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Why Christian Theology Should Accept that Miracles Occur

In this article I argue that Christian theology, in order to be sufficiently coherent, should claim that miracles, like those described in the New Testament, do occur. I discuss first an argument by Wolfhart Pannenberg that any theory of God must be based on revelation, and suggest an improvement to Pannenberg's line of reasoning. Presupposing that Christian theology must hold that God has revealed himself decisively through Christ, I then discuss whether or not Christian theology can reject that miracles happen. Based on arguments from the discussion of Pannenberg, I argue – against scholars like David Griffin and Arthur Peacocke – that Christian theology should accept that miracles occur in order to be sufficiently coherent. The reason for this is that if miracles do not happen it is more coherent to believe that God is not revealed decisively through Christ, than to believe that he is.

Key words: miracles, revelation, Pannenberg, Griffin, Peacocke.

Introduction

It seems to be generally accepted among participants in the science-theology dialogue that coherence is an important criterion of truth.¹ Many theologians strive to achieve coherence with science in their theology, and it is good that they do. A common problem concerning coherence between theology and science is what to think of miracles.² I define miracles narrowly as events where God at particular times and places in the world introduces new causal chains with local physical effects that break with the regularities of nature.³ Some

1 See e.g. Peacocke, A.R. *Theology for a Scientific Age: Being and Becoming - Natural, Divine and Human*, 2nd edn., London: SCM (1993), pp. 15-17; Ward, K. *Pascal's Fire: Scientific Faith and Religious Understanding*, Oxford: Oneworld (2006), p. 118; Griffin, D.R. *Reenchantment without Supernaturalism: A Process Philosophy of Religion*, Cornell Studies in the Philosophy of Religion, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press (2001), p. 355; and Clayton, P. *The Problem of God in Modern Thought*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans (2000), p. 32.

2 See e.g. Polkinghorne, J.C. *Science and Providence: God's Interaction with the World* Philadelphia, PA: Templeton Foundation Press (2005), chap. 4; Ward, K. *Divine Action: Examining God's Role in an Open and Emergent Universe*, 2nd edn., Philadelphia, PA: Templeton Foundation Press (2007), chap. 10; and Davies, P. *God and the New Physics*, London: Penguin (1990), chap. 14.

3 This definition implies a regularity view of laws of nature as developed by Pannenberg and defended by N.H.Gregersen (see Gregersen, in Pannenberg, W. & Gregersen, N.H. *The Historicity of Nature: Essays on Science and Theology*, West Conshohocken, PA: Templeton Foundation Press (2008), pp. viii-ix; and Gregersen, in Nissen, U. & Niekerk, K. van K. *Lidenskab Og Stringens: Festschrift Til Svend Andersen*, Copenhagen: Anis (2008), pp. 59-60). I presuppose that a great number of the miracles described in the New Testament fall under this definition, although it is recognised that biblical miracles more generally include miracles of timing, such as the east wind that separated the Red Sea (or Sea of Reeds), thereby enabling the Israelites to cross cf. Ex. 14:21. For a defence of why miracles are not inconsistent with natural science, see Ward *op. cit.*, (2), chap. 5; or Swinburne, R. *Miracles*, New York: Macmillan (1989), chap. 8.

argue that Christian theology should not claim that miracles happen, in order to be coherent with science. Process theologian David Griffin is one example, and the Christian biochemist and theologian Arthur Peacocke is another.⁴ Their views will be presented and discussed later in this article.

In addition to being coherent with science, it is also crucial for Christian theology to have a coherent theory of revelation – regarding both how revelation occurs and what the content of revelation is. Many books that seek to combine theology and science in a coherent manner have a chapter on miracles, but not on revelation.⁵ But the explicit or implicit theory of revelation that one holds gives some guidelines as to what it is possible to argue as coherent or not in relation to science. One's theory of revelation is therefore important. For example, a theory of revelation that entails a literal reading of Genesis is not coherent with the theory of evolution. In this article I argue against scholars such as Peacocke and Griffin that a Christian theory of God, in order to be sufficiently coherent, should claim that miracles occur.

In order to show this I first discuss Wolfhart Pannenberg's theory of revelation. Pannenberg argues that a theory of God must be based on revelation authorised by God. He argues that the content of Christian revelation should be reconstructed on the basis of the Bible, and that the reconstruction should be argued as more coherent than alternative understandings. But it is unclear how this reconstruction should be carried out. Are there any limits to this reconstruction, or how radically can the Bible be reinterpreted?

Pannenberg does not answer this very complex question. This article suggests that a minimum requirement is that Christian theology should make it plausible that God is decisively revealed through Christ. In order for such a claim to be plausible it must be defended against alternative theories. A coherent alternative theory is that God did not reveal himself⁶ through Jesus; rather, Jesus was a special human being who many deluded people believed to be the Messiah, and so the stories about him became more and more miraculous as time went by. If you have a theory about Jesus as the revelation of God and measure it against this alternative theory, it becomes clear that at least a literal reading of most parts of the New Testament should be accepted as true. Otherwise it is more coherent to believe that the New Testament authors were deluded people, and so it is not plausible⁷ that God is decisively revealed through Jesus. I will argue that the New Testament loses its trustworthiness as a witness of revelation if all the reports of miracles are regarded as not literally true, for if the authors cannot be trusted regarding these stories, there is no good reason to trust their claim that God revealed himself through Jesus

4 e.g. Griffin, *op. cit.*, (1), p. 137; or Peacocke, A.R. *Paths from Science Towards God: The End of All Our Exploring*, Oxford: Newworld (2001), p. 57.

5 see e.g. Polkinghorne *op. cit.*, (2); Ward *op. cit.*, (2) and Davies *op. cit.*, (2), chap. 14.

6 I refer to God as 'he' for lack of a gender-neutral personal pronoun.

7 When I use the term 'plausible' I mean 'likely to be true because apparently more coherent than alternative understandings'.

either. This means that scholars who want Christian theology to be coherent with natural science should not reject miracles, but rather show how miracles and natural science can be integrated.

The claim that Christian theology should accept that miracles occur will now be argued in the following way. First I present Pannenberg's theory of revelation and his argument that any theory of God should be based on revelation. Then I criticise him for being unclear on the relation between God's self-revelation and the text of the Bible. In the third part I suggest how this lack of clarity can be rectified. Here I argue my own suggestion against an alternative suggestion found in Richard Swinburne's book *Revelation*.⁸ This will lead to an understanding of revelation that I use to argue against the views of Griffin and Peacocke in part four. In part five, I conclude that Christian theology should accept that miracles occur.

Pannenberg's Theory of Revelation

Most scholars in the science-theology dialogue agree that coherence is an important criterion of truth, although the term coherence is not always defined in the same way.⁹ Wolfhart Pannenberg agrees that coherence is important. He argues that systematic theology should discuss whether Christian doctrines are true and suggests that coherence can be used as a criterion of their truth.¹⁰ For his understanding of coherence Pannenberg is indebted to the German philosopher L. B. Puntel and the American philosopher Nicholas Rescher.¹¹ As they understand the term, coherence has three aspects.¹² The first is that of consistency, which means lack of contradiction among the elements of a theory. The second is comprehensiveness, which has to do with the number of elements that are integrated in the theory. The third is cohesiveness, and has to do with

8 Swinburne, R. *Revelation: From Metaphor to Analogy*, 2nd edn., Oxford: Oxford University Press (2007).

9 e.g. Richard Swinburne does not include integration of available data in the definition of coherence (Swinburne, R. *The Coherence of Theism*, rev. edn., *The Clarendon Library of Logic and Philosophy*, Oxford: Clarendon (1993), pp.11-50), while Pannenberg does (as will be shown). David Griffin does not include integration of data in the term coherence, but rather uses the term 'adequacy' for this (Griffin *op. cit.*, (1), p. 355; and Griffin, D.R. *Evil Revisited: Responses and Recon-siderations*, Albany: State University of New York Press (1991), p. 53.

10 Pannenberg, W. *Systematic Theology* 1, 3 vols., vol.1, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans (1991),pp. 21-22.

11 *ibid.*, p. 53.

12 I here present the three aspects that Rescher presented in 1973, see Rescher, N. *The Coherence Theory of Truth*, *Clarendon Library of Logic and Philosophy*, Oxford: Clarendon Press (1973), pp. 31-38, 168-175, repeated in Puntel, L.B. & White, A. *Structure and Being: A Theoretical Framework for a Systematic Philosophy*, University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press (2008), p. 410, although Rescher presents more aspects of coherence in Rescher, N. *Philosophical Reasoning: A Study in the Methodology of Philosophizing*, Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publications (2001), p. 191. The reason is that I find Puntel's connection of coherence with ontology in Puntel & White much better developed than the pragmatic use of coherence found in Rescher *Philosophical Reasoning*.

the totality of relations among the elements of the theory. The theory is more cohesive when there are more connections between the elements and these are tighter, more detailed, more finely grained and more precise. While consistency is an either-or issue, the aspects of comprehensiveness and cohesiveness make it possible to compare consistent theories as more or less coherent.

Coherence is a general criterion of truth, and Pannenberg holds that it is important for systematic theology to be as coherent as possible. He adds, however, that when a theory is about God, something else is also required. When a theory is about God, Pannenberg points out that it is crucial that the theory is based on revelation. He argues that the only thing human beings can know about God is what God has revealed. According to Pannenberg, this is self-evident if God is considered to be incomparably transcendent or the power that determines everything.¹³ But even if God is not considered to be such, Pannenberg finds that it is an implicit or explicit premise in all talk about God or gods, that such knowledge must be based on revelation. He argues that this grounding in revelation gives claims about God a sense of authorisation by God, whereas statements not based on revelation are extremely presumptuous.¹⁴

Pannenberg points out that this does not determine the kind of revelation that God chooses in order to reveal himself. The world could have been such an evident result of God's power and nature that no extra revelation was needed. But Pannenberg's claim is that the evidence from nature and our use of reason only provide some basic clues about God, whereas special revelation is needed to say more about God than the basic descriptions.¹⁵ For Pannenberg, special revelation does not mean that only special people have access to it, because Pannenberg believes that when God acts in history it is open for all to see.¹⁶ Nor does he think that some people were especially inspired by the Holy Spirit to write down an exact message later to appear in the Bible.¹⁷ Special revelation in Pannenberg's theology refers to acts of God in history, as opposed to natural knowledge of God, which is what can be inferred about God from nature or reason alone.¹⁸

At this point I would like to add another reason in support of Pannenberg's claim that a theory of God must be based on special revelation in his sense. As Hume points out in his dialogues concerning natural religion, the evidence of nature does not make it clear that there is only one God as opposed to several gods, or that God is perfect.¹⁹ A great problem with constructing a hypothesis about God based on evidence from nature and reason alone, is that numerous

13 Pannenberg *op. cit.*, (10), p. 189.

14 *ibid.*, p. 194.

15 *ibid.*, pp. 189-190.

16 *ibid.*, p. 189.

17 *ibid.*

18 *ibid.*, p. 243.

19 Hume, D. & Aiken, H.D. *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, New York: Hafner (1948), pp. 37-41(part five).

theories about God match the data equally well, and so there is no good reason to pick one instead of the other. Because we have so little certain knowledge about God, and because of the problem of evil, there are many theories about God that are consistent and pretty much equally comprehensive and equally simple (the degrees of which can also be difficult to decide). God may be an impersonal force that is morally neutral, as in some pantheistic thought; or he may be good but finite in power, as in some process theology; or he may be a deistic amoral God, as was popular during the Enlightenment. God may also be a dualistic principle, as in the theory of Yin and Yang; and so on. I do not mean that the problem is solved by referring to special revelation, since there remain many candidates of revelation and many questions concerning how to interpret them. But at least the scope is narrowed a little if we restrict ourselves to candidates claiming revelation.

So far we have seen that Pannenberg holds that the content of Christian systematic theology should show itself as more coherent than alternative world-views and that it must be based on revelation. How does he understand the process of revelation? Pannenberg argues that there are many manifestations of God in history that are vague and partial, but that they are part of the one self-revelation where it gradually becomes more and more known that God is the one God for all people.²⁰ Decisive in this history is the revelation of God through Jesus. In Jesus, the kingdom of God that will come fully in the end is already present. Many of the things that will not be fully revealed before the end are already present through Jesus: the power of God, resurrection from the dead and justification of those who believe.²¹ The end has been anticipated through Jesus, which makes his revelation final.²²

Summing up Pannenberg's view so far, Pannenberg develops his systematic theology as a theory about the content of the revelation that God has given in history, most importantly through Jesus. And he argues that the next step after developing such a theory about the content of revelation is to argue that it is true by showing that the theory is more coherent than other alternatives. The test of coherence is both a test of internal consistency and cohesiveness, but it is also a test of the coherence between the theory and its implications for the world. For example, if God is claimed to be good and omnipotent, we expect that there should be no evil in the world – and so when there is, that must be explained.

A problem in Pannenberg's account

At this point, however, there is something unclear in Pannenberg's position. What is the relation between his theory of the content of revelation and the

²⁰ Pannenberg *op. cit.*, (10), p. 243.

²¹ *ibid.*, pp. 210, 247.

²² *ibid.*, p. 213.

text of the Bible? Pannenberg's understanding of revelation gives a different degree of authority to the different parts of the Bible. The revelation of God in Jesus is decisive, while different manifestations of God in the Old Testament only partly reveal God. According to Pannenberg, the Old Testament receives authority in so far as it prepares and prophesies about God's revelation in Christ.²³ But how does Pannenberg arrive at such views? How does he get from the text of the Bible to his theory of the content of the revelation of God?

At this point, Pannenberg's position lacks clarity. In 1973, he wrote a book on theology and philosophy of science. Here he formulated some negative criteria for when a hypothesis about the content of Christian theology is *not* satisfactory, namely when:

- 1 it is intended as a hypothesis about the implications²⁴ of Israelite-Christian belief, but cannot be shown to express implications of biblical traditions (even in light of changed experiences);
- 2 it has no connection with reality as a whole, which can be supported by contemporary experience;
- 3 it cannot integrate relevant experience, or does not attempt to integrate it;
- 4 it is less coherent than competing existing hypotheses, and does not improve in comparison with their limitations.²⁵

Points two to four are primarily concerned with coherence. The first point is especially connected to the Bible, but it is not very clear how one shows whether or not a hypothesis expresses 'implications of biblical traditions'. In his systematic theology Pannenberg often supports his own arguments by saying that they are implied in the Bible.²⁶ But 'implication' is a vague term that can be understood in a strict logically deductive way or in a more loosely inductive way and Pannenberg uses the term without defining it. Sometimes he says that systematic theology must 'systematically reconstruct' the historical revelation that it asserts²⁷ but he does not explain in any detail the meaning of the term 'systematic reconstruction'.

The big question then is: Are there any limits to systematic reconstruction? How far can a Christian theologian go in rejecting parts of the Bible, or in reinterpreting them very differently from an immediate interpretation, while arguing that this gives a more coherent understanding? The question is relevant since, for example, process theologian David Griffin has an interpretation of the Bible where he argues that, while it contains some truths, many things are

23 *ibid.*, p. 463.

24 In German Pannenberg here uses the term 'Tragweite', while the English translation uses 'implications'. 'Tragweite' is even less precise than 'implication'.

25 Pannenberg, W. *Theology and the Philosophy of Science*, Philadelphia: Westminster Press (1976), p. 345.

26 Pannenberg *op. cit.*, (10), pp. 195, 257, 292, 395, 397.

27 *ibid.*, pp. 196, 232, 257.

not true, and that a process theological interpretation of the Bible is the most coherent. Others claim, however, that Griffin's position is not worth considering as a Christian position at all.²⁸ The problem is that the Bible is to be reconstructed as coherently as possible and then tested by the criterion of coherence. But what if someone reinterprets everything in the Bible symbolically – or as a fairy tale, or as mostly wrong – and then argues that their reconstruction is very coherent with natural science and a naturalistic world-view? Can such an interpretation be put forward as a serious account of what Christianity is about? How low is it acceptable to score on the first part (a coherent reconstruction of the content of the Bible) in order to score high on the second part (coherence with our current understanding of the world²⁹) while still remaining a candidate seriously to be considered as Christian?

A partial solution to the problem

In this part I will make a suggestion concerning how the problem in Pannenberg's account can at least partly be solved. In order to argue that my suggestion is plausible, I will discuss it in the light of the best alternative answer available. Richard Swinburne has written a book about revelation where he discusses more thoroughly the question that Pannenberg only touches upon.³⁰ I will first present and criticise his answer, then I will present my own suggestion.

Swinburne discusses how to interpret the Bible appropriately, criticising various authors for giving vague answers about 'implications'.³¹ He is sceptical of modern writers who give all kinds of interpretations, and wants a criterion by which to reject implausible interpretations of Christian revelation.³² His starting point is a general principle of interpretation which he describes thus:

The simplest general account of the thinker's principles which entails almost all the sentences (understood in a literal way) purportedly written or uttered by the thinker is an account of his principles which is most probably true.³³

It is a bit unclear what Swinburne means when he says that such an account

28 Griffin says that one of the chief criticisms of process theology is that their theodicy should be ignored in Christian discussion of theodicies since they deny basic Christian premises, and he refers to John Hick for such critique (Griffin, in Davis, S.T. *Encountering Evil: Live Options in Theodicy*, new edn., Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press (2001), p. 137).

29 Of course 'our current understanding of the world' is for many partly influenced by their understanding of the Bible, but it is at least partly independent of the Bible, and so the question makes sense concerning all the other parts of their understanding of the world to the degree that these parts are not influenced by the Bible in the first place.

30 Swinburne *op. cit.*, (8).

31 *ibid.*, pp. 190-200.

32 *ibid.*, p. 200.

33 *ibid.*, p. 193.

is 'most probably true', but from the context it seems plausible that he does not mean that the account says something true about the world, but that it is the best interpretation of what the thinker wanted to convey.

If some sentences remain that are inconsistent with the overall interpretation, they must either be interpreted in a non-literal way, or be explained as inaccuracies by the one(s) who wrote them down.³⁴ Swinburne argues that this way of understanding interpretation leaves much room for reflection and intellectual systematisation. Those who interpret should construct an overall theory that gives the simplest account of the data, including matters that are not explicit. For example, Swinburne claims that Jesus indirectly, mostly by his actions, taught that he was divine, and that he also implied that the Holy Spirit was divine.³⁵

To find out what the Bible 'implies', Swinburne argues that one should give the simplest overall account that integrates most of the data of the Bible literally, but where some elements of the Bible may be interpreted symbolically; or some elements may be left out; or some new elements may be understood as implied in the Bible text. And this is probably quite similar to how Pannenberg envisions 'systematic reconstruction', although Swinburne is more specific. Swinburne gives a quite specific answer on how to move from the text of the Bible to a theory of the content of revelation, and his procedure entails that the reconstruction must lie close to a literal reading of most of the biblical text.

In Swinburne's theory of revelation there is an interesting addition compared to Pannenberg's. Swinburne emphasises the point that Jesus founded a church to ensure correct interpretations of the revelation in the future.³⁶ But which of the many churches today is still the same church as the one that Jesus founded? Swinburne has a long discussion of this, emphasising the criteria of connectedness and continuity with regard to aim and organisation.³⁷ Connectedness has to do with the features of the later society being similar to the original society, while continuity has to do with there being a society at all times, where changes are only limited and gradual.³⁸ Swinburne suggests that the Catholic and Orthodox churches score quite well on both these criteria, while Protestant churches need to emphasise more strongly the criterion of connectedness over continuity in order to argue that it is the same church as the original church founded by Jesus. He does not say of one church that it is the true Church, but notes that the main churches share the main doctrines in common.³⁹ The Trinity, the Incarnation and the Atonement are examples of such

34 *ibid.* Swinburne here explains that when it comes to Jesus he leaves out the possibility that the thinker is inconsistent, presuming that a revelation from God cannot be inconsistent.

35 *ibid.*, p. 195.

36 *ibid.*, pp. 151-154.

37 *ibid.*, pp. 173-218.

38 *ibid.*, p. 174.

39 *ibid.*, pp. 211-214.

common doctrines.⁴⁰ This means, according to Swinburne, that to the extent that we can establish what the Church means, we can establish a minimum requirement of what is to count as the Christian understanding of the content of revelation. If this content can be refuted, Christianity is refuted, because there then is no true Church. But Swinburne does not think that these central doctrines can be refuted.⁴¹

As mentioned by Swinburne, Protestants like Pannenberg place less weight on church continuity and more weight on connectedness in terms of doctrinal content as held by the early Church. Protestants in general are, more than Catholics and Orthodox, open to the possibility that the humans representing the different churches can be in error. Some churches can be close in content to the original church; some can go astray and return; others can forever lose track. Compared with Swinburne, Pannenberg appeals less to the continuing teaching of the Church and more to criteria of truth that the particular churches must use to test the truth of their teaching. But, as we have seen, Pannenberg is unclear on how far a church may go in its reinterpretation of the Bible. Swinburne on the other hand, gives an answer referring to the Church, but is less clear as to who represents the Church.

I wish to argue here for a minimum requirement concerning how to establish the content of Christian revelation. A revelation of God through Jesus can obviously be interpreted in numerous ways, but I suggest as a minimum requirement that the interpretation should make it plausible that Jesus decisively reveals God. By a 'decisive revelation' I mean a revelation that is understood as final compared to other claims of revelation, and a good example would be how Pannenberg understands the revelation of Jesus as final. Since Pannenberg holds that any Christian theory must hold that God has acted through Jesus, this suggestion fits well with the rest of his theology.⁴² Swinburne's suggestion goes further than my suggested minimum requirement, but this minimum requirement is also included in his proposal; Swinburne is interested in the Church's teaching *because* it is an interpretation of God's revelation in Christ.

The term Christian may change its meaning in radical ways in the future, but I suggest that it will only be confusing to retain the name Christian for a religion that gives up the claim that Jesus gives a decisive revelation of God. Muslims and Hindus may believe that Jesus reveals something about God, but it is not a part of Islam or Hinduism that God is *decisively* revealed through Christ. My claim is that this requirement (that a Christian theory should make

40 *ibid.*, p. 206.

41 *ibid.*, p. 288.

42 That is at least how I interpret Pannenberg when he says that, regardless of interpretations, there is a subject matter in the Bible that all interpreters must refer to, and he identifies this common subject matter treated by all the writers of the New Testament as the claim that God has acted through Jesus of Nazareth (Pannenberg *op. cit.*, (10), p. 189).

it plausible that Jesus decisively reveals God) is the minimum requirement that a reconstruction of the content of Bible must fulfil in order to still be Christian. I also think that more elements should be included, but in this article this minimum requirement must suffice.

In order to make an understanding of the content of revelation plausible, one should test whether or not it is more coherent than the best alternative theories in which Jesus is understood as not giving a decisive revelation of God. An example of such a theory could be that God did not reveal himself through Jesus, but rather that Jesus was a special person who many people wrongly believed to be the Messiah, and so the stories about him became more and more miraculous over time.⁴³

In the next section it will be argued that if it is more coherent to believe that Jesus decisively reveals God than to believe this alternative theory, then it becomes clear that at least a literal reading of most parts of the New Testament should be accepted as true. Otherwise it is more coherent to believe that the New Testament authors were deluded people, and that they cannot be trusted in portraying Jesus as giving a decisive revelation of God. If a literal reading of most parts of the New Testament should be accepted as true, however, this also means that it must be true that Jesus was bodily resurrected, since this belief permeates all of the New Testament.⁴⁴ Christian theology should hold so if it wants to make it plausible that God is decisively revealed through Christ.

So far I have argued in favour of Pannenberg's understanding of revelation, slightly modified. The main point of this was to make the case that Christian theology should be based on revelation and tested on coherence. In the rest of the article I shall go on to argue that it then follows that Christian theology should accept that miracles occur. In the following I presuppose as a minimum requirement of Christian theology that it should make it plausible that Jesus decisively reveals God. But one does not need to agree with the precise content of the minimum requirement of Christian theology in order still to be interested in the following question: Does it follow that one should accept that miracles occur if one wants to argue plausibly that God is decisively revealed through Christ? Griffin and Peacocke argue the opposite: one should reject the occurrence of miracles in order to argue plausibly that God is decisively revealed through Christ. This is now discussed.

43 Bart Ehrman defends such a theory in Ehrman, B.D. *Jesus, Interrupted: Revealing the Hidden Contradictions in the Bible (and Why We Don't Know About Them)*, New York: HarperOne (2009), chap. 5.

44 N. T. Wright argues convincingly that this resurrection belief permeates all of the New Testament. See Wright, N.T. *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, London: SPCK (2003), pp. 209-479.

Should Christian theology accept that miracles occur?

I argue in the following that the New Testament loses its trustworthiness as a witness to revelation if most of its content, or crucial parts of its content, are false. This, in turn, would mean that the foundation for believing that Jesus reveals God is also lost. Here the many accounts of miracles are a good example. If the authors cannot be trusted regarding these accounts, there is no reason to trust their claim that God revealed himself through Jesus either – at least not in any decisive way. These accounts are so exceptional, that if they are not true, I find it hard to trust the authors in their less exceptional claims. This would especially apply to the greatest miracle of them all, namely the resurrection. N.T. Wright convincingly argues that the resurrection should be understood as a historical claim of someone returning bodily to life, something which it was believed had never happened before.⁴⁵ If this fundamental claim is not trustworthy, the authors are generally not trustworthy. And if an interpretation of God's revelation through Jesus does not make the Bible trustworthy as a witness of revelation, then the interpretation undermines itself. The reason for this is that if the interpretation is too unrecognisable from the original text, then it does not support the trustworthiness of the interpretation, but rather undermines the trustworthiness of the *basis* for the interpretation, namely that the New Testament does indeed contain witness reports of God's revelation through Jesus.

An example may clarify the point. Imagine that some people you do not know came and told you that something very implausible had happened, the interpretation of which could have great consequences for you. Maybe you would be sceptical and try to check out whether or not what they said was true. If it was impossible to check it directly, how would you proceed in forming an opinion on what they said? If what they said made good sense, and also fitted well with other information you had, then maybe you would believe them. Even if some of the things they said were not quite right or one of the persons seemed less reliable, you could still believe the main message. But if most of what they said was clearly wrong, then you would rather think that they were liars or that they themselves had been fooled – and that this incredible thing had not happened at all. If you had to reconstruct what they said into something unrecognisable in order to believe the incredible event, then you should not believe this new reconstruction to be true, but rather think that they were not trustworthy as witnesses to some incredible event. You would have good reason to think that they were wrong, and that no incredible event had taken place. In like manner in relation to the Bible: the writers tell us that God has revealed himself through Jesus and that Jesus has done many miracles and has been resurrected. If we cannot believe what they say about these miracles, we should not believe what they say about God's revelation through Jesus either. Of course we could accept that some of the stories are false, and that

45 *ibid.*, pp. 32-206.

some of the stories may be poetic ways of making a point. But if none of the many stories of miracles, the resurrection included, are to be taken in their most straightforward sense (namely as miracles in the sense that was defined in the introduction), then I see no reason to take literally the claim that God revealed himself through Jesus.

This means that one should choose as true either option 1: God revealed himself through Jesus + miracles do occur; or option 2: God did not reveal himself through Jesus + miracles do not occur. The choice between 1 and 2 depends on other evidence of miracles and revelation. But one should not choose option 3: God did reveal himself through Jesus + miracles do not occur, since no matter how much other evidence for miracles and revelation one can give (extremely unlikely examples excluded), option 1 or 2 will be more coherent than option 3. A Christian theologian should then choose option 1 to remain a Christian theologian, and not option 3, since option 2 is more coherent. And if option 2 is chosen, the term Christian theologian can no longer plausibly be used, since a minimum requirement of what is meant by the term Christian is the belief that God is decisively revealed through Jesus.

Arthur Peacocke and David Griffin both want to present a Christian theology.⁴⁶ Both also argue that God is decisively revealed through Jesus.⁴⁷ But neither of them accept miracles, partly because they find them incoherent with science.⁴⁸ It seems reasonable to conclude that they then hold that most of the miracles reported in the New Testament did not occur. That would be the case for Griffin, because his theodicy depends on God not having the power to do most of the kinds of miracles that the New Testament reports.⁴⁹ Griffin says that he does not rule out that some of the miracle accounts actually occurred, because he believes in parapsychological phenomena,⁵⁰ but he clearly seems to reject the crucial miracle of a bodily resurrection of Jesus.⁵¹ Peacocke also seems to reject most miracles, since he emphasises that God does not break the order that he has created.⁵² Peacocke does not exclude the possibility that there may have been events that cannot be given a naturalistic explanation, but from the historical record he thinks that 'we may well conclude' that this does not apply to any events.⁵³

In the following, I will discuss arguments against my claim that Christian theology should accept that miracles occur. The first argument is that our understanding of revelation changes over time, and that the time has come to

46 Peacocke *op. cit.*, (1), p. x; Griffin, D.R. *Two Great Truths: A New Synthesis of Scientific Naturalism and Christian Faith*, Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press (2004), p. 58.

47 Peacocke *op. cit.*, (1), pp.300-311; Griffin *op. cit.*, (46), p. 30.

48 Peacocke *op. cit.*, (4), p. 57; Griffin *op. cit.*, (1), p. 137.

49 Griffin *op. cit.*, (1), chap. 6.

50 Griffin *op. cit.*, (46), p. 35.

51 *ibid.*, p. 112.

52 Peacocke *op. cit.*, (4), p. 57.

53 Peacocke *op. cit.*, (1), p. 183.

accept that miracles do not occur. David Griffin argues that Jesus had a message, but he had to express it in the ontology of his day. He argues further that today, the ontology that best expresses the message of Jesus is process philosophy.⁵⁴ And a part of Griffin's translation of the message of Jesus is to give up most of the stories about miracles. Also Swinburne accepts that sometimes a message is conveyed by accepting the presuppositions of the listeners, and so the presuppositions can be rejected while the point of the message remains.⁵⁵ And as seen above, even Pannenberg thinks of revelation as happening through history in a process where God is revealed more and more. Should we not think of miracles as belonging to pre-modern belief, while science has shown that they do not occur today? Most theologians do not read Genesis literally any more, and one could argue that the time has also come to reject the idea that miracles occur.

I agree that both revelation and our understanding of it develop and change over time. Some beliefs have rightly been rejected, such as a literal reading of Genesis. But the question is again how far one can go in reinterpreting the Bible. Can also salvation, judgement, and even the existence of God, be interpreted as symbolic speech referring to life on earth without there actually existing any God or life after death? I would argue that if one goes that far, then it is not plausible to believe that God is decisively revealed through Jesus. But what about miracles – can they be rejected in an otherwise plausible understanding of Jesus as the decisive revelation of God? Can Jesus' moral and spiritual teaching alone do the job, without miracles to support the claim that his message is from God?

Swinburne does not think that Jesus' moral or spiritual teaching is enough to convince plausibly anyone that his message is a revelation from God. Of course the message must be such that it is plausible to believe that this is something God could have wanted to reveal. But, according to Swinburne, that is not enough: God must also put his special signature on the message to show that it really is from God. And what could function as a signature of God? Something that only God can do – namely miracles.⁵⁶

Maybe some of the miracles can be understood as parapsychological phenomena, maybe some can be understood as poetic ways of making a point. But at least there has to be one clearly miraculous event to verify the message, and Swinburne naturally points to the resurrection of Jesus for such verification.⁵⁷ This special miracle authenticates the revelation through Jesus as decisive, so that even if God also reveals himself to our reason or to the church today, such unauthenticated claims of revelation are only plausible to the degree that they are coherent with the message of Jesus in the context of his resurrection.

54 Griffin, D.R. *A Process Christology*, Lanham, MD: University Press of America (1990), p. 143.

55 Swinburne *op. cit.*, (8), p. 27.

56 *ibid.*, pp. 112, 161-162.

57 *ibid.*, p. 162.

The resurrection would not support the coherence of Christian theology unless one could also give other good arguments to make it coherent to believe that the resurrection actually happened. But if such arguments can be given, then the resurrection is one of many different arguments that strengthen each other by increasing the cohesiveness of the whole theory. Swinburne has written a book with arguments to support that the resurrection really happened: *The Resurrection of God Incarnate*.⁵⁸ And if God could raise Jesus from the dead, then the other miracles reported in the New Testament are not impossible either. Rather – as Keith Ward among others has pointed out – the miracles surrounding Jesus fit into a common biblical theme, namely that people chosen by God to reveal a message are surrounded by miracles that function as a sign that God is approving their message.⁵⁹

For both Pannenberg and Swinburne, it is crucial (and convincing to this author) that the resurrection is understood as a miracle that really happened in history.⁶⁰ Griffin rejects a physical understanding of the resurrection. Referring to Gregory Riley for arguments against a physical resurrection, he favours instead a spiritual resurrection.⁶¹ But N.T. Wright shows that Riley's view fails.⁶²

Belief in a physical resurrection leads to other problems. And of course the main reason that Peacocke and Griffin (and many others) have for rejecting miracles, is that they hold that acceptance of miracles leads to inconsistencies in Christian theology. One apparent inconsistency is in relation to science, as stressed by both Griffin and Peacocke.⁶³ Another apparent inconsistency stressed by Griffin is the problem of evil, since a God capable of miracles presumably should make them happen more often and not (apparently) so arbitrarily.⁶⁴

I think that there are good arguments that can show that these apparent inconsistencies are indeed only apparent. Many such arguments can be found in Keith Ward's book *Divine Action*.⁶⁵ But the central argument of this article has been that either miracles should be integrated into Christian theology, or

58 Swinburne, R. *The Resurrection of God Incarnate*, Oxford: Oxford University Press (2003). A summary of the evidence for resurrection can be found in Swinburne *op. cit.*, (8), pp. 162-165.

59 Ward *op. cit.*, (2), pp. 180-182.

60 Swinburne *op. cit.*, (8), p. 162; and Pannenberg, W. *Jesus – God and Man*, London: SCM Press (2002), pp. 55-104.

61 Griffin *op. cit.*, (46), p. 112, cf. Riley, G.J. *Resurrection Reconsidered: Thomas and John in Controversy*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press (1995).

62 Wright *op. cit.*, (44), direct critique against Riley pp. 41-42, 50, 57, 62, 64, 83, 476-477, 525, 536, 552, 677-679.

63 Peacocke *op. cit.*, (4), p. 57; Griffin *op. cit.*, (1), p. 137.

64 Griffin *op. cit.*, (1), p. 222; and Griffin, D.R. *Religion and Scientific Naturalism: Overcoming the Conflicts, Suny Series in Constructive Postmodern Thought*, Albany, NY: State University of New York Press (2000), p. 236.

65 See footnote 2 for bibliographical information.

one should not believe that Jesus decisively reveals God. This conclusion has been argued through a discussion of revelation, and that argument remains the same whether or not the belief in miracles is inconsistent or not. Either it is consistent to believe that miracles like the resurrection can occur and have occurred, and then it is also plausible that Jesus is the decisive revelation of God. Or it is not consistent to believe that miracles occur, but then it is not plausible to believe that God is decisively revealed through Jesus either.

Conclusion

In this article I have argued with Pannenberg that any theory of God should be based on revelation and tested on its coherence. But Pannenberg was criticised for being imprecise on the role of the Bible in establishing the content of the revelation of God. In interaction with the writings of Swinburne, I have suggested as a minimum requirement that a Christian understanding of revelation should make it plausible that God is decisively revealed through Jesus. I then argued that this has the consequence that Christian theology should hold that miracles occur. The reason is that if most of the New Testament is not literally true, then it is more likely that the New Testament was written by deluded authors than that God has chosen to reveal himself decisively through Jesus. This argument was given extra support by Swinburne who argues that miracles function as God's verification of revelation. Counterarguments by David Griffin and Arthur Peacocke were considered, but their arguments do not appear to defeat the central thesis of the article namely, that in order to be sufficiently coherent, a Christian theology that accepts Jesus as the decisive revelation of God should also accept that miracles occur.⁶⁶

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⁶⁶ Thanks are due to Dr Denis Alexander, Professor Jan-Olav Henriksen, John Kaufman, PhD, and some anonymous referees (one in particular, who read the article a couple of times) for very helpful comments on earlier drafts. Needless to say, any remaining errors are still my own.