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Autor: Fuller, Daniel P.
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The Fundamental Presupposition of the Historical Method

A paper read before the Theological Fellowship of the Southwestern Baptist
Theological Seminary, Fort Worth, Texas, on January 12, 1967.

There is considerable agreement among historians, and even among those having a theological interest, that the pursuit of historical knowledge is really justified only when the historian excludes the possibility that *miracles* could have occurred at certain points in history.

1. The Question of Presuppositions.

Rudolf Bultmann has often expressed the following conviction:

The historical method includes the presupposition that history is a unity in the sense of a closed continuum of effects in which individual events are connected by the succession of cause and effect... Even a free decision does not happen without a cause, without a motive; and the task of the historian is to come to know the motives of actions. All decisions and all deeds have their causes and consequences; and the historical method presupposes that it is possible in principle to exhibit these and their connection and thus to understand the whole historical process as a closed unity. This closedness means that the continuum of historical happenings cannot be rent by the interference of supernatural transcendent powers and that therefore there is no 'miracle' in this sense of the word. Such a miracle would be an event whose cause did not lie within history¹.

James Robinson joins Bultmann in this assertion, even though Robinson is more interested than Bultmann in making the findings of the historical method pertinent to faith. He has said, "The possibility of miracles must be excluded from positivistic historiography not because of certain dogmatic presuppositions but because of the demands of the historical method itself"².

Just what are these *demands* which are supposed to make it necessary to exclude the possibility of the supernatural in pursuing the *historical* method?

¹ R. Bultmann, *Exegesis without Presuppositions?: Existence and Faith*, transl. by S. M. Ogden (1961), pp. 291 f.

² J. Robinson, *Kerygma und historischer Jesus* (1960), p. 14 n.

In the book entitled *The Historian's Craft*, written by the late French historian Marc Bloch, we find representative reasoning for why so many historians have felt that they must exclude the possibility of miracles. Bloch cites the example of a certain Marbot, an officer in Napoleon's army, who in his *Memoirs* relates how on the night of May 7, 1809, he crossed the raging torrents of the Danube, then in full flood, to free some French prisoners from the Austrians. But other evidences indicate that the old braggart Marbot was simply acting in character when he penned this portion of the *Memoirs*. For one thing, a petition drawn up by Marbot himself on June 30, 1809, contains no mention of his supposed exploit of the preceding month. There was no conceivable reason why Marbot would have kept silent about such an exploit when he drew up this petition, for to relate all that was in his favor would surely be his desire and would be expected by his superiors. What, then, should the historian do? Should he credit the *Memoirs*, or should he declare that Marbot had simply lost another bout with truth when he penned this incident?

According to Bloch, the fundamental precept which enables the historian to know that Marbot was most surely lying is that "the universe and society possess sufficient uniformity to exclude the possibility of overly pronounced deviations"³. "We have been able to clear our picture of the universe of so many fictitious marvels", he declares, because "we are doubtless primarily indebted to the gradual evolution of the idea of a natural order governed by immutable laws"⁴. As Bloch applies this presupposition of the regularity of the world to the question of whether or not to credit Marbot, he notes that everything is happening with regularity if one understands that Marbot's story of freeing the French is a lie. In writing this tale, Marbot was simply continuing to be the braggart he always was, and the very motive which led him to brag in his *Memoirs*, namely, his desire for approval from others, would also have led him to refrain, when seeking his promotion, from lying before those who would have had an immediate check on the veracity of his tale. In an orderly world, a cause consisting

³ M. Bloch, *The Historian's Craft*, transl. by P. Putnam from *Apologie pour l'histoire, ou métier d'historien* (1954), p. 115.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 135.

of Marbot's being a braggart, would lead to the effects that, on the one hand, he would not lie before those who already knew the truth, and, on the other hand, that he would lie to the readers of his Memoirs who could not take the trouble to check out his story.

The world, however, becomes an exceedingly disorderly place if one tries to insist that Marbot was telling the truth, for then, despite the fact that Marbot is a braggart, he becomes modest at a time when it was fitting and to his interest to tell of his worth. If Marbot is telling the truth, then his behaviour is an overly pronounced deviation. If Marbot's behaviour can deviate to the extent of acting contrary to his motives and circumstances, then we live in a world where there is spontaneity, and where causes do not necessarily lead to commensurate effects. In such a world it would not be possible to test whether the report of what happened was valid. Only in a world where one can feel confident that there are no overly pronounced deviations can one be assured that by following the historical method he gains knowledge of the past.

If Marc Bloch's reasoning is correct, how can the Christian, who believes that Jesus rose from the dead (a confessedly overly pronounced deviation), still be an historian?

Going back to both Bultmann's and Bloch's statements of the basic presupposition on which the historical method operates, we notice that this *presupposition* has *two parts*. First there is the insistence, to use the words of Bultmann, that "individual events are connected by the succession of cause and effect". Second, there is also the insistence that the succession of cause and effect is closed. "This closedness", declares Bultmann, "means that the continuum of historical happenings cannot be rent by the interference of supernatural transcendent powers." One should note how *completely separate* these two parts are. The second assertion, that the world is a closed continuum of causes and effects, is by no means a logically necessary corollary from the first assertion, that for every effect there is an efficient cause. The statement that every effect has an entirely adequate cause says nothing at all about whether the source of this cause is transcendent or immanent. Therefore the second assertion, which denies that effects can have a transcendent cause, stands wholly by itself and could be discarded without modifying the first statement in any way. Thus if it could be shown that the gaining of historical and scientific

information depends only on the first assertion, that every effect must have sufficient cause, then it would still be possible for a Christian to be an historian and a scientist⁵.

Marc Bloch, we remember, discredited Marbot's story on the basis of the presupposition that "overly pronounced deviations do not occur in nature or society". But an analysis of the Marbot problem reveals that all one needs to presuppose in order to conclude that Marbot was lying is that every effect must have a sufficient prior cause. The truthfulness of Marbot's story is to be rejected, because if he were telling the truth, the effect, consisting of his penning the incident in his *Memoirs*, could not lie in a cause that would also have kept him quiet about the story when coming up for promotion. But if he were telling a lie, then the motive which led him to write the incident in his *Memoirs* would also have kept him quiet before his superiors. The historian can therefore accept the hypothesis that Marbot was lying since this hypothesis maintains the bond between cause and effect. Indeed, then, the historical method does depend very heavily on the hypothesis that effects are connected to causes by an indissoluble bond. Does it also depend on closing the door to all thought of miracle?

Perhaps the best way to answer this question is to imagine how historical reasoning would fare if it were possible that through a miracle the braggart Marbot became so humble that when he was up for promotion he demurred from mentioning anything about this remarkable exploit. Then indeed there would be sufficient cause to explain why he remained silent before his superiors. But, it should be pointed out, there would still be no cause for telling of his exploit in his *Memoirs*. If, through a miracle, he became so humble as not to tell of his exploit before his superiors, then it would be difficult to explain why he then turned around and wrote his *Memoirs*. But since he did write his *Memoirs*, the historian could still exclude the possibility of his having been made

⁵ It seems that the only presupposition to which the scientific method must adhere is the indissoluble bond between cause and effect. A. Pap, *Has Science Metaphysical Presupposition?:* Herbert Feigl and Mary Brodbeck (eds.), *Readings in the Philosophy of Science* (1953), p. 30: "A firm belief is generated in the experimental scientist's mind that the production of any natural phenomenon depends on the value of a surveyable finite number of causes."

humble by a miracle, simply by holding to the indissoluble bond between cause and effect. Since a miracle is not sufficient to account for both his silence before his superiors and his writing the Memoirs, the possibility of a miracle is to be excluded.

But it may be objected that we would not know whether Marbot was lying or not if it were possible that two miracles had occurred: one to make him humble before he came up for promotion and another to change him back to being a braggart before he penned his Memoirs. To be sure, if such a thing were to have happened, then it would not be possible to know whether merely natural forces were operating and Marbot was lying, or whether these two miracles had occurred so that Marbot was telling the truth. If for every event which can be explained as stemming from natural causes there is just as much possibility that it stemmed from a supernatural cause, then indeed, all possibility of gaining historical and scientific knowledge vanishes. Does this mean, then, that to keep the historical method intact, we must go along with Bultmann and shut the door of our thinking to the possibility of miracles?

2. Shutting the Door on Miracles?

It would seem that the best way to maintain the validity of the knowing process is not to close the door in our thinking to any possibility of miracles, but simply to say that where there is knowledge of natural causes which in themselves are perfectly adequate to explain a phenomenon, we should understand this phenomenon as stemming from these causes and not from a miracle. Only when all the immanent causes antecedent to an effect would, of themselves, produce an effect that is opposite to that which occurred should we assign a miracle as the cause. Thus we would exclude the possibility that Marbot was telling the truth because two miracles had happened and simply say that the causes already existent are sufficient to explain what happened, and therefore that he was lying.

The Marbot incident, therefore, provides an instance where historical reasoning can conclude that no miracle occurred.

But the *case of Paul* spearheading the Gentile mission provides an instance where, it would seem, historical reasoning must con-

clude that a miracle occurred. Before his conversion, Paul was more zealous for his religion than any other Jew (Gal. 1:13–14). He was very proud of his rigid adherence to the details of the Mosaic law, and thus he was totally opposed to any thought of proffering God's covenant blessings to the Gentiles unless they were willing to submit to circumcision and the dietary laws. There was nothing in Paul that would encourage him to preach a Gospel of grace to the Gentiles. So opposed was he to anything like this that he gave himself wholly to the task of persecuting the Christian Church, because it seemed to him that their emphasis that salvation for the Jew could come only by repentance and faith in Christ tended to divest the Jewish distinctives of any basis on which one could boast before God. Paul makes it clear that before his Damascus Road experience he was in no wise tending gradually toward the Christian point of view; rather, according to Gal. 1:14, he was advancing (*proékopton* – imperfect tense) in Judaism. All of Paul's motivation before his conversion was so taken up with Judaism that, as Heinrich Schlier has said:

Paul's pre-Christian past is itself a guarantee for the fact that there can be no talk of any kind of a reception of the Gospel (even an unconscious receptiveness on his part to the Gospel) with its principle of grace from any Christian spokesman. His inner bent of mind and his way of acting were wholly incompatible with the Christian message⁶.

To catch a glimpse of how contrary Paul's Gentile mission was to Jewish thinking, we have only to remember how, later on, the Jews tried to kill him when he had become very successful in leading this mission (Acts 22–26). How then did Paul ever come to lead this mission when he was originally like the Jews in wanting to kill anyone preaching the Gospel of grace?

Since we look in vain for any causes in Paul to explain how he who had once persecuted the Church could now preach the Gospel of grace to the Gentiles, we are forced to understand that a miracle took place in which, as Paul relates, the risen Jesus appeared to him on the Damascus Road and commissioned him to head up this mission. Not to be willing to go along with Paul's explanation for this change is to run the risk of allowing an effect to exist (the Gentile mission) without a commensurate cause to explain it, and

⁶ H. Schlier, *Der Brief an die Galater* (1962), p. 52.

this would nullify the very presupposition which is so essential for gaining all scientific and historical knowledge. To avoid doing this, then, one credits the miracle of the appearance of the risen Jesus to Paul on the Damascus Road to explain how he could spearhead the Gentile mission⁷.

Hence it is argued that to maintain the validity of the pursuit of historical knowledge there is no need to close the door of our thinking to any possibility of miracles, but only to *keep it closed* so long as there are perfectly adequate *natural causes* to explain a phenomenon. But *when these fail*, then we must *open the door* to the possibility of a miracle, or else destroy all possibility of knowing anything. All that is necessary for keeping the historical method intact is the indissoluble bond between cause and effect. This bond is honored both by closing the door to the possibility of a miracle so long as there are sufficient immanent causes to explain an effect, and then by opening the door when there are no such causes.

3. *The Integrity of the Historical Method.*

The lengths to which David Hume was willing to go in *denying* that *miracles* can occur is an illustration of how such an insistence threatens to *destroy* the bond between *cause* and *effect* and thus the very cornerstone of the historical method. Hume declared that “no testimony for any kind of miracle has ever amounted to a probability, much less to a proof”⁸. So unwilling was he to admit the possibility of miracles that he said that if Queen Elizabeth I appeared in public a month after she had died and claimed that she had risen from the dead, he would still insist that no miracle had taken place. He would deny that she rose from the dead even though he would have to say that the good queen, for no conceivable motive, had deliberately deceived her people in allowing them to believe that she had died, and even though he would have to credit the virtual impossibility that all the chamberlains, courtiers, and ladies in waiting that surrounded her would not have let the secret out somehow.

⁷ For a more detailed presentation of this argument, see my *Easter Faith and History* (1965), chaps. 7 and 8.

⁸ D. Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (ed. LaSalle, Ill.: Open Court, 1949), pp. 133 f.

“All this might astonish me”, declared Hume, “but I would still reply, that the knavery and folly of men are such common phenomena, that I should rather believe the most extraordinary events to arise from their concurrence, than to admit of so signal a violation of the laws of nature” [as a resurrection from the dead]⁹.

To go to such lengths to keep the door shut against the possibility of miracles virtually succeeds in saying that effects can occur without prior causes. According to Hume, men in their knavery and folly are constantly able to act so contrary to any conceivable motive that there is no limit, apparently, to what any given person can do in any given situation, and as a result, “the most extraordinary events” are to be credited before one agrees that a miracle has happened. Thus to apply what Hume said to Marbot’s *Memoirs*, it would have been perfectly possible for Marbot to have done this remarkable exploit and yet have remained silent about it when coming up for promotion, for his “knavery and folly” would have been sufficient to keep him quiet before his superiors and yet allow him to pen his memoirs. If Hume is right, then Marbot, or anyone else for that matter, can act in contempt of motives and circumstances. But to grant this is to give up all possibility of gaining historical knowledge.

Therefore, we conclude that shutting the door on the possibility of miracles does not safeguard but rather jeopardizes the *integrity* of the historical method. An insistence that miracles cannot happen can force one to understand effects as happening spontaneously without prior causes. This, it would seem, would make the historical method completely unworkable.

The only way, then, to safeguard the pursuit of knowledge is to honor the indissoluble bond between cause and effect by shutting the door to miracles so long as natural causes for an effect exist, and then opening it when they do not exist. On this basis a Christian can believe that Jesus rose from the dead – and still be an historian or a scientist.

While the chief purpose of this paper is to take issue with those who feel they must deny miracles in order to maintain the integrity of the historical method, it should be pointed out that the paper also takes issue with that view of history in which miracles happen as a result of the fact that the personal God is at the center of existence of this world. According to this

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 135.

view, the most essential aspect of this world (whether nature or history) is the *God who acts in freedom* and is therefore not at all bound to the rigorous law of cause and effect. Two leading representatives of this view would be H. Richard Niebuhr and Wolfhart Pannenberg¹⁰. Both of these men emphasize that the essential thing about history is its *contingency* rather than the connection by which every effect is related to a prior cause. My objection against this view of history is that if the phenomena within the world itself can emerge of themselves, as it were, because the freely acting God informs all of history, then one could never be sure that any phenomenon actually occurring in history would produce its commensurate effect upon its surroundings. These surroundings might at that given moment act contingently instead of in accord with cause and effect, and if this is indeed the way the world operates one can never test a claimed cause by reference to relevant effects. It would seem, then, that with this view of history all *knowledge* would become *impossible*. Even the most simple knowledge, such as that one faces a tree because he sees it through his eyes, would become problematical. For how could one be sure that the cause-effect sequence by which the nerve impulses from the retina to the brain were acting according to cause-effect if the chief thing about the world (including one's optic nerve) is contingency?

In the system which I am advancing the world is so constructed that every *cause* (whether immanent or transcendent) *must* produce a commensurate *effect* in the world, because the world itself does not behave contingently but only in accordance with the law of cause and effect.

Daniel P. Fuller, Pasadena, California

¹⁰ H. R. Niebuhr, *Resurrection and Historical Reason* (1957); W. Pannenberg, *Heilsgeschehen und Geschichte: Kerygma und Dogma* 5 (1959), pp. 218–237, 259–288; id., *Dogmatische Thesen zur Lehre von der Offenbarung: Offenbarung als Geschichte* (1963), pp. 91–114.