the researchers accepted as indicating some personal relationship to ultimate reality. The 69 experiences described were content-analyzed, yielding 20 themes. These were then factor-analyzed, yielding four factors—the major one of which was a mystical factor “very similar to the classical mystical experience described by Stace and others” (Margolis & Elifson, 1979, p. 62). Two of the other three factors (a life change experience factor and a visionary factor) were clearly religious experiences. One factor, vertigo experience, was a loss of control experienced negatively, often triggered by drugs or music. No paranormal experiences were reported. Thus it is likely that survey questions worded to avoid religious language probably elicit a variety of experiences, including paranormal ones, that otherwise would not be identified as religious by the respondents. Mainstream religious persons (who are religious and spiritual) are less likely to identify a religious experience as a paranormal experience. The obverse is the case for the spiritual but not religious persons; their paranormal experiences are likely to be seen as spiritual. As Yamane (2000) has argued, how one narrates his or her experience is linked to the sophistication from which he or she is able to make distinctions among types of experiences. Thus, we will make the case that mysticism, as a nonsensuous transcendent experience, should be distinguished from the wide variety of paranormal experiences, all of which are best identified as sensuous whether or not they are also perceived as transcendent experiences.
THE UNIQUENESS OF MYSTICAL EXPERIENCE

I have long argued for what is identified as the unity thesis in the study of mysticism (Hood, 1985, 2003a, 2003b, 2006) as well as this thesis’s relevance for the paranormal (Hood, 1989). The thesis is associated with the pivotal work of Stace (1961). He argued for a common core to mysticism, derived from his phenomenological study of mystical experiences both within and outside of various faith traditions.

Stace’s common core has been operationalized in a widely used measure of mysticism, the M-scale (Hood, 1975; Hood et al., 2001). The importance of this measure for our discussion of mysticism and the paranormal is linked to four factors. First, Stace derived his common core thesis from a wide variety of reported experiences from which he sought to identify a common, phenomenological core. For our purposes we will focus upon his claim that mysticism involves an experience of unity that can be either perceptually based, perceiving the one with a multiplicity of perceptual objects (extrovertive mysticism), or non-perceptually based, experiencing the unity of a pure consciousness devoid of content (introvertive mysticism). These are but related ways of experiencing the same unity, with introvertive experiences perhaps a more fully developed unity experience than extrovertive. Introvertive mysticism is a nonsensuous transcendent experience found both within and outside of faith traditions. Second, while both introvertive and extrovertive experiences can be variously interpreted, the interpretation is not totally constructive of the experience. Third, the M-scale derived from Stace’s phenomenological work has been demonstrated in several different cultures to have a factor structure consistent with Stace’s common core model (Hood et al., 2001; Spilka et al., 2003, pp. 320–28). Fourth, Stace argues for a “causal indifference” in that he refuses to judge the experience based upon proximate triggers. Thus, any number of conditions may facilitate a mystical experience, including naturally occurring psychoactive substances and drugs derived by isolating the active ingredients in those substances. However, mystical experience is not a drug-specific effect. This will become crucial in this discussion shortly. Finally, mystical experiences challenge views of reality supported by mainstream science. Since the time of William James, mystics have always claimed their experience to be noetic. Noetic knowledge is directly given in experience and is ineffable. This ontological claim of mystics is as problematic to mainstream science as it is to mainstream faith traditions. However, it is not an issue that affects the focus upon the phenomenological description of this experience and the study of conditions under which it can be facilitated.

Stace’s claim that there is a common core to mysticism is based upon his claim that one can separate levels of interpretation from what is experienced. There is much empirical support for this claim (Hood, 1985, 2003a, 2006, Hood et al., 2001. However, there is also much conceptual criticism of
this claim. Katz (1977) devoted an entire edited volume to challenging the distinction between experience and interpretation, central to Stace’s work. For reasons of space we cannot address this literature here. Likewise others have developed scales to measure mysticism derived from other theorists. For instance, Francis and Louden have developed a scale based upon Happold’s (1963) seven criteria of mysticism as well as a short version of this scale (Francis & Louden, 2000, 2004). Most recently, Lange and Thalbourne (2007) have developed a single-factor measure of mysticism.

The various scales to measure mysticism all have merit but lead to different conceptualizations of what is being measured. For instance, Thalbourne and his colleagues argue that common positive correlations between measures of mysticism and paranormal phenomena (as well as creativity, schizotypy, and magical ideation) are all derived from a common underlying factor identified as transliminality (Thalbourne & Delin, 1999; Thalbourne, Bartemucci, Delin, Fox, & Nofi, 1997). My measure does not identify paranormal experiences as mystical nor does it assume a common underlying factor that accounts for correlations between paranormal phenomena and mysticism. Thus I can ask under what conditions mysticism and paranormal experience might covary, but there is no assumption they are necessarily correlated. I shall address this issue by a detour through the not uncontroversial field known by the rather cumbersome term archeopsychopharmacology.

**ARCHEOPSYCHOPHARMACOLOGY**

It has long been recognized that many religions have employed various naturally occurring psychoactive substances in rituals that facilitate transcendent experiences interpreted within the religious or spiritual frameworks of the culture. It is often rather arrogantly assumed that interest in the facilitation of experience by psychoactive botanicals is the domain of anthropology and sister disciplines concerned with non-Western religions (Hollenback, 1996). However, as we shall shortly discuss, such chemicals have experimental relevance in the contemporary study of mysticism in industrialized cultures as well.

Archeopsychopharmacological scholars often cooperate with ethnobotanists. The combination of ancient texts and artifacts with knowledge of naturally occurring psychoactive plants in various cultures has led to a controversial thesis. We will identify a strong and a weak version of this thesis.

The strong version is that all religion has its origins in experiences triggered by naturally occurring psychoactive botanicals. Religion is an effort to meaningfully frame the experience in ontological terms (Kramrisch, Otto, Ruck, & Wasson, 1986; Shultesa & Hoffman, 1979). This strong version of the thesis, that all religions originated this way, is not falsifiable and remains speculative.
The weak version of this thesis is falsifiable and thus a more appropriate scientific hypothesis. It states that many oral and faith traditions have records of experiences that are identical in all respects to those facilitated by naturally occurring psychoactive botanicals. These may be a factor in the origin of some religions. However, they are empirically reported in many religious traditions as valued transcendent experiences. The empirical evidence for this weak claim, especially that paranormal and mystical experiences facilitated by psychoactive chemicals are identical to spontaneous and nonchemical facilitating conditions such as prayer or sensory isolation, is substantial (Spilka et al., 2003, chaps. 9 & 10).

While likely to be always speculative, and controversial, the strong claim continues to be persuasive to many. Allegro (1971) contends that the origin of the Judeo-Christian tradition may have been heavily influenced by altered states facilitated by the use of naturally occurring psychedelic substances, such as the mushroom *Amanita muscaria*. So influenced, too, Wasson (1969) argues, was the sacred soma of the ancient Indian text *Rig Veda*. Soma has been linked to the fly agaric mushroom, which has well-documented psychoactive effects (Kramrisch, Otto, Ruck, & Wasson, 1986). Wasson, Hofmann, and Ruck (1978) have argued that an ergot similar to LSD was integral to the Eleusinian mystery cults of ancient Greece, and from there influenced Western philosophy, particularly Platonic and neo-Platonic philosophies. Merkur (2000) argued that the miraculous bread that the Israelites consumed in the wilderness contained a naturally occurring entheogen. He went on to argue that Philo of Alexandria, Rabbi Moses Maimonides, and St. Bernard of Clairvaux all referred to special meditations to be performed when partaking of a naturally occurring entheogen (Merkur, 2001).

Shanon (2000a) has suggested that mandrakes, known for their psychoactive properties, were so desired by Rachael in the story of Genesis (30:14–15) that she was willing to give up the love of her husband for them. Likewise, Fuller (2000) has documented the role of entheogens in American religious history, especially among the spiritually unchurched. Others have noted how naturally occurring psychoactive botanicals illuminate particular American faith traditions. For instance, it is likely that Joseph Smith and members of the early Mormon Church used the peyote cactus, the *Amanitaria muscaria* mushroom, and the datura plant to facilitate visions of a transcendent realm (Beckstead, 2007; Peterson, 1975). Shanon (2002b) also has noted the role ayahuasca, a psychoactive brew, continues to play in South America, especially in the church of Santo Daime, and he has produced the most complete phenomenological description of experiences commonly evoked by ayahuasca.

Finally, Roberts (2001) has edited a volume in which over two dozen essays document the use of psychoactive chemicals as sacraments. Thus, whether the strong version of this thesis is accepted, the weak version is clearly compatible with the claim that some religions emerged as they sought to provide
meaningful explanations for mystical and paranormal experiences facilitated by naturally occurring psychoactive plants. The shift is from the phenomenology of the experience to a certification of the ritual that would authenticate the sense of ontological wonder afforded by such experiences. This is a move to religious or spiritual worldviews. A clue to this is in the language used to describe these substances.

FROM PSYCHOTOMIMETIC TO PSYCHEDELIC TO ENTHEOGENS

The terminology for various psychoactive chemicals often reflects the orientation of the researcher. Archeopsychopharmacological theories in the weak sense, when applied to mystical or paranormal experiences, simply argue that psychoactive chemicals can produce experiences identical to those acknowledged by many faith traditions. Proponents of mainstream faith traditions argue that an experience that is chemically induced cannot be genuinely religious (Zaehner, 1972). Ironically, this claim was also made by one of the early psychologists of religion who favored reductionistic explanations for mysticism. Leuba (1896) used the report of mystical experience among the faithful as a criticism of modern religions. He noted that insofar as modern religions seek cultivation and recognition of mystical experience, they are a regression to primitive religions. However, as Weil (1986) has emphasized, the similarity of psychoactive substances found within plants, animals, and the human brain suggests that any simple distinction between naturally and artificially induced states is arbitrary. Insofar as experience is a function of neurophysiological processes, chemicals are omnipresent.

Various names have been used to classify the psychoactive chemicals identified in their natural forms by ethnobotanists. Hallucinogenic is the most inadequate term, since hallucination is one of the least common responses to these chemicals (Barber, 1970). Although they do produce various visual and imagery effects, whether users’ eyes are open or closed, they do not produce false perceptions attributed to a nonexistent external stimulus (hallucinations). Psychotomimetic was the term favored by early researchers who thought that this class of chemicals produces psychoses or psychotic-like states. Given the cultural evaluation of psychoses, the negative connotations of psychotomimetic are obvious. However, it is well established that the ability of these chemicals to elicit sudden psychoses in otherwise normal persons is highly exaggerated (Barr, Langs, Holt, Goldberger, & Klein, 1972). Psychedelic was the term most preferred by those who favored the mind-manifesting aspect of these drugs. It is a common term today, despite its positive connotations among participants in the 1960s deviant drug culture and its still-current association with the illicit street drug culture (Stevens, 1987). However, the term entheogen is favored by researchers who accept at least the weak sense of the
Mysticism and Paranormal Experiences Facilitated by Entheogens

Our detour into archeopsychopharmacology has put us on track to reconsider Blackmore’s call for a new paradigm for the study of paranormal experiences. Thus, just as shamans enter into a spirit realm and return, the realm itself would be of no significance if it were not both a psychological and a sociological fact that the shaman and his followers both believe in the reality of what was experienced. Furthermore, as we will note shortly, paranormal and mystical experiences triggered by entheogens require careful attention to set and setting, since the range of experiences is drug facilitated, but as noted above, not a drug-specific effect. The intimate relationship between the uses of psychoactive sacramentals documented by archeopsychopharmacologists is not simply embedded in the history of religions. Religions have discovered and elaborated means of arranging set and setting to facilitate the experience of realities long noted to be different from the mundane. Thus the distinction between sacred and profane is maintained in mystical and paranormal experiences. Mystical experiences are impossible to describe with language that functions to identify distinctions between subjects and objects. In so far as both introvertive and extrovertive mysticism have no separation between subject and object, these experiences transcend distinctions rooted in language. Likewise, paranormal experience disrupts the natural world as currently understood by science. Religious or spiritual language is often an effort to express or evoke such experiences, not to describe them, and is often viewed as metamorphic or mythical in a derogative sense. However, if archeopsychopharmacologists are correct, religious and spiritual traditions authenticate transcendent experiences that can only be maintained if the text is seen as self-authenticating, a principle we have termed *intratextuality* (Hood, Hill, & Williamson, 2005). Under this principle, experiences recorded in sacred texts are to be interpreted as exemplars of various experiences that, as we shall soon see, can be both facilitated by entheogens and scientifically studied.

SET AND SETTING EFFECTS IN DRUG RESEARCH

Set and setting effects are well established for all drugs, but especially for entheogens that archeopsychopharmacologists identify as associated with
most if not all religious and spiritual traditions. We cannot exhaustively treat this massive literature here. However, we can summarize what are consistent effects over several thousand studies. Excellent reviews on set and setting effects are available for entheogens and other drugs used under both legal (Barber, 1970; Grof, 1975; Shanon, 2002b) and illegal conditions (Zinberg, 1984). Our purpose here is to demonstrate that what is known about set and setting effects in laboratory-based drug research is one key to the archeopsychopharmacological discovery that entheogens facilitate both mystical and paranormal experiences that religious authenticate as sacred.

Set Effects

Under set we can identify three major factors that are relevant to any effect. First is the nature and amount of drug ingested. Entheogens exist either in naturally occurring form (e.g., peyote) or in drugs which are assumed to have identified the single or major active chemical in naturally occurring substances (e.g., psilocybin). Relative to drug set effects a simple summary is possible. First, neither mystical nor paranormal experiences are drug-specific effects of any entheogen. Second, as a general rule there is a curvilinear relationship between drug dosages: at moderate level mystical and a variety of paranormal experiences are likely. They seldom occur at low levels, and at high levels of drugs, one is more likely to be disoriented. Levels of drug are best individualized by mg/kg body weight and by the specific entheogen used.

The two most studied set effects are mood and expectation. One example of each from the massive literature should suffice. The single best predictor of mood during an entheogen session is the participant’s mood just prior to his or her session. Positive moods predict positive experiences during the session, or if a negative experience occurs, it is worked through and the overall experience is positive. This holds whether or not mystical or paranormal experiences occur.

The final set variable is expectation. Generally speaking, entheogens produce drug-specific effects linked to such things as perceptual alterations with eyes open. This will occur whether expected or not. However, mystical and paranormal experiences are greatly facilitated by proper expectations. Knowing that one might have an out-of-body or near-death experience will greatly facilitate its occurrence, and it is generally experienced as positive if the participant is not anxious and can be guided thorough the session by an entheogenic-experienced person.

Setting Effects

Here setting effects are separated into proximate and distal. Proximate setting includes the place where the entheogen is ingested; whether the
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entheogen is ingested in isolation or in a group; and the rapport between the participant and his or her guide (if used) or others (if in a group setting), and the researcher (if present). These results too can be readily summarized from the consistencies in the literature.

**Proximate Setting Effects**

The place where entheogens are ingested is crucial. Early research encouraged the participant, often a professional, to explore psychotic possibilities with predictable results. Here is the origin of the term *psychotomimetic* as a label for these drugs. Research in therapeutic setting produced claims to transformation, often akin to religious conversions. Many of these transformations were associated with paranormal experience, accepted as revelatory of a newly discovered scared realm. However, such conversions were mostly limited to self-report data, and little objective transformation in terms of overt behavior was documented. Artists taking entheogens in relaxed settings, often in personal homes, anticipated and often experienced various visual effects, from figure ground reversal to archetypical manifestations of strikingly realistic visions documented in the prophetic texts of many faith traditions. Here is the origin of the term *psychedelic* for these drugs. Finally, the rare specific religious settings in which entheogens were taken revealed the greatest range of mystical and paranormal phenomena. We will return to this when we discuss the tradition of what has become known as the Good Friday experiment.

One cautionary note is relevant before we continue regarding what is now recognized by many as inappropriate use of entheogens. Just as Blackmore argued to move research on paranormal phenomena away from the question of veridicality, much of the early research testing performance effects of entheogens on everything from memory recall to performance of experimental tasks and efforts to increase scores on telepathic base rates is appropriate (Barber, 1970; Krippner & Davidson, 1974). Entheogens are best used to explore and experience what Tart (1975) identifies as altered states of consciousness. Researchers who facilitate such states with entheogens cannot wisely expect performance in one state to facilitate performance inappropriate in certain altered states. Thus entheogens are best explored in relaxed settings where the focus is on experience, not task performance.

The second proximate setting variable is whether the entheogen is taken in a group or individual setting. Generally, entheogens taken in group settings reduce the occurrence of anxiety for participants. However, group effects are hard to isolate, as many studies employ one or more guides, even if there is but one participant. The real variable here is whether the guide is also under the influence of the entheogen. Two traditions emerged. One, heavily influenced by Timothy Leary, utilized a guide under the influence
during sessions with one or more participants. The other tradition used entheogenic-experienced guides who were not under the influence when guiding any participant or participants.

The differences in guides (entheogenic-influenced or not) turns out not to be a factor. Instead, the crucial factor is rapport with an entheogenic-experienced guide and, if taking the entheogen in a group, with others in the group. Under these optimal conditions the widest range of experiences can be explored and worked through more as a spiritual quest and sometimes even spiritual trial. Here mystical and paranormal experiences are likely to abound and, as we shall see, be meaningfully transformative of participants’ lives.

**Distal Setting Effects**

Distal setting effects include the broader context within which entheogens are taken. First is the general cultural setting with respect to spiritual and paranormal claims. Cultures vary widely in their acceptance of various anomalous experiences and the ontological status they grant them. Likewise they vary greatly in the acceptance and use of indigenous psychoactive sacramentals and, especially in the United States, the acceptance of the use of drugs for recreational, spiritual, or religious purposes. In 1970 when entheogens were classified as Schedule I drugs by the Controlled Substances Act they were officially identified as having no legitimate medical use (Griffiths, 2007). For some, America’s “War on Drugs” reflects the worry of both mainstream science and religion that spiritual and paranormal realities might be readily accessible and no longer controlled by social institutions, whether scientific or religious. Entheogens are reasonably safe, and in many cultures naturally occurring entheogens are used as sacramentals in religious and spiritual rituals. In such cultures mystical and paranormal experiences are common and authenticated in spiritually meaningful systems of belief and practice (Roberts, 2001; Shanon, 2002b). Entheogens have played a significant role in American religious history, often among spiritual seekers who remained unchurched (Fuller, 2000; Stevens, 1987). They continue to do so today among the unchurched likely self-identified spiritual but not religious persons.

It goes without saying that set and setting factors interact. When the proper chemical dose is taken by a confident participant with a guide or a group in which there is great rapport and an openness of participants to explore expected altered states of consciousness in a relaxed and pleasant setting, entheogens can facilitate both paranormal and mystical experiences. Furthermore, these experiences are identical in all respect to experiences not facilitated by entheogens. This claim has significant empirical support. We shall briefly consider three studies.
STUDIES IN THE “GOOD FRIDAY” TRADITION

One of the more fortuitous happenings in the history of research on entheogens was the fact that Stace (1961) developed his phenomenological common core thesis with the assumption of causal indifference. Stace included some drug-facilitated instances in his exemplars of mystical experiences from which he derived his common core. Thus, he recognized that mystical experience could be facilitated by drugs but was not a drug-specific effect. Most of the instances of mysticism Stace used were culled from various reports embedded within faith traditions that did not cultivate the use of entheogens.

Early researchers of psilocybin were intrigued to verify the reality of various states of consciousness experienced under the influence of this chemical. Pahnke (1966) was a doctoral student at Harvard. Timothy Leary was his dissertation advisor. His dissertation was designed as a double-blind study in which set and setting were to be manipulated to maximize the probability of facilitating a mystical experience. Fortunately, he had Stace’s common core criteria to use as one objective self-report measure of mystical experience.

He utilized as participants graduate students at Andover Newton Theological Seminary. All were volunteers and had never taken entheogens prior to this experiment. The setting was the basement chapel, and the day was meaningful to all Christians, Good Friday, 1962. Participants were psychologically and medically screened beforehand. Twenty participants were selected, half to receive a moderate dose of psilocybin; the others to receive nicotinic acid as a placebo control. Participants were in groups of four, with two knowledgeable guides, one of which received psilocybin, the other the placebo control.

On the day of the study, participants met in a lounge beside a private chapel into which the sermon would be transmitted over loudspeaker. The chemicals were taken 90 minutes before the service began. Besides the lengthy sermon, participants heard solos, read, prayed, and meditated.

There are criticisms of this study (Doblin, 1991). A primary criticism is that the double-blind was quickly broken. Nicotinic acid produces a warm, tingling sensation that dissipates rapidly. Many in the control group thought this tingling signaled they were in the experimental group but quickly realized this was not so. Also, one negative experience that required medical intervention was not reported in write-ups of this experiment (Pahnke, 1966, 1969). Still, as Pahnke and Richard (1966) noted in discussing this experiment, set and setting were carefully manipulated to correspond to what occurs in cultures where tribes use naturally occurring psychoactive sacramentals in religious ceremonies. This likely contributed immensely to the success of this study.

Of the many measures used in this study, the criteria derived from Stace’s common core interests us most. Here the results were clear: on all criteria the experimental group scored significantly higher than the controls. Simply put, by independent criteria established by Stace, Panhke’s experimental
participants indicated that they had mystical experiences while the controls did not.

Nearly a quarter of a century after the Good Friday study, Doblin (1991) was able to contact nine of the original control participants and seven of the original experimental participants. From November 1986 to October 1989 he interviewed participants in person or by phone. He was able to administer the original Pahnke questionnaire containing Stace’s criteria. Using as the criteria the percentage of participants who scored the maximum on each criterion of Stace’s common core, Doblin found that over 75 percent of the experimentals reported maximum scores on introvertive experiences of undifferentiated unity compared to only 5 percent of the controls. In Pahnke’s study the percentages were 70 percent and 8 percent, respectively. Thus, nearly 25 years later, participants who had mystical experiences elicited under proper set and setting with an entheogen gave evidence that entheogens can indeed be used as sacramentals and can produce lasting and profoundly meaningful effects, at least based upon self-report.

In a recent experiment Griffiths Richards, McCann, and Jesse (2006) sought to advance the Good Friday research. This benchmark study is a significant advance over Pahnke’s study for several reasons. It was a double-blind, between groups, crossover design. Thirty entheogenic-naïve volunteers received psilocybin and methylphenidate (Ritalin) in counterbalanced order over two sessions. Methylphenidate was chosen as an active placebo control, and it has similar time-course effects to psilocybin on blood pressure. Additionally, six randomly assigned volunteers received methylphenidate in the first two sessions and unblended psilocybin in the third session. The purpose of this condition was to obscure the study design to both participants and guides. This was successful. Despite using an experienced entheogenic guide (who was drug-free when guiding) and additional knowledgeable monitors, almost one-quarter of sessions were misclassified with methylphenidate identified as psilocybin or psilocybin identified as some other drug. Thus, unlike Pahnke’s original study, this double-blind was successful.

Participants were volunteers with some religious and/or spiritual interests. Thirty-six participants (20 females) were medically and psychologically healthy, without histories of prior entheogen use. Ages ranged from 24 to 64 (mean age was 46). Most were college graduates and half had postgraduate degrees. Thirty participants were told that they would receive psilocybin and also that various other drugs might be administered (double-blind conditions), while six participants who received methylphenidate in the first two sessions were told that in the third session they would receive psilocybin. All participants met with the primary monitor over four sessions, for a total of eight hours, and on four occasions, for a total of four hours. The primary purpose was to develop rapport and trust and to minimize any negative reactions.
This study is a longitudinal study in that participants will be followed up on and assessed on a wide variety of measures at various intervals. For our purposes we will focus only upon the assessment of mysticism in this study. The assessment occurred in several ways. Before and two months after the study, participants took the M-scale. Seven hours after drug ingestion participants took a modified version of Pahnke’s questionnaire to assess mysticism. Both of these measures of mystical experience directly relate to Stace’s phenomenologically identified common core.

Results of the study indicated that seven hours after drug ingestion, participants in the experimental group had significantly higher scores on the modified Pahnke questionnaire than the methylphenidate controls. Likewise, two months after the experiment, psilocybin participants had higher scores on the Hood M-scale than the methylphenidate controls. Scores on the Hood M-scale after psilocybin predicted the spiritual significance of the experience (r = .77) in a 12- to 14-month follow-up (Griffiths, 2007). The majority of psilocybin participants rated their experience in the study, at both two months and at the one year follow-up, as one of the five most spiritually significant experiences in their lives.

Studies in the Good Friday tradition clearly establish that when entheogens are ingested under appropriate conditions of set and setting they can facilitate mystical experiences. The consistent use of measures derived from Stace’s common core indicates that these facilitated experiences are indistinguishable from mystical experiences that occur spontaneously or by other facilitated means, such as prayer or meditation. Thus, psilocybin and even methylphenidate (Ditman et al., 1969) can serve as psychoactive sacramentals. The Griffiths et al. study indicates that psilocybin is a more effective facilitator than methylphenidate.

Paranormal phenomena are common as mystical experiences with moderate dosages of psilocybin, but again the crucial requirement is that set and setting are appropriate. Individuals can be guided through out-of-body experiences, near-death experiences, and telepathic experiences equivalent to those so common in shamanic cultures. However, as noted above, to require improvement on paranormal tasks is as inappropriate under entheogens as it is to test the value of entheogens by performance on standardized tests. The crucial value appears to lie in their ability to facilitate altered states of consciousness. As Tart (1975) has long argued, these may require state-specific sciences to be properly understood. Wulff (2000, p. 430) has also suggested that if we accept mysticism as a healthy and veridical response, one must be open to views of the world that fundamentally challenge assumptions, theories, and methods favored by modern empirical psychology.

Mystical experiences of unity are among the most common cited by users of LSD and psilocybin (Luke & Kittenis, 2005). Interestingly, psilocybin is the active ingredient in the *Psilocybe* genus of mushrooms. Those experienced
with naturally occurring entheogens rather than the synthesized single active ingredient suggest that there may be subtle and complex differences (Luke & Kitten, 2005; Shanon, 2002b). It may be that naturally occurring psychoactive substances would perhaps be easier to legalize in American culture, should that be desired. Regardless, that psychoactive substances can facilitate mystical and paranormal experiences seems so well established that the legitimate exploration of these experiences on their own terms appears to be more than feasible. If so, is there a frame within which they can be non-reductively explored? I think there is, and so I end this essay with a brief consideration of Jung and a concept he developed with the winner of the Nobel Prize for Physics in 1945.

SYNCHRONICITY AND SET/SETTING EFFECTS

Several investigators have argued for the relevance of synchronicity to parapsychology and to the psychology of religion (Aziz, 1990; Bender, 1976; Rao, 1977; Storm, 1999). As is widely known, with the help of the physicist Wolfgang Pauli Jung (1960) sought to develop an acausal theory of meaningful coincidences. The value of this theory for paranormal phenomena is that it allows one to abandon the assumption that paranormal phenomena occur via causal means, including energy transmissions, that seem to violate known laws of physics. Instead, events can be causally connected, which in the case of humans usually requires the activation of archetypes. This is directly relevant to our previous discussion of entheogens in that investigators have long argued for the relevance of Jungian psychology to experiences facilitated under appropriate conditions set by LSD and psilocybin (Grof, 1975; Richards, 2005).

Schmeidleur (1997) has argued that paranormal phenomena may be natural abilities that, as with many abilities, exhibit wide individual differences. However, they can be cultivated and developed under appropriate facilitative conditions. Schmeidleur revised set and setting variables first identified by Braud (1975) that facilitate the report of paranormal phenomena. Included are such things as a non-anxious openness to experience and a positive orientation to alternate views of reality. If the focus is upon the phenomenology of paranormal experiences rather than as opposed to efforts to assess the veridical nature of the experience as recently reemphasized by Targ, Schlitz, and Irwin (2000, p. 221), then researchers can as readily facilitate paranormal experiences under experimental conditions with entheogens as they can facilitate mystical ones. If paranormal events are seen as meaningful coincidences, the activation of archetypes under entheogens can be expected to produce meaningful coincidences. When the set and setting are carefully crafted to focus upon the possibility of experiencing paranormal phenomena, they can readily be facilitated. There is a considerable body of theory and research documenting this claim (Aziz, 1990; Grof, 1975; Rao, 1977).
If entheogens under appropriate set and setting can produce both mystical and paranormal experiences, the value of Stace’s phenomenological common core thesis becomes evident. Hollenback (1996, p. 615) argues that Stace’s focus upon introvertive mysticism as a nonsensuous form of transcendent experience undervalues the sensuous mystical experiences associated with visions, voices, and shamanistic flights to other realities. Hollenback would broaden the term *mysticism* to include such sensuous transcendent experiences. He also persuasively argues for their veridicality. However, we have taken a more neutral stance that nevertheless remains sympathetic to Hollenback’s view. We simply want to distinguish clearly nonsensuous transcendent experiences and identify these as mystical. Other sensuous forms of transcendent experience we identify as paranormal. We have argued that both mystical and paranormal experiences may be facilitated by entheogens.

Furthermore, as Richards (2005) has noted, it is often the case that mystical experiences are reported after experiencing archetypical imagery in entheogenic sessions. Thus, mystical experiences may follow paranormal experience. However, there need be no causal correlation between the two. The parallel to well-known progression in mystical traditions is obvious. The experience of paranormal powers is authenticated within many mystical traditions. However, the paranormal experiences are sensuous in nature and therefore not mystical. If we choose to restrict the term *mystical* to nonsensuous transcendent experiences, it does nothing to deny either the phenomenological descriptions of what we have simply called paranormal experiences, nor does it require the reduction of any of the experiences discussed in this chapter to claims that would refute the possibility that they are veridical.

It would appear that entheogens are among the most reliable facilitators of both paranormal and mystical experiences when set and setting are appropriate. Albert Hoffman (1994) was the first person to prepare LSD as a compound in 1938 and was the one who accidentally discovered its “extraordinary psychical effects” (p. 7) five years later. He repentantly noted that LSD (derived from the active ingredient in a naturally occurring ergot) has a fascinating history along with other psychoactive substances used as sacraments. At the symposium of the Swiss Academy of Sciences, assessing the current status and future of such compounds, he cautioned that the careless profane use of these chemicals would not have happened if notice had been taken of the thousand-year-old experiences of ancient cultures on how to properly use these substances (Hoffman, 1994, p. 14).

The meaningful study of paranormal and mystical experiences is clearly possible. There can be a science of spirituality but it must be “one that is nonreductionist. One that is phenomenologically rich” (Walach, 2007, p. 118). The simple fact that entheogens can be used to facilitate paranormal and mystical experiences does nothing to deny that the phenomenology of these experiences is identical to those that have been authenticated and valued.
within many faith traditions. The experiences themselves continue to fascinate those who have them and others who wish they could.

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The most important obligation of any science is that its descriptive and theoretical language embrace *all* the phenomena of its subject matter; the data from ['altered states of consciousness'] cannot be ignored if we are to have a comprehensive psychology.  
—*Charles T. Tart*, Altered States of Consciousness

When most people consider something to be a *miracle*, they mean it was caused by the direct intervention of God, and otherwise would have been impossible. The theocentric meaning, of course, depends on our definition of possible and impossible. What if we are wrong about what is normally possible? Multistate mindbody theory shows that our meanings of these words are flawed; thus, our understanding of miracles and other extraordinary events needs to be thought through anew. This chapter summarizes mindbody theory then uses its narrower field of entheogens to reconsider miracles and other inexplicable events such as epiphanies, sudden insights into spiritual issues and theology, and instances of inexplicably remarkable recovery from diseases. Multistate theory does not fully explain these events but gives us a theoretical platform on which to begin a new way to think about them.

From a multistate perspective, some inexplicable events seem, incorrectly, to be miracles; but some of them may more accurately be seen as results of capabilities that reside in mindbody states other than our usual, awake state. This is not to claim that all miracles are expressions of other mindbody states, but that religious scholars need to be clear about the relationships
between miracles and mindbody states. This chapter probes that process. A full study of miracles would include their relationships to all mindbody states and all psychotechnologies for attaining these states, but this chapter narrows that by focusing on mystical experiences, and on entheogens as a mindbody psychotechnology for achieving them.

Can the mysterious ways God works include working through entheogens: psychoactive mushrooms, plants, and chemicals? To address this question, the first section of this chapter outlines the multistate paradigm and then points out that some so-called miracles and inexplicable events may be infrequent or rare simply because they occur in infrequent or rare mindbody states. The second section reviews selected literature on the relationship between entheogens and mystical experiences. That leads to the third section, which raises questions about the relationships between mystical experiences, especially those caused by entheogens, and miracles.

Then this chapter examines other so-called impossible events brought about by psychedelics and illustrates how scholars of religious studies might expand their field through experimentation. The chapter ends by raising a number of questions that point to further directions in the study of miracles, inexplicable events, and religious studies. Resting behind these idea lurks the questions, Do entheogens, used in a spiritual context, make it possible to study miracles experimentally? Do some so-called miracles and allegedly inexplicable events provide a foretaste of an emerging stage in human development?

What are we to make of entheogens and the questions they raise? In addition to informing the study of miracles and other exceptional phenomena, what may happen if they take their place along side other religious items and practices? A parallel reformation of religion has happened before. With the advent of movable type, the printing press five hundred years ago, Western religion transformed from a predominance of religious activities and behaviors to verbal religion which centers not on activities but on words—texts, creeds, beliefs, dogma, doctrine, theology—all cognitions and ideas (see Figure 3.1). Does today’s rediscovery and invention of ways to produce direct religious experience presage as monumental a shift today from our text-based religion to the future’s experience-based religion? The particulars in this chapter fit within much broader contexts.

**MULTISTATE THEORY**

Multistate theory recognizes that humans produce and use many mindbody states, also called states of consciousness, in addition to our ordinary, awake mindbody state. Mindbody theory values these states for their possible usefulness and for developing a full map of our minds. Charles Tart, who initiated and organized the study of mindbody states with his 1969 book
Altered States of Consciousness;[^5] caught the psychological importance of paying attention to all mindbody states. The same applies to miracles and to religious studies. To paraphrase Tart, “The most important obligation of religious studies, including the study of miracles, is that its descriptive and theoretical language embraces all the phenomena of its subject matter; the data from mindbody studies cannot be ignored if we are to have a comprehensive study of spirituality. The same standard of including all evidence applies just as appropriately for a complete study of any aspects of the paranormal world.

Thus, this chapter contributes to a more complete study of miracles and religious studies by selectively examining how the entheogen family of mindbody psychotechnologies enriches our understanding of miracles and raises questions for further inquiry. In this chapter, we narrow our attention to states brought about by entheogens used in a religious context. Context includes both their intentional spiritual and religious uses and times when the users’ motivations may not have been spiritual but when the results were. While this chapter examines entheogens, parallel studies might look at other ways of generating mindbody psychotechnologies and their intersections with miracles.

**Mindbody State**

Starting with the recognition that our minds produce and use many states, the first of the three main ideas of multistate theory is mindbody state. A mindbody state is an overall pattern of combined mental and biological functioning at any one time. Being awake, sleeping, and dreaming are the examples people most easily recognize, but there are hundreds, possibly thousands, of these overall patterns. The number of these states and how to stipulate where one state becomes another is an unresolved theoretical issue and will probably remain one of the most difficult theoretical distinctions to make.
This chapter pays particular attention to a select group of states that is especially significant to religious studies, mystical states, which also go by many other names such as unitive consciousness, intense conversion states, blessedness, grace, ecstasy, to name a few. Thus, this chapter is not a full treatment of religion and mindbody states but takes some steps toward that goal of understanding the connection between the spiritual and the paranormal.

A handy way to think about mindbody states is by making an analogy to a computer. When we install new programs into our computer, we can do additional kinds of information processing. Analogously, mindbody states are biological information processing programs, and we do new kinds of biological information processing with them.

programs: computers
mindbody states: minds

The implications of this idea for studying miracles and inexplicable events are quite apparent. Because our ideas of what is possible and impossible are primarily based on what we can do with our usual awake mindbody state, are some of the things we call miracles really events or even skills based in other mindbody states? If so, then we can understand some so-called miracles by recognizing that they may be the expressions of other mindbody states than our standard conscious awake state. By learning to produce these states and to use their skills, can we perform actions that were impossible in our ordinary, awake state? Any study of miracles or inexplicable events that does not consider this may be mislabeling other-state events and skills as miracles, when in reality they are normal operations of alternative states. Are some of the so-called miracles described in other chapters of this set of books actually phenomena produced by paranormal mindbody states?

Mindbody Psychotechnologies

The ways of producing these states (mindbody programs) brings us to the second main idea of multistate theory. Psychotechnologies are methods or techniques of producing mindbody states. Common ones include going to sleep, becoming absorbed in a TV show or movie, drinking tea, coffee, or cola, drinking an alcoholic drink, staying up all night, jet lag, eating chocolate, lucid dreaming, extreme sports, and so forth. Others include contemplative prayer, fasting, restrictive diets, intensive martial arts training, Holotropic Breathwork and other breathing exercises, chanting, yoga, meditation, and many more. Although not often recognized as such, many spiritual disciplines are actually psychotechnologies. Here we discover a fruitful and well-trod path between spiritual development and mindbody techniques. Someday,
will entheogens take their place alongside such other mindbody spiritual disciplines, such as Ignatian prayer regimens?

In this chapter we explore the entheogenic psychotechnologies of psychedelics, notably LSD and its near siblings. A fuller discussion would include the religious use of peyote, of psychoactive mushrooms, the Union du Vegetal’s use of ayahuasca, which was recently supported by the U.S. Supreme Court, ibogaine, San Pedro cactus, and similar divine entheogens to see what insights they bring to miracle studies.?

Residence

The overarching or resident principle here assumes that all human abilities, experience, and behaviors take place within mindbody states and are expressions of their home states. Every ability, experience, and behavior is stronger in some states and weaker in others. Residence leads religious scholars and practitioners to ask, Which states strengthen which spiritual experiences and which weaken them? Residence provides a model for systematically exploring religious practices, beliefs, and experiences using the Central Multistate Research Question. How does any given experience vary from mindbody state to mindbody state? How do miracles vary from mindbody state to mindbody state? How do inexplicable events vary from mindbody state to mindbody state?

While this chapter uses multistate theory to focus on current unusual events and on entheogens, we should remember the larger context of long-term human evolution and development. With the ideas of multistate theory, mindbody states, psychotechnology, and residence, we have a group of interlocking concepts that leads us to reconsider most topics in religious studies and takes us beyond them to broader perspectives. Miracles and inexplicable events are important not only in themselves and for religion, but primarily because they are examples of a new range of mental and physical capacities and benefits that are emerging over the horizon of human development. A fuller repertoire of abilities and increased flexibility to one’s environment are adaptigenic for individuals, societies, and species. Among the questions we should ask ourselves are, How can humanity benefit from multistate abilities? Are the rare and unusual phenomena that these books on miracles and inexplicable events contain also hints about our human future?

SELECTED ENTHEOGENIC LITERATURE

The multistate perspective in religious studies is not merely a collection of new ideas floating in the conceptual ether. Huston Smith’s _Cleansing the Doors of Perception_ is probably the best-known book on entheogens, while the anthologies _Entheogens and the Future of Religion_ and _Psychoactive Sacramentals_

Most controversial is the possibility that entheogens (formerly called psychedelics) can facilitate mystical experiences. One cannot discount the reality of an experience as genuinely mystical because it was facilitated by a chemical or any other proximate cause. As James long ago noted, one cannot dismiss an experience because one can identify the physiological conditions that may accompany it. . . . Triggers may allow one to move beyond mediation to unmediated experience of reality, the lasting claims of mystics of all faith traditions. It may be said that entheogens are one such set of triggers.

“Chemical Input, Religious Output—Entheogens,” in McNamara’s trilogy Where God and Science Meet, uses multistate theory to reframe over 150 religion-related questions in theology, the sciences, humanities, and in church and polity. The same book contains “The Neuropharmacology of Religious Experience: Hallucinogens and the Experience of the Divine” and “The Common Core Thesis in the Study of Mysticism.” The former chapter describes some of the neurochemistry in the mysticism-miracles complex, and the latter (quoted from above) discusses links between mystical experiences and perennialism.

The Internet is a rich source of information on entheogens. Even after discounting the Web sites that use the word entheogen only as a synonym for psychedelic, a Web search for entheogen finds thousands of sites that consider religious and spiritual aspects of these compounds. This indicates an enormous and widespread interest in the religion-spirituality-entheogen complex and raises another question. Are these Web sites evidence that entheogen use is emerging as a new religious movement? Being Web-based rather than building-based, this network of users and Web sites interested in the religion-spirituality-entheogen complex uses a distributed method of organization instead of the usual organizational paraphernalia of buildings, meetings, hierarchies, leadership, clergy, and social structures. While few of these Web sites actually use the word miracle, they often describe transformative spiritual experiences that previously would have been labeled miracles.

Both Web literature and printed literature sample unresolved issues that entheogenic states present theologians. For example, if we do not know the origin of a mystical experience, does that make it a miracle? If we know a mystical experience was stimulated by an entheogen, does that disqualify it
as a miracle? On the other hand, if a mystical experience comes about after years of contemplative prayer, we claim some understanding of why it occurred. Yet both taking an entheogen and practicing extensive prayer are at least partially determined by intentional human action rather than the grace of God. So are both disqualified as miracles? What if someone is suddenly and for no apparent reason struck with a mystical experience? Is it because God threw a mystical thunderbolt at the person? Does this qualify as a miracle?

Perhaps the strongest published grounding of entheogenic religious studies is *Higher Wisdom* and the works of Stanislav Grof, who may be the leading entheogenic theologian. Edited by Roger Walsh and Charles Grob, *Higher Wisdom: Eminent Elders Explore the Continuing Impact of Psychedelics* is an anthology of interviews with 15 longtime leaders in psychedelic scholarship and clinical work.¹⁴ As its title indicates, recognizing *Higher Wisdom* as a record of “courageous explorers and amazing tales,” Zen Buddhist teacher Jack Kornfield marks the book as “describing a critical chapter in the transformation of human consciousness.”¹⁵

Probably the largest collection of entheogenic, miracle-like, inexplicable occurrences is in the works of Grof. His works provide an alternative foundation for exploring miracles, inexplicable events, and spiritual development. Before discussing Grof’s anomalous events, and extending religious studies to include experiments designed to study spiritual development, it is important to consider mystical experiences.

**DO MYSTICAL EXPERIENCES QUALIFY AS MIRACLES?**

It should not be necessary to supply any more proof that psychedelic drugs produce experiences that those who undergo them regard as religious in the fullest sense. . . . Every kind of typically religious emotion, symbol, and insight appears during psychedelic drug trips.¹⁶

Simply put, the question entheogens present for the study of miracles, inexplicable events, and epiphanies is, under what conditions are these miracles? They can deepen meaningfulness in people’s lives, increase their understanding of religious ideas, provide a powerful and deep sense of sacredness, and transfer motivation from self-centeredness to social-centeredness, especially resulting in more socially responsible values. Does this qualify them as miracles?

First, what is a mystical experience? The characteristics that comprise mystical experiences are unity, transcendence of time and space, deeply felt positive mood, sense of sacredness, objectivity and reality, alleged ineffability,
transience, and persisting positive changes in attitudes and behavior.\textsuperscript{17} These characteristics frequently appear in entheogenic mystical experiences and explicable events. Hood has operationalized these in a self-report Mysticism Scale.\textsuperscript{18} He also produced an update and revised version.\textsuperscript{19} He discusses the relevant characteristics in his “Common Core Thesis in the Study of Mysticism.”\textsuperscript{20} From an entheogenic angle, Hood’s chapter “The Facilitation of Religious Experience” summarizes the research on entheogens as of 1995:

If one surmises from the available empirical literature it would appear that somewhere between 35 and 50 percent of psychedelic participants report religious experience of a mystical or numinous nature, even without religious contexts. The figure may rise to as high as 90 percent, but only if one counts as religious experience any imagery of a religious nature, or any religious language used to describe the experience.\textsuperscript{21}

Hood notes, however, that this finding is not so different from non-psychedelic findings: “one-third of the recreational (illegal) psychedelic users reported mystical experiences facilitated by drug use, matching exactly the proportion of the traditionally religious who had their mystical experiences facilitated by traditional religious activities such as prayer.”\textsuperscript{22} Does this mean that one-third of the population is predisposed to having mystical experiences? Does it mean that psychedelics are as effective as prayer and other traditional spiritual disciplines? Does it mean that psychedelic drug users come to resemble traditionally religious people? Are the psychedelic users from a population that was originally different from the traditionally religious to start with, or were they from a similar population?

UNDERSTANDING: NOETIC SENSE OF KNOWLEDGE, UNITY, AND SACREDNESS

Suppose a devoted person praying in church were to have an experience that resulted in the following. Would this qualify as a miracle? We see the traits of noetic sense of knowing and unity in Vaughan’s experience too:

The perennial philosophy and the esoteric teaching of all time suddenly made sense. I understood why spiritual seekers were instructed to look within, and the unconscious was revealed to be not just a useful concept, but an infinite reservoir of creative potential. I felt I had been afforded a glimpse into the nature of reality and the human potential within that reality, together with a direct experience of being myself, free of illusory identification and constrictions of consciousness. My understanding of mystical teaching, both Eastern and Western, Hindu, Buddhist, Christian, and Sufi alike, took a quantum leap. I became aware of all great religions, and understood for the first time the meaning of ecstatic states.\textsuperscript{23}
Would this qualify as a miracle? If these insights had occurred while Vaughan was on a religious retreat or using an established or widely accepted religious practice such as Ignatian devotion, I think many people would say her experience qualifies as legitimate understanding; for others it qualifies as an inexplicable event, and for others perhaps even a miracle. What if these insights were identical except that she had eaten peyote or smoked marijuana before contemplative meditation? Would that disqualify the mindbody state and negate its insights? In fact, she had this experience as part of a then-legal program of LSD administration within a controlled medical experiment. Does this disqualify the results as a miracle, as inexplicable, or as valid spiritual insight?

Another instance of religious understanding comes from Huston Smith. In *Cleansing the Doors of Perception: The Religious Significance of Entheogenic Plants and Chemicals*, he describes insights from his first entheogen experience:

Two things struck me especially. First, the mescaline acted as a psychological prism. It was as if the layers of mind, most of whose contents our conscious mind screens out to smelt the remainder down into a single band we can cope with, were now revealed in their completeness, spread out as if by spectroscope into about five distinguishable layers. And the odd thing was that I could to some degree be aware of them all simultaneously, and could move back and forth among them, shifting my attention to now this one, now another one. . . . I was experiencing the metaphysical theory known as emanationism, in which, beginning with the clear, unbroken Light of the Void, the light then fractures into multiple forms and declines in intensity as it devolves through descending levels of reality. . . . Along with “psychological prism,” another phrase occurred to me: empirical metaphysics. *24*

Both instances include reports of positive mood, unity, and especially noetic understanding. For both Vaughan and Smith some previously inexplicable ideas became explicable. Huston chose “Empirical Metaphysics” for the title of this chapter, and leads us to the claim, later in this chapter, that through entheogens, religious studies, including miracles and inexplicable events, can be broadened and deepened on the basis of experimental evidence.

How do powerful entheogenic mystical experiences influence people’s behavior, values, and orientation toward the spiritual life?

**Sacredness, Meaningfulness, and Significance**

There is a central human experience, which alters all other experiences . . . not just an experience among others, but rather the very heart of the human experience. It is the center that gives understanding to the whole. Once found, life is altered because the very root of human identity is deepened. *25*
While Van Dusen was relying on anecdotal reports in 1961, in 2006 a study at Johns Hopkins Center for Behavioral Biology confirmed his claim with experimental evidence. In “Psilocybin Can Occasion Mystical-Type Experiences Having Substantial and Sustained Personal Meaning and Spiritual Significance,” the authors found that “thirty-three percent of the volunteers rated the psilocybin experience as being the single most spiritually significant of his or her life, with an additional 38% rating it to be among the top five most spiritually significant experiences.”

If 71 percent of the attendees at a religious revival meeting had gone through such an experience, the preacher would be hailed as a miracle worker. Why not at a medical research institute? To be informed on this question and to meet the criterion of “best evidence,” people who want to consider this question should have these experiences themselves. Here is a path for religious studies and scholars of religion to explore when political censorship of entheogenic religion is removed. Caution: the path is not cozy armchair theorizing, but direct personal experience of the \textit{tremendum et fascinans}.

### Transcendence of Time and Space: Changing Beliefs—The Case of Joan

If people were to have a life-changing experience, one that reoriented their ways of understanding themselves spiritually, their worldview, and their theology, would this qualify as a miracle? The entheogenic literature is filled with such experiences. One example of changing beliefs comes from Grof’s work with terminal patients as reported in \textit{The Ultimate Journey}. The purpose of the psychotherapy was not to treat the fundamental, underlying disease, but to reduce the fear of dying and contribute to the patients’ psychological well-being during their remaining days. Joan, a 44-year-old housewife, caring for six children, was active in the community as an adult and had a history of stress as a child. She was diagnosed with a malignant stomach cancer. During the preparation for the LSD sessions, she reviewed her life and her current relationship with her husband. She had three LSD sessions, and her written descriptions of them and her thoughts about them contain a rich store of spiritual events. Using single-state psychology, these events are hard to interpret, including encountering demons that she said “were products of my own mind” and a new view toward life, but they also include emotionally and spiritually enriching experiences:

The most important aspect of these experiences was their relevance for the understanding of death. I saw the magnificent unfolding of the cosmic design in all its infinite nuances and ramifications. Each individual represented a thread in the beautiful warp of life and was playing a specific role. All these roles were equally necessary for the central energy core of the universe; none of them was more important than the others. I saw that
after death the life energy underwent a transformation and the roles were recast. I saw my role in this life to be a cancer patient and was able and willing to accept it. I envisioned and intuitively understood the dynamics of reincarnation.\textsuperscript{29}

Grof’s book \textit{When the Impossible Happens} includes many similar apparent re-incarnation cases.\textsuperscript{30} Are these merely ideas Joan generated to assuage her fear of death, or is Joan’s experience evidence for reincarnation, or of some other alternative model?

VALUES, MOTIVATION, AND BEHAVIOR: POSITIVE CHANGES IN ATTITUDES, BEHAVIOR, AND SACREDNESS

Among the predictable characteristics of mystical experience are a sense of the sacredness of all life and a desire to establish a new, more harmonious relationship with nature and with other human beings. There is a corresponding renunciation of the various forms of self-seeking, including the ethos of manipulation and control. (Wulff, 1991)\textsuperscript{31}

A change of heart is often associated with miraculous experiences, and mystical experiences also exhibit this switch. Would experiencing a miracle make one more loving, more socially responsible, and more moral? Does this kind of motivation show up in people who have had entheogenic mystical experiences? Looking at both entheogenic and non-entheogenic ego-transcendent experiences, Walsh reports, “The thought of harming ‘others’ therefore makes no sense whatsoever. Rather, the natural expressions of these states are said to be love and compassion or \textit{agape}.”\textsuperscript{32} He goes on to spot this observation from religions both Eastern and Western, but, he cautions, these experiences are “under significant voluntary control only in contemplatives.” While clearly less in control in entheogenists?

This shift in values is apparently a natural product of mystical experiences of either sort, as reported in \textit{Quantum Change}.\textsuperscript{33} In “Anatomy of Spiritual Change,” Miller and C’dé Baca describe the shift in motivation that accompanies mystical experiences, quantum change, as they call it. Their sample was nonpsychedelic.\textsuperscript{34}

The Moment that Turns Your Values Upside Down

Men and women ranked their most highly valued personal characteristics before and after such a quantum change (see Table 3.1).

As measured by a shift in values, these might indicate a miracle or at least an epiphany, but would psychedelically stimulated mystical experiences show similar results? Some evidence that these shifts are associated with
psychedelics exists in survey research that compares the values of psychedelic users with values of the users of other illegal drugs and with non-users. In “Values and Beliefs of Psychedelic Users: A Cross-Cultural Study,” Learner and Lyvers found that psychedelic users scored higher on emotional empathy, in keeping with the compassion that results from enlightenment experiences. Furthermore, the life values of spirituality and concern for others were higher among psychedelic users than they had been before such use, according to their own self-report.

This study, of course, did not examine changes in values over time as the effects of drugs, so it does not show a possible shift that occurs following a mystical experience; nor does it rule out the self-report being a calculated justification for drug use rather than an objective report of real, sustained change of values or character. Moreover, the differences between the groups may have already been present prior to drug use. Did the three groups choose their drugs consistent with their already preexisting orientations to the world? It may become possible to examine the complex changes in ego-transcendent values and social responsibility inherent to spiritually or drug-incited mystical experiences. Such studies may give us clues as to why miracles that include self-transcendent states reorient people toward spiritual and social values.

Mystical experiences of whatever kind are generally recognized by religious persons and communities. The events above provoke the question of

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causal indifference regarding the quality of mystical experiences. Do entheogenetic mystical experiences qualify as spiritual events?

EXPERIENCING PARADOXICALITY: WHEN THE IMPOSSIBLE HAPPENS

In contradiction to writings on the psychedelics which are occupied with experiences the mind can have, the common concern here is with evidence they afford as to what the mind is . . . . Judged both by the quantity of data encompassed and by the explanatory power of the hypotheses that make sense of this data, it is by far the most formidable evidence the psychedelics have thus far produced. The evidence to which we refer is that which has emerged through the work of Stanislav Grof.36

This section is a summary of Grof’s 2006 work, When the Impossible Happens. Multistate theory proposes that when we shift from one mindbody program to another mindbody program, things that were impossible in our earlier state may be possible in the later state. When the Impossible Happens provides evidence that supports this idea. Psychedelic experiences seem to create states of perception otherwise considered impossible.

Grof’s works ground the study of inexplicable events and apparent miracles in clinical case histories and in the recovery of parts of our minds that can be discovered and described via mindbody psychotechnologies. He calls these states when used in a therapeutic context “holotropic,” that is, as moving toward wholeness. This wholeness is both moving toward mental health, and, echoing Tart’s idea that a complete psychology needs to include all states of consciousness, psychedelic exploration is holotropic in moving toward a more complete view of the human mind. Grof’s work partially answers the multistate question, How does the human mind vary from mindbody state to mindbody state?

While Grof’s collection of case studies is both secular and sacred, I will concentrate here on those that pertain to traditional religious concepts.

Healing Depression with a Sephardic Prayer: Cases

The first case used Holotropic Breathwork, not psychedelics. Gladys had suffered from attacks of intense anxiety for about four years. In her third session in a five-day-long Holotropic Breathwork workshop, her “screams became more articulate and started resembling words in an unknown language.37 At one point she sat up and began chanting a haunting repetitive sequence that sounded like some kind of prayer. This went on for quite some time.”38

When she completed her chant, she lay down, quieted down, and entered a state of bliss. Furthermore, she had no idea of what language she used in her chant. It happened that another participant in the workshop, a man from Argentina, recognized the language as Ladino, a combination of Hebrew
and medieval Spanish. Although Carlos had studied Sephardic as a personal religious interest, Gladys had no conscious knowledge of Ladino, was not Jewish, and knew neither Spanish nor Hebrew. Her depression disappeared, and having seen her several years later, Grof reports that this remission persisted: “It was one of the most powerful healings I have observed in my entire psychiatric career.”

What should we make of this kind of healing? Is it a coincidence, a miracle, a healing associated with a spiritual practice? If it had happened in a church, accompanied by glossolalia, people would be tempted to call it a mystical event. Grof cites this case as an example that there are healing mechanisms in our minds that are currently unknown to Western psychology, that is, they exist in paranormal mindbody states. While he admires Freud as an early explorer of the unconscious, Grof believes that “most of his theoretical concepts have not withstood the test of time and require substantial revisions.”

Do our concepts of the mystical, and of miracle, require substantial revisions, too? When a more complete map of our minds is drawn, one that includes all mindbody states and their resident abilities, we will have to revise our ideas about what is possible and impossible. Thus, multistate theory informs most current thinking about miracles, mysticism, the paranormal, and inexplicable events.

Devil Possession and Exorcism?

In Gladys, we saw Holotropic Breathwork as the psychotechnology. In “Interview with the Devil: The Story of Flora,” we turn to LSD as the psychotechnology and what appears as a case of malevolent spirit possession and spiritual healing. Flora’s case occurred while Grof was at the Maryland Psychiatric Research Center (MPRC). Flora had been in a locked ward for 10 months. After release from a penitentiary sentence for driving a getaway car at age 16, she became a drug addict. She felt guilt over her lesbian sexual orientation and often thought of violent suicide. While cleaning a gun, she accidentally wounded her girlfriend, and she was court-committed to the MPRC. “Probably the most agonizing of her complaints was a painful facial cramp, tic douloureux, for which a Johns Hopkins neurosurgeon had suggested a brain operation of severing intracranially her trigeminal nerve.”

None of the drugs and psychotherapies with which she had been treated worked, so she was facing a lifetime transfer to the chronic ward.

During Flora’s third LSD session, her face painfully cramped into what Grof called a mask of evil.

She started talking in a deep, male voice, and everything about her was so different that I could not see much similarity between her present appearance and her former looks. Her eyes had an expression of indescribable malice reminiscent of the last scene from Rosemary’s Baby, which showed a close-up of the infant conceived by the devil. Her hands, which were now...
spastic and looked like claws, completed the picture. Then the energy that took control over her body and voice assumed a personified form and introduced itself as the Devil.  

The evil spirit ordered Grof to stay away from Flora, claimed she was in his territory, and threatened Grof with “explicit blackmail” against him and his colleagues at the Maryland Psychiatric Research Center. In spite of feeling “considerable emotional stress” and “fear that had metaphysical dimensions,” Grof managed to envision Flora wrapped in a capsule of white light and as she had appeared previously. After two hours, “Flora’s hands relaxed and her face returned to its usual form.” She was radiant, felt wonderful, and had no recall of the possession. Lesser problems remained, but later she was released and took a job driving a taxi in Baltimore. In Grof’s words, “I have never in my fifty-some years of practicing psychiatry seen a more dramatic, lasting improvement than the one I witnessed in Flora’s case.” Grof remarks on the irony that the most dramatic therapeutic result he has ever witnessed “resembled more a medieval exorcism” than a therapeutic procedure grounded in modern science.  

What are we to make of this, not only for the study of miracles and inexplicable paranormal experiences but also for theology and metaphysics? Is Flora’s experience an instance of going through a dark night of the soul in order to be reborn? Is the overall process a miracle or mystical spiritual event? Do miracles occur during intense spiritual efforts such as Grof’s envisioning the white light or intense prayer by other people at other times and places? If we conclude that Flora’s case is not a miracle but simply some kind of psychological healing perhaps accompanied by a drug (LSD), what criteria do we use to justify that conclusion? Is there any evidence that God did not directly (immediately) produce this process and its result? Is this a clue to yet undeveloped healing potentials of mystical experiences? Probably!  

Phenomenologically, these and similar experiences are real, but what to make of them is the problem. This is a challenge not just to the study of miracles, but also to contemporary theology and other religious studies. We might add that if the events above had occurred in a religious setting, from the perspective of our usual, rational, awake mindbody state they would likely be understood as miraculous moments of mystical experience. Is it not the case that, when they take place in other settings, they are nonetheless acts of God and authentic mystical human experiences of healing and great benefit?  

**Entheogens as Divine Agents of Change**  
- Are some so-called miracles simply other mindbody state happenings?  
- If God works through the laying on of hands, can he work through eating mushrooms or swallowing a chemical, or use of other synthetic or natural medications?
• Who has the knowledge to deny this possibility?
• Are people more receptive to the miraculous words and deeds of God while in psychedelic states?
• How do we have to refine our understanding of the concepts miracle and mystical to include events that happen in other mindbody states?
• Will people’s experiences, both entheogenic and secular, with psychedelics change the way they think about spiritual issues?
• Beyond discovering other mindbody states, describing them, and developing their resident abilities, can we invent new ones that, like new computer programs, will allow us to do new things with our minds?
• Can we use psychedelics to investigate these questions experimentally?

When one considers a religious quest that includes entheogens, these questions and others demand attention. In the quotation that began this section, Huston Smith claimed that psychedelics provide formidable evidence about what the human mind is, and the examples in this section support his position. We do not have to rely on anecdotes and historical reports, however; the last question in the list above moves us to ways of testing Smith’s claim.

STUDYING MIRACLES EXPERIMENTALLY

The rejection of any source of evidence is always treason to the ultimate rationalism which urges forward science and philosophy alike. (Whitehead, 1929)

As scholars in religious studies reformulate their assumptions about the human mind and its multistate capacities, and as they consider these, a major expansion in religious studies will occur. Scholarship on miracles and inexplicable events can expand to add scientific, experimental evidence to the current knowledge base. The experiment showed that competent experimental research can be done. The Good Friday Experiment from 1962 is the classic model from 46 years ago. The 2006 Johns Hopkins psilocybin study shows how laboratory-based experimental entheogen studies have progressed since then, and the cases cited illustrate ongoing clinical research. The remaining questions can be informed by experiments.

Just as astronomy, physics, chemistry, and biology moved from descriptive studies to experimental ones, so this may be the time for theology and religion to move forward into some areas of empirical science. As the secular parts of our culture depend upon a scientific, evidence-based world, it is possible that our culture’s sacred aspects can move from being primarily rationally and phenomenologically based to becoming experimental. It seems odd, at first, to think about studying mysticism empirically. But (1) if entheogen-stimulated experiences do qualify as authentic mystical spirituality, this is clearly possible. If they do not qualify, (2) we need to clearly
differentiate these apparent mystical events from genuine ones. An empirical, phenomenological, and heuristic database and methodology will assist us in implementing that. Furthermore, if they do not qualify as miracles, then we still have them as inexplicable events that deserve investigation.

Can mere humans acquire the knowledge to decide when a human action or experience is miraculous or mystical? Does it make a difference what tools or channels God uses, working with and through us, to accomplish beneficial effects for his children on earth? Evangelicals who convert people often suppose it is not they who cause the conversion, but God working through them. Surely this applies to lesser everyday events as well. If God can work through us, or can accomplish spontaneous remissions of cancer without our agency, can God also work through mushrooms, illegal chemicals, as well as prescribed synthetic medications? They are all products of his grand created world. It was these questions that prompted the Chicago Theological Seminary to cosponsor a remarkable 1995 conference on entheogens and religion as reported in *Psychoactive Sacramentals: Essays on Entheogens and Religion*.

The Miracle at Marsh Chapel: The Good Friday Experiment

In April 1962, Walter Pahnke, a physician and minister, administered psilocybin to 10 divinity students and nicotinic acid to 10 others in the basement of Marsh Chapel at Boston University during a Good Friday service. His hypothesis was that the psilocybin-treated subjects would have mystical experiences whose characteristics had been described in the literature on mysticism. They did. In a 25-year follow-up, Doblin found that the psilocybin subjects still “considered their original experience to have had genuinely mystical elements and to have made a uniquely valuable contribution to their spiritual lives.” Shortly after this “Miracle at Marsh Chapel,” as the news media called it, federal laws blocked further legal experimentation with psychedelics. For years the Good Friday experiment remained the gold standard of empirical, experimental entheogenic research.

The Hopkins Spiritual Significance Study

Updating the experimental design, outcome measures, and statistical procedures since the Good Friday experiment, in the summer of 2006, a study published by the Behavioral Biology Research Center of Johns Hopkins Medical Institute became the new gold standard for entheogen experiments. In a clinical setting modeled after the relaxed atmosphere of session rooms at the Maryland Psychiatric Research Center 40 years previously, Roland Griffiths and his team administered either psilocybin or another compound to 36 hallucinogen-naïve subjects screened from 195 individuals. Using self-report instruments to measure altered states, mysticism, personality, spiritual
transcendence, and similar outcomes, the investigators measured the results seven hours after the drugs were administered.

In a two-month follow-up, they remeasured their earlier results and included reports from both the subjects and from people who knew the subjects well. “Thirty-three percent of the volunteers rated the psilocybin experience as being the single most spiritually significant experience of his or her life, with an additional 38 percent rating it to be among the top five most spiritually significant experiences.”54 Unfortunately, we do not have here the definition of spiritual experience utilized in the experiment.

The standard operating definition used in this multivolume work, *Miracles: God, Science, and Psychology in the Paranormal*, is simple and straightforward, and likely the basic concept used in the Johns Hopkins study. In our definition, spirituality refers to the irrepressible and universal human quest for meaning. This spontaneous hunger is a longing for every aspect of life to have profound meaning, particularly in terms of our connectedness with the transcendent world we intuit but cannot comprehend.

Reducing Death Anxiety

In “The Use of Psilocybin in Patients with Advanced Cancer and Existential Anxiety,” Charles Grob, a psychiatrist, reports on work he and his team at UCLA-Harbor Medical Center are doing.55 Prior to one case study, “P,” a 58-year-old Japanese American woman, had a cancerous polyp removed from her colon. The removal, however, had not shown cancer-free margins. Her health maintenance organization refused additional treatment, and the cancer spread to her lungs, peritoneum, and lymph nodes. Following her psilocybin session in Grob’s study, she reported decreased anxiety, a sustained positive mood, and a desire to spend quality time with her husband and friends. Cox Films taped interviews with P.56 In them P expresses her gratitude for the psilocybin session, and the wish that in the future both patients and their families can participate in such sessions.

The Hopkins Spiritual Significance study and the UCLA death anxiety study exemplify a renewed wave of psychedelic experimental studies that meet legal, governmental, institutional, medical, and scientific standards. Current studies address clinical research in medicine and psychotherapy, including addiction and alcoholism, obsessive compulsive disorder, emotional disorders, posttraumatic stress disorder, cluster headaches, depression, AIDS-related syndromes, and others.57 What is the outlook for parallel research in religion and spiritual studies? In “Psychological Healing and Growth” Walsh and Grob look toward the combined spiritual aspects of health and growth.58 House examines psychospiritual change, while Marsden and Lukoff distinguish psychedelic transpersonal healing from their shamanic and psychotherapeutic roots.59 Here are leads for religion’s future.
SUMMARY AND OUTLOOK

To be complete, as Tart challenged, a scholarly field needs to “embrace all the phenomena of its subject matter.” Entheogens influence meaningfulness, perceptions, thinking, abilities, values, feelings, religious beliefs, and spiritual ideas; and they may participate in some apparent miracles and other inexplicable events. Thus, to be complete, religious studies, including the study of mysticism, miracles, and other inexplicable events, needs to study entheogens.

These are one family of psychotechnologies. Others within religious traditions include various kinds of meditation, prayer, chanting, martial arts, movement disciplines, and such spiritual regimens as Ignatian devotions, the Rules of St. Benedict and St. Francis, and the models of St. John of the Cross, St. Teresa of Avila, and St. Theresa of Lisieux. To fill in gaps in their disciplines, scholars of religious studies can move their disciplines forward by investigating how spiritual abilities and experiences lose or gain strength, appear anew or disappear, as one moves from one mindbody state to another.

We have attempted here to urge the process of using multistate theory as a way to think about events that otherwise seem impossible, by realizing they may be expressions of other mindbody states. Multistate theory can bring enriching questions to religious thought and spiritual practices.

TOWARD WIDER HORIZONS

Among the most salient new cartography of the human mind is that which Grof presents in *LSD Psychotherapy.* In *The Antipodes of the Mind*, cognitive psychologist Benny Shanon identifies additional dimensions that need attention. He draws on research with the Brazilian psychoactive sacrament ayahuasca. Meanwhile, the *Journal of Psychoactive Drugs, Journal of Transpersonal Psychology,* and *Journal of Consciousness Studies* are constantly pushing forward the frontiers of mindbody studies, both secular and sacred. Jeffrey Kripal, chair of the Department of Religious Studies at Rice University, suggests we are moving toward a “fusion of Western and Asian esoteric traditions that turns to the potential of the human body as the most potent site of spiritual transformations and intellectual insight.” These traditions are sources of mindbody disciplines with histories of development going back millennia. Again, what Western religion and science consider miracles and inexplicable events are common reports in other traditions. In *Esalen: America and the Religion of No Religion,* Kripal presents Esalen Institute as a protective, innovative, and nourishing East-West research and development center where mindbody practices and ideas can grow and even hybridize with each other.
According to Kripal, the cofounder of Esalen and one of its constant guides, Michael Murphy, interprets these disciplines as early steps in a progression into the next stage in human evolution, a step toward evolutionary transcendence that Esalen Institute nourishes. This idea, borrowed from Dobzhansky and Ayala, proposes that long-term development started with the physical universe, Big Bang, chemicals, stars, galaxies, and so forth. These then transcended into life, which in turn transcended into consciousness. Murphy, says Kripal, foresees a third, transcendent period, a progressive jump “into a fourth domain, the domain of broadly conceived history of mysticism and the supernormal transformation of the human form.” From this perspective, some currently inexplicable events and what we call miracles may simply be early, misunderstood sightings of this fourth stage of advanced mindbody frontiers.

Just as today’s computer programmers write new programs, will future mindbody inventors design new mindbody states with new biological information-processing routines and new mental abilities? This possibility quite naturally asks,

Can we go beyond discovering, describing, and domesticating mindbody states as they now exist to designing new states with new spiritual potentials? This is a new kind of religious endeavor. (Roberts, 2006)

It is possible to address this question experimentally. Thanks to mindbody psychotechnologies including entheogens but not limited to them, religious studies can become experimental. Empirical!

NOTES
6. Holotropic Breathwork is a registered trademark; Stanislav Grof (1988), *The Adventure of Self-Discovery: Dimensions of Consciousness, New Perspectives in Psychotherapy,*


22. Ibid., 585.


27. Roberts and Hruby, *Religion and Psychoactive Sacraments*.


38. Grof, *When the Impossible Happens*, 300.


42. Grof, *When the Impossible Happens*, 290.


44. Grof, *When the Impossible Happens*, 294.


50. Roberts, Psychoactive Sacramentals.


57. Winkelman and Roberts, Psychedelic Medicine.


60. Tart, Altered States of Consciousness, 5.


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Multistate and Entheogenic Contributions to the Study of Miracles


Anomalous experiences and intense forms of mental strife are always interpreted in the context of culture and an epistemological paradigm. Throughout history, the same type or category of experience has been interpreted in drastically different ways depending upon the dominant paradigm of the time. In a premodern paradigm, it would have made little sense to interpret anomalous experiences as mental illness or brain dysfunction; this was not part of their understanding. In contemporary times, it is equally odd to interpret many behaviors classified as mental illness in spiritual terms, such as demon possession, which was common in the premodern period.

Over the past 100 years, mental health and religion competed for the right to dictate the correct understanding of many anomalous experiences. Despite impressive improvements in cooperation between religion and psychology, many points of highly contentious controversy remain. This is particularly true of scientism, representing the extremists of the modern paradigm, and religious fundamentalists, representing the extremists of religious and premodern paradigms.

In this chapter, we examine many aspects of anomalous experience and intense mental strife in the context of how they are interpreted differently in the three major philosophical paradigms of premodernism, modernism, and postmodernism. For the purpose of this paper, we are defining anomalous experience as “an uncommon experience . . . or one that, although it may be experienced by a substantial amount of the population . . . is believed to deviate from ordinary experience or from the usually accepted explanations of reality.”

Intense mental strife is understood as intense forms of emotional
discomfort, such as sadness, depression, anger, or grief, that are more than transient or beyond what is typical given the context.

**MAJOR HISTORICAL PARADIGMS AND THE INFLUENCE ON PSYCHOLOGY AND RELIGION**

Western thought has often been divided into three primary philosophical epochs: premodernism, modernism, and postmodernism. As is evident, any attempt to classify the history of intellectual thought into three periods or categories requires many oversimplifications and overgeneralizations; however, this project is not without utility. These are not discrete periods; nor did any of these periods exist without many important dissenters. However, they reflect a dominant paradigm influencing all of Western society, even the dissenters.

Although another oversimplification, we focus mostly on the epistemological aspects of these periods. The epistemologies form into dominant paradigms of how knowledge is understood, approached, and attained. Kuhn, who coined the language of “a paradigm,” described paradigms as having an active role in shaping how people interpret and understand sensory data and information. Paradigms shape knowledge; but this also means that all knowledge is contextual. As Kuhn was aware, this has both positive and limiting connotations.

Without paradigms, people could not make sense of the world. If one were to try to imagine approaching each moment in life with a completely blank slate, it quickly becomes evident how impossible it is to live without a frame of reference for interpretation. Paradigms also delimit understanding and knowledge by preventing creative perspectives and interpretations on knowledge outside of what is conventional at that time. Today, most people take for granted that paradigms exist, even if their paradigms are different from Kuhn’s basic understanding and structure of paradigms. For example, the very common discussions of worldview could be understood as a derivative of the paradigm concept in laymen’s terms.

**Premodernism**

Premodernism is generally understood as encompassing the history of time through the transition to modernism in the mid-1600s. The basis of premodernism is that ultimate truth is attainable through revealed knowledge. Initially, this epistemology was rooted in direct revelation from God or the source of truth. Over time, as claims of direct revelation became less frequent and were viewed with greater suspicion, more formalized ways of determining and understanding revealed knowledge developed.
The development of premodern epistemology is rooted in controversies. Gradually, competing revelations that did not fit together emerged. Furthermore, competing interpretations of the meaning of the revelations emerged, particularly as the original receivers of the revelation were no longer alive to interpret the meaning. This forced religious leaders to find ways to deal with these controversies. The Hebrew scriptures and the New Testament of the Bible began addressing these questions. There are examples in these sacred texts of how to determine what is from God and what is from another source, such as the devil. Over time, these discussions led to heresy trials and other forms of prosecution of those labeled as false prophets.

Distance between us and the original receptors of revealed knowledge forced religious leaders to develop ways of interpreting prior revealed knowledge, generally seen as contained in the scriptures. Early forms of dealing with this question were rooted in positions of power, such as appointed church leaders. Based on their position of power and proximity to God, these leaders were believed to have special insight into interpretation. Over time, as religious leaders were trusted less and there were an increasing number of disparate viewpoints, more formalized approaches to interpretation, or hermeneutics, emerged. In the late premodern period, systematic theologies were derived based upon hermeneutic principles as cornerstones of beliefs. These theologies often were considered pure interpretations of scripture; however, later interpretations conceived of these as paradigms that shaped the way religious knowledge was understood.

Other important developments from the premodern period are worth noting. First, Christianity has become the dominant religious force in the last 1,500 years of the modern period. Because of this, Christianity became the vehicle for much of intellectual thought. There were also a number of other influential perspectives, some of which had an important impact upon Christianity.

St. Paul, who wrote many of the books of the New Testament scriptures, is one of the most influential Christian figures. Paul is also highly controversial in many circles of religious thought. Having received a classical Greek education, Paul was exposed to Plato and other Greek scholars. This is evident in much of Paul’s writing and represents a major shift from Hebrew thought and the theology reflected in the Gospels. Plato, through Paul, introduced dualism to Christianity. Prior to Paul, Jewish and Christian thought was monistic. Through Christianity, dualism became so intertwined with Western thought that later it became difficult to separate the two.

Christianity, after assuming its position of power, was the most significant roadblock to modernism. Influential, and potentially influential, late premodern scholars were often persecuted, jailed, or even killed because of their challenges to modernism. It was not until Aquinas began to integrate a basic aspect of modern epistemology (i.e., reason) with faith that the door began to
open for modernism to develop. Early modernism, too, often was Christian in nature. Although Aquinas was extremely influential in the transition to modernism, what was later to develop as more formal modern philosophy was far from what he intended.

Modernism

The transition from premodernism to modernism occurred in the mid-1600s. The transition was not quick or without conflict. The signs of the time included the crusades, witch trials, and persecution of scholars, such as the famous trial of Galileo. Modernism started with two basic epistemological platforms, rationalism and empiricism, that would eventually be synthesized into one.

At first, each of these rudimentary epistemologies was far different from how they are understood today. They were much more basic. Today much of the academy, except some philosophical circles, interprets the word *empirical* as equivalent to quantitative or scientific research. Oftentimes, this means the utilization of paper-and-pencil survey measures. Originally, empiricism referred to knowing through the senses or sensory information. The evolutionary end meaning of this word often shares little similarity with historical origins.

Rationalism developed more than it evolved to a different perspective. Early rationalism was rooted in knowing through reason; however, there was little to determine what was rational from what was irrational or pseudo-rational. Rationalism was assumed to be a basic aspect of being human that all people had access to.

Over time, the early simplistic epistemologies of rationalism and empiricism required the development of more complex understanding of the nature of truth and how to know it. In empiricism, it was necessary to identify *real* experience and what experience means, or to distinguish between genuine experience versus distortions of sensory information, such as hallucinations. Empiricists varied, too, on how much they believed that sensory experience was a representation of the external world versus being more concerned with experience regardless of the real world, if it indeed existed. Rationalists developed logic, the formal methodology of rationalism. Rationalism was understood as lying above cultural influence. In other words, rationalism was beyond culture and there existed a pure form of logic that rational people could discover or identify through natural means.

As modernism matured, rationalism and empiricism were integrated into science and the scientific method. In many ways, science can be understood as applying reason and logic to empiricism. Positivism, logical positivism, and scientism are products of the modern period that represent the more extremest forms of the modern period. Modernism assumed that science would solve the problems of the world, similar to premodernism’s assumption that
God or religion would save the world. The modern period produced many utopian stories, such as Thoreau’s *Walden* and Skinner’s *Walden Two*. These utopian myths were modernism’s version of heaven and were believed to be achieved through the perfection and accomplishments of science.

As science failed on its promises to end war and violence, create eternal youth, and achieve perfect mental and physical health, critics of the modern paradigm emerged. The twentieth century emerged with waning trust in science, eventually leading to alternative ways of viewing the world. As will be demonstrated, postmodernism’s first task was to complete the discrediting of modernism through deconstructing it.

**Postmodernism**

Postmodernism has successfully eluded a concrete definition, which is part of the nature of postmodernism. Just as there were many versions of premodernism and modernism, there are many postmodernisms. Part of the confusion about postmodern theory is that too many, especially those clinging to the greater apparent clarity of modernist definitions, attempted to create a master definition of postmodernism that clearly articulates its many essential tenets.

We propose a different understanding of postmodernism that is much less specific, but also offers greater hope at unifying what makes a theory postmodern. In essence, postmodernism is better understood and identified rather than defined. Using epistemology as the foundation, postmodernism can be understood as a collection of philosophies united by a belief that truth as an ultimate truth cannot be known.

Much of the confusion around postmodernism emerged from attempts to understand this emerging paradigm outside of the context of history and apart from an understanding of how paradigms often shift. The early stages of postmodernism were a reaction to the limitations of modernism. These early postmodern theories were deconstructive in nature and primarily focused on critiquing and deconstructing modernist theories. These theories tended to be extremist in their critiques and negligent on offering alternative constructive ways of building knowledge or understanding.

Definitions of postmodernism froze it in its early stages. Critics, along with the many major contributors and proponents, reinforced this inability to evolve. Other theorists encouraged an evolution of the theory as well as diversification of postmodern approaches. What remains central in these is the belief that truth in an ultimate sense cannot be known.

Stating that truth cannot be known is not the same as saying truth does not exist, although many theories rightly labeled as postmodern adhere to this position. Several other options for truth remain open to the classification of postmodern. For instance, postmodernism can claim that truth that exists cannot be fully known or comprehended. In general, these theories often
maintain that much, or most, of what is often construed of as ultimate truth is not truth at all. In other words, many realms identified as ultimate truth are more correctly understood as local truths. The postmodernisms that allow for the existence of an ultimate truth maintain that the ultimate truth that exists cannot be known and believe that which falls under the realm of ultimate truth is much smaller than typically maintained by modernists and premodernists.

A couple of clarifications of common objections may help clarify the matter. Gravity is often used as proof that postmodern theories, which deny the ability to know truth, could exist as proposed. Gravity, after all, is very certain. However, this also reflects an important limitation in the ultimate sense. Prediction, even perfectly consistent prediction, is not the same as knowledge. Since Newton’s original discovery of gravity, the common understanding of it has undergone several changes. For instance, Einstein’s theory of relativity demonstrated that Newton’s original proposal was flawed. Even the so-called hard sciences are always based upon limited knowledge, even in the presence of 100 percent accurate prediction.

Second, postmodernism often is accused of requiring an absolute relativism when it comes to ethics and morality. This critique can be more simply dismissed as a naïve and defensive reaction to postmodernism. One would be hard-pressed to find a postmodern thinker who would claim such an extremist view. Rather, postmodernism recognizes that morality and its understanding are always embedded in culture, and thus culture limits relativism. How right and wrong are defined is culturally dependent. Although there are some universal tendencies in morality, there are few absolutes and no consistencies in how those universals are understood.

The prohibition against murder has been used as an example of the dangers of postmodernism, but this is easily clarified. In the United States, it is proclaimed that killing is wrong. However, the United States allows for preemptive wars and the death penalty. Many other countries view the United States’ understanding of prohibiting killing as inconsistent and soft on preventing people from being killed. Even if there is some type of universal innate understanding that killing is wrong, how this is interpreted is undeniably localized.

Several central themes of postmodernism can be identified; however, consistent with postmodern thought, these should always be understood as localized understandings that are conceived of differently in the various forms of postmodernisms. In other words, for postmodernism to remain internally consistent, it must allow for different localized understandings of these central tenets. Here is what we propose as postmodernism’s central tenets in epistemology:

1. Truth in an ultimate sense cannot be known.
2. Local truths are often, or always, more important than attempts to define ultimate truth.
3. There is a central concern with language, narratives, and how language shapes reality.
4. Postmodernism seeks to integrate multiple ways of knowing, or what is called epistemological pluralism, epistemological holism, and methodological pluralism. It values and encourages different ways of interpreting the world.

This fourth point needs some further elucidation. One position purports that the best way to approach truth is through using multiple epistemologies and methodologies to better approximate ultimate truth. For example, in psychology the move toward mixed methods research, a form of methodological pluralism, is often thought to be a postmodern approach to research. Through using various ways of approaching it, truth can be triangulated and better approximated. Although postmodernism would applaud the mixed methods approach in general, it would advocate caution in how this is used in regards to focusing in on truth. When one gets to the point that truth is thought to be obtainable through this process, or when it is assumed that this metaphor works for all areas of study, then it is a more complex modernist approach, not postmodernism.

Postmodernism adds the qualifier that many truths cannot be approximated because they are not universal in nature. Furthermore, most truths, even universal truths, are less stationary and more fluid in nature, making them elusive even to the best mixed methods approaches. Finally, even with the mixed methods approach, truth will always remain elusive, and pursuers of truth must remain cautious about their biases. Although the idea of approximating truth may fit with some forms of knowledge, it should be evident that many more localized and subjective forms of knowledge do not fit with this understanding.

The nature of truth is also significantly different in postmodernism as opposed to premodernism and modernism. Premodernism and modernism both functioned from a foundational approach to knowledge in which all knowledge was built on certain universal and stable knowledge foundations. If the foundation is challenged, everything built upon it is also challenged. Postmodernism conversely interprets truth as more variant. Some truth is purely subjective, located within the individual, while other truths are local, within the community. These truths take on a narrative or story format. Broader truths can be compared to a web in which all truths are understood as interdependent upon each other. Each strand of the web, representing a point of knowledge, is connected to other truths and impacted by all the truths in the web. No truth is foundational, or necessary, and a change in any one truth impacts the entire web of truth. Truth is fluid, ever-changing, and a mixture of different types of truths. Although there are many limitations to the web metaphor, it does emphasize the paradoxical independence and interrelatedness of truth.
Before ending the discussion of postmodernism, it should be noted that we recognize that many postmodern thinkers, including influential leaders, would be critical of this broad conception of postmodernism, at least partially because too many theories with significant differences can fall under this umbrella. To this we say, “Yes!” If postmodernism is going to be a major philosophical epoch and paradigm on the same level as premodernism and modernism, it must defy overly restrictive definitions. The often urged criterion that there is no ultimate truth is simply too restrictive, particularly for many religious individuals drawn to postmodernism. It is better to understand it as a broad, inclusive paradigm with many subparadigms, some of which are more restrictive in their understanding of postmodernism and of truth.

CONCEIVING THE MIRACULOUS

Miracles, one form of anomalous experience, have been claimed throughout history but interpreted differently. In this section, we will take a very brief look at how miracles are understood in each of the three philosophical epochs.

Premodernism: Miracles as Unexplainable Miraculous Events

Cobb and Griffin maintain that the understanding of miracles gradually changed over time. In traditional religious thought, everything was believed to be caused by God or an “act of God.” It was a later development that miracles were separated out as specific acts of God. This allowed for differing views of miracles to emerge through the premodern and modern periods.

Literal Interpretations

Many miracles in the premodern period were believed to be literally true. For example, most early Christians believed that Jesus literally turned water into wine and healed many sick individuals. Many religious individuals today function as if this was the only understanding of miracles and miraculous stories; however, from a historical perspective, there is little support for this. At the very least, there were multiple approaches to understanding the miraculous.

Stories as Teaching Myths

The ancient Greek understanding of myths was that these were stories that were not literally true but represented a fundamental truth or meaning.
Rollo May furthers this distinction in stating that myths are not false, but they cannot be proven true.\textsuperscript{18} Throughout much of history, stories were interpreted as teaching tools and not intended to be interpreted literally. The literal interpretation of stories is a later development with important consequences.

An example of religious stories as myth is the Jewish Exodus from Egypt. In the literal story, God caused many plagues to persuade the Pharaoh to let the Israelites leave Egypt. After they left, God hardened the Pharaoh’s heart and he sent his army to bring the Israelites back. God, then, separated the Red Sea for the Israelites to cross, but when the Egyptian Army pursued, God closed the Red Sea, drowning the Pharaoh’s army. The moral of this story is that God provides for his people and so provided salvation from their oppression. The meaning of this story is the same regardless of whether a literal or mythical understanding is taken.\textsuperscript{19}

These two approaches to understanding the miraculous coexisted, which can mean two things. First, similar to today, it is likely that some people adhered primarily to literal interpretations while others viewed stories of the miraculous as mythical and symbolic. Second, these views coexisted within the same individuals. In other words, it is likely that many of the stories were seen as literal truths while others were interpreted mythically.\textsuperscript{20}

If many, or most, religious stories were intended to convey a truth, but not to be interpreted literally, then the dominant religious views that rely on literal interpretations of most stories in the sacred texts have misunderstood the basic intended message. For much of the modern and postmodern periods, it has been assumed that premodern views were almost exclusively literal; however, this misrepresents the way that many people in premodern times understood truth, stories, and myths.

Modernism: Two Uses of Science

The understanding of miracles changed in the modern period. Although many continued to adhere to premodern interpretations of miracles, within the academy, intellectual circles, and many areas of the general public, premodern interpretations of miracles became more suspect. Two dominant modernist approaches replaced the premodern views.

God’s Use of Science

Many scientists of the modern period attempted to reconcile their faith or religious belief with science. These scientists used different approaches to accomplish this, two of which were influential and are pertinent to our discussion. Some scientists used science to try to prove biblical truths.\textsuperscript{21} They employed archeology, historical methods, and many sciences to try to
prove the existence of God and the accuracy of the Bible (most of these were Christian approaches).\textsuperscript{22} Although this sounds premodern, they elevated the modern epistemology, therefore slighting the premodern epistemology, reflecting a momentous change.

Other scientists took a more philosophical approach, declaring that God first created the laws of science, then worked within that framework, or the constraints of science, to accomplish His intentions, maybe with insight into how to manipulate them in favor of desired goals.\textsuperscript{23} Through understanding science one would come to better understand God.

Christianity and science increasingly became unified. Through this, Christianity continued as a vehicle for the development and spread of modernism, even beyond the West. Kim, discussing the role of Christianity and science in China, stated, “Christianity was first welcomed [in China] because of the impressive power and advantages of modern science that those missionaries brought with them. For this reason, in this non-Christian world, science has been viewed as an inseparable part of Christianity."\textsuperscript{24} In the end, modern Christianity was very different from premodern versions.

\textbf{Explaining Away Miracles}

Modernism signified the death of miracles for many who could not reconcile them with science. As Sponge states,

\begin{quote}
When people say today, for example, that “the age of miracles is over,” what they mean is not that miracles no longer occur, but that they never did—the age when we perceived events as miraculous is gone. The things that our ancestors called miracles and even magic are explained today without appeal to the supernatural because we understand so much more completely the way the universe operates.\textsuperscript{25}
\end{quote}

Many scientists sought to disprove the miracles and other religious propositions while other scientists just seemed to stumble across them.\textsuperscript{26} For example, Galileo never intended to contradict religion, but many of his discoveries ran contrary to popular religious belief. Similarly, many other scholars never set out to contradict religion, but routinely seem to discover inconsistencies between science and religious belief.

The accidental discoveries provided more fuel for scientists who sought to disprove miracles and the Bible; however, much of their energy was also used to develop alternative explanations for the miracles. For example, over time scholars have sought to develop alternative explanations for the Exodus story discussed previously. One approach is to maintain that the Israelites crossed the Red Sea during a drought and then it was an ensuing flood that caused the Pharaoh’s army to drown. In this, God worked within the miracle.
Other miracles also were explained away with modern science. For example, the miraculous healings were reported to be a misinterpretation of what happened. Scholars maintained that it was not a miraculous healing that occurred in the healings of Jesus, but rather a placebo effect, a psychological healing of a conversion disorder, or a psychological healing based more on personal, not metaphysical, factors. Support for this emerges from scientific investigation of contemporary faith healings. Using the modernist paradigm, many faith healings have been disproved as shams or as having an alternative explanation.

Postmodernism: Unconceiving the Miraculous

Postmodernism allows for a return of old explanation in a new context as well as alternative explanations. We will discuss two possible postmodern explanations of miracles.

Renewed Premodernism

In modern times, there was a strong movement away from indigenous and alternative approaches to health and healing. Although many of these appear similar to premodern understandings of miracles and anomalous experience, when set in the postmodern context they get a different interpretation. There is also a renewed interest in classic premodern interpretations that emerged in the context of the failures of science.

Postmodern perspectives recognize that multiple causes often account for what is purported to be miraculous, while premodern and modern interpretations take a more linear or narrow approach. For example, there tends to be a small positive correlation between being religious and psychological health; however, there are many factors that can explain this relationship. Premodern approaches emphasize the direct benefits of being religious, or attribute the better mental health directly to God. Modernism focuses on the intervening variables, such as the benefits of social support, often part of being religious, as the cause of improved mental health. Postmodern approaches recognize that there are both personal and systemic factors, as well as direct or indirect means, through which religion provides physical and mental health benefits.

Additionally, cultural factors play an important role in determining how religion is related to mental health. Krippner and Achterberg report on research that suggests that the efficacy of spiritual or religious healings is often dependent upon the culture. In other words, if an individual is in a culture that believes in a particular approach to faith healing, it is more likely to have a positive impact. As a second example, symptoms of mental illness are often exacerbated when they are experienced in a cultural context in which...
they are pathologized. In summary, postmodernism emphasizes the role of context and individual differences in the miraculous, whereas premodernism and modernism emphasized the universality of experience.29

A New Understanding of Myth

Rollo May, as discussed previously, interpreted myths as something that cannot be proven to be true. However, this does not mean myths are false: “There can be no stronger proof of the impoverishment of our contemporary culture than the popular—though profoundly mistaken—definition of myth as falsehood.”30

As myth is extended, many implications emerge. First, there is a renewed interest in the ancient Greek interpretation of myth as not literally true, but representing truths nonetheless. Second, there is greater recognition of the cultural constructions of what is deemed miraculous. For example, Krippner and Achterberg distinguish between healing and cure in elucidating what constitutes an anomalous healing, such as a spiritual or faith healing. In their account, cure represents a biological or material change, whereas healing is much broader, constituting a related attitudinal change incurred. Healings may coincide with cures or facilitate cures or improvements through their psychological impact; however, they remain distinct.31

In summary, postmodernism emphasizes that physical and psychological health, healing and cures must all be interpreted in the context of culture: “Because health care systems are socially constructed, they are most usefully studied in relationship to their cultural and historical contexts,” as indicated in Krippner and Achterberg.32 Additionally, both premodern and modern ways to understanding contribute to the broader understanding, but they must always be understood as partial truths and in context.

CONSTRUCTING PSYCHOPATHOLOGY AND MENTAL ILLNESS

Conceptions of anomalous experience and mental strife now classified as mental illness changed through each emergent philosophical paradigm. Demon possession became a brain disorder, and spiritual weakness became biologically determined mental illness. There are strengths and weaknesses of the different models, but what stands out more is the power of the paradigm in determining how various forms of mental strife and anomalous experience are understood and classified. Additionally, consistent with Krippner and Achterberg, the cultural and paradigmatic context provides useful information as to which approach to treatment may be most successful with different individuals.
Premodernism: Faith Corruptions and Tests

Two dominant conceptions of mental illness in premodern times were spiritual weakness or a lack of faith, and demon possession. Much of what is now in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders—Fourth Edition, Text Revision (DSM-IV-TR) was once explained by these two spiritual explanations. Many people still cling to these views as a plausible interpretation for what causes mental illness, at least some of the time. However, when spiritual weakness and demon possession are used today, they often are understood very differently than in premodern times.

Spiritual Weakness

All of the major world religions seemingly have contradictory messages about the role of religion in happiness, positive mental health, or blessings in life. Often, these are difficult to interpret because the historic religious language is not consistent with the contemporary language for various forms of strife and mental health. It is consistent within the major world religions to promise benefits, often including emotional benefits, to being religious. Similarly, all the major world religions acknowledge that suffering is inevitable and, at times, may even be caused by being religious. Although this appears paradoxical, it is not. Religions tend not to make an all-or-nothing distinction between positive mental health and suffering, made by many people today, particularly in Western cultures.

The implicit thesis of the mental strife position is that most of what is considered mental illness occurs due to a lack of faith, to immoral behavior (i.e., sin), or to spiritual weakness. Suffering in these forms, then, is a form of punishment from God, either in that God caused the suffering or structured reality in such a way that these sins and spiritual weaknesses necessarily cause suffering. This continues to be a popular perspective espoused by many religious leaders in the modern and into postmodern times.

The Devil, Demon Possession, and the Creation of Evil and Mental Illness

In Christian and Islamic traditions, the devil is a commonly cited cause of evil and human suffering. Although human cooperation, either intentionally or passively, is often necessary for the devil or demons to accomplish their goals, these external metaphysical realities are the origin of most suffering. This metaphysical position locates evil within external origins.

Fascination with demon possession continues, or more properly re-emerged, in postmodern times. Several movies depict demon possession and the controversy between scientific viewpoints and religious perspectives on demon possession. Within psychology, some authors have discussed the
differential diagnosis between demon possession and mental illness. M. Scott Peck, for example, writes of his experience with exorcisms and with what he believes was demon possession. However, Peck also maintains that demon possession is rare and that it is more common to experience other forms of human evil and pathology: “Genuine possession, as far as we know, is very rare. Human evil, on the other hand, is common.” Similarly, Friesen, in his book on multiple personality disorder (now dissociative identity disorder), cautions that misdiagnosing this mental illness as demon possession can be extremely harmful, especially when this is followed with attempts at exorcism. Like Peck, Friesen maintains that both are real and that differential diagnosis is what is important.

Modernism: Deconstructing Demons and Internalizing Mental Illness

Modernist views focused on debunking these premodern “superstitions.” The medical model became the dominant viewpoint, focusing on genetic and biological explanations for mental illness. The medical model had minimal tolerance for the spiritualizing of mental illness and sought to debunk it through research and science.

From Metaphysical to Personal Explanations: Individual Responsibility

As discussed, evil spirits and demonic influences historically have been a way to understand and explain deviant behavior and physical maladies. External evil spirits and metaphysical forces were believed to inflict themselves on human victims and cause misery and suffering that could only be alleviated by religious intervention. Historically, the concept of mental illness was based on interpretations from religious doctrine and the dominant culture of the time. Individuals whose behavior, beliefs, and physical abnormalities differed from the established norms of society were viewed as mentally and morally defective, not as the result of their free will, but as the result of evil and tormenting spirits.

The realization that social deviance and psychological problems could be chemically and biologically explained changed the societal approach to mental illness. Having a scientific explanation for social deviance, physical maladies, and mental illness meant individuals were predetermined by nature to mental illness, deviance, or criminality. Mental illness transformed from having an external origin to having an internal and biologically based origin. The focus turned to the internal workings of the individual and his or her physical structure, which predetermined his or her psychological and physical health. The modernistic view of mental illness was that it was a sickness
that afflicted the body like other medical diseases and thus could be cured. It also excused the behavior of the individual because he or she was deemed sick and had no control over his or her actions.

Darwin’s theory of evolution in 1859 significantly contributed to the modern period and the scientific view of biological importance. Darwin connected human beings to animals on a single continuum, which meant humans were “influenced and controlled by the same biochemical and physical forces and motives inherent in all creatures.”

Freud also challenged the ideology of Christian doctrine with his theories of mental illness. Freud’s explanation for mental disorders and his conceptualization of the conscious and unconscious broke from the strict biological justification for mental illness. Freud’s determinism was biological, but it also took into account the important role of early life experience, therefore adding a second force in determinism.

Reinterpreting Mental Illness

The scientific recognition of psychopathology logically explained away mysteries that had defied explanation, and gave names and labels to afflictions. Although these explanations were not always accurate, not all were without merit. The impetus to find cures for these disorders created medical treatments, some of which were cruel and torturous and others that were useful. Some are still used today but remain controversial. Psychopharmacology developed during this time, as well as the use of lobotomies, electroshock therapy, sterilization, and blaming mothers for schizophrenic children.

Using the medical model for categorizing mental illness had advantages. Classifying and defining mental disorders gave practitioners a structure to work from and allowed for articulation as to the manner and method of a particular mental illness. Human experiences that fell outside the spectrum of “normal” were pathologized, and definitions of mental disorders set the boundaries for normality; however, they were arbitrary and not absolutely scientifically based.

Medical conditions, such as pregnancy, can clearly be defined; mental disorders, such as anxiety or depression, cannot be precisely defined since the level or degree determines what is considered normal and what constitutes impairment.

Categorizing and classifying mental illness also had disadvantages. Labeling individuals as damaged or defective occurs in a social, cultural, and political context and therefore discriminates against those not in the mainstream. Defining a mental disorder as an individual’s internal and predetermined illness corresponds to the medical model of physical disease. It places responsibility and blame on the individual and rejects outside influences.
Biological predeterminism means cures may not be possible and dysfunction may be permanent.

Pathologizing behavior that is different or considered outside normal limits has had detrimental results in the past; pathologizing normal behavior has had the same effect. Masturbation was demonized during the modern period, and various contraptions and treatments were devised to prevent individuals from participating in a behavior that was thought to cause mental illness, blindness, seizures, and other maladies. Children and adults alike were punished and blamed for a sexual behavior that is now considered biologically normal. Some cultures and religions still consider masturbation deviant; some professionals do as well.

Pathologizing and labeling individuals and groups encouraged discrimination and marginalization for those who deviated from societal norms. One of the best examples of this is homosexuality, which was classified as a sexual deviation diagnosis in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders–II (DSM-II)* in 1968. It was finally removed as a disorder in 1973 after much debate. Ironically, in moving away from the medical model of mental illness and the significance of biological and genetic influences on determining behavior, homosexuals continue to be discriminated against and demonized by many.

Homosexuality remains a controversial subject regarding nature versus nurture. Homosexuality has changed over the years from being viewed as a sin, to a crime, to a mental illness, and now a difference in lifestyle. The social desire or need to “cure” homosexuals and make them “normal” heterosexuals has persisted into the twenty-first century. Reparative therapy is still available and encouraged by some even today. Similar paths may be seen for other psychiatric diagnoses such as gender identity disorder. Currently, the *DSM-IV-TR* identifies gender identity disorder as the stated desire to be a member of the other sex and has been described by some transgendered individuals as being born in the wrong body. The biological basis for gender identification disorder has also been widely ignored.

**Miraculous Healings and Somatic Disorders**

The existence of miracles and miraculous healings long has been the source of suspicion, disagreement, and debate. Philosopher David Hume (1711–1776) refuted the existence of miracles, saying in order for a miracle to occur, it must violate the laws of nature. According to Hume, a miracle could be “considered true only if its falsehood must be more miraculous than the reported miracle itself.” According to Krippner and Achterberg, miracles are events that can be known by the senses but are outside the laws of nature and are brought about by a force or power external to those natural laws. Miraculous healings are described as recovery, remissions, regenerations, or
uncharacteristic changes in a direction reflecting improvement in physical or psychological health.

Somatic disorders are subjective physical complaints that have no medical explanation or are beyond the normal scope of symptomology. They are “recurring, multiple and clinically significant” complaints that defy medical relief and cause impairment. Somatic disorders are currently classified in the DSM-IV-TR as being a combination of pain, gastrointestinal, sexual, and pseudoneurological symptoms that result in medical treatment and impairment and occur over the period of several years. Historically, somatic disorders were ailments believed to be caused by demons and evil spirits, and ridding individuals of demons resulted in the individual being healed. As somatic disorders are psychological in nature, they were used in the modern period as a plausible scientific explanation for miraculous healing; the psychological, not biological, cause went away or was “cured.”

Demon Possessions, Exorcisms, and Dissociative Identity Disorder

Historically, deviant behavior, physical deformity, medical problems, or a simple accusation could cause an individual to be suspected of demonic possession. Because individuals were not responsible for their behavior due to external influences of evil, methods were developed to physically rid individuals of their demons. During the Crusades and Inquisitions, torture was commonly used to extract confessions. There is little doubt that the scientific understanding of these events today could have prevented many horrific events.

Dissociative identity disorder (DID), formerly multiple personality disorder (MPD), is an example of a mental condition that it is considered psychologically based or spiritually based. DID is defined as “the presence of two or more distinct identities or personality states, that recurrently take control of behavior.” Individuals with different but distinct personalities were thought to be possessed by demons or evil spirits, and some still subscribe to that belief. The Bible describes Jesus confronting a man who is thought to be possessed; when Jesus asks him his name, he replies, “My name is Legion for we are many” (Mark 5:9, New International Version). This same section of the Bible describes Jesus casting out devils, along with engaging in other types of healing.

Demonic or satanic possession seemed an appropriate explanation in most cultures to describe individuals who appeared to be taken over by another entity. There are many historical examples from various cultures of evil spirits or demonic possession. In ancient Egypt, classical Greece, and events from the New Testament, people believed demonic possession occurred when evil spirits acted upon an individual to cause distress or sickness. Many of the
disorders that were thought to be demon possession can be explained in modern times as mental illness. Epilepsy, diabetes, cancer, and other diseases explain what was once believed to be demonic possession and are now cured or relieved with medical interventions.

Exorcisms, the healing intervention for demonic possession, are not completely obsolete. Exorcisms can be seen as "the primeval prototype of modern psychotherapy" and are based on the idea that the person is possessed by external and evil forces that have entered and altered the individual. The only way to rid the person of the evil spirits is to drive them out and cast them away. The ability to cast away spiritual evil entities lies with righteous spiritual forces represented by the religious or spiritual.

There are modern references to dark forces of the mind; Freud referred to psychological demons and the unconscious in his works, and Jung referred to the shadow. Both were describing dark places in the human psyche where dark emotions are found; however, they were not referencing an external entity but the internal struggle of individual. According to Diamond, "Modern psychiatry and psychology have sought to provide a scientific alternative to demonology."

**The Biological Revolution, the Medical Model, and a Return to Irresponsibility**

As noted, the medical model focused on scientific and biological explanations for mental illness. As with any body part or body function, the brain could become sick or diseased. No longer were demonic influences causing social deviance or physical maladies. Physical conditions and social behavior were genetically determined, which removed the elements of individual responsibility, cultural influences, and social perspectives. Individuals could be labeled into neat categories and treated by empirically based remedies.

The modernistic period saw a shift from external dominance of personality, behavior, and deviance to an internal individual, biological, genetic, and predetermined cause. Mental illness was seen as an internal process that occurred inside the person, thus dismissing social, situational, or relational events that could cause or contribute to mental illness. The focus moved from external and spiritual influences to the individual’s inner liability for illness, disease, and dysfunction. Responsibility was redefined and moved from one end of the pendulum swing to the other. Originally, people were not responsible for their behavior or mental illness if they were possessed or influenced by evil spirits outside of their control. Individuals then became solely responsible for their illness and disease based on their predetermined genetics and biology. There remained, however, a new form of irresponsibility. Now, an individual’s genes and biology
became responsible for his or her behavior, removing it from consciousness. On one level, people were hyper-responsible in the sense that they could do no other than what they did because it was biologically and historically determined. On the other hand, free will was gone, therefore freeing people of any responsibility.

Postmodernism: Constructing and Deconstructing Mental Illness

Postmodern scholars developed many alternatives to the premodern and modern constructions of anomalous experience and mental strife, often integrating aspects of both. A staple in postmodern understanding is that it does not necessarily disregard premodern and modern knowledge, but it places it in a different context that changes the meaning. As Walter Truett Anderson stated, postmodernism “has to do with a change not so much in what we believe as in how we believe.” Shades of the old are recast in a new context bringing new understandings.

Deconstructing Hyper-Responsibility and the Medical Model and Postmodern Constructions of Mental Illness

Modernism produced various forms of hyper-responsibility, some of which have roots in premodern times. The development of individualism in the West, along with the frontier myths of America, idealized the independent person and overestimated personal power. Some of the extremes of the humanistic psychology movement of the 1970s and the later cognitive revolution, set in modernist tones, further the belief that people could create their own destiny.

Postmodernism debunked the fallacy that mental illness could occur in isolation; it is always a product of culture. Furthermore, the cultural appraisal of mental illness further impacts how it is experienced. As an example, during the age of science depression increasingly was pathologized, whereas in premodern times it often was seen as normal, as a personality style, or as a combination of the two. Now that it has been labeled a mental illness and people with depression are portrayed as pathological, the experience of depression for the depressed person has changed.

Culture determines what mental illness is, and then it creates or influences the consequences, often resembling a punishment, for being mentally ill. In this context, mental illness is better understood as a social and systemic problem, not an individual one. However, the individual should not be lost either. Although the culture and system create the context and define mental illness, from a postmodern perspective the therapist ought to be primarily concerned with the individual’s subjective experience, taking into account
the contextual or communal influences. The therapist should not impose upon a client the cultural norms or views of mental health; rather, the therapist should work with the client to help him or her define and achieve the outcomes the client desires.

**Demon Possession and Daimonic Possession**

Postmodernism’s relationship with ideas such as demon possession is complex. In general, it is more sympathetic toward demon possession; however, it still tends to be skeptical. This skepticism is not out of necessity, but rather is a general tendency. In other words, there is nothing in the nature of postmodernism that would stand against the idea of demon possession; however, most postmodernists remain skeptical of most or all purported cases.

Stephen A. Diamond provided one of the most thoughtful critiques of demon possession written to date. He argues that demon possession is better understood as *daimonic possession*. The daimonic, which resembles Jung’s idea of the shadow, was first developed by Rollo May. May defined the daimonic as “any natural function which has the power to take over the whole person.” This places the daimonic squarely in the realm of depth psychology. Aspects of the psyche that are denied or repressed form the primary power of the daimonic.

Daimonic possession, according to Diamond, resembles demonic possession. Because that which is exerting control over the self is repressed or otherwise kept from consciousness, it feels as if the controlling force is external. Demons, in this sense, can be a mythical language for the daimonic aspects of the psyche. The utilization of symbolic language brings the classic ideas of demon possession into contemporary light, giving them a very different meaning. It honors the experience of feeling as if one is possessed, and recognizes this language as valid, in a sense. However, it continues to remain skeptical of the metaphysical basis of classical interpretations of demon possession.

**From Szasz to Critical Psychology**

The most disturbing aspect of contemporary constructions of mental illness, such as those represented in the *DSM-IV-TR*, is the blatant lack of awareness of the values imposition that is part of diagnosing. In a very real sense, the writers of the various versions of the *DSM* have created a value system that has been adopted by the majority of the mental health field in the United States and then imposed upon people with little consideration of disparate views, clients’ views or therapists’ views. This view has been imposed on other cultures living in the United States and exported to other countries to be imposed upon them, too. This usage of the *DSM* is ethnocentric,
narcissistic, and immoral. This is a strong and harsh statement, but not made without reason.

Three examples of harm should sufficiently demonstrate the danger of missing the values judgment component of diagnosis. First, homosexuality was considered a mental illness until 1973 when it was finally removed from the DSM. The harm of labeling homosexual as mentally ill or morally wrong is fairly evident in the literature. *American Psychiatry and Homosexuality: An Oral History* includes many stories of gay, lesbian, and bisexual psychiatrists who underwent significant suffering because of their sexual orientation leading up to the 1973 change and even afterward as the judgments continued. Recent research exploring the impact of religious judgments of homosexuality suggested that even religious statements intended to be tolerant of homosexuality often cause harm.

In a second example, Krippner and Achterberg report on several professional articles that associated shamanism with mental illness, particularly psychotic and dissociative disorders. The research, however, finds that there is no association between shamanism and mental illness and that it may even be correlated with better psychological health than the general population. The biases against alternative ways of approaching health often are prone to being unfairly pathologized despite evidence to the contrary.

Third, many religious experiences, such as glossolalia (i.e., speaking in tongues), dissociative and mystical religious experiences, and believing that God talks to an individual, are often viewed as signs of mental illness, particularly psychotic or dissociative disorders. Within the religious community and cultural context, these are normal, and potentially even normative. Oftentimes, these experiences are associated with healing potential within many religious groups, and there is some support for their healing potential.

Many critics of mainstream psychology point out other problems with the dominant paradigm of mental health, which generally assumes that one should be happy or comfortable, normal, and stable over time. Existential approaches, conversely, point out the value and redemptive qualities of suffering. Providing comfort too quickly or in certain situations can be destructive. The more evident form of the destructive aspects of providing comfort connects to comfort that facilitates repression; what is uncomfortable is pushed from conscious awareness, but not resolved. Several critics have also voiced concern about providing comfort at times where it may be more appropriate to incite discomfort and even anger. For example, when therapists help minority groups and other targets of oppression to become comfortable with their situation, they are reinforcing a system of oppression. A more appropriate response is often to help clients use their pain, suffering, and anger as motivation to engage in appropriate activism against these discriminatory forces.
A Postmodern-Premodern Alliance

Postmodernism, at times, seems to be aligning with premodernism more than modernism. In many ways, this is true; however, it tends to recast premodern ideas into a more contemporary understanding. Drawing from previously cited examples, postmodernism defends the understanding of indigenous healing; however, it suggests that this may be because it is a culturally derived truth, not a universal one. The premodern understanding would claim a universal truth where postmodernism would claim a local truth; both would agree on the power to change.

MAKING SENSE OF DISPARATE VOICES

A valid critique of this chapter to this point would be to maintain that the differences between premodernism, modernism, and postmodernism are largely linguistic. For example, demon possession, dissociative identity disorder, and daimonic possession can, at times, be referring to the same experience. It is simply using a different language to describe the experience. In all of these, the subjective experience is as if something external to the self is taking over control, or partial control, of the individual. We agree with this critique.

The limitation of this critique is that it can be taken to imply that the specific language used and cultural beliefs do not matter. To this, we strongly disagree. First and most obvious, the language used will determine whether spiritual means (i.e., exorcism), biological means (i.e., psychopharmaceuticals), or psychotherapy will be used for treatment. Postmodernism would maintain that because mental illness is socially constructed, all of these treatment approaches would likely be successful at times, and unsuccessful at other times. Success may be more dependent upon the individual’s belief system than the technique. However, there are still consequences to each treatment, and some of those consequences cause harm.

Second, we would maintain, consistent with the postmodern perspective, that language has impact. How the anomalous experience is put into language impacts how it is experienced. In other words, although there are similarities in the subject experience of all three (demon possession, dissociative identity disorder, and daimonic possession), how the individual conceptualizes the anomalous experience will change his or her experience. Additionally, how the culture around the individual understands the anomalous experience will also have an impact on the broader experience. The redundancy of the word experience in this paragraph should be taken to emphasize the various levels of experience and the complexity of it.

It is possible to log the varieties of anomalous experience across the different paradigms, noting how each paradigm brings a different language and
understanding to the experience. Mental strife, miracles, and other anomalous experiences are existential realities in the sense that people have experienced them as long as humans have existed. What has changed is how they have been interpreted, understood, and treated (or not treated).

CONCLUSION: WHERE ARE WE NOW?

We conclude with no clear answers regarding the reality of the nature of mental strife and anomalous experience. It is now up to the reader to develop his or her conclusions about the reality of these events. If we could end with a caution, it is to be careful of how these conclusions are used and to take into consideration the applicable variations and cultural differences. The various types of spiritual, religious, and mental health practitioners should be aware that culture is more than a construct or something that should be approached sensitively. Culture creates or impacts reality for individuals. So treatment, intervention or guidance should always be conducted with careful attention to the cultural context in which it is provided.

NOTES

3. Louis Hoffman, John L. Hoffman, Brad Robison, and Kristen Lawrence, “Modern and Postmodern Ways of Knowing: Implications for Theory and Integration” (paper presented at the International Conference of the Christian Association for Psychological Studies, Dallas, TX, April 7–10, 2005).
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Ironically, those attempting to define postmodernism in concrete terms have demonstrated their lack of understanding of postmodernism. To say that postmodernism cannot be defined is not to say it does not exist, except in the most concrete of understandings of the world. Instead, it states that postmodern exists as a nonentity, or as general tendencies or theories with shared values. While abstract, this retains a way to understand what is postmodern without reducing it to something that contradicts the basic premises of the theory.

13. Hoffman et al., “Modern and Postmodern Ways of Knowing.”


15. Although there is not time or space to address the limitations of the web model, a brief note on some of these is helpful. First, the web model does not adequately discriminate the difference and relation between personal, local, and universal truths (many postmodern models would not include the ultimate truth level; for the purpose of inclusiveness, we include it). Second, the two-dimension aspect of a web and limitation in how different lines of knowledge are connected through the web represents an oversimplification. The web, for all its limitations, still may be the best visual model of postmodern theory.

16. It could also be noted that this is true of many such broad groupings of individuals. For example, many who identify as Christian would maintain that what some other individuals believe is Christian is not. The same would be true of many other religious, political, and philosophical groupings.


20. This provides a basis for the work of the Jesus Seminar, which seeks to take a scientific and rational approach to determining what verses of the Bible Jesus really said and what miracles are likely to have really occurred. It should be noted, however, that the Jesus Seminar uses a more modernist approach to making these determinations. See Robert Funk and the Jesus Seminar, The Gospel of Jesus: According to the Jesus Seminar (Santa Rosa, CA: Polebridge Press, 1999); Robert Funk, Roy W. Hoover, and the Jesus Seminar, The Five Gospels: What Did Jesus Really Say? The Search for the AUTHENTIC Words of Jesus (New York: Polebridge Press, 1993).


22. For a contemporary example, see Lee Stroebel, The Case for Christ (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998).


32. Ibid., 356.


34. Martin Bobgan and Deidre Bobgan (1987), Psychoheresy: The Psychological Seduction of Christianity, Santa Barbara: Eastgate Publishers. Psychoheresy is an example of a book that takes this principle to dangerous and disturbing extremes. In the view of the Bobgans, the Bible should be the sole source for dealing with any type of mental illness, and all suffering is essentially reduced to a spiritual problem.


36. Two popular movie depictions include The Exorcist, which was recently remade, and The Exorcism of Emily Rose.


43. Ibid.


46. Ibid.


50. Ibid., 526.


52. Ibid.

53. Ibid., 191.

54. Ibid.

55. Ibid., 119.


57. Hoffman et al., “Modern and Postmodern Ways of Knowing.”


64. Krippner and Achterberg, Anomalous Healing Experiences.

66. Krippner and Achterberg, Anomalous Healing Experiences and David M. Wulff, Mystical Experience, in *Varieties of Anomalous Experience: Examining the Scientific Evidence*. Wulff points out that some branches of psychology, in particular transpersonal psychology, also believe that various mystical and anomalous experiences have healing potential.


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A soldier shelters himself in a foxhole while deep in the chaos of battle. He decides to change locations to get a better vantage point, and only a moment after running to his new firing spot, the foxhole he just came from is destroyed by enemy bombing.

A mother in her late fifties is told that it is medically impossible for her to have a child. Yet she stares down at a positive sign on the pregnancy test, knowing that a child is growing in her womb.

A teenager decides to jump off a 30-foot cliff onto protruding rocks in a desperate attempt to end a life of pain, abandonment, and rejection, but somehow survives, with only minimal cognitive and physical complications.

Each of these are true stories relayed to me by patients, and each patient has been quick to explain these events as modern-day miracles. Yet how do we really go about deciding something is a miracle? In each of these cases, the results are certainly advantageous and unexpected, but what leads us to elevate these events to miracle status and derogate the possibility that they are simply fortuitous chance events?

Interestingly, not much is known about the neurological mechanisms or processes involved in attributing events to miraculous intervention. Some of this is due to the rarity at which perceived miraculous events occur, making it difficult to capture someone’s reactions in the moment. It is also virtually impossible to scientifically create, assess, and analyze a miracle. If a miracle could be replicated for scientific study, by definition it would no longer be a miracle. Then again, even if science could come up with a logical and natural explanation for an event that seemingly defies natural explanation, this
would not necessarily prevent individuals from still perceiving it or defining it as a miracle. Therefore, what seems to matter most is not whether a miracle is real, but rather our interpretation of the event and our cognitive turn toward using a miracle framework to explain it.

It is the contention of this chapter that the human frontal lobes have a large, though not singular, role in the process by which we ascribe events to be miraculous. Although recent attention to the religious features of temporal lobe epilepsy and schizophrenia has helped showcase the involvement of the temporal lobe and limbic system in religious experiences and hallucinations, less attention has been devoted to the large role of the frontal lobes in these experiences and the way we interpret them. One way of studying the neural substrates guiding this process is to examine neurological conditions that might make individuals more inclined toward miracle explanations. Both frontotemporal dementia and obsessive-compulsive disorder have atypical frontal functioning and are characterized by greater than normal levels of religiousness, which includes a propensity to ascribe counterintuitive events to miracles or religious explanations. By examining the functions of the frontal lobes and the neural substrates underlying these conditions, we may learn something about the role of the frontal lobes in our tendency to engage in miracle ascription.

WHAT ARE MIRACLES?

By their very nature, miracles defy explanation. This represents both a strength and a weakness for most major religions that rely on records of miraculous events as epistemological evidence or truth-claims for the veracity of their doctrines. But the definition of miracles is naturally difficult, not only because of the aforementioned problems in studying them, but also because a definition depends on one’s religious, cultural, and scientific background. Some cultures might ascribe miracle status to the appearance of rain after a long drought, whereas others might simply attribute this to a return to normal weather patterns. Others might call it miraculous when a malignant tumor mysteriously disappears, yet others might find some neurological explanation for this event, depending on their experiences and culture.

One constant across these definitions is that miracles involve counterintuitive events. They do not make sense in light of, and often contradict, our knowledge of natural or expected processes. This is consistent with philosopher David Hume’s (as cited in Pojman, 2001) understanding of miracles as violations of the laws of nature. We know that objects fall downward toward earth at a rate of 32.17 feet per second, that fire consumes wood, that the dead do not rise, and that something will only float if it has less density than the surrounding liquid. Any counterinstance of these laws arrests our attention due to the sheer improbability that the regularity of nature will be
violated and by the innumerable occasions when the laws of nature are upheld (Pojman, 2001). In a sense, miracles are those events and episodes that are contrary to our customs, experiences, and understandings for how the world should generally work.

It is this counterintuitive nature that probably leaves so much room for speculation about the cause or origin of the unusual event. If these events occurred outside the typical laws of nature, then it is easy to assume the intervention of a nonnatural and divine cause. Others might agree that counterintuitive events are miraculous, but rather than invoke divine intervention, they may favor waiting for the discovery of a natural explanation. Whatever cause or explanation is ultimately invoked largely depends on the cognitive filter, schema, or lens through which we view the world. For some individuals, particularly those with leanings toward the religious, spiritual, or mystical, this lens may be shaped toward miraculous explanations. This suggests that what we perceive as unordinary and counterintuitive may actually be mediated by mental and neural mechanisms that are very ordinary (Boyer, 2003) and most likely governed by the frontal lobes.

The Frontal Lobes and Frontal-Subcortical Circuitry

The frontal lobes are the last region of the brain to develop, both from an evolutionary and ontogenetic perspective. They are the final, highest, and most advanced region of the brain, which most likely evolved to guide organisms toward selecting the behaviors and responses that confer the best chances of survival (Damasio & Anderson, 2003). As a result, they are intimately involved in personality, emotion, information processing, sustained attention, movement, language, and executive functions (e.g., set shifting, abstraction, planning, judgment, inhibition). They constitute almost one-third of the neocortex and are made up of everything anterior to the central sulcus, including the primary motor (precentral) cortex, the premotor cortex, and the prefrontal regions (Kolb & Whishaw, 2003; Martin, 2006). Of these, damage to the primary motor area can result in paralysis, whereas injury to the premotor regions can cause difficulties initiating and organizing movements, like speech production (McNamara, 2001).

Anterior to these is the prefrontal cortex (PFC), which is among the last brain regions to develop within the frontal cortex and therefore within the entire brain. It receives input from sensory association regions, has dense interconnections with several limbic sites, and has diffuse projections throughout the brain that allow it to regulate emotions, output to other cortical regions, and global cortical arousal levels (Damasio & Anderson, 2003). In short, it is interconnected with virtually all other cortical sites, so it can inhibit and regulate the input and output to most other cortical regions. Consequently, it is heavily involved in rational and directed activity, such as planning and
strategy formation, personality and spontaneity of behavior, cognitive flex-
ibility, encoding and retrieval, social behavior, and response inhibition (Mar-
tin, 2006). It is further subdivided into three main frontal-subcortical circuits
that begin in separate areas of the prefrontal cortex and project to defined
areas within the striatum, caudate nucleus, putamen, or nucleus accumbens.

The first of these, the dorsolateral prefrontal circuit, is directly responsible
for mediating executive functioning and organizing information to facilitate
a response. This includes working memory, conceptual reasoning, developing
and acting on plans, and directing and maintaining attention. In short,
it is responsible for selecting and directing behavior, which is supported by
its dense interconnectivity with the basal ganglia (McNamara, 2001). The
medial frontal circuit, which is also known as the anterior cingulate circuit,
is necessary for motivated behavior, error detection, and reward anticipation
(Cummings, 2003). The third, orbitofrontal circuit allows for the integration
of limbic and emotional information with behavioral responses (Bonelli &
Cummings, 2007; Cummings, 2003). It is involved in stimulus acquisition,
associating stimuli with rewards, complex decision making, and behavioral
self-regulation. One of the special roles of the orbitofrontal circuit is the
mediation of social and interpersonal behavior (Cummings, 2003), such as
behaving according to cultural norms, contemplating what others are think-
ing, and even responding to our own autonoetic awareness, or self-knowing.
Because this region is highly interconnected with limbic sites (McNamara,
2001), damage can result in poor inhibition of behavior, emotional distur-
bance, and loss of the ability to self-regulate behavior, both because there
is lost awareness of the constancy of self and also because there is com-
promised sensitivity to reward and punishment. Individuals with damage
to this orbitofrontal region are described as impulsive, displaying both fi-
nancial imprudence and obsessive behavior, such as hoarding or compulsive
worrying.

Not surprisingly, the prefrontal region has become appreciated as the seat
for much of what we know as personality. In fact, the prefrontal region has
been implicated in many of the features of antisocial personality disorder
and psychopathy (Bassarath, 2001; Pridmore, Chambers, & McArthur, 2005).
Among those with antisocial personality disorder, there is an 11 percent re-
duction in prefrontal gray matter volume (Raine, Lencz, Bihrl, LaCasse, &
Colletti, 2000), as well as reduced prefrontal perfusion and metabolism
(Pridmore et al., 2005). This suggests that the low arousal, poor fear con-
ditioning, lack of conscientiousness, and decision-making deficits that char-
acterize antisocial behavior may actually be related to prefrontal structural
and metabolic deficits. This may account for the historical targeting of this
region for transorbital lobotomies, where a mallet is used to pound and force
a surgical instrument through the thin layer of skull at the top of the eye
socket. Historically, the pick was then wiggled to damage the orbitofrontal
lobe, subsequently leaving the patient emotionally flat, lethargic, mentally dulled, and often more amenable to cooperation with treatment providers.

Perhaps one of the most striking examples of the emotional and personality disturbances that can result from frontal damage is the well-known case of Phineas Gage, made famous by the physician Harlow. Gage was a railway workman who survived an explosion that blasted an iron bar about four feet long and one inch wide through his frontal lobe. Although Gage retained intact cognitive abilities and made a remarkable physical recovery, his personality underwent a dramatic change after the accident. His previous disposition, which was described by acquaintances as calm and responsible, was replaced by irascibility, impulsivity, and social inappropriateness. He could no longer control his emotions, make good judgments, or execute planned behaviors. His language became profane and his behavior capricious, resulting in the loss of his job and social relationships. In short, it seems like Gage's self changed, at least in terms of his personality and his self-awareness as a calm and responsible person. When Damasio and colleagues (Damasio, Grabowski, Frank, Galaburda, & Damasio, 1994) later examined Gage's skull, they found that the regions most affected by the tamping iron were the orbitofrontal and medial frontal cortices. This finding has driven much of the current thinking about the role of these regions in personality, social behavior, and the awareness of self and others.

The prefrontal cortex is also the region that is probably most implicated in the process of miracle interpretation. In addition to mediating planning, goal-directed behavior, social inhibition, and insight, the PFC is responsible for agency detection and attributing independent mental states to oneself and others. As Atran and Norenzayan (2004) suggest, the brain is wired with an agency detection mechanism that is ready to be triggered by ambiguous information as a way of imputing causality to events. This agency detection mechanism is likely dependent on the neurocognitive networks in the frontal lobes, particularly the prefrontal cortex (McNamara, 2001). It is this area that likely seeks an explanation, cause, or originating source when individuals are confronted with counterintuitive information.

In similar fashion, these networks also control our theory of mind, namely the process by which we attribute complex mental representations of intentional mental states to other agents and ourselves. Theory of mind, sometimes known as social cognition, essentially refers to our ability to deduce the mental states and intentions of others (Gallagher & Frith, 2003; Leslie, 1987). It is a cross-cultural cognitive activity that involves constructing representations of mental states, like thinking, deceiving, and believing, and then attributing these mental states to other agents or people. It is this ability that normally allows us to appreciate novels and movies as fiction, as well as comprehend and interact with others' minds, including inferring the intentions of the divine or the supernatural. As a result, it is heavily
involved in the way we attribute counterintuitive events and experiences to the intentions of the miraculous, to powers outside oneself or contrary to the laws of nature.

Therefore, to the extent that agency detection and theory of mind are both dependent on the cognitive networks in the frontal lobes, much of the process involved in miracle ascription can be traced to frontal lobe activity. This is readily apparent among those with frontotemporal dementia and obsessive-compulsive disorder, where frontal lobe deficits result in damage or perseveration of agency and theory of mind in a way that makes afflicted individuals more amenable to miracle attributions.

**Frontotemporal Dementia**

Frontotemporal dementia (FTD) is the second most common form of primary degenerative dementia after Alzheimer’s disease (AD), accounting for up to 20 percent of presenile cases of dementia (Mendez & Perryman, 2002; Snowden, Neary, & Mann, 2002). It is equally common in men and women, and it is considered an early-onset dementia because it starts insidiously and occurs earlier than AD, typically between the ages of 45 and 65 (Ratnavalli, Brayne, Dawson, & Hodges, 2002; Snowden et al., 2002). It is one of three neurobehavioral disorders that fall under a constellation of syndromes called frontotemporal lobar degeneration. FTD is the frontal variant of this syndrome, whereas the other two disorders, semantic dementia and primary nonfluent aphasia, are temporal variants that are defined by greater disturbances in speech and language. The core diagnostic features of FTD include an insidious onset and gradual progression, an early decline in interpersonal decorum, disinhibition in personal conduct, and both emotional blunting and a loss of insight (Neary et al., 1998).

Although the exact cause of FTD has yet to be identified, the responsible neuropathological changes have been narrowed to a loss of large cortical nerve cells, microvacuolation, and gliosis associated with abnormalities in tau metabolism (Cairns et al., 2007; Cummings, 2003), sometimes with spongiform degeneration. This leads to disproportionate atrophy and hypometabolism of the frontal and temporal structures. Structural neuroimaging, such as MRI procedures, often reveal prominent bilateral atrophy and white matter signal intensity in the frontal and anterior temporal lobes, with slightly disproportionate right–relative to left-hemisphere degeneration (Cummings, 2003; Mendez & Perryman, 2002; Neary et al., 1998; Rosen et al., 2002; Snowden, Neary, & Mann, 2007). Recent estimates by Snowden and colleagues (2007) suggest 54 percent of those with FTD have bilateral atrophy of the frontal and anterior temporal lobes, with 20 percent showing atrophy confined to the frontal lobes and 14 percent with bilateral atrophy isolated to the temporal lobes. On functional neuroimaging, FTD often
appears as significantly reduced cerebral blood flow in the dorsolateral and orbital frontal regions bilaterally (Grossman, 2002).

In light of these structural and metabolic changes, it is not surprising that the cognitive deficits experienced by those with FTD are largely circumscribed to frontal and temporal deficits. In general, patients with FTD demonstrate a dysexecutive syndrome characterized by deficits in attention, abstraction, planning, and problem solving. Reduced verbal production is sometimes common, as well as mental rigidity, poor abstraction, difficulty shifting mental set, and perseverative tendencies (Craft, Cholerton, & Reger, 2003; Kramer et al., 2003; Neary et al., 1998; Twamley & Bondi, 2003). Although there is little idiopathic decline in memory and perception, at least early in the disease process, these executive deficits may occasionally interfere with encoding, organization, and learning (Snowden et al., 2002).

Perhaps the most salient features of FTD, however, are profound changes in character and disordered social conduct. In fact, it is these neuropsychiatric and behavioral symptoms that frequently lead patients to treatment, not because patients themselves perceive any problems (they are often anosognosic for their deficits), but because family members are overtly concerned by the alteration in personality and social conduct. It is these behavioral and psychiatric disturbances, rather than cognitive problems, that lead to greater caregiver stress and institutionalization (Mourik et al., 2004; Srikanth, Nagaraja, & Ratnavalli, 2005).

Central to these disturbances is a decline in social conduct, which often emerges in the form of disinhibition and loss of self-control (Mendez & Perryman, 2002), such as making lewd remarks, violating others’ interpersonal space, or making inappropriate gestures. This behavior is not antisocial, but rather asocial (Srikanth et al., 2005), largely due to damage to the orbitofrontal regions responsible for linking internal or external cues with positive or negative outcomes. Their own personal conduct can also be impaired, such that they become more passive in caring for themselves. They lose interest in personal hygiene, failing to wash or groom appropriately and sometimes defecating unconcernedly in front of others. Emotionally, they are often blunted and stifled in their capacity to demonstrate joy, sadness, or empathy for others. Utilization behavior is also common, where patients grasp and use any nearby objects, even when it might be inappropriate, such as indiscriminately grabbing someone else’s food or drink. This is more likely to appear later in the disease course and may be related to their mandatory exploration of the environment.

In some persons with FTD, behavioral excesses emerge, perhaps related to the prefrontal loss of inhibition. Many become hyperoral, developing substantial elevations in appetite, a preference for sweeter foods, and increased oral behavior, like smoking (Ikeda, Brown, Holland, Fukuhara, & Hodges, 2002;
Hypersexuality can emerge in the form of sexual jokes or compulsive masturbation, just as antisocial forms of hypervisuality can result in shoplifting or playing with fire (Grossman, 2002). Over 60 percent of those with FTD also develop repetitive, ritualistic, and stereotyped behaviors, like humming, counting aloud, and hoarding objects (Rosso et al., 2001). They may pace the room, repeat certain catch phrases, and engage in superstitious and compulsive behaviors. It is not uncommon to hear of these patients engaging in compulsive counting or becoming distressed when prevented from eating the same foods at exactly the same time each day. Despite the compulsive nature of these symptoms, they are qualitatively different than those in obsessive-compulsive disorder because they are not linked to intrusive thoughts or overt anxiety (Mendez & Perryman, 2002). Many of these socially undesirable traits and behavioral excesses are more common when the right hemisphere is differentially affected and may reflect the dysregulation of the frontal lobes in regulating control over their behavior (Mendez & Perryman, 2002).

Another way researchers (Darvesh, 2005; Hodges, 2001; Rosen et al., 2002; Rosso et al., 2001; Snowden et al., 2002) have conceptualized the symptoms of FTD is to categorize them according to the frontal regions involved. The disinhibition, impulsivity, asocial tendencies, and compulsive and stereotypical behaviors have been linked to orbitofrontal involvement. Many of the cognitive problems, such as deficits in planning, organization, and executive functioning, may reflect the spread of the disease to the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex, whereas apathy, aspontaneity in speech, and social withdrawal may be related to medial frontal/anterior cingulate involvement. These groupings may actually represent three distinct subgroups of FTD.

**Frontotemporal Dementia and Hyperreligiousness**

Interestingly, part of the symptomatology of those with FTD also appears to be hyperreligiosity. This area of research is relatively new, but several studies have found increased levels of religiousness among those with FTD (Rossor, Revesz, Lantos, & Warrington, 2000; Saver & Rabin, 1997; Twamley & Bondi, 2003). In particular, many of those with FTD score high on tests of religiousness, report increased devotion to religious beliefs, become preoccupied with religious ideas (Rosso et al., 2001), and engage in a greater number of religious behaviors and report a stronger belief in God. Although little has been done to determine the prevalence of miracle attributions in this population, it seems likely that this hyperreligiousness extends to a greater tendency to rely on supernatural explanations for unusual and counterintuitive experiences. The precise cause for this increased religiousness is not known, but it may be related to some of the co-occurring changes in the brains of those with FTD.
One possibility is that this hyperreligiousness is related to the loss of inhibition and increased impulsivity experienced by those with FTD. Deterioration of the orbitofrontal regions appears to result in a reduced ability to inhibit competing responses (Snowden et al., 2002), so there may be a spontaneous release of compulsive and stereotyped behavior, such as hyperorality, hypersexuality, and hyperreligiousness. This is evident in the new interest in painting experienced by some patients with FTD (Miller & Hou, 2004). Remarkably, Miller and Hou suggest that artistic productivity can actually increase in FTD, despite the progressive and degenerative nature of the disease. They have noticed that there may be a spontaneous burst of visual creativity triggered by the illness, where many of the visual scenes absorbed and internally represented over a patient’s lifetime are released. Consistent with the other features of the disease, the paintings that emerge are often approached compulsively, frequently in realistic or surrealistic styles. It may be that these individuals have a compulsive need to paint, or there may be a releasing of artistic inhibition related to the sparing of the parietal regions responsible for visuospatial activities (Miller & Hou, 2004). In a sense, the hypometabolism in the frontal regions may stimulate the release of hypermetabolism in the parietal and occipital regions not affected by the illness.

In the same way, it may be that hyperreligiousness, which includes a propensity toward interpreting counterintuitive information as a miracle, is released when the barrier of inhibition is dropped. The compulsive thoughts and behaviors in FTD have been linked to disruptions in the individual’s normal ability to engage in suppression (Rosso et al., 2001), suggesting that this loss of suppression may release an abnormal level of behaviors, including religious thought, activity, and attribution. Paired with this, orbitofrontal atrophy promotes impulsivity, so there may be a greater willingness to accept and proclaim religious explanations for positive, harmonious phenomena (Saver & Rabin, 1997). This seems particularly likely considering that many of those with hyperreligiousness come from families with strong religious tendencies (Darvesh, 2005), so the lowering of one’s inhibitory threshold may stimulate the release of religious thinking, explanation, and experience that has been internally absorbed over one’s lifetime.

Added to this is the heightened significance of spirituality and religion for this population. Many of those with dementia rely on their personal spirituality as an important resource for coping, improving their quality of life, and sustaining meaning and purpose in the face of their illness (Katsuno, 2003). Higher levels of spirituality and engagement in private religious practices have been associated with slower progression of the disease (Kaufman, Anaki, Binns, & Freedman, 2007), which suggests that it may even be helpful and adaptive for some of those with FTD to examine events from a religious/spiritual perspective. When this is paired with their growing difficulties in setting shifting and abandoning previous opinions and strategies, they may become
more rigid and inflexible in their religious beliefs, making them more predisposed to preoccupation with religious ideas or the use of miracle language to explain counterintuitive information.

In contrast, those with AD often experience a progressive loss of religious interests and behaviors, perhaps related to the decreased pursuit of lifelong interests, which may extend into religious concerns (Saver & Rabin, 1997). This may be related to the greater passivity and decreased spontaneity associated with AD, compromising an individual’s ability to construct religious cognitions.

Another possibility, or perhaps an interacting element, is that increased religiousness and miracle ascription is a by-product of the altered ability to infer one’s own and others’ mental states. Along with impaired social awareness and loss of insight, those with FTD have impaired metacognitive abilities, such as theory of mind, that interfere with their ability to infer others’ mental states, thoughts, and feelings (Eslinger et al., 2005). Those with FTD are impaired on tests of theory of mind (Lough et al., 2006), which seems particularly related to the degeneration of the ventromedial prefrontal cortex (Frith & Frith, 2003). They may be aware of social rules and norms, but they cannot recognize when they violate these norms or integrate this social knowledge with the affective connotations (Lough et al., 2006). This leads them to struggle to take another’s perspective or accurately impute the effect of their actions on the thoughts and feelings of others. In part, this may be related to their reduced capacity for set shifting and adopting a perspective outside their own, which is mediated by atrophy and hypometabolism in the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex (Snowden et al., 2002). Therefore, when they are confronted with events or experiences that do not conform to known natural processes, their hyperreligiosity may lead them to fall back on an attribution to miraculous intervention, rather than being able to consider alternative explanations.

But their difficulties are not limited to representing mental states in others. They also have difficulty representing their own mental states, or their own autonoetic awareness (Eslinger et al., 2005). In addition to deficits in their theory of mind about others, they also have problems with metacognition about themselves. They have little self-awareness, self-monitoring, and self-regulation that can promote adaptive behavior in changing environments. In a sense, they do not have a working sense of self because they lack a persistent perception of their behavior and a synthesis of their experiences over time and space (Eslinger et al., 2005). Miller and colleagues (2001) found that a majority of those with FTD undergo significant changes in their concept of self, in their ability to perceive those essential qualities that distinguish themselves from others. Despite having intact memory and language, the authors found that patients often exhibited a diminished maintenance of previously learned self-concepts. Put simply, they demonstrated a
distinct change of self, an alteration of their temporally stable sense of their core features. Very few areas seem to be immune to this change. Eating habits, food preferences, weight levels, dress styles, and political and religious ideology can all change with FTD, particularly among those with reduced activity in the right frontal lobe (Assal & Cummings, 2002).

For example, Miller and colleagues (2001) report on a case where a woman, in the course of FTD, changed from wearing expensive designer apparel and eating at fine French restaurants to wearing cheap clothing and developing a love for fast food. In another example, they mention a man who went from being scrupulous, tight with money, and short-tempered to being relaxed and easygoing, with his views on sex changing from conservative to tolerant and experimental. In fact, it appears that those with FTD show significantly less self-awareness about their personality than even those with AD, with a tendency to exaggerate positive qualities, minimize negative qualities, and a failure to update their self-image after the onset of the disease (Rankin, Baldwin, Pace-Savitsky, Kramer, & Miller, 2005). In some cases, this change in self involves a loosening of inhibition and increased devotion to religious beliefs, preoccupation with religious ideas, and a greater number of religious behaviors and attributions. There are even cases of those with FTD who change from being vegetarian prior to diagnosis to consuming large amounts of meat after the onset of the disease. In all cases, these are distinct changes in religious, social, and political beliefs, all of which are things that we might associate with core features of the self. Most of these changes can be traced to abnormalities in the right frontal lobe, suggesting that normal functioning of the right frontal lobe is necessary for the maintenance of self (Miller, Chang, Mena, Boone, & Lesser, 1993).

As a result, there is something askew in the representational ability of those with FTD, both to represent the constancy of self and to accurately assign intentionality and agency to others. One by-product appears to be a new or a more vigorous pattern of using religious thinking to assign causality and intentionality, which may translate into a greater proclivity to rely on miracle attributions. Considering the heavy involvement of the frontal lobes in FTD pathology, metacognition, and agency detection (Eslinger et al., 2005), it seems likely that they have a strong role in the human tendency to assign miracle explanations to counterintuitive information. Similar processes may be at play among those with obsessive-compulsive disorder.

**OBSESSIVE-COMPULSIVE DISORDER**

Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) is a persistent anxiety disorder that affects 1–3 percent of the population (Graybiel & Rauch, 2000). It typically has an early onset, usually peaking in the twenties, and it occurs with similar prevalence rates across cultures and between men and women (Brune, 2006).
The name rises from the hallmark signs and symptoms, which affect both cognition and motor behavior. Obsessions typically refer to unwanted but insistent and recurrent thoughts, urges, doubts, or images that evoke anxiety. Fears about dirt and contamination are common examples. Compulsions are ritualistic, stereotyped urges and behaviors that are repeated in response to the obsessions, often to defuse or neutralize the anxiety associated with the obsession. Among the more typical compulsions are cleaning, checking, and seeking symmetry and order.

These symptoms are different than the habits and mannerisms or the senseless thoughts that many of us share, like songs that repeat through our mind or a strict routine when showering in the morning. These more typical thoughts and behaviors can even be helpful because they release tension and calm us, but the obsessions and compulsions associated with OCD are excessive, intrusive, and out of the individual’s control. They are intrusive and ego-dystonic because the afflicted individual recognizes them as excessive and unreasonable, but believes something terrible will happen unless he or she acts on them. Any attempt to ignore the symptoms simply arouses more anxiety. In a sense, the relatively normal thoughts and fears that most of us experience are misappraised by those with OCD as overly significant and catastrophic in consequence, producing anxiety and motivating efforts to reduce the distress (Abramowitz, Deacon, Woods, & Tolin, 2004).

Interestingly, many of the obsessions of those with OCD have religious themes or imagery. The actual prevalence of religious obsessions ranges from 20 percent (Karadag, Oguzhanoglu, Ozdel, Atesci, & Amuk, 2006) to 42 percent of patients with OCD (Tek & Ulug, 2001). It appears that religious obsessions may actually keep company within a primary symptom cluster of taboo social topics that include sexual, somatic, and perhaps aggressive obsessions (Denys, de Geus, van Megen, & Westenberg, 2004). The taboo content of these obsessions may reflect the heightened anxiety associated with social concerns, and the particular sensitivity of teenagers to these social concerns may account for the early, adolescent onset among those whose OCD involves religious themes (Grant et al., 2006).

The actual content of these religious obsessions and compulsions may vary with the individual and culture. Hindus reportedly have more symptoms related to contamination and washing, largely because these are themes that are important to Indian culture of purity and cleanliness (Khanna & Channabasavanna, 1998). In the same way, the religious themes of obsessions and compulsions likely reflect one’s cultural and religious background. One common pattern across cultures or traditions is increased levels of scrupulosity among those with OCD (Nelson, Abramowitz, Whiteside, & Deacon, 2006), including obsessions related to a fear of God and compulsions of washing and hoarding related to a fear of sin (Olatunji, Abramowitz, Williams, Connolly, & Lohr, 2007).
Moreover, the actual number of these religious obsessions and compulsions appears to vary according to the degree of one’s religiousness. Abramowitz and colleagues (2004) discovered that those who are more religious generally report greater obsessional symptoms, compulsive washing, and beliefs about the importance of their religious thoughts. They also report a greater need to control their thoughts and an inflated sense of responsibility for controlling their actions. Even within denominations, Protestants who report greater religiousness score higher than Catholics, Jews, and less religious Protestants on measures assessing obsessionality, overimportance of thoughts, control of thoughts, and perfectionism and responsibility (Abramowitz, Huppert, Cohen, Tolin, & Cahill, 2002). Some of this might be related to their greater fear of God and their heightened fear of sinful thoughts. This relationship does not appear to be exclusive to Protestants, since Catholics with high or moderate degrees of religiousness also showed higher scores on measures of OCD-related cognitions than less religious Catholics (Sica, Novara, & Sanavio, 2002). This includes greater obsessionality, perfectionism, responsibility, and perceived overimportance of thoughts and control of thoughts. Therefore, religious obsessions and compulsions appear in many of those with OCD, but may be particularly prevalent in those with greater levels of religiousness.

Why would those with religious beliefs be more prone to obsessions and compulsions than those with more moderate, mitigated, or absent religious beliefs? Some of it might be related to the intrinsic value placed on religious thought and ritual, as well as their control. If you are taught that certain thoughts are sinful, as with many Protestant doctrines, then you may be likely to assume you can, and should, control these thoughts due to a fear of potentially disastrous consequences. To uphold these tenants, parents and religious leaders may encourage the suppression of these unwanted thoughts, which only leads to a cycle involving the greater urgency of the unwanted thoughts and more preoccupation toward neutralizing them through compulsive behavior. In many ways, thoughts and behaviors become indistinguishable, making the mere thought equivalent to the feared action (Nelson et al., 2006). This can be found even in non-Protestant religions where strong emphasis is given to moral behavior, purity of mind, and responsibility for one’s actions. This may be why obsessive traits are more common in highly religious and spiritual persons, with correlations ranging from +.15 to +.40 (Previc, 2005).

Furthermore, many of the rituals inherent to most religions are characterized by repetitive and exaggerated behavior. These rituals share many features with the compulsions of OCD, including a common goal for achieving order, regularity, and predictability. They both serve social purposes to contain fear and stave off perceived threats. OCD may just represent an exaggeration of these behavior strategies aimed at harm and risk minimization.
Considering these similarities, as well as the value placed on thought and ritual by most forms of religion and spirituality, those with OCD may be particularly predisposed to adopt religious obsessions and compulsions. They may also be more inclined to ascribe miracle status to events that do not fit known physical or natural laws. High levels of magical ideation and perceptual distortions are reported by those with OCD (Tolin, Abramowitz, Kozak, & Foa, 2001), including a greater tendency to believe in God and miracles. Examining the pathology and brains of those with OCD may help us better understand this increased tendency toward miracle ascription.

**OCD, the Frontal Lobes, and Miracle Ascription**

Although there is no overt locus of neuronal degeneration in OCD, the prevailing hypothesis for its pathogenesis is a defective or hypertonic striatum that disturbs the frontosubcortical balance in striatal loops (Pujol et al., 2004). Functional imaging on those with OCD shows abnormal metabolic activity, usually hypermetabolism, in the cortico-basal ganglia circuitry that links the orbitofrontal and medial frontal regions of the prefrontal cortex with the caudate nucleus (Anderson & Savage, 2004; Graybiel & Rauch, 2000; Saxena & Rauch, 2000). On MRI scans, OCD typically emerges as reduced gray matter volume in the medial frontal gyrus, medial orbitofrontal cortex, and left insulo-opercular regions (Pujol et al., 2004). These deficits largely account for the cardinal features of OCD. For example, the frontostriatal system modulates behavioral responses, and the dorsolateral and orbitofrontal cortices contribute to the execution of flexible behavior, so that damage or overactivity in these regions can result in difficulty switching between tasks, behaviors, and beliefs (Brune, 2006).

Dysregulation in each of these systems can also contribute to the emergence of stereotyped, recurrent, and persistent obsessions and compulsions. The orbitofrontal and medial prefrontal cortices have been implicated in the way we evaluate rewards and punishments, which is compromised in OCD (Graybiel & Rauch, 2000). Both of these prefrontal cortices are strongly interconnected with the limbic system and are therefore implicated in motivation and our ability to perceive the emotional value of stimuli and select behavioral responses based on our expectations about the outcome. In the case of OCD, disruption to these areas likely results in the overvaluing of stimuli and inaccurate anticipation of rewards and punishments, both of which can foster obsessive thinking and compulsive behavior.

When it comes to miracle attributions in particular, part of the tendency for those with OCD to be more likely to engage in miraculous explanations may be related to an excess theory of mind. Again, there is no research showing the explicit processes involved in religious obsessions and compulsions, but they may stem from an overactive metacognitive system that is inclined
toward attributing events to miraculous intervention. In the case of those with FTD, we stated that there is an alteration, most likely a deficit, in their ability to assign intentionality, infer one’s own constant mental state, and maintain earlier and perhaps more inhibited methods of agency detection. In the case of OCD, there may be an overactivity of metacognitive mechanisms and agency detection.

Considering the responsibility of the prefrontal cortex for cognitive flexibility, concern over one’s existence, and theory of mind, the hyperactivation of this region may result in hyperreligiousness, including a tendency to look for religious or miraculous explanations for counterintuitive information (Muramoto, 2004). It may be that individuals with OCD are more likely to look for both internal and external explanations for events that do not conform to natural, known processes. In a sense, elevated prefrontal activity may widen the scope of the agency detector, making those with OCD more susceptible to assigning intentional states, such as goals, thoughts, and intentions, to objects or agents, including agents outside the self and outside natural law. This seems particularly true among those primed with religious or spiritual backgrounds.

Similar to those with FTD, the reduced prefrontal inhibition of those with OCD may promote a release from internal and external cognitive anchors (Previc, 2005). This can lead to the loosening of associations and unusual attributions of causality, including incorrect attributions to self, which can reinforce the perceived control gained by compulsions. It can also reinforce unsubstantiated associations between external events, like superstitions about one’s behavior and the agents behind counterintuitive events. With the lowering of inhibition in the prefrontal system, exaggerated attention may also be devoted to extrapersonal space and extrapersonal sources of agency (Previc, 2005), particularly among those with preexisting neural networks primed toward religion or the supernatural. This is consistent with studies showing greater activation in the frontal relative to the occipital and parietal systems during meditation, religious reading, and other transcendental and spiritual experiences (Herzog et al., 1990–1991; Newberg et al., 2001; Newberg, Pourdehnad, Alavi, & d’Aquili, 2003). Put differently, the impact of frontal pathology on abstraction may lead those with OCD toward a different method of abstract reasoning. Their release from inhibition, paired with their greater penchant for religious themes, may result in the abstraction of meaning from nonnatural and miraculous sources.

This predilection for miracle attributions may also be supported by the unusual level of belief fixation experienced by those with OCD. Intrinsic to the overactivation of the frontal systems may be a clinging to one’s belief structure, even when confronted by evidence to the contrary. This belief fixation likely contributes to the maintenance of obsessions despite the disproportion between the obsession and the actual threat involved. In the same
way, this belief fixation may also lead those who have OCD and a religious background to become even more open to, and entrenched within, their religious beliefs, rituals, and explanations, making them more firmly convinced of the reality of miracles and external sources of control.

Regardless of the mechanisms involved, the reliance on miracle explanations for counterintuitive events may be adaptive for those with OCD. The brains of individuals with OCD are overinvolved in anticipating possible consequences to their thoughts and actions. Their obsessions and compulsions help them in turn to predict and control both current and future events. Miracle attributions, like superstitious beliefs and obsessions, may represent methods for anticipating the outcome of future scenarios (Brune, 2006). They may serve as metarepresentations designed to impute meaning and controllability to events, thereby staving off real and perceived danger. Even among those without OCD, a tendency to interpret anomalous experiences as miracles can impart purpose and meaning to past and current events, as well as control and predictability to future events. In fact, Atran & Norenzayan (2004) suggest that omniscient agents may be more attractive sources of attribution than nonomnicient agents because they do not succumb to false beliefs and because they provide an unassailable explanation that can be conformed to any need. This may make miracle explanations all the more appealing to those with OCD because they can be invoked to deal with any anxiety and uncertainty, be it commonplace or unnatural.

TOWARD A UNIFIED UNDERSTANDING OF MIRACLE ATTRIBUTION

Having considered the pathology underlying FTD and OCD, it may be possible to abstract a somewhat unified, albeit tentative, understanding of the neuropsychological processes involved in miracle attribution. Insights from both neurological disorders suggests that the impact of perceived miraculous events is not universally preconceptual or immediately affective (Azari et al., 2001), as many might think. Instead, there is a heavy cognitive and attributional component, where there is a causal claim regarding the mysterious and nonnatural source for the experience. It seems likely that this causal attribution is predominantly mediated by frontal lobe processes.

In particular, when we are confronted with anomalous or counterintuitive situations, we seek a solution, a satisfactory explanation that involves an active agent. We postulate the existence of agents because agents are primary sources of meaning and teleology, even when they cannot be directly observed (Pyysiainen, 2001). This search for a solution likely activates the frontal regions responsible for agency detection, theory of mind, and metarepresentations that have specifications about the causal relations between counterintuitive events. In the case of those with disordered frontal lobes,
this activation might follow from a release of inhibition or a diminishing of one’s stability of self (as in the case of FTD), or it can be secondary to an excess theory of mind or even belief fixation (as with OCD). In both cases, there is a disruption in normal metacognitive and agency detection mechanisms.

Activation of these cognitive mechanisms, both in intact and disordered systems, likely stimulates the release of personally salient mental representations or cognitive schema that are housed in the prefrontal cortex, each of which has distinct specifications about causal relations. Although there are multiple ways of dealing with counterintuitive information, those who are religious, spiritual, or simply inclined to see a world beyond our explanation and hidden from our senses may have more distinctly extrapersonal, spiritual, or supernatural representational systems. They may be more prepared to make miracle attributions in accordance with their religious or spiritual representations, including how they causally experience events. Azari, Misseri, and Seitz (2005) describe it as an assumption about a relationship between the body and a conscious agent, be it the world, space, or the divine. Put simply, counterintuitive information may activate miracle representations in accordance with preexisting assumptions about the extraordinary and supernatural origin, agency, and intentionality of anomalous events.

The prefrontal cortices are critical for each stage of this process, from agency detection and mentalizing to selecting from available representations, so they are intimately involved in the way we explain counterintuitive information as miraculous. This is consistent with much of the research on the neurobiology underlying spiritual and religious experiences. The spiritual experiences of those with temporal lobe epilepsy are related to increased cerebral blood flow in the frontal regions that control how we attribute mental states to self and others (Azari et al., 2001; Newberg et al., 2001). During meditation, there appears to be increased frontal activity on PET imaging (Herzog et al., 1990–1991), and SPECT imaging with Franciscan nuns and Tibetan monks has revealed increased activity and blood flow in the dorsolateral and dorsomedial prefrontal cortex (Newberg et al., 2001, 2003). Even the simple recitation of religious texts activates dorsolateral and dorsomedial frontal cortices on PET imaging (Azari et al., 2001). Therefore, the increased activity of the frontal lobe during spiritual and religious experiences, paired with its role in agency detection and causal attribution, supports a strong role for frontal processes in the attribution to miraculous processes.

Undoubtedly, there are limitations to this approach. Methodologically, there are inherent difficulties in trying to discern the operation of a cognitive process by examining how it goes awry in disordered systems like FTD and OCD. By all accounts, the use of miracle language and miracle representations to explain counterintuitive information is a common and arguably normal process that has been evolutionarily selected; otherwise it would be much less prevalent. However, there is nothing concrete to suggest
that miracle attributions work precisely the same way among unafflicted individuals and those with FTD and OCD. In fact, the processes leading to miracle attribution in FTD and OCD may be an artifact of the dysregulated frontal systems associated with these conditions, with little corollary to normal mechanisms for miracle ascription. The risk is that something will get missed by examining dysregulated systems, such as intact functions that are also operating in miracle ascription, but that are easily overlooked because they are not part of FTD or OCD pathology.

It is also likely that miracle ascription is not isolated to the frontal lobes. Multiple other areas may also be involved. As argued elsewhere in this series (Paloutzian, Rogers, Swenson, & Lowe, in press), it may be more accurate to say that miracles are made along a frontal-parietal circuit, where counterintuitive information is first perceived as sensory input and later constructed using a meaningful miracle schema. The medial temporal lobe has also been heavily implicated in religious and paranormal activity (see Previc, 2005, for a review), probably related to the affective valence experienced with these events. While it is true that many of the events deemed as miraculous are given this designation due to their strong emotional loading, it is equally important not to diminish frontal lobe involvement in the actual process of defining something as a miracle. Although limbic and temporal involvements likely play a precursory role in how we define a miracle, this focus on the immediate, eye-catching emotional element may minimize the larger, cognitive process involved in the way we interpret events to be miracles.

CONCLUSION

It seems safe to say that many people want to believe in miracles. There is a strong human appeal to be awed, to find wonder, and to be held captive to the extraordinary. Hume calls it a “propensity of mankind toward the marvelous” (as cited in Pojman, 2001, 85). This intimates that many individuals are primed toward seeing or experiencing miracles, particularly if they have a spiritual or religious worldview. In this light, it would seem easy to argue that studying the neural substrates involved in miracle attribution only cheapens the miracle, removing the mystery from something meant to be appreciated on its own merit and taken on faith. But it seems important to acknowledge that calling something a miracle is a decision, an overt cognitive process that is likely mediated by frontal-subcortical activity, predominantly involving prefrontal regions that control agency detection, theory of mind, inhibitory processes, and the flexibility or rigidity of thought. This does not remove or threaten the highly affective or mysterious nature of these events, but simply suggests that the process for experiencing and perceiving a miracle is more than an emotional response or a mysterious feeling. It is a very cognitive process, which is most likely governed by the frontal lobes.
It should also come as no surprise that this process for miracle interpretation is brain-based. It is akin to the conversation reported by Nasar (1998) between Harvard professor George Mackey and John Nash, the mathematical genius afflicted with schizophrenia. Professor Mackey posed the question to John, “How could you, a mathematician, a man devoted to reason and logical proof . . . how could you believe that extraterrestrials are sending you messages? How could you believe that you are being recruited by aliens from outer space to save the world?” Nash quietly replied, “Because the ideas I had about supernatural beings came to me the same way that my mathematical ideas did” (11). Hallucinations and mathematics, attributions to miracles and attribution to chance—each of these alike can be traced to distinct neural substrates. In the case of miracles, these attributions seem preferentially localized to frontal lobe activity.

Some people might ask why we do not see more miracles in modern times. Perhaps the advance of science has increased our knowledge about natural processes, thereby reducing occasions of counterintuition, where events do not fit known natural laws. Perhaps individuals have exchanged miracle explanations for other agents, like luck or good fortune. Perhaps our use of the term miracle has been so watered down that we have become desensitized to true miracles. Either way, maybe our understanding of miracles is limited because we have been looking in the wrong place. Maybe more attention needs to be given to unlocking the secrets of the frontal lobe, where miracle attributions are made.

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INTRODUCTION

Mystical experiences are widespread, and they often involve an awareness of a divine presence. Several types of mystical experiences are distinguished including religious visions and dreams (Loewenthal 2004, 87–89). According to Oats (1981, 111), mysticism assumes that God and spiritual truth may be known instinctively. Romans 1:19 confirms this notion: “For that which is known about God is evident to them and made plain in their inner consciousness, because God [Himself] has shown it to them” (Amplied Version [AV]). Although intuitive knowledge is gained in a different way than scientific knowledge, it is just as valid.

Mystical experiences happen at the non-rational level of human functioning and viewing the world from a mystical perspective may influence one’s perception and interpretation of miracles (Oats 1981, 111–18).

Miracles

A *miracle* is defined as “an extraordinary event manifesting divine intervention in human affairs” (http://www.Merriam-Webster.com). There is normally no scientific explanation for such an intervention, and the experience of a miracle may be categorized as a mystical experience. A *miracle* is also defined as “an extremely outstanding or unusual event, thing, or accomplishment” (http://www.Merriam-Webster.com). The word *miracle* used in this sense refer to an event that is statistically unlikely to happen but is beneficial; for example, Japan’s economic success after the country was destroyed during World War II.
Miracle may also refer to something good that happens regardless of its likelihood; for example, good rainfall after a drought. For the purpose of this chapter miracle is defined as a positive experience perceived as extraordinary and attributed to a supernatural or divine intervention.

In Africa, mystical experiences are part and parcel of the Africans’ traditional religious beliefs. They also form part of the Christian spirituality of a large number of Christian Africans. Africans view the spiritual world as more dominant than the physical world, which implies that life events are influenced by the spiritual world. Religious communities that firmly believe in miracles include the Orthodox Jews, Christians, and some Muslim groups. However, not all of these groups view and interpret miracles in a similar manner. The religious texts of the Orthodox Jews and the Christians describe supernatural acts by God that change the normal course of nature. All these accounts of miracles indicate God’s power over natural laws.

The question arises, does the African worldview affect the perception and interpretation of miracles? This chapter aims at exploring how the African worldview affects the perception and interpretation of miracles.

In order to do this investigation I will briefly discuss the concepts African and worldview and then describe the traditional African worldview. The effect of this worldview on the African’s perception and interpretation of miracles will then be explored. This exploration will be supported by qualitative research data from a research project, Project Crossroads, partially commissioned by the author for this purpose.

Project Crossroads is an explorative qualitative study conducted by a South African-based independent market research company, Qualitative Intelligence (Kotze and De Kock 2007). The purpose of this study was to explore miracles within the African worldview.

The study was limited to South Africans as a subset of Africans. The study was further limited to Christians as a subset of African religions. The Christian religion is the largest African major religion constituting of 48 percent of the African population (Johnstone and Mandryk 2001, 21).

In South Africa the study was geographically limited to Johannesburg, the largest South African metropolitan municipality which includes Soweto, the predominantly black South Western townships of Johannesburg. The study included white South Africans to investigate a probable contrasting view on miracles based on a Western worldview.

All quotations used to illustrate the view of Africans on the African worldview and miracles originate from this project.

The African Concept

The word African is derived from the name of the continent. African may be used to refer to different ethnic groups indigenous to the continent of
Africa, to people of African origin, or to cultures and traditions specific to Africa (Kaphagawani and Malherbe 2003, 220). According to Van Wyk and Higgs (2007, 61–62), the views and ideas emanating from the traditional African world form the basis of a true African philosophy. In this case the concept *African* refers to the different ethnic groups as well as the cultures and traditions specific to Africa.

Meyer, Moore, and Viljoen (2003, 530–531) use the word *African* specific to the indigenous people of the sub-Saharan region of Africa and delineates the variety of different cultures, languages, and religions that form part of the African diversity. For the purpose of this chapter this definition of *African* will apply. According to Sow (1980, quoted in Meyer, Moore, and Viljoen 2003, 531), it is possible to talk of an overarching African perspective in spite of the diversity. There is a unity in the diversity, and Sow describes it as “a unity that is evident in the realm of spirituality as well as in that of representation and expression, from works of art to behaviors manifested in everyday life. . . . There is no doubt that, with a few variations, African thought has a distinctive character, deriving its principles from symbols and myths as well as from a collective ritual” (531).

THE WORLDVIEW CONSTRUCT

The worldview concept includes a philosophy of life, world hypotheses, value orientations, and unconscious systems of meaning (Koltko-Rivera 2004, 4). For the purpose of this chapter the conceptual definition provided by Koltko-Rivera is applied. According to this definition a worldview is “a way of describing the universe and life within it, both in terms of what is and what ought to be. . . . Worldviews include assumptions that may be unproven, and even unprovable, but these assumptions are superordinate, in that they provide the epistemic and ontological foundations for other beliefs within a belief system” (Koltko-Rivera 2004, 4). Observations and mystical contemplations form part of a worldview. Worldview beliefs may include existential beliefs, evaluative beliefs, and prescriptive or proscriptive beliefs and focus largely on less concrete aspects of everyday life (for example, God) and on abstract concepts (for example, “Can people change?”) (Koltko-Rivera 2004, 5). The focus of a biblical worldview is upon understanding God and his relation to humans and the world. Worldview is a justifiable psychological construct that acts powerfully in shaping affect, cognition, or behavior (Koltko-Rivera 2004, 22–26). Support for this arguments lies in the evidence of cultural differences in cognition, ethno-cultural differences in values, the worldview research findings, and research findings pertaining to the effects of religious belief and experience on people’s functioning (Koltko-Rivera 2004, 23–24). Based on these arguments it can be assumed that an African worldview shapes the beliefs, cognition, behavior, affect, and experiences of Africans regarding miracles.
The literature indicates that the traditional African worldview is embedded in traditional spiritual beliefs and metaphysical thinking (Teffo and Roux 2003, 163–64). Metaphysical thinking in Africa is characterized by beliefs that give it a specific way of conceptualizing reality. Teffo and Roux hold that people who believe in witchcraft or a supreme being have exacting conceptions and interpretations of reality (163–70). These conceptions include views and ideas on issues such as causality, personality, responsibility, and the nature of matter, which play a role in how the people of Africa explain their reality and respond to their reality.

Ashforth (1996, 1183) described the spiritual insecurity of the Sowetans he witnessed while he lived in Soweto, for four years during the 1990s. He observed that the Sowetans were driven in their daily actions by their belief in unseen powers (1183–85). He further observed the uncertainty, ambiguity, mystery, ignorance, and secrecy that are part of that world. This experience forced him “to take seriously the commonplace dialogue between beings and forces seen and unseen” (1185).

Most of the Sowetans are nominal Christians, which leaves us with the impression that the traditional African worldview prevails amongst Christian and non-Christian Africans. It is clear that Africans grapple with existential realities through a mystical belief system emphasizing the existence of the spirit world and the interaction between the spirit world and the physical world. Phenomena such as religious ceremonies, ancestral veneration, witchcraft, magic, rites, and cultural ceremonies are part of the Africans’ attempt to understand and make meaning of existential realities.

Koltko-Rivera (2004, 27–36) proposed a comprehensive worldview model. This model comprises different groups of beliefs, namely, human nature, will, cognition, behavior, interpersonal, truth, and world and life (Koltko-Rivera 2004, 27–31). Each group includes two or more worldview dimensions. Each dimension deals with a particular topic of worldview beliefs, and in turn includes two or more options, that is, positions that a person may take on the topic that the dimension addresses.

The traditional African worldview will next be discussed according to the Koltko-Rivera model.

TRADITIONAL AFRICAN WORLDVIEW

The traditional African worldview includes two major aspects, namely, the interconnectedness of the phenomenal worlds and spiritualism. The interconnectedness of the phenomenal worlds implies an inseparable cosmic whole. This view holds that humans form an indivisible whole with the cosmos and therefore with God, other humans, and nature (Meyer, Moore, and Viljoen 2003, 532; Teffo and Roux 2003, 164). The spiritualism traditionally embraced by Africans includes the belief in impersonal (mystical) powers,
the belief in spirit beings, the belief in divinities/gods, and the belief in the Supreme Being (Turaki 2000, 1).

In applying the Koltko-Rivera model to the traditional African worldview it is found that the first six groups of the worldview beliefs apply largely to the aspect of the interconnectedness of the phenomenal worlds and the last group applies largely to spiritualism. The probable relation between the different belief dimensions and the perception and interpretation of the supernatural or miracles will be highlighted.

The Human Nature Group

This group includes beliefs about the fundamental functioning of human nature. The three dimensions that are part of this group are the moral orientation dimension, referring to whether humans are basically good or evil; the mutability dimension, referring to whether humans can be changed; and the complexity dimension, referring to beliefs about whether human nature is complicated and in what ways (Koltko-Rivera 2004, 28–29).

The African perspective on human nature holds that humans are an interdependent and inseparable part of the microcosmos. The microcosmos refers to the terrain of everyday life. A person’s everyday life forms an inseparable part of the existence of others. Personhood and identity are embedded in the collective existence of the person (Coetze 2003, 275–77; Meyer, Moore, and Viljoen 2003, 535–36; Van Niekerk and Prins 2001, 99). A human becomes a person through others. The person is not seen as basically good or evil but as capable of good or evil actions. The following quote from one of the participants from Project Crossroads illustrates the respondent’s view on human nature as sinful but also the interpretation of the experience of confession and forgiveness as a miracle. “I have witnessed people speaking out in tongues and then also I can say in terms of their sin, they voice out on their sins and they say what they did and go and admit all they have done so they can come clean and that is actually a miracle and then you will find people accepting their sins, which is a form of a miracle” (black Christian, charismatic church, 25–34 years old).

The microcosmos is furthermore totally influenced by the meso-cosmos, the world of forces, spirits, ancestors, and sorcerers, and the macro-cosmos, the sphere where God is encountered (Meyer, Moore, and Viljoen 2003, 535–36). Social and moral considerations are guided by metaphysical thinking. The role of ancestors, for example, is to exercise moral leadership and guarantee moral consistency (Teffo and Roux 2003, 167). Moral and ethical questions and actions aim at restoring any expression of disharmony between different human beings and between the different cosmic levels (Turaki 2000, 1–6).

This holistic view implies that mankind is one with and stands face-to-face with the physical and spiritual dimensions of the world. All conflict,
sickness, death, and disasters are explained in relation to the meso-cosmic level of reality. The morally correct response to any situation is seen as spiritual. Therefore, Africans view the relationship between the human person and his or her world not as a simplistic but as a complex relationship. They moreover believe that meaning and ultimate reality should be found in this complex relationship (Teffo and Roux 2003, 167–68). The following three quotes harvested by Project Crossroads illustrate the awareness of the complex relationship between the microcosmic and meso-cosmic levels.

• “Ancestor worship will help them, I think God does not want us to talk to the ancestors like they are God and that is what God does not want.” (black Christian, traditional church, 25–34 years old)
• “Whether you go there (the graves of the ancestors) to pray or go there to talk it is different.” (black Christian, traditional church, 25–34 years old)
• “Like when you have a child then you will go to the grave and show the child to your ancestors, and we will continue to do that even while we are Christians.” (black Christian, traditional church, 25–34 years old)

The Will Group

This group of beliefs reflects beliefs about motivation for behavior, destiny, purpose and meaning in life. The question of free will and choice of behavior versus determinism is addressed by the beliefs in this group, as are the rational and irrational origins of behavior. The traditional African worldview holds a deterministic view regarding human behavior. External agents emanating from the meso-cosmos in the form of ancestral spirits, forces, malignant spirits, sorcerers, and witches determine human behavior (Meyer, Moore and Viljoen 2003, 533–35). The law of the spirit that is upheld implies that mystical and spirit powers and forces cause events and affect people’s lives. Behavior is also determined by moral laws pertaining to interpersonal relationships. Religious practices, ceremonies, and rituals are performed to abide by these moral laws. African charismatic Christians express the view that people have a free will and the ability to choose how they want to behave. This view differs from the traditional view discussed above. The following view expresses a synthesis between the charismatic Christian beliefs and the traditional African beliefs. “I think Christianity is a matter of choosing. You choose what is right and wrong” (black Christian, charismatic church, 25–44 years old).

The Cognition Group

The beliefs included in this group pertain to knowledge and consciousness. Beliefs in this group express views on how knowledge is gained and
whether the highest state of human consciousness occurs within the context of the ego or transcends the ego. The transcendence of ego cognition is described as peak or mystical experiences (Koltko-Rivera 2004, 32).

Africans rely on intuitive and emotional knowledge. According to Meyer, Moore, and Viljoen (2003, 538–539), African rationality relates to Pascal’s view on “logic of the heart.” This view states that the heart is the personal, spiritual center of man from which man forms relationships with other people. It further states that man also grasps reality in its wholeness from this personal inner center. Heart in this sense refers to the mind as an intuitively sensing aspect of the person. From the African perspective the application of an intuitive rationality is seen as a reliable way of gaining knowledge. The traditional African worldview holds the view of transcendent consciousness. When answers are needed to explain events or guide behavior, Africans will consult their religious experts to divine and provide satisfactory meanings to the events as well as advice. The following account of a personal miracle experienced by one of the participants of the research project illustrates the belief in transcendent consciousness and how it has directed and shaped the person’s actions and interpretation of the event.

I was pregnant and went to the hospital but it was too early and they sent me home. I was supposed to be getting back on Saturday, and something just happened and I felt like something was hitting me around my waist and couldn’t feel everything, and then I wanted to scream for someone to help me but all I could see was a black cloud and I could feel a weight on my chest and this old lady said to me she can see what is coming over me and I said it is heavy and she said it is death coming over me and I screamed I don’t want to die and then she said the only weapon was to pray and then I started to pray and then I could see a small light and then the more I prayed and the more light came through the more the cloud got smaller and at last I could breathe and I was wet, wet with sweat and I could not even stand up I was just tired and then I lost the baby but luckily I survived because I was pregnant at the time, it adds up like a dream but it was very real to me. (black Christian, traditional church, 35–49 years old)

The physical symptoms of the threatening miscarriage were interpreted as a spirit of death coming to take the woman’s life, and the action taken to find a solution for this threat was spiritual: prayer. The person made an appeal to a higher force to save her. According to Teffo and Roux (2003, 168), it is a possible misconception that life in traditional African culture is totally based in metaphysical thinking. Much of the African day-to-day life is based on empirically verifiable facts, independent of spiritual influences. African metaphysics also has a strong empirical basis, which indicates the implementation of a rational logical process in gaining knowledge.
The Behavior Group

The beliefs in this group pertain to the focus of or the guidelines for behavior. Different dimensions are included, as follows.

- Time orientation refers to the temporal focus of behavior. The focus may be on the past (tradition and stability are valued), the present, or the future (rewards and planning are emphasized; Koltko-Rivera 2004, 32).

Traditionally Africans emphasized the past and the present but not the future. As the actual experience of an event gives meaning to it, the focus is on the past. The past represents a long history of events already experienced by the person and previous generations and is therefore meaningful. The present has meaning because it is experienced now (Meyer, Moore, and Viljoen 2003, 538–39). The future has not been experienced and has no meaning.

- Activity direction refers to directional focus of behavior. Either an inward focus (such as emotion, personality traits, mental processes, or spiritually) or an outward focus (on external qualities such as achievement and possession) is taken.

The findings of Project Crossroads indicated that some black Christian South Africans differ from the traditional view regarding the temporal focus of behavior (Kotze and De Kock 2007). Some of the black participants indicated a future, external focus based on the Soccer World Cup event to be hosted in South Africa. They seem to be driven toward strongly defined individual dreams (My own business). The white South Africans have a future internal focus marked by concerns and a tendency to fixate on escape strategies. The black and Afrikaans (whites of Dutch origins) speaking participants indicated a general sensitivity to tradition and history (Kotze and De Kock 2007).

- Activity satisfaction refers to whether the behavior aims at movement or stasis.
- Moral source refers to whether the moral source of behavior lies in a human source, for example, society, or a transcendent source, such as a divine being or force.

The source of morality is seen as both a transcendent source, such as spirit beings or forces, depending on their position in the hierarchy of spirits, and society. Society serves as a source of moral behavior in the sense that the ends of the community determine moral behavior. Self-understanding of the community, which is based in shared understandings of the community, acts as the framework for a moral identity (Coetzee 2003, 273–76).
• Moral standard reflects beliefs about the relativity of moral guidelines: Are they absolute or relative to time, culture, or situation?
• Moral relevance reflects beliefs about society’s moral guidelines in terms of the relevance it has for a particular person.

From an African perspective moral standards are part of the traditions and shared understanding of communal life of a specific group and are therefore relative to time, culture, and situation. Society’s moral guidelines determine personal choices of behavior because the end goals of the community take precedence over individual needs.

• Control location includes beliefs about the factors that determine the outcomes in one’s life. The options are action (one’s own actions upon the world determine the outcomes), luck (personal magic), chance (randomness), fate (personal destiny), society (bias, favoritism), and divinity.

The traditional African belief system emphasizes external sources such as divinity, spirit beings, magic, sorcery, and the jealousy of other people, as the determinants of the outcomes of one’s life.

• Control disposition describes the stance that the determinants of one’s outcomes take in relation to oneself. The options are either a positive, negative, or neutral position. The African worldview provides for both positive and negative control dispositions and the belief in supernatural forces that are effective in changing the world.
• Action efficacy refers to beliefs about the types of actions that effectively may change the world. These beliefs fall into three categories, namely, the belief that direct personal or group action creates change, the belief that a supernatural force, through magic, ritual, sacrament, or prayer, creates change, and the belief that there is no way to create change.

The Interpersonal Group

Beliefs about the proper or natural characteristics of interpersonal relationships are included in this group. The dimensions are otherness, relation to authority, relation to group, relation to humanity, relation to biosphere, sexuality, connection, interpersonal justness, sociopolitical justness, interaction, and correction. As previously mentioned, the African view on the interpersonal dimension is collectivistic, that is, the self would not exist without the community. The emphasis is on the role of the community and on interdependence rather than independence (Teffo and Roux 2003, 170–71).

The Truth Group

The beliefs in this group describe the stance that people take toward the “truth.” This stance is represented in an overarching body of doctrine such as
social or cultural myth, a philosophical approach, a specific religious teaching, or a political dogma. The dimensions of this group are scope (the degree to which the truth is valid across different situations), possession (the degree to which one’s reference group is in possession of an accurate account of truth about the universe), and availability (the degree to which the truth belongs exclusively to the reference group or whether other groups also have the truth).

The stance to truth taken in the traditional African worldview is represented in the concept of *ubuntu* (Ramose 2003, 230–31). *Ubuntu*, meaning a person exists through the existence of those around him, refers to three levels of human existence, that is, those that are alive, the living-dead (ancestors) and the future generations (Ramose 2003, 235–36). From this perspective truth is based in a social and cultural context.

Truth is furthermore seen as the convergence of perception and action (Ramose 2003, 235–36). Instead of being made or live by truth human beings are making and living truth. Human beings perceive truth and at the same time partake in making truth. This stance to truth is decidedly relativistic rather absolute (Ramose 2003, 235–36).

**The World and Life Group**

The beliefs in this group concerns life, the world, natural reality, and the universe, and include dimensions such as ontology, cosmos, unity, deity, nature-consciousness, humanity-nature, world-justice, well-being, explanation, worth of life, and purpose of life. In relation to this group of dimensions the African worldview is characterized by spiritualism (the spiritual dimension to reality is ontologically real), theism (God[s] exist as personal being[s]), nature-consciousness (a force is part of all objects), harmony (people are part of nature and should work with it), transcendent source for well-being, contextualism (explanation for the different causes for events is related to the context), worth of life (optimism, i.e., social progress is possible), and purpose in life.

**Spiritualism**

Traditional African concepts of reality and destiny are entrenched in their view of the spirit world, which is viewed as ontologically real. The actions of the spirit beings preside over social and spiritual phenomena. Even mundane changes of social power are matched in the spirit world (Ashforth 1996, 1190–94; Turaki 2000, 1–6). Reality is seen as a closed system, which means that everything is interrelated and affected by any change in the system. The system consists of different vital forces that exist between the different subsystems of reality and that are hierarchically placed. A vital force exists between God, the creator and source of all vital forces and at the top of the hierarchy, and human beings. Vital forces also exist between humans and animals as well as between humans and the material world. God is
seen as the creator and source of all vital forces (Deacon 2003, 105–6; Teffo and Roux 2003, 168). In terms of the hierarchy, the ancestors are next in line, followed by humankind, then the lower forces: animals, plants, and matter. When one part of the system gains in force, another has to lose in force. If a person is ill, for example, it means that the person loses vital force, which implies that somebody or something is taking it away. Disasters and death are thus explained ontologically.

Theism

According to the African worldview, two broad categories of spirits exist: the nonhuman spirits and the spirits of the dead elders (ancestors). Nonhuman spirits are placed in a hierarchical order depending upon their type, power and function in the spirit world (Turaki 2000, 2). As previously discussed, God as the Creator is first in the hierarchy, followed by the deities, object-embodied spirits, ancestral spirits, and various other spirits. These spirits comprise both good and evil spirits. The spirits of the ancestors are close to the humans and function as protectors and mediators between humans and God. The following quote from one of the respondents of Project Crossroads illustrates this belief. “My ancestors are my angels. Sometimes when I want to talk to God I talk through them” (black Christian, traditional church, 35–49 years old).

Belief in Many Divinities

In some parts of Africa a variety of divinities is worshipped, while in other parts, such as, southern Africa, it is not the case. Some African scholars debate polytheism and prefer to speak about divinities and deities rather than gods. According to this view, the divinities or deities are seen as intermediaries between the Supreme Being and human beings, and they are venerated rather than worshipped. Sacrifices, offerings, and prayers are not offered to the divinities and ancestors as a goal in themselves, but through them to God (Taruki 2000, 3). African divinities take different forms from nature, such as mountains, rivers, forests, the earth, the sun, the moon, stars, and people such as ancestors.

Belief in a Supreme Being (God)

Although Africans have a concept of a universal God and the Creator, most Africans view God as part of the world and not outside of this world (Teffo and Roux 2003, 165–66). The implication of this is that in general the traditional African has an awareness of and belief in God as the Supreme Being, but the Supreme Being is not exclusively worshipped (Turaki 2000, 4). In some Africa regions, the Supreme Being may be mentioned in prayers
and songs in some religious ceremonies. The Supreme Being is believed to be higher than the lesser divinities in the hierarchy of beings, but is not seen as personally involved with the human world. Consequently humans turn to the nonhuman spirits and the ancestors for help. God is only periodically acknowledged by the traditional African.

According to the findings of Project Crossroads (Kotze and De Kock 2007) the beliefs of the black Christians differ in some aspects from the traditional African beliefs as discussed above. The following spiritual beliefs are expressed by African Christians from the traditional and charismatic churches:

- A belief in the existence of God as the Creator, Jesus Christ as the Savior, and the Holy Spirit. “There is a God out there who made us and created us and he is the reason we eat and sleep and wake up; and in the world around us you see people living around us just doing their own thing but when you are a Christian then you know which way that God is directing you” (black Christian, charismatic church, 25–34 years old).
- A belief in the existence of Angels, Satan, and demons.
- A belief in heaven and hell. “If you read the Bible, there is heaven and hell and I think that is what there is and you will need to go where you belong and if you live your life according to the ways that Jesus wants you then you will go to heaven and if you don’t then hell will wait for you” (black Christian, charismatic church, 25–34 years old).
- A belief in ancestors.

Most black people in South Africa, it is thought, grow up with belief in ancestor worship. However there is a divide between the black Christians from the traditional churches and those from the charismatic churches. The participants from the black traditional Christian churches in general believe that the ancestors play an important role in their lives and that they should be worshipped. The Zion Christian Church (or ZCC) is the largest African initiated church in South Africa, with more than four million members. They were intentionally excluded from Project Crossroads because of the prominence that ancestral worship takes in the ZCC churches. The researchers were thus surprised by their findings regarding the participants from the traditional Christian churches and their views on ancestor worship (Kotze and De Kock 2007). Although ancestral worship is not endorsed and encouraged by the black traditional Christian churches, as it is in the case of the ZCC, it is still part and parcel of their worldview.

Some testimony in this regard harvested by Project Crossroads included the following:

- “Some people pray for help from the grandmother and ask for help for rent and a job and everything” (black Christian, traditional church, 35–49 years old).
• “When Jesus died, after three days something happened, the whole world shook and the graves opened, the holy spirits then started and that is how I read my Bible. That is where the holy spirits started and those were people that were dead and they grew alive and Jesus told them to go and show themselves to the people and they did but no one saw them” (black Christian, traditional church, 35–49 years old).

• “I don’t know if white people worship [ancestors] but I know they go to the graveyard and go and talk to their parents and things like that so it means they do worship” (black Christian, traditional church, 35–49 years old).

• “The Bible came after our culture so I think there is still a blend, because we cannot just throw our culture away” (black Christian, traditional church, 25–34 years old).

• “There needs to be new churches where people understand God and their ancestors” (black Christian, traditional church, 25–34 years old).

The black Christians from the charismatic churches hold different views regarding the ancestors and express strong beliefs against ancestor worship. They also share stories of how they have endured disapproval from their family members, usually as close as mothers and sisters, because of their views. “You see, it all depends on how the person [ancestor] was living here on earth, you see. And how can a sinner, someone who was not living right for God, who was not born again, how can this person, that the Bible will even call a witch or a wizard, how can this person, someone who is destroying other people, how can that person carry a message to God?” (black Christian, charismatic church, 18–24 years old).

**Nature-Consciousness**

Nature-consciousness and the belief in mystical powers furthermore dominates traditional African religious thought. According to this belief the whole of creation, nature, and all objects are filled with a mystical power that has been given various names such as mana, life force, chi, and life essence (Turaki 2000, 1). Traditional Africans normally attribute the source of the force to the activities of higher mysterious powers or the Supreme Being. Objects are viewed as endowed with this power. Some objects have inherently more power than other objects. Traditional healers, diviners, and seers use natural objects, such as plants and animals, filled with this mysterious power, for medicine, magic, charms, and amulets. Some people believe that the power can be extracted from these objects and transmitted to a person or another object for good or evil purposes (Turaki 2000, 1–7). The traditional African believes he or she is left at the mercy of the benevolent or wicked users of these powers and may get involved in religious practices influenced by these powers (Ashforth 1996, 1184).
Summary of the African Worldview

Based on our discussion of the traditional African worldview it emerges that this worldview is embedded in the belief that the world is essentially spiritual and that the physical and the spiritual worlds are totally integrated. Western based concepts like normal and paranormal are not quite relevant in this context. Even normal daily events are interpreted as being determined by spiritual beings, ancestors and impersonal forces. Human beings are at the mercy of the spirit beings and need power outside of themselves to control their environment. The performance of rites and ceremonies to appease the spirit beings is of extreme importance and part of everyday life.

These beliefs might set the stage for Africans to believe in and expect miracles (extraordinary events caused by a deity or spiritual force). The synthesis between the traditional African worldview and the Christian worldview expressed by the participants of Project Crossroads supports this notion.

TRADITIONAL AFRICAN WORLDVIEW AND MIRACLES

The following discussion serves to elucidate the probable relation between the African worldview and the perception and interpretation of miracles. The question arises whether the Africans' perspective on miracles is fostered by their traditional belief system. Does the hope and expectation for miracles influence their experiences and interpretation of miracles? Do social factors like poverty, internal wars, high illiteracy rates, and the high prevalence of terminal diseases play a role in their perspective on miracles? Poverty in Africa is extreme and widespread, sanitation is poor, the prevalence of terminal diseases is high, and medical and educational systems are poor. Within this context the innate hope for miracles to transform social distresses and to cure diseases is exceptionally high. Akosah-Sarpong (2004, 1) is of the opinion that it borders on the fanatical. In West Africa people attend spiritualist churches daily with the hope of visions and miracles (Akosah-Sarpong 2004, 1). Aside from spiritualist churches they also seek help from other spiritual sources such as juju and marabou mediums and witch doctors. More traditional and uneducated societies express a more profound hope in miracles through their belief systems and religious actions than modernized countries (Akosah-Sarpong, 2004, 1).

It seems that the Africans' belief in miracles is embedded in their mystical worldview and driven by the sociopolitical challenges they are faced with. According to various authors (Akosah-Sarpong 2004, 1; Ashforth 1996 1183–84), a constant interaction between Africans and the spiritual world takes place through rites, ceremonies, sacrifices, and consultations with people viewed as spiritual experts, such as witches, sangomas, diviners, traditional
healers, and mediums. The purpose of this interaction is to make meaning of their reality and to get guidance for their behavior.

In terms of the discussion so far, it seems clear that Africans would explain their own existence and experience of reality, poverty, illness, war, natural disasters, violence, disappointments, failures, successes, social changes, prosperity, and achievements in terms of their interconnectedness with other people and the activities of the different spirits, according to their positions in the hierarchy of spirits. This implies that miracles would be defined and interpreted in accordance with this view.

How Do Black Christian South Africans View and Interpret Miracles?

The concept of miracles within a Christian African worldview was explored within the South African context and by means of an exploratory qualitative research project (as explained in the introduction). The focus groups used for the collection of the data included individuals from both charismatic (nondenominational charismatic churches and Baptist churches) and traditional Christian churches (Anglican, Methodist, Presbyterian, Catholic, Reformed, and Dutch Reformed) who had firsthand or secondhand experience of miracles. The groups were of mixed gender representing different race and language groups in South Africa.

Black Charismatic Christian Churches

The participants from the black charismatic Churches defined a miracle as something that is above human power, as a spiritual intervention, and they were unanimous in the belief that miracles happen. Most of them relayed personal experiences.

The following example indicates the belief in a spiritual intervention as an explanation for a phenomenon related to a serious illness. “I think for me it was a friend of mine whose husband tested HIV positive and then she tested negative the whole time and for me that is like something that you can’t explain and they wanted to test the immune system and they have a child and it is the husband’s child so at the end of the day it is not the doctor’s and, WOW, even the doctors cannot explain it” (black Christian, charismatic church, 25–34 years old).

The belief that any spiritual source, even an evil source, can bring about a change in the physical world is illustrated by the next quote. “I knew this lady who was sick and when she was there the devil spoke to her and said he will heal her and then he said when he has healed her there are a few things that she must do for him” (black Christian, charismatic church, 18–24 years old).

The belief that an intervention from an evil power source will turn negative
versus an intervention from God is also expressed. God-given miracles will be confirmed by an increase in faith.

According to the traditional African belief in a spiritual hierarchy, God is seen as the Supreme Being and the source of all vital forces but not directly involved with people. Miracles, in this case are seen as the work of God, not of human beings, and are thus not related to a particular country and do not depend on the pastor. This view deviates from the traditional African belief regarding God as an impersonal force. “There was a faithful lady at church and she could not walk properly, she had a problem with her feet and then I saw with my own eyes that God had perform a miracle for her” (black Christian, charismatic church, 18–24 years old). Other accounts of miracles include the experience of speaking in tongues, forgiveness of sins, supernatural protection against hijackers, healings of illnesses like HIV/AIDS and breast cancer, and a healing of a serious injury. These accounts imply that harmony is restored between the person and the various cosmic levels.

Black Traditional Christian Churches

The participants from the black traditional Christian churches view every supernatural phenomenon as a miracle. They believe that their ancestors are a channel between them and God, interceding and asking God for miracles for them, even if it is winning the national lottery. This view relates to the traditional African worldview that God, as the Supreme Being, is not intimately involved with man’s world. Spirit beings positioned lower in the spiritual hierarchy are consulted to intervene and provide solutions to life’s problems. Ancestors are the custodians of human beings and are often sought out to meet the needs of men. God is only occasionally remembered. Any existential reality challenge may be brought to the ancestors or other spirit beings for a solution.

• “I remember there was this lady from Potchefstroom who spoke to her mother’s grave and said she was broke and she couldn’t find a job and then two weeks later she won the lotto, and then she said her mother answered her prayers so it depends, and maybe she went to the grave at the right time.”
• “I was traveling with the public transport [taxi] and I was right by the door and no one could open the door and then I saw that my grandmother opened the door and that was a miracle for me.”

This view on miracles differs from the previous views mainly in the fact that it does not distinguish between miracles from God and demonic or other spiritual encounters. The Christians from the traditional churches hold many of the traditional African worldview beliefs about the world, life, and nature. For this group, demonic apparitions are as natural as the manifestation of
their ancestors. All of these are mentioned in the same breath. Their experience with the paranormal is far more intense or conscious than that of the other participants. They ascribe all supernatural phenomena to God’s power, as God is seen as the source of all vital forces. They also rely on intuitive and emotional knowledge as a reliable source of knowledge.

Other accounts include near-death experiences. “When I passed out I saw the most beautiful flowers and then I saw a river and the river was flowing and it was sparkly and I saw people that had passed away before at a table; and the woman said to me it is not my time to be at the table. She told me to go back to my children and then I woke up” (black Christian, traditional church, 35–49 years old).

White English Charismatic Churches

White South Africans generally have a worldview that differs from the traditional African worldview and that relates more to a traditional Western worldview. The following views and accounts of miracles illustrate the different approaches.

The participants from the white English charismatic Churches distinguished between miracles and God’s blessings. They defined miracles as life-changing things and view smaller happenings that are good as God blessing a person. They expressed a firm belief in miracles, and according to them, miracles come true because of people’s faith and because it is part of God’s plan for humankind. Their accounts of miracles included mainly healing experiences and events in which they experienced supernatural protection.

- “When my child was born, my little monster, they did fertility tests and gave me medication and then when I got to the second trimester it was awesome, and then my son was born with a heart problem and a spastic colon and he was in ICU for 32 days and I prayed every day and he had an allergic reaction to his heart medication and the doctor said he will never make it, my son is a miracle and he is my miracle” (white English Christian, charismatic church, 25–34 years old).
- “My mom was driving on the highway and she has night blindness. Then there was a truck, and the lights of the truck, and she felt the car go under the truck and then she felt this sensation of being lifted and held and nothing happened to her” (white English Christian, charismatic church, 25–34 years old).
- “Those people that survived the Tsunami, that is a miracle” (white English Christian, charismatic church, 25–34 years old).

This group assigned God’s intervention to the same type of experiences as the previous two groups but were more conservative in their terminology and their definition of a miracle. Not every good thing that happens to them is interpreted as a miracle, but only those that are huge and life-changing.
White English Traditional Churches

The participants from the English traditional churches were more skeptical toward, and less eager to call interesting events, miracles. One participant expressed the view that he doesn’t believe in miracles. Miracles were defined as something impossible that happens that cannot be explained by human logic. Participants are, however, aware of large and inexplicable miracles, such as cancer disappearing or legs growing. Most participants in this group view the media and the hype regarding miracles negatively; and they also state that there is too little scientific and medical authentication of claimed miracles. They have very indistinct knowledge of and little interest in miracles coming from suspect sources (Kotze and De Kock 2007). Some of the participants in this group view sightings of Christ and angels as suspect and media exploitation while others hold different views. Catholic stigmata made a huge impression on the Catholic and Anglican participants and made them aware of the supernatural.

Some expressed the view that there are special purposes for people who experience miracles. “A friend of mine, when he was very much younger, was into drugs, and then one day he stole his dad’s car and punched his dad out and he crashed into a car and the minister gave him a choice to go to jail, which would be his second time, or to go to church the next day with him and stay there. He didn’t know what to do, and then he went to church, also stoned, and then his whole life was turned around with that minister and in that congregation” (white English, traditional church, 35–49 years old).

In this group an account of a near-death experience was also shared. “I know of someone who died and saw Christ and came back and I believe him, he can look at you and tell you stuff about yourself that no one else knows” (white English, traditional church, 35–49 years old).

White Afrikaans Traditional Churches

The participants in this group expressed a belief in miracles and acknowledged that Satan can instigate supernatural happenings to mislead people. They further believe that miracles must lead one closer to God to know whether the miracles are from God. All the participants expressed knowledge of miracles. Miracles were defined as anything supernatural, and the events viewed as miraculous ranged from smaller good events, such as getting some extra money or a parking space, to more serious happenings, such as cancers disappearing. “What made me believe is that a friend of mine had a photo in her Bible and the clouds make the shape, and it is unbelievable it is a road and the clouds form this most beautiful form of Jesus” (white Afrikaans, traditional church, 18–24 years old).
The participants in this group believe demons are real, as are angels, but had no personal experiences to share. Although a strong belief in guardian angels was expressed, nobody had seen an angel. Sightings of angels depend on the situation, such as protection against a car accident. “There are times you swing out and just miss a head-on collision where you could have been dead and I believe that an angel then protected you” (white Afrikaans, traditional church, 18–24 years old). The participants expressed the view that people who experience miracles are not different from other people and that miracles happen entirely because of the divine will of God. Although they believe that miracles are still happening today, they do not believe it is to the same extent as in biblical times.

Other accounts pertain to medical situations, such as a person becoming pregnant, legs growing, and recovery after a car accident.

- “My friend’s brother was in a horrific car accident and he was in a lot of pain and he had surgery and then they saw that there was a tear on his pancreas. They saw on the scan that it was torn and they would try to operate, but it was only a 50 percent chance, and then there could still be more complications. He was already a diabetic so the risks were more and then they opened him up and then it was only a bruise and I think that is a miracle. They said they will see how it goes but gave him no guarantees so I think that is a miracle” (white Afrikaans, traditional church, 18–24 years old).
- “Look, sometimes I think God can choose people on earth to give messages to others I think” (white Afrikaans, traditional church, 18–24 years old).

This group emphasized that the purpose for miracles is to deepen one’s relationship with God. The Christian worldview shared by all participants included existential and evaluative beliefs and values.

**DISCUSSION**

The different views of the groups regarding the miracles will now be discussed in order to clarify findings and their implications. The findings will be classified according to definition and acceptance of miracles, source and purpose of miracles as well as the contrasting comparison between the black and white South Africans. The implications of the limitations of the study will also be discussed.

- The definitions of what constitutes a miracle include the notion of a spiritual or supernatural intervention but the groups differ with respect to the range of events described as miracles.
- The participants of the black charismatic and traditional churches described a wide range of events as miracles including normal good events.
like finding a job and phenomena like speaking in tongues and forgiveness of sins in their definitions.

• The contrasting comparison to the white participants from the Afrikaans traditional churches indicate a similar view to miracles including smaller daily events like finding a parking space as well as more serious events such as healings.

• In contrast to these views the participants from the English charismatic churches limit miracles to life-changing events and distinguish these from daily positive events that are referred to as blessings.

• In contrast to the consistent belief in miracles from the black participants the participants from the white English traditional churches limited their definition of miracles to happenings of the impossible and a more skeptical view as well as a disbelief in miracles was expressed.

• Regarding the source and purpose of miracles the participants from the black charismatic churches expressed the belief that any spiritual source, even an evil source, can be responsible for a miracle although such a miracle will have a negative result. The purpose of a miracle is to increase faith.

• The participants from the black traditional churches relate miracles to the intervention of their ancestors and thus ancestors are seen as the source of the miracles. This view concurs with the traditional African worldview stating that ancestors act as protectors and mediators between humans and God or the Supreme Being.

• The contrasting comparison with the white South African Christians indicates that the participants from the Afrikaans traditional churches endorse a similar view as the black Christians from the charismatic churches. They believe that both God and Satan can be the source of miracles and that the purpose of God-given miracles is to lead the person closer to God.

• Despite the fact that the sample for the research was drawn from one African country, South Africa, the findings may hold for other sub-Saharan countries which is defined as “African” by Meyer, Moore and Viljoen (2003, 533–31) as both the overarching traditional African worldview and the Christian worldview prevail in the largest part of this region of Africa (Johnstone and Mandryk 2001, 19).

In summary:

• All the black Christians indicate a strong belief in miracles where miracles are defined as positive experiences perceived as extraordinary and attributed to a supernatural or divine intervention. They also believe in miracles as defined as something good that happens regardless of its likelihood. As a group they have attributed miracles to supernatural interventions whether it was from God or another spirit. The belief in the role of the ancestors was expressed indicating a clear synthesis between the traditional African worldview and the Christian worldview.
• In contrast to the views expressed by the black Christians as a group the white Christian group as a whole didn’t endorse the belief in miracles either as positive experiences perceived as extraordinary and attributed to a supernatural intervention or as something good that happens regardless of its likelihood. Although the Christian worldview allows for the belief in miracles as divine interventions, skepticism and unbelief was expressed by the English Christians from the traditional churches.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter the traditional African worldview and its affect on the perception and interpretation of miracles by Africans have been explored. This investigation is supported by an exploratory qualitative study done in South Africa including black and white Christians. The results of this study indicated that the traditional African worldview, seen as a mystical worldview, serves a paradigm for Africans in their perception and experience of miracles. This worldview sets the stage for Africans to believe in and expect miracles to happen. The differences between the black and white Christian groups support this notion.

Although miracles are also acknowledged and experienced by white Christian South Africans, skepticism is more prevalent in this group than in the black group. No references to ancestors or other deities were made. Miracles are seen as purposeful interventions from God to bring a message to people, producing spiritual growth. The different perspectives on miracles expressed by the black South African Christians and the white South African Christians do indicate that one’s worldview directs the perception and interpretation of miracles.

REFERENCES


They are as much a part of the American culture as Harley-Davidson motorcycles, baseball, and Barbie dolls. They have given rise to movies such as *Leap of Faith*, starring Steve Martin, and pop songs such as Neil Diamond’s *Brother Love’s Traveling Salvation Show*. Robin Williams (*Mrs. Doubtfire*), Sacha Baron Cohen (*Borat*), and other comedians have frequently used them as subjects of religious parodies (Haferd 1987). Bart Simpson even played the role of one in an episode of *The Simpsons*. Faith healers, as they are popularly called, though it is a label they generally despise, are a cadre of male and female Christian evangelists who have crisscrossed this country throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first century, preaching spiritual and physical deliverance from sin, sickness, and disease, on the condition that individuals have the necessary faith in God to heal them.

Historically, many well-known faith healers in the United States came from foreign countries. One of the earliest faith healers in America, for example, was Alexander Dowie, who arrived from Scotland via Australia in 1888 before settling in Chicago. Smith Wigglesworth, who preached in America in the 1920s and 1930s, was English. Aimee Semple McPherson, who was enormously popular before her death in 1944, was born in Canada. She eventually obtained U.S. citizenship when she married her second husband, Harold McPherson, in 1912 (Blumhofer 1993; Harrell 1975).

The end of World War II brought with it an explosion of American-born independent healing revivalists. For example, tent-toting Oral Roberts, who was born near Bebee, Oklahoma; Asa Alonzo Allen, who was born in Sulphur Rock, Arkansas; and Jack Coe Sr., who was born in Oklahoma City; took
center stage. William Branham, another post–World War II faith healer, who was born in Burkesville, Kentucky, before eventually establishing his headquarters just over the Ohio River in Jeffersonville, Indiana, was one of the most popular traveling evangelists of his day. Perhaps more of the world would have known him were it not for his premature death in 1965 as the result of a car wreck near Amarillo, Texas (Harrell 1975).

Ernest Angley, a prominent, contemporary faith healer, who was born in Mooresville, North Carolina, in 1922 and who began his illustrious career in the early 1950s, is currently headquartered in Akron, Ohio. Although born Palestinian in Tel Aviv, Israel, on December 3, 1952, Benny Hinn, one of the most well-known faith healers in the United States today, is headquartered in Grape Vine, Texas, near Dallas (Frame 1997). Gloria Copeland, wife of well-known televangelist Kenneth Copeland, is another prominent healing evangelist in her own right whose base of operation since 1967 has been Fort Worth, Texas. These are only a handful of the many faith healers who have preached, and who continue to preach, in the United States.

Throughout their careers, these men and women, and many others like them, have been enormously influential, amassing large followings and millions of dollars. Throughout each decade, thousands upon thousands have turned to them, seeking miracles of one type or another. Why? Perhaps an even more interesting question is, how? In other words, how have faith healers been able to sustain such large followings throughout their lifetimes? What was it about their preaching that endeared them to so many people, that caused multitudes to flock to them? These, I believe, are worthwhile questions, especially given the fact that faith healers have been so successful economically, socially, and religiously.

Using a sales metaphor, I will address three separate but related questions in an attempt to account for such a popular phenomenon: (1) Exactly what were these faith healers selling? (2) To whom were they selling? Or more to the point, who was buying? (3) How was it that they were selling it? Simply put, what rhetorical strategies did they consciously or unconsciously employ as a group of preachers to persuade individuals to accept their message? In examining this last question, I will attempt to demonstrate that there exists a body of faith healing discourse, a genre of faith healing rhetoric, crucial to this enterprise. While there may be subtle differences in each individual’s preaching and method of operation, in general one will find that they made similar types of promises, preached to comparable types of audiences, and relied primarily on the same types of proofs.

**APPROACH**

In attempting to answer the above questions, I analyzed books of printed sermons, magazine articles, and other primary literature produced by faith healers Branham, Roberts, Allen, Coe, Angley, Copeland, and Hinn. Additionally,
I examined countless hours of audio and videotapes of these men and women. Chronologically, these artifacts ranged from shortly after World War II to the present day. In a number of instances, I was personally able to attend the actual healing services themselves, most notably those of Ernest Angley, Gloria Copeland, and Benny Hinn.

In critiquing the discourse of faith healing, I proceeded inductively, looking at a number of specific instances before drawing conclusions. Foss (1996), for example, advises that when taking this approach, the critic should follow four steps: First, one determines if “similar situations, removed from each other in time and place, seem to generate similar rhetorical responses” (229). Second, one collects several samples of rhetoric that may be indicative of the genre. Preferably, these artifacts should come from various periods of history. Third, the critic seeks to discover shared “substantive or stylistic features” in the samples. In doing so, the critic need not follow any prescribed methodology. Instead, he or she merely allows the rhetorical artifacts to speak to the critic or “suggest . . . important similarities and differences” (230). Finally, the critic should “formulate the organizing principle that captures the essence of the strategies” that the rhetorical artifacts share. Foss notes that “labeling the organizing principle actually may occur simultaneously with the delineation of substantive and stylistic strategies since the elements identified may come to the critic’s attention grouped around an obvious core or principle” (231).

There are at least two important reasons for doing generic criticism: First, it “provides a history of communication rules” (Cali 1996, 12). As will become evident, I am not advocating that we emulate the communication rules and patterns of faith healers any more than I would advocate that we emulate the rhetoric of Adolf Hitler. Nonetheless, recording the rhetorical history of faith healers in and of itself is a worthwhile goal. Second, and perhaps more importantly, generic criticism “serves as an index to social and cultural reality” (Cali 1996, 12). That is, it helps us to understand how groups and subgroups view the world around them. As in the case of faith healers, sometimes this reality is intriguing. At other times it can be frightening, with an entire set of consequences often overlooked by both the faith healers themselves and an unsuspecting public. In saying this, I am not suggesting that faith healers are inherently evil people. To the contrary, most of the faith healers in this study were fine, upstanding individuals who were and are very sincere about doing good. Ostensibly, they truly believed in what they practiced. In spite of their sincerity, however, their realities lacked much to be desired, as I will demonstrate later. Let us turn now to an examination of their discourse.

WHAT ARE FAITH HEALERS SELLING?

A close look at what faith healers have taught throughout the years reveals the preaching of two types of deliverance, assuming one had the necessary faith in God: (1) deliverance from sin and (2) deliverance from
bodily afflictions, diseases, and addictions. The fact that faith healers preach deliverance from sin raises no eyebrows. Within Christianity, the idea that humans are in sin, that Jesus died on the cross to reconcile them to God, and that all they need to do is accept him in order to avoid eternal punishment and enjoy the bliss of heaven, is really no different from what is taught in most Protestant, conservative, Evangelical churches. While there may be differences in how the sin was obtained or what an individual must do to be forgiven, generally what faith healers teach regarding deliverance from sin would be accepted by many religious people in the broader culture of American Christendom, Catholic and Protestant. Indeed, this common teaching may account for part of faith healers’ appeal.

In addition to preaching deliverance from sin, faith healers teach that one can receive bodily healings as a result of the atonement of Jesus on the cross. Or, to use the words of Ernest Angley (1988), “Come right on. Whatever it is, God will heal.” Post–World War II faith healer A. A. Allen (“Allen Exhorting” n.d.) stated this idea as well as any: “At Calvary something happened that will be beneficial not only for your soul but also for your body. . . . Jesus not only died for the sins of the world but before he ever died . . . they placed the stripes on his back and the scripture says, ‘whereby ye were healed.’” The scriptural allusion is to Isaiah 53:5, and faith healers interpret this passage to mean that one can be healed physically as well as spiritually because of Jesus’ death on the cross.

Faith healers believe that many—not all, but many—physical afflictions and addictions to bad habits such as cigarette smoking and drug addiction are caused by demons possessing people. Perhaps Oral Roberts (1954a) illustrated this best when he suggested that “deaf and dumb demons do take the hearing and speech of some people.” Roberts contended that there are numerous types of demons, such as epileptic demons, lying demons, and sex demons. Jack Coe once quipped, “I think if there’s anything that’s of the devil, it’s a cancer” (1989b).

Roberts (1954a) often told stories about casting demons out of people. Whenever this occurred, one would likely hear him yell something like, “Thou foul tormenting demons, I adjure thee in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, come out of this woman! Loose her and let her go free!” (113). When laying his hands upon those in his healing lines, A. A. Allen would often yell, “Thou devil of deafness I rebuke you” (“It Is Finished” n.d.). On one occasion, I witnessed Benny Hinn (personal observation, Nashville, October 23–24, 1997) attempt to convince a woman, and over twenty thousand people in attendance, that he cast out a cancer demon from the bottom of her foot and that it wiggled off the stage. I have also watched Ernest Angley (personal observation, Akron, OH, February 19, 1988) lay hands on individuals in his prayer lines and scream in their faces, “Loose her, thou foul, tormenting spirit! Yeaaaaaha, come out!”
Before going any further, we need to address a question that occasionally arises. What is wrong with faith healers praying for the sick? After all, is this not taught in almost all Christian churches today? It is true that just as faith healers believe that one could be healed through prayer, so do many churches throughout America. The difference, however, in what faith healers teach and practice and what many other Protestants believe—and this is a big difference—is that faith healers believe God will heal miraculously exactly as miraculous healings were recorded in the Bible. What is being sold is not so much prayer for the sick but belief that the one prayed for will be healed wholly and instantaneously, that is, miraculously, of whatever ails him or her. Unlike other Christian groups, faith healers fail to make a distinction between the providential, wherein it is believed that God acts behind the scenes to heal through the laws of nature, and the miraculous.

One is left to conclude that faith healers really do not understand what a miracle is in the first place. Both the eighteenth-century Scottish philosopher David Hume and the twentieth-century theologian C. S. Lewis (Swinburne 1970) agree on this point. Each suggests that a miracle is a violation of the laws of nature. To borrow Lewis’ words, miracles “interrupt the orderly march of events, the steady development of nature according to her own interest, genius, or character” (quoted in Swinburne 1970, 70). To illustrate this principle, Lewis (1947) suggests that if a virgin were to conceive without a man, the conception would be miraculous because it violates the laws of nature regarding procreation. Once the conception occurs, however, the birth itself would not be miraculous. Lewis argues, “If God creates a miraculous spermatozoon in the body of a virgin, it does not proceed to break any laws. The laws at once take it over. Nature is ready. Pregnancy follows, according to all the normal laws, and nine months later a child is born” (1947, 59).

In the New Testament, the source faith healers appeal to as proof that what is happening in their revivals is miraculous and, hence, God-ordained, one can read that dead people were made alive (Matthew 9:18–25; Luke 7:11–17; John 11:17–46). What is ironic about these examples is that these individuals had no faith whatsoever. How could they when they were dead? Also in the New Testament, one reads that withered hands were instantaneously made whole (Matthew 12:9–14). The deaf and dumb were made to hear and speak immediately (Mark 7:31–37). These are just a few of the more than 30 examples of miraculous cures one can find in the New Testament. All of these healings involved a violation of the laws of nature. What is more, these miracles were visually verifiable, while the so-called miracles performed throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have not been.

Faith healers in our day most often call out ailments such as backaches, diabetes, sinus problems, heart conditions, nerves, addictions, and other similar healings (personal observations, Angley, Akron, OH, February 19, 1988;
The problem is, one cannot see these types of cures. They simply are not empirically verifiable like those recorded in the scriptures. Moreover, because they are not empirically verifiable, they are nonfalsifiable, which is advantageous to faith healers. One must simply take the word of the individual with the affliction as to whether he or she was really healed. This is also problematic because often the individual thinks he or she is healed when in reality no healing has occurred at all. Certainly nothing miraculous occurred. Medical doctor William Nolen (1974) looked at dozens of cases of so-called miraculous healings that supposedly occurred during the ministry of Kathryn Kuhlman during the 1970s and concluded that he could not find a single case of the miraculous. While some individuals who claimed a cure gradually became better over time, only to relapse, others showed no improvement at all. In fact, some whom Nolan interviewed, who claimed to have been healed at a Kathryn Kuhlman crusade, died shortly after his interview with them.

Moreover, contemporary audiences of faith healers who witness miraculous healings really do not know to what extent the person who claims a healing is sick or ailing in the first place. Perhaps the person him or herself does not even know. Audiences simply have to take the word of the person onstage, if they want to know how sick or ailing a person is. While we cannot and should not accuse an individual of lying about his or her disease, one has to wonder to what extent an individual is dramatizing his or her physical problems. After all, there is a certain expectation for these people who are standing under the spotlight in front of thousands of onlookers, to perform in the heat of the moment so as not to disappoint both the faith healer and the audience. Of course, the more dramatic the story told, the louder the applause one will receive. Everyone goes away happy as if something miraculous had indeed occurred.

On rare occasions, audiences do not even know what the ailment is. The minister merely lays hands on the individual and he or she walks off the stage leaving the audience wondering what just happened (Branham, “Deep Calleth unto the Deep” n.d.). Nonetheless, audiences clap in approval because they know what is expected of them, regardless of what they have just witnessed.

As I have argued elsewhere (Pullum 1999), it matters little whether one believes the New Testament accounts of miraculous healings. The fact is faith healers themselves do. Further, they believe that these types of miracles are still occurring today, just as they were recorded in the Bible. However, by the standard that they set for themselves, namely, the Bible, they fail to show similar authentication as indicated in the biblical miracle narratives.

Jack Coe, who is typical of the faith healers in our study, illustrates the point well. A young man with “old deaf ears” came into his healing line with
a friend who served as an interpreter. Coe laid his hands on him and supposedly healed him of deafness. To demonstrate to the thousands in attendance, Coe whispered three words in the man’s ear, “baby,” “boy,” and “mama.” When asked to repeat these words, the young man could not. Instead, he often muddled “mama” when Coe wanted him to say “boy” or “baby.” Out of resignation, Coe turned to the young man’s interpreter and said, “Somebody’s gonna have to teach him” (1989a). I have witnessed similar incidents with Benny Hinn (personal observation, Nashville, TN, October 23–24, 1997) and Ernest Angley (personal observation, Akron, OH, February 19, 1988). Obviously, no healing took place, let alone anything miraculous; unless, of course, the deaf man had always been deaf and consequently had never been able to talk—a common condition in deaf mutes. Now the man was speaking, which would have been miraculous. If this truly were the case, why did Coe not emphasize the wonderful fact that this man was even talking? Instead, Coe disappointingly said that someone was going to have to teach him. Moreover, why didn’t Coe just obviate the need for a teacher altogether and miraculously cure the man of his inability to speak? If the man could be healed of deafness, why could he not also be cured of his inability to talk?

The main point to be understood throughout this discussion is that faith healers believe that a divine, miraculous healing could and would occur upon their praying for a person, just as they occur in the Bible, provided one had the prerequisite faith. For faith healers, prayer for the sick involved more than just a healing. It was intended to provide a miraculous cure, and here is the proverbial rub. This, in part, was what was being sold to the public, and many were buying.

TO WHOM ARE FAITH HEALERS SELLING?

If one were to ask the faith healers in our study “To whom are you preaching?” no doubt they would respond, “To anyone who is listening.” Ostensibly this may be true, but the reality is that faith healers are acutely aware of who their predominant audiences are. They know that not just anyone accepts their kind of message. Rather, it is the physically afflicted, or their relatives, who in many cases have exhausted all hopes of being cured by medical doctors, who have sought and seek them out. For these people they are in business. Most audiences are composed of Pentecostals or Neo-Pentecostals, those who already believe that the nine spiritual gifts mentioned in 1 Corinthians 12 are normal occurrences for Christians today.

William Branham (1957a) once relayed the story about “a fine [non-Pentecostal] brother” who had just finished preaching to about eighteen hundred “nice, well-dressed [non-Pentecostal] people, intelligent-looking people” before Branham took the stage of the same auditorium. Contrasting that audience to his own, Branham sullenly continued, “I thought, ‘My that’s
very nice.’ But here come [sic] my group in. Mine come [sic] in on crutches, wheelchairs, [and] straight jackets.”

Oral Roberts believed his audiences were “incurably ill” (1954c) who “in most cases have exhausted the resources of medical science and now their only hope is faith in God” (1954b). Frequently he made these types of statements. He also believed his partners were primarily “hard core Pentecostals” who had “fallen on hard times” economically. Roberts once described them as “the simple, uneducated, uninhibited, with few sidelines, to whom God means all and who worship with their hands, feet, and voices” (quoted Harrell 1985, 90, 110, 256).

A. A. Allen was also acutely aware of who his followers were. Among them were the “sick” and “suffering.” In stating the obvious, Allen once remarked how “hundreds of people are rolled under this tent on this ramp on stretchers in dying condition” (“Allen Exhorting” n.d.; “It Is Finished” n.d.). Regarding his followers’ educational level, Allen disclosed that his revival “isn’t breaking out among the intellectuals. The bible says much learning hath made thee mad. So we’re making no special effort to reach intellectuals” (quoted in Hedgepeth 1969, 29). Hedgepeth (1969) once described those in attendance at an Allen revival as “skeletal men in bib overalls, chubby matrons, scrawny teens, and septuagenarians.” Additionally, there were “blind ladies,” “lunatics,” and people with “faded eyes,” “varicose veins,” and “hook hands.” He further described these individuals as having “bottomless frustrations” and “unlabeled loneliness” (24, 28).

Jack Coe realized to whom he was primarily speaking when he once asked an audience, “How many believe he’s [Jesus] here to smite that old cancer, to heal that old tumor, to open them [sic] blinded eyes, to cause them [sic] old lame legs to leap for joy?” (1989c). Jack Coe Jr. reveals that “as a young man” he remembers “hundreds of people coming to my father’s tent revivals on stretchers and in wheelchairs” (1989d).

Even those in attendance at more contemporary healing revivals mirror those who flocked to the tents of post–World War II faith healers. These audiences included those with withered or malformed limbs, those hooked to oxygen tanks, and those dependent on crutches, stretchers, or wheelchairs. Further, while there appear to be at the revivals of Benny Hinn, Gloria Cope-land, and Ernest Angley a number of financially well-off people who dress in fine clothing and sport what appears to be expensive jewelry, the predominant picture is one of people in flannel shirts, tee shirts with various logos, sweat shirts, blue jeans, and causal footwear, such as tennis shoes and boots. In short, these individuals appear to be ordinary people. Moreover, judging by the number of people who close their eyes, look upward, stretch their hands toward heaven, and respond to the preaching with “Amen,” “Hallelujah,” “Thank you, Jesus,” “Praise the Lord” or some similar expression, these individuals are already highly religious and know the routine (personal
observations, Angley, Akron, OH, February 19, 1988; Copeland, Nashville, TN, October 17, 1992; Hinn, Nashville, TN, October 23–24, 1997). Clearly these people are “true believers” (Hoffer 1965) in the first place.

Todd Lewis (1988) points out that the situational crises in which audiences find themselves serve as perceptual filters. “If audience members believe that their immediate context is hopeless, stress-producing, or threatening, their scope of perception narrows until they locate a leader/communicator who can remedy their exigency” (97). Similarly, medical doctor William Nolen (1974) suggests that once doctors admit that they can no longer help people, these persons “go looking for salvation elsewhere” (7). Certainly the crises that audiences of faith healers find themselves in contributed to their eagerness to “buy” the wares that faith healers were “selling.”

HOW DO FAITH HEALERS SELL THEIR MESSAGE?

Having looked at what faith healers preach and who their primary audiences are, the next logical question is, how is it that they are able to persuade their followers to accept their message, despite evidence to the contrary or at least little confirming evidence? Simply put, what rhetorical strategies do they consciously or unconsciously employ in selling to their constituencies the idea of miraculous cures?

God Healed Me

In examining the discourse of faith healers, one of the first things that audiences hear them preach, as proof of miraculous cures, is that they themselves have been personally healed by God. Oral Roberts frequently reminded those in his healing lines that God healed him of both tuberculosis and stuttering (1955b). In fact, on one occasion Roberts told the once-popular talk show host Merv Griffin that “the greatest miracle I ever saw was my own personal miracle when God healed me of tuberculosis and loosed my stammering tongue” (1974, 7). Ernest Angley reminded audiences that God healed him of a bone disease in one of his legs “that almost destroyed me as a child.” After many nights of prayer, “King Jesus came and made me whole, made me well. I knew he could heal. I didn’t doubt his healing power” (1987). Although not specific about the nature of her illness, Gloria Copeland reminded her audience that God healed her and that, because of this, “nobody believes in healing more than I do” (personal observation, Nashville, TN, October 17, 1992). Jack Coe told of how he was so sick that he weighed only 134 pounds and the doctors had given up on him. They “folded their hands and shook their heads.” Then “Dr. Jesus came into my room” and healed him. Coe, a big man in the first place, humorously suggested that now he weighed “two hundred thirty-five pounds and none of your
business how much more” (“Practicing Medicine without a License” n.d.). A. A. Allen told of how God had healed his permanently damaged vocal cords. After a friend prayed for him and the demons left his body, “My ‘ruined’ vocal cords were as good as new” (Allen and Wagner 1970, 118). William Branham (1976) claimed to have been healed from “stomach trouble” (96). Benny Hinn tells of being healed of stuttering (1990) and being healed of a bleeding heart valve. Now, he assures his audiences, he’s so “anointed” by God that he “has even kept my teeth from cavities” (personal observation, Nashville, TN, October 23–24, 1997).

Todd Lewis (1988) refers to the above types of claims as “conquered physical imperfections.” He suggests that audiences are “drawn to . . . leaders whose defects have been surmounted and those who exist despite possible difficulties” (103). When faith healers tell such stories about personal healings, they embody the beliefs, values, and hopes of the group. Audiences reason that if God could heal the preacher, surely he can heal them. To borrow Bormann’s term (1972), the faith healer becomes the “ultimate legitimizer” of what is preached (401).

God Called Me

Faith healers are always quick to remind their audiences that they were called by God. What is more, these callings came through miraculous visions. William Branham (1949b, 1952, 1976), for instance, often told of how at the age of seven an angel warned him not to “drink or smoke or defile your body in any way, there’ll be a work for you to do when you get older” (1976, 60). Branham also frequently disclosed how on May 7, 1946, at the age of 37, he was visited by an angel and was commanded to “go to all the world and pray for the sick people.” Angel continued, “If you get the people to believe you, and be sincere when you pray, nothing shall stand before your prayers, not even cancer” (1976, 74; Lindsey 1950, 77).

Oral Roberts (1955b) often reminded his audiences of how, while he was lying flat on his back in his study in 1947, the Lord spoke to him: “Son from this hour you will heal the sick and cast out devils by my power.” Roberts (1955a) assured his audiences that since this visitation from God, he had “prayed for thousands upon thousands of these cases and in many instances the Lord has set them free and made them whole.” Like Branham and Roberts, A. A. Allen (Allen and Wagner 1970) told how God appeared to him while he locked himself in a closet to pray. “Then, like a whirlwind, I heard His voice. God’s voice. Speaking to me” (96).

Ernest Angley (1977) claimed that God called him one night at the age of seven, when he was lying on his bed. Like a scene from The Wizard of Oz, Angley describes how “the bed began to spin around and around until I was out in space under the stars” (129–130). Showing him millions of stars in the
heavens, the Lord told Angley that he would eventually lead unlimited souls to Christ. Angley also recalled how one night in 1945, the same night he was healed of a stomach ulcer, Christ appeared to him in a blinding light and told him “that He would give me his power of healing others and that I was to carry the ministry of healing to the multitudes” (de Groot 1966, G-4). Benny Hinn (1990) recalled that day in April 1974 when he was called to preach: “I saw someone standing in front of me. He was totally in flames, moving uncontrollably; his feet were not touching the ground. . . . At that moment, the Lord spoke to me in an audible voice. He said, ‘Preach the gospel’ ” (43).

The fact is, faith healers frequently report that God, or angels, appeared to them with a message. Most of them claimed to have had numerous supernatural encounters, and they were quick to remind their audiences of such. It is as if these experiences were their stamp of approval. God had validated, in other words, what they were teaching and practicing, and audiences loved it. Todd Lewis (1988) suggests that it is natural for audiences who are “driven by the frustrations and stress of their situational crises” to seek out “a leader with a ‘messianic destiny’ ” (103). Certainly, the faith healers in this study claimed to have had such a destiny.

Give God the Credit

Unlike what many people believe about faith healers, those in this study were really not arrogant individuals at all. Most appeared to be humble servants of God, which accounts in part for their relative popularity. Historically, faith healers never claimed to have the power to heal people. Instead, they always gave any credit or honor associated with what they were doing to God. Furthermore, they went to great lengths to make sure that their audiences understood this. Their followers loved them for their humility, giving them the respect and credibility appropriate to a humble person.

In attempting to explain what he was about, Jack Coe once stated, “I am not a healer. I never claimed to be a healer. I believe there’s only one healer and his name’s Jesus.” Coe went on to explain, “We do not claim to heal any of these people, but it’s the prayer of faith that I pray for them” (1989d). Making sure that the audience did not think more highly of Jack Coe than they ought to, he once quipped, “I didn’t come to you with a degree from any big college” (“Practicing Medicine without a License” n.d.). William Branham was incredibly humble. He taught, “I do not claim to do one thing myself. I have no power within myself to do anything” (1949a). He believed “there’s no great people and big people in the kingdom of God. We’re all one” (1954).

Time and time again, A. A. Allen reminded his followers, “I’m not a healer, but I’m a believer” (“Two Services under the Tent” n.d.). “I’m not a healer. I couldn’t heal anybody” (“This Gospel of the Kingdom” n.d.). “We are not a healer, but the healer is here” (“Skepticism” n.d.). On one occasion, Allen
humorously remarked, “I do not play at being God. . . . I am not a healer. A. A. Allen couldn’t cure a fly with a headache” (Allen and Wagner 1970, 9).

Before calling people into his healing lines, Oral Roberts would remind those in attendance, “I’d like to tell you friends, as we start praying for the sick tonight; I’d like you to understand how God works through me. I am not the healer. I cannot heal. Only God can do that. But I am an instrument in his hands, which he is using to bring healing to many, many people” (1954c). Among more contemporary faith healers, one can hear similar disclaimers. Gloria Copeland (1990), for instance, teaches that “you come to receive healing from the Lord Jesus Christ . . . healing that will flow out of my hands into you, but it’s not my anointing. It’s the anointing of the Holy Spirit.”

Ernest Angley (personal observation, Akron, OH, February 19, 1988) is equally disavowing when he publicly prays, “Thou knowest, oh God, that I never take any of the honor. I never claim any of the glory. I am just a weakness to your greatness.” Once Angley disclosed to Cleveland television personality Fred Griffith that “everything” he did “is centered around Jesus, not around Ernest Angley” (1988). Benny Hinn reminds would-be critics, “I don’t heal anybody. The Lord is the healer” (“Impact” 1997).

These types of claims help faith healers increase their ethos with their “partners,” a term that some use to refer to their constituencies. Audiences love speakers who appear to be genuinely humble. Conversely, they despise those who are arrogant. Not claiming to have any personal power is advantageous to faith healers for two reasons: (1) not only does it help them increase their credibility with their audiences, but (2) it can also be used as an excuse when healings do not occur. Rather than shoulder the blame themselves, all faith healers have to say is that they never really claimed to have power to heal in the first place. The problem, therefore, must lie with the individual seeking the healing. Obviously, he or she does not have the necessary faith in God. Nonetheless, giving glory to God is one way that faith healers “sell” what they do to a compliant constituency.

The Bible Says So

Had there been no Bible or had the Bible not contained stories of miraculous cures, there probably would never have been Christian faith healers as we know them. For, despite the fact that faith healers have ministered in every community everywhere in the world since prehistory, Christian faith healers themselves take their marching orders from the miracle stories in the New Testament. They often remind their audiences that they practice what they do because they believe they can find evidence for it in the scripture. This strategy appears to work.

Throughout his sermons, for example, Jack Coe made numerous references to healings in the Bible. Coe pointed out that healing begins in Genesis
17 and runs “like a scarlet thread” throughout it. He reminded his audiences that “the Bible said that all who came to Jesus was [sic] healed.” So sure of his right and ability to heal people because of what he believed the scriptures taught, he challenged, “I dare any fair-minded person to take this blessed old book that I hold in my hand and make a fair-minded, open investigation of the word of God in divine healing.” Coe believed that he had “enough Bible to back it up” (1989d). As did other faith healers, Coe often quoted Hebrews 13:8 (“Jesus Christ the same yesterday, today, and forever”) as a proof text that healing occurs today just as it was recorded in Jesus’ day (1989a). In fact, this passage is probably quoted more than any other verse in the entire Bible to prove that miraculous healings should still be expected.

Similar to Coe, A. A. Allen also practiced what he did because he believed he could find it in the New Testament. Once, seemingly out of frustration, Allen earnestly pleaded with his audience, “Listen to me. I am giving you biblical, scriptural proof” (“Skepticism” n.d.). Like Coe and other faith healers, Allen relied on Hebrews 13:8 (Miracles Today n.d.), 1 Peter 2:24 (“Allen Exhorting” n.d.), Matthew 8:17 (“Allen Exhorting” n.d.), and Mark 16:17 (“This Gospel of the Kingdom” n.d.) among others. Allen even had a portion of Mark 16:17 plastered on a long banner, which hung behind the pulpit in his tent to remind those in attendance: “These signs shall follow them that believe.” So confident was Allen in using the Bible to prove miraculous healing that he often began statements with “my Bible says” (“Monkey Boy” n.d.) and then commanded the audience to “say amen if you believe everything in God’s word” (Miracles Today n.d.).

Oral Roberts also relied heavily on the Bible as proof of miraculous cures. Hebrews 13:8 was one of his favorite passages (1954b; 1955b). Once, Roberts labeled Matthew 8:5–13 as “the greatest healing chapter in the Bible” (1952). There was never a time when Roberts did not attempt to ground what he was practicing in the scriptures. Nowadays, Gloria Copeland often assures her audiences that “It says so in the Bible” or “I’ll prove it to you from the word” when referring to miraculous healing: “God doesn’t use cancer to teach the church. He uses the Holy Spirit and the word.” “Scripture teaches,” explains Copeland. Copeland once preached, “The same word that we [she and her husband Kenneth] listened to twenty-five years ago, we still listen to because it’s the same word with the same power” (personal observation, Nashville, TN, October 17, 1992).

Many other examples could be cited, but these are sufficient to show that references to the Bible are a central rhetorical staple in the preaching of faith healers. Furthermore, such strategy works for the predominantly Pentecostal audiences who already believe the Bible to be the inspired word of God. It matters not to them that some of these passages had nothing to do with miraculous cures. The fact is, faith healers use them repeatedly and their listeners accept them as proof. Certain verses (e.g., Hebrews 13:8; Isaiah 53:5;
1 Peter 2:24; Mark 16:17) became part of the faith healing culture. When audiences hear the same verses over and over again, it becomes difficult for them not to believe that these passages teach what the preacher says they teach. In this way, use of the Bible became a major inducement for audiences to believe.

I've Seen It with My Own Eyes

In an attempt to persuade those in attendance to believe in miraculous cures, faith healers frequently cite examples of individuals they have personally witnessed who had been cured. Gloria Copeland tells of how during the various years of her ministry, people with “all kind [sic] of terminal diseases, serious things, just absolutely serious things . . . were healed” (1990).

Jack Coe seemed to thrive on this type of proof. In February 1956, Coe was arraigned in a Miami, Florida, courtroom on charges of practicing medicine without a license. Eventually the charges were dropped, but the sassy Coe seized the opportunity to let the authorities of Miami know how much he did not appreciate being questioned about his authority to preach and practice healings. In one sermon preached during his Miami revival shortly after his arrest (“Practicing Medicine without a License” n.d.), Coe offered example after example of persons he had seen healed. In bold fashion, he told of how “last Saturday night” a man was healed of blindness, and Sunday afternoon his wife testified that “God has given him back his eyesight.” He reported that a woman was “here last night who had never heard or spoke” before but was healed. After citing the healing of Naaman in the Bible (2 Kings 5) and his own personal healing, Coe cited the example of a Mr. Chumley, a Baptist preacher from Plainview, Texas, who was healed. Now Mr. Chumley is “out preaching divine healing,” Coe assured his audiences. In graphic detail, Coe boasted of the healing of Christine Carmichael of Tulsa, Oklahoma, who was dying of a brain tumor. “Puss and blood ran from her brain.” He told of how after he laid hands on her she “spit up” her tumor and coughed it from her mouth. “I tell you that’s the best cancer operation you’ll ever undergo.” Coe often used these types of graphic examples to persuade audiences to accept divine healing.

William Branham (1950) boasted to his audiences how he had seen “better than three hundred cases of cross eyed [sic] healed in less than six months time.” He told of people who were healed of paralysis, withered hands, demon possession, and crippling diseases. He assured his audiences of how he had seen miraculous cures “hundreds of times” during his ministry.

Likewise, Oral Roberts assured his audiences of how thousands of people had been cured after he laid hands upon them and prayed for them (1955a). A. A. Allen often cited examples of people who had been healed under his tent (“Two Services under the Tent” n.d.). Among the many examples that
he has given, Ernest Angley (1988) once told his audience that one woman “flew in from Russia to get her miracle” before having to return.

No matter who the faith healer, examples are commonly employed in an attempt to prove to onlookers that God can and does heal people miraculously. Like the other rhetorical strategies that are employed, use of dramatic examples appears to contribute to the speaker’s ability to persuade.

If It Happened to Me, It Can Happen to You

In addition to citing concrete cases of people being healed, faith healers often allow these individuals to stand in front of audiences to recount their own personal stories. Often they return with envelopes containing x-rays or medical papers as proof that tumors or other ailments are now gone. Once, for instance, Oral Roberts called Fred Odel from Oakland, California, to the stage to testify of how he was clear of lung cancer after being healed in a previous Oral Roberts crusade. When asked by Roberts what was in the envelope he was carrying, Odel confidently responded, “That’s my proof.” Odel had returned with an x-ray and doctor’s letter, verifying his cure. If only for a few minutes, Odel reveled in the spotlight, and the audience loved it. Roberts, too, appeared to relish the occasion. In fact, Roberts liked these moments so well that he often allowed individuals to return at a later date to testify to audiences about their healing. Like the other faith healers, he realized the inherent value of such testimonies (1957).

Not only do faith healers allow individuals to stand in their services to testify about their healings, but they often publish these testimonies in their monthly magazines. Among the numerous others, A. A. Allen, for example, once published a testimonial entitled “I Took My Cancer to Church in a Jar” (Miracle Magazine, January 1960). Other claims involved being healed of hemophilia, growing an arm longer, passing an open safety pen from the stomach, up the esophagus, and through the mouth, being set free from demons, or having one’s lungs cured of cancer (Miracle Magazine, October 1959; December 1959; January 1960). One individual even testified how God had miraculously filled one of her teeth with gold (Miracle Magazine, October 1961). Suffice it to say that testimonials, spoken or printed, are often employed to sell the idea of miraculous cures. Just as advertisers rely on various testimonials to endorse their products, so, too, do faith healers rely on testimonials to “sell” the miraculous. It appears to work. But how?

I have argued elsewhere (Pullum 1999) that testimony is effective for several reasons. First, it is entertaining. Audiences simply like to hear peoples’ stories. They find them interesting. The more sensational the story, the more entertaining the testimony. Second, if audiences perceive that a person is credible and has received a healing, they begin to think that a healing can happen to them. While the nature of the ailment may not be identical, the fact
that both are human and both have suffered a sickness or affliction provides sufficient common ground. Finally, the tendency to identify with another individual is particularly strong when the ailments are identical, especially if an individual has exhausted all other hopes of cure. The testimony of one person offers hope for another.

**Just See for Yourself**

Empirical demonstrations are central to the healing lines of faith healers. After persons claim to have received a healing, faith healers often command them to bend over and touch their toes, swirl their backs in circles to demonstrate a cure, or run across the stage to show that not only could they walk but could run after being confined for years to a wheelchair. Those deaf and dumb are often asked to parrot some simplistic expression that the preacher will call out, such as “baby,” “boy,” or “mama.” Others are asked to repeat “Thank you, Jesus,” “Hallelujah,” or “Praise the Lord.” These expressions vary little from faith healer to faith healer. Faith healers would often move several feet away from a person to demonstrate to an audience just how well the person can now hear (see Coe 1989f, for example).

On one occasion, in an attempt to demonstrate just how well-off a man with a bad back had become, A. A. Allen jumped into the man’s arms and commanded him to carry him across the stage (“It Is Finished” n.d.). On another occasion, after raising a man off a stretcher, Allen had him eat a ham salad sandwich and drink a carton of milk to demonstrate to the audience how he had been healed of stomach cancer (“Miracles Today” n.d.).

In his attempts to be empirical, Jack Coe was often rough with those who sought healings. It was not uncommon for him to place his hands on their neck and force them to bend their back forward or ram his knee in their back and force them to bend backward to demonstrate that they were healed. Also, Coe frequently grabbed a person with a locked arm or shoulder and physically moved it up and down for the person to demonstrate to the audience that he or she was now healed. “Up! Down! Up! Down! Up! Down! Up! Down!” Coe would sometimes command an individual in rapid, repetitive fashion after freeing his or her arm. Coe also attempted to show how cancers would fall off people’s faces into his hands (“Practicing Medicine without a License” n.d., 1989c, 1989e).

Once after healing a woman with a goiter on her neck, Oral Roberts pulled at the woman’s throat and told the audience that the goiter was leaving because her skin was “loose and flabby” and “as smooth as it can be” (1955c). Roberts often affirmed to his television audiences that what they had seen was real. “Now after you’ve seen with your own eyes and felt with your own heart what God’s done for the people in the healing line tonight, I want to offer prayer for you personally there in your room for the Lord to heal you” (1955a).
Aware that many people were skeptical about what they were seeing, A. A. Allen once assured his television audience, “The camera picks them up just as they happen. Actually, it’s a part of the service” (“Skepticism” n.d.). Many other examples could be cited, but from William Branham through Gloria Copeland and Benny Hinn, faith healers relied heavily on persons to demonstrate in some physical way to those in attendance that they were healed. Apparently this strategy worked, judging by the immense applause and numerous outbursts of “Praise the Lord” or other expressions of exultation that one could hear at these healing revivals.

There is a problem, however, with these “empirical” demonstrations. Often onlookers have no idea of how severe a problem an individual has, if any at all. As I have argued previously, audiences are at the mercy of the individual’s testimony. They are asked to assume that the person is truly afflicted, and merely take their word for it. When a person throws away his or her crutches or stands up out of a wheelchair, audiences just assume the individual could not walk at all before. Who really knows, though, to what extent these individuals lack the ability to walk? Who really knows to what extent a person has arthritis, cancer, or any other ailment for that matter?

You Don’t Need Those Crutches Anymore

In addition to having people who supposedly were healed demonstrate their cures in an empirical way, some faith healers such as Jack Coe and Benny Hinn appealed to their audiences’ visual senses with references to abandoned medical apparatuses (e.g., crutches, canes, wheelchairs, oxygen tanks). These served as nonverbal symbols of inducement. Jack Coe intentionally displayed hundreds of crutches, strung on ropes around the inside of his tent, to show audiences that individuals had once come into the healing line on crutches but no longer needed them after being healed. In fact, at the beginning of Coe’s television programs, aired in the 1950s, the camera would pan the inside of the tent and a narrator would ask “what is the meaning” of these crutches and braces. He would then invite people to stay tuned so that they would find out for themselves (“Practicing Medicine without a License” n.d.). Once when trying to persuade an audience to believe in what he was practicing, Coe brashly pointed to the medical apparatuses hanging around the tent and told an audience, “I want you to see all of those crutches and all of those braces, and all of those wheelchairs that came off people’s spines here in the city of Miami” (“Practicing Medicine without a License” n.d.). No doubt Coe was using them as symbols to induce audiences to believe in miraculous cures.

Similarly, Benny Hinn employs “abandoned” medical aides to convince his followers. After calling out scores of healings in the audience, Hinn’s ushers
begin to line the stage as quickly as is humanly possible with discarded wheelchairs, walkers, oxygen tanks, and crutches. No doubt these are placed there for a reason. Hinn wants everyone in attendance to see them. Empty wheelchairs, of course, imply that people are cured. They are symbols of healings, and Hinn understands this, which is why he has his ushers place them onstage for everyone to see. Once Hinn responded after seeing so many wheelchairs on the stage, “We have a traffic jam on the platform” (personal observation; Nashville, TN, October 23–24, 1997). The audiences, already worked into a frenzy, erupted in more praise and applause.

There is a limit, though, to what discarded medical aids one will see. They are limited to crutches, braces, wheelchairs, oxygen tanks, and the like. It’s interesting to note that one will never see prostheses such as artificial arms, legs, hands, teeth, eyes, or ears because, the fact is, these are never miraculously regenerated.

Let Me Entertain You

In his model of communication influence of media evangelists, Todd Lewis (1988) points out that one factor that makes a speaker so charismatic and hence persuasive is the speaker’s delivery. Elements such as “vocal force,” “rapid delivery,” and “nonverbal qualities,” such as, physical attractiveness, gestures, facial expressions, clothing, touch, and crowding, contribute to the selling of the miraculous. Audiences respond favorably to varied volume, pitch, and stress of certain words. Moreover, rapid delivery, interspersed with short pauses and repetition of key phrases (“Hallelujah, Thank you, Jesus!”), “forestall[s] the possibility of immediate critical analysis” and “short-circuits the reflective process” (106).

All of the faith healers of this study employed one or more of the above elements, perhaps consciously or unconsciously, in appealing to their followers. Physically, A. A. Allen was a dynamic preacher, often athletically jumping around in the pulpit. While preaching, he frequently jumped up and down on two legs while making a chopping motion with his right hand, all the while yelling at the top of his lungs. During his healing lines, more often than not he would grab an individual’s head with both of his hands or firmly place his index fingers in his or her ears, working them in a circular motion as he cast out some type of demon. Not since the days of Billy Sunday had America seen a more animated, acrobatic speaker in the pulpit.

After being introduced by his associate pastor Bob DeWeese, like a game show host, Oral Roberts would bound through a back door onto the stage with a smile on his face. No one had more spring in his step than did Roberts. Moreover, he was tall (ca. 6’2”), dark, and handsome. He was always impeccably dressed, as are all of the other faith healers in this study. While preaching, Roberts would place one hand in his coat pocket, pick up the four-foot-long
chrome microphone stand with the other, and pace across the platform. He preached so adamantly that his black hair would frequently fall limp across his forehead. While healing people, he would sit in a fold-out chair, take off his coat, and lay his hands firmly on the forehead of an individual standing a few feet below him on another platform.

With a body like Santa Clause’s, Jack Coe was a large man, well over 235 pounds. He had a large stomach, which was noticeable, in part, because he often took off his suit coat in an attempt to stay as cool as he could. Due to his size, Coe did not jump around in the pulpit as did Allen. Instead he used his voice and facial expressions to emphasize his points. Coe also frequently repeated himself for the sake of emphasis. Once when defending his right to practice healing, he read from the Bible about Jesus’ ministry. With a sassy smirk on his face, Coe yelled that Jesus went about all Galilee preaching “and healing aaaaaall manner of sickness and aaaaaaall manner of diseases without-a-license. I said with-out-a-license” (‘Practicing Medicine without a License’ n.d.). Coe’s nonverbal mannerisms and vocal inflection dared anyone to take issue with what he preached.

Benny Hinn is one of the most animated faith healers one will ever watch. His performances are nothing short of theatrical. In fact, Hinn once disclosed that when he is onstage, he is under “pressure to produce.” “People don’t come just to hear you preach; they want to see something” (Davis 1993, D7). If people “want to see something,” certainly Hinn does not disappoint them. Holding a cordless microphone in one hand, Hinn roams widely across the platform while preaching or calling out healings. He frequently takes off his coat and swings it around and around in lasso fashion while running across the stage to slay someone in the spirit.

Slaying people in the spirit is one of Hinn’s specialties. Like Ernest Angley, after Hinn places a hand on an individual’s forehead, the person falls backward into the waiting arms of an usher, trained to catch people. Often times the ushers themselves fall out under the power of the spirit. Even Hinn will fall backward as if overcome by the Holy Spirit. Once I witnessed Hinn’s ushers catch him just in time before he crashed into the drum set. Audiences burst with sidesplitting laughter when they see such histrionics. Although critic Ole Anthony describes Hinn’s behavior as “goofy” (“Impact” 1997), audiences find him highly entertaining. It is doubtful that they could have a better time at a stand-up comedian’s concert.

Less dramatic in her stage presence than any of the above faith healers, Gloria Copeland is still a dynamic speaker, physically restrained but bold in speech nonetheless. Often she directs her comments forcefully and adamantly toward the devil himself. One woman in the audience of Gloria Copeland explained to me that she likes her so much because “she’s so powerful—dynamic.” When asked what she liked about Gloria Copeland, another woman replied, “Her strong faith. Her healing is real—very real!”
In addition to her dynamism, Copeland is physically attractive. Standing approximately five feet five inches tall with smooth complexion and blonde, shoulder-length hair, Copeland is pleasing to the eye (personal observation, Nashville, TN, October 17, 1992).

Both Ernest Angley and William Branham were also forceful speakers. Although their power came more from their voices than from their physical presence, they still were entertaining to watch, especially when laying hands on an individual to be healed. There can be no doubt that part of the success of faith healers was due largely to the way they conducted themselves onstage, which was generally very entertaining.

**CONCLUSION**

In summary, the faith healers in this study attempted to sell the miraculous to uncritical, highly religious, not-well-educated audiences who were afflicted with various physical and emotional problems. Supposedly, these ailments were oftentimes the results of demons inhabiting people. Faith healers used a number of strategies, often consciously, to persuade those listening that miraculous healings were normative for the here and now. These included (1) testimonies of healers themselves of being miraculously cured, (2) claims of being miraculously called by God, (3) disavowing personal power while simultaneously giving God the credit, (4) references to various passages throughout the Bible, (5) use of examples seen by the faith healers themselves, (6) public testimonies of individuals who claimed to be healed in prior revivals, (7) empirical, physical demonstrations, (8) use of nonverbal artifacts, and (9) commanding stage presences of the faith healers.

The above strategies are powerful factors in persuading audiences that they can receive a miraculous cure, particularly when used in combination with each other. It is hard for unsuspecting religious followers to deny the claims that faith healers make when constantly bombarded with these rhetorical arguments, especially if a person has already exhausted all that medical science has to offer. Given the fact that humans will always suffer physical and mental afflictions, one should not look for faith healers to go out of “business” any time soon. In fact, it is doubtful that such will ever be the case. For now, at least, all over this country people continue to flock to large auditoriums, seeking relief, just as they fled in hordes into the tents of post–World War II faith healers, and as they came flocking to Jesus in the biblical narratives. Like the faith healers who evoke them, the expressions “Hallelujah! Thank you, Jesus!” will not likely fall silent any time soon.

The haunting fact, of course, that leaves us all wondering, is that despite the foibles of faith healers, and perhaps even because of some of the characteristics of their ministries, here and there individuals continue to claim indications that miracles happen, usually in other settings than the faith healer’s tent.
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One can hardly publish volumes on miracles without taking account of the very popular publication titled *A Course in Miracles*. *A Course in Miracles* is, however, extremely difficult to categorize. On the surface, it is a three-volume, 1250-page book, consisting of a Text, Workbook, and a Manual for Teachers, published in 1976. It was “scribed” (as she referred to it) by Helen Schucman, a research psychologist at Columbia University’s Columbia-Presbyterian Medical Center, who took down words dictated to her by an inner voice.

The Course, as it is called by its students, is therefore channeled material. However, it thwarts the expectations we have acquired regarding channeling. We may expect bland New Age platitudes delivered in an unidentifiable accent by a channel with celebrity status. Yet the Course’s scribe was a highly intelligent psychologist and self-proclaimed militant atheist, who was deeply embarrassed by her role as scribe of this work. Her name does not appear on the cover. Further, the Course does not genuinely fit the New Age label. It has been embraced by the New Age movement, yet this could be seen as a historical accident. Dutch scholar Wouter Hanegraaff, in his voluminous study *New Age Religion and Western Culture*, acknowledges that on the level of its content, the Course is “decidedly atypical” of the New Age. He says it “has correctly been characterized as a Christianized version of non-dualistic Vedanta.”

Finally, the Course is hardly a repository of vapid spiritual platitudes. Hanegraaff again: “It is among those channeled texts which refute the often-heard opinion that channeling only results in trivialities.” The Course sets forth an extremely sophisticated and multifaceted thought system that is
also strikingly original. Even while it resonates with insights from many traditions and disciplines, it regularly offers perspectives that one would be hard-pressed to find anywhere else.

As one would expect, the word miracle is a central term in *A Course in Miracles*. The title makes the implied claim that this course will teach its students how to work miracles. This sounds bizarre, since we usually consider miracles to be the prerogative of the saints or the unpredictable product of divine grace. Yet what working a miracle means in the Course’s context is not necessarily what we would expect.

As part of its aim of transforming our perception, the Course uses familiar terms but regularly fills them with new meaning. This new meaning has the effect of making the term a container of the Course’s thought system and thus a vehicle of the Course’s goal. As the Course itself acknowledges, this new meaning takes time and effort to understand: “It is a meaning that must be learned and learned very carefully” (Manual, p. 14). We will find that this is clearly the case with its use of the word miracle.

In exploring the Course’s teachings on miracles, I will be using the Course’s own capitalization conventions and at times its pronoun usage. The Course itself uses only masculine pronouns. It refers to God as Father and to all of us as Sons of God and brothers to each other. However, we should not read a sexist or patriarchal meaning into this. This is another example of the Course filling familiar terms with new meanings. By referring to God and humans with masculine pronouns, the Course was using the prevailing cultural conventions at the time it was channeled (1965–1972), but using them to express a teaching that transcends culture, in that it does not regard gender as real. From the Course’s standpoint, we are genderless, transcendental beings caught in a dream of separation. Yet all forms of separation, including that between the sexes, are ultimately illusory.

**THE MIRACLE AS DESCRIBED BY THE COURSE**

**The Object of the Miracle: The Mind’s Illness**

We tend to think of miracles as solving physical problems. When we say, “I need a miracle,” we are almost always referring to deliverance from some physical predicament, like an illness or financial crisis, from which there seems no way out. In the Course, however, the miracle is aimed at healing the mind: “Miracles restore the mind to its fullness” (Text, p. 5). From the Course’s standpoint, the problem behind all of our problems is that our minds are sick and need healing. In this sense, we are like the alcoholic who thinks he or she has a liver problem, a work problem, and relationship problems, when his or her real problem is alcoholism. The manifold appearance of our problems, therefore, masks a simplicity of content: “All this complexity is but
a desperate attempt not to recognize the problem, and therefore not to let it be resolved” (Workbook, p. 141).

“The problem” ultimately amounts to a fundamental distortion of perception. We tend naively to assume that we are seeing things the way they are. The Course teaches, however, that rather than seeing the unadorned truth, all we are seeing are our own beliefs projected outward. The Course summarizes this idea in three words: “Projection makes perception” (Text, pp. 248, 445). In its view, we have no idea how deep our prejudices actually go, and how completely they control what we see. We may assume that perceiving correctly is just a matter of interpreting the forms outside of us in an objective manner, yet the Course teaches that even those forms are a projection. In its rather extreme worldview, the entire phenomenal world is a collective dream, a colossal projection of a deeply entrenched belief system shared by all living things.

The Course calls this belief system the ego, using the term in a way that is more akin to Eastern mysticism than Western psychology. In Course terminology, the ego is our fundamental belief in what we are, a belief that says, “I am separate from everything else” and “I am end; everyone else is means.” This is the core distortion that warps all of our perception. The ego sees itself as the center of the universe. In the Course’s portrayal, it is like a black hole that gives out no light, warps the space around it, and devours anything that comes too close. As part of growing up, we learn how to put a pleasing disguise on our ego, in part because of how ashamed we are of it. Yet according to the Course, we need not be ashamed, because the ego is not who we are. Identifying with it means we have forgotten who we are. We have amnesia. The ultimate purpose of the miracle is not to solve our earthly problems, but to bring us out of this amnesia. The Course puts it poetically: “The miracle but calls your ancient Name” (Text, p. 557).

Physical Illness in Relation to the Miracle

Unlike our conventional image of the miracle, the Course’s miracle is not primarily aimed at healing physical illness. We find these surprising lines in the Course:

When the ego tempts you to sickness do not ask the Holy Spirit to heal the body, for this would merely be to accept the ego’s belief that the body is the proper aim of healing. Ask, rather, that the Holy Spirit teach you the right perception of the body, for perception alone can be distorted. (Text, pp. 157–158)

In the Course’s teaching, not only are the body’s illnesses rooted in sick perception, but the body itself is ultimately a result of sick perception, a projection of the false self-concept called the ego.
However, the Course acts as if the miracle will often heal the body as an automatic consequence of healing the mind. This flows logically from how the Course views sickness. The Course teaches that every person is profoundly burdened with unconscious guilt. This is a direct product of the belief that one is an ego. Identification with the ego causes one to habitually attack others (mentally, verbally, and physically) in order to further one’s own interests. A lifetime of this slowly crystallizes into the hardened belief that one is a sinner, even if one never uses the word, and is therefore guilty and deserving of punishment. This belief tends to be buried deep in the unconscious. It surfaces, however, in our fears of getting caught, our low self-esteem, our ready defensiveness, and our constant efforts to redeem ourselves.

It also surfaces in the form of physical illness. According to the Course, sickness comes from unconsciously projecting our guilt onto our body. Sickness, it says, is punishment taken out on the body “because of all the sinful things the body does within its dream” (Text, p. 587). In one place, the Course provides this visual metaphor: “Illness can be but guilt’s shadow, grotesque and ugly since it [the shadow] mimics deformity [guilt].” In other words, guilt is an image of ourselves as deformed and monstrous, and this deformed image in the mind then casts a deformed shadow onto the body. The obvious implication is that the most effective way to remove the shadow (illness) is to remove that which is casting the shadow (guilt). This is exactly what the miracle aims to do.

Clearly this view of illness stretches credibility to the breaking point. It implies that those cases of hysterical blindness or paralysis in which guilt seems to be the motivating factor are a window onto the real nature of all illness, such that even an organic “cause” of illness would simply be a vehicle for a deeper cause in the mind. This view also implies that our guilt predates our current existence, for how else could it explain illness in infants? In this chapter, however, our task is not to render a verdict on the Course’s teachings, but simply to understand what they are.

Interpersonal Extension: Miracle Workers and Miracle Receivers

In the Course, the miracle is something that is extended from a “miracle worker” (also called “giver”) to a “miracle receiver” (or “receiver”). This miracle worker has gained her ability to extend miracles through the spiritual disciplines provided by the Course. This may involve acquiring paranormal abilities, which may be utilized in giving the miracle. All of these features parallel our conventional image of miracles, drawn from the example of many religious traditions. One key difference is that the Course teaches that working miracles is not the province of rare spiritual prodigies. Rather, we are all called to be miracle workers, who experience miracles as “natural” (Text, p. 3).
and devote every day to doing them (Text, p. 4). Indeed, the Course openly holds out to all of its readers the possibility of doing what Jesus purportedly did: “Miracles enable you to heal the sick and raise the dead” (Text, p. 4).

Although the Course’s miracle worker, in keeping with the traditional image, may exercise unusual powers, these are a sidelight. The key factor is his ability to be “in his right mind”:

As a correction, the miracle need not await the right-mindedness of the receiver. In fact, its purpose is to restore him to his right mind. It is essential, however, that the miracle worker be in his right mind, however briefly, or he will be unable to re-establish right-mindedness in someone else. (Text, p. 25)

The miracle, then, is a transfer of right-mindedness or sanity from one person to another. This takes place in what the Course calls a holy encounter. This is an interpersonal encounter in which one person lifts her mind above the constricting self-interest that usually so dominates our interactions. Out of this broader, more inclusive perspective, she gives a gift, and this draws the other person out of self-concern and into a state of thankfulness and reciprocity. The two enter a shared state of gratitude and love, a state of joining. Such holy encounters need not look like a scene from a stained glass window. Rather, as the Course points out, they can consist of what seem to be very casual encounters; a “chance” meeting of two apparent strangers in an elevator, a child who is not looking where he is going running into an adult “by chance,” two students “happening” to walk home together. These are not chance encounters. Each of them has the potential for becoming a teaching-learning situation. Perhaps the seeming strangers in the elevator will smile to one another, perhaps the adult will not scold the child for bumping into him; perhaps the students will become friends. Even at the level of the most casual encounter, it is possible for two people to lose sight of separate interests, if only for a moment. That moment will be enough. Salvation has come. (Manual, p. 7)

As can be gleaned from this quote, the Course teaches that even seemingly insignificant encounters have been divinely arranged because they have the potential to become holy encounters.

**True Perception: The Active Ingredient of the Miracle**

The form in which the miracle is given can be anything: It can be words, it can be a smile, it can be refusing to scold someone, it can be walking home with someone. But to convey the miracle, this form must, at least to some degree, have the content of what the Course calls true perception.
True perception is a deep spiritual recognition of the true nature of the miracle receiver. In the Course’s teaching, this other person is not a body, nor is he the ego that is the source of most of his behavior. He is not even a psychophysical unity. He is what the Course calls a *Son of God*, a being of pure spirit, bodiless, limitless, eternal, and as pure and holy as God Himself. This ancient, transcendental being has simply fallen into a dream of being a tiny, flawed human being. True perception looks past the entire earthly persona—both body and personality—and sees the truth of who this person really is. This is how the miracle worker “calls forth the miracle of healing. He overlooks the mind *and* body, seeing only the face of Christ shining in front of him” (Manual, p. 56)—the “face of Christ” being a metaphor for looking on the true nature of another, which the Course calls the “Christ.”

When the Course speaks of seeing the Christ in someone, it is talking about an actual kind of perception, which is seen through a different set of (nonphysical) eyes, called the *eyes of Christ*. While the physical eyes see the body of another, the eyes of Christ look directly on that person’s innate holiness. This perception can result in seeing a visible halo around that person’s body and other physical objects, but according to the Course, such “light episodes” “merely symbolize true perception” (Workbook, p. 25). True perception itself is not a seeing of visual light but rather an inner “knowing,” in which the mind directly experiences the divine worth of another person. In this passage, the Course describes what true perception sees:

> It does not look upon a body, and mistake it for the Son whom God created. It beholds a light beyond the body; an idea beyond what can be touched, a purity undimmed by errors, pitiful mistakes, and fearful thoughts of guilt from dreams of sin. It sees no separation. And it looks on everyone, on every circumstance, all happenings and all events, without the slightest fading of the light it sees. (Workbook, p. 299)

This true perception, then, is what the miracle worker gives. A miracle, in Course parlance, is when true perception transfers from the mind of a giver to the mind of a receiver. We often see a spiritual healer as channeling some kind of semi-physical energy from her body (perhaps her hands) to the patient’s body, this energy being what does the healing. In the Course, however, the healer is channeling *true perception* from her *mind* to the patient’s mind. She is channeling a new perception of the patient, which shines into his mind and becomes his own. This new *self-perception* is what does the healing. In this scenario, a semi-physical energy may still transfer from the miracle worker’s hands to the patient’s body, but this energy would presumably be analogous to the halos discussed earlier—a physical reflection or symbol of true perception, which is the real healing agent.
The Central Role of Forgiveness

Another way of talking about the active ingredient in the miracle is forgiveness. “Only forgiveness offers miracles” (Text, p. 540), says the Course. This stems from the role of guilt in the Course. Earlier, we saw the Course’s teaching that guilt is the underlying cause of physical illness. The Course goes even further than that, saying that “guilt is . . . the sole cause of pain in any form” (Text, p. 635). The Course claims that none of our pain is caused by outside events, by the attacks of others on us. Rather, all of it is a form of self-punishment for our own attacks. According to the Course, we are all heavily invested in the denial of this fact: “The world has marshalled all its forces against this one awareness.”7 As a result, we have stored our guilt in “shrouded vaults” that lie deep “in the mists below” the conscious mind (Text, p. 657). With our guilt thus safely out of sight, it doesn’t even appear to be a factor in our lives: “Of one thing you were sure: Of all the many causes you perceived as bringing pain and suffering to you, your guilt was not among them” (Text, p. 583). Most of us would probably not even put guilt on the list of things that bring pain and suffering to us. Yet according to the Course, it is really the only thing on the list.

In the Course’s view, then, the miracle heals because it conveys to the receiver the message that he is forgiven, guilt-free, absolved. As he takes this message in, he is healed. The Course captures this message in these succinct words: “Awake and be glad, for all your sins have been forgiven you.”8 This, of course, is an allusion to Jesus’ healing of a paralytic, in which Matthew reports him saying, “For which is easier, to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven you,’ or to say, ‘Arise and walk?’”9 By alluding to this scene, and by changing “arise and walk” to “awake and be glad,” the Course makes several statements at once. It implies that the message “your sins have been forgiven you” is the message of the miracle worker, the pronouncement that sets another free from his bonds. It also implies that the real bonds loosened by this message are not a paralysis of the body in which one cannot arise and walk, but a paralysis of the mind in which one cannot awake and be glad.

Characteristically, the Course defines forgiveness in its own unique way. It takes issue with the conventional meaning, in which the forgiver decides to forego anger and retribution, even though the other person deserves these because of what he did. According to the Course, when we give another the message “You are a sinner who deserves to suffer, but I will graciously forego my rights and let you off the hook,” there is a condescending element in that message that does not go unnoticed: “You’re a sinner, but I am gracious.” It is hard to see how such a message could bring true release to one burdened with guilt.

The only way to fully release another from her sense of sinfulness is to give her the message that she is forgiven because she never sinned. This is the
practical import of the Course’s alternate view of reality. The Course fully acknowledges that we often do cruel and hurtful things in this life, which really do have the “intent to hurt” (Workbook, p. 326) and even to “murder” (Text, p. 495). But in its view, this life is a dream, and “what is done in dreams has not been really done” (Text, p. 351). Although we tend to find this “dream” idea dispiriting, we shouldn’t overlook the profound liberation implied in it. For it implies that we didn’t really injure the people we feel so guilty about. Thus we did not really tarnish our identity with our wrongdoings. All the brutal things that happened in our lives, all the wounds we inflicted and the scars we accumulated, were just a dream, nothing more.

Because our nature is ultimately pure, the Course says that even within the dream, we didn’t gain happiness from causing another to suffer, for that would make us truly evil. Instead, we walked away lugging the heavy burden of guilt. Despite what we told ourselves, our attack was not an authentic expression of our nature nor an act of strength. Instead, it was a forgetting of our nature and a “call for help.”

These ideas form the rationale for Course-based forgiveness. In conventional forgiveness, we let go of resentment even though we perceive it as fully justified. In Course-based forgiveness, we let go of resentment by choosing a different perception of reality itself, in light of which the entire situation is seen radically differently. This allows us to look straight at the behavior, and without denying that it took place, have an entirely different emotional response to it. It allows us to see that from the highest perspective, “there was no sin” (Workbook, p. 401), and thus that “there is nothing to forgive” (Text, p. 320).

According to the Course, this is the perspective God has on us. The Course goes further than saying that God forgives, or even forgives unconditionally. Instead, it says that “God does not forgive because He has never condemned” (Workbook, pp. 73, 100). God cannot even understand the need to forgive, because “God knows His children as wholly sinless” (Text, p. 192). Our sense of being condemned by God, therefore, comes not from Him but from ourselves. The Course speaks of our ego as a judge who gathers all our “sins” together and convicts us in the court of our own minds. The Course, however, asks us to appeal this conviction to “God’s Own Higher Court,” saying, “It will dismiss the case against you, however carefully you have built it up. The case may be fool-proof, but it is not God-proof. . . . His verdict will always be ‘thine is the Kingdom’ ” (Text, p. 88). Quite simply, the role of the miracle worker is to be the messenger of this verdict.

The Holy Instant: The Instant in Which the Miracle Occurs

By definition, a miracle is an overturning of the ordinary course of things. In this world, we often seem caught in the gears of processes that simply
have to run their course, even if their terminal point is our death. The whole idea of a miracle is that sometimes something enters from outside these inexorable processes and, against all the usual rules, sets us free. This notion of something new entering and overturning the ordinary course of things is captured in the Course’s concept of the *holy instant*. Again, however, the Course’s emphasis is on the psychological realm. The Course sees us caught in the gears of habitual *thinking* and in the chains of painful *memories*. Accordingly, our minds tend to revolve in the same tight circles, resisting change. In the Course’s teaching, this refusal to let change enter the mind is what keeps deliverance from entering all of the problem areas of our lives. Our future thus becomes a mere repeat of our past. “The past becomes the determiner of the future, making them continuous without an intervening present” (Text, p. 246).

The holy instant is a time in which we momentarily let past and future fall away, come fully into the present moment, and allow a new perspective, which ultimately comes from God, into our minds. The miracle occurs when the miracle worker steps outside the usual pattern of human thinking and enters this “out-of-pattern time interval” (Text, pp. 6, 27), and then draws the miracle receiver into it as well. “The holy instant is the miracle’s abiding place. From there, each [miracle] is born into this world as witness to a state of mind that has transcended conflict, and has reached to peace” (Text, p. 577). The miracle, the holy instant, and forgiveness are all extremely closely linked in Course terminology. All of them refer to a sudden release from psychological chains and the burden of the past.

**Behavior: The Chief Transmitter of the Miracle**

The Course seems to assume that the miracle will usually be transmitted behaviorally. Though from its standpoint “minds need not the body to communicate” (Text, p. 435), most of us are not adept at mind reading, having effectively shut down all senses but the physical. Therefore, the miracle worker needs “a medium through which communication becomes possible to those who do not realize that they are spirit. A body they can see. A voice they understand and listen to” (Manual, p. 31).

This behavior is aimed at communicating the miracle worker’s true perception of the receiver. We saw earlier that this can be done in a variety of ways—with a word, a smile, a gesture. There are stories of spiritual masters transmitting *shakti* (divine energy) to their students with a single glance. The choice of the behavior, however, must be geared toward what the receiver is able to receive. “This means that a miracle, to attain its full efficacy, must be expressed in a language that the recipient can understand without fear” (Text, p. 24). The whole point of the miracle is to have a certain psychological effect on the receiver. Therefore, “miracles depend on timing.”
just as comedy depends on timing, and for the same reason: both seek to evoke an intense psychological reaction. Yet it is impossible for us to know what someone can receive without fear, and when. Therefore, the Course urges that we let the Holy Spirit control “the action aspect of the miracle” (Text, p. 10)—let the outer expression of the miracle flow from an inner connection with divine guidance.

This is not to say, however, that all miracles will be communicated behaviorally. The Course sees a major role for miracles that are expressed strictly mind to mind. In one of the Course’s supplements (channeled through the same process as the Course), we find these words to psychotherapists:

Your patients need not be physically present for you to serve them in the Name of God. This may be hard to remember, but God will not have His gifts to you limited to the few you actually see. You can see others as well, for seeing is not limited to the body’s eyes. Some do not need your physical presence. They need you as much, and perhaps even more, at the instant they are sent. You will recognize them in whatever way can be most helpful to both of you. It does not matter how they come [to your awareness]. They will be sent in whatever form is most helpful; a name, a thought, a picture, an idea, or perhaps just a feeling of [a person] reaching out to someone somewhere. The joining [between you and this person] is in the hands of the Holy Spirit. It cannot fail to be accomplished.11

The Holy Spirit: The True Agent behind the Miracle

Miracles are traditionally seen, of course, as the action of the divine working through a human vehicle. This is true in A Course in Miracles as well. The Course sees the Holy Spirit as “the Bringer of all miracles” (Workbook, p. 191). The Holy Spirit, in the Course’s system, is an extension of God Who mediates between God and His sleeping Sons. He is the aspect of the Divine that acts within this world. His role is essentially a psychotherapeutic one. He works to heal and awaken minds.

The Course describes the Holy Spirit as ever present behind the scenes of the miracle. He called the miracle worker to her function, and gave her a form of giving miracles that is particularly suited to her unique mix of abilities. He brought the miracle worker and miracle receiver together, because He saw the potential for something miraculous to happen between them. He guided the worker to give a miracle to this particular receiver, based on this receiver’s openness to miracles. He placed the true perception of the receiver in the giver’s mind and then guided the behavioral expression of that true perception. And when the receiver’s mind opened to the miracle, He was the One Who shifted that mind away from its former fixed perception and infused it with true perception. The Holy Spirit, in other words, works both through the miracle worker and in the miracle receiver. He is on both sides
of the transaction: “Healing is the change of mind that the Holy Spirit in the patient’s mind is seeking for him. And it is the Holy Spirit in the mind of the giver Who gives the gift to him” (Manual, p. 20).

Because of how encompassing the Holy Spirit’s role is, one of the Course’s basic dictums is “The sole responsibility of the miracle worker is to accept the Atonement [or true perception] for himself” (Text, pp. 25–26). If the miracle worker simply allows true perception into his own mind, then the Holy Spirit will engineer the rest. The Course even makes the claim that if the miracle worker places his mind completely under the Holy Spirit’s guidance, then the Holy Spirit will actually control his behavior for him (Text, p. 28). His performance of a miracle will become “involuntary” (Text, p. 3), something he observes himself doing rather than wills himself to do.

Conversely, unless He is allowed into the mind of the miracle worker, the Holy Spirit cannot perform miracles. “The miracle extends without your help, but you are needed that it can begin” (Text, p. 576). The Course does not acknowledge divine intervention in the usual sense. To act in the world, the Holy Spirit needs to act through us. This is because, in its view, this world is not a physical place but a psychological “space.” To enter this space, the Holy Spirit needs the permission of the minds who are holding it. To show up in this dream, He needs the permission of those who are dreaming it. Thus, He is not the architect of the system, which would make Him responsible for all the brutalities of the system, and which would make His relative lack of action here inexplicable. Rather, He is a Voice of love from outside the system, Who depends on an insider to open a door and let Him in. This idea, I believe, has the ability to help us resolve both emotional and philosophical difficulties concerning why God doesn’t act more frequently and dramatically in this world.

The Result of the Miracle: Healing of Mind and Body

The miracle’s primary result is that the receiver’s mind is healed. This is accomplished by the Holy Spirit. In the same way that we traditionally view the Holy Spirit healing sick tissue, so in the Course the Holy Spirit heals sick perception. We appear to have a great need for the healing action of a Presence from outside of our mental framework. We can be stuck for years in the grip of a bitter resentment, a crippling fear, or a self-destructive desire, wanting to get free from it, yet seemingly powerless to move. And then, in an instant, it can be removed, as if by an outside hand. In its place we find a fresh outlook, a healed perspective, seemingly from out of nowhere. The Course would say that this is the action of the miracle on our minds. “A miracle . . . acts as a catalyst, breaking up erroneous perception and reorganizing it properly” (Text, p. 5).

This need not be mediated by a miracle worker. It can come directly from the Holy Spirit within us. Indeed, this strictly internal healing of perception
is an important secondary meaning of “miracle” in the Course. I have focused on the interpersonal miracle, though, simply because that is the Course’s main focus.

This healing of the mind, as I said earlier, may generalize to the healing of the body, since, in the Course’s view, the body’s sickness is a “shadow” of the mind’s sickness. Thus, the Course’s miracle may indeed look like the stereotypical miracle, in which physical healing occurs that defies the known laws of science: “What He [the Holy Spirit] enables you to do is clearly not of this world, for miracles violate every law of reality as this world judges it. Every law of time and space, of magnitude and mass is transcended, for what the Holy Spirit enables you to do is clearly beyond all of them” (Text, p. 230).

Indeed, the “first principle of miracles” (Text, p. 490) in the Course is that “there is no order of difficulty in miracles” (Text, p. 3). This means that cancer can be healed as easily as a cold, or as a psychosomatic illness. Only our deep-seated belief that one kind of illness is bigger, more real, and more intractable makes it seem more difficult to heal.

According to the Course, then, the body can be miraculously healed. However, this happens not because the Course’s miracle worker aims spiritual energy at the body, but because the miracle worker overlooks the body, seeing past it to the light beyond. “The body is healed because you came without it, and joined the Mind in which all healing rests” (Text, p. 398).

The miracle is the Course’s preferred method of physical healing, since it heals both the physical symptom and its underlying mental cause. That underlying cause, says the Course, “can appear in many forms,” as many different physical symptoms. Therefore, “it serves no purpose to attempt to solve [the problem] in a special form. It will recur and then recur again and yet again, until it has been answered for all time and will not rise again in any form. And only then are you released from it” (Text, p. 544). However, the Course does not take the route of Christian Science and discourage standard medical treatment. Instead, it describes conditions under which “it is safer for you to rely temporarily on physical healing devices” (Text, p. 25). These conditions include a patient being blocked to healing (Text, p. 24) and a healer wanting to egotistically claim credit for the healing (Text, p. 25).

The Receiver Returns the Miracle

The miracle is a service performed by the miracle worker. “It is the maximal service you can render to another” (Text, p. 4). However, the miracle is also a vital catalyst of the miracle worker’s own development. It “introduces an interval from which the giver and receiver both emerge farther along in time than they would otherwise have been” (Text, p. 8). How does the miracle further the miracle worker’s development? The miracle worker, too, is slowly emerging from a view of herself as guilty and unworthy. She doesn’t
know the immeasurable value of what lies within her. But those who receive miracles from her do know, for they are on the receiving end of it. They feel the full force of its blessing. Their gratitude to her thus contains a view of her that is higher—and truer—than her view of herself. Through their gratitude, they are her teachers now, her miracle workers. “The sick, who ask for love, are grateful for it, and in their joy they shine with holy thanks. And this they offer you who gave them joy. They are your guides to joy” (Text, pp. 252–253). This explains why this course in spiritual development is titled *A Course in Miracles*. In its view, our most significant spiritual (and psychological) development occurs through the miracles we extend, through the love and forgiveness we give to others.

**EXAMPLES OF THIS KIND OF MIRACLE**

To put some flesh on this admittedly abstract picture, I will recount four examples of miracles, all drawn from the life of Helen Schucman, the scribe of *A Course in Miracles*. Three are found in quotations from her unpublished autobiography and the fourth in a portion of the Course’s early dictation that was deemed personal and thus edited out of the published Course.

**Helen Schucman and Bill Thetford’s Joining in “Another Way”**

The story of the Course’s scribing began with a life-changing miracle. For seven years, Helen Schucman had worked with a colleague named Bill Thetford in the Psychology Department at Columbia-Presbyterian Medical Center, of which Bill was head. During that time, she and Bill worked hard to build up the Psychology Department, in what she described as “an atmosphere of suspicion and competitiveness to which I had not been previously exposed.”¹² This atmosphere extended to their dealings with other departments and even other medical centers. Furthermore, as Helen’s and Bill’s personalities were poles apart, their own relationship became increasingly strained. Helen wrote, “It became more and more evident that the best thing for me to do was to leave. However, Bill and I seemed trapped in a relationship which, although we hated it in many ways, could not be escaped.”¹³

Then, one afternoon in June 1965, something happened that was definitely “out-of-pattern.” Bill delivered to Helen a preplanned and very earnest speech, something totally uncharacteristic of him:

He had been thinking things over and had concluded we were using the wrong approach. “There must,” he said, “be another way.” Our attitudes had become so negative that we could not work anything out. He had therefore decided to try to look at things differently.
Bill proposed, quite specifically, to try out this new approach that day at the research meeting. He was not going to get angry and was determined not to attack. He was going to look for a constructive side in what people there said and did, and was not going to focus on mistakes and point up errors. He was going to cooperate rather than compete. . . . When [the speech] was over he waited for my response in obvious discomfort. Whatever reaction he may have expected, it was certainly not the one he got. I jumped up, told Bill with genuine conviction that he was perfectly right, and said I would join in the new approach with him.¹⁴

This joining was the proverbial bolt out of the blue that changed everything. Three lines of effects flowed from it. First, using this “other way,” they slowly turned the department around. “Bill worked particularly hard on this, determined to turn hostilities into friendships by perceiving the relationships differently. . . . In time the department became smooth-functioning, relaxed, and efficient.”¹⁵ Second, they undertook a conscious reform of their personal relationships. For Helen this meant resurrecting earlier friendships that had withered or broken off. Third, Helen began having a series of spontaneous visions, dreams, and psychic experiences that culminated, four months later, in an inner voice announcing to her, “This is a course in miracles. Please take notes.” Thus began the scribing of the Course, which both Helen and Bill viewed as detailed instruction in realizing Bill’s “other way.”

Here we see many of the key characteristics of the miracle in the Course. There are people locked in a destructive pattern from which there seems no escape. Then suddenly something new enters. In this case, Bill asks Helen to join him in stepping out of the old pattern and trying “another way.” He has set aside old resentments and, in their place, has faith in her and a desire to join with her. He is extending a new perception of her, and thus playing the role of the miracle worker. Helen, as the receiver, accepts his gift and returns it, agreeing to join with him. They enter into a holy encounter in which they transcend the separateness that had been foundational to the old pattern. From this single moment, their lives headed off in a new and unexpected direction.

What is striking about this miracle is its complete absence of religious or spiritual elements. Neither Bill nor Helen are religious believers. Further, the “other way” that Bill proposes contains no religious elements whatsoever. It is simply about trying to cooperate with others. Even in their moment of joining, neither apparently has any sort of spiritual experience. And yet this entirely secular moment seems to evoke a response from some spiritual influence. This response takes the form of Helen experiencing overtly spiritual dreams and visions and then channeling a spiritual book, which amounts to a lengthy program in Bill’s “other way.” As such, the book repeatedly extolls Bill and Helen’s joining (referring to it 118 times in all), characterizing it as a classic example of a holy instant (or miracle).
Mental Message Sent to a Suicidal Friend

Somewhere in the four-month period following this joining and preceding the scribing of the Course, Helen began to have a series of psychic experiences. Here is her account of the first:

Bill and I were working on a research report and I was concentrating on the statistical treatment of the data. Suddenly and very unexpectedly I laid the papers down and said, with great urgency, “Quick, Bill! Joe, your friend from Chicago, is thinking about suicide. We must send him a message right away.” Bill sat down next to me as I “sent” an earnest mental message to Joe. The words I used were: “The answer is life, not death.” Afterwards, I said to Bill, “I bet there was nothing to it,” but I was wrong. Bill called his friend that evening to ask him if he was all right. Joe was glad he had called; he had been very depressed, and had actually picked up a gun that afternoon, but something held him back. He put the gun down.  

This has much of the flavor of the traditional miracle in that it carries the implication that a life was saved through a form of prayer. It is also striking for how closely it mirrors the passage I quoted earlier about the psychotherapist offering distant mental healing. That passage said that those you help “need not be physically present.” It said that, rather than “your physical presence,” “they need you . . . at the instant they are sent.” It said that they will “be sent” to you through some extrasensory means. And it implied that you should then immediately sit down and offer them the healing they need, trusting that the Holy Spirit will make sure it reaches them. All of these points appear to have been actually demonstrated in Helen’s story.

The Mayo Clinic Experience

After the experience with Joe, Helen continued to have more psychic experiences. These made her very anxious, since she had not believed in the paranormal. Yet they also caused her feelings of pride and self-inflation.  

In September 1965, shortly before the scribing of the Course began, she and Bill were sent on a research trip to the Mayo Clinic in Minnesota. The night before they left, Helen internally saw a clear picture of a Lutheran church. She felt certain they would see the church the next day as they landed, and she clearly envisioned this as a decisive demonstration of her newfound powers. Yet they did not see the church, and after an exhausting search in which they took a taxi past 24 of the city’s 27 or so churches, they still did not see it. The next day, while they were at the airport waiting to return home, Bill found a guidebook containing a picture of the very church Helen had “seen.” Ironically, the church had occupied the site of the current Mayo Clinic; it had been razed so that the hospital could be built.
On the way home, Helen and Bill had a layover in Chicago. In the airport, Helen saw a young woman sitting by herself against a wall.

Huddled against a wall was a solitary young woman. I could feel waves and waves of misery going through her. I pointed her out to Bill, who was against my talking to her. We were both exhausted, it was very late, and he was not up to getting involved with strangers at that point. Besides, I might just be imagining her distress. She did not give any outward signs of anything but sleepiness. I could not, however, escape the feelings of pain I was receiving from her. Finally, I told Bill I could not help myself, and went to talk to her.\textsuperscript{17}

The young woman’s name was Charlotte. As she was terrified of flying, Helen and Bill offered to sit on either side of her on the plane, while Helen held her hand. Charlotte had felt like her life was “closing in” on her, and so, without any planning, she had left her husband and three children and, with nothing but a small suitcase and a few hundred dollars, was heading off to New York City to make a new life. She had not even arranged a place to stay.

She was a Lutheran, and she was sure all she had to do was find a Lutheran church in New York and they would take care of her there. Bill and I exchanged glances. The message was not hard to grasp. “And this,” I seemed to hear [from the now familiar inner voice], “is my true church . . . helping another; not the edifice you saw before.”\textsuperscript{18}

Helen and Bill ended up being Charlotte’s support team during her brief stay in New York City. They found her a Lutheran church to stay at. She kept running into them in the city, and regularly managed to show up at Helen’s apartment around dinnertime. She soon returned to her family, after which she and Helen kept in touch for many years. She eventually decided to leave her husband under more considered circumstances. She told Helen she was happy and peaceful. Helen said, “She seems to have gotten herself fairly well straightened out now.”\textsuperscript{19}

Helen gained from this experience as well, for it brought her to a pivotal realization about what her new abilities were for; a realization that she felt allowed the Course to come through her. At the heart of the experience was a contrast between two uses of her paranormal abilities. The first use was represented by her psychic impression of the Lutheran church. This benefited no one. All it did was prove that Helen \textit{had} the abilities, which merely served to inflate Helen’s ego. The fact that the church no longer existed simply underscored the practical uselessness of her psychic impression.

The second use was represented by Helen using her psychic abilities to see Charlotte’s pain. That she did so is evident from her story. She said, “I could feel waves and waves of misery going through her,” even though “she
This use of Helen’s abilities had a genuine practical utility. For it allowed her to recognize a stranger’s pain, and thus to provide needed assistance at a crucial juncture in that person’s life. The contrast between the two uses could not have been more clear-cut, and was captured in what Helen’s inner voice said: “And this . . . is my true church . . . helping another; not the edifice you saw before.” We could restate this to say that the real miracle is not a flashy display of paranormal powers, but the use of those powers to help a stranger in need.

The Shield Report

The early part of the Course dictation was punctuated by a series of miracle principles. After one of these principles (“Miracles are part of an interlocking chain of forgiveness which, when completed, is the Atonement”), the following example from Helen’s life was given:

e.g. given of HS [Helen Schucman] report rewrite for Esther. Esther had hurt something you loved [the Shield Institute for Retarded Children], by writing a report you regarded as very bad. You atoned for her by writing one in her name that was very good. Actually, it was not your responsibility professionally to do this, but because you do love the Shield you recognized that in this case, you are your brother’s keeper. While you did not cancel Esther’s sin (later defined as “lack of love” [remark from Helen]), you did cancel out its effects.

Someday I [the author of the Course] want to tell Esther that not only is she forgiven but that the effects of all her sins are cancelled. This is what I have already told you. When I can tell her, she will be afraid for a long time, because she will remember many things, consciously or unconsciously, including the Shield report, a lack of love which you cancelled out in advance by a miracle of devotion.21

According to this material, because Esther’s report would affect something Helen cared about, she recognized that she and Esther were in this together. “You recognized that in this case, you are your brother’s keeper.” This inspired her to perform “a miracle of devotion.” She went above and beyond the call of professional duty and wrote a new report in Esther’s name. She thus cancelled out all the consequences that would have flowed from Esther’s “very bad” report. In doing so, she was actually acting as the instrument of the Atonement (another word the Course redefines), which cancels out the effects of our sins (or lacks of love). Indeed, the Atonement had already cancelled the effects of all of Esther’s sins. You would think this would be incredibly joyous news for Esther to hear. Yet ironically, when Esther was finally ready to hear it, her first reaction would be to “be afraid for a long
time.” When she heard “The effects of all your sins have been cancelled,” all those innumerable misdeeds that she had buried deep in her unconscious would begin to rise to the surface. She would initially fixate on “all your sins,” rather than “have been cancelled.” We can assume, though, that eventually, as events like Helen’s “miracle of devotion” came to consciousness, she would let in the happy message that her slate had been wiped clean.

From this example, we can see how mundane a miracle can be in the Course. It can be as down-to-earth as someone graciously rewriting another person’s shoddy report so that, by this act of mercy, the writer of the report (and others) can be spared the negative consequences of her careless act.

THE COURSE’S MIRACLE IN RELATION TO THE TRADITIONAL MIRACLE

Throughout, we have seen the Course’s miracle existing in a certain tension with the traditional miracle. The Course has clearly taken the usual meaning of the word and preserved certain aspects of it while transforming other aspects. In this final section, I would like to look at both the preserving and the transforming.

Parallels with Miracles as Traditionally Understood

The Course, here as elsewhere, is working off of popular images. In the popular image of the miracle, the Divine is acting through a human instrument, a miracle worker. This miracle worker is someone who is spiritually gifted, perhaps possessing an extraordinary quality of holiness, perhaps possessing extraordinary powers, possibly gained through the use of intensive spiritual disciplines. This miracle worker goes to someone who is trapped in a disease from which there seems no escape. This disease is often seen as physical. However, it may be mental (after all, exorcism is one of the most familiar kinds of miracle). There is a transfer of power from the miracle worker to the diseased person, the laws of this world are superseded, and the person is miraculously healed. As we have seen, all of these features are part of the Course’s miracle. There is more to the conventional image of the miracle, and more to the Course’s concept of the miracle, but the two come together on a core of key features.

Overlooking the Appearance of the Miracle-Working Situation

Now, we turn to the transforming of the word miracle. Although the Course’s miracle looks very much like the traditional miracle on the outside, something entirely different is taking place in the miracle worker’s mind.
Her gift of miraculous healing flows from her ability to look past every facet of the situation that greets her eyes, since what greets her eyes are disease, inequality, and separation.

Though the miracle worker may appear to be on a higher plane than the receiver, she realizes that she is in fact an equal who has simply become “more natural” (Manual, p. 62). The miracle receiver may look quite sick, yet the miracle worker heals by experiencing the receiver’s real nature as eternally whole. The receiver may appear to be so flawed and sinful that he seems to deserve his problem, but the giver knows that his guilt is his own delusion, one that God does not share. The miracle worker seems to be giving the receiver something from outside, something he obviously lacks, yet she knows that she is merely reawakening in him the same perfection that exists in her. Indeed, she realizes that she is not outside of him at all, but in truth is one with him. “It is your task to heal the sense of separation that has made him sick” (Manual, p. 56). The miracle worker’s eyes see a diseased body with a certain severity of illness, yet her mind looks past the body, refusing to even “consider the forms of sickness in which [her] brother believes” (Manual, p. 19). Everything may seem to rest on her shoulders, but she knows that she is only the channel for the true Healer, and so she never doubts the Power in her or worries about her adequacy. The situation may look dire, but the miracle worker heals not by feeling the gravity of it, but by being infectiously happy. “God’s messengers are joyous, and their joy heals sorrow and despair” (Workbook, p. 180). Finally, she understands that by giving healing, she is not depleting herself to benefit someone else, but is instead “receiving something equally desirable in return” (Text, p. 121).

Enriching the Concept

The Course also transforms the popular image of the miracle by immensely enriching the concept, filling it with an extensive thought system. From start to finish, each aspect of the miracle is filled out with a detailed system of thought, the true extent of which can only be hinted at in a chapter of this length. For instance, I have presented here only one of the Course’s teachings for how the mind causes illness in the body. There are at least a dozen more, all of them relating to how the miracle heals the body.

Into its concept of the miracle, the Course packs a number of additional concepts: guilt, forgiveness, true perception, the holy encounter, the holy instant. In the process, it extends the miracle into a number of areas not usually associated with miracles, and in some cases even considered at odds with them. The Course’s miracle, for example, is intimately involved with the psychology of perception. It is also grounded in a depth psychology that is considerably Freudian in character, with a vast unconscious whose contents have been repressed, are kept from consciousness using defense mechanisms,
and thus tend to show up only in disguised form. The deeper reaches of this unconscious, where we might expect to find Jungian archetypes, are instead filled with pure, unformed miracle-working potential, which is also repressed and usually rises to consciousness only in distorted forms.

The Course’s miracle also reaches into the area of mysticism in that true perception, at full strength, seems roughly equivalent to what is often called extrovertive mysticism, in which the mystic experiences the phenomenal world as suffused with the divine and one with him. The Course’s miracle also extends into the area of interpersonal healing, since it involves using the power of forgiveness to wipe away interpersonal blocks and restore unity. It also relates to the helping professions, in that real help and service, from the Course’s standpoint, involve giving miracles—giving those in need a new perception of themselves, conveyed through sincere acts of caring. Finally, the Course’s miracle extends into spiritual development, for the Course sees miracles as a crucial instrument of the miracle worker’s own awakening.

Broadening the Miracle’s Range

The Course consistently works to broaden the miracle’s accessibility and application. In the conventional image, a miracle is a rare exception to the almost seamless workings of natural law. In the Course, however, “miracles are natural” (Text, p. 3). They are the spontaneous expression of our true nature, which, if allowed, would routinely overturn the “laws” of this world, which the Course calls “not laws, but madness” (Workbook, p. 134). In the conventional image, a miracle is something that only spiritual prodigies can do. However, the Course says, “If miracles, the Holy Spirit’s gift, were given specially to an elect and special group . . . then is He ally to specialness” (Text, p. 540)—He is playing favorites. Instead, He calls all of us to be miracle workers. And we all possess the capacity to do miracles and can be trained to access this capacity; training that the Course attempts to provide.

In the standard image, we cannot expect a miracle to solve all problems. Many of our problems seem too big, or perhaps we feel undeserving of a miracle. The Course, however, asserts, “You have no problems that He [the Holy Spirit] cannot solve by offering you a miracle” (Text, p. 298). This is because “there is no order of difficulty in miracles” (Text, p. 3), and because “everyone is equally entitled” (Text, p. 540) to miracles because of his or her divine nature. Finally, in the standard image, miracles are mainly associated with dramatic changes in the physical that occur in a religious or spiritual context. The Course broadens the miracle to include psychological and interpersonal healings that may occur in distinctly secular settings (as we saw in the examples from Helen Schucman’s life).

The net result is that all of us are called to devote every day to working miracles, applying them to all problems in our own lives and in the lives of
everyone we encounter. Thus, “You should begin each day with the prayer ‘Help me to perform whatever miracles you want of me today.’”

Focusing the Miracle Away from the Physical

One of the greatest differences between the traditional miracle and the Course’s miracle concerns the role of physical healing and change. In our cultural image of the miracle, its main job is to release us from physical problems, especially physical disease. Such problems are seen as real, and so being released from them is seen as an end in itself. Additionally, we often think of the miracle as a spectacular physical feat accomplished by “spiritual” means (e.g., walking on water). Here, the purpose of the miracle may be not so much to relieve someone’s suffering as to prove the reality and power of the spiritual realm.

The Course strongly takes issue with these ideas. It teaches that although the body can be healed by miracles, it is not “the proper aim of healing” (Text, p. 158). Rather, the healing of the body occurs because the body is overlooked, being recognized as an illusion. “Miracles . . . are sudden shifts into invisibility, away from the bodily level. That is why they heal” (Text, p. 4). The bodily healing that results is not meant to emphasize the importance of the body, but rather the unreality of the body. The Course views reality as changeless by definition. Consequently, by changing the body, the miracle demonstrates that the body is only a shifting appearance, not a genuine reality. “The miracle is means to demonstrate that all appearances can change because they are appearances, and cannot have the changelessness reality entails” (Text, pp. 642–643).

As for miracles seen as paranormal feats designed to compel faith, the Course says flatly, “The use of miracles as spectacles to induce belief is a misunderstanding of their purpose” (Text, p. 3). As we saw in Helen’s psychic perception of the Lutheran church, the “miraculous” feat may have no practical utility apart from the point it supposedly proves. Further, this point may actually be about the miracle worker herself, about her “achievements from the past, unusual attunement with the ‘unseen,’ or ‘special’ favors from God” (Manual, p. 62), as the Course puts it. All of this amounts to proving her superiority over those she helps; a message that actually weakens them (Text, p. 120). Thus, even if the body is authentically healed by paranormal abilities, if the underlying message is the superiority of the miracle worker, the Course would not consider this a miracle, but rather an instance of “magic” (echoing the traditional distinction between miracles and magic). In the Course, magic is where strictly personal power is used to manipulate illusions (the forms of this world), as opposed to God’s power being used to heal the mind.

At the heart of the Course’s miracle is the giver’s loving recognition of another’s worth, equality, and unity with himself, which brings palpable
healing and relief to the mind of this other person. This stands in marked contrast to the common image of the miracle worker engaged in an almost solitary affair of producing a spectacular physical result that may not directly heal anyone but instead may subtly affirm how much higher he is than those he helps. “Unless a miracle actually heals,” says the Course, “it is not a miracle at all.”

This category, then, represents not a broadening but a narrowing of the concept, one that excludes perhaps most of what we would usually call a miracle. For instance, the nature miracles of Jesus—walking on water, stilling the storm, feeding the multitudes, physically disappearing—would not qualify as miracles in the Course sense, for they were not direct healings of someone’s perception but were first and foremost dramatic physical manifestations. (They are also regarded with much more skepticism by New Testament historians than Jesus’ miracles of healing and exorcism.) Even the genuine healing of a body by paranormal means would only qualify as a miracle (in the Course sense) if the healing was at its core a mental healing. The Course calls spiritual healing that heals the body but not the mind “false healing.”

Centering the Miracle on the Psychological and Interpersonal

This is the flip side of focusing the miracle away from the physical. As we have seen throughout this chapter, the Course’s miracle aims at healing the mind by giving the receiver a new self-perception. While it wouldn’t be strange for someone to call a dramatic psychological healing a “miracle,” this is certainly not the image the word brings to mind.

Moreover, the miracle in the Course has a strongly interpersonal character that does not fit the traditional stereotype. We tend to think of the miracle as a transfer of power or energy from a miracle worker to someone who is spiritually beneath him and with whom he is not in an ongoing relationship. And though the miracle worker may gain material rewards, nothing comes back from the other person that benefits him spiritually or psychologically. In the Course, however, what transfers from giver to receiver is a genuine feeling of forgiving love, without which the miracle becomes an “empty gesture” (Text, p. 28). Though the miracle worker may seem to be above the receiver, the actual content of his gift is the “recognition of perfect equality of giver and receiver on which the miracle rests” (Text, p. 8).

Furthermore, the two may well be in a long-term relationship, in which case the miracle worker may be giving the release of years of resentment, thus freeing the receiver from years of guilt, and allowing the relationship itself to heal. Yet the process does not end here, for the Course builds a mutuality into its vision of the miracle. The receiver returns the gift in
the form of gratitude. This gratitude contains real insight into the lofty nature of the miracle worker, and thus heals his own ailing self-concept. The receiver has become his savior. “Forgiven by you, your savior offers you salvation” (Text, p. 528; emphasis from the original dictation, as found in what is called the Urtext). The miracle, then, sparks a mutual exchange that draws both individuals into a joining. “And in the space that sin left vacant do they join as one” (Text, p. 548). Through this joining, the miracle frees both giver and receiver from “the narrow boundaries the ego would impose upon the self.”

26 All in all, there is an interpersonal warmth to the Course’s miracle that does not seem nearly as present in our conventional image of the miracle. The Course puts it this way: “Miracles . . . are genuinely interpersonal, and result in true closeness to others” (Text, p. 7). From the Course’s standpoint, this psychological and interpersonal focus makes the miracle more truly practical. In its view, as debilitating as physical problems can be, problems of the mind and of relationships are yet more central to human suffering. They are the source and substance of what truly ails us.

CONCLUSION

The relationship between the Course’s miracle and the traditional miracle can be summed up very simply as “same form, different content.” On the form level, the Course envisions an interaction between a miracle worker and a miracle receiver that would be familiar to anyone in our culture. However, the Course then fills this familiar form with new content, in a number of ways. Behind the form, the miracle worker’s mind is looking past the outer situation, pervaded by disease, inequality, and separation, to a spiritual reality characterized by wholeness, equality, and unity. The Course also enriches the content of the miracle, packing into it sophisticated concepts of forgiveness, true perception, and the holy instant, and extending it into areas of depth psychology, extrovertive mysticism, and spiritual development. This new content broadens the miracle’s range, making it something “natural” that everyone is called to do, enabling it to heal any problem, and stretching it to include mental and interpersonal healing. The Course then focuses the miracle away from the physical, saying that it’s not about healing bodies or performing spectacular physical feats. Rather, it’s really about the healing of minds and relationships; any physical healing that occurs is just a by-product of this more essential healing.

Perhaps the chief value of this concept of the miracle, for those who aren’t students of the Course, is to raise a number of important questions, such as, Can forgiveness really produce miracles? Is the miracle worker’s loving perception of the receiver an essential aspect of the miracle? Do we want to consider a dramatic psychological healing a miracle? Is the healing of perception
and relationships even more important than the healing of bodies? And can it result in the healing of bodies?

Since miracles are really about God acting in the world, this view of the miracle also raises numerous questions about God: Is it possible that God lovingly offers unlimited healing power to our every problem, but must wait until we let that power in? What do we make of the idea that, once let in, God’s agenda is mainly to heal our minds and our relationships? Could it be that the real purpose of God’s activity in the world is to help us relinquish our self-centered, predatory ego, so that we can awaken to our divine nature? And could it be that the real expression of God’s activity in the world is a “holy encounter” between a loving giver and a grateful receiver, even if the two don’t believe in God?

These are important theoretical and theological questions, but these are also relevant personal questions. For who does not have fixed, unhealthy perceptions that could use a miracle from the Holy Spirit? Who does not have broken relationships that could use the healing power of forgiveness? The Course’s vision of the miracle clearly has implications for every life.

NOTES

1. Helen Schucman’s actual stance appears to have been much more complicated: an angry disbelief in God coupled with an underlying belief in God that seems to have never left her.


3. Ibid., 115.

4. Ibid., 37–38.

5. A Course in Miracles (1992), 2nd edition, Mill Valley, CA: Foundation for Inner Peace. A Course in Miracles has three volumes: the Text, the Workbook for Students, and the Manual for Teachers. All references to the Course will be indicated parenthetically in the text, using the name of one of three volumes (Text, Workbook, or Manual), followed by a page number.

6. Psychotherapy: Purpose, Process, and Practice (1976), 2nd edition, Mill Valley, CA: Foundation for Inner Peace, 10. This is a supplement to the Course scribed after the Course was published.

7. Ibid., p. 6.

8. Ibid., p. 21.


12. Wapnick, Absence from Felicity, p. 87.

13. Ibid., p. 91.

15. Ibid., pp. 94–95.
16. Ibid., p. 118.
17. Ibid., p. 122.
21. This passage is from what is known as the “Urtext,” the original, mostly unedited typescript of A Course in Miracles. The Urtext is currently not available in book form, but can be downloaded from a number of Internet Web sites, including http://courseinmiracles.com/.
22. Ibid.
23. Ibid.
24. Ibid.
25. The Song of Prayer: Prayer, Forgiveness and Healing (1992), 2nd edition, Mill Valley, CA: Foundation for Inner Peace, 17. This is a supplement to the Course scribed after the Course was published.

REFERENCES
“I’ll have to talk that over with my therapist.” “I’m in therapy right now trying to figure out what I should do.” “My wife and I are seeing a marital therapist hoping to resolve our ‘issues.’ ” “My kid is in therapy because of his ADD, ODD, and OCD.” “I wish my husband would get into therapy.” These and similar psychotherapy-based statements are frequently heard these days. We have even had presidential candidates, their spouses, presidents’ wives, and even presidents talking about therapy without much chagrin.

We are, so it seems, in the midst of a time when psychology, psychiatry, and their cognates are at the center of our cultural milieu. Fifty years ago it was unheard of to be talking about one’s therapist. Today, it is commonplace. The very term therapy was infrequently used until about 1970, following the 1960s explosion of emotion and feelings. More accurately, Carl Rogers’s client-centered therapy (1951) and Albert Ellis’s rational-emotive therapy (Ellis and Harper, 1973) initiated this focus on psychotherapy. Behavior therapy and cognitive therapy soon followed, which eventually fused into the most common form of therapy used today, cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT), and in some spheres has become fused with Ellis’s style to become rational-emotive behavioral therapy. The last half century has seen not only a plethora of therapies and therapists, but people of every walk of life and every stratum of society utilizing the therapeutic process.

The growth of the practice of psychotherapy has not been entirely matched with justifying research. A good bit of research has been done with CBT in order to judge its effectiveness, often in conjunction with psychopharmacological treatment. But the established effectiveness of the many
other therapies still lies in unfinished research or in clinical lore, promoted by people who are true believers in psychotherapy. I am one of those true believers, having been a psychologist and psychotherapist for 40 years. Yet I must admit that there is scant evidence that psychotherapy actually helps most people. This is a scary thought for someone like me who has devoted his entire adult life to the pursuit of the profession.

It is my contention that when psychotherapy works, it is a miracle. There are times in the psychotherapy process that seem quite miraculous: a person with little self-insight gains genuine insight into herself; a person who has lived primarily so that he could become drunk finds the joy of sobriety; a marriage that has been unhappy for decades finds genuine and lasting happiness; a child who has always failed at school finds academic and social success; a depressed person finds permanent relief. These are miracles, indeed. Psychotherapists are often in the crucible of the human experiment: the intense suffering that all humans seem to have.

WHAT IS PSYCHOTHERAPY?

Psychotherapy exactly translated from its Greek roots means healing of the mind or healing of the soul. Psychology means the study of the mind, or soul, or spirit. Therapy may take the form of client-centered therapy or rational-emotive therapy, psychoanalytic or psychodynamic therapy, cognitive behavioral therapy (Beck, Wright, Newman, & Liese, 1993), didactic therapy, Gestalt therapy, primal therapy (Janov, 1970), hypnotherapy (Erickson, 1976), family reconstruction therapy (Nerin, 1986), music therapy (Sacks, 2007), or friendly diagnosis (Johnson, 2000).

It may be true, in fact, that one kind of therapy works better than others; one kind might work with a particular problem, or personality style, or individual, or at one time in one’s life and not in another, while not being efficacious for everyone. But success in psychotherapy—real life-changing and freeing success—is a miracle.

WHAT IS A MIRACLE?

Writers and readers of the current volumes on miracles will doubtless be trying to discern the essence of the term miracle. Original philosophical thought, at least, considered miracles to be of divine origin. Aquinas (Summa Contra Gentiles III) says those things are properly called miracles which are done by divine agency beyond the order commonly observed in nature. Philosopher David Hume suggested a similar divine intervention (1947) as the source of miracles. Sometimes, however, we use the term miracle without reference to the divine or supernatural, viewing miracles as roughly equivalent to something very special, out of the ordinary, and having a unique positive
outcome. I shall be working with the approximate definition of a miracle as being an event, usually involving one or more human beings, having the following characteristics. It has a positive outcome for one or more persons, is of an extraordinary nature, and is demonstrably real, that is, it has some effect that can be seen, felt, or measured.

THE PROCESS OF PSYCHOTHERAPY

Most psychotherapies involve some form of (1) healing, (2) self-understanding and self-acceptance, (3) self-enhancement and success in life, and (4) the facilitation of these three elements by some kind of action of a psychotherapist. Consider two clinical cases that have been in my practice recently, one that we might identify as a failure, and one that we might consider a success, or a miracle.

Case Number 1

“John” (not his real name) is a 52-year-old man, professionally trained, single for all his years, and presently unemployed having recently been fired for lack of performance, after being at his latest job for less than six months. John has been a patient of mine, on and off, for 25 years. I have seen him in and through a myriad of friendships and relationships, both with men and women, almost all of which have been unsuccessful. John’s failed relationships have usually come about by his directly or indirectly demanding that his friend or lover reveal his or her depth of feeling and “soul.” John is also functionally alcoholic, and has been for at least all of these 25 years I have known him. He is very bright, probably in the 135 IQ neighborhood, and has also some secondary intelligences including kinesthetics and music. I have seen John through at least six different job changes over the past 10 years.

One of the most interesting aspects of John is his intense self-seeking, self-understanding, and, dare I say, undue self-interest, much of which is seemingly based on his lack of true and adequate development of his self. It is interesting that John is self-interested and curious about his inner feelings despite his lack of a true sense of safety in the world. The principal symptom that John and I are trying to attend to is his nightly fear of a “presence” in his bedroom, a presence that he can never really see, but feels. John has always been intensely interested in his feelings, intuitions, and alleged understanding of other people’s souls. Yet at 52 he is without job, life partner, concrete life direction, and home. He would be diagnosed as having borderline personality disorder, but also suffers from other disorders, including depression, anxiety, and alcoholism.

John is two important things to me: (1) a person I deeply care for, and one to whom I have devoted a good deal of my life’s energy, and (2) a person whom I have failed to truly help to be successful in the world of work, relationships, home, and service to humankind. I have given all that I know to give to John. I have utilized many different techniques in my therapy
with him. I continue to give all that I have to give to him. He often seems to profit from my work, but he remains essentially blocked from succeeding in life despite my best efforts, and beside what appear to be his best efforts.

With John, self-understanding and self-acceptance seem to have given him little of what it takes to find happiness and success in life. Frequently, I have wished for a miracle for John, namely, that he would find some way through what appears to be a morass of meaningless emptiness in his life. It would be nice if he could just find a job that he liked, or a woman that he liked, a friend that he liked, a car that he liked, or a geographical location that he liked. Alas, he seems to be able to find none of these despite my best work, his best work on himself, prayers, and his apparent brilliance. Why is that? Could not God find it reasonable to at least grant John one of these small miracles?

Case Number 2

"Jeff" is a completely different story. Jeff is 14. I met him just a couple of weeks ago, after a myriad of e-mails from his mother, who reportedly heard that I did miracles with children. Jeff’s mother and Jeff came into my office together for a few minutes during which time I asked Mom to tell me about why she wanted me to see Jeff. She proceeded to tell me that he has “ADHD, ODD (oppositional defiant disorder), depressive disorder, and probably other disorders” that she did not know about. She further reported that another of her sons has autistic spectrum disorder (ASD), and yet another son has some sort of learning disorder (LD). Furthermore, she herself may have seasonal affective disorder (SAD) and wonders if she has Alzheimer’s disorder (AD). Surely, Jeff’s father has a “never diagnosed ADHD” disorder and some kind of bipolar disorder. All these disorders: everyone in the family had at least two! So Jeff must have one or more of these disorders. I learned that Jeff has not been doing well in school for years, is generally unhappy, and is abusive much of the time to his brothers and to his mother. That was her opener.

I frequently have people coming to my office talking about their disorders, much of it derived from TV shows like Oprah and Dr. Phil, as well as simplistic news magazine articles. It has been interesting to follow the flow of popular disorders over the 40 years of my psychological practice. If we were to believe that these disorders were as rampant as people seem to believe, everyone would be in psychotherapy and on psychotropic medications. Such was the position of Jeff’s mother as she desperately presented her unhappy son to me. She expected me to find out what was wrong with him and fix him. She believed I could do this despite her failure to do so in 1+ years, because she had somewhere heard of my powers to perform such miracles.

Understandably, most teenagers do not like coming to a therapist’s office. Teenage years are a transitional time and generally difficult for all teenagers because of the profound neurological changes that occur during these years, to say nothing of the challenges presented by peers, future
directions, and drugs and alcohol availability. So when I see a teenager, I am very aware of the complexity of such an individual and his life, and I work diligently to understand what is going on with him given these complexities.

I excused Mom to the waiting room while I attempted to visit with Jeff. Jeff sat slouched in the chair across from me, a position he had assumed at the time he was dragged into my office by his mother. I told Jeff that I wasn’t going to read his mind, find out what was wrong with him, try to fix him, or tell him what to do. Instead, I said, I wanted to understand what was right about him, hear about what he liked to do, and find out what he was good at. It took a few minutes for Jeff to believe me, and that I was not going to tell him how to live life, or psychoanalyze him in some way. An adolescent who does not want to be in a psychologist’s office in the first place and is clearly unhappy with much of life is afraid of yet another adult telling him what he has to do.

I asked Jeff what he liked. Slowly, but quite clearly, he said that he liked snowboarding and skateboarding. That’s good, I thought. He likes at least something. Then, surprisingly, I learned that he actually liked the first half of school, hating the second half. The first half of school was Math, French, Woodworking, and Physical Education. The second half was Science, Social Studies, and English. I already suspected something: this kid was probably right-brained. Right-brained people are visual, kinesthetic, artistic, musical, and tend to be more aware of and expressive of feelings. They usually are much more inclined to seek out and develop relationships.

Left-brained people are usually more oriented toward words, particularly the written word, concepts and theory, and most elements of mathematics. Jeff liked the right-brained experiences of physical activity, snowboarding, skateboarding, and gym; and the visual-spatial activity of woodworking. Why would he like math and French, which seem to be left-brained classes? I learned that he liked French because the teacher was “wild and crazy” and evidently spent a good deal of time relating to her students and entertaining them, making French class fun for Jeff. He liked math because it was easy for him. Evidently, not all of his functioning is right-brained, or maybe his math teacher was also a fellow with an affable and pleasant way of relating to Jeff.

Jeff and I talked first about this right-brained idea, and then about some of his personality characteristics, like being “low boundary” and spontaneous in the “high boundary” world of school, family, culture, and church. We talked further about his deeply feeling-oriented way of judgment, and his interest in ideas more than facts, and finally about his introverted nature. Jeff started to come alive. It probably helped that I was able to talk to Jeff in teenager language replete with the expletives that typify much adolescent conversation. Thirty minutes into this initial conversation with Jeff, he said that he liked me, that he had learned something, and that he would like to come back to see me. I had previously told his mother and him that I would not see him a second time unless he wanted to come back. We finished our
time together, and I shook his hand as adolescents do, and brought him to the waiting room where mother sat wondering if I had done a miracle. She seemed to think that I had, because Jeff was willing to come back to see me. Jeff left happy. His mother left pleased and a bit stunned. Had I done some kind of miracle to turn this kid around from an unhappy, whiny, demanding child into someone who was seemingly interested in understanding himself, and maybe ultimately finding happiness? Or had God done some kind of miracle? Mother seemed to think so. Time will tell. But it did seem like a miracle to me that through known and unknown forces Jeff appeared happy for what seemed like the first time in a long time.

No miracle with John despite the better part of 25 years of work! An apparent miracle with Jeff within 45 minutes! It is a general understanding among therapists that some patients get better and find happiness within a short period of time, while others seem to be unable to ever improve their lots in life, despite the same therapist, the same treatment approach, the same diagnosis, and the same God.

In my practice I have few Johns, meaning 25-year patients, and even fewer Jeffs, kids who seem to turn around within a few minutes. These are but the extremes of psychotherapy patients. Most people lie somewhere in between chronic dissatisfaction with life and instantaneous cure. A larger question, however, is the actual nature of psychotherapy, namely, whether there are miracles occurring in the therapist’s office. Furthermore, might there be miracles that are unknown to the psychotherapist, or even more curiously, unknown to the psychotherapy patient?

MIRACLES IN PSYCHOTHERAPY

It certainly seems that miracles do occur in psychotherapy: a woman freed of the results of chronic sexual abuse in her childhood; a man freed of chronic alcoholism; a teenager finding some happiness in life despite a history of great dissatisfaction; a man finding his life’s passion can also be his life’s work; a child who learns to be introverted without shame; an avid sportsman who finds a way to engage in sports without destroying his family; a returning veteran who can grieve the sorrows of war without the symptoms of flashbacks and anxiety. There is no doubt that miracles of this sort do happen. Granted, they do not often happen, but is that not the nature of a miracle: an infrequent occurrence of a positive experience in life for which there is no known cause?

I believe that miracles happen in the offices of psychotherapists, as I also believe they have happened in my office. In my maturing years in this profession I realize that I know more about my field and am certainly better at my profession than I was even a few years ago. I am more efficient. I am more honest. I just told a patient who presented with panic disorder that I didn’t
know whether I could help him, but that I was willing to give all that I have
to give to him, and that I might help him. I love this work; but I am also hum-
bled in it because more people do not find lives of genuine happiness, perma-
nent satisfaction, sustained harmony, and character-changing altruism.

I am humbled by the people who do find these things in life, seemingly miraculously, almost as if I were just a bystander and a brief compatriot in their life journeys. I remain committed and content in this miracle-based profession, knowing that even with the best of effort, skills, and technique, some patients will not find real joy in their lives. Yet when one does, when one person truly finds joy and satisfaction, I rejoice with him or her, knowing that I have been in the presence of God’s work, of God’s handiwork, of God’s miraculous influence.

REFERENCES
Awe is not a very comfortable standpoint for many people. Hence, all about us today, we see avoidance of awe—by burying ourselves in materialist science or in absolutist religion positions; or by locking ourselves into systems, whether corporate, familial, or consumerist; or by stupefying ourselves with drugs.

—Kirk J. Schneider, Rediscovery of Awe: Splendor, Mystery, and the Fluid Center of Life

In all the major world religions, the deepest wisdom and most powerful lessons come in the form of parables, difficult stories, and abstract statements. Yet we continue to pursue certainty and concrete knowledge. Rarely has a great religious teacher taught primarily in simple truths. These leaders seemed to be in touch with a deeper wisdom. Rollo May once pointed out that those things that are simple and quickly understood have little impact upon people; however, the truths that at first elude understanding often have great impact. This, in part, is the way the human unconscious works. The unconscious continues to ponder that which was not understood while that which is quickly grasped is no longer considered.

That is one of the reasons humans need miracles and believe they see them happening in their own experiences. Miracles symbolically represent a world of the unknown, and even when a given miracle can be described or even explained, it leaves us with a haunting sense of awe and wonder at having encountered the apparently wide and mysterious transcendental world of God and his infinite unknown. The greatest lessons of religious teachers are as much in the process as the content. Those teachers seem to be teaching
us not to have too much confidence in our ability to know. They continue to entice us into a spirituality of the journey and the unknown and the paranormal, while only giving passing interest to the content of the known.

We wish to explore the connection between the unknown and spirituality as experiences in what may be called the paranormal range of human experience; and compare this with the known and religion. In many ways this is a false distinction. David Wulff, one of the most important influences in the history of the psychology of religion, demonstrates that the distinction between religion and spirituality is a contemporary development that would not have made much sense a century ago. Today, however, this distinction is quite essential for many people who have become disillusioned with organized religion but seek to maintain a connection to the underlying meaning system.

It is unfair, however, to place the known and the unknown in an absolute dichotomy. Part of this is because truth and the basic nature of the known have become much more complex over the past 50 years as Western culture transitioned into postmodern times. The known and the unknown often coexist in the same place. Knowledge cannot be simplified into the simple categories of what we know and what we do not know. Instead, all realms of knowledge contain at least a degree of the unknown.

PARADOXES IN KNOWING AND THE UNKNOWN IN RELIGIOUS AND INTELLECTUAL HISTORY

The distinction between religion and spirituality deserves some clarification. The division of religion and spirituality is a fairly new development. Over the past century the terminology has evolved so that religion tends to refer to content and structure of belief while spirituality refers to the personal and relational aspects of belief. As such, organized religion has remained in the world of religion, often thought of as distinct from spirituality. In accordance with this distinction, religion is often associated with religious knowing while spirituality is associated with unknowing or not knowing. Spirituality is more mysterious, awe-based, and mystical; religion is more concrete and clear. The tension between these two approaches has long existed.

The various psychological and social influences on preference for the known or unknown, for religion or spirituality, are fairly well established in the psychological literature. For example, attachment is a good predictor of religious conversion and preferences for charismatic or emotional religious experience. Often intense religious experiences combine a more mystical experience with the belief that one has directly or concretely communicated with God.

Richardson developed a basis for understanding one’s preferred approach to religion and spirituality based upon the Myers-Briggs Personality Typology. In this, it is purported that personality plays an important role in the
preference for certain aspects of religion, including a preference for more concrete or abstract views of religious belief. In other words, an individual’s personality impacts one’s way of being religious, just as it impacts many other aspects of his or her life.

Existential psychology and philosophy have long urged that religion can be used as a defense against anxiety. As anxiety is rooted in the unknown, religion can be seen as a defense against anxiety and the unknown. It is important to note that, contrary to popular misconceptions about existential theory, neither existential philosophy nor psychology suggests that religion is always a defense. There are many existential approaches that are highly religious and spiritual; however, even these existential approaches tend to be critical of certain ways of being religious and affirm the potential for religion to be a defense. In other words, from an existential perspective, religion can be authentic or inauthentic. When the primary mode or motivation for religion is to defend against the anxiety of the unknown, it is an inauthentic and a potentially destructive form of religion.

This existential understanding of religion can also be applied to science, accounting for the similarity of aspects of science and religion. Science, in its purest form, is rooted in the pursuit of knowledge more than the attainment of knowledge. The scientific method is designed to allow for discoveries to be continuously tested and retested in order to be refined by the process of verifiability and non-verifiability.

Through the modern period, science developed its version of fundamentalism: scientism. Although science is rarely called on the carpet for scientism, religion is often taken to task for fundamentalism. Both, however, are often rooted in a similar psychological process: the pursuit of the known and the removal of anxiety. This is not to say that all religious fundamentalists or those aligned with scientism do so out of a pathological process to avoid anxiety; indeed, many may come to these positions through genuine cognitive alignment or cognitive agreement with this approach. However, there are important distinctions between those clinging to scientism and fundamentalism as a defense, on the one hand, and aligning with them because of agreement, on the other.

When any belief system is used as a defense, it is rigidly, and often ferociously, defended. When a scientist aligns with scientism because of a genuine belief in its epistemological truth, then criticism and expression of differing perspectives are not threatening; there is no need to defend science. Similarly, when a religious person is rooted in genuine religious belief, he or she does not feel the need to protect God or his or her religious convictions.

A distinction between passion and coercive evangelizing, whether to religion or science, can be noted here. The genuine believer in science or religion may be passionate about the beliefs but allow the passion to be the tool to attract people to the belief system. Such folk recognize, if only on the intuitive level, that passion enlists people who share similar passions while coercion
Spiritualizing the Unknown

brings a different type of adherents, who may change the nature of the beliefs. Religious and scientific zealots feel the need to defend their positions, often because in doing so they are defending their own psychological security.

This may explain why the genuinely religious or scientific often feel ashamed of their more zealous fellow believers. They share the same content of belief, but they do not share the same belief or faith process. Herein lies the distinction between content and process, which, in contemporary language, is what transforms religion to spirituality. For the spiritual person, process is the essence of belief, while for the religious, content is essential. One may note the limitations and confusions in the language of religion and spirituality in this section of the paper. From this point forward, we will begin to distinguish those who are religious, namely, those whose faith is rooted in content, from those who are spiritual, namely, those whose faith is rooted in process.

There are at least two motivations for being religious: one genuine and one pathological. We think there is not an absolute distinction between the two. There can be both healthy and pathological reasons for specific beliefs existing within the same believer. It should also be noted that there are healthy and pathological reasons for being spiritual. Spirituality should not be idealized in such a way as to suggest it is always healthy. Just as there may be differing motivations for being religious, there can be differing motivations for being spiritual. Today one may encounter what may be called spiritual fundamentalists.

Spiritual fundamentalists, essentially a subcategory of postmodern fundamentalists, react strongly against anything known. They challenge any claims at knowledge or truth of almost any sort. This is done reactively, not reflectively, and is rooted in a fear of the known. Spiritual and postmodern fundamentalists do not want to commit to anything, and do not want to be tied down. They also may have a reflexive rebellion rooted in antagonism to any authority. This postmodern fundamentalism can also be seen in the realms of science, although the terminology is more distinct. It is rooted in a distrust of anything scientific.

The existential position, which we wish to develop here, is founded in paradox. Schneider understands paradox as central to the human condition, or central to human existence. In his view, paradox transcends simple dualism by seeing opposing poles as necessarily connected. The tension between these poles is not so much tension between polar opposites as an existential necessity.\(^8\) The tension between the known and the unknown is an existential reality that provides an answer to the extreme versions of postmodernism.

This existential postmodernism pulls back from the extremist tendency of postmodernism that, at times, implies that ultimate truth does not exist. Instead, it claims that there are always elements of the unknown in the known and vice versa. Truth always retains some mystery. This paradox is reflected
in a quote from Paul Tillich in which he stated, “Sometimes I think it is my mission to bring faith to the faithless, and doubt to the faithful.”

This, too, reflects the paradox between process and content. Content apart from process is distorted and incomplete; however, process without content is often nonsensical. When content and process, the known and the unknown, are placed together in paradox, this creates the foundation of what Schneider speaks about as awe. Even in the paradox of the known and unknown, some mystery or awe remains necessary and can serve as a basis for avoiding the extremes of excessive trust in knowledge or the knowns; as well as avoiding the extremes of cynicism, hopelessness, and faithlessness. As Camus states in The Plague, “How hard it must be to live only with what one knows and what one remembers, cut off from what one hopes for! . . . There can be no peace without hope.”

Religious and Spiritual Rituals

Rituals are closely connected with both spirituality and religion; however, they are means to differenting ends. Many religious rituals are enacted symbols. According to Tillich, symbols “point to something beyond themselves” and they “participate[s] in that to which it [the symbol] points.” Religious rituals, then, are intended to point people toward something beyond themselves and provide opportunities to participate with God or our Ultimate Concern. Tillich says that symbols can often become idolatrous; this occurs when the symbol is thought to be truth or reality instead of pointing toward a truth beyond itself. In other words, concretizing symbols is a form of idolatry. Similarly, when ritual is made into a requirement of which its enactment is its main end, it has become idolatrous. Although Tillich uses Judeo-Christian language to express these ideas, the basic meaning can be extended beyond religions. Rituals often are used to deaden or escape, instead of to engage or incite participation. This is a misuse of rituals; however, this tendency can be seen in all religions. In Buddhism, when meditation practices are used simply to escape current pain, this is a misuse of the original intent of the ritual.

This problem is inherent in the commonplace applications of meditation and mindfulness in Western psychology. Meditation is often used as stress reduction or relaxation; the intended end is calmness. Mindfulness, which is a ritual used to attain deeper awareness of oneself, is often used for relapse-prevention or to increase awareness of thoughts that cause discomfort and increase the likelihood of acting out. Psychology takes the Buddhist ritual out of its context and uses it for immediate psychological gain. The end is in the ritual, not beyond.

When meditation and mindfulness are placed in their original Buddhist context, their aim is to connect with an ultimate reality beyond the illusion of oneself, and to produce nonattachment to the self, since it is an illusion.
Western Buddhist approaches, as well as psychological approaches utilizing Buddhist rituals, often are excessively self-focused, even if they seek transcendent or transpersonal experiences. In Tillich’s language, these concretized rituals are a form of idolatry, and certainly they are a distortion of Buddhism. Religious rituals, as an end in themselves, tend to be such idolatrous substitutions for profound meditation and mindfulness; thus they miss the ritual’s deeper meaning: they merely fulfill a requirement, they create a desired state, or they distract or numb the individual from what is occurring outside the ritual in real life. Conversely, spiritual rituals, employed authentically, increase awareness in true meditation and mindfulness, broadening one’s experience, and going beyond what is immediate in the ritual itself. Religious rituals often serve to quell anxiety; spiritual rituals often deepen anxiety.

The anxiety triggered by spiritual rituals, however, is not a pathological anxiety and may not even be perceived as uncomfortable. It may be experienced as exhilarating, freeing, and expansive. Religious rituals often heighten the focus on the immediate situation or context. Their practice and intentions are concrete, short-focused, and often self-serving. Spiritual rituals are usually rooted in mystery, awe, and the unknown. Spiritual rituals also open one up to the inscrutable, as Schneider refers to it, which is the ultimate mystery beyond one’s self. Tillich would add to this that through the symbolic elements of the ritual, the individual participates in the inscrutable (Tillich, 61, 104–9, 129–33 143, 157, 242).

Compassion and Love versus Obedience

It may be evident that our presentation of religion suggests that it is often connected to the immediate in a way that it loses sight of the vast context of the immediate. Religion focuses on immediate ends while talking continuously about future promises, on the now to get to the there (heaven; nonattachment), but often does not truly value the present or see the present as part of the there.

Spirituality, conversely, recognizes the interconnectedness of all things, including the interconnectedness of past, present, and future. This represents a different understanding of time. For religion, A is endured to get to B. In spirituality, A is part of B; they are one. Both the religious and spiritual tendencies can be seen in the various world religions. In Christianity, two views of Jesus’ ministry illustrate this point. Some followers of Jesus focus on Jesus’ commandments, connecting these to the future promise. Although the promise of the future is discussed, the focus is on the requirements of the present. Other Christians focus on replicating the faith and ministry of Jesus because it is its own end. They do not see living in the present as a requirement for blessings, but as a way of life that is a blessing.
Similar conceptions can be seen in Buddhism. Like Christianity and all the major world religions, compassion is an important aspect of Buddhism. When approached religiously, compassion is another requirement to be attained. When approached spiritually, compassion is a sought after way of life. A beautiful example of this can be seen in Barasch’s book Field Notes on the Compassionate Life: A Search for the Soul of Kindness. As the title suggests, Barasch’s understanding of compassion is a pursuit of living a compassionate life; it is not a requirement, not something to be checked off, and not something attained. It is pursued.17

As soon as concepts such as compassion and love are turned into requirements, their very nature is changed. They no longer reflect the nature of what they purport to be. Most individuals recognize when they are the recipient of love or compassion as a technique or as a requirement versus when it is given naturally, freely, and openly. When love and compassion are cultivated as a way of life, their expression is genuine, emanating from the individual. This type of love and compassion is healing and rewarding in an ultimate sense. It is an end in itself, but not an immediate end. It is a transcendent end, but not in the sense that once it is attained, it is forever attained. Rather, it is continuously pursued.

THE HERESY OF THE KNOWN

Whereas definable gods (such as those in the Old and New Testaments, ancient myth, and popular culture) polarize us—either containing and belittling us on the one hand, or inflating and exaggerating us on the other—the inscrutable fosters neither. That which the inscrutable does foster, by contrast, is wholeness—not puritan or absolute wholeness, but dynamic, paradoxical wholeness. The inscrutable evokes our humility and our possibility at the same time, but instead of dictating these conditions from on high, it inspires us to negotiate them, to find our way within them.18

As Anselm thought that faith moves toward understanding and not vice versa; so Christians do not try to understand so that they may believe, but by believing they come to understand the word, way, and will of God. As the world wrestles with moving from a modernist to a postmodernist view of religion, spirituality, and psychology, much effort is being expended to hold on to the modernist notion that knowledge (science) enables and empowers faith (mystery or awe). Thus fundamentalist and evangelical Christians argue the creation of the world, something inherently mysterious, from a scientific perspective (intelligent design, creationism, or creation science) instead of from a belief system that is rooted in mystery and awe.

In the movie Simon Birch, Simon and his friend Joe are talking shortly after Joe’s mother has died. Simon is talking about his sense of destiny and
being placed on earth for a purpose. Joe is uncomfortable with what Simon is saying and tells Simon he is talking nonsense. Simon responds to Joe, “That’s your problem, you have no faith.” Joe responds, “I have faith. I just need proof to back it up.”

The need for proof, the need for tangible, verifiable evidence on which to base our faith or values, moves people further and further away from what they seek as human beings—a sense of awe of something greater than themselves at work in this world.

**Tillich’s Faith as Ultimate Concern and God Beyond God**

In Tillich’s terminology, faith is the expression of ultimate concern and God is that in which people are grounded, or the ground of being. From a postmodern perspective, it is necessary to ask how one identifies his or her ultimate concern. Cooper states, “For Tillich, the key criterion for evaluating an ultimate concern is fairly simple: Does it indeed point toward that which is truly ultimate? Conversely, an ultimate concern which has a finite object becomes idolatry, or worse still, demonic.” Cooper goes on to say,

But the natural question most of us may want to ask is this: How does one “get” ultimately concerned? The answer again, is relatively simple: We are grasped by an ultimate concern. We don’t conjure it up, create it, or go searching for it. It “finds” us. Ultimate concerns cannot be tracked down or trapped. Nor can faith emerge from accumulating enough evidence. While faith presupposes reason, reason cannot “serve up” faith. Again, nothing finite, and this includes human reason, can produce faith. While faith had better not contradict reason, it always goes beyond reason. Faith is a gift.

Tillich’s perspective of faith is rooted in his Lutheran background, as well as Luther’s understanding that humans cannot will or cause themselves to have faith. In addition, Tillich saw faith, or ultimate concern, as something that involves an individual’s entire being. This all-consuming nature of ultimate concern, or faith, encompasses both the conscious and the unconscious for Tillich.

Just as Tillich’s view of faith as ultimate concern is grounded in existential thought, so is Tillich’s understanding of God as the ground of being, or God beyond God. For Tillich, the only way in which human beings can talk of God or describe God is through the language of symbols. Tillich contends that the Old Testament “conveys a basic relationship between humanity and God based on fear and a sense of awe” and that in the New Testament the Apostle Paul argues for a relationship with God “by which God declares us acceptable. This acceptance occurs in spite of our unrighteousness.” In each case, the relationship between humans and God is experience-based in story...
and symbols. In other words, as finite beings people are incapable of describing God to the fullest extent because people’s language and experience is limited and as such confines God.

Piety in the Unknown

Sometimes . . . a wave of light breaks into our darkness, and it is as though a voice is saying: “You are accepted. You are accepted, accepted by that which is greater than you, and the name of which you do not know. Do not ask for the name now; perhaps you will find it later. Do not try to do anything now; perhaps later you will do much. Do not seek anything; do not perform anything; do not intend anything. Simply accept the fact that you are accepted.” If that happens to us, we experience grace.

This quote from one of Tillich’s most famous sermons best describes his view of piety. Tillich believed that finite humans long for connection with something beyond themselves but are unable to make that connection via their own will. This lack of connection or separation is what Tillich saw as sin, a condition from which people are unable to free themselves. Tillich believed that being separated from the source or ground of being is the basis of anxiety. Because people are separated from that which grounds them, their sense of being is threatened by death, meaninglessness, and condemnation. Furthermore, according to Cooper, “Tillich argues that for our situation today, it is not guilt, but meaninglessness, which is the primary dilemma. Doubt has replaced guilt as our central problem.”

Doubt in and of the infinite only exacerbates the struggle with a sense of being, a sense of connection, and self-acceptance. According to Tillich, it is only when we realize and accept that we are unacceptable that we can truly begin to experience grace or the grounding of our being. Cooper quotes Tillich: “Accepting our acceptance is never based on moral qualities, achievements, intellectual abilities, or any other human strength. It is transforming only when we realize we are unacceptable. In fact, the experience of being accepted is life changing only when all our own attempts at self-acceptance have miserably failed.” For Tillich, true piety is acknowledging our separateness and the meaninglessness of our efforts to be acceptable, and simply accepting that we have been accepted—this is the ultimate act of belief. True belief also always encompasses doubt, a central idea for Tillich.

The Dangers of Knowing and the Truth

In discussing the concepts of “knowing” and “truth,” Hoffman, Hoffman, Robinson, and Lawrence articulate the difference between truth in the finite realm and truth in the infinite realm. Using an illustration from C. S. Lewis
concerning miracles, Hoffman and colleagues delineate the difference between truth in small letters or finite truth and Truth in large letters or infinite truth: “According to Lewis, from God’s perspective the Truth of miracles is but a small Truth. However, from a human perspective, the Truth of miracles is a grand truth as it surpasses human understanding or explanation.”

In other words, finite truth is that truth which humans are able to grasp or understand. The problem with finite truth is that it does not present the whole picture and is therefore incomplete, whereas infinite truth, or as in Lewis’s example of miracles—God’s truth—is complete and whole and is beyond the human ability to comprehend or clarify.

Tillich took the difference between finite truth and infinite truth a step further. Hoffman and colleagues observe that “For Tillich, if humans claim to have hold of ultimate truth, they claim to have truth in the realm of the infinite. In other words, to fully know the truth is to claim to be God.”

The limitations of finite truth impact personal and cultural epistemologies or how we know what we know. These limitations determine how people interpret their life experiences and relationships. In the course of their lives, the limitations of finite truth cause people to question and doubt truths, values, or beliefs that they have held as essential to their existence. Under a modernist perspective such change is seen as a shaking of the foundations and is cause for reasserting fundamental understandings of such concepts as God, faith, patriotism, or self. However, a postmodern view would suggest that such changes, questions, and doubts are indications of a self that is more adaptable and fluid. In addition, postmodernism would emphasize that we have a variety of selves in which people function. From this perspective, the process of knowing, or knowing how we know what we know, focuses on understanding these various selves and what each persona contributes to being a whole person.

When our concepts of truth are held to rigidly, another danger emerges: the use of truth to oppress others. The absolute conviction of one’s beliefs, especially when these beliefs are used at least partially to quell anxiety, often can be forced upon others. In the less harmful examples, this may involve coercive approaches to recruiting others to one’s way of thinking. In more extreme examples, this can entail forcing others into similar beliefs through physical means. On a national level, this has contributed to many wars and countless deaths.

THE UNKNOWN’S ROLE IN THE TRANSITION FROM RELIGION TO SPIRITUALITY

The role of the unknown is both a product and a cause of the transition from religion to spirituality. The transition from premodern faith all the way through modernistic faith to postmodern faith was closely connected
to the unknown. In each transition, the conflict between the known and unknown played a role, and in each period one or the other held the privileged placement.

**Apologizing for Apologetics**

In the premodern period, there was no need for a rational defense of faith; faith was the legitimate way of knowing. Faith was closely connected to direct divine revelation. However, when modernism surfaced, empirical science became the dominant paradigm and religion was forced to defend its place in the world of knowing. The power in knowing switched from the church to the academy.\(^5\)

Religious leaders, set on defending faith, developed what is known as apologetics, a rational defense of the faith. The result was a significant change in the very nature of faith and being religious. In premodern times, faith was connected with direct knowledge and knowing through stories or myths.\(^6\) This was not necessarily literal truth, but truth nonetheless. Apologetics put faith and religious belief in the realm of science. This required that faith and religion needed to defend themselves by the methodological standards of the academy. Through this process, religion lost its faith and became mere knowledge.

Tillich, as discussed, saw doubt as an essential part of faith and viewed faith more holistically than could be accounted for in reducing it to something known.\(^7\) From a premodern perspective, apologetics represents religion becoming something it is not. This could be conceived of as Western religion’s dark night of the soul.

Gerald May clarifies a common misperception of the dark night of the soul. Many Christians have understood the dark night as merely a form of suffering that Christians go through. Instead, May points out that St. John of the Cross’s initial conception of the dark night is much different. It reflected a transition in which many religious symbols and rituals, such as prayer, lost their significance.\(^8\) This is not a loss of faith, but rather a transformation into a different type of faith. The transformed faith is more mature, less dependent upon symbolism, and more reliant on what the religious symbolism was pointing toward. By the late premodern and early modern eras religion had acquired a significant amount of extraneous liturgical, doctrinal, and symbolic baggage. Faith turned into knowledge, and what it meant to be religious became increasingly narrow, rationalized, and rigid. There were too many symbols, too many requirements.

**Saving Religion through Spirituality**

As extraneous religious baggage increased, religious organizations also developed a bad reputation through abusing their power and trust. This
continued through the modern period into postmodernism, and religious people were losing their trust in religion. Because religion had become essentially connected to the church and organized religion, for many this meant abandoning religious institutions altogether. The separation of spirituality from religion, in a sense, represents a way in which people were able to save the essentials of faith, while abandoning what they could no longer believe in or tolerate in the abuses of institutional religion. In separating off, many were able to remain spiritual, but not religious. In doing so, religion was saved by a linguistic evolution in which genuine or personal religion became spirituality, and this new emphasis upon spirituality evolved into the organized and structured aspects of a new kind of religion. Spirituality acquired the unknown, mysterious, and awe-based aspects of religion, while religion retained the known portions.

Dangers in separating spirituality and religion still exist. First and foremost, religion retained the ritual and communal aspects of faith, leaving spirituality excessively personal and individualistic. Although many spiritual individuals have found ways to reincorporate relationships into ritual and community, the danger and tendency to separate spirituality from religion remains. Second, when spirituality was personalized, it allowed for the possibility of extremist relativism in which all faiths are considered equally valid. Although few people take spirituality to this extreme, the danger remains for doing so.

**Faith, Spirituality, and Moral Development and the Unknown**

Just as religion went through a developmental process, individuals also go through a transformation that moves toward the unknown. In Christianity, this is represented in the progression of the Bible from the Old Testament to the Gospels. In the Old Testament, God makes a concession in giving the Israelites the written Ten Commandments because the Israelites were unable to follow the law written on their hearts. In the Gospels, Jesus began to clarify the placement of the Old Testament laws and summarized them all into two commandments: Love God and love your neighbor as yourself, or simply love. All the other commandments, rules, and requirements are simply commentary on these two commandments. Humans absolutized those other laws, not God.

This basic truth is easily recognizable in many of the theories of faith and moral development today, such as Fowler’s stages of faith and Kohlberg’s theory of moral development. There is a notable bias in these theories for the abstract, the contextual, and the unknown. Known and absolutized perspectives on faith and morality are placed in the early stages of development. The higher levels of development are increasingly abstract and unclear. The lack of clarity is not because of poor articulation or development in the theory,
but rather the theory explicitly states that these higher levels of development entail more abstraction and less clarity, and with them more unknowns.

There is a certain logic to this represented in the biblical idiom about spiritual milk and spiritual meat (Heb 5: 12–14). The immature live on spiritual milk, which is easy to digest and understand; however, the higher calling is to spiritual meat, which is tougher and more difficult to process. This places the known and the unknown on a continuum in which all people need spiritual milk (the known) early in their development, but hopefully move on to spiritual meat (the unknown). Again, this returns to paradox, suggesting that different levels of tension are more appropriate at different points of development.

A parallel to this can be seen in Buddhism. According to Buddhism, the self is an illusion, and spiritual development entails a process in which one gradually lets go of attachment to the self, recognizing one’s true nature. However, as Epstein points out, this does not mean that one should seek to go directly to the end of no self. Instead, this is a developmental process in which one must first recognize the self in order to move toward the recognition of no self. There are no shortcuts. Again, one moves gradually toward the unknown, which represents a more mature faith.

**CONCLUSION**

Spirituality is rooted in the unknown and hence paranormal. The known is not only not spirituality, it is often a barrier to attaining true spirituality. Healthy spirituality incorporates the unknowns, awe, mystery, doubt, and anxiety. This is part of what makes spirituality holistic. Religion, as it has come to be defined over time, is primarily about behavior and knowledge. If individuals stop at this type of religion, both their religion and their spirituality are left very incomplete.

Religion and spirituality are not enemies, and the boundary between them is highly permeable. When we fail to discern or acknowledge that, we truncate the function of both severely, and to our own detriment. Instead, religion is at its best when rooted in and the expression of profound personal spirituality, and spirituality is amorphous until it is expressed in the forms and rituals of religion. However, in the end, if some degree of the unknown and doubt is not included, that is, if the paranormal is not accorded ample potential play in our experience and ritual, a stale religiosity will likely emerge. If, on the other hand, the miraculous of the paranormal (the unknown) and its accompanying anxiety can be valued, an invigorating spirituality is likely to be the result.

**NOTES**


3. Ibid.


10. Schneider, *Rediscovery of Awe*.


13. Ibid., 48.


15. As will be discussed, a ritual can be an appropriate end, but the mere enactment of it should not be an end of its own. In other words, the behavior of the ritual is not an appropriate end. Only when the ritual participates in something beyond itself can it be an appropriate end.

16. Schneider, *Rediscovery of Awe*.


22. Ibid.

23. Ibid., 112.

24. Ibid., 112.


31. Ibid.
32. Ibid.
35. Hoffman et al., *Modern and Postmodern Ways of Knowing*.
36. Ibid.
37. Tillich, *The Dynamics of Faith*.

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I was riding in the car on the way back from working out in the gym one early morning. In Bermuda the streets are narrow, and they are often carved out of the gray, porous limestone. My wife was driving, and as we turned uphill, a middle-aged man with a hat, bright yellow shirt, pink shorts, and tie came walking down a pathway to our right. To the left, on the adjacent street, a rusted taxi approached, and a young Bermudian male was driving; he had dark sunglasses, and he didn’t appear very happy. On the far left, shuffling over the hill, a middle-aged man approached carrying a large paper bag. The sun had just come up and the light reflected off the foliage and buildings in fresh tones; it was a new day.

My wife said, “That looks like Mr. Smith.”

I had been watching the taxi as it approached and so inspected the driver a bit more closely. Although I did not think he looked anything like Mr. Smith, I responded, “Right. His second job.”

She said, “What?”

I repeated myself, and she didn’t say anything, so I added a commentary. “You know. Driving a taxi is his second job.”

By that time she was smiling.

I asked what that was about, and she told me she had been talking about the man in the hat. I had not paid attention to him. My experience of making a turn up that hill was mostly about missing the taxi, thus avoiding a serious accident, but hers had been about the tone of the light falling on everything, and the way the man in the hat reminded her of her friend, Mr. Smith.

This illustrates that individual experience is just that, individual, by which I mean subjective. Psychologists encounter this fact routinely in practice with
couples having conflict and struggle. These people are at opposite corners in an intersection, and the only reality they have to go on is the way they have experienced the intersection from their own respective vantage points.

If, for instance, a red car and a blue car collide in the middle of the intersection, one of the witnesses might say, “The red car ran into the blue car,” but from across the intersection, on the far corner, another witness might reply, “No. The blue car ran into the red car.” This is the usual way conversation goes between such troubled couples, because instead of sharing their experience of the situation and becoming mutually enriched by one another, they are trying to win an argument about whose version of reality is the truth.

This chapter explores experience using some of the constructs found in Gestalt therapy theory, in order to provide an orientation to personal experience, self-reporting, and hyperbole in regards to the miraculous. I do not offer a formula for determining the truth about miracles. Gestalt therapy lends itself to such an exploration because it’s an experiential approach that is phenomenological, dialogical, and field theoretical. Gestalt therapy theory provides a rich method for a clinical psychologist, using the experience of the client to facilitate progress in therapy. Here, it provides a convenient heuristic model by which to consider paranormal experience, the testimonial concerning such experience, and some of the possibilities associated with hyperbole in reference to such self-report.

SELF-REPORT

Self-report is a matter of speaking for oneself and about one’s self: self-disclosure or witness. Among psychotherapists and psychologists there are commonly held to be two kinds of self-disclosure and two kinds of witness.

PSYCHOLOGICAL INSIGHTS INTO SELF-DISCLOSURE

The first kind of self-disclosure has to do with what is communicated during the ongoing process of being together, without an overt and intentional revealing process. It is often a matter of reading the body language in any given situation (Norberg, 2006). This is sometimes referred to as nonverbal communication and consists of subtle interpersonal exchanges based in the nature of the relationship. Resonance, mutuality, and empathy, for instance, “are affective states which are frequently, although not always, non-verbal and non-conscious processes occurring between a mother and child, a therapist and patient, and probably in all close human relationships” (Rubin and Niemeier, 1992, p. 599). Indeed, it is also not always the warm and supportive messages people read in one another; many couples fight because of the non-verbal messages between them.
Frequently in couples therapy one person will say one thing but the partner will interpret it as quite another based on the nonverbal level of communication. That is because the verbal content forms the foreground that can only be understood against the nonverbal background that provides its context. Thus, the relationship of foreground to background provides meaning in such cases, and it is the background of nonverbal self-disclosure that gives significance to the foreground of verbal content. As such, the nonverbal self-disclosures tend to dominate the overall meaning-making in communication episodes. For instance, it is one thing for a spouse to walk into the room with relaxed posture and a smile on the face to say, “Aren’t you wonderful,” but it’s another for the same person to walk into the same room while tense, with a smirk on the face, to say the same thing. The nonverbals reveal the meaning of the message: the first one generous and warm, the second, caustic and demeaning.

The second kind of self-disclosure is comprised of conscious self-revelations of specific content. In psychotherapy these usually relate to the client’s issues and are either revealed by the therapist to the client (Zahm, 1998; Zeddies, 2000; Zur, 2007) or by the client to the therapist (Farber and Sohn, 2007). Client self-disclosure has been closely linked to positive outcomes in therapy (Watson, Goldman, and Greenberg, 2007). However, such conscious and intentional self-disclosure does not belong only to the realm of psychotherapy.

Researchers at Boston College, the University of Miami, and Pennsylvania State College (Laurenceau, Barrett, and Rovine, 2005) found that self-disclosure and partner disclosure both significantly and uniquely contributed to the development of intimacy in relationships. In recognition that one’s experience is not formed in a vacuum, perceived partner responsiveness can mediate the effects of self-disclosure and partner disclosure on intimacy. This might seem like common sense; if a person reveals more about him or herself to someone, and that someone listens, the experience is a process that tends to bring those two people closer together. In an exercise called “truth telling,” for instance, marital therapists Gay and Kathlyn Hendricks state that the central question for most people in close relationships is, “‘Can I be me and still be with my partner?’” They go on to say, “We can learn the crucial skill of honoring our experience and hearing our partner. This activity is designed to differentiate your experience from your partner’s. . . . The ability to be present to our experience while in the company of another person, especially a romantic partner, is at the heart of building an enlightening relationship” (Hendricks and Hendricks, 1993, p. 75).

This kind of self-disclosure is also called authenticity. Authenticity is a matter of being the person one actually is (Crocker, 1999), of not veiling the face; not concealing in some fashion the person one is in the current moment. Thus, in therapy, it is common for a psychologist to conceal himself or herself behind the veil of professional distance. Relational psychoanalysis
and Gestalt therapy, by contrast, acknowledge the necessity for a therapist to actually meet the client and to do so truthfully. “Dialogue is based on experiencing the other person as he or she really is and showing the true self, sharing phenomenological awareness. The Gestalt therapist says what he or she means and encourages the patient to do the same” (Yontef, 1993, p. 132).

Experienced therapists know when they are communicating to patients the therapist’s fears or courage, defensiveness or openness, confusion or clarity. The therapist’s awareness, acceptance, and sharing of these truths can be a highly persuasive demonstration of authenticity (Levitsky and Simpkin, 1972, pp. 251–252).

PSYCHOLOGICAL INSIGHTS INTO WITNESS

This process of intentional self-disclosure can also be seen in forensic psychology under the heading of witness. In forensic psychology there are two kinds of witness: witness of fact and expert witness (Bank and Packer, 2007; Costanzo, Krauss, and Pezdek, 2007). The distinction between them is especially useful to this discussion. The witness of fact is just that, someone who relates to the court what he or she has experienced in a matter. The witness of fact must be able to provide a report of aware, firsthand sensation or perception that is also usually fixed in space and time. The witness of fact saw something, somewhere, on a particular day, at a specifiable hour. The witness of fact heard something. Something happened to him or her.

By contrast, the expert witness is someone who relates to the court what he or she thinks about a matter, offering opinions, providing diagnosis, and making risk assessments based on expertise and competence. These opinions, assessments, and so forth, are not tied to movement through physical space, nor do they accord with any necessary chronology. Rather, they usually express some kind of necessary logic. As such, the constructs and conceptions that are relevant for such a witness are just as intentional, but they are not presented in an experiential fashion. The expert witness can pass judgment on the testimony of a witness of fact, but the witness of fact cannot offer a rebuttal based on his or her own competence. As such, and compared to the expert witness, the witness of fact is more clearly experience-near.

A BIBLICAL UNDERSTANDING OF WITNESS

The concept of an experience-near witness can be further understood by considering biblical constructions of the term. The word group associated with martyrion indicates a testimony that can serve as proof or evidence in a court of law. In classical Greek it was used to denote the confirmation of a fact or an event, and from about the fifth century BCE onward, the verb form, martyreo, meant to bear witness (Hillyer, 1971).
In the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, martyrion expresses Hebrew words indicating a time and place of meeting, where and when God met experientially with his people. Since the same Greek word was also used in reference to the ark of the covenant, its meaning shifted over time from the act of encounter to the place of evidence, and then to the observance of the Law (Hillyer, 1971).

The use of the word in the New Testament is largely reserved for the works associated with the Apostle John. Jesus, for instance, was not in need of the testimony of other people to understand the nature of humanity. John the Baptist came as a witness so that people of that day might hear and believe in the one to whom John pointed (John 1:6–8, 14–15, 31–34; New American Standard Version [NASV]). Jesus stated that God himself bore witness to Jesus by giving him works that authenticated him (John 5:30–38; cf. John 8:12–19). Thus, the miracles that Jesus performed were the testimony that had impact on those who could understand.

Consequently, it is not just that a witness was given, but also that there was or was not a corresponding witness received, apprehension of the witness, and the formation of an appropriate appraisal. People either do, or do not, have the spiritual sensitivity, the capacity to perceive spiritual realities and to comprehend, to make an appropriate meaning from their experience. Those who have this capacity see beyond the empirical limits of physical sensation. Thus, John sang a chorus to them in Revelation, chanting over and over, “Let those who have ears hear what the Spirit says to the churches” (Rev. 2:7, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22; [NASV]). In a corresponding thought, Paul stated,

Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, so that we might know the things freely given to us by God, which things we also speak, not in words taught by human wisdom, but in those taught by the Spirit, combining spiritual thoughts with spiritual words. But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised. (1 Cor. 2:12–14)

Where martyrion appears in the synoptic Gospels, it does so largely in its classical sense. It can be that which serves as a testimony or proof, consisting of an action, a circumstance, or a thing that serves as a testimony (Matt. 8:4, 10:18, Mark 6:11, Luke 21:13; Arndt and Gingrich, 1957). Luke makes a significant extension of that meaning in Acts, however, applying it in a technical sense to indicate a certain group of people who could tell what they had perceived while living with Jesus, seeing and hearing the things he did and said, perceiving his resurrection, and encountering the postresurrection Jesus (Acts 1:8, 1:21–22; 2:32; 3:14–15; 13:30–31; 26:12–18). In Paul’s statements before King Agrippa, for instance, he offered that his witness was not
only of the things that he, Paul, had experienced, but also, in harmony with John, that this witness served a purpose. It was not mere narrative; it was evangelistic. This, then, is consistent with a witness of fact. These witnesses were testifying to what they had experienced and not just to their opinions, estimations, or considered evaluations.

EXAGGERATION AND HYPERBOLE

Hyperbole is a figure of speech in which statements are intentionally exaggerated for effect. It is an overstating of the facts designed to evoke a response, but it should not be taken literally. When I was growing up, one of my best friends used to turn simple events and objects into superlatives on such a regular basis that I learned to dilute everything he said. I could not trust that things were as he had said they were. He did not merely ride his bike home fast; he rode it faster than anyone had ever ridden a bike over that distance. He did not simply get a good price when he bought a model airplane; it was marked down so low the store lost money by selling it to him. Sometimes I wondered if my friend knew the difference between things as they actually happened and things as he related them. The response he at first evoked in me was amazement and envy, but after I figured out what he was actually doing, the response turned decidedly in the opposite direction.

Imagination is intrinsic to such hyperbole. It exaggerates the concrete experience of a person, extending the here-and-now into a potential that then is seen as present reality. In a specific application of imaginative exaggeration, hypotheses are constructed in which a person performs a “what if . . .” calculation. He or she then extends or expands some aspect of current experience so as to form a larger than life mental image of something not yet experienced. Thus, Stamatopoulou (2007) hypothesized a shared, embodied frame of reference for emotional experience between people. He then conducted research exploring the concept of the intersubjective nature of embodied subjectivity, which he uncovered, regarding an imaginative enactment that induced a shared understanding between the persons. However, does such a shared and co-constructed field exist, or is it a construct of exaggerated imagination? Is the intersubjective relationship hyperbole or literal fact?

While hyperbole is an understood exaggeration (extension or projection), simple exaggeration is not always understood as such because it is used to achieve other purposes. Malingering, for instance is the deliberate and imaginative exaggeration of physical and/or psychological symptoms for a known external reward such as additional sympathy or attention, or relief from work (Adetunji et al., 2006). It is a factor among forensic populations where clinical symptoms often bring pragmatic advantages (Walters, 2006). Sullivan, Lange, and Dawes (2007) estimated as many as 4 in 10 people in America evaluated for personal injury compensation exaggerated their symptoms, so
they created a research project in Australia and found that 17 percent of criminals, 13 percent of personal injury persons, 13 percent of persons with disability or workers’ compensation, and 4 percent of medical or psychiatric cases were reported to involve exaggerated symptoms.

In still another way of seeing exaggeration, Grant Gillett (2007) theorized the origin of paranoid thought, claiming that psychotic thinking comes about through exaggeration of a person’s adaptive cognitions while situated in the world. Though common sense would normally lead to a coherent narrative to explain life events, the psychotic person is cut off from the customary checking that occurs in relationships, and he or she constructs explanatory narratives that become exaggerated to pathological dimensions.

Are the reports of miracles examples of hyperbole? If so, they would be exaggerated purposefully but not meant to be taken literally. Are they hypotheses meant to explain? Are they exaggerations for personal gain? Is miraculous experience a loss of reality, a form of psychosis? Perhaps reports of miracles are testimonies to the work of both God’s immanence and transcendence.

These are questions in which the answers are contingent upon the actual nature of the experiences in question. What is miraculous experience like? For that matter, what is experience itself?

**PERSONAL EXPERIENCE**

Experience is the conscious awareness of the feeling of what happens (Damasio, 1999; Gendlin, 1997) for an embodied organism that is situated. Thus, situation is an important concept, for it points to several issues, the foremost being that experience is never entirely just a matter of an individual consciousness (Wheeler, 2000), but of the person-in-context, or the lived body within a lived or experienced world (Merleau-Ponty, 2002). Such a lived world is a mix of subjective, intersubjective, and polysubjective experience. Further, consciousness, often a synonym for the experience of self, is dependent upon contact of an organism in such contexts (Thompson, 2007; Varela, Thompson, and Rosch, 1993), raising the issue of alterity, which is the sense of one’s connection, or even ethical obligation toward an other (Buber, 1996, 2002; Levinas, 1999). Contact with the world is, then, at the heart of consciousness (Natsoulas, 1999). As Gillian King (2004, p. 72) observed, “People create meaning out of their experiences to give their life a sense of coherence and purpose. . . . A sense of meaning arises through the development of a structure to everyday life that consists of various ways of engaging the self with the world.”

In the example of those who observed a wreck of the blue and red cars, the situation for them was a combination of the physical properties of the intersection, including the time of day and the amount of light available to see, how many lanes converged, and how much other traffic was also present when the wreck occurred. It also included the rate of metabolism and quality
of the sensory apparatus each had to bring to bear on the process of embodied observation and reporting. The situation included the presence of a third person, as well as the presence of many other people, a social audience, who had gathered to look at the wreck. This third person was a person of authority, the policeman investigating the wreck, who asked them for the facts that appeared in the account of what they witnessed.

The situation also included the difference in perspectives that became apparent, and the conflict between them as each attempted to assert the validity of his or her version of events. At that point also drawn into the situation was the memory of conflicts and how they were handled in their respective families when each was growing up, as well as the fact that each was late for an important appointment and wanted to get the interview with the policeman over, but without appearing uncooperative. While each had only an individual, subjective experience of the situation, that emerged within a process of being embedded in a context of mixed features with many contributing factors.

Theories of situated experience focus on agency and intentions of people existing on a day-to-day basis within their respective communities. Thus, collaboration within groups of scientists creates a mutually beneficial experience comprised of many factors (Bond-Robinson and Stucky, 2006), and leadership is a function of the group; it is not simply dependent upon the traits of one significant person within it (Frew, 2006).

Working from the perspective of experimental psychology, various researchers have made several related observations. For instance, the sense one has of the relationship between oneself, including one’s values, and his or her situation, determines subsequent emotional experience (Siemer, Mauss, and Gross, 2007; Silvia and Brown, 2007). Research into self-disclosure indicated that what a person is apt to share with either a spouse or a psychotherapist is largely driven by the situation, that is, the nature of the relationship of the person to the other in either context (Farber and Sohn, 2007). Child development specialist Michael Lewis concluded that it is one’s current context that is the greatest influence on behavior, and thus on one’s experience. “A contextual model does not require progress or that early events necessarily are connected to later ones; it requires only adaptation to current context” (Lewis, 1998, p. 2). Finally, Kenny, Kashy, and Cook (2006, p. 1) stated, “Many of the phenomena studied by social and behavioral scientists are interpersonal by definition, and as a result, observations do not refer to a single person but rather to multiple persons embedded within a social context.”

**Phenomenological Considerations**

When I was the pastor of a small, rural church along the Oregon coast, two things happened that stand out to me with regard to the subject of this chapter. First, after an especially difficult couple of weeks in which I had to perform funerals and meet with families who had lost children, one of our
members told me that after her mother died, she (the mother) had come to her daughter and stood at the end of her bed. From there the mother had consoled her grieving daughter, and the daughter had come to share that story with me so that I could know that those who pass on sometimes communicate with the loved ones left behind. This woman did not believe that she had hallucinated or been the victim of an illusion caused by severe grief; she believed the spirit of her dead mother had come to her, in a bodily shape that was recognizable, stood close, and interacted with her.

Second, that church had been a troubled place and there had been conflict and disagreement over many issues. In that church was a single-parent woman who had had a rough life. She was not what many might have considered the model parishioner. One day, while I was preaching, she stood up in the middle of the sermon, and I stopped to inquire what was on her mind. You might imagine that this was something out of the ordinary, and the place was hushed. She looked very uncomfortable, and she said, “I don’t know how it fits, but I feel like God is telling me to say, ‘What right do you have to use my word to fight your battles?’” Instantly, I felt struck and convicted, because I realized I had been doing that very thing. Some might call what she spoke a prophetic message, but others would include it among experiences classified as paranormal. Some might say that prophecy was only present for a certain time period in the developmental history of the church, but others might say it is relevant for today. Some might say that woman was charismatic; others would not know what to call her.

One person perceived her mother, and the other person conceived a message. Both of these are real experiences and can be understood within a phenomenological perspective. Phenomenology is the science and philosophy of experience. It began as a discernible movement with Edmund Husserl’s insistence that “philosophy take as its primary task the description of the structures of experience as they present themselves to consciousness” (Wrathall and Dreyfus, 2006, p. 2). Phenomenology can be defined as the study of the experience of embedded, or situated, persons in spheres of overlapping person-environment relationships (Wilson, 2003). Writing from the perspective of phenomenological philosophy, Maurice Merleau-Ponty asserted,

All my knowledge of the world, even my scientific knowledge, is gained from my own particular point of view, or from some experience of the world without which the symbols of science would be meaningless. The whole universe of science is built upon the world as directly experienced, and if we want to subject science itself to rigorous scrutiny and arrive at a precise assessment of its meaning scope, we must begin by reawakening the basic experience of the world of which science is the second-order expression. (Merleau-Ponty, 2002, p. ix)
When I say, “Ball,” something comes to mind, does it not? That could be a baseball, a soccer ball, or a basketball. Perhaps you even see it in your mind’s eye. Perhaps you recall a specific ball you either currently have in your possession or used to play with at some time in your past. Maybe the ball is currently right in front of you, or maybe absent physically, not present to your perception but only present to you because you can remember and recall it to your awareness. If you think of one, you think of a specific and real ball, you do not think of something that is only an imaginary ball, or a fictional ball. If, on the other hand, after reading that something like an imaginary ball is an option, then you might be thinking now about that, so that you could have had at least two, three, or four such kinds of balls come to mind.

When we experience things, generally speaking, we can do that in one of two ways. We can either have a direct interaction with something through our senses, and we call that a perception, or something appears to us through our use of language and our ability to imagine and to conceptualize. Thus, we can see a tree and relate to it as a matter of perceptual experience in a very natural way. We can also form a construct, for example, of the Tree of Life, and think of something in the Garden of Eden. While one can see a physical tree, the Tree of Life is a concept that has substance but cannot be seen. It can only be comprehended and held in the mind. Phenomenologically, the object that is given to us in either case is known as an intentional object (Moran, 2000; Sokolowski, 2000).

The physical tree can burn down, but the process of seeing it and the perception itself cannot. They persist as the residue of experience. According to Edmund Husserl, this residue, in terms of process and content, has no chemical elements, forces, or physical properties (Moran, 2000). The process is known as noesis and the content as a noema. One is a mental act and the other a product of such an action.

The noema is also known as an intentional object. When noemata appear to us through our senses, we can call these perceptual noemata, but when something comes to us through language or reflection, that is a higher order of consciousness known as a categorial noema. Thus, as mentioned above, experience itself can either be of something currently present or of something conceived but physically absent. If physically absent, it can be imagined and anticipated, as when one can only see one side of a box but can perceive the unseen sides as well, even without moving to the opposite side of it or turning the box around. Conversely, we can experience something that is physically unavailable altogether and only present to us categorially through our imagination. Further, categorial noemata can be concepts, constructs, and situations just as easily as they can be concrete objects and people.

The term intentionality itself is taken from Latin intendere (Thompson, 2007), which means to stretch forth or to aim at something. Franz Brentano elucidated the concept to clarify his assertion that a real physical world
exists outside our consciousness and that all consciousness is directed toward it. It is the aboutness of thought (Jacquette, 2004). Thus, when Husserl refined the construct of intentionality, he asserted that consciousness is always consciousness of some thing, because the most basic interpretative act of human consciousness is to experience the world in terms of objects, or things (Spinelli, 2005).\(^4\) Intentionality was the most fundamental aspect of mental life for Husserl, who conceived of it as a self-transcending experience. It was of something that was beyond itself (Wertz, 2006).

By extension, all experience is experience of something. Thus, when someone has an emotion, it is about something. I encounter this often with my clients who are depressed, and I say to them, “Your depression is about something.” Thus, our feelings, our emotions, are about the important things in our lives, and they actually help us to pay attention, to orient, and to organize around those things that matter the most.

Let me bring some of this together in a natural way.

One morning my wife and I went out to Warwick Long Bay on the island of Bermuda, where we live, where I practice, and where we have a training institute. The sunlight hit the horizon out on the open sea in beams shooting down from the sky through breaks in the clouds. The clouds were billowy and thick but scattered, and they squatted low on the horizon in various shades of gray. The beach was deserted, and we walked down to where the dry sand gave way to wet. The water was choppy and the surf was slapping at the beach. As we stood there in the quiet of the early morning, two things happened that I regarded as remarkable.

First, a man rode up on his bike, parked it, and walked down toward us. At first I did not recognize him. He wore his bathing suit and a loose fit shirt. That was about it. His hair was uncombed and he had not shaved. He looked a bit crusty and slightly sunburnt. As he got closer I saw who it was. At first, he had been present to me as a stranger and some early morning denizen, but when I recognized him, he became revealed to me as a man of prominence, a member of one of the more distinguished and eminent families in Bermuda.

I said, “Hello,” and introduced him to my wife. That is when he recognized me as well, and he said, “At first I didn’t know you with your long hair.”

As we were standing there, this man looked over our shoulders to announce the presentation of the second remarkable thing. He asked, “Is that your ball?”

There, about 50 meters down the beach, came rolling with the wind a yellow, green, blue, and transparent beach ball about one meter in diameter. It was rolling with some velocity, and my wife caught it. We all stood there contemplating the mystery of the runaway ball; it seemed like a sign or a signal to us of something more significant, and we decided to let it go free. So, Linda dropped it onto the sand, and the wind caught it and rolled it all the way down to some rocks, where it careened into the surf and then was
caught in a repeating surge back and forth from the sea onto the land, again and again.

Did you experience the man? Did he come to you in some way? Was he present to you as a real man? Did you see the ball? Did you understand its mystique as potential “sign”? Perhaps you imagined the beach and the ocean, or the sand. If you followed the narrative so that these objects became vivid for you, then they became part of your intuitive experience. They were presented to you as noemata. They were not fantasy; they were real, for you know of real prominent families, “denizens,” and you know of beach balls.

This is the essence of what we have to offer one another in our various relationships, and when you think about it, it is all we have to offer: our own, unique way of experiencing people and things, the world in which we live.

When I meet with clients as a Gestalt therapist I am always working the edge of shared experience, for something is present in our meeting one another, and something becomes presented to me in the stories, situations, cathartic expressions, and interpersonal conflicts in which I often participate. As a Gestalt therapist I do not merely deal in the experiences of my clients; I also have an experience of myself that emerges by being with them, and that, in turn, feeds back into the working relationship. This is at the core of both psychoanalytic and Gestalt psychotherapy (Jacobs, 2002; Orange, 2001).

SYNTHESIS: RELATIONSHIP TO THE MIRACULOUS

How might a Gestalt therapist, then, work with someone presenting “a case of the miraculous”? On June 9, 1970, a visiting priest was conducting a Tridentine Mass in the chapel at Stich, in the Bavarian region of Germany, near the Swiss border. The Mass proceeded in normal fashion until after the Consecration of the Host when the priest suddenly noticed, on the corporal next to the chalice, a small reddish spot that soon grew to the size of a coin. At the elevation of the chalice, the priest noticed another red spot on the corporal at the place where the chalice had rested. On July 14, 1970, at 8 o’clock in the evening, the Swiss priest was scheduled to celebrate another Holy Mass, according to the Tridentine missal, in the chapel of Stich. Shortly after the Consecration the red spots again appeared on the corporal.

Turning slightly aside, the priest signaled to the sacristan, who was in the sanctuary, to approach the altar. While the sacristan looked in bewilderment at the spots, the priest distributed Holy Communion. Noting the unusual behavior of the sacristan, members of the congregation suspected that something unusual had taken place and were noticeably restless during the remainder of the Mass. The priest satisfied the people’s curiosity at the end of the Mass by permitting them to approach the altar to inspect the stains for themselves (Cruz, 1987, pp. 181–82).
All concerned were careful to have both sets of stains tested to see what they were, and independent laboratories each indicated that they were human blood. This, then, constituted a miracle. Later, Mr. Johannes Talscher, the brother of the sacristan of Stich, declared that he had been in attendance during the Mass of July 14. He stated that he had known about the previous stains, and so he was hoping that it would happen again. When, during the Mass, the priest informed the congregation that it had, indeed, happened again, and when they were allowed to come forward, Mr. Talscher stated, “I saw four spots. One was the size of a priest’s host and a cross was visible on it. Another was the size of a small host, and the other two were smaller. They were all brownish red. It is my firm and considered opinion that these mysterious blood stains have no natural explanations” (Cruz, 1987, pp. 183–184).

What if Mr. Talscher later came as a client of a Gestalt therapist, doubting, and feeling that somehow, in some way, he had been duped by the whole incident? What if he stated that he might have exaggerated his testimony, for he began to wonder if he had actually seen or just imagined the cross on the stains?

A Gestalt therapist has four major ways of working that, in some ways already mentioned in this chapter, concern experience. He or she can follow a phenomenological method, engage the client dialogically, work with the life space or field of the client, and create new experience through experiments designed to heighten awareness (Brownell, in press). These are not four separate interventions, although they are described below as distinct and are taught in training groups as such for the sake of clarity. They form a unity of practice and are at play simultaneously during the course of therapy.

One can work directly with the immediate experience of the client using a phenomenological method. Although Brentano believed in a real world, none of us can prove it exists. We believe in an ontological field, and we can express our reasons for believing in it, but the only thing we have to base such beliefs on is our experience of the phenomenal field. That is where many Gestalt therapists tend to settle down, emphasizing working to increase awareness of aspects of experience that are available but not necessarily given to a specific person’s consciousness.

The phenomenological method is comprised of three steps: (1) the rule of epoché, (2) the rule of description, and (3) the rule of horizontalization (Spinelli, 2005). In the rule of epoché one sets aside his or her initial biases and prejudices in order to suspend expectations and assumptions. In the rule of description, one occupies himself or herself with describing instead of explaining. In the rule of horizontalization one treats each item of description as having equal value or significance. First one sets aside any initial theories with regard to what is presented in the meeting between therapist and client. Second, one describes immediate and concrete observations, abstaining from interpretations or explanations, especially those formed from the application of a clinical theory superimposed over the circumstances of experience. Third, one avoids
any hierarchical assignment of importance such that the data of experience
become prioritized and categorized as they are received.

One can work purposefully emphasizing the cocreated, two-person field
of the client and therapist relationship. At that point the quality of contact
between the two people becomes very important. Thus, the exploration of
the client’s experience takes place within the dialogical relationship between
therapist and client. This is a subject-to-subject relationship (Hycner and
Jacobs, 1995) in which each person becomes known to the other. The Gestalt
approach proposes that the potential for change and self-development arises
not through the counselor or therapist, nor even through the client alone,
but through what emerges in the meeting or existential encounter between
the two of them (Mackewn, 1997, p. 80).

One can also work with an understanding for the life space, all things
having effect for any given person. This is also known as the field (Brownell,
2005; Latner, 2000; MacKewn, 1997). The field is the medium in which ther-
apy takes place and is inseparable from it. The field is the entire situation
and all that goes on among those involved. To work the field is to comprehend
the relevance of current effects and to intervene in the social, psychological,
and physical world of the client (Brownell, 2005). Five principles distinguish
clinical work that is essentially field theoretical (Yontef, 2005):

1. Change is a function of the whole context in which a person lives.
2. Change anywhere in the field affects all subsystems of the field.
3. Therapy focuses on the subjective awareness of the client, the interactions
within session, and an understanding of the whole context of forces that is
the background for everyday life.
4. Process in therapy refers to the space-time dynamics of change.
5. All observation is from a particular place, time, and perspective.

Finally, one can experiment, by which is meant that a therapist can move
from talk into action (Crocker, 1999). Through experiment, therapist and cli-
ent create new experience from which increased awareness and learning can
emerge. The most effective experiments, then, resemble artistic creations,
arising from the circumstances and details of therapeutic process, rather
than stylized interventions that can be used over and over with various and
numerous clients. In the process, the client “acts from experienced awareness
rather than following a direction imposed by the therapist” (Melnick and

When one puts all these together, four observations can be made about
the practice of Gestalt therapy: (1) the therapist and the client are always in
some form of meeting, (2) they each have some degree of awareness around
that, (3) for each there are various factors affecting how they experience what
is going on, and (4) the entire interaction is alive and flowing through time
in a fairly unpredictable fashion (Brownell, in press).
Let us consider what a possible session between a Gestalt therapist, who is essentially working with the experience of the client, and a person who comes claiming to have miraculous experience might be like.

**A POSSIBLE SESSION**

*Client:* I don’t know if you can help me. Do you believe in miracles?

*Therapist:* I don’t know if I can help you either, but I feel confident that together we can explore the situation. I’m curious why you ask if I believe in miracles.

*Client:* Well, because I think I’ve seen one, and I feel kind of nuts. One minute I feel like I’ve been close to God Himself, and the next minute I’m sure people are laughing at me whenever I talk about this.

*Therapist:* What do you feel like right now, as you say this much to me?

*Client:* I’m waiting . . .

*Therapist:* For me?

*Client:* Yes.

*Therapist:* Okay, what do you see so far?

*Client:* Okay so far.

*Therapist:* Good. I’m glad. I would invite you not to tell me anything about which you feel vulnerable, but as much as you can, I would be interested to hear more of the situation.

*Client:* Yeah? That sounds good . . . Well, the priest was serving Communion and then there were drops of blood where the chalice had been.

*Therapist:* They just appeared?

*Client:* Right. And we all came up after the Mass to look, because the priest was so moved by it, you know, and then we became moved as well, but now I feel a little foolish, and I ask myself, “Did I see what I thought I saw?”

*Therapist:* What else do you ask yourself?

*Client:* I wonder if we all just imagined it. Maybe the priest spilled some wine. But, no, he checked for that; he checked for a leak in the chalice. Maybe he exaggerated and we all just went along with his excitement. I don’t know. I have no explanation for it. I know what I saw, but I can’t explain it.

*Therapist:* Has anyone else in your family or in the church there seen a miracle—I mean, does this kind of thing happen in your church?

*Client:* Never!

*Therapist:* I notice that you’re wringing your hands, and you’re leaning over with your elbows on your knees.

*Client:* Right! This really bothers me. Part of me wishes this had never happened, because now nothing can be the same.

*Therapist:* It can’t?

*Client:* No! How do you see a miracle and then just go on with a “ho-hum” as if nothing happened? It has to mean something. God did something at the Eucharist, and it’s like he put up a billboard with block letters saying, “I gave my Son for you; give me yourself in return.”
Therapist: I can sense the energy coming from you about this. I imagine you carry this around with you and think about it frequently.

Client: You got that right! That’s one of the reasons I came here, because I’ve got to get this thing straightened out. I’ve got to figure out if I actually saw a miracle, or if I saw . . . well, I just don’t know what to call it. Have you ever had an experience like this?

Therapist: No. I’m not a Catholic; I’m Buddhist, but I’m very interested in what you’re telling me, and I get the sense of burden that you have.

Client: For a Buddhist, you’re doing well.

Therapist: Well, thank you for being so gracious! . . . What’s it like now between us? Are you feeling more comfortable with me, or are you feeling less so?

Client: Yeah. It’s better. I think you are interested. Who knows. Maybe the reason for the miracle is so that I would come to you and tell you about it and then God would change your life!

Therapist: I want you to know that I take seriously what you’ve told me, and I believe that you saw what you saw, but like you, I am without a definite answer as to its significance. It’s a mystery to me.

Client: Hm.

Therapist: Do you talk about this with your friends who were also there?

Client: No. I mean, not after I left the chapel that day. Of course, everyone else is just buzzing about the whole thing, and they want me to tell them about it, but I just want my peace. This thing has robbed me of my peace. Everything was so easy before, and now everything is busy and pressing.

Therapist: Would you like to try an experiment? That’s where you try something out to see what might happen.

Client: Well, maybe. What do you have in mind?

Therapist: What if we had some silence right here in which you could relax and let go?

Client: Right here? Right now?

Therapist: Yes.

Client: I don’t know. That feels weird.

Therapist: Fair enough. What would happen if you went away to a quiet place and asked God to tell you the significance of the miracle?

Client: You mean just between God and me?

Therapist: Yes.

Client: Well, I could try it, and then I could come back and we could talk about it.

Therapist: Sounds like a deal.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

It is the nature of personal experience that it is irrefutable. People know what they have experienced, normal or paranormal. They may turn its meaning around and around, but the elements of experience are presented to them in perception, and the thoughts that occur to them during the course of their
lives, and the emotions, and the physical sensations—the intentionalities of living—all these things comprise what it feels like to be that living person. If someone comes to me and says he or she has seen and interacted with the spirit of his or her recently deceased mother, I am not going to that person that is impossible because my theology will not allow it. Further, if I were to do that, the experience would not vanish for that person, but the trust between us might.

Still, there are differing perspectives on any given experience. Once, I worked the intensive care unit of a secure psychiatric hospital. One day we admitted a new patient, and while we were putting together a blank chart to use in getting him started, he began to carry on an animated conversation with someone who was not actually there for me, nor for the charge nurse, nor for the other staff people, and not for the other patients either. That other person was there for the new patient, but the meaning of what appeared to him was different for him than it was for me. Once on medications, the meaning for him changed as well.

The point here is that miracles, by definition, are a form of experience that may remain elusive—not able to be explained to everyone’s satisfaction. They are experienced by some, and that experience is reported in the form of a witness of fact. Just as the experience is subjective, the significance is a matter of individual interpretation. Further, the experience of one leads to an experience of another, and then to still others in the network of relationships comprising one’s field, but the nature of the experience evolves as it moves from direct event, to witness of events, to narrative about others’ experience. At every stage in the process experience becomes interpreted.

NOTES

2. Intentionality is an important construct in phenomenological philosophy and consequently it also pertains to qualitative or phenomenological methods of research in science, as well as to the more phenomenological approaches to psychotherapy such as the Gestalt therapy model described in this chapter.
3. Here, the use of the word intention or the implication of intentionality is to denote purpose or goal. That is in contrast to the phenomenological use of the word, which people often find confusing. Intentionality, in its phenomenological sense, will be defined subsequently in this chapter as well as in this author’s other chapter in this overall work (“Faith: An Existential, Phenomenological, and Biblical Integration,” vol. 2, ch. 13).
4. As already seen, phenomenologists understand differing types of intentionality, sometimes acknowledging a relatively more narrow sense, as in object-directedness, while at other times referring to an openness to the world or “what is ‘other’ (‘alterity’)” (Thompson, 2007, p. 22).
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The heart of man has been so constituted by the Almighty that, like a flint, it contains a hidden fire which is evoked by music and harmony, and renders man beside himself with ecstasy. These harmonies are echoes of that higher world of beauty which we call the world of spirits, they remind man of his relationship to that world, and produce in him an emotion so deep and strange that he himself is powerless to explain it. (al-Ghazzali, 57; also cited in Becker 2001, 145)

For an anthropologist, few films are as memorable as Stanley Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey*. In this classic, Kubrick uses striking visual metaphors to compress time and communicate complex ideas. A bone tool hurled by a chimp-like hand that returns to earth as the weightless pencil of an in-flight astronaut is one such metaphor that beautifully and succinctly symbolizes millions of years of human physical and cultural evolution. The most haunting of Kubrick’s images, however—the one that captured my imagination more than 20 years ago and remains just as intriguing to me today—is the sleek, towering monolith that suddenly appears on the flat savannah landscape. It possesses neither history nor apparent function, but simply “is.” A perfect single chord emanates from the metallic, abstract structure. As dawn casts red shadows across the dry, dusty desert, a band of proto-hominids tentatively approach the monolith, drawn by its single ethereal sound. Fear and awe mingle in their faces. Soon, many bands of these creatures form a congregation at the base of this ineffable object. They reach out, first to one another, and, then, to touch the monolith itself. The transition to humanity has begun.
These memorable, compelling scenes present an apt and unforgettable metaphor for both music and the miraculous in the evolution of our species. The capacity to be moved by music and the ability to experience the miraculous are closely intertwined in our neurophysiology and our transition to humanity. Grounded in, and representative of, numinous emotional experiences that instantiate the abstract, music and miracles are at once individual and social, biological and cultural, sensory and symbolic (Alcorta and Sosis 2005). Otto has noted that “in our experience of the sublime and the beautiful we dimly see the eternal and true world of Spirit and Freedom” (Rappaport 1999, 385). The emergence of the capacity to experience music and behold the miraculous is likely to have laid the foundation for both the cooperation and culture that are the hallmarks of human evolution.

MUSIC AND MIRACLES

The human ability to make and be moved by music is a universal human trait. It is shared across cultures throughout the world as a central element of religious ritual. Like miracles, music is intimately interconnected with a sense of the sacred, the numinous, and the divine. Music not only represents the sacred; it also calls it forth and embodies it, as well. Among the Mbuti pygmies of Africa, the haunting music of the sacred bull roarer is not just the symbol of the divine; this music is the divine as it embodies the “voice” of the forest (Turnbull 1962). For the Mbuti, music has the miraculous power to transform a rusty pipe into a sacred presence that evokes joy, fear, and awe. The ability of music to invest the profane with sacred significance by eliciting feelings of joy, fear, and awe lies at the heart of music’s central role in all religions. When combined with communal ritual, the intense emotions stirred by music become powerful motivational forces.

In traditional cultures, music is not only a prominent feature of religion; it is inseparable from it. Among the Igbo of Africa, music and the sacred are so closely associated that there exists only a single word, nkwa, for both (Becker 2001). Across cultures as diverse as those of Australian hunter-gatherers, African agriculturalists, and American capitalists, music constitutes a common unifying theme across totemic, ancestral, and monotheistic religious traditions. This is true even in modern Western societies where the secularization of music has sundered it from its religious roots.

A recent nationwide survey of U.S. congregations conducted by sociologist Mark Chaves and his colleagues (1999) found music to be the single most consistent feature of contemporary worship across all faiths in the United States. The indispensability of music to religion is perhaps best illustrated by the fact that even the most fundamentalist of religious sects retain music as a central element of religious worship. As noted by cognitive scientists Scott Atran and Ara Norenzayan, “Even the Taliban, who prohibited nearly all
public displays of sensory stimulation, promoted a cappella religious chants” (2004, 717). Music is a recurrent and fundamental feature of the religious experience in all known cultures.

Although the past two centuries have witnessed an increasing secularization of music in modern Western societies, this secular music is itself derived from the Gregorian chants of medieval Europe, and in contemporary popular culture, gospel represents the roots of rock and roll (Huron 2001). Even when music is secularized and divorced from the canons and rituals of formalized religions, it retains its power to evoke feelings of fear, awe, and ecstasy. Speaking of Mahler’s Tenth Symphony performed in concert, one woman writes:

I remember tears filling my eyes. I felt as if I understood a message, from one time to another, from one human to another. . . . The way through the symphony had been hard and frightening, even shocking, but it was a great happiness—almost an honor—having had the opportunity to experience this. . . . Now all words would have been superfluous, even my own. My thoughts had nothing to do with words. (Gabrielsson 2001, 441)

Whether we experience music within the sanctuary of a cathedral, as part of a Balinese ceremonial ritual, in the concert halls of New York, or at a rock-and-roll rave in Tokyo, music has an extraordinary power to move us in inexplicable, ineffable, seemingly miraculous ways. During my fieldwork with American adolescents, I asked one 15-year-old boy how important music was to his religious experience. He replied that music was not important to his religion; it was his religion. I recently heard a similar sentiment expressed by a self-described atheist in reference to the music of the Grateful Dead. For this latter individual, and for the millions of others who comprise the growing secular music market, music retains its power to deeply affect us even in the absence of communal religious ritual. How does music so miraculously move us to smiles, to tears, and to joy, and why does it do so?

What Is Music?

Music is miraculous not only because it moves us, but also because we still have little understanding of why it does so. What, exactly, is music? Musical forms differ widely from culture to culture. The atonal music that stirs the heart of a Thai listener may sound cacophonous to the Western ear, and the plaintive chords of country music may be unpleasant for the classical music aficionado to hear. Yet within their respective cultures, each of the widely variant musical forms throughout the world is able to elicit powerful emotions in listeners. Some elements of music, such as pitch, rhythm, and dissonance, may even elicit universal responses in listeners untrained in the cultural musical idiom (Gabrielsson and Lindstrom 2001). How does music
elicit these feelings in listeners? Why does our heartbeat speed up to match the brisk tempo of military music and slow down when we hear the sonorous measures of a dirge? What happens to our bodies when we listen to music? Are there specific structures in the human brain dedicated to musical processing? Do these same structures participate in other miraculous, transcendent experiences? Finally, why have humans evolved this capacity to process and be moved by music?

We certainly do not have the answers to all of these questions, but accumulating research is providing intriguing insights into many of them. Within the last several years, neuroscientists have employed neuroimaging techniques to examine the effects of music on the human brain. Simultaneously, neurologists have learned much about both music and miracles as a result of their work with such disorders as amusia, anhedonia, epilepsy, Parkinson’s disease, and prefrontal disconnect syndrome. The experiments of developmental psychologists have enriched our understanding of the ontogeny of music perception and processing. Cross-cultural research conducted by anthropologists and ethnomusicologists has expanded our knowledge of universal and culturally specific features of music, trance, and other transcendent experiences. Physicians and sociologists have amassed reliable and replicable research regarding the beneficial effects of music and religion on both mind and body. We now have empirical evidence to support our intuitions that “music perception potentially affects emotion, influences the autonomic nervous system, as well as the hormonal and immune systems, and activates (pre)motor representations” (Koelsch and Siebel 2005, 578). This research shows that music’s ability to elicit emotion and alter our affective state also impacts our social judgment, cognitive processing style, and decision making (Clore and Huntsinger 2007). Our understanding of music has expanded considerably over the past decade, including our ability to identify the neurophysiological mechanisms by which we experience music’s emotional power.

MUSIC AND DEVELOPMENT

Cognitive scientists Stefan Koelsch and Walter Siebel note that “music perception involves complex brain functions underlying acoustic analysis, auditory memory, auditory scene analysis, and processing of musical syntax and semantics” (2005, 578). Decoding the culturally prescribed “meaning” of music entails the learning of emotional, autonomic, and cognitive associations, as well as the encoding of motor and sensory stimuli (Becker 2004; Cross 2003). Since the neural structures underlying these various functions follow different developmental trajectories, the cultural encoding of music is necessarily an ongoing developmental process that begins in the womb and continues across the life course.
Neuroscientists Isabelle Peretz and Max Coltheart (2003) have proposed a modular model of musical processing that encompasses four hierarchical processing levels. Their modules include (1) acoustic analysis, (2) pitch and temporal organization, (3) emotion expression analysis and musical lexicon, and (4) associative memories. This model summarizes the basic functional components that must be integrated for musical processing. It also reflects the maturation patterns of brain regions responsible for each of these processing tasks.

Acoustic processing areas of the brain are functioning even before we are born. Temporal lobe regions of our brain responsible for pitch and temporal organization mature shortly thereafter. The emotional processing structures of our limbic system, and the cortical regions necessary for emotion expression analysis and musical lexicon, including both the cingulate and prefrontal cortices, follow different maturational trajectories. Higher-level association areas in the temporal and prefrontal cortices are among the last brain regions to develop and do not reach full maturation until adolescence. As a result of this heterochronic pattern of brain development, the encoding of musical meanings and the mastery of musical skills are cumulative processes, with some components of these processes more easily achieved during particular brain development periods.

Moreover, since many higher-level skills build upon and integrate numerous prerequisite abilities, the full development of these higher-level skills may continue across the maturation period. Throughout the process of learning music both motor and cultural inputs are essential in shaping the maturing neural pathways. Such cumulative skill development involves ongoing feedback and is intuitive to anyone who has watched a baby learn to walk. Just as it is necessary for an infant to first roll over, balance, crawl, stand, and step before running and jumping, it is also necessary for an individual to first process pitch, rhythm, tone, timbre, and basic structural components of music before these elements can be integrated into the cultural encoding of higher order syntactic, emotional, and symbolic meanings acquired during later developmental periods.

Music and Infancy

The acquisition of our musical processing capabilities begins before birth. Babies exposed to music as fetuses show post-birth preferences for this familiar music (Levitin 2006). Newborns prefer song to speech; they also prefer a particular type of song. Throughout the world, caregiver communications with newborns include songs that are slower, higher pitched, and have an exaggerated rhythm when compared to non-infant songs (Levitin 2006). Videotaped experiments conducted by psychologist Sandra Trehub (2001) demonstrate that even six-month-old infants perceive and attend to both the
Music and the Miraculous

structural and emotional features of musical sounds. Infants not only remember musical selections over extended time periods, but also subsequently prefer these familiar selections to unfamiliar music (Trehub 2002).

The ability of infants to perceive and process music utilizes both the auditory pathways that enable us to hear sounds in general, and more specialized modules that decode specific features of music in particular. The perception of musical pitch engages tonotopic neuronal maps in the right superior temporal lobe, while the homologous left temporal lobe structures are responsible for the time interval processing involved in perceptions of rhythm (Liegeois-Chauvel et al. 2001).

In addition to their ability to recognize specific musical selections, infants can also identify transpositions of tunes to a new pitch range, indicating that they encode such melodies in terms of relative pitch. No other primate species studied to date demonstrates this skill (McDermott and Hauser 2006). Human infants also show enhanced processing for scales with unequal pitch steps, suggesting that the commonly used scales across cultures that incorporate unequal pitch spacing express innate predispositions (Peretz and Coltheart 2003). Encoding of music by infants appears to be feature-specific; when the tempo of musical selections is altered, infant retention of the selection is disrupted. Additionally, some features of music have been shown to be more memorable for infants than other features. Timbre is one such feature. In a study conducted by neuropsychologist Laurel Trainor, six-month-old infants were exposed to seven days of the same tunes played on both a piano and a harp. The tunes played on a harp were subsequently remembered for longer periods by the babies than those performed on the piano (Trehub 2002).

Infants appear to exhibit musical preferences based on their personality style, as well. Infants as young as six and nine months old have been found to display individual musical preferences that correlate with patterns of visual fixation. Infants who exhibited slower visual tempos also preferred slower tempo songs, while those who consistently displayed brief visual fixations preferred faster, playful songs (Trehub 2002).

Music and Childhood

Although infants enter the world with the ability to perceive and attend to both the structural and emotional features of musical sounds, and with some apparently innate preferences for pitch spacing and timbre, cultural exposure and socialization experiences are required for the development of these predispositions into musical syntax and meaning. By age three, children are able to recognize the musical representations of happiness within their respective cultures, and by age five, they are able to employ tempo differences to discriminate between happy and sad musical excerpts. By six years of age,
children readily employ both tempo and mode to identify the basic emotions of happiness, sadness, fear, and anger in music, with much of this learning occurring through passive exposure to culturally normative musical forms (Trehub 2001).

Cognitive scientists Stefan Koelsch and Walter Siebel note that “numerous studies have shown that even non-musicians, individuals who have not received formal musical training, have a highly sophisticated implicit knowledge about musical syntax, knowledge which is presumably acquired during listening experiences in everyday life . . . and which is important for processing meaning and emotion in music” (2005, 581).

Stefan Koelsch and his colleagues (Koelsch, Fritz et al. 2005) used functional magnetic resonance imaging to examine the effects of development and music training on activation patterns in the human brain. Ten-year-old children with varying degrees of musical training, adults with no formal musical training, and adult musicians were compared during exposure to musical sequences that ended on chords that were regular or irregular in relation to the musical syntax. While the neuroimaging data showed similar right hemisphere activation patterns across all three groups, in the left hemisphere, “adults showed larger activations than children in prefrontal areas, in the supramarginal gyrus, and in temporal areas” (1068). These researchers also found that musical training in both adults and children correlated with stronger activation in the frontal operculum and the anterior portion of the superior temporal gyrus. These findings demonstrate significant effects of both development and musical training on brain activation patterns in response to music.

Music remains an important mnemonic device throughout childhood, as attested by anyone who still locates “k” in the alphabet by singing the “ABC” song. Neuroimaging studies indicate that cultural rules for the syntactic processing of music continue to be learned throughout this developmental period. Yet, the deep emotional and social connotations of music that are so exaggerated in the pitch, tone, and tempo of infant caregiver songs appear to take a backseat to syntactic learning during this time. This abruptly changes with the advent of adolescence, however, when emotional and social functions of music reemerge as central foci of musical processing and performance.

Music and Adolescence

During adolescence, interest in and emotional response to music appears to reach its zenith. An Australian study on families and electronic entertainment found that music is “mentioned by young people as their most favoured form of entertainment and is more important to them than to adults” (Jackson 2001). Similar results were found in the United States and Sweden (Jackson 2001). The extent of adolescent interest in music is reflected in
the size and economic impact of the growing multibillion-dollar U.S. teen music industry. More than 40 million iPods have been sold since Apple first introduced these digital music players, and iTunes is currently selling an average of 3 million song downloads per day (McGrath 2006). A survey of 3,000 U.S. Web users conducted in the year 2000 found that “by far the heaviest users of music downloads are individuals under 20 years old” (Jackson 2001, 2).

The teen music market is not confined to the United States. There exists an enormous and growing global market for Western teen music that includes iPods, CDs, videos, downloads, radio, concerts, and even cellular telephone ring tones. The economic impact of this adolescent interest in music is considerable. Penelope Lewis notes that “in the United States . . . the music industry is currently economically larger than the pharmaceutical industry” (Lewis 2002, 364). This burgeoning global adolescent interest in Western music has political ramifications as well. The attempted repression of Western “rock and roll” by such authoritarian governments as those of Soviet Russia and, more recently, mainland China attests to the social and cultural significance of music.

The music of our adolescent years does seem to have special significance. Far into our adulthood we remember this music; a song from those years can instantaneously recall people, places, and feelings. A few whistled notes of the Lovin’ Spoonful’s “Daydream” can still instantly transport me to the lakeside cabin of a teenage friend. We even define historical periods within our national culture in terms of the adolescent popular music of that era. Jazz, swing, rock and roll, and Woodstock all immediately connote both a style of American music and a cultural milieu. Neuroscientist David Levitin notes that “part of the reason we remember songs from our teenage years is because those were . . . emotionally charged” (Levitin 2006, 225). This emotional charging enhances both the things associated with these songs and our memories of them.

During adolescence, music is also socially significant. Like dress, hairstyle, and speech, adolescents employ music to define both their self-identity and their membership in social groups. This is particularly true in heterogeneous modern secular cultures. The American teen who listens to country music has both a different self-image and a different peer group than the teen who prefers heavy metal or rap.

In traditional cultures throughout the world, music has historically played a special role during adolescence. The adolescent rites of passage that occur in nearly three-quarters of cultures around the world are sacred rituals that incorporate music as a central, prominent feature. These rites transmit the culture’s sacred knowledge and beliefs in preparation for the adolescent’s transition from child to adult status within the society. There is considerable variation in the onset, duration, and intensity of these rites across cultures,
but in every culture known, sacred symbols, social experiences, and emotionally evocative music are fundamental elements of these rites.

In both modern and traditional societies music holds a special social and emotional significance for adolescents and serves an important function in the teen’s transition from child to adult. Human brain development patterns suggest what this function is and why music is particularly well suited to fulfill it.

**THE NEUROPHYSIOLOGY OF MUSIC**

**Music and the Reward System**

Humans are born with the genetically encoded neural structures necessary for the analysis and processing of the acoustic, pitch, and temporal properties of music. The emotional encoding of music, however, and its integration into socially and symbolically meaningful associational networks requires cultural inputs during specific developmental periods.

Adolescence is a particularly sensitive developmental period for the maturation of social and symbolic associational networks. Neural tracts connecting prefrontal, temporal, and limbic areas of the brain undergo significant changes during adolescence as gray matter increases to its maximum volume. This increase is subsequently reduced through synaptic pruning, which eliminates as much as one-half of the cortical synapses per neuron (Spear 2000). Since neurons are energetically expensive, the brain reduces these costs by eliminating lesser used pathways. Synapses that are frequently activated by environmental stimuli are retained while those that are not are eliminated. Since neuronal firing results from the processing of environmental stimuli, “the environment or activities of the teenager may guide selective synapse elimination during adolescence” (Giedd et al. 1999, 863). Simultaneously, myelination of those neuronal interconnections retained during the pruning process serves to speed up network processing.

The temporal lobe of the human brain functions in the processing of music, language, and social stimuli. During adolescence this brain area is undergoing significant increase and pruning. Maturation and pruning of the prefrontal cortex (PFC), a critical association area of the brain responsible for executive functions, is also occurring during this time. The PFC is the seat of abstract, symbolic thought. Additionally, various substructures of the PFC are critical for individual decision making, moral reasoning, and social judgment. As the highest-level association area of the brain, the PFC receives and integrates information from numerous other brain regions, including sensory, motor, and higher-order association areas. The integration of this information is a central function of the PFC and underlies its executive role. In order to use this integrated information in effective social judgment and personal decision making, however, the PFC depends on
additional input from the brain’s emotional processing centers to evaluate alternative choices (Bar-On et al. 2005; Damasio 1994).

The incentive value of stimuli is assigned by the brain’s reward system. By assigning incentive value to stimuli, the brain’s reward system translates motivational stimuli into adaptive behaviors. Some stimuli, such as food and sex, have intrinsic reward value, but other neutral stimuli may acquire reward value through a process of associational learning. Neuroimaging studies have shown that for drug-addicted individuals, even the locations and paraphernalia associated with drug use can acquire incentive value over time. After such incentive learning occurs, these previously neutral stimuli are themselves capable of activating the brain’s reward system even in the absence of the drug itself.

The nuclei of the brain’s limbic system, and particularly the amygdala, function in processing and evaluating emotional stimuli. The amygdala is directly interconnected with both the reward system and the prefrontal cortex. Input from the amygdala to the PFC regarding the emotional valuation of stimuli has been shown to be critical in decision making (Bar-On et al. 2005; Damasio 1994). While the PFC is capable of determining rational solutions to problems in the absence of amygdala inputs, the valuations of the amygdala are critical for applying these solutions for accurate social judgments and effective personal decision making. In the absence of such input from the amygdala, individuals exhibit an inability to make sound social judgments or adaptive personal choices (Bar-On et al. 2005; Damasio 1994).

Adolescence is a critical maturation period for both the reward and limbic systems of the brain. In early adolescence, dopamine inhibitory input to the prefrontal cortex reaches its maximal levels while dopamine inhibition of limbic activity, including the hippocampus and amygdala, is at its lowest. This affects judgment, decision making, and impulse control. Adolescents exhibit greater novelty seeking, risk taking, emotional responsivity, and impulsivity than either children or adults (Dahl 2004). In modern secular societies, these changes in the reward and emotional processing centers of the adolescent brain have been implicated in the increased vulnerability of teens to drug and alcohol abuse. As the adolescent brain matures, however, a shift occurs in the dopaminergic inhibition of the amygdala and the PFC, with the PFC exhibiting less dopaminergic inhibition and assuming greater dominance vis-à-vis the brain’s reward system.

These concurrent changes in the adolescent brain create an experience-expectant window for assigning emotional meaning and reward value to social and symbolic stimuli. At the same time, the changes occurring in the temporal and prefrontal cortices create an opportunity to integrate emotionally charged social and symbolic stimuli into associational networks of motivationally powerful and highly memorable cognitive schema (Alcorta
In traditional societies, adolescent rites of passage create an extremely effective mechanism for creating such schema.

Music is a central feature of adolescent rites of passage. Like drugs of abuse, music evokes positive emotions through its activation of the brain’s reward pathways. Positron emission tomography (PET) studies of adults listening to music demonstrate changes in cerebral blood flow in emotional processing and reward systems correlated with subjective reports of pleasurable “chills” in response to the music. These changes are accompanied by changes in heart rate, respiration, and skin conductance. Blood flow in brain structures that process and evaluate such negative emotions as fear decrease during these experiences, while blood flow in areas of the brain such as the ventral tegmental area that register reward and pleasure increase in response to highly pleasurable music (Blood and Zatorre 2001).

Neuroscientists Vinod Menon and David Levitin (2005) used functional and effective connectivity analysis to examine the effects of pleasurable music on the response and physiological connectivity of the reward system in 13 adolescent subjects aged 19–23 years. These researchers found that listening to music “strongly modulates activity in a network of mesolimbic structures involved in reward processing, including the nucleus accumbens (NAc) and the ventral tegmental area (VTA), as well as the hypothalamus and insula, which are thought to be involved in regulating autonomic and physiological responses to rewarding and emotional stimuli” (175). A strong correlation between nucleus accumbens and ventral tegmental area responses was found by these researchers, pointing to an association between dopamine release and the brain’s reward center structures’ response to music.

Dopamine release is a key factor in the reinforcing effects of many addictive drugs and is critical for reward processing. Additionally, dopaminergic input to the nucleus accumbens from the ventral tegmental area is important for endogenous opioid peptide transmission. Increased dopaminergic activity in response to pleasurable music predicts increased opioid release in the nucleus accumbens, as well (Blood et al. 1999; Menon and Levitin 2005).

These studies have shown that listening to highly pleasurable music can directly activate the dopaminergic reward system of the brain, resulting in the release of both the neurotransmitter dopamine and endogenous opioids. Listening to music also activates numerous autonomic functions including heart rate, blood pressure, respiration, immunological function, and neuroendocrine responses (Hirokawa and Ohira 2003). These effects occur even when individuals are simply passive listeners. When music is combined with other sensory stimuli, these effects are further intensified.

A recent study conducted by neuroeconomist Thomas Baumgartner and colleagues (2006) looked at the effects of music on emotional response to affective pictures. The results showed that the subjective rating of emotional experience markedly increased when music was combined with affective
Music and the Miraculous

pictures. Functional magnetic resonance imaging showed that in addition to the activation of auditory and syntactic musical processing areas of the brain, the combined condition of music and pictures markedly increased the activation of emotional and associational brain processing regions, as well. In contrast, the only activation increase for the picture condition alone occurred in the prefrontal cortex. From these findings the researchers conclude that “emotional pictures evoke a more cognitive mode of emotion perception, whereas congruent presentations of emotional visual and musical stimuli rather automatically evoke strong emotional feelings and experiences” (Baumgartner et al. 2006, 151).

Outside of modern Western cultures, music is seldom experienced as a solitary, isolated phenomenon, and even in contemporary secular societies much musical listening occurs within social and religious contexts. Across cultures, music has been traditionally experienced as a central element within a rich ritual complex that incorporates vibrant visual, linguistic, and motor components, as well (Bloch 1989). Such multimodal sensory inputs enhance, intensify, and guide the emotional responses of participants. These responses are likely to be particularly pronounced and long-lasting during adolescence as a result of brain maturation patterns. Adolescent rites of passage are particularly effective in evoking emotional responses in initiates. The simplest of such rites utilize music and myth to transmit social rules, religious beliefs, and moral codes. The most elaborate, however, subject participants to isolation, food and sleep deprivation, and mental and physical pain, as well (Turner 1967). Such sacred pain (Glucklich 2001) introduces a new level of emotional intensity above that engendered through music and myth alone. Memories and associations created through participation in such rites are replete with emotionally charged social symbols and schema.

Emotion, Cognition, and Empathy

Musicologist Ian Cross has noted that “music is not only sonic, embodied, and interactive; it is bound to its contexts of occurrence in ways that enable it to derive meaning from, and interactively to confer meaning on, the experiential contexts in which it occurs, these meanings being variable and transposable” (Cross 2003, 108). Music’s capacity to engage the emotional- and reward-processing pathways of the human brain is central to its ability to imbue social and symbolic stimuli with reward value and emotional meaning.

Emotions weight alternative choices. Emotions also consciously and unconsciously influence judgments of trustworthiness (Morris, Ohman, and Dolan 1998), as well as our attraction to others, regardless of our conscious cognitions (Clore and Huntsinger 2007). Perhaps most surprising, however, is the fact that emotion influences not only what we think, but also how we think.
Psychologists Gerald Clore and Jeffrey Huntsinger recently conducted experiments to assess the effects of positive and negative affect on modes of information processing. Their findings showed that “in addition to influencing judgment and decision-making, affect influences how people process information. . . . When people are happy they engage in global, category-level, relational processing, whereas when they are sad they engage in local, item-level, stimulus-specific processing” (Clore and Huntsinger 2007, 395). Studies conducted by other cognitive psychologists have additionally shown that positive moods also have several other important cognitive effects. They (1) promote semantic priming and the use of judgment heuristics; (2) increase the likelihood of false and schema-guided memory; (3) enhance false memories and retrieval-induced forgetting; and (4) promote in-group, out-group stereotyping (Clore and Huntsinger 2007). These cognitive consequences of positive affect all have important ramifications for the creation and ongoing cohesion of social groups.

Across human cultures the predominant setting for listening to and performing music is the social group, and the dominant emotion experienced during musical experiences is happiness and joy (Becker 2004). Traditionally, musical performance has occurred almost exclusively within the context of religious rituals, and even in modern secular societies musical performance remains an important component of religious participation. In modern westernized cultures, however, music is also frequently heard and performed within a secular group context, whether in ballparks, classical concert halls, or in rock-and-roll raves.

Even in such secular settings, when individuals within these groups share the encoded cultural meaning of the music, the emotions evoked throughout the group and their associated autonomic and motor effects are shared, as well. The patriotic feelings stirred by the playing of America’s national anthem before the opening pitch at baseball games and the euphoria experienced by audience members at a Dave Matthews concert derive from this shared meaning of the music. This capacity of music to instantiate culturally defined emotional meaning provides the basis for music’s ability to entrain the emotional, autonomic, and motor responses of social groups. Such entrainment is an important precursor for empathy and the social cooperation it enables.

Studies conducted by R. W. Levenson (2003) have shown a significant positive correlation between congruent autonomic states and empathy. More recently, functional magnetic resonance imaging has been used to identify the neural mechanisms involved in engendering and experiencing empathy. This research has focused on action-representation modules and emotional processing centers in the brain, since “empathic individuals exhibit unconscious mimicry of the postures, mannerisms, and facial expressions of others (chameleon effect) to a greater extent than non-empathic individuals” (Carr et al. 2005, 144).
Neuroscientist Laurie Carr and colleagues imaged subjects who were either observing or imitating the emotional facial expressions of others. The results showed a “substantially similar network of activated areas for both imitation and observation of emotion,” including the anterior insula, the amygdala, the superior temporal cortex, and the inferior frontal cortex. Imitation was found to produce stronger activation of this network than observation alone. They concluded that “the type of empathic resonance induced by imitation does not require explicit representational content and may be a form of mirroring that grounds empathy via an experiential mechanism” (Carr et al. 2005, 150).

Music provides just such an experiential mechanism. It evokes similar emotions, entrains motor movements, and elicits congruent autonomic functions across groups of listeners. It also activates the neural structures involved in imitation in both adults and children (Koelsch et al. 2005). The ability of music to engage these networks and elicit empathy among listeners is likely to play an important role in both the creation and cooperation of social groups.

Music and Trance

Music’s ability to evoke intense emotions is central to its capacity for engendering empathy and investing both social and symbolic stimuli with deep emotional meaning. Yet, not all individuals find music moving, and it is clear that music’s ability to elicit and engage emotion varies across the life course. While music appears to be particularly powerful in evoking emotions during infancy and adolescence, this is certainly not true for all babies or all teens. For some adolescents music is all-consuming, but for others it holds little meaning. Likewise, babies, children, and adults exhibit a wide range of interest in and response to music (Levitin 2006; Trehub 2002).

This variability in music’s importance across the population, like that of most complex human traits, is likely to exhibit a normal distribution. One tail of this distribution may encompass those individuals for whom music holds neither appeal nor emotional meaning, while the other represents those persons for whom music is deeply powerful and intensely moving. For this latter population the emotional intensity experienced in response to music, particularly when coupled with participation in ritual and dance, not only engages deep emotions, but also has the power to alter perceptions and usher in new states of consciousness.

In modern secular societies these individuals comprise the “deep listeners” described by Judith Becker (2004) for whom music is an ecstatic experience that may even engender paranormal out-of-body experiences (Gabrielsson 2001). In traditional societies, such music-induced experiences are both accepted and institutionalized. The Siberian shaman whose chants transport
him to a spirit world of gods and demons, the Islamic Sufi for whom music is the “flint and steel” that sparks the heart’s ecstasy, and the Latin Pentecostal list moved by music to speak in tongues all share this capacity for intense, emotional engagement through music. For these individuals, the words of Sufi mystic al-Ghazzali ring true:

Lo! Hearts and inmost thoughts are treasuries of secrets and mines of jewels. . . . There is no way to the extracting of their hidden things save by the flint and steel of listening to music and singing, and there is no entrance to the heart save by the ante-chamber of the ears. So musical tones . . . bears as fruit a state in the heart that is called ecstasy. (al-Ghazzali cited in Becker 2004, 79)

In many traditional cultures of the world, such intense, ecstatic emotional responses to music are an important precursor to and inducer of ritual trance. Ethnomusicologist Judith Becker (2004) notes that two basic features of musical trance appear to be universal: (1) all trancers share deep, intense emotions in response to music; and (2) this emotional intensity, when situated within the appropriate socio-ritual context, results in a temporary loss of the autobiographical self. Becker notes that “trancing in religious contexts draws on emotion, depends on emotion, and stimulates emotion through sensual overload; visual, tactile, and aural. In trancing contexts, the ANS [autonomic nervous system] seems in overdrive, propelling the trancer to physical feats not normally possible, and to the feeling of numinous luminosity that encapsulates special knowledge not accessible during normal consciousness” (Becker 2004, 66).

Trancing is a highly subjective, deeply emotional, and motor-intensive paranormal experience. It is also a highly structured social performance that follows a very specific cultural script. Balinese bebuten trance, Pentecostal possession trance, and Sufi ecstatic trance all involve both deep emotional response to movement and music, as well as a loss of autobiographical self; but they differ widely in the particular movements made, the types of emotions experienced, and the ritual personae assumed by the trancers during their trance experiences. Within each of these respective cultures, trancers exhibit very structured, stereotypical, and predictable behaviors. In regard to Central Javanese trancers, anthropologist Ruth Benedict makes the observation that “even in trance, the individual holds strictly to the rules and expectations of his culture and his experience is as locally patterned as a marriage rite or an economic exchange” (Benedict cited in Pilch 2006, 46). This prescriptive nature of trance is echoed by ethnomusicologist Judith Becker:

One of the startling aspects of religious trancing worldwide is its stereotypicity. Trancers behave exactly the way in which they have learned to behave, and trance behavior is narrowly circumscribed by time.
and place. . . . Precisely at the point in the drama at which they begin trancing, their actions, gestures, and the duration of the trancing are predictable. . . . Trancers follow a script that determines the time of the onset of trance, the duration of trance, behavior during trance, and the style of withdrawal from trance. (Becker 2004, 67)

Trancing divorces the individual from his or her normal autobiographical self; behaviors exhibited by trancers appear to be beyond conscious control. Trancers may exhibit both miraculous abilities and abnormal thresholds for pain. From “the self-stabbing of the Sulawesi bissu and the Balinese behuten trances, trancing individuals transcend their normal bodily limitations and perform [paranormal] feats of physical endurance that are unthinkable in ordinary states of consciousness” (Becker 2004, 147). Yet, the alternate self and actions that emerge during trancing closely adhere to ritually prescribed and culturally specific categorical constructs and heuristic frames. Pentecostal trancers can often miraculously speak in tongues, but they do not converse with Yanomamo hekuba spirits, nor are they possessed by angry Balinese witches. Trancers may shed their autobiographical selves of profane existence, but the spirits with which they are possessed and the behaviors in which they engage during the trance experience are neither universal nor arbitrary. The highly scripted nature of these spirits suggests, instead, that trancers draw on internalized cultural schema during the trance experience.

Semantic priming is an important element in this process. Individuals prepare themselves for trancing through pre-scripted actions involving such primes. For Pentecostalists, tarrying at the altar is a potent precursor to trance; among Sufi mystics, trancing is as dependent on the repeated poetry of the Qur’an as on the music and dance that accompany it (Becker 2004). Once primed, the trance experience relies on schema-guided memories for the appropriate roles assumed by trancers and the behaviors they enact.

The intense positive affect induced in trancers by both ritualized music and movement promotes global, category-level relational cognitive processing (Clore and Huntsinger 2007). During trance, this relational processing engages sacred categories and schema outside of normal, profane existence. The use of specific, highly emotionally charged music during religious trancing, and the cognitive priming of the trancer are important triggers for accessing these specialized neural networks. These triggers activate different associationial pathways from those that pattern non-trance perception and behaviors, thereby taking the trancer outside of the normal autobiographical self.

This associationial network model of trance is similar to that proposed by Becker (2004) and posits the existence of alternative neuronal pathways to those of everyday life that are both created and accessed through musical ritual. These alternate associations connect the cognitive schema of religious belief with emotional, motor, and sensory processing structures. They
are developed through individual exposure to and participation in religious training and ritual and are activated in response to both the deeply emotional music of ritual and the semantic priming of the ritual itself.

These associational pathways, and the cognitive schema they incorporate, differ from those normally accessed by the individual in the profane world. As a result, the self that emerges in trance is quite different from the autobiographical self of everyday life. Becker notes that “one of the salient features of possession trance is the apparent absence of, or inactivity of, or substitution for the autobiographical self. Trancers temporarily lose their sense of their private, autobiographical self in favor of the sense of the special self of trance possession” (Becker 2004, 144). Sensory perceptions, motor responses, reactions to stimuli, and even autonomic and neuroendocrine responses differ, as well.

These changes contribute to the ability of trancers to perform extraordinary feats and withstand unusual pain. The intense and ecstatic emotions engendered by the music, the ritual, and the sacred schema are likely to result in the flooding of neural structures by dopamine and opioid release. The result is “a new way of being in the world” (Becker 2004, 106). Music and ritual become the portals to access these paranormal worlds, as well as a symbolic instantiation of them. In contrast to profane schema, the schema accessed through trance incorporate the metaphor of myth and the possibility of the miraculous, including such things as glossolalia, spirit possession, and indifference to suffering and pain. Subsequent activation of these new pathways through the emotional and symbolic prime of musical ritual further strengthens these associations, simultaneously re-creating and reinforcing the cognitions and emotions experienced during trance and validating their existence and reality. While trancing requires preparation, experienced trancers become increasingly adept at shedding the autobiographical self and moving into these alternate realities or paranormal states readily.

What if there are no alternative categories and schema to be accessed? Is musically induced trance possible in secular cultures? The importance of alternative religious schema for the induction of trance is suggested by the absence of trance during the emotionally intensive musical concerts and raves of Western secular culture. At such events, musically induced euphoria is quite evident and may even result in out-of-character behaviors and fainting. Yet, the autobiographical self is never lost, extraordinary powers are never demonstrated, and alternative, miraculous worlds are never experienced. Entry into such worlds appears to require preexistent knowledge of them.

The importance of religious schema for trance is also suggested by the appearance of trance in the life course. In diverse cultures throughout the world, the first trance experiences occur during adolescence when emotional responses to musical primes are particularly intense. These trance experiences are often considered to be dangerous for the novice trancer. Throughout the
world adolescent rites of passage exist for the explicit purpose of inculcat-
ing religious schema. In many cultures these rites purposefully seek to break
down the autobiographical self of the initiate in order to create a new social
persona. Music, movement, and intensely emotional ritual experiences con-
stitute central components of this process. In many cultures these primes not
only prepare the initiate for learning the religious schema presented through
ritual and myth but also provide the venue for initial trance experiences.

MUSIC, MIRACLES, AND HUMAN EVOLUTION

The accumulating neuroimaging data and psychological research on music
and the human brain provide strong support for the view that music, like lan-
guage, is an evolved human adaptation. In order for music to be perceived
and processed there must exist specific, dedicated, genetically encoded brain
structures capable of analyzing acoustic signals related to pitch, tone, timbre,
and rhythm. There must also exist basic neural pathways connecting these
structures to mesolimbic areas of the brain involved in reward and emotion
processing, as well as to those involved in social and symbolic cognition.
The research indicates that the development of these pathways is dependent
on both brain maturation patterns and cultural learning. Humans are born
with a natural ability to perceive music as a mnemonic, emotionally evocative
stimulus, but it is through conditioned and associational learning that these
basic abilities are patterned and developed. From these studies we are now
beginning to understand the proximate causes, or the how of music’s strong
emotional power, but this research sheds little light on the ultimate explana-
tions of why music is of such universal importance in human cultures.

Many different explanations have been advanced to explain why humans
make music. Some cognitive scientists have argued that music is simply an
enjoyable but essentially parasitic by-product of other evolved human ca-
pacities (Pinker 1997). Like the spandrels of Gothic cathedrals, which ap-
pear complex and purposeful, music, though aesthetically pleasing, serves
no adaptive function in its own right. Others who view music as an evolved
human adaptation have considered music to be a mechanism to enhance
sexual selection, like birdsong or gibbon duets (Darwin 1872; Miller 2000).
Some view it as serving social accommodation functions, similar to the songs
of humpback whales. Yet, human music making is not confined in function to
territorial or courtship displays; it also differs considerably from nonhuman
songs in numerous other respects, as well (McDermott and Hauser 2006).

The key to understanding the evolution of music is likely to be its unique
capacity to instantiate and emotively evoke cognitive schema in collective
groups across both time and space (Alcorta and Sosis 2005). The ability of
music to evoke intense emotional responses in listeners and to activate the
brain’s reward system renders it an important mnemonic and motivational
force. The fact that the emotions usually elicited by music, and particularly by religious music, are happiness and joy has significant consequences for modes of cognitive processing. Research demonstrates that positive affect promotes the activation of semantic priming, heuristic processing, schema-guided memory, stereotyping, and categorical and relational thinking. All of these effects of music advance the creation of socially significant cognitive schema with deep emotional meaning. Moreover, the ability of music to entrain listeners renders it an unparalleled mechanism for engendering empathy in groups, thereby laying the foundation for both group cohesion and cooperation.

The symbolic and structural attributes of music make it an effective mechanism for instantiating and activating learned associational pathways. The lullabies of infancy, the campfire rounds of childhood, and the love songs of adolescence indelibly etch themselves into our memories. Yet, it is not just the music that we remember. When we hear these songs we also feel the touch of our first caregiver, smell the smoky pungency of burning wood, and see the youthful face of our old flame. Music has the power to evoke a myriad of associations, both cognitive and sensory. Psychiatrist Tsvia Horesh, who employs music therapy in her work with drug addicts, describes this effect of music on her clients: “The song evoked a totally reminiscent mode of being (smell, pictures, sounds, memories and emotions), and threatened to drown the people in an overwhelming emotional ocean” (Horesh 2006, 138). Even Alzheimer’s patients who have lost much of their explicit memory can still recall songs and the feelings associated with them (Levitin 2006).

The ontogenetic nature of music provides an effective developmental mechanism for both the cultural encoding of music with emotional meaning, and the association of such emotionally encoded music with socially salient schema. We are born with innate capacities to perceive and process music and with some innate emotional preferences and responses to music. Yet, exposure and socialization are required for us to learn and encode the syntactic structure and emotional meaning of our culture’s music. By the time we have reached adolescence we are ready to associate this emotionally encoded music with social schema, and adolescents worldwide appear to do so naturally.

Humans also appear to possess a predisposition to associate music with sacred ritual and its symbolic schema, as well. Throughout the world, music is intimately associated with religion and is imbued with symbolic, sacred meaning. This interconnection of music and the miraculous may be both a human predisposition and a basic human need. Indeed, the emotional power of music may be dangerous in the absence of such structured meaning (Horesh 2006). One teen interviewed by sociologist Tia Denora observed that he stopped listening to music because, although it moved him, it failed to “go anywhere” (Denora 2001, 168). The symbolic ritual that accompanies music in nearly all traditional societies, particularly during adolescent rites of passage, has
the explicit purpose of taking the music somewhere. This *somewhere* consists of alternative worlds, symbolically and metaphorically represented through art, myth, dance, and mime. Such socially salient metaphors and symbols are emotionally charged through music-based ritual. It draws participants through the looking glass into the world of the paranormal.

There is growing evidence that humans in general, and adolescents in particular, benefit from participation in music-based religious ritual. Both mental and physical health is positively correlated with such participation (Donahue and Benson 1995; Smith 2005). Sociologist Phil Zuckerman has shown that the incidence of mental disorders and suicide in the world today is significantly and positively correlated with secularization (Zuckerman 2006). These findings suggest that music, and the sense of the miraculous that it mnemonically and emotionally evokes, may not only be beneficial to human health, but fundamental to it, as well.

**CONCLUSION**

Of all species on earth, only humans have succeeded in creating and maintaining large, cohesively functioning groups of genetically unrelated individuals. Such non-kin cooperation is certainly dependent on our cognitive abilities to delay gratification and plan for future benefits, as well as on our linguistic ability to effectively communicate with one another. Yet, non-kin cooperation is equally dependent on our ability to trust other group members to uphold their commitments to the group, even when such commitments run counter to immediate self-interests. The human ability to socially create miraculous worlds and to emotionally evoke those worlds through music is likely to play a central role in the creation of such trust.

For cultures throughout the world, religion appears to solve this problem of trust. Those of us who live in modern, secular nation-states have difficulty understanding this role of religion in other areas of the world or moments in history. With well-developed legal contracts, an extensive penal code and judicial system, and a powerful, state-run police force, the problem of trust is confined principally to personal and domestic issues. Yet, in many regions of the world these amenities do not exist. Even when these elements are in place, for those disenfranchised within such systems, the trust question looms large. For these persons religion remains an important solution, as evidenced by the role of black churches in the American Civil Rights Movement, the high religious participation rates of women in the United States today, and the growing importance of Pentecostal churches throughout Latin America.

The neurophysiological model of music, trance, and miracles presented here suggests proximate mechanisms by which both music and miracles create and cohesify groups. Ultimate causes are likely to relate to the need for
non-kin cooperation early in human evolution—a need that still exists today. Our ability to enjoy music and experience miracles may have profane origins, yet this ability has produced a human mind with the potential of creating a symbolic human culture capable of collectively reaching the stars. That “music of the spheres” is truly miraculous.

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Revelation and the Practice of Prophecy: With Special Reference to Rabbi Nachman of Breslov

Dan Merkur

The text of Jeremiah 33:2–3 states: “Thus says Yahweh who made the earth, Yahweh who formed it to establish it—Yahweh is his name: ‘Call to me and I will answer you, and will tell you great and hidden things that you have not known’ ” (all scripture citations in this chapter are the author’s own translation from the original Hebrew text). Revelation, in this formulation, is a divine response to a human practice; and many Jews over the centuries have agreed with the biblical author. Possibly in polemic against early Christian prophets, the Talmudic Sages claimed the historical extinction of prophecy during the Second Temple period; but many Jews in late antiquity and the Middle Ages continued to discuss prophecy as precedent for their own contemplative experiences (Heschel, 1996). In the twelfth century, Maimonides provided both rabbinical authority and practical advice concerning the achievement of “the rank of the prophets” (Guide 3:51; Maimonides, 1963, 620); and his point of view has since come down in a host of variants among the kabbalists and Hasidim.

KAWWANAH

The Hebrew word kawwanah, meditation (Scholem, 1981), derives from the verb kiwwen (from the root kwn), which means “to aim at, to face toward.” In Talmudic usage, kawwanah referred to the act of attending to the meanings of the words of prayer, while one was engaged in reciting them, in a manner that avoided distraction (Wolfson, 1996, 139–40). In contemporary usage, kawwanah during prayer refers to meaning or intending the words of prayer, as distinct from reciting them unthinkingly (Kaplan, 1985, 50).
Jewish mystics have engaged in scores of meditative procedures, any or all of which may be termed *kawwanah* (Verman, 1996, p. ix).

In his codification of Jewish law, Maimonides addressed ordinary Jews when he explained: “*Kawwanah* means emptying the heart of all thoughts, and to think of oneself as if standing before the *Shekhinah* [*Presence*]” (*Mishneh Torah: Book of Adoration, Laws of Prayer* IV, 16). Maimonides was explicating the Talmudic teaching: “One who prays should perceive the Divine Presence before him” (Babylonian Talmud [BT], Sanhedrin, 22a). As precedent for their teaching, the Talmudic Sages had cited Psalm 16:8, “I have continuously placed (shiviti) the Lord before me; He is at my right hand so that I shall not falter.” Jewish mystics understood the verse literally, as a reference to mystical experiences of the divine presence. In the Talmudic period of late antiquity (300–600 ce), Jewish mystics employed mental images as part of their meditations in synagogue, in order to inculcate visions of the divine presence (Wolfson, 1996). More elaborate visions of the divine presence were also pursued outside the context of synagogue prayers by the *merkabah* mystics who wrote the *hekhalot* literature (Scholem, 1965; Merkur, 1993). Maimonides recommended the practice of the presence as a means for ordinary Jews to obey the commandments to love and fear God.

And what is the way that will lead to the love of Him and the fear of Him? When a person contemplates His great and wondrous works and his creatures and from them obtains a glimpse of His wisdom which is incomparable and infinite, he will straightway love Him. . . . And when he ponders these matters, he will recoil affrighted, and realize that he is a small creature, lowly and obscure, endowed with slight and slender intelligence, standing in the presence of Him who is perfect in knowledge. (*Mishneh Torah: Book of Knowledge, Laws Concerning the Basic Principles of the Torah* 2:2; Maimonides, 1971, 35b)

Maimonides (1963) called the *Shekhinah* a created light (p. 60; *Guide* 1:28) and asserted its abstract, conceptual character: “‘In Thy light do we see light’ [*Ps. 36:10*] has the . . . meaning . . . that through the overflow of the [active] intellect that has overflowed from Thee, we intellectually cognize, and consequently we receive correct guidance, we draw inferences, and we apprehend the intellect” (p. 280; *Guide* 2:12). In this theory, the active intellect is an unconscious process that generates the intellectual light that is the *Shekhinah*, divine presence, or *indwelling*. The *Shekhinah* was synonymous with the Glory; both terms designated the manifest content of a vision of prophecy. In Maimonides’s use, the terms did not refer to specific contents. Maimonides allowed that prophecies might potentially have any manifest content. All were instances of the *Shekhinah* because the very occurrence of prophetic revelation presupposes the presence of God.
Because Maimonides subscribed to the medieval Aristotelian view, shared by Jewish and Muslim philosophers, that the prophecies of the scriptural prophets consisted of the actualization of their rational faculties by the Active Intellect (Blumenthal, 1980, 1984, 1988, 1999; Rahman, 1958), his instructions on the practice of the sense of presence were intended as instructions in the practice of prophecy. *Arba'ah Turim*, a codification of Jewish practice by Rabbi Jacob ben Asher (1270–1343) that was similarly addressed to the general Jewish populace, provided further detail on the technique.

How has it been taught that the one praying must intend his heart, as is said, “[O Lord], You will make their hearts intend, You will incline your ears (Ps. 10:17)” . . . As he brings the words out in his lips, he thinks as though Shekhinah were before him, as it is said, “I keep the Name before me always” (Ps. 16:8). When the kawwanah awakens, it will remove all distracting thoughts until his thought [alone] remains. When his kawwanah is successful in his prayer, he thinks as though he were speaking before a king of flesh and blood who is here today and tomorrow in the grave. He orders his words and intends them nicely in order that they not falter. How much more [must he do so] before a king, the King of Kings, the Holy One blessed be He! must intend even his thoughts because thought is as speech before Him, who examines all thoughts. The [medieval German] Hasidim and the practical [kabbalists] behaved in this way. They used to meditate and intend their prayers until they attained derealization of the body and the triumph of the Intellectual Spirit, and [so] arrived near the degree of prophecy. Should another thought come to him during prayer he would be silent until the thought ceased. He would not pray in a place where there was speech that invalidated his kawwanah nor in an hour that invalidated his kawwanah. (*Arba’ah Turim*, *Orah Hayyim* 98:1)

The practical Kabbalah followed Maimonides in attributing the mediation of revelation to the Active Intellect (Idel, 1988, 125–32; Blumenthal, 1984). Rabbi Joseph Karo (1488–1575) quoted this passage from *Arba’ah Turim* verbatim in his *Shulkhan Aruch*, “Prepared Table” (*Orah Hayyim* 98:1), which superseded *Arba’ah Turim* as the most popular codification of Jewish law. The Baal Shem Tov, the eighteenth-century founder of the Hasidic movement, endorsed the passage on kawwanah as well (Jacob Joseph of Polnoye (1780), *Toldot Yiakov Yosef*, *Acharey*, 88c).

**MEDITATION ON SHEKHINAH IN THE ZOHAR**

The classical sourcebook of the Kabbalah, the thirteenth-century *Sefer ha-Zohar*, “Book of Splendor,” enjoined a derivative practice on kabbalists. The *Zohar* conformed with Maimonides’s advice to seek the Shekhinah. It also accepted his view that the visions are manifestations of the Shekhinah (Wolfson,
Where, however, Maimonides had invested the traditional term with a metaphoric significance when he interpreted it psychologically, the Zohar reified it in a kabbalistic manner. For the Zohar, the Shekhinah was both a psychological phenomenon and a feminine hypostasis of the divine. In attributing gender to the Shekhinah, the Zohar interpreted the soul’s conjunction with the Shekhinah during a vision as a hieros gamos, a “sacred marriage” of unio mystica between the male kabbalist’s soul and the feminine within the divine. This intellectual erotization of mystical experience permeated the Zohar’s worldview. A kabbalist was to perform kawwanah, so far as possible, during all waking hours, in order to attempt always to remain united with Shekhinah in perpetual spiritual intercourse. This intercourse took bodily sexual form when he happened to be with his wife. It was accomplished differently in her absence. The Zohar explained:

When a man is about to set out on a journey he should pray to the Holy One, blessed be He, so that his Master’s Shekhinah should come down to him before he leaves, while male and female are still together. Once he has said his prayer and his words of praise, and the Shekhinah has come down to him, he should leave, for then the Shekhinah will be united with him so that male and female may exist together. Male and female in the town; male and female in the country. . . .

When he returns to his home he should give his wife great joy, because it was his wife who enabled him to have celestial union. . . . Should his wife become pregnant as a result, the celestial union will bestow upon her a holy soul. . . . Therefore he must direct his mind with joy. . . .

Similarly, when scholars are separated from their wives on weekdays in order to study Torah, celestial intercourse is granted them and does not desert them, so that male and female may exist together. . . . Similarly, when a man’s wife has her menstrual period and he has proper respect for her, celestial intercourse is granted him during those days, so that male and female may exist together. . . . The principle is that all the sons of faith must direct their minds and their intentions during [intercourse]. (Zohar 1, 49b–50a; as cited in Tishby, 1989, 3, 1397–99)

The requirement that kabbalists should “direct their minds and their intentions” referred to the practice of kawwanah. The meditations had to be pious, reverent, and concerned with the fulfillment of divine commandments.

One should not act licentiously or obscenely, or with whorish intentions like animals. . . . For we have learned whoever has intercourse for immoral reasons, or with any of the intentions that we have mentioned, and does not pay heed to those matters that are essential, then, as the Mishnah says, the child that is produced will be wicked, licentious, impudent, and shameless, and will not be counted among the seed of truth. But if he has
intercourse for the sake of fulfilling the commandment [of procreation], and sanctifies himself, and directs his mind to heaven, he will have worthy children, righteous and pious, holy children, full of the fear of heaven. (Zohar Hadash, Bereshit 11a–11b, Midrash ha-Ne’elam; as cited in Tishby, 1989, 3, 1394)

Not only was a kabbalist to venerate the act of procreation, but he was obliged to approach his wife with a reverence that was due her as a manifestation of Shekhinah.

“[Jacob] approached the place, and lay there . . .” (Genesis 28:11). . . . This teaches us that when a man wishes to lie with his wife he must first of all coax her and persuade her with words, and if he is unsuccessful he should not lie with her, for they must share the same desire and there must be no compulsion. (Zohar 1, 49a; as cited in Tishby, 1989, 3, 1389)

The Zohar’s ethic of sexual behavior was consequently at odds with the joylessness of Talmudic tradition.

RABBI NACHMAN ON HITBODEDUT

The great-grandson of the Baal Shem Tov, Rabbi Nachman of Breslov (1772–1810), founded the Breslover sect of Hasidism, which continues to flourish down to the present time. Nachman used the traditional term hitbodedut in reference to his practices of meditation. Initially popularized in Bahya ibn Pakuda’s Duties of the Heart (1973) in the eleventh century, the term hitbodedut etymologically means “making oneself solitary” and literally denoted “isolation, seclusion, going on a retreat.” Moses Maimonides’ son Abraham Maimonides (1938), writing in the early thirteenth century, distinguished external and internal solitude. Internal solitude involved a considerable or complete inactivity of sense perception, and a withdrawal of emotion and action from worldly concerns. Both imagination and thought were to be devoted to the biological and celestial design of the creation and love for its creator (385). The term rapidly became a euphemism that simply meant meditating (Kaplan, 1985, 52), for example, in the passage from Arba’ah Turim cited above.

Nachman engaged in a variety of meditations that he called hitbodedut, but his “most common practice” consisted of talking with God (Shevachay HaRan 11; Nathan, 1973, 12). Green (1979) remarked: “There is simply no other way to be close to God, Nahman taught, and nearness to God was the single ultimate goal that a Bratslav hasid was to allow himself” (145). Nachman cited the precedent of Maimonides, whose Code stated that prayer was originally personal and informal. Prayer only became formalized in the Second Temple
era, but “the original form is still most beneficial” (Sichos HaRan 229; Nathan, 1973, pp. 364–65). Nachman taught:

The main thing is prayer. Accustom yourself to beg and plead before God. Speak to Him in any language you understand—this is especially important. Beg Him to open your eyes. Ask Him to help you along the path of devotion. Please that you be worthy of drawing close to Him. (Shevachay HaRan 27; Nathan, 1973, 30)

Make a habit of praying before God from the depths of your heart. Use whatever language you know best. Ask God to make you worthy of serving Him. This is the essence of prayer. (Sichos HaRan 229; Nathan, 1973, 365)

Nachman suggested setting aside “a specific time each day to calmly review your life.” “You may do this for days and years, apparently without effect, but in the end you will reach your goal.” He recommended that the meditations be spoken aloud. “You can meditate in thought, but the most important thing is to express it in speech” (Sichos HaRan 47, 68, 232; Nathan, 1973, 151, 175, 367). It was also important to be joyous. “It is . . . impossible to receive the spirit of prophecy, the divine spirit, except by means of joy” (Likutey Moharan 54:7; Nachman, 1999, 209).

Nachman recommended seclusion and meditation in grassy fields and meadows, away from human habitation. Alternatively, “hitbodedut should take place in a special place, namely, away from the city, on a secluded road, in a place not frequented by people.” In town, a special room might be set aside for “Torah study and prayer . . . secluded meditation and conversation with God.” In the absence of a special room, it is possible to drape a prayer shawl over one’s head and converse with God beneath it or to proceed in the manner of King David who referred to secluding himself in bed under the covers, when he wrote: “Each night I converse from my bed” (Ps 6:7; Likutey Moharan 52:3; Nachman, 1999, 123). Another possibility was to “converse with God while sitting before an open book. Let others think that you are merely studying” (Sichos HaRan 227, 274, 275; Nathan, 1973, 364, 401).

Nachman urged beginners to start speaking to God in any way that was heartfelt. “All Israel are called children of God. Therefore, you should pour out your thoughts and troubles before God, just like a child complaining to his father” (Sichos HaRan 7; Nathan, 1973, 112–14). Beginners were to seek to pray to know God and be motivated to repent. If they could say no more than “Lord of the World!” or repeat a single word over and over again, they were to persist until they could bring themselves to speak more fully and openly (Green, 1979, 146). Nachman’s encouragement of persistence should not be misconstrued as a reference to monotony as a means of hypnotic induction. He explicitly advised rapid movements of thought from one contemplative idea to another (Jacobs, 1993, 56).
More advanced practitioners might engage God in more sophisticated conversations, but to the same humble ends.

When the Rebbe was speaking before God, petitions and supplications would pour forth from his heart, and he would often bring up some particularly good argument, or compose an especially fitting and well ordered prayer. He would take the prayers he particularly liked and preserve them in writing. These he would repeat many times.

These conversations with God were the Rebbe’s most common practice. All his prayers had one single focus, that he should be worthy of drawing himself close to God. On many occasions he literally demanded this of God. (Shevachay HaRan 11; Nathan, 1973, 11–12)

Nachman’s general instructions to talk with God are less informative than might be hoped. As a practical endeavor, it may be a question, as it was in my own experience, of learning to recapture a state of mind whose first occurrence is spontaneous. In one of his discourses, Nachman remarked: “By means of the lasting impression which the body has because of the enlightenment with which the soul previously illuminated it, she can now recall and ascend and return to her level” (Likutey Moharan 22:5; Nachman, 1990, 343).

IRA PROGOFF’S “INNER WISDOM DIALOGUE”

A closely related, workable technique has been developed by Ira Progoff, an analytical psychologist who designed a program of self-therapy that involved keeping a journal. One component of his “Intensive Journal process” adapted Carl G. Jung’s technique of active imagination (see Merkur, 1993, 40–49; Miller, 2004) to the context of journal writing. Progoff (1992) explained that “many human beings know intuitively more than they rationally understand” (267–68). He designed his procedure of “Inner Wisdom Dialogue” to “actually gain access to the potentials of personal development and knowledge that are contained in the depth of us” (268).

A journal writer might choose, as a dialogue partner, any person or figure that represented wisdom for the writer. Some might be family members, teachers, or other real human beings. Others, whom Progoff termed “transpersonal wisdom figures . . . belong to history and the universe” (280). For Progoff, God was one among many possible dialogue partners. “God, in one aspect, is a transpersonal wisdom figure with whom we can establish a dialogue relationship, God by whatever name and in whatever form He is recognizable to us” (280–81). Progoff treated God in a Jungian fashion as a psychological component of the unconscious. He was speaking of the God-representation within the psyche, while leaving God, as understood theologically, out of his discussion.
Progoff was not interested, however, in a dialogue only with unconsciously held ideas that were associated with God. He sought genuine communication, original inspiration, and revelation. “We are not establishing contact by dialoguing with the personal side of these inner wisdom figures. We are reaching toward the transpersonal depth of wisdom within them seeking to establish a relationship between that and the corresponding depth of wisdom in ourselves” (281).

Progoff provided the following instructions concerning the conduct of the dialogue:

Our eyes are closed and we feel the presence of the wisdom figure with whom we wish to enter into dialogue. We feel its presence, but we do not think of it with conscious thoughts. We let our thoughts come to rest. Our breathing is slow. It becomes slower, softer. We are still. In the stillness we feel the presence of this person, this wisdom figure, this being. We are feeling its presence, feeling the inner quality of its being, feeling the deep wisdom, the unity and knowing of existence that is personified in it.

Sitting in quietness, we let images come to us. They may come to us visually upon our Twilight Imagery screen. More important, through our image of them we feel the quality of the person, its atmosphere, and especially its presence. We feel its life, its concern, its desires, and we speak to it. We greet it. We say what we feel of its life and of its quality of life. We say what we feel of our life, our concerns, and our questions. We speak of our relationship to it, why we come to it, why we call upon it, and what we have to ask.

All that we say we write as our part of the dialogue script. We return to silence and wait. When the Wisdom figure is ready, it speaks to us, and it is written. Whatever it says, be it casual or profound, we record it. We let the dialogue move along its own path, make its own turns, cover its own subject matter. We speak and the other speaks, and we let the dialogue continue as long as it wishes.

We are sitting in stillness, waiting in openness. We feel the presence of the person and its quality of wisdom. We speak and are spoken to. And we let it be written through our pen. Thus the dialogue script is written between ourselves and the person of wisdom. We sit in openness, enabling the dialogue to take form through us, in the silence, in the silence. (Progoff, 1992, 283)

As a criterion for choosing a dialogue partner, Progoff (1992) recommended the figure’s suitability as a confidant: “What is most important is that it be a person to whom we can open our hearts fully on any of our deepest concerns, and that we can do so with no reservations, knowing it will all be accepted” (282). Progoff was here echoing Freud’s basic rule—to tell everything honestly—but I suggest that applying the same criterion to the dialogue partner will explain the superiority of selecting God. Which inner
wisdom figure can speak most openly and completely in response to a journal writer? God, who alone is omniscient!

In practice, of course, how one conceptualizes God places constraints on the unconscious inspirations that one will accept as coming from God. An inspiration that is doctrinally unacceptable will not be accepted as valid, but will instead be dismissed as temptation. The God-representation may be the potentially most versatile inner wisdom figure that may be used in meditation as a vehicle of the transcendent, but its function as a conduit imposes finite, psychological constraints on the experience of revelation.

RABBI NACHMAN ON INSPIRATION: ACCESSING THE PARANORMAL IN PRAYER

By his practice of hitbodedut, Nachman sought to engage God in conversation. The conversations pertained to all manner of topics. There was no one mystical or paranormal experience at which Nachman aimed. He promoted the practice of literally speaking aloud to God as the technique most accessible to novices and most powerful even for experts. However, his practices of hitbodedut also included other techniques of meditation and visualization. The many and varied experiences that he discussed were consistent with the liberal attitude of Maimonides and the Zohar. An omnipotent God was not limited to a single type of mystical experience. Any and all manner of revelation merited treatment as miraculous creations by God. What was important was to interact with God by means of meditation, revelation, and human response.

In many cases, the revelations that Nachman sought would today be regarded in psychological terms as instances of creative inspiration. For example, Nachman adhered to a conventional Jewish regard for the revelatory character of dreams.

There is a type of grace (Chen) that enables a man to see the future in dreams.

If a man has this grace, he can ask for a vision and perceive the future in a dream.

The Talmud teaches us, “Just as grain cannot exist without chaff; so dreams cannot exist without nonsense” (Berachot 53a). Dreams contain predictions of the future, but they are intertwined with much worthless chaff.

There is also the clear dream of the prophet, regarding which it is written (Num. 12:6), “I will speak to him in a dream.” This is the dream of the man who has grace.

Such a man can also predict the future through the dreams of another. When he hears the other’s dream, the worthless chaff falls away and only the clear vision falls upon his ears. Joseph had such grace. (Sichos HaRan 262; Nathan, 1973, 393–94)
Nachman regarded creative inspirations during wakefulness as a further category of revelation that was available to any interested person.

Even an ordinary person, if he sits himself in front of a holy book and looks at the letters of Torah, he will be able to perceive new insights and wonders. That is, by his concentrating well on the letters of Torah, the letters begin to shine and come together in the aspect of “[the] letters stood out and came together,” as our Sages, of blessed memory, have said (Yoma 73b). Then, one can see wonders [in the] new combinations. It is possible to perceive in the book something the author did not think of at all. Even an ordinary person can do this. A great person can perceive this without any effort, yet even a totally ordinary person can comprehend and perceive new insights, if he sits himself [in front of a book] and concentrates on the letters of Torah, as explained above. Nevertheless, a person should not put this to the test, for it could be that just then he will perceive nothing at all. But even so, even an ordinary person can achieve this, as explained above. (Likutey Moharan 281; Nachman, 2000, 405)

Nachman recognized that in other cases, considerable efforts were needed before inspirations occurred.

When you want to come up with new ideas in the Torah, you must concentrate on one particular subject. Take a verse or a subject, and review it many times, hammering on the door until it is opened for you. Sometimes a thought flashes through your mind and is then forgotten. You must be a man of valor, pursuing it until it is recaptured. (Sichos HaRan 58; Nathan, 1973, 165)

Nachman generalized that creative inspiration in every field of human endeavor owed its occurrence to divine revelation.

The Rebbe said that all scientific discoveries and inventions come from on high. Without such inspiration, they could never be discovered. But when the time comes for an idea to be revealed to the world, the necessary inspiration is granted to a researcher from on high. A thought enters his mind, and it is thus revealed. Many people may have previously sought this idea, but it still eluded them. Only when the time comes for it to be revealed can the inspiration be found. All inspiration comes from the place associated with the seeker. If one seeks secular wisdom, then it does not come from the Holy, but from the Other Side. The same is true when one discovers new meanings and ideas in his sacred studies. Were the ideas not granted from on high, it would never occur to him. All wisdom comes from on high, each thing emanating from its proper place. Each idea has its own place, and there are thousands and thousands of different levels. All discoveries, sacred or profane, have a root above, each in its own particular place. (Sichos HaRan 5; Nathan, 1973, 111)
Nachman’s psychological theories expanded on Maimonides’s medieval Aristotelianism and distinguished potential, actualized, acquired, and transcendent intellects. The intellect existed in potential when it was not in use. Rational thinking constituted the actualization of the intellect; and the acquisition of insights and inspirations comprised the acquired intellect (Likutey Moharan 25:1; Nachman, 1993b, 109–13). The transcendent intellect corresponded more closely to Aristotelian ideas of the active intellect (see Brentano, 1977) and similarly anticipated the modern concept of the unconscious. “This intellect is so very great that the mind is incapable of holding it. It does not enter the mind, but encircles it from without.” The transcendent intellect was the immediate source of revelation. “Inspiration of the heart is born out of the motion of the [transcendent] intellect.” “When this transcendent intellect is internalized in the mind . . . the intellect then expands and reveals to man the [understanding of] foreknowledge and free will” (Likutey Moharan 21:1, 4; Nachman, 1990, 253, 261–63). Nachman possibly identified the transcendent intellect with the Shekhinah, (divine) Presence, of the kabbalistic system. “Know, there is an intermediary! This is the Shekhinah (the Divine Presence), which is a mediator between man and God, so to speak” (Likutey Moharan 159; Nachman, 1993c, 275).

Just as Maimonides (1963) had conceptualized revelation as a creation ex nihilo that was mediated to the soul’s rational faculty by the operations of the active intellect, so Nachman’s understanding that inspirations are mediated psychologically did not, in his view, detract from their revelatory character.

The Rebbe once spoke to me about innovating original concepts in the Torah. Speaking with wonder and awe, he said, “From where does one get a new concept? When one is worthy of innovation, his original thoughts are really very wondrous and mysterious. From where do they come?”

An original idea is a revelation from God, bringing something from nothingness to existence. At first you do not know the idea at all. It still exists within the Infinite in a state of nothingness. This is the source of all wisdom. Every new idea is drawn from this source. We therefore see God’s revelation in each new idea. (Sichos HaRan 245; Nathan, 1973, 378)

Nachman also experienced creativity as revelation in connection with his tales, which are kabbalistic allegories that he designed to resemble folktales. Nachman stated that each tale was inspired by a contemporary event.

Each tale came to be told because of a conversation regarding current happenings in the world. A news item would contain some idea related to a story the Rebbe had in mind, and would lead him to tell it. The news would be the “awakening from below,” (Zohar 1:35a, 82b, 210a, 3:8b) drawing an aspect of Godliness down to be clothed in a particular tale. This was true
of every single story. It was also true of many lessons that the Rebbe revealed when it was not a regular time for followers to come together with him. (Sichos HaRan 151; Nathan, 1973, 291)

Nachman apparently experienced the composition of the tales as something over which he had no control. His disciple, Rabbi Nathan of Nemirov, stated:

On Wednesday morning I... brought up the subject of the story he had begun the previous Friday night. The Rebbe said that he was anxious to know how the story continues and what happened on each of the seven days of the wedding feast. He also wanted to know what happened to the prince who inherited his kingdom during his father’s lifetime, the episode that introduces the story. [Even though the Rebbe was telling the story, he spoke as if he was hearing it himself.] (Sichos HaRan 149; Nathan, 1973, 287)

Nachman was also attentive to more informal and momentary inspirations. To illustrate, he told a story of his paternal grandfather:

My grandfather, Rabbi Nachman Horodenker, of blessed memory, told the following story:

I was once travelling on a ship. We ran out of provisions and were without food for several days. Finally we reached an Arab city, where there were no Jews. An Arab took me in and offered me food. I had not eaten for several days, and quickly washed my hands and said the blessing for bread. I was just about to take a bite, when a thought entered my mind: “Do not eat the bread of one with a mean eye.”

A random thought is not without meaning, and I did not know what to do. I had already said blessing, but I realized the significance of this thought, and was determined not to eat anything of this Arab. Just then another thought entered my mind. “I have commanded the Arabs to feed you.” [I Kings 17:4, with a wordplay on the Hebrew word ARV, “raven” or “Arab.”] When the Rebbe told this story, he commented how proper it was for his grandfather to insist on acting according to this thought. Every thought entering the mind must contain some element of truth.

You must learn a lesson from my grandfather. A confusing thought may enter your mind, but if you stand firm, God will send you another thought to encourage you. (Sichos HaRan 7; Nathan, 1973, 112–14)

Nachman’s belief in the divine creation of original inspirations coincided with his belief that God responds to prayer with miracles.

And [prayer] corresponds to miracles, the supernatural. For prayer transcends nature; the natural course dictates a certain thing, but prayer
changes nature’s course. This is a miracle. And for this, one needs faith. A person has to believe that there is a *Mchadesh* (an Originator) with the power to originate as He sees fit. (*Likutey Moharan* 7:1; Nachman, 1993a, 3 and 5)

Whether a miracle proceeds within the soul as an inspiration, or in the perceptible world as an event outside the course of nature, it is a work of divine creation.

Nachman’s ambition to engage God in a dialogue of prayer and miracle, inspiration and devotion, will account for his attitude toward himself. Where many rabbis were content with themselves as learned authorities, Nachman approached everything as though he were a novice.

As soon as he achieved a new level, he would immediately begin anew. All his effort would be forgotten, as if he had not yet even taken the first step. He would then begin afresh, like one taking his first steps into the realm of holiness. (*Shevachay HaRan*, Pilgrimage 33; Nathan, 1973, 98–99)

Like a painter who completed one canvas only to begin again by going on to the next, Nachman “would . . . fall and begin anew several times each day” (*Sichos HaRan* 48; Nathan, 1973, 152).

**HITBONENUT, “SELF-UNDERSTANDING”**

Another basic use to which Nachman put *hitbodedut* was an approach to self-analysis. In its simplest form, it entailed pouring one’s heart out to God as a means to clarify what it was that one was seeking. Nachman remarked that attempting to meditate would immediately encounter resistance.

All the confusions of the mind and all the disturbances and all the foolishness which we at times experience, are all drawn into our prayers. For all the disturbances, etc., and all the thoughts which a person occasionally thinks, all come to mind precisely at the time of prayer. Precisely then, when he gets up to pray, he hears them all. (*Likutey Moharan* 30:7; Nachman, 1993b, 305–7)

To manage confusions, a meditator was to focus on the divine wisdom that manifests as the “wisdom and inner intelligence”—the virtue or essential nature—of whatever phenomenon his meditations might consider. “The power of the letters of the Holy Tongue . . . are in each thing in the world” (*Likutey Moharan* 19:6; Nachman, 1990, 155).

The Jew must always focus on the inner intelligence of every matter, and bind himself to the wisdom and inner intelligence that is to be found in each thing. This, so that the intelligence which is in each thing may enlighten
Nachman also applied his quest to appreciate the essences of all things in a reflexive manner, to his own circumstance. He advised: “Speak to God and understand your purpose in life” (*Sichos HaRan* 68; Nathan, 1973, 174–76).

“I commune with my heart, and my *ruach* [spirit] searches”—Through this he is roused to speak with his heart about his eternal purpose, that being the World to Come, and to search and seek to find the good points, the aspect of the good *ruach* he has within him, in order to return to God through this. For the essence of repentance is subduing the evil *ruach* and extracting the good *ruach*, as is known. (*Likutey Moharan* 54:9; Nachman, 1999, 223)

Breslover tradition refers to this aspect of meditation as *hitbonenut*, “self-understanding,” and credits its introduction to Maimonides. Aryeh Kaplan, one of the pioneers of the contemporary revival of Jewish meditation, explained *hitbonenut* as follows:

Normally, we look at things dispassionately and objectively. I may look at a leaf and even examine it very closely, but it does not affect me in any way. I am exactly the same person after as I was before. It does not change my state of consciousness at all. My mind is the same looking at the leaf as it would be otherwise. However, I may also look at the leaf with the aim of using it to attain a higher level of consciousness or a greater degree of self-awareness. . . .

Maimonides . . . speaks about using *hitbonenuth* meditation while contemplating God’s creation. One can achieve a profound love for God through such contemplation. This is effective precisely because it is not merely a simple contemplation of various aspects of God’s creation, but is understanding oneself as part of this creation. When one sees God’s creation, and understands one’s own role as part of it, one can develop a deep and lasting love for God. Who has not gone out into the fields on a clear night and gazed at the stars, yearning to unlock their secret? One thinks about the vast, unfathomable reaches of the universe and stands in rapt awe. For many people, this in itself can be a “religious experience.” It is an experience that can bring a person to feel a profound humility before the infinite vastness of the universe.

The next step is to go beyond the physical and contemplate the fact that this vast universe, with all its countless stars and galaxies, was all created by God. One ponders the fact that one ineffable Being created everything. We realize how different this Being must be from us, and yet we feel a certain closeness.

The final step is *hitbonenuth*, understanding oneself in the light of this vast creation. At this level, one asks the questions, “If God created this vast universe, then who am I? How do I fit into all of this?” At the same time,
one may feel privileged that God allows us to have a direct relationship with Him. Imagine that the creator of all the stars and galaxies deigns to listen to me! Not only that, but He is concerned about me! Realizing God’s greatness, and at the same time contemplating the closeness to Him that He allows us to enjoy, is precisely what can bring a person to profound love for God.

*Hitbonenuth* meditation can be focused on anything—a stone, a leaf, a flower, or an idea. One allows the subject to fill the mind and then uses it as a means to understand the self. It is a type of mirror in which one can see oneself in the light of true Reality. Using this mirror, one can see the Divine within oneself. . . . When one looks into this mirror and sees the Divine within oneself, one can also communicate with the Divine. (Kaplan, 1985, 50–52)

The technique of *hitbonenut* takes for granted that God’s power is omnipresent, that His purposes in creating all the many features of creation are omnipresent. Each and every individual created thing embodies a divine intention at each and every moment. Human beings are no exception to this rule. The self-understanding designated by the term *hitbonenut* consists of the understanding that the meditator seeks to gain regarding God’s purposes for him–or herself, in the details and particulars of his or her life. The practice requires an individual to engage in teleological reflection, by adopting God’s point of view, as it were, and empathizing with God in thinking about created things, including oneself (compare Blumenthal, 1982, 113–14, 116–22). Constantly thinking beyond one’s own motives, to consider the place of one’s motives and actions in the divine scheme of things, may simply result in an increased attentiveness (Bindler, 1980). However, the practice may instead induce a creative process that issues in realizations or inspirations on the desired topics.

Breslover tradition gives, in the name of Maimonides, what is perhaps better treated as Nachman’s interpretation of Maimonides’s thinking. Maimonides (1963) followed Aristotle in treating the soul’s rational faculty as the distinctive and essential nature of man. He maintained that a person fulfills his purpose by perfecting his rational faculty, through its actualization by the Active Intellect—which is to say, by engaging in prophecy. Maimonides wrote only of the general principle of revelation; but Nachman presumably assumed that Maimonides knew, from personal experience, that there is no general revelation, that each revelation is particular, finite, momentary, occurring at a specific time and place, and addressing a specific circumstance, with a specific purpose. Accordingly, for a person to fulfill the general purpose of being human by attaining prophecy, as Maimonides taught, was always to be concerned with the particular purpose of the moment. What is one’s present purpose? What might one best do under the circumstances of the moment? What does God intend for one to do? What is one’s best course of action?
"The Rebbe himself said, ‘When the day begins, I surrender my every movement to God. I ask that every motion that I may make be according to God’s will’ " (Sichos HaRan 238; Nathan, 1973, 374).

The procedure of hitbonenut, self-understanding, aimed to discover the immediate, momentary purpose for which one was being created at the moment. It was an effort to understand the potential for virtue that one could presently actualize, that is, the divine service to which one was presently being called. Nachman summarized: “Through himself, by engaging in private conversation with His Maker in hitbodedut, he can also inspire his own heart by means of ‘My mouth utters wisdom’ ” (Likutey Moharan 34:8; Nachman, 1997, 79).

A principle that governed Nachman’s practice of hitbodedut was his concern to achieve peace. The Mishnah teaches: “Be one of the disciples of Aaron, a lover of peace, following after peace, loving mankind, and drawing them to the Torah” (Pirke Avot 1:12). Nachman applied the teaching to intrapsychic as well as interpersonal conflict.

The principle is that a person should pursue peace. [He should see] that there is peace between Jews, and that each person is at peace with his attributes—i.e., he should not be conflicted within himself or over what happens to him. It should make no difference to him whether he experiences good times or bad; he always finds God in it. (Likutey Moharan 33:1; Nachman, 1997, 3)

The criterion of seeking peace led Nachman, for example, to make a lifelong habit of owning his disaffections with God as his own chosen actions.

It always seemed to the Rebbe that all his prayers were being disregarded. He was sure that he was not wanted at all, and was being pushed further and further from any true devotion. For he saw the days and years passing, and he still felt far from God. After all his prayers, he felt that he had not been worthy of drawing close to God at all. It was as if his words were never heard, and he had been totally ignored all this time. It seemed as everything was being done to push him away from God.

But the Rebbe’s resolve remained firm and he did not abandon his ground. It was not easy, for there were many things to discourage him. He prayed and pleaded before God, begging to be worthy of true devotion, and still he saw no results. He felt as if he was being totally ignored. There were times when he became discouraged and let his conversations with God lapse for several days. But then he would remind himself that he should be ashamed for criticizing God’s ways. He said to himself, “God is truly merciful and compassionate. . . . He certainly wants to draw me near to him . . .” He was then able to again strengthen his resolve. He would again begin anew, pleading and speaking before God. This happened very many times. (Shevachay HaRan 12; Nathan, 1973, 12–13)
Theological reflection on God’s mercy and compassion permitted Nachman to recognize his projections as his own, and to correct his emotional deportment. Nachman’s recognitions of his negative transferences onto God (Merkur, in press) did not entail their psychoanalysis, but successfully enabled him to remain at peace with God. Interestingly, his experience of hit-bonenut was reflected in a teaching about self-sabotaging behavior:

Whatever lack a person experiences—be it children or livelihood or health—is entirely from the side of the person himself. For the light of God flows upon him continuously, but the person, because of his evil deeds, makes a shadow for himself so that God’s light does not reach him. And, commensurate with his deeds, so the shadow is cast which blocks God’s light. Thus, the lack which he experiences is in accordance with the deed through which the shadow was cast. (Likutey Moharan 172; Nachman, 1993c, 339)

In several passages, Nachman used the term hitbodedut in connection with the practice of bitul, “negation” or “annihilation” of the self, a meditative technique that induced mystical experiences of ‘ayin, “nothing” (Likutey Moharan 52:3–4; Nachman, 1999, 121–27). “Know, the essence of bitul—that a person negates his corporeality and becomes ayin (nothingness), becoming encompassed in the oneness of God—is achieved only through hitbodedut” (Likutey Moharan 52:5; Nachman, 1999, 129). Although Hasidim generally regard the achievement of ‘ayin as the principle goal of the religious life, Nachman instead privileged conversations with God. “This claim that the core of religion lay in the inner life of the individual and in the impassioned outpourings of his innermost thoughts before God is quite unique in the history of Judaism” (Green, 1979, 146). In this respect, too, Nachman followed Maimonides (1963, 518; Guide 3:29), who had been vehemently shouted down when he asserted that meditation that enabled a practitioner to “come near to this true deity and to obtain His good will” was a complete and sufficient program of divine worship.

BIBLICAL THEORIES OF REVELATION

The biblical concept that miracles are revelatory is expressed by several biblical terms. The Hebrew word ‘ot, “sign, omen, miracle” also means “letter, mark, sign, signal.” The biblical term nes, “miracle, wonder, prodigy, marvel” also means “flag, banner, standard, pennant, sign, signal.” The word mofet, “portent, wonder, miracle, marvel” also means “sign, token.” Each of the terms denoted a type of communication—letter, flag, token—and had metaphoric use in reference to miracles, which were understood as communications, revelations, messages.
Deuteronomy expressed a simplistic version of the theory. Obedience to the covenant would be rewarded with progeny, agricultural and pastoral wealth, health, and success in warfare (Deut. 7:12–16; 11:13–17; 28:1–14). Disobedience would be punished in an equal and opposite manner (Deut. 28:15–46), “as a sign [‘ot] and a portent [mofet] forever” (v. 46). The book of Job tells the story of a man who adhered to a strict belief in divine reward and punishment, only to enter spiritual crisis when he met disaster despite his righteousness. Three of his friends, who similarly advocated the Deuteronomic theory of miracles, insisted that Job could not have been righteous and must instead have been guilty of sins. Eliphaz explicitly asserted that suffering was disciplinary (Job 5:17). Job’s young friend Elihu offered a more sophisticated theory. He asserted that God speaks both in dreams and visions (Job 33:14–18), and also by means of somatic complaints (Job 33:19–22). He explained the miracles as educational:

He opens the ear of men,  
and terrifies them with warning,  
to deter man from his deed,  
and annul pride from a man. (Job 33:16–17)

According to Elihu, God was not punishing Job. God was instead engaged in teaching, when, by frightening a man, “he keeps back his soul from the Pit” (v. 18). Having received divine rebuke either in a dream or vision (v. 15), or by means of bodily infirmity (v. 19), a person might learn from an angel the right things to do (v. 23). If the angel graciously commanded the man’s restoration, he recovered (vv. 24–25). If the man prayed, and God accepted the penitent, he would enjoy the divine presence, envisioning the face of God (v. 26).

Elihu’s speech referred repeatedly to the theory that miracles are educational in purpose. They are signs simultaneously in the sense of miracles and indications.

But none says, “Where is God my Maker,  
who gives songs in the night,  
who teaches us more than the beasts of the earth,  
and makes us wiser than the birds of the air?” (Job 35:10–11)

And if they are bound in fetters  
and caught in the cords of affliction,  
then he declares to them their work  
and their transgressions, that they are behaving arrogantly.  
He opens their ears to instruction,  
and commands that they return from iniquity.
If they listen, and serve him,
they complete their days in prosperity,
and their years in pleasantness. (Job 36:8-11)

See, God is exalted in his power;
who is a teacher like him? (Job 36:22)

Elihu did not deny the Deuteronomic association of righteousness with advantageous events, and sin with adverse events. He declined, however, to interpret reward and punishment as God’s purposes. Miracles provided confirmation that good was good and evil was evil. Reward and punishment were not ends in themselves. They were object lessons that advised people regarding their own behaviors.

The concept that miracles are communications was developed into a general theory through its application to the first and greatest of all miracles, God’s creation of the universe. In the first chapter of Genesis, God spoke, and things existed. In this narrative, creation is, above all, a linguistic event. It is God speaking through the medium of all of the many things that he creates. The Mishnah, Pirke Avot 5:1, integrated the creation narrative’s concept with the doctrine of reward and punishment:

With ten sayings was the world created. And what does this teach? Could it not have been created with one saying? But [it was done] to punish the wicked that destroy the world that was created with ten sayings, and to give the good reward to the righteous who establish the world that was created with ten sayings.

The ten sayings in the first sentence of the paragraph refer to the number of times that the creation narrative of Genesis 1 describes God as speaking in order to create the universe and its contents (Dan, 1984, 20). However, the ten sayings that have reward and punishment as their consequences refers to the Ten Commandments that God gave Moses at Sinai in Exodus 20. It is the Ten Commandments whose performance is rewarded and whose violation is punished. The Mishnah’s assimilation of the Ten Commandments to the ten creative sayings implied that God’s creation of the universe as a linguistic event coincided with the educational function of miraculous rewards and punishments. In this way, the Mishnah expressed much the same teaching as did the character of Elihu in the book of Job.

Sefer Yesirah, “Book of Formation,” an esoteric text of uncertain date (Wasserstrom, 1993, 2002), built on the Mishnah by treating the 10 numbers of the decade and the 22 Hebrew letters as the elementary building blocks of creation (Hayman, 2004). Sefer Yesirah’s account of the numbers and letters was further developed in Sefer Ha-Bahir, the twelfth-century foundation text of the Kabbalah (Abrams, 1994). These esoteric sources were reflected in Nachman’s presentation of the general theory.
The creation came into existence by means of the spoken word, as it is written (Psalms 33:6) “By the word of God the heavens were made, and by the breath of His mouth their entire host [was created].” The spoken word contains wisdom, because the whole of speech is but the five articulators of the mouth. Through them all the things of the entire creation came into existence, as it is written (ibid. 104:24), “You created them all with wisdom.” (Likutey Moharan 64:3; Nachman, 2003, 407)

Nachman owed his concept of “the five articulators of the mouth” to Sefer Yesirah, which had categorized the sounds of the Hebrew consonants into five groupings. Nachman’s point, that the physical aspect of speech, its production by mouth as sound, is the seat or vehicle of wisdom, was paradigmatic. All physical existents, the whole of creation, has wisdom. Nothing in creation is devoid of meaning, indeed, of divine wisdom.

**RABBI NACHMAN ON RESPONDING TO MIRACLES**

Nachman considerably expanded the biblical theory that miracles serve the ends, not only of reward and punishment, but also of teaching. He placed the human capacity to choose between good and evil at the center of his understanding of creation. “Everything you see in the world, everything that exists, it is all a test to give man freedom of choice.” Everything is “either a test, or else a disgrace. . . . If you do not pass the test, you will come to disgrace.” (Sichos HaRan 300, 304; Nathan, 1973, 415, 416). All choices ultimately concern a person’s relationship with God.

Even today you have free will. You have the power to escape from these painful discussions and worries. You can flee from them and trust in God, abandoning the struggles of this bitter world and involving yourself in the struggles of the Torah. God will certainly sustain you. Does He not sustain all the world, now as always? And now God directs the world better than ever before. (Sichos HaRan 308; Nathan, 1973, 422)

Evildoers were confronted by different choices than the righteous encountered. Sinners needed to repent. When sinners did not choose to repent, all manner of events in the world communicated the revelation that they needed to repent.

When a person does not evaluate and judge himself, he is then evaluated and judged from Above. This is because “when there is no judgment below, there is judgment Above” (Devarim Rabbah 5:4). And when a man is judged with the judgment of heaven, then justice becomes clothed in all things and all things become God’s messengers for executing “the written judg-
Miracles called people to repent in many different ways.

There is a great difference in the sin a person commits, God forbid, whether he is stirred immediately to repentance, in which case it is easy for him to return to his place, since he has not yet moved far from the good road. The reason is that when someone commits a sin, God forbid, he then turns from the straight road to another path, which is crooked. That road leads into a number of other paths and roads that are particularly misleading and tortuous, such that when people start to go on that evil road, God forbid, they stray and get so confused on those [other] roads that it is difficult to return and get out from there.

But God’s way is to call to the person immediately when He sees him straying from the way of the intellect. He calls to him to turn back. And [God] calls to each person according to his aspect. To one He calls with a hint, and to another with an actual call. There is also one whom He tramples down and punishes, and that is his call. For the Torah calls to them, “Fools, how long will you love being misled?” (Proverbs 1:22) . . . Therefore, if one has not yet strayed far from the straight road it is easier for him to return, since he still recognizes the voice and is familiar with it; for it was not so long ago that he was with God and heard His voice, the voice of the Torah. He has not yet forgotten the voice or strayed far along these other misleading and confusing roads. Therefore, he can easily repent. (Likutey Moharan 206; Nachman, 2000, 43–45)

The miraculous revelations that encourage repentance included the phenomena of parapraxes—Freudian slips. The following example involved a kabbalistic pun, with regel, “leg” but also “pilgrimage,” taking a different value in connection with moed, “festival,” and moad, “shaky.”

Know! someone who slips and falls while walking, and as a result people laugh at him and he is embarrassed because of this, this came about because he degraded the joy of yom tov (the festivals). For a festival is called both regel and moed. As a result of his having degraded the joy of yom tov it becomes regel moad (a shaky leg). Therefore, his leg gave way and he fell.

The laugh that people have [at his expense] is the aspect of the fallen joy that comes from degrading the joy of the festivals. Therefore, he is embarrassed. . . . Sometimes, [the fall] serves as his atonement. At other times, he is not atoned thereby; rather, it serves him as a reminder to repent. (Likutey Moharan 235; Nachman, 2000, 181)

In other contexts, revelations are accomplished by phenomena that we would today consider psychosomatic. Nachman adhered to the traditional secrecy of Jewish esotericism. On different occasions, he remarked, “I know
wisdom that cannot be revealed” and “All my teachings are introduction” (Sichos HaRan 181, 200; Nathan, 1973, 321, 341). On one occasion, he felt confirmed in his practice by a miracle.

The Rebbe began the explanation, but as soon as he started speaking, blood began to pour from his throat. He said, “Now you see with your own eyes that I am forbidden from on high to reveal anything to you.” (Shevachay HaRan, Pilgrimage 31; Nathan, 1973, 94)

Nachman also recognized divine miracles in the punitive character of obstacles to repentance. Even the obstacles constitute divine revelations.

When the attribute of judgment denounces someone who is not worthy of drawing closer to God and prevents him from entering the path of life . . . God is obliged, as it were, to agree to arrange obstacles for him so as to keep him from the path of life. [These obstacles are] commensurate with what he deserves based on his evil deeds, in accordance with judgment and justice. For the Holy One cannot disregard the judgment, because God loves justice . . .

However, since in truth God loves Israel, and that love for Israel is greater than the love for justice, what is the Holy One to do? . . . God grants permission for obstacles to be arranged for him. But He Himself hides Himself, as it were, within the obstacles. And one who is wise will be able to find God within the obstacles themselves. For the truth is that there are no obstacles whatsoever in the world. In the very force of the obstacles themselves, God is hidden. Thus, specifically through the obstacles themselves one is able to draw closer to the Holy One, for God is hidden there. (Likutey Moharan 115; Nachman, 1993c, 57–59)

Although it may be extremely difficult to overcome obstacles to repentance, their revelatory character guarantees their potential for spiritual use.

Wherever you are, you can be near to God.
You can approach God and truly serve Him even in the deepest pit of hell.
The Rebbe remarked that for this one needs tremendous effort or God’s help.
Sometimes one needs both. (Sichos HaRan 51; Nathan, 1973, 161)

Where sinners encountered miracles that called them to repentance, the righteous met and experienced God’s approval. Their observance of the Torah did not require correction or comment. Revelations attended their lives, as we have seen, in response to their practices of hitbodedut; but meditations were only one category of human initiative to which God responded with miracles. In Nachman’s view, adversity was sometimes a divine reproof, but in other cases, it was an obstacle that God created in order to test faith.
“When a person wants to do something holy, he must face great barriers” (Shevachay HaRan, Pilgrimage 28; Nathan, 1973, 90). Nachman's interpretation of adverse circumstances as positive opportunities to exercise spiritual initiative formed the cornerstone of his theory of wonder working. Whatever miracles occurred, subsequent to his active initiatives, were divine responses to his actions that would not have occurred had he not acted to provoke them. In this manner, Nachman conceived of a pilgrimage to the Holy Land in 1798–1799 as a prophetic mission that advanced the world’s redemption by trailblazing a path in virtue. Buber (1946) explained:

In Rabbi Nachman’s teaching as it has come down to us . . . we meet the “Obstacles” in connection with Palestine again and again. The obstacles have, according to this teaching, a great significance. They are put in the way of the man whose yearning and destiny impel him into the Holy Land, so that he may overcome them. For they excite and exalt his will and make him worthy to receive the holiness of the land. Whoever intends to be truly Jewish, that is to say, to climb from step to step, must “smash” the obstacles. But in order to conquer in this fight, “holy boldness” is needed, the kind in which God delights, for He praises Israel because of the holy boldness and obstinacy of the Israelite man for the sake of which the Torah was given. This struggle is ultimately a spiritual struggle; for the powers of evil increase the obstacles in order to confuse the understanding, and fundamentally it alone is the source of the obstacles. But the greater a man is, the greater are the obstacles before him, for an all the more intense struggle is demanded of him in order to raise him on to a higher level. (188)

Implicit in Nachman’s biography is the belief that by making certain choices, he was able to engage God in a dialogue of human action and miraculous providence. Because both Nachman and his community were confident of his virtue, he did not experience adverse events as punishments. Discounting the possibility that he merited divine rebuke, he interpreted misfortunes as divinely intended opportunities. Surmounting the obstacles called for “holy boldness.”

A man who is lowly and abject, without any holy boldness, . . . has no share in the Torah. As our Sages teach: Why was the Torah given to Israel? Because they are bold (Beitzah 28b). For it is necessary to possess holy boldness. As our Sages teach: Be bold as a leopard (Avot 5:20). Through the holy AZut (boldness) which he possesses, he receives holy boldness from God. This corresponds to (Psalms 68:35,36), “Give AoZ (strength) to God. . . . The God of Israel, he gives aoz and might to the people.”

“Give strength to God” corresponds to arousal from below. By virtue of our having holy boldness to oppose all those who rise up to prevent us from our service, Heaven forbid, we overpower them with great boldness,
i.e., holy boldness. As a result, we give strength and power Above, so to speak. This corresponds to, “Give strength to God.”

Through this, the aspect of holy boldness is aroused Above and is bestowed upon us, corresponding to, “The God of Israel, He gives strength and might to the people.” The Holy One bestows upon us holy boldness and gives us strength and might to oppose the brazenness of the Other Side, of all the brazen of the generation. For it is only possible to oppose them through holy boldness. (Likutey Moharan 147; Nachman, 1993c, 211–13)

Nachman regarded his journey to the land of Israel as an opportunity to perform tikkun, “correction, repair”—a work preparatory to the future Redemption.

Wherever you travel, there are things you must correct. You must only be careful not to sin while you are there. If you do not sin, you can correct things wherever you travel. Even if you are an average person, you will do holy things in each place. You will pray, say a blessing over food, and many similar things. For even the lowliest Jew does holy things wherever he goes. Each man is destined from on high to be in a particular place at a given time. At that time and place there is something he must correct. (Sichos HaRan 85; Nathan, 1973, 196–97)

Nachman believed that any person who was willing could interact with God with holy boldness, could accomplish tikkun. “He said, ‘Every man can attain the highest level. It depends on nothing but your own free choice. You must truly care about yourself and carefully decide what good truly lies before you. For everything depends on a multitude of deeds’” (Shevachay HaRan 26; Nathan, 1973, 29). Holy boldness did not require exceptional courage. It required a confident joy in the dialogue with God. “Holy boldness is achieved through joy, as in (Nehemiah 8:10), ‘For the delight in God is your boldness’” (Likutey Moharan 22:9; Nachman, 1990, 359). Nachman did not think choice to be limited to the inner life of the individual. Rather, he maintained that God creates the world on a moment by moment basis, in such a way as to confront each individual with ever new opportunities to make spiritually significant choices.

**MARTIN BUBER’S DIALOGUE WITH GOD**

Martin Buber (1878–1965) first brought the teachings of Hasidism to public attention in modern Western culture. Although he has been criticized for misrepresenting Hasidism by deleting its scrupulous concern with Jewish ritual and its otherworldly, theosophical gaze (Scholem, 1971), his generalizations about Hasidism are considerably valid for the teachings of Rabbi
Nachman and the Breslover sect that he founded (see Weiss, 1953; Magid, 1995). Buber’s portrait of Hasidism fails, however, because Nachman was “very unconventional, even from the Hasidic point of view” (Jacobs, 1993, 123). Buber’s own contributions to philosophy, as expressed in *I and Thou* (1958), *Between Man and Man* (1965), and other works, are in many ways a contemporary, liberal Jewish presentation of a similar religious sensibility. Buber presumably recognized a kindred spirit in Nachman and erred in thinking Nachman normative rather than a rarity among Hasidism. Buber (1990) described his point of view as “a believing humanism” (117). Much as it was schooled in biblical and postbiblical studies, it was based, I suggest, on Buber’s independent witness to the dialogue of divine revelation and human response. “I am no philosopher, prophet, or theologian,” Buber (1973) stated, “but a man who has seen something and who goes to a window and points to what he has seen” (4).

Extending the traditional Jewish conception of creation as a linguistic event, Buber characterized God’s relation to humanity as a dialogue.

Judaism regards speech as a happening which reaches out over the existence of mankind and the world. In contradiction to the static of the Logos-idea the word appears here in its full dynamic as that which comes to pass. God’s act of creation is speech; but also each lived moment is so. The world is spoken to the human beings who perceive it, and the life of man is itself a dialogue. What happens to a man are the great and small, untransmittable but unmistakable signs of his being addressed; what he does and suffers can be an answer or a failure to answer. And thus the whole history of the world, the hidden, real world history, is a dialogue between God and his creature; a dialogue in which man is a true, legitimate partner, who is entitled and empowered to speak his own independent word from out of his own being. (Buber, 1946, 4)

In many passages, Buber’s references to “the dialogue between God and man” can be understood in very general terms to pertain to divine and human actions in history: “the divine voice speaking in what befalls man, and man answering in what he does or forbears to do” (Buber, 1988, 17); “the dialogical principle . . . the dialogical relation between a divine and a human spontaneity” (76). In other passages, Buber referred explicitly to the minute particulars of the historical dialogue. Divine signs were involved when the events of one’s life were taken personally as important. The signs were denied when events were instead treated impersonally, as natural, accidental, or otherwise unimportant.

Each of us is encased in an armour whose task is to ward off signs. Signs happen to us without respite, living means being addressed, we would need only to present ourselves and to perceive. . . . The signs of address are not
something extraordinary, something that steps out of the order of things,
they are just what goes on time and again, just what goes on in any case,
nothing is added by the address. . . . What occurs to me addresses me. In
what occurs to me the world-happening addresses me. Only by sterilizing
it, removing the seed of address from it, can I take what occurs to me as
a part of the world-happening which does not refer to me. (Buber, 1965,
10–11)

Anything and everything in creation could function as a sign. The most
auspicious signs, those that lead to immediate recognition as miracles, that
is, those that access the transcendent and paranormal, are the coincidences,
great and small, that are found meaningful (for a comparison with Jungian
synchronicity, see Merkur, 1999, 139–57). Like writing in an unknown lan-
guage, a coincidence may be self-evidently meaningful without the meaning
being known. In other cases, the meaning of the sign is immediately intel-
ligible (Merkur, 2006). All manner of phenomena and events that are not
themselves coincidental may have a depth of meaning that is not intrinsic to
them but is instead imparted by the personal encounter with them. Whether
or not coincidental, spontaneous discoveries of meaning can be denied as il-
lusions or errors: a meaningful coincidence can be dismissed as an accident, a
random event, a superstitious interpretation. But meaning is first discovered,
disclosed, revealed.

Only secondarily, as critical thinking questions how the meaning can
have come to be and what the precise meaning is, does the question of doubt
arise. By far the majority of signs in Buber’s discussions are everyday oc-
currences: contacts with other people that led to profound realizations, fre-
quently of ethical character, and demanded responses of the human spirit.
Signs are experienced by all human beings on a continuous basis. Theoreti-
cal reflection on their occurrence, which leads to conscious recognition of
their intrinsically and inalienably religious character, is less frequent. Theo-
ries about the interpretation of signs are many and varied cross-culturally:
animisms, polytheisms, monotheisms, parapsychologies, solipsisms—the
list is endless.

In Buber’s view, the modern Western assumption that signs are not omni-
present, but are instead human projections, facilitated the pursuits of science
and philosophy. At the same time, these advances of human knowledge also
facilitated abdications of moral responsibility.

From generation to generation we perfect the defense apparatus. All our
knowledge assures us, “Be calm, everything happens as it must happen, but
nothing is directed at you, you are not meant; it is just ‘the world’, you can
experience it as you like, but whatever you make of it in yourself proceeds
from you alone, nothing is required of you, you are not addressed, all is
quiet.” (Buber, 1965, 10)
Buber offered only general remarks about the content of the dialogue by means of signs. “Revelation is continual, and everything is fit to become a sign of revelation” (Buber, 1990, 113).

It by no means needs to be a man of whom I became aware. It can be an animal, a plant, a stone. No kind of appearance or event is fundamentally excluded from the series of the things through which, from time to time, something is said to me. Nothing can refuse to be the vessel for the Word. The limits of the possibility of dialogue are the limits of awareness. (Buber, 1965, 10)

Buber suggested that the experience of dialogue with the inanimate was notable for its power to encourage recognition of the unity of the dialogical process.

When a man draws a lifeless thing into his passionate longing for dialogue, lending it independence and as it were a soul, then there may dawn in him the presentiment of a world-wide dialogue, a dialogue with the world-happening that steps up to him even in his environment, which consists partly of things. (Buber, 1965, 37)

The dialogical process implied a source, a speaker, who caused but was not present in the signs themselves.

When we rise out of it into the new life and there begin to receive the signs, what can we know of that which—of him who gives them to us? Only what we experience from time to time from the signs themselves. If we name the speaker of this speech God, then it is always the God of a moment, a moment God. (Buber, 1965, 15)

The most that could be inferred about God from the dialogical process was the dialogical relationship itself. “What is disclosed to us in the revelation is not God’s essence as it is independent of our existence, but his relationship to us and our relationship to him” (Buber, 1990, 113). Buber claimed that the dialogical process is common to all humanity. All religions are based upon it, but human communities have each understood it in their own ways. Judaism is distinctive only in making it central to its teachings (p. 115). The Jewish practice of yikhud, “unification,” asserting “the divine unity in the manifoldness of the manifestations” (Buber, 1946, 3), was integral to the Jewish approach to the dialogical process. “In such a way, out of the givers of the signs, the speakers of the words in lived life, out of the moment Gods there arises for us with a single identity the Lord of the voice, the One” (Buber, 1965, 15). Buber asserted, however, that participation in a dialogical relationship with God did not require any historical designation of God. “He who practices
real responsibility in the life of dialogue does not need to name the speaker of the word to which he is responding—he knows him in the word’s substance which presses on and in, assuming the cadence of an inwardness, and stirs him in his heart of hearts” (Buber, 1965, 17).

Buber characterized signs as a divine call for human action, an invitation for response, that could be declined, even when signs were recognized as revelations. In other cases, people respond, however haltingly or inadequately as they are able (Buber, 1965, 16–17). Responses to signs were always spontaneous, original, and individual.

The relation of faith is no book of rules which can be looked up to discover what is to be done now, in this very hour. I experience what God desires of me for this hour—so far as I do experience it—not earlier than in the hour. But even then it is not given to me to experience it except by answering before God for this hour as my hour, by carrying out the responsibility for it towards him as much as I can. What has now approached me, the unforeseen, the unforeseeable, is word become word—and it demands my answer to him. I give the word of my answer by accomplishing among the actions possible that which seems to my devoted insight to be the right one. With my choice and decision and action—committing or omitting, acting or persevering—I answer the word, however inadequately, yet properly; I answer for my hour. . . . There is not the slightest assurance that our decision is right in any but a personal way. God tenders me the situation to which I have to answer; but I have not to expect that he should tender me anything of my answer. Certainly in my answering I am given into the power of his grace, but I cannot measure heaven’s share in it, and even the most blissful sense of grace can deceive. (Buber, 1965, 68–69)

Buber’s presentation was congruent with Nachman’s views, but deleted his concerns with the details of meditation and responses to revelation. Buber’s discussions of moments of revelation in his own life consisted almost exclusively of moments of realization, of suddenly deepened understanding, that occurred while he was interacting with another person. His biblical studies and his presentations of Hasidic legends discussed the variety of revelations claimed in those literatures, but typically emphasized the process of realization while downplaying the more fantastic tales of miracles and the paranormal or transcendental.

THE ATTITUDES OF I-IT AND I-THOU

Buber’s concern with the revelatory character of the natural and everyday permeated his philosophical writings. He offered a partly philosophical and partly psychological account of the validity of the life of dialogue. Buber was not content with the attitude, conventional in the modern era, that religion is a matter of private faith, whereas science deals with shared reality. Buber
(1990, 34, 52) personally knew Max Weber, understood the Protestant roots of the “innerworldly” attitude, and unembarrassed, asserted a Jewish point of view. Buber made bold to claim that the dialogue with God is entirely real. Buber based his case on an epistemological observation (Friedman, 1986, 28). Everyone conceptualizes reality in two manners. “To man the world is twofold, in accordance with his twofold attitude” (Buber, 1958, 3).

William James (1950, vol. I, 21) had distinguished the two orientations as “knowledge by acquaintance” and “knowledge-about”; but Buber additionally referred explicitly to what is known in each instance. In one attitude, Buber (1958, 3) suggested, all relations are experienced in terms of “the primary word I-Thou.” In the other attitude, all relations are instead experienced in terms of “the primary word I-It.” It is not simply that people can experience all things either impersonally in the third person as It, He, or She, or personally in the second person as Thou. Each of these attitudes also involves a sense of self. “If Thou is said, the I of the combination I-Thou is said along with it. If It is said, the I of the combination I-It is said along with it” (3). In addition, the two senses of self differ. “The I of the primary word I-Thou is a different I from that of the primary word I-It” (3).

Science, philosophy, and theology depended alike on “the unlimited reign of causality in the world of It”; but religion, the dialogical process of signs and responses, depends on “the world of relation” that is disclosed by the I-Thou attitude (Buber, 1958, 50). It was not a question of one attitude being correct and the other mistaken. Both are inborn, inalienable, and valid. We cannot know the world by means other than the two attitudes. Each discloses the world in a different way. Each disclosure is partial, and there are no criteria for privileging one attitude over the other. Knowledge depends on both. Each attitude and the knowledge that it discloses has its place in life. “Without It man cannot live. But he who lives with It alone is not a man” (34).

In Buber’s view, an excessive, would-be exclusive, validation of the I-It attitude is responsible for the eclipse of God that characterizes modern Western culture.

In our age the I-It relation, gigantically swollen, has usurped, practically uncontested, the mastery and the rule. The I of this relation, an I that possesses all, makes all, succeeds with all, this I that is unable to say Thou, unable to meet a being essentially, is the lord of the hour. This selfhood that has become omnipotent, with all the It around it, can naturally acknowledge neither God nor any genuine absolute which manifests itself to men as of non-human origin. It steps in between and shuts off from us the light of heaven. (Buber, 1988, 129)

It was nevertheless the case that the very concept “I” has its origin in an I-Thou relationship. “The I’ emerges as a single element out of the primal experiences, out of the vital primal words I-affecting-Thou and Thou-affecting-I,
only after they have been split asunder and the participle has been given eminence as an object" (Buber, 1958, 21–22). In Buber’s view, there can be no I-It attitude without a prior I-Thou relationship.

Psychoanalytic Approaches to the Two Attitudes

Buber first discussed the I-Thou and I-It attitudes in *I and Thou* in 1923, the same year that Sigmund Freud introduced his concepts of the ego and superego. There is no indication that Buber influenced Freud. Rather, both theories originated as reactions to the monstrosity of the First World War. Freud’s line of reasoning began in 1914 with the traditional duality of will; and when Binswanger (1963) mentioned the dialogical I-Thou relationship to Freud, Freud dismissed the notion as a projection of infantile dependency. We may consequently see a convergence of ideas in Freud’s attribution to the superego of a capacity to treat the ego, and be treated by it, as a Thou. It was not a function that Freud emphasized. It was a function that Freud took for granted and mentioned in passing.

The super-ego is, however, not simply a residue of the earliest object-choices of the id; it also represents an energetic reaction-formation against those choices. Its relation to the ego is not exhausted by the precept: “You ought to be like this (like your father).” It also comprises the prohibition: “You may not be like this (like your father)—that is, you may not do all that he does; some things are his prerogative.” (Freud, 1961, 34)

Another passage, written a decade later, is slightly less clear. Freud, deeply committed to impersonal scientific phraseology, routinely avoided the term person and instead used the term object, initially as an abbreviation for loved-object. To understand his superego concept, however, the following passage needs to be read with the word person substituted for each instance of object.

The ego can take itself as an object, can treat itself like other objects, can observe itself, criticize itself, and do Heaven knows what with itself. In this, one part of the ego is setting itself over against the rest. So the ego can be split; it splits itself during a number of its functions—temporarily at least. Its parts can come together again afterward. (Freud, 1964, 58)

Freud went on to describe the split-off portion of the ego as the superego and to characterize it as an “internal object” within the personality.

For the most part, the I-It attitude that dominates modern science permeated psychoanalysis; but object relations theorists have repeatedly confirmed elements of Buber’s epistemology (Oppenheim, 2006). D. W. Winnicott developed a way of thinking about the ego’s relations to its objects that closely
agreed with Buber’s observations. Winnicott worked with the assumption, originating with Freud (1957), that the newborn commences life with a solipsistic outlook, in which all things are included in the ego, but later develops a realistic perspective, in which things outside the body are recognized as external phenomena. Winnicott (1974) introduced an intermediate phase in the developmental process, which he termed the “transitional stage”; and he developed a considerable variety of observations and theories about how to facilitate therapy with a patient who has never matured beyond the transitional stage. Although psychoanalysts have since abandoned the assumption of neonatal solipsism, Winnicott’s clinical observations retain currency.

Winnicott (1974) initially proposed the term *transitional object* to designate the type of object that belonged to the transitional stage. In other contexts, he replaced the stage-specific term with the more general concept of a subjective object or subjectively perceived object (Winnicott, 1965). “The term subjective object has been used in describing the first object, the object *not yet repudiated as a not-me phenomenon*” (Winnicott, 1974, 93). The term captured the paradox of the infant’s situation. “I have used this term, subjective object, to allow a discrepancy between what is observed and what is being experienced by the baby” (Winnicott, 1974, 152). To name the type of interaction that proceeds with subjectively perceived objects, Winnicott proposed the term *object-relating*.

In object-relating the subject allows certain alterations in the self to take place, of a kind that has caused us to invent the term cathexis. The object has become meaningful. Projection mechanisms and identifications have been operating, and the subject is depleted to the extent that something of the subject is found in the object, though enriched by feeling. Accompanying these changes is some degree of physical involvement (however slight) towards excitement. (Winnicott, 1974, 103)

“Object-relating” was Winnicott’s designation of the mentality that manifests, in Buber’s terms, in an I-It relation to another person.

Reasoning that conscious communication presupposes recognition of the object as a person in her own right, Winnicott imagined that the transitional stage involves no communication that is consciously recognized as such. Communication is possible only with objectively perceived objects, whose existence outside the ego makes communication with them necessary.

In so far as the object is subjective, *so far is it unnecessary for communication with it to be explicit*. In so far as the object is objectively perceived, communication is either explicit or else dumb. Here then appear two new things, the individual’s use and enjoyment of modes of communication, and the individual’s non-communication of self, or the personal core of the self that is a true isolate. (Winnicott, 1965, 182)
Winnicott spoke of the infant’s earliest achievement of conscience as a capacity for concern. Building on Melanie Klein’s (1975) theory of the depressive position, he associated the capacity for concern with the infant’s awareness of whole objects. “To reach the depressive position a baby must have become established as a whole person, and to be related to whole persons as a whole person” (Winnicott, 1992, 264).

We can say that at this stage a baby becomes able in his play to show that he can understand he has an inside, and that things come from outside. He shows he knows that he is enriched by what he incorporates (physically and psychically). . . . The corollary of this is that now the infant assumes that his mother also has an inside, one which may be rich or poor, good or bad, ordered or muddled. He is therefore starting to be concerned with the mother and her sanity and her moods. (Winnicott, 1992, 148)

Winnicott’s speculations about the preverbal development of infants retrojected clinical observations that he had made with regard to adults. In addition to “personalization” and “the appreciation of time and space and other properties of reality” (Winnicott, 1992, 148), Winnicott suggested that “every individual who has reached to the stage of being a unit” has also “an inner reality . . . an inner world which can be rich or poor and can be at peace or in a state of war” (230).

A further consequence of unit status was its application in what Winnicott called the use of an object. Only when an object is known to be an object can the object be used as an object. “The object, if it is to be used, must necessarily be real in the sense of being part of shared reality, not a bundle of projections. It is this, I think, that makes for the world of difference that there is between relating and usage” (Winnicott, 1974, 103). Because it is conventional to speak of using people as a euphemism for their exploitation, it is crucial to appreciate that Winnicott intended the term usage in a literal sense. A person can be used as a person, but can only be related to when treated as a thing. Object usage, as Winnicott defined it, is the attitude that, when reciprocated, makes possible the relationship that Buber called an encounter of I and Thou.

Buber’s assertion that neither Thou nor It can be said in the absence of an I has similarly found psychoanalytic expression. A consensus has emerged that the internalization of object relations depends on the internalization of complete relationships and not on object representations alone. Fairbairn proposed that what is internalized includes three components having to do with one’s sense of self, the object “out there,” so to speak, and the consequent emotional response. Kernberg’s (1990, 250) spells this out by listing them as, “a self-image component, an object-image component, and both of these components linked with an early affect.” Laing (1967) emphasized that the internalizations consist of interpersonal dynamics.
What is “internalized” are \textit{relations between} persons, things, part-objects, part-persons, not the persons or objects in isolation. . . . What is internalized are not objects as such but \textit{patterns of relationship between human presences}. The more constant patterns of such relationships are what we call family structure. That is to say, the individual does not simply internalize or introject persons, parts of persons, objects or part objects, good or bad breast, penis, mother or father, but the individual incarnates a \textit{group structure}. . . . It is \textit{relations not objects} that are internalized. (111, 114, 118)

In both Buber’s philosophy and object relations theory, “there is no self, there is no such thing as a self, without the other” (Oppenheim, 2006, 103).

Buber (1958) wrote of the infant’s inborn “longing for the Thou” (27), his “instinct to make everything into a Thou, to give relation to the universe” (27), as motivating his “effort to establish relation” (28). Actual relations are secondary: “The inborn \textit{Thou} is realised in the lived relations with that which meets it” (27). This recognition of the priority of relationship was also fundamental to Fairbairn’s (1990) formulation of object relations theory. Fairbairn maintained that “man is by nature object-seeking rather than pleasure-seeking” (132). “The ultimate goal of libido is the object” (Fairbairn, 31).

Buber’s claim that it is Thou addressing I that brings I to consciousness has also become integral to contemporary psychoanalytic thinking. The collapse of the theory of neonatal solipsism, which Freud and Winnicott wrongly assumed was valid, has brought prominence to alternative theories, including the argument of Wilfred R. Bion (1962, 1967, 1984) that an infant learns how to organize his or her feelings and conceptualize himself or herself, as a self, by observing his or her mother’s responses to him or her.

Coordinating these trends in theory with David Bakan’s (1966) duality of agency and communion and Neville Symington’s (1993) theory of narcissism, I have elsewhere proposed a distinction between self-focus and relationality as two concerns of conscious mental operation; and I have suggested that self-focus is accomplished by the ego, whereas relationality is a product of ego-superego integration (Merkur, 2007). The superego functions as a Thou to the ego’s I, and the ego responds in a considerable variety of ways. Sometimes it denies the Thou. Sometimes it responds to the Thou; and sometimes it takes the Thou into consideration without responding directly to it.

In health, people oscillate continuously between self-focus and relationality. All pathologies inhibit relationality to lesser or greater extents (Merkur, 2007). Alternate states typically alter the proportions of the mixture of self-focus and relationality within consciousness. I have also argued that the superego is an inborn psychic function that accomplishes what used to be called object cathexis, the construction of objects as objects. \textit{Ex hypothesi} the superego’s inborn function is to imagine the mother’s point of view, in order to facilitate empathy, communication, compliance, and survival. The superego’s default position, as it were, is consequently anthropomorphizing and...
personal, constructing objects as persons. Only secondarily, through reality-testing, does the superego learn to construct inanimate objects as things (Merkur, 2001).

These several formulations of psychoanalytic theory, by Freud, Fairbairn, Winnicott, Bion, and others, support Buber’s claim that the I-Thou and I-It attitudes are both primary. Because they are how the mind processes sense data, they have equal claims to knowledge. They are equally empirical, and truth is not the province of one attitude alone.

**HESCHEL ON UNIO SYMPATHETICA**

Rabbi Nachman was well aware of some of the personality dynamics that contemporary psychoanalytic formulations seek to express. For example, he recognized the need to move from depressive self-pity into relationality in order to accomplish *hitbodedut* successfully. Like Winnicott (1974), he suggested being playful.

When you are depressed, it is very difficult to isolate yourself and speak to God. You must force yourself always to be happy especially during prayer. The Rebbe said that true happiness is one of the most difficult things to attain in serving God. Another time he said that it seems impossible to achieve happiness without some measure of foolishness. One must resort to all sorts of foolish things if this is the only way to attain happiness. (*Sichos HaRan* 20; Nathan, 1973, 121–22)

As an alternative to foolishness, Nachman also counseled a strategy that was consistent with the approach of cognitive-behavioral therapy.

During prayer . . . be like the man who makes himself angry. Work yourself up and bring these emotions into your prayers. The enthusiasm may be forced at first, but it will eventually become real. Your heart will burst aflame with God’s praise, and you will be worthy of knowing true prayer. You can make yourself happy in the same way. You must pray with great joy, even if this happiness is forced. Happiness is always a virtue, but especially during prayer. If you are disturbed and unhappy, you can at least put on a happy front. Deep down you may be depressed, but if you act happy, you will eventually be worthy of true joy. This is true of every holy thing. If you have no enthusiasm, put on a front. Act enthusiastic, and the feeling will eventually become genuine. (*Sichos HaRan* 74; Nathan, 1973, 179)

Particularly important for community leaders, whose meditations sought revelations on public policy, Nachman recommended a practice of empathy. A person might initially be able to empathize only conceptually, but the intellectual achievement should also be augmented with heartfelt emotion.
You should be able to feel another’s troubles in your own heart. This is especially true when many are suffering. It is possible to clearly realize another’s anguish, and still not feel it in your heart. When an entire community is in distress, you should surely feel their agony in your heart. If you do not feel it, you should strike your head against the wall. You should strike your head against the walls of your heart. This is the meaning of the verse (Deut. 4:39), “Know this day and realize it in your heart.” You must bring the realization from your mind to your heart.” (Sichos HaRan 39; Nathan, 1973, 141–42)

Nachman’s practice of empathy may perhaps have inspired Abraham Joshua Heschel’s discussion of the biblical prophets’ subjective experience of prophecy. Basing himself on the biblical texts, Heschel suggested that prophets sympathized with the passions of God.

The prophet may be characterized as a *homo sympathetikos*. . . . The pathos of God is upon him. It moves him. It breaks out in him like a storm in the soul, overwhelming his inner life, his thoughts, feelings, wishes, and hopes. It takes possession of his heart and mind, giving him the courage to act against the world. . . . His sympathy is an overflow of powerful emotion which comes in response to what he sensed in divinity. For the only way to intuit a feeling is to feel it. One cannot have a merely intellectual awareness of a concrete suffering or pleasure, for intellect as such is merely the tracing of relations, and a feeling is no mere relational pattern. . . .

The unique feature of religious sympathy is not self-conquest, but self-dedication; not the suppression of emotion, but its redirection; not silent subordination, but active co-operation with God; not love which aspires to the Being of God in Himself, but harmony of the soul with the concern of God. To be a prophet means to identify one’s concern with the concern of God. Sympathy is a state in which a person is open to the presence of another person. It is a feeling which feels the feeling to which it reacts—the opposite of emotional solitariness. In prophetical sympathy, man is open to the presence and emotion of the transcendent Subject. He carries within himself the awareness of what is happening to God.

Thus, sympathy has a dialogical structure. What characterizes prophetic existence is, indeed, an interpersonal relationship, either a relationship between the one who feels and the one who sympathizes with that feeling, or a relationship of having a feeling in common. . . . Sympathy always refers to a person or persons. Sympathy, however, is not an end in itself. Nothing is further from the prophetic mind than to inculcate or to live out a life of feeling, a religion of sentimentality. Not mere feeling, but action, will mitigate the world’s misery, society’s injustice or the people’s alienation from God. Only action will relieve the tension between God and man. Both pathos and sympathy are, from the perspective of the total situation, demands rather than fulfilments. Prophetic sympathy is no delight;
unlike ecstasy, it is not a goal, but a sense of challenge, a commitment, a state of tension, consternation, and dismay. (Heschel, 1962, vol. II, 88–89)

The prophets were as profoundly aware of the reality of the divine pathos as they were of themselves and their own feelings. That is the true meaning of the religion of sympathy—to feel the divine pathos as one feels one’s own state of the soul. . . . There is no fusion of being, unio mystica, but an intimate harmony in will and feeling, a state that may be called unio sympathetica. . . . One does not feel united with the divine Being, but emotionally identified with divine pathos. This unity in the consciousness, the unity of will and experience, of personality and inspiration, express well the very essence of the prophetic spirit. (Heschel, 1962, vol. II, 99)

Although Heschel was a Conservative rabbi, his upbringing was Hasidic, and he was an academic scholar of early Hasidism. It is not necessary to accept Heschel’s thesis that biblical prophets experienced divine pathos to accept the thesis that at least some practitioners of the living meditative practice of hitbonenut experience divine pathos and understand their experiences as prophecy. The empathic function of the superego has its paradigmatic activity, I have suggested, in the infant’s communication with the mother (Merkur, 2001). The capacity for empathy presumably undergoes both healthy and pathogenic development. The function is applied to other people, as well as to sentient animals, no later than the onset of stranger anxiety around eight months of age.

The empathic function is an involuntary, constantly operating, unconscious effort to infer the motivation of others on the basis of their actions; the function includes but is not limited to social psychology’s “role-taking.” The unconscious application of the same empathic function, not to the motivation of this or that sentient creature, but to events in the world in general, is involved in the discovery and interpretation of the revelatory signs. Revelation is a question, as it were, of empathizing with God’s activities in the world; and the practice of prophecy is a deliberate inculcation of psychic states that enhance the operation of the role-taking function. Empathy with the world-process is a normal and healthy psychic function, although of course it may undergo pathological distortion, for example, into “ideas of reference” in paranoid schizophrenia, and the devastation of meaninglessness in depression. Empathizing with events in the world considerably resembles aesthetic appreciation of the world, except that empathy implies, and projects, an intentionality.

In a negative theology, everything that may be said about God must also be unsaid, through the recognition that the saying speaks from and of humanity, and not about God (Sells, 1994). A practice of hitbodedut may lead to creative inspirations of divine pathos that are rich in emotional and intellectual
content. Critical theological reflection must nevertheless recognize the experiences as imaginations that project feelings and thoughts onto God. For a negative theology, the relevant question is not whether the feelings and thoughts are God's thoughts, for they are not; yet they are inspired. The question, then, is the nature of the contribution to the world-process that the inspirations call the person to undertake.

**Buber's Philosophical Argument**

Buber’s assertion is that the I-Thou attitude is not only psychologically necessary, as I have argued previously, but ontologically valid: that revelation is truly revelation. Buber contended, I believe correctly, that interpersonal I-Thou relations among human beings both form the basis for and, in some measure, participate within the I-Thou attitude toward God. “Every particular Thou is a glimpse through to the eternal Thou; by means of every particular Thou the primary word addresses the eternal Thou” (Buber, 1958, 75). “In every sphere in its own way, through each process of becoming that is present to us, we look out toward the fringe of the eternal Thou, in each we are aware of a breath from the eternal Thou; in each Thou we address the eternal Thou.” (6). Buber’s poetic phrasing should not be allowed to undercut the logical force of his argument. For relationality to exist interpersonally presupposes that relationality exists as such. Every relation with a particular human Thou presupposes and participates within relationality in the world. This conclusion is as necessary for an atheist as it is for a theist, but it falsifies atheism. One may choose between a pantheism, such as vitalism, and a creator God; but mere materialism cannot be allowed. “The aim of relation is relation's own being, that is, contact with the Thou. For through contact with every Thou we are stirred with a breath of the Thou, that is, of eternal life.” (63).

The same considerations preclude falsification of the dialogical relation with God. We may grant the inconclusiveness of philosophical theology, which deploys the I-It attitude, to demonstrate the existence of God; but the shortcomings of the I-It attitude are consequent to its inherent limitation. The I-It attitude is only one of two ways of experiencing reality. The I-Thou attitude is capable of equal realism, for example, in the experience of knowing another person in a deep, experiential, empathically attuned way. The I-It attitude of science is incapable of falsifying the I-Thou attitude, which discovers the dialogical process of divine signs as matters of realistic observation.

The Thou meets me through grace—it is not found by seeking. But my speaking of the primary word to it is an act of my being, is indeed the act of my being. The Thou meets me. But I step into direct relation with it. (Buber, 1958, 11)
Buber used the term *spiritual* to describe the relation between God and humanity. “Spirit is not in the *I*, but between *I* and *Thou*” (Buber, 1958, 39). Buber wrote similarly of love. “Love does not cling to the *I* in such a way as to have the *Thou* only for its ‘content,’ its object; but love is between *I* and *Thou*” (14–15). Spirit is conceptual where love is emotional, but both have their exclusive existence within the I- Thou attitude, in the mutual interrelating of the I and the Thou. Spirit and love belong to neither I nor Thou, but are formed when I and Thou come into relation. “Spirit in its human manifestation is a response of man to his *Thou*” (39). The Holy Spirit is the reciprocal response of God to his creation.

At several points in his discussions, Buber mentioned the phenomenon of meaning, whose importance to philosophy and psychology has grown enormously in the interval since Buber wrote. If his references to spirit seem quaint to intellectual readers today, his passing references to meaning retain currency. In Buber’s view, meaning is relational. “We do not find meaning lying in things nor do we put it into things, but between us and things that can happen” (Buber, 1965, 36). The relation with God establishes meaning in general. “Meeting with God does not come to man in order that he may concern himself with God, but in order that he may confirm that there is meaning in the world” (Buber, 1958, 115).

Nor does association [with the divine Thou] make life any easier for us; it makes life heavier but heavy with meaning . . . the inexpressible confirmation of meaning. It is guaranteed. Nothing, nothing can henceforth be meaningless. . . . What could it intend with us, what does it desire from us, being revealed and surreptitious? . . . The meaning we receive can be put to the proof in action only by each person in the uniqueness of his being and in the uniqueness of his life. (Buber, 1958, 158–59)

The existence and reality of the dialogue with God guarantee that meanings are discovered and not merely imagined.

One can believe in and accept a meaning or value, one can set it as a guiding light over one’s life if one has discovered it, not if one has invented it. It can be for me an illuminating meaning, a direction-giving value only if it has been revealed to me in my meeting with Being, not if I have freely chosen it for myself from among the existing possibilities and perhaps have in addition decided with some fellow-creatures: This shall be valid from now on. (Buber, 1988, 70)

Meaning is an illusion, but it is an inevitable, necessary, and healthy one. Freud considered skepticism pathological: “The moment one enquires about the sense or value of life one is sick, since objectively neither of them has any existence” (Freud, letter to Marie Bonaparte, August 13, 1937; cited in Jones,
Revelation and the Practice of Prophecy 291

1957, 465). The experience of meaning or value depends on an attribution of intentionality—technically, mentalization (Fonagy, 1989, 1991)—to the phenomenon that embodies it. For the world to be found meaningful, for values to exist in general, the world must logically be the product of an intention, hence a work of divine creation.

In the absence of a creative intentionality, meaning cannot exist at all. Although it has never been as popular as the argument from design, what may be termed the “argument from meaning” is a classical gambit in theology that Hasidim repeatedly made the basis of explicit meditations (Merkur, 1991). It is also a natural and inevitable bit of healthy human reasoning. The unconscious projection of meaning onto the world, so that intentionality may be discovered in it, is a normal and wholesome mental operation. Mentalization is integral to how a healthy human mind thinks. Its absence or diminished capacity is currently understood as characteristic of autism. It is, I would suggest, a superego function that manifests consciously in the I-Thou attitude.

Signs are a subcategory of meanings. Both external, material and internal, mental phenomena can function as divine signs. They can be found personally meaningful as revelations, because they communicate intentionality. Certainly meanings can be considered psychologically as projections; but the fact that meanings are projected does not bear on their validity. The case with signs is the same as the case with meanings in general. The operations of the I-Thou attitude discover signs as realities that convey meanings that God intended for them to have. One knows the meaning of a sign as surely, and in the same way, that one knows the love of another person. It is immediately present to the mind, as a certainty, a conviction.

CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

Buber was keenly aware of the inconclusiveness of his teaching. “If one were to exist, there would no longer be any difference between belief and unbelief; the risk of faith would no longer exist. I have dared to believe . . . and I cannot bolster my faith with arguments.” “The question ‘How do you know?’ is answered of itself in the personal experience of the believing man and in the genuine living-together of men who have analogous experiences; rather, there it is not asked. I give no guarantees, I have no security to offer. But I also demand of no one that he believe. I communicate my own experience of faith, just as well as I can, and I appeal to the experiences of faith of those whom I address” (in Rome and Rome, 1964, 96).

Buber’s appeal to faith was not unreasonable. Buber (1951) brilliantly recognized that particularly Christians and Jews have explored different aspects of faith. Christians and Jews experience both aspects, but historically articulated divergent doctrines. For Christianity, faith is *pistis*, a question of
assent to a theological proposition. It is an instance, in Winnicott’s (1965, 93–94, 100–101) phrase, of “belief-in.” For Judaism, faith is *emunah*, a matter of trust, confidence, and reliance. The doctrinal emphases of the two religions should not be allowed to create pernicious stereotypes: every human person experiences both *pistis* and *emunah*, in varying proportions, on a continuous basis. It is only that like shame and guilt, *pistis* and *emunah* are distinctive aspects or registers of faith. Each merits attention. Psychoanalytic discussions of religion have repeatedly considered faith in the sense either of “belief-in” (Meissner, 1969, 1987; Bion, 1970; McDargh, 1983; Ward, 1993; Britton, 1995, 1997, 1998; Gerard, 1997) or belief-in admixed with trust (Eigen, 1993a, 1993b; Charles, 2003; Figueiredo, 2004; Neri, 2005; Tracey, 2007). However, Buber’s view of *emunah* is better understood with reference to Erikson’s (1963) discussion of “basic trust” and Bowlby’s (1981) discussion of a “secure base.”

The trust involved in recognizing both revelatory signs and values in general does not differ epistemologically from the trust that we have in written words. Shapes of ink on paper are interpreted as words when a reader projects meanings onto them. Again, the conscious experience of sense perceptions depends on projections that interpret mental phenomena as representations of a physical world that is external to the mind. The spontaneous treatment of mental phenomena as sense perceptions does not involve “belief-in,” but it does involve trust. Just as we naively trust sense perceptions and only exercise doubt as a secondary and occasional mental operation, so too we naively rely on our concepts (Gerard, 1997). The pleasure ego does not yield to the reality ego until around age six; creative inspirations initially seem certain, and are only submitted to critical examination after the moment of inspiration has passed. Both developmentally and in creativity, disillusionment, skepticism, and reality testing are belief-in secondary and optional processes.

Trust in the intentionality of revelatory signs has an epistemological status that is consistent with sense perceptions. One can prove neither the world’s externality to the mind nor the divine intentionality of signs. Both sets of meanings are projections, mentalizations, whose validity rests on faith. But why should one doubt? People ordinarily consider trust in the externality of the world to be sane. Doubt in its reality is generally considered pathological. The logical question, as Buber appreciated, pertains not to the mental operation, but to reality. How are we to judge the real? What is the actual case? Buber maintained that the two epistemic attitudes have differing but equally defensible consequences for the evaluation of reality.

What is here apparent is the double structure of human existence itself. Because these are the two basic modes of our existence with being, they are the two basic modes of our existence in general, I-Thou and I-It. I-Thou finds its highest intensity and transfiguration in religious reality,
in which unlimited Being becomes, as absolute person, my partner. I-It finds its highest concentration and illumination in philosophical knowledge. (Buber, 1988, 44–45)

Buber suggested that choice, with its opportunities and responsibilities, is a reality of the I-Thou attitude. “Human choice is not a psychological phenomenon, but utter reality, which is taken up into the mystery of the everlasting” (Buber, 1946, 5). God’s production of signs is similarly a reality that is appreciated _empirically_ by means of the I-Thou attitude. “The religious reality of the meeting with the Meeter, who shines through all forms and is Himself formless, knows no image of Him, nothing comprehensible as object. It knows only the presence of the Present One” (Buber, 1988, 45). In this the finite human mind participates in the transcendent and the paranormal, in which state the miraculous seems normal and is normally expected.

Buber maintained that revelation’s reality is to be transformative. A sign communicates something wholly new, wholly originary and creative, that transforms the recipient.

What is the eternal, primal phenomenon, present here and now, of that which we term revelation? It is the phenomenon that a man does not pass from the moment of the supreme meeting, the same being as he entered into it . . . The man who emerges from the act of pure relation that so involves his being has now in his being something more that has grown in him, of which he did not know before and whose origin he is not rightly able to indicate. However the source of this new thing is classified in scientific orientation of the world, with its authorized efforts to establish an unbroken causality. We, whose concern is real consideration of the real, cannot have our purpose served with subconsciousness or any other apparatus of the soul. The reality is that we receive what we did not hitherto have, and receive it in such a way that we know it has been given to us. (Buber, 1958, 109–10)

Fackenheim (1967) appreciated the force of Buber’s epistemology. “In the committed _I-Thou_ relation there is knowing access to a reality which is inaccessible otherwise; . . . uncommitted objective knowledge which observes as an _It_ what may also be encountered as a _Thou_ is a lesser kind of knowledge, and . . . the most profound mistake in all philosophy is the epistemological reduction of _I-Thou_ to _I-It_ knowledge, and the metaphysical reduction of _Thou_ to _It_” (281). Contemporary psychoanalysis, with its contributions by Winnicott, Fairbairn, Bion, and others, confirms Buber’s epistemology not only theoretically but as a matter of daily clinical experience. Every form of psychopathology that we know involves an unwarranted expansion of the domain of I-It to a point that the mind is sickened with self-focus (Farber,
1967; Symington, 1993). And the therapeutic procedures of psychoanalysis, from Freud onward, have consisted precisely of freeing the domain of I-Thou—the domain of love, of Eros, after all—from the repressions and displacements that trauma, folly, and ill will have imposed.

The life of dialogue is not a question of interpretation that is placed on the natural world. Psychoanalysts do not choose love to be therapeutic, nor do the religious choose to interpret nature as miraculous. There is no option. What is at stake is an immediate, empirical perception of reality. In postmodern psychoanalytic terms, we can say: there is here no conscious 
*pistis*, no taking a chance on an intellectual possibility. There is 
*emunah*, trust, and it is unconscious. Meaning is found, and having been found, is reality-tested and trusted—all unconsciously, prior to its presentation to consciousness as an empirical perception. Unconscious trust can be denied, but only at the self-traumatizing and crazy-making expense of denying reality itself. Buber (1958) sagely appreciated: “All modern attempts to interpret this primal reality of dialogue as a relation of the *I* to the Self, or the like—as an event that is contained within the self-sufficient interior the life of man—are futile: they take their place in the abysmal history of destruction of reality” (85).

The human inability to remain constantly within the I-Thou attitude, the continuously oscillating fluctuation between I-Thou and I-It in the course of each day, gives faith its tenuous quality. We go back and forth from the knowing *emunah* of I-Thou, to the hopefully believing *pistis* of I-It—and in the I-It attitude we must also inevitably confront the end of our strength, and suffer the anxiety of doubt, of disbelief, of having to extend faith, rather than simply to know it.

How did Buber reconcile his trust in revelation with his scientific knowledge of the world? He was aware, as Nachman had not been, that the psychologically naive can mistake products of the unconscious for signs. He insisted, however, that signs were not products of the unconscious alone. They are not “just the monologue of man with his own projection” (Oppenheim, 1985, 79). Projection is the vehicle of *all* communication; mentalization facilitates interhuman conversation and reading no differently than it supports the dialogue with God. The contents of revelation are not reducible to the media—variously mineral, vegetable, animal, interhuman, and introspectively psychological—that momentarily function as intelligible signs. Buber conceptualized revelation as a rearranging of existent mental elements—unconscious ideas and emotions—in unprecedented patterns that convey original insights or inspirations.

In revelation something happens to man from a side that is not man, not soul, not world. Revelation does not take place in man and is not to be explained through any psychologism. . . . Revelation does not gush forth from the unconscious: it is mastery over the unconscious. Revelation comes
as a might from without, but not in such a way that man is a vessel that is filled or a mere mouthpiece. Rather the revelation seizes the human elements that are at hand and recasts them: it is the pure shape of the meeting. (Buber, 1990, 135)

In this theory, which may be found in Maimonides as well as Buber, the physical elements that come together to construct a meaning are to be explained in neuroscientific and psychological fashions, but their particular occurrence at a particular time in a particular gestalt, when any of a multitude of other gestalts would have been equally physically possible, is an event of “pure shape,” a purely spiritual phenomenon by which meaning is conveyed to the mind in which the shape takes form.

A parallel theory can be developed for signs that proceed externally in the perceptible world. Rearrangements of physical substances in patterns that are revelatory to a human mind do not differ ontologically according to whether the substances belong to a human nervous system or occur instead in matter outside the human body. Such meaning-producing signs may be miracles in the mind or miracles in the objective material world. In both cases the signs are revelations to be attended seriously.

We need to treat seriously Buber’s concept of religion as a self-evident truth that has its basis in a lived relationship with divine signs. Most of humanity is religious in Buber’s sense of the term, but woefully inefficient in responding to revelations. Manic defenses and negative transferences both misconstrue the signs (Merkur, 2006, in press), displacing the unobjectionable-positive-transference-onto-God into idolatries that are undeserving of trust. The therapeutic challenge—the holy boldness of tikkun—awaits interested practitioners.

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The 13 chapters in this volume represent the careful work of 16 scholars from a number of different countries in Africa, North America, and Europe. This work has been made urgently necessary because inadequate cooperation has been achieved so far, between what the empirical sciences and the biblical and theological sciences can bring to bear upon the study of miracles. This is true with regard to miracles in the ancient world and in our own day. The exact sciences and the psychosocial sciences have tended to follow a trajectory of investigation in one direction, and the biblical and theological or spiritual investigations have tended along a different track. The former, understandably, follow the avenue of the hermeneutic of suspicion, while the latter, also understandably, hold themselves open to a hermeneutic of analytical but less suspicious and more affirming inquiry.

The virtual absence of pages or sections in professional and scientific journals devoted to religious, spiritual, or theological perspectives on issues dealing with paranormal human experiences is most unfortunate. The Journal for Psychology and Christianity and the Journal for Psychology and Theology are virtually alone in the American world as sophisticated professional journals that regularly seek and publish empirical and clinical research on phenomena in the fields of psychosocial science and spirituality or religion. In the European Community the Journal of Empirical Theology has undertaken similar concerns. Division 36 of the American Psychological Association also deals continually with interests in these matters.

Of course, the function of peer-reviewed journals is to publish replicable research results. However, perhaps a section in each professional journal
Conclusion

should be devoted to reporting incidents of the paranormal so that a universe of discourse and a vehicle for discussion could be developed for taking such data into consideration. At present the paranormal is not discussed in the scientific realm because no instrument is available for collecting and processing the data. It is important to create a culture of openness to the paranormal experiences humans have regularly and really, so that the frequency of such events can be understood more clearly, recorded, described, named, categorized, and analyzed.

We may discover, if we create such instruments for raising our consciousness level and increasing our information base, that there are eight things that strike us with surprising urgency. First, we may discover that the incidents of paranormal events are more frequent, should I say more normal, than we think. Second, we may discover that they fit into specific patterns that can be categorized and even analyzed more readily than we have imagined. Third, that may bring to the surface of our thought processes insights about the nature and sources of paranormal events that are currently ignored because we have not reduced our mystification about them simply because we have not done the first and second steps above.

Fourth, we may find that the paranormal events are apparently more normal, in terms of the frequency and universality with which humans experience them, than are the normal. Fifth, we may discover that we can establish criteria for sorting out the real from the unreal in what we are now referring to as the mystifying paranormal. Sixth, we may discover that a solicitation of anecdotal reports will produce such a wealth of information as to give rise to an entirely new arena for productive research. If the spirit of God is communicating with our spirits by way of paranormal experiences, presumably it is because God thinks we can hear and interpret the content. God must assume that we can make unmystifying sense of it if we study it carefully. That is just like the way in which we have made sense of the tangible material stuff of this world that we have mastered by our empirical science. Seventh, not all truth is empirical data. A great deal of our understanding of the truth about this mundane world we know from phenomenological investigations and heuristic interpretations. These seem to be trustworthy instruments of research that are particularly suited to investigation of the reported experiences humans have of the paranormal. We should be able by means of them to create useful theories, data collections and management systems, hypotheses, and laws regarding the human experiences of the paranormal.

Eighth, if one assumes the existence of God and God’s relationship with the material world, immediately a great deal of data is evident within the worldview of that hypothesis, suggesting a good deal of available knowledge about God. Much of this is derived from the nature of the universe itself. Much of the evidence for God’s nature and behavior, within that model of investigation, is replicable, predictable, testable, and the like. Why would we
not assume the same is true of the world of the paranormal, if we studied it thoroughly and systematically? We call it paranormal only because we have not yet discovered or created a framework of analysis by which its data can be collected and managed.

Some decades ago a great deal was made of chaos theory and entropy in interpreting the unknown aspects of the material world, particularly in the field of astrophysics and cosmology. It turned out that we always think things just beyond our model and grasp are chaotic. That is only because we do not understand them, not because they are not coherent, lawful, and predictable. We think things just beyond our ken are chaotic because our paradigm is too limited to manage the data out there. Life is always a process of that kind of growth that requires constant expansion of our paradigms. When we cannot expand our paradigm to take in the next larger world we are discovering, whether because of our fear or blockheadedness, we shrink and wither, and our scientific systems go down.

At this very moment we stand upon a threshold demanding an expansion of our scientific paradigm to take in the data of the paranormal in a manner such that it can be brought into new, but coherent, models of knowledge and understanding. In chapter 15 of the first volume of this set, William Wilson said that part of the difficulty in studying the spiritual and related paranormal data lies in the fact that each event is intensely personal and unique. Each scientific exploration of that event must deal with an equation in which \( n = 1 \). That makes scientific extrapolations impossible. I suggest, however, that if we undertook the program I propose above, we might well discover that \( n \) is much more than 1, and in that case we would be off and running along a trajectory that would teach us how to expand our present limited scientific paradigms to take in the additional real data. The data we have been able to identify so far strongly suggests that human experiences of the paranormal manifest themselves in remarkably similar modes, from person to person and cross-culturally. Is that merely because all humans are psychologically similar and tend to develop similar psychopathologies in very predictably patterned ways? Or is it because there is a patterned structure to paranormal experience, and it will all make sense to us as soon as we figure out the pattern? We have attempted to begin the quest for answering those questions and the enterprise of creating a science of the paranormal with the first volume of this work. We have continued it in the second volume, and have now rounded it out here in this third volume of careful scholarly investigation.

Apparently, what is for us the world of the paranormal is, from God’s perspective, a normal, functional part of his world of operations. We may not yet understand that world well; we may be infinitely mystified by it. However, if paranormal events enhance human well-being, they are real and of God, since God is God and grace is grace.
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EDITOR

**J. Harold Ellens** is a research scholar at the University of Michigan, Department of Near Eastern Studies. He is a retired Presbyterian theologian and ordained minister, a retired U.S. Army colonel, and a retired professor of philosophy, theology, and psychology. He has authored, coauthored, or edited 165 books and 167 professional journal articles. He served 15 years as executive director of the Christian Association for Psychological Studies and as founding editor and editor-in-chief of the *Journal of Psychology and Christianity*. He holds a PhD from Wayne State University in the Psychology of Human Communication, a PhD from the University of Michigan in Biblical and Near Eastern Studies, and master's degrees from Calvin Theological Seminary, Princeton Theological Seminary, and the University of Michigan. He was born in Michigan, grew up in a Dutch-German immigrant community, and determined at age seven to enter the Christian Ministry as a means to help his people with the great amount of suffering he perceived all around him. His life’s work has focused on the interface of psychology and religion.

ADVISERS

**LeRoy H. Aden** is professor emeritus of Pastoral Theology at the Lutheran Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. He taught full-time at the seminary from 1967 to 1994 and part-time from 1994 to 2001. He served

**Alfred John Eppens** was born and raised in Michigan. He attended Western Michigan University, studying history under Ernst A. Breisach, and received a BA (summa cum laude) and an MA. He continued his studies at the University of Michigan, where he was awarded a JD in 1981. He is an adjunct professor at Oakland University and at Oakland Community College, as well as an active church musician and director. He is a director and officer of the Michigan Center for Early Christian Studies, as well as a founding member of the New American Lyceum.

**Edmund S. Meltzer** was born in Brooklyn, New York. He attended the University of Chicago, where he received his BA in Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations. He pursued graduate studies at the University of Toronto, earning his MA and PhD in Near Eastern Studies. He worked in Egypt as a member of the Akhenaten Temple Project/East Karnak Excavation and as a Fellow of the American Research Center. Returning to the United States, he taught at the University of North Carolina—Chapel Hill and at The Claremont Graduate School (now University), where he served as associate chair of the Department of Religion. Meltzer taught at Northeast Normal University in Changchun from 1990 to 1996. He has been teaching German and Spanish in the Wisconsin public school system and English as a Second Language in summer programs of the University of Wisconsin. He has lectured extensively, published numerous articles and reviews in scholarly journals, and has contributed to and edited a number of books.

**Jack Miles** is the author of the 1996 Pulitzer Prize winner, *God: A Biography*. After publishing *Christ: A Crisis in the Life of God* in 2001, Miles was named a MacArthur Fellow in 2002. Now Senior Advisor to the President at J. Paul Getty Trust, he earned a PhD in Near Eastern languages from Harvard University in 1971 and has been a regents lecturer at the University of California, director of the Humanities Center at Claremont Graduate University, and visiting professor of humanities at the California Institute of Technology. He has authored articles that have appeared in numerous national publications, including the *Atlantic Monthly*, the *New York Times*, the *Boston Globe*, the *Washington Post*, and the *Los Angeles Times*, where he served for 10 years as literary editor and as a member of the newspaper’s editorial board.

Grant R. Shafer was educated at Wayne State University, Harvard University, and the University of Michigan, where he received his doctorate in Early Christianity. A summary of his dissertation, “St. Stephen and the Samaritans,” was published in the proceedings of the 1996 meeting of the Société d’Etudes Samaritaines. He has taught at Washtenaw Community College, Siena Heights University, and Eastern Michigan University. He is presently a visiting scholar at the University of Michigan.
About the Contributors

Candace S. Alcorta is an anthropologist specializing in the evolution and behavioral ecology of religion. She has conducted ethnographic research on adolescent religious involvement and resilience in Thailand and the United States. Her publications include works on the evolution of religion, music and religion, and religion and terrorism. Dr. Alcorta is currently a research scientist in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Connecticut.

Philip Brownell, MDiv, PsyD, is a graduate of the doctoral program at George Fox University and a registered clinical psychologist, organizational consultant, and coach, living and practicing in Bermuda. He is also a licensed clinical psychologist in Oregon and North Carolina. He has over 30 years of experience working with people in various capacities, such as line staff in residential settings, clergy in full-time Christian ministry, psychotherapist and psychologist in outpatient community mental health, senior psychologist for an adolescent sex offender treatment program, and organizational consultant to international law firms and corporations. He is on the core faculty at the Gestalt Training Institute of Bermuda, senior editor of the online journal Gestalt!, consulting editor for the European Journal for Qualitative Research in Psychotherapy, and a member of the Editorial, Production, and Marketing Board for Studies-in-Gestalt Therapy: Dialogical Bridges. He is also the founder and facilitator of Gslt-L, an eCommunity started in 1996 for Gestalt therapists, trainers, trainees, theorists, and writers, and he serves as information technology officer on the Board of Directors of the Association for the Advancement of Gestalt Therapy—an international community.
Steve Fehl is a student in the Doctor of Clinical Psychology program at the Colorado School of Professional Psychology in Colorado Springs, Colorado. Fehl served Lutheran parishes in Texas, Michigan, California, Minnesota, and Colorado before beginning his doctoral work. He has an MA in psychology and has done additional graduate work at San Francisco Theological Seminary in San Anselmo, CA.

John Geiger was born in Ithaca, New York, and studied history at the University of Alberta. He has written four books, including *Frozen In Time: The Fate of the Franklin Expedition*. Geiger was St. Clair Balfour Fellow at Massey College, University of Toronto, where he remains a senior resident. He is a governor and fellow of the Royal Canadian Geographical Society.

Louis Hoffman is a core faculty member at the Colorado School of Professional Psychology, a college of the University of the Rockies, and an adjunct assistant professor of psychology at the Graduate School of Psychology at Fuller Theological Seminary. He serves on the editorial board of the *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* and *PsycCRITIQUES: APA Review of Books*, and is coauthor of *Spirituality and Psychological Health; The God Image Handbook for Spiritual Counseling and Psychotherapy: Theory, Research, and Practice*; and the forthcoming book *Brilliant Sanity: Buddhist Approaches to Psychotherapy*. Dr. Hoffman is active in writing and presenting on existential-integrative psychotherapy, religious and spiritual issues in therapy, theoretical and philosophical issues in psychology, and diversity issues.

Ralph W. Hood, Jr. is professor of psychology at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga. He is a former editor of the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* and is currently a coeditor of the *Archiv für religionspsychologie*. He is a past president of Division 36 (Psychology of Religion) of the American Psychological Association and a recipient of its William James Award. He has authored over 200 articles in the psychology of religion and has authored, coauthored, or edited 10 books, all dealing with the psychology of religion.

Ron Johnson is a psychologist in private practice in Lodi, Wisconsin. He consults regularly, as well in medical centers in St. John’s, Newfoundland. He served for decades as a member of the national board of The Christian Association for Psychological Studies and has presented regularly at the annual conventions of that association. He is a graduate of Denver Seminary (MDiv) and of University of Iowa (PhD).

Nicolene L. Joubert is a registered counseling psychologist and trained biblical counselor. She is the founder of the Institute of Christian Psychology in South Africa.
Marika Kurzenberger is currently a doctoral student at Colorado School of Professional Psychology, a college of the University of the Rockies, and lives in Trinidad, Colorado, with her husband and two children. She is a former police officer with a BA in sociology/criminology and teaches criminal justice at Trinidad State Junior College.

Dan Merkur is a psychoanalyst in private practice in Toronto, Canada. Trained academically in comparative religion, he has taught at five universities and is currently a Research Reader in the Study of Religion at the University of Toronto. He has authored 11 books and many articles in the history and psychoanalysis of religion, including, most recently, Crucified with Christ: Meditation on the Passion, Mystical Death, and the Medieval Invention of Psychotherapy (2007).

Robert Perry has been a teacher and interpreter of the modern spiritual classic A Course in Miracles since 1986. In 1993 he founded the Circle of Atonement in Sedona, Arizona, a nonprofit center that supports students of A Course in Miracles in their understanding and practice of this path. He has authored or coauthored 19 books and booklets on the Course, as well as hundreds of articles, and has lectured throughout the United States and internationally. His goal has been to draw out a comprehensive understanding of A Course in Miracles as a spiritual path, including both theory and practice, to support students in walking that path, and to help establish an enduring spiritual tradition in which students walk the path together.

Stephen J. Pullum is professor of communication studies at the University of North Carolina, Wilmington, where he teaches courses in Communication Theory, Intercultural Communication, and the Rhetoric of Faith Healing, among others. He is the author of “Foul Demons, Come Out!”: The Rhetoric of Twentieth-Century American Faith Healers. Dr. Pullum has won UNCW’s Distinguished Teaching Professorship and the Chancellor’s Teaching Excellence Award.

Thomas B. Roberts developed multistate theory to systematize the study of mind-body states and the leads they provide for cognition, intelligence, creativity, mental health, and abilities that reside in various mind-body states: see Psychedelic Horizons: Snow White, Immune System, Multistate Mind, Enlarging Education. He specializes in the entheogenic uses of psychedelics: see Psychoactive Sacramentals: Essays on Entheogens and Religion and the online archive Religion and Psychoactive Sacramentals at http://www.csp.org/chrestomathy/, which excerpts over 550 books, dissertations, and topical issues of journals. A two-volume set coedited with Michael Winkelman, Psychedelic Medicine: New Evidence for Hallucinogenic Substances as Treatments extends this interest.
into health studies. Roberts has taught Foundations of Psychedelic Studies at Northern Illinois University since 1981; this is the first such catalog-listed course at a college or university. He wrote the entheogen chapter for Where God and Science Meet, a three-volume work edited by Patrick McNamara (Praeger, 2006).

Steven A. Rogers received his PhD from Fuller Graduate School of Psychology and completed a postdoctoral fellowship in neuropsychology at UCLA’s Department of Neurology. He is assistant professor of psychology at Westmont College, Santa Barbara, California. With Karen Miller he coauthored The Estrogen-Depression Connection: The Hidden Link Between Hormones & Women’s Depression (2007).

Peter Suedfeld was born in Hungary and emigrated to the United States in 1948. After three years of active duty in the U.S. Army, he received his bachelor’s degree from Queens College of the City University of New York in 1960 and his PhD from Princeton University in 1963. He taught at the University of Illinois and at University College, Rutgers—The State University of New Jersey before moving to the University of British Columbia (UBC), where he was appointed professor of psychology in 1972. He served as department chairman at Rutgers from 1967–1972 and at UBC as head of the Department of Psychology from 1972–1984 and dean of the Faculty of Graduate Studies from 1984–1990. In 2001, he was appointed dean emeritus of Graduate Studies and professor emeritus of Psychology. Suedfeld has held Canada Council and Killam Foundation fellowships and sabbatical or concurrent appointments as Visiting Professor at the University of New South Wales, Visiting Fellow at Yale University, Distinguished Visiting Scholar at the Ohio State University, and Distinguished Scholar in Residence at the Peter Wall Institute of Advanced Studies.