Can the ‘miracles’ of Lourdes be classed as miraculous?
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Abstract
This paper discusses the debate surrounding the existence and occurrence of miracles. It explores differing views on miracles and focuses specifically at the sixty eight miracles which have occurred at Lourdes in south-west France.

There have been many attempts to define what a miracle is; three contrasting views on miracles are examined here, followed by a brief description of Lourdes and the miracles that have occurred there. The paper then considers some of the criticism, in particular the views of David Hume (1711-1776), and concludes with an evaluation of the miracles at Lourdes, to determine whether they can be called miraculous or not.

Keywords: Miracle, Religious Experience, Coincidence, Laws of Nature, Lourdes, Christianity.

In The Bible there are many reported events which are known as miracles. Additionally, miracles have been reported in a number of places at different points in time, including Lourdes in south-west France. There have been many attempts to define what a miracle is; ‘an event due to supernatural agency’ is the OED definition. Not surprisingly, miracles are regarded as the work of God or divine intervention. Meister (2008) defines a religious experience as an experience which affects the receiver’s religious life. For example, a person could have a vision of God, see an angel or begin to speak in tongues (a language unknown to him). Meister claims that these types of religious experience are not exclusive to any single religion, he states that ‘countless persons from every creed and culture have claimed to have had these sorts of esoteric or numinous experiences’ (Meister 2008, 473). He also states that certain people may have a ‘mystical experience’. The American philosopher and psychologist, William James (1842-1910), described this as a type of personal, religious experience that has one or more of four characteristics: ineffability, noetic quality, transiency and passivity.

James (1902) explains that the first characteristic, ineffability, refers to the way in which a receiver of a religious experience cannot impart or transfer their experience to other people because they would not be able to find the words to do so. According to James, ineffability of a mystical experience is a state of feeling, rather than a state of conveying the experience in words. The second characteristic, noetic quality, is similar to ineffability, because a state of feeling is also involved, with
the addition of a state of knowledge. James argues that the state of knowledge that the receiver is in allows them to be given certain wisdom through revelations. For example, in The Bible, Joseph has a vision in which he sees an angel, who tells him that Mary will have God’s child (Matthew 1: 20). Joseph’s experience has a noetic quality as the angel imparted wisdom to him regarding Mary and her child. The third characteristic, transiency, refers to the amount of time the experience has consumed. James states that a mystical experience only lasts a short time. He also says that once the receiver’s experience is finished, they can reproduce the experience, but not perfectly. The receiver is also left with a feeling of higher importance. The final characteristic, passivity, refers to the amount of control the receiver has over their religious experience. James maintains that a person who has a religious experience with passivity has no control over the experience – the person is subject to a higher power. He also argues that sometimes a secondary experience occurs, such as speaking in tongues. After the experience, the receiver will have very little memory of the experience, but will retain a sense of change within his/her life.

Taking James’s theory of mystical experience forward, one type of religious experience which incorporates his four characteristics is a miracle. Richard Swinburne (1997) states that: a miracle is a ‘violation or suspension of natural laws, brought about by God’ (quoted in Meister 2008, 410). If, for example, someone was to pray for a family member to be cured of cancer and they are cured, if they believe in God, they would believe that the recovery was a miracle. This is because, for the believer, God has suspended the laws of nature (cancer being a sometime incurable, deadly disease) in order to cure their family member.

Holland (1965), however, holds a different view on miracles. He argues that events that are seen as miraculous are nothing more than a chain of coincidences that are perceived to be miraculous. He gives an example of a child who is stuck on a train line while a train is speeding toward it. The driver of the train does not see the child but at the last possible moment, he faints and the brakes automatically engage and the train stops just before hitting the child. For Holland, this event is a coincidence, but for the mother of the child, she would see this event as a miracle if she believed in God.

The views on miracles from Holland and Swinburne focus on the actual ‘miraculous’ event taking place. However, Paul Tillich (1973) believes that the concept of a miracle has more to do with the effects on a person’s life after the event, than the violation of the laws of nature. For example, the family whose relative has been cured of cancer may have been affected by the event of their relative
making a recovery from cancer; Tillich would argue that the miracle is the religious significance (if any) that has impacted on the family’s life.

These three views on miracles may be different; however they share a common element: their definitions of a miracle are linked to religious experience. Swinburne’s view of God suspending the laws of nature may have the characteristic of transiency because the event may have lasted a short time. Whilst Holland views miracles as coincidence, the characteristic of noetic quality may be attached because, although a series of coincidences has taken place, the person who experiences a miracle may have received hidden wisdom through the event. Tillich’s view of a miracle (the effects on a person’s life) may have the characteristic of ineffability, because the person experiencing the miracle may not be able to share how the event has changed their life in words. One place where miracles are believed to occur is Lourdes in France.

Lourdes is a small town at the foot of the Pyrenees mountain range in south-west France. In 1858, a fourteen year old girl called Bernadette Soubirous was collecting firewood with her sister and a friend, when she saw a female figure appear in a nearby cave for approximately a quarter of an hour. Bernadette had seventeen more visions (more commonly known as apparitions) of the woman, who instructed her to do various things. During one of the apparitions, the woman asked Bernadette to drink and wash from ‘the spring’, although there was no spring near the cave. The woman proceeded to tell Bernadette to dig into the ground, which she did, and uncovered a spring, which still produces water today. The woman revealed who she really was during the fifteenth apparition. The woman revealed herself as Mary, the mother of Jesus. According to Werfel (2006), a large number of people scrutinised Bernadette’s visions; however, the Bishop of Tarbes (the town where Bernadette lived) announced that Bernadette’s apparitions of Mary were genuine and true. Bernadette was made a saint by Pope Pius XI in 1933. (Britannica Encyclopaedia 2012).

Lourdes has since become a great place of pilgrimage for Catholics, who go to see the spring which Bernadette uncovered. The fact that the spring still exists for people to see could itself be considered a miracle because, as the river flows through Lourdes, the rocks and land surrounding the river have not eroded away, which is what usually happens to flowing water (BBC 2012). Taking Swinburne’s view of miracles, God could be suspending the laws of nature in Lourdes to preserve the spring, thus making it a miracle that it has survived.
Since Mary appeared to Bernadette in 1858, there have been over seven thousand apparent cures which have happened without explanation following a visit to Lourdes. To each of the seven thousand, their personal curing would be a miracle in their opinion, specifically because they were suddenly cured of an ailment. However, out of the multitude of people who have been inexplicably cured, only sixty seven have been officially recognised as miraculous by the Catholic Church (Zenit 2004).

For the Catholic Church to formally announce that a miraculous cure has taken place at Lourdes, an extensive analysis of the seeming miracle must be carried out. This analysis has been in place for all miracle cases since 1905, when Pope Pius X asked that all miracles that occur in Lourdes should be scientifically analysed (Zenit 2004). For a miraculous healing to be declared ‘certain, definitive and medically inexplicable’ (Zenit 2004, 1), the account needs to meet four criteria set by the medical office in Lourdes. The first criterion is that the diagnosis of the person’s disease should be accurate and correct. The second is that the illness must be permanent or terminal. The third criterion is that the cure is instant – any healing that is gradual is disregarded. The final criterion is that any treatment that the person had been prescribed must not have been part of the cause of the person’s cure. As well as the criteria set by the medical office, there is also a process a sick person who has been cured must go through before the Church will publically announce that the person has been miraculously cured (ibid).

When sick people go to Lourdes as part of a pilgrimage group, for example as part of their diocese, they will have a doctor accompany them to the hospital (Zenit 2004). The doctor will have a medical file which documents relating to the sick person’s condition and the history of the sickness. If a sick pilgrim believes that they have been cured, they will be examined; their file will be inspected by the medical office, who will then use the four criteria to examine if the person’s healing is a miracle. People who are in Lourdes at the time of the healing who are also ‘members of the medical profession’ (Zenit 2004, 1) are brought together if they wish to examine the person and their file. If the first examination is successful, subsequent examinations will then take place, possibly over a number of years. If the examinations are successful and if three-quarters of the doctors present agree to do so, the healed person’s file is sent to the Lourdes International Medical Committee (ibid).

The Lourdes International Medical Committee is made up of thirty medical experts who meet once a year to discuss various ‘patients’ and their accounts of miraculous healing (Zenit 2004). The
committee could discuss an individual file for many years, but if they reach an agreement that is positive, the file is then sent to the bishop of the diocese which the healed person belongs to. It is then the duty of the bishop, on behalf of the Church, to announce that the healing is a miracle and that the miracle has come from God. The process of the claim of a miracle being evaluated by the Church, to an announcement that it is so, can take a long time and during the time of examination various medical professionals monitor the condition of the person in question (ibid). The fact that the Church takes so long to declare miraculous status, testifies to the scrutiny and possible authenticity of the miracle.

In total, sixty seven miracles have been authorised by the Catholic Church to date. These miracles are all healings that have happened after the individual had visited Lourdes (Lourdes-France.org 2012). For example, in 1987, a fifty one year old man, Mr. Jean-Pierre Bely, claimed to have been cured of multiple sclerosis, but it was not until 1999 that the Church declared it a miracle. The most recent miracle that has been announced by the Church was in 2005. A woman, Miss Anna Santaniello, was cured of mitral valve stenosis – a form of heart disease which can lead to ‘serious heart complications’ (Mayo Clinic 2011). The woman claimed she was cured in 1952 – fifty years later the Church agreed it was a miraculous cure. It is not just the elderly that have had miraculous cures in the past. The youngest person to have been miraculously cured in Lourdes was just three years old. The young child, Francis Pascal, was diagnosed with ‘blindness and paralysis of the lower limb’ (Lourdes-France.org 2012). The healing took place in 1938 and was officially declared a miracle in 1949. Although these miracles have taken the Church a number of years to examine, the shortest amount of time it has taken the Church to announce a miraculous healing is just two years (two meetings of the Lourdes International Medical Committee). In 1953 and 1954, Miss Marie Bigot was cured of her blindness, deafness and hemiplegia – paralysis of one side of the body (NHS 2012). The miracle was then confirmed and announced by the Church in 1956.

Even though there have been sixty seven miracles approved by the Church, as well as medical professionals, there are those that believe miracles do not and cannot occur. Scottish philosopher David Hume (1711-1776) shared the view, more recently supported by Swinburne, that ‘a miracle is a violation of the laws of nature’ (Hume cited in Meister 2008, 400). Hume offers four arguments against miracles. First, that there has not been a miracle ‘in all of history’ that has been ‘attested by a sufficient number of men, of such unquestioned good-sense, education, and learning’ to prove that any event is miraculous (cited in Meister 2008: 401). His second principle is that it is in human nature to be drawn towards the drama and wonder of a miracle, which in turn makes people tend to
believe in miracles because of the miracle’s spectacular nature. Hume’s third argument states that: miracles are ‘observed chiefly to abound among ignorant and barbarous nations’ (ibid, 402), which for Hume means that any claim made by a person from such a nation should be disregarded. Hume’s fourth argument is that ‘there is no testimony for any [miracle] ... that is not opposed by an infinite number of witnesses’ (ibid, 403). Hume develops his fourth argument, saying that each religion has had claims of miracles from their believers in the past. Hume says that if a multitude of religions make claims of miracles, then there is a possibility that their claim will disprove other religions’ miracles. For example, if a miracle were to happen to a Christian and they believe that God made something happen, it may discredit a miracle claim from a Hindu, who may believe that one of a plethora of Gods caused the miracle and vice versa. Meister claims that Hume’s view on miracles has had ‘profound implications for religious believers’ (2008, 397). This is because, according to Meister, many of the religions practised around the world are ‘grounded upon the miraculous’ (ibid).

According to Hume, miracles have not been attested to by educated men. He maintained that miracle claims were made by people from ‘ignorant and barbarous nations’ (cited in Meister 2008, 402). In Lourdes, however, each claim of a miracle is examined by medical professionals over a number of years – surely doctors and other medical professionals are educated enough to examine a miracle claim and say it is a miracle if they cannot explain it (which has happened). In his second argument, Hume uses the drama of a miracle to discredit a claim. However, when coupled with a team of medical professionals’ examinations, the drama and wonder of a miracle counts for nothing when discrediting a miracle because the medical professionals are educated people. Furthermore, it should not matter where the person is from because the miracles have been proven inexplicable by science and by people from another nation and possibly another faith. In his fourth argument, Hume states that miracle claims by different religions cancel each other out. However, if a Christian believes to have received a miracle from God, this should not cancel out a miracle claimed by a Hindu for example, because in Hinduism there is one supreme God (Flood 2009) and other religions similarly point to one God (Hick 1999). It is therefore possible to assume that all miracles could be attributed to one God or divine power. The Lourdes miracles are examples which cast doubt on Hume’s appraisals, but if these are miracles, to which definition of ‘miracle’ do they belong?

If the miracles of Lourdes were to take on Holland’s (1965) definition, then the healings of the three people mentioned above were coincidences – perhaps due to-the medication they might have been taking, or varying conditions the person was in at the time of the healing may have caused a reaction in the body to cure them. However, Swinburne’s (1997) definition – that the laws of nature are
suspended by God – seems to fit in with the nature of Lourdes being a religious place and the seemingly incurable nature of some of the diseases that have been cured after the sick person has visited Lourdes. If the diseases were incurable, as suggested by doctors, but then the disease was cured, the laws of nature (the incurable nature) were suspended. So according to Swinburne’s definition, the miracles which have occurred in Lourdes are actually miracles.

The debate surrounding Lourdes and the authenticity of its miracles will continue as more and more people visit the spring where St. Bernadette saw Mary. People who visit and drink the water may search for a cure to an ailment, whereas some people may simply want to see at first-hand how miraculous Lourdes is and strive to see why the miracles of Lourdes are miraculous. Swinburne, Holland, Tillich and Hume offered varying definitions and views surrounding miracles, but Hume’s argument that miracles do not occur appears flawed, as the miracles of Lourdes are proven by the medical world and seem to fit with the definition given by Swinburne which leads to the answer that the miracles of Lourdes are indeed miraculous.

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