

Time for divine intervention

SIR—R.J. Berry¹ reminds us that he and thirteen other professors of science in British universities “gladly accept the virgin birth, the Gospel miracles and the resurrection of Christ as historical events”. He insists, however, that our standards of evidence in approaching apparent miracles should be “just as rigorous” as those we employ for any scientific observation. It is therefore appropriate to note that the virgin birth is documented within the New Testament only in the two nativity stories of Matthew and Luke, and that theologians have long admitted that each is full of its own difficulties, as well as being incompatible with the other. Kümmel says in his standard handbook that they “contradict each other in essential features”².

On the Catholic side, R.E. Brown’s full-scale study admits that it is “quite impossible” to harmonize them, and that we have “no reliable information about the source of either”³. Mark, the earliest evangelist, introduces Jesus as an adult and records nothing of his early life. Paul, writing still earlier, says that Jesus was “born of a woman” (Galatians 4:4) and this does not suggest acquaintance with the doctrine. Even so conservative a scholar as C.H. Dodd attempted only a half-hearted defence, calling the two infancy narratives a “structure of imagery” with “a basis in fact somewhere behind it all”⁴.

As to the resurrection, the gospel narratives contradict each other in essentials, as when one evangelist makes Jesus’s appearances to his disciples occur exclusively in Galilee, while another sites them exclusively 80 miles away at Jerusalem. Paul knows nothing of the place of crucifixion, let alone of resurrection. Even the nature of the post-resurrection appearances is not the same in the various accounts. Did Jesus return for a time to normal life with his disciples, or appear only from on high with a body of heavenly radiance? The theologian D.F. Strauss was perfectly justified in saying of the resurrection: “Rarely has an incredible fact been worse attested, and never has a badly attested one been intrinsically less credible”⁵. Dodd allowed that “the historian may properly suspend judgement” as to whether “Jesus had in some way left his tomb”⁶. Such concessions have come to be made only because vindicating the actuality of the event on the basis of the New Testament evidence has proved a well-nigh hopeless task.

That such divergent accounts could be written by authors who had already come to believe (for reasons that need to be investigated) that Jesus was virgin-born and rose from the dead is perfectly plausible: that their narratives provide any basis for such belief is not. The events alleged in these stories did not form the basis of the

faith, but the stories resulted from faith. One suspects that the professors of science who accept the miracles recorded in these and other gospel stories are less well acquainted with the inadequacy of the documentary evidence than are many of their theological colleagues.

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1. *Nature* 322, 321 (1986).
2. Kümmel, W.G. *Introduction to the New Testament* (English translation) 43 (SCM, London, 1975).
3. Brown, R.E. *The Birth of the Messiah* 7 & 497 (London, 1977).
4. Dodd, C.H. *The Founder of Christianity*, 31 (Collins, London, 1971).
5. Strauss, D.F. *Der alte und der neue Glaube*, 72 (Leipzig, 1872).
6. Dodd, C.H. *The Founder of Christianity*, 166–167 (Collins, London, 1971).

SIR—It is hard to disagree with R.J. Berry’s discussion of the difficulties inherent in the scientific verification or repudiation of “miracles”¹, which by their unique nature appear necessarily opaque to the scientific method. Matters of faith aside, even the personal experience of a miraculous event would not meet the standards of scientific publication. It is also difficult to disagree with his comment that “science has limits”, as modern philosophers opposed to the demythicization of previous cultures have suggested^{2,3}.

Our success as scientists does not compel the belief that science is sufficient to encompass all possible aspects of life, since the scientific method, powerful as it is, is not supplied to us *a priori* (in which case it would be a “miracle” itself). Certainly such a relativistic attitude need not detract from our ability to perform scientific work.

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1. Berry, R.J. *Nature* 322, 321 (1986).
2. Hubner, K. *Critique of Scientific Reason* (University of Chicago Press, 1983).
3. Eliade, M. *Ordeal by Labyrinth* (University of Chicago Press, 1982).

SIR—On the subject of My Divine Essence, Character, Attributes, Inclinations, Motives, Philosophy, Politics and *modus operandi*, especially as regards what is vulgarly referred to as *miracles*, speculations about which have recently been appearing in this magazine, and even more especially as regards My hypothesized role in Universe construction where, so it has been alleged, I, in the form of a bipedal primate outwardly resembling an elderly and bearded male *Homo sapiens sapiens*, created the Universe for the amusement and edification of men, I should like to state:

(1) I am not a very good Member of the Church of England. (2) When I come to think of it, I am not even a bad Member of the Church of England. (3) When I really pause to consider the matter, I fear (if that is the word) I am not even a Christian, having been around an eternity before that particular creed was organized, and consequently, am supremely indifferent to its beliefs, dogmas and convictions.

I am, therefore, rather inclined to take a dim view of *all* people of whatever persuasion voicing opinions on Me, this for the simple reason that, as I am Ineffable and exist beyond all human comprehension in no particular spatio-temporal relation to the physical cosmos, *all* opinions about Me are meaningless, when not actually insulting, and, what is worse, tiresomely predictable, especially to One Who knows all things, reflecting as they do only the outlooks and attitudes of these, My unsolicited and intellectually and imaginatively limited interpreters who, if ever they *really* thought about Me, would be more inclined to keep silent.

You will understand that, while I am not in the habit of presenting My views on theology in the correspondence columns of periodicals (except as occasionally in the past to *The Times*), I am taking this opportunity to do so because, though as is well attested, My Patience is infinite, It is not *that* infinite. Nor, may I remind your contributors, does being Omniscient and Omnipotent of necessity compel One to be All-Benevolent.

I in parting, hope that this correspondence can now be closed. GOD

(As revealed to Ralph Estling)

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• God’s will be done; this correspondence is now closed. Editor, *Nature*.

Student loans

SIR—In response to your leading article entitled “Social security for students” (*Nature* 321, 797; 1986), I would remind you of a scheme once proposed for the United States by the late Professor Jerrold R. Zacharias: that students receive adequate maintenance grants from the central government against a lifelong repayment scheme in the form of a surtax upon their annual income tax. Those who are financially successful would eventually reimburse more (or even much more) than they receive; those who earn less (including ministers, teachers, university lecturers and others in socially valuable but impecunious professions) would be automatically forgiven a part of their grants.

In equilibrium, the surtax should amply finance current grants; the major obstacle is how to finance the starting transient.

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