

THE PRESUPPOSITION OF ANTI-SUPERNATURALISM

By Mark Paynter

The philosophical study of metaphysics concerns itself with the question of “is nature all there is or is there something or someone beyond”. Interestingly enough this is the question that ultimately led me to become a Christian in the first place.

From beginning to end the Bible contains a complete metaphysical view that is primarily supernatural.

“The Bible sets forth a definite metaphysical scheme. It begins with God who is a personal, infinitely perfect, pure spirit (Ex. 15:11; Mal. 2:10; John 4:24). The triune God (2 Cor.13: 14) is unique in His nature and works (Ps. 86:9), self-existent (Ex. 3:14; John 5:26; Gal. 4:8-9), eternal (Ps. 90:2), immutable (Mal. 3:6), and omnipresent (Ps. 139:7-10). Everything else that exists has been created out of nothing (Col. 1:16-17; Heb. 11:3), whether the material world (Gen. 1:1; Ex. 20:11), the realm of spirits (Ps. 148:2, 5), or man. Man was created as the image of God (Gen. 1:27), a being who exhibits both a material and immaterial character (Matt. 10:28), surviving bodily death (Eccl. 12:7; Rom. 2:7) with personal awareness of God (2 Cor.5: 8), and awaiting bodily resurrection (I Cor.6: 14; 15: 42-44).

In creation God made all things according to His unsearchable wisdom (Ps. 104:24; Isa.40: 28), assigning all things their definite characters (Isa.40: 26; 46: 9-10). God also determines all things by His wisdom (Eph.1: 11) - preserving (Neh.9: 6), governing (Ps. 103: 19), and predetermining the nature and course of all things, thus being able to work miracles (Ps.72: 18). The decree by which God providentially ordains historical events is eternal, effectual, unconditional, unchangeable, and comprehensive (e.g., Isa.46: 10; Acts 2: 23; Eph. 3: 9-11).”¹

Since the Bible presents a super naturalistic perspective on metaphysics; miracles are a distinct possibility. McDowell points out that a miracle can be defined “as special acts of

¹ <http://www.cmfnow.com/cgi-bin/nextpg?cmd=NextPg!18111&dir=s7!articles&tpl=PA107.htm> 23
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God in the world. Since miracles are special acts of God, they can only exist where there is a God who can perform miracles.”²

John Schwarz amplifies

“A miracle has been described as “an event that happens in a manner contrary to regularly observed process of nature.” In the Bible, Jesus miracles are of two kinds. The vast majority are healing miracles: exorcising demons, curing lepers and giving sight to the blind. The others are nature miracles: stilling the wind’ feeding the multitudes and raising people from the dead.

People today especially those who do not believe in the supernatural, are skeptical of miracles. In Jesus’ day, people believed in miracles. Even Josephus, the first century Jewish historian (thus not a Christian) recorded that Jesus performed miracles. If Jesus was the incarnate Son of God who “created the heavens and the earth” there is no reason to be hesitant about his performing, numerous, spectacular miracles.”³

As McDowell readily points out to admit that there is a God, is to admit that miracles are a distinct possibility.⁴ Miracles can exist where there is a God to perform the miracle. McDowell points out that this is an argument that arises from any worldview that is theistic.

McDowell in commenting on the nature of miracles notes that

- 1 Miracles are acts that God performs by his supernatural power.
- 2 A theistic view of the world allows for an open system where miracles can occur and are not a violation of natural law.
- 3 A miracle is an immediate, spontaneous act that is not progressive.
- 4 Miracles are always complete and successful⁵

² McDowell page 358

³ Schwartz page 85

⁴ McDowell page 661

⁵ McDowell page 663-664

McDowell then address the question of what purpose God has in performing a miracle. Miracles occur

- 1 To confirm that a message is from God
- 2 To confirm that a messenger is from God.
- 3 Miracles glorify God alone and are beneficial to the recipient.
- 4 Miracles are the unique backbone of Christianity. Miracles can be subtracted from every other religion and the teaching of that religion will remain essentially intact, subtract miracles from Christianity and you destroy the whole of its teaching.⁶

McDowell takes care to distinguish between miracles and magic

Miracle	Magic
Under God's control	Under man's control
Done at God's will	Done at man's will
Not naturally repeatable	Naturally repeatable
No deception involved	Deception involved
Occurs in nature	Does not occur in nature
Fits into nature	Does not fit into nature
Unusual but not odd	Unusual and odd

Dave Hunt explains the significance of miracles to Christianity.

“Christianity isn't embarrassed by the recital of miracles in the Bible. On the contrary, Christianity is based upon the greatest miracle of all, the resurrection of Christ...Christianity doesn't apologize for miracles or back away and shrug its shoulders as though it isn't really important whether miracles happen or not. Christianity requires miracles. This is not the case with Buddhism or Hinduism or Islam or any other of the world's religions, which get along quite well without miracles. Their leaders left a philosophy of life and certain rules to follow which have

⁶ McDowell page 665-666

⁷ McDowell page 666

no bearing upon Buddha, Krishna, Mohammed, et al are alive or dead or even lived at all. Not so with Christianity.

The Christian faith stands or falls upon the sinless life, the sacrificial death, and the miraculous resurrection of Jesus Christ – and all other miracles are minor occurrences in comparison to that one. If the resurrection actually happened, then for God to open blind eyes or heal any illness or make the lame walk or even to open the Red Sea is obviously within the realm of possibility.”⁸

However over the last two hundred years an anti – supernatural view has dominated intellectual circles. In fact it has been one of the most prominent ingredients that has shaped society and culture in the Western World over this period of time. “ It has altered common views regarding man and ethics, it has generated a radical reformulation of religious beliefs, and it has significantly affected perspectives ranging from politics to pedagogy. Consequently a very large number of the skeptical questions or challenges directed against the Christian faith are either rooted in, or colored by, this negative spirit with respect to metaphysics”⁹

McDowell defines “Anti-supernaturalism as disbelief in God’s existence or in his intervention in the natural order of the universe.”¹⁰

Some of the common presuppositions that anti-super-naturalists hold are

- 1 They believe that we live in a closed system where every cause has a natural effect.
- 2 There is no God.

⁸ Hunt page 82

⁹ <http://www.cmfnow.com/cgi-bin/nextpg?cmd=NextPg!18111&dir=s7!articles&tpl=PA107.htm> 23
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¹⁰ McDowell page 352

3 Since there is no God, there is no supernatural.

4 Since there is no supernatural, miracles are not possible.¹¹

Since anti-supernaturalists start with the presupposition that there is no God, for them miracles are impossible. Therefore they reject the Biblical revelation which reveals that God is the one who determines the limits of nature and will at times act outside of the rules of nature.¹² Therefore they reject the miracles of Jesus as historical fact, as their presuppositions exclude them from perceiving of a God who can intervene in history and suspend the normal rules of nature. So no matter how convincing the argument in favor of miracles they reject the evidence and doggedly stick to their position. McDowell points out that

1 We must all be aware of our presuppositions.

2 Science increasingly no longer believes that the universe is a closed system.

3 Historians should draw their conclusions from the facts to be gleaned from the evidence, and not insist that the facts conform to their presuppositions.¹³

Bashan contrasts Anti-supernaturalism with supernaturalism. Supernaturalism is based upon the self-revelation of the living God. Supernaturalism is scientific, based upon reasoning that is logical and rests upon real human experience. Anti-supernaturalism is on the other hand based upon presuppositions that “are arbitrarily applied, self-refuting, unable to pass their own strict requirements, and which undermine science and argumentation - indeed undermine the usefulness of those very empirical procedures which are made the foundation of all knowledge”¹⁴

¹¹ McDowell page 352-353

¹² <http://www.cmfnw.com/cgi-bin/nextpg?cmd=NextPg!18111&dir=s7!articles&tpl=PA107.htm> 23

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¹³ McDowell page 368

¹⁴ <http://www.cmfnw.com/cgi-bin/nextpg?cmd=NextPg!18111&dir=s7!articles&tpl=PA107.htm>