Presidential Address
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# THE PROLIFERATION OF MIRACLES

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In *The Brothers Karamazov*, completed only months before his death, Dostoevsky gives a detailed portrayal of Russian Orthodox believers who appear committed to miracles of the kind the average nineteenth-century Protestant and Catholic would have regarded as ridiculous. Dostoevsky's passages effectively raise serious questions about all miracles. In the novel, the leading example of Christian piety, Father Zosima, is regarded as spreading goodness more by love than by miracles. His healing miracles do not come off even in the story as clear-cut miracles, and the narrator, apparently an Orthodox believer, says that miracles do not generate faith. Rather, faith generates miracles. This comment would not sound strange coming from the lips of the skeptical Ivan Karamazov. It does sound strange, however, coming from the Orthodox narrator.

Because of censorship in Russia, we cannot be sure what Dostoevsky's real beliefs were about miracles. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, censorship of various forms and degrees cast a long shadow across Russia and much of Europe. In 1799 the German philosopher Johann Fichte was fired from his teaching position at the University of Jena because several Lutheran theologians thought his views led to atheism. If Dostoevsky in Russia had strong doubts about the very possibility of miracles, he might have taken a serious political and legal risk had he expressed such doubts straightforwardly in his published writings. In *Dostoevsky Reminiscences*, his wife Anna tells of his handing her his thick packets of closely written, large-sized paper and asking her to burn them. They included drafts of his great novel *The Idiot* and the shorter work *The Eternal Husband*. She reluctantly also burned part of *The Possessed*. Dostoevsky believed that he would be searched at the Russian border as Anna and he returned from their long stay in Germany. All his papers would have been confiscated. By carrying only a comparatively few pages instead of a suitcase full of manuscripts, Anna succeeded in preserving valuable notes.[1]

At the age of 27, Dostoevsky had been arrested for attending a literary group that the Tsar's governmental agents had labeled as conspirators. Despite having already made a reputation for himself as a significant writer, he was imprisoned for ten years in Siberia and prevented from returning

to St. Petersburg. Before sending him to prison, the Tsar arranged to stage a mock execution, leading the young Dostoevsky to think he would soon suffer execution. For the rest of his life, the secret police followed him, read his mail, and required him to submit all his works to the censor's eye before publication. I suggest that the mock execution and subsequent imprisonment in Siberia so influenced Dostoevsky's manner of writing that it is difficult if not impossible to be certain as to what his personal views were. In March 1854, when he was 33, he wrote the following to the wife of a fellow prisoner: "I am a child of this century, a child of doubt and disbelief, I have always been and shall ever be (that I know), until they close the lid of my coffin."[2]

The narrator of *The Brothers Karamazov* contends that for a realist like Alyosha Karamazov (Father Zosima's protégé), faith gave birth to miracles. This appears to be close to William James' "Will to Believe." But what does that mean with regard to specific miracles? According to Dostoevsky's narrator in *The Brothers Karamazov*, Thomas in the Gospel of John wanted to believe or perhaps already believed and, therefore, wished to touch the risen Christ to confirm his faith (Bk. 1, ch. 5, 32).[3] Dostoevsky's polyphonic technique in composing his novel allows him to confuse or even mislead his readers regarding his own views. Furthermore, his polyphonic technique is not only his way of writing but also his way of thinking. We can catch Dostoevsky debating creatively in his own mind about miracles. The graphic scenes regarding the premature decay of Elder Zosima's corpse, and its noxious odor, are steeped in ambivalence about the continuation of miracles. This was for Dostoevsky a multi-layered crisis. Did the Christ present in the Orthodox Church really work miracles? If he was not working contemporary miracles, had he ever been a miracle worker? Strauss, Hegel, Renan, and others of the nineteenth century had already denied that he had worked real miracles. In *The Brothers Karamazov*, the discussions about the sweet odor and glowing face of the previous monk's corpse serve also to cast the whole notion of miracles under suspicion. The odor of putrefaction rising from Zosima's corpse generates considerable gloating by some of the monks who take Zosima's hasty decay as a negative miracle, as a "deliberate sign from God" that Zosima was *not* a holy man after all. Envy both inside and outside the monastery spreads quickly because Zosima "attracted many people, more through love than through miracles" (7, 1: 416-419).

At the heart of this paper is the thesis that Dostoevsky's treatment of miracles in his greatest novel is more profoundly telling against miracles than is David Hume's. Examining miracles as a general category tends to

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generate equivocation and elusiveness, whereas focusing on specific miracle claims proves more fruitful. The narrator of *The Brothers Karamazov* notes that the youngest brother Alyosha believed not only in the Elder's power to work miracles, but also that a coffin flew out of the church. By making it clear that Alyosha's expectation of miracles to follow upon Zosima's death was falsified, the narrator raises the question of whether Zosima's healings were really a supernatural cure "or merely a natural remission" (1, 5: 37).

There can be little doubt that Dostoevsky was personally troubled about the miracle question. The issue of the color of the bones of dead holy men appears in a strange context, to say the least. One of the monks, Father Yosif, contends that the Orthodox communities regard the color of the bones rather than the condition of the flesh itself to be a better test of the rightness and righteousness of the deceased hallowed person. Yellow bones (the color of wax) rather than black bones are supposed to indicate that the Lord has vindicated the deceased in glory (7, 1: 418). Of course, this raises graphically the whole question of the criteria for miracles.

Guignon rightly contends that as a novelist, Dostoevsky entered the worldview of the nihilists to see things from their point of view and, by carrying their fundamental assumptions to their inevitable conclusions, exposed some of their incoherencies.[4] I contend that Dostoevsky effectively used this same technique of *internal criticism* to show also that the Orthodox faith harbored serious problems about both the existence and function of miracles. G. A. Wells says,

> For centuries, Christianity had been deluged with all sorts of putative miracles and relics. About 1200 [CE] Constantinople was so crammed with relics that one may speak of a veritable industry with its own factories. Blinzler (a Catholic New Testament scholar) lists, as examples: letters in Jesus' own hand, the gold brought to the baby Jesus by the wise men, the twelve baskets of bread collected after the miraculous feeding of 5000, the throne of David, the trumpets of Jericho, and the axe with which Noah built the ark, and so on.[5]

William J. Leatherbarrow notes that in Dostoevsky's novels, voices hostile to his own ideology enjoy "the freedom to ensnare and subvert *themselves* through their own inner dialogue, inconsistencies, ambiguities, false notes, and paradoxes."[6] This tactic of letting the voices subvert themselves is precisely the tactic that Dostoevsky employs in dealing with the miracle component of Orthodoxy. As a polyphonic novelist, he does not spare even himself in exposing severe difficulties inside Orthodox Christianity.

## Specific Miracles

Let us consider specifically the reputed resurrection of Jesus, one of the great miracles of historic Christianity. According to the Gospel of John, Thomas could touch Jesus' hand presumably to feel the nail print (20:27). It would seem to be a body of flesh and muscle. And since Jesus was standing, presumably he would have had bones behind his skin. Yet, the Gospel of John pictures Jesus as walking through a closed door (20:19). The first problem here is not so much belief or disbelief as meaning. Did both the author and his first audience understand this body to be a real body? Let's get more specific. If it possessed hands and feet, did it possess also a liver and a bladder? Presumably it had something that could be grasped since Jesus tells Mary not to cling to him because he had not yet ascended to his Heavenly Father (20:17). So, if this body has some external members, does it have lungs? Are they sufficient to carry Jesus miraculously through the atmosphere en route to heaven? (Here the principle *One-miracle-requires-many-supportive-miracles* comes into play.) In the New Testament, heaven is up there, or at least out there, among or beyond the stars. How many other miracles are required to sustain this one?

The resurrected Jesus is assumed also to have had also lips, eyes, tongue, and other members of the body. But did he have blood? According to Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:50, "flesh and blood (*sarx kai haima*) cannot inherit the kingdom of God." So, can this body of muscle and bone be void of flesh and blood? If so, is it a mobile, talking hologram?

According to Luke 24:41-42, the resurrected Jesus ate broiled fish to demonstrate that he was not a ghost. Presumably a ghost would lack certain crucial bodily ingredients. Ghosts nevertheless were believed to have the capacity to talk and to enjoy some measure of consciousness. So, assuming that the fish that Luke's Jesus ate was real food, did it digest in Jesus' stomach? If so, did the body have the juices to make digestion possible? Or was yet another miracle required? Was the resurrected body capable of indigestion if it ate spoiled fish? According to the Gospel of John, this same body passed through a wall or closed door (20:19), presumably taking the undigested fish with it.

## Two Apostles Who Failed to Recognize Jesus

One of the most puzzling stories about the resurrected Jesus can be found in Luke 24:13-32. Although two apostles on the road to Emmaus meet the resurrected Jesus and converse and dine with him, they do not recognize him. This is a strange little story. Did its author mean to suggest that despite having only recently been two of Jesus' followers, they neither recognized his body with their eyes nor recognized his voice with their ears? If he did not look like Jesus or sound like him, how could they be sure he was not someone else? Had Jesus gone through a radical face-lift, the story might at least have some internal plausibility. But according to Matthew 28:9, two women, each named Mary, recognized him instantly and worshipped him, holding him by the feet. (On the other hand, according to John 20:14–16, Mary of Magdala does not recognize him at first but thinks she is talking with the gardener.) Of course, Luke had a point to make, namely, that those two Emmaus apostles, one of them named Cleopas, were so "foolish" and "slow of heart" that they could not recognize him (24:25). They would have had to be also pretty dull mentally.

Luke wants to impress on his readers that Jesus' resurrected body was flesh and bones (24:39). The Greek word is *sarks*, not *soma*. "I am myself. Feel me and see. A ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have" (24:39). This, of course, raises the question of Jesus' blood and urine. If samples of each could have been taken prior to the reputed crucifixion, would the post-resurrection samples of blood and urine have matched the pre-resurrection samples biochemically? In the *Iliad* (5.331-51), the Greeks had Gods who, being without mortal blood (*anaimones*) (*haima*), possess a different humor (*ikhor*). Since the fluid passing so copiously through the veins of the Gods was produced by what they ate, the Greek Gods had their special diet, namely, ambrosia.[7] It is noteworthy that the Gospel of Luke in particular emphasizes Jesus' flesh and bones, although the author also has Jesus suddenly disappearing from the Emmaus apostles' sight after he broke bread at their table and handed it to them (24:30-31). A similar disappearance might be affirmed in Luke 4:30, but the passage can be interpreted differently.

The Gospel of John tells the story of Mary of Magdala who, upon eventually recognizing the resurrected Jesus, apparently grabs his feet or is about to. "Do not hold on to me," Jesus says, "for I have not yet returned to the Father" (20:16-17). After that, Jesus made a quick trip to the Heavenly Father and then returned to perform the miraculous sign of appearing to the disciples who were behind closed, locked doors (20:19, 30).

## One Miracle Usually Requires Others

As is often the case, to support one miracle, others have to be brought in as support. Indeed, miracles proliferate with surprising quickness. According to Acts 7 (possibly written also by the author of the Gospel of Luke), Stephen, the deacon, was on the verge of being denounced or attacked because of a long, religiously incorrect sermon he had just delivered. "Being full of the Holy Spirit, [Stephen] looked up to heaven and saw (*eiden*) God's glory, and Jesus standing at God's right hand. Look,[8] I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at God's right hand" (7:55-56).

That claim was enough to provoke his Jerusalem audience to stone him to death. This interesting story raises some crucial questions. Did Luke mean to imply that he, Luke, actually believed Stephen saw heaven open literally and the Son of Man standing literally at God's literal right hand? Or was he merely reporting, or at least telling a story, about a man named Stephen who only *thought* he was looking at Jesus (and possibly God) in heaven? In this putative account, is Stephen's "seeing" the resurrected Jesus the same kind of "seeing" as those reported in the Gospel of Luke? According to Acts 10, while Peter was hungry and waiting for the meal to be prepared, he fell into a trance and "saw" heaven open. From it descended a large sheet (or perhaps a tablecloth) containing all kinds of four-footed animals as well as reptiles and birds. A voice then told him to get up, kill, and eat (10:9-13).

Now, did Luke mean to suggest that Stephen, too, had fallen into a trance or perhaps hallucinated, thinking he saw heaven open and Jesus standing at God's right hand? According to Acts 16:9-10, Paul during the night had a "vision" of a Macedonian begging him to come to Macedonia. The question naturally emerges: did Luke make any distinctions between visions, actual public appearances of someone, dreams, hallucinations, and trances? Can the words for "see" be used in all these cases? If so, how do they functionally differ? Of course, we are faced with Thomas Hobbes' question: What is the difference between saying God spoke to someone in a dream and saying he dreamed God spoke to him?[9]

According to Acts 16:10, "[a]fter Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them." This is truly a revealing passage. It is an ordinary dream that is *interpreted* to be a divine revelation or communication. Furthermore, only one person had the dream, but *more than one* interpreted it to be a divine communication with specific instructions. Moreover, we the readers must make our interpretations of what actually happened or did not happen.

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But our interpretations depend partly on Luke's interpretation of what he believed did or did not happen. Who told him about Paul's vision? Was it a secondhand report? Firsthand? Fourth-hand? Did he believe it? Or was he writing with a specific agenda that gave him a storyteller's license?

Returning to Stephen's experience, what do we make of Stephen's inviting his audience to see what he saw? According to Acts 7:56, he says, "Look (or behold). I see the heavens open and the Son of Man . . . ." Ordinarily, this expression would be an invitation for others to observe what the speaker is observing. So was Luke implying that Stephen believed that if others around him had looked up, they too would have seen the Son of Man at God's right hand? Did Luke himself think that if others had looked up, they would have seen the Son of Man? In short, for Luke, was the Son of Man's standing at God's right hand publicly observable at the time? Or was it a case of "faces in the clouds?"[10] Although Luke claims that Saul (Paul) was present at Stephen's stoning, Paul makes no mention of it in any of his surviving letters.

## Controversy among Evangelicals

In a controversy over the resurrection of Jesus, evangelical philosopher Norman Geisler in a February 1988 letter to New Testament scholar and fellow evangelical Murray J. Harris writes, "To this day you have not given a clear and unequivocal answer to a straightforward clearly understandable question." Harris in his book *From Grave to Glory* insists that he did answer unequivocally when he said he believed in "the personal and bodily resurrection of Jesus . . . 'He rose bodily from the dead.'"[11]

Geisler was so committed "to the literal, physical resurrection"[12] that he asked the question of whether Jesus' resurrected body was the same physical body that was buried. Harris could not give an unqualified "Yes" because he believed the resurrected body "clearly had properties that were not true of a mortal, physical body."[13] Following Paul the Apostle, Harris adds the word "spiritual," hence, "spiritual body." This is where the controversy between Geisler and Harris arose, in part at least. A spiritual body, says Harris, "does not share in 'flesh and blood.'"[14] So, in what respects is a body a body if it does not share in flesh and blood? Geisler's son-in-law Samuel Kostreva III offered what he hoped would be a clarifying resolution at the 104th Annual Conference of the Evangelical Free Church of America in 1988. "Be it resolved: that we affirm Article III, C and L of the Articles of Incorporation of the Evangelical Free Church of America, where it states that 'He rose

bodily from the dead' and 'We believe in the bodily resurrection of the dead,' to *exclude* all views that maintain that the resurrection body is *by nature immaterial and non-physical*."[15]

Murray Harris, however, wants to emphasize the difference between Jesus' pre-resurrection body and his resurrected body. The resurrected body, therefore, need not contain the atoms of the pre-resurrected.[16] Harris conjectures that during the reputed forty days on earth after his resurrection, Jesus was generally invisible to mortal eyes.[17] He became visible at his own will and for his own purposes. So, was it the same body during those forty days? Yes and no. For Harris, it is the same but with some entirely new properties: "In his resurrection state, Christ has what God does not have, a 'spiritual body.'"[18] Christ now has a permanent body, but its post-resurrection appearances "were momentary."[19]

Harris concludes that during the forty post-resurrection days, Jesus' body, from an earthly perspective, was a spiritual body that occasionally made visible, fleshly appearances. Jesus' *customary mode*, however, during those days was to be an invisible, nonfleshly, immaterial, spiritual body.[20] After the forty post-resurrection days, Jesus' body, from a heavenly perspective, was and is a spiritual body whose sole mode is visible but nonfleshly. This means that after the resurrection, Jesus assumed an embodiment he did not have before his incarnation. In heaven, Harris conjectures, Jesus has recognizable corporeality that, nevertheless, is bound by neither space nor time. Furthermore, it continually generates new somatic and spiritual life.[21] Moreover, Jesus did not jettison his flesh but so transformed it as to assume a "glorified body" in which God's fullness can dwell bodily. Clearly, a vast network of miracles is needed.

## B.B.Warfield's Concern

I think that our theories are not verified, nor are they absolutely falsified if we are willing to pay the price of making numerous revisions and calling on numerous auxiliary hypotheses for reinforcement. However, reinforcements can sometimes become so heavy as to sink our initial theory. It is fair to say that some aspects of our theories do sometimes appear to be falsified unless we make drastic revisions and corrections. The job is to keep track of our revisions and to keep a record of the severe prices we pay to keep them.

Often we work from two paradigms, or at least two or more models. Somewhere along the way, we begin thinking that one paradigm or model is more fruitful and intellectually promising. The older model or paradigm

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then begins to seem less credible.

Once we step into the arena of miracles, we must face the problem of their proliferation and thus the proliferation of hypotheses not only to account for each of them, but also to expose pseudo-miracles. One of the bulwarks of Reformed Christianity, Benjamin B. Warfield, wrote a book that he hoped would persuade his fellow believers to conclude that miracles had ceased. He wrote to refute what he regarded as the proliferation of Babel with its competing religions that claimed miraculous sanction of their beliefs. In *Counterfeit Miracles*,[22] he argued that miracles ceased during "the Apostolic Age," that is, roughly the first century. Miracles after that century have been merely counterfeit.

In 1993, however, Jon Ruthven, a Protestant, wrote a defense of the perpetuity of miracles.[23] Although lacking the time to review this scholarly work, I should perhaps note that Ruthven in this work does not wrestle profoundly with the question of where to draw the line determining what is a genuine miracle and what is not, nor is the proliferation problem seriously addressed. I suspect that Bishop George Berkeley in Ireland had already faced this looming question and had perhaps, in his unique way, concluded that the real miracle was the coherent, orderly world called nature, a world that kept intact the regular connections between actions and consequences. If the connections are suspended by the proliferation of miraculous interventions, moral responsibility goes on a permanent holiday. Not even the most dedicated Charismatic and believer in miracles would find much meaning in such a loose, unpredictable world. Perhaps some prophet, rising up to pray for the end of the Babel of miracles, will proclaim, "Enough is enough!"

## A Dilemma

What might be labeled the "dilemma of the miracle" may be stated as follows. A miracle requires supportive miracles that require still more with no conspicuous end of the proliferation. But if the proliferation does not end, the value of miracles declines and perhaps the very definition of "miracle" collapses. So we face either cosmos with no miracles or chaos with the proliferation of miracles. On Saturday-morning TV, ducks and other creatures talk and sometimes dance. We know, however, that ducks do not speak English or Spanish, and we doubt that they have the brains rendering conversation possible. According to Numbers 22:21–34, the god Elohim opened a donkey's mouth so that she could *reason* with her rider

Balaam. It is miracle enough to have a donkey speaking Hebrew, but for her to *reason* with obstinate Balaam, additional cerebral miracles appear to be required.

I suspect that much of the debate about whether a God could work miracles is not much of a debate. It is largely a matter of advancing a definition. If one defines a God as a miracle-working Being, it is no big step to claim that he or she can work miracles. The problem with miracles is that people adhering to "strange religions" call on their favorite miracles too. Like angels, miracles sometimes show up for the wrong causes or among those who are supposed to be spiritually blind. So, an auxiliary hypothesis often has to be employed. *Either* an evil supernatural being tricked Muhammad, Joseph Smith, and numerous people of those "other" religions into believing the deity had performed miracles through them, *or* the evil being generated impressive but sinister miracles of his own.

## NOTES

[1] Anna Dostoevsky, *Dostoevsky Reminiscences*, trans. and ed., Beatrice Stillman (New York: Liveright, 1975) 166-177.

[2] "Letter to Natalya Dmitriyevna Fonvizina," 1854, *Selected Letters of Fyodor Dostoevsky*, eds. Joseph Frank and David I. Goldstein, trans. Andrew MacAndrew, (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1989) 68.

[3] Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Karamazov Brothers*, trans. Ignat Avsey (New York: Oxford UP, 1994).

[4] Charles B. Guignon, "Introduction" to *Dostoevsky, The Grand Inquisitor*, ed. Charles B. Guignon, (Indianapolis: Hacket Publishing, 1993).

[5] G. A. Wells, *The Historical Evidence for Jesus* (Buffalo: Prometheus, 1982) 184.

[6] William Leatherbarrow and J. P. Stern, Dostoevsky: *The Brothers Karamazov* (Cambridge UP, 1992) 91.

[7] Giula Sissa and Marcel Detienne, *The Daily Life of the Greek Gods* (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 2000) 29-31.

[8] Or "behold"; the Greek is *idou*.

[9] Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, xxxii, 6.

[10] Stewart Elliott Guthrie, *Faces in the Clouds: A New Theory of Religion* (New York: Oxford UP, 1993).



[11] Murray J. Harris, *From Grave to Glory: Resurrection in the New Testament, Including a Response to Norman L. Geisler* (Grand Rapids: Zonderman, 1990), p. 358.

[12] Harris 353.

[13] Harris 357.

[14] Harris 358.

[15] Harris 364, italics added.

[16] Harris 367.

[17] Harris 381, 384.

[18] Harris 383.

[19] Harris.

[20] Harris 404, 406.

[21] Harris 403.

[22] B. B. Warfield, *Counterfeit Miracles* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1918) 3-5, 21.

[23] John Ruthven, *On the Cessation of the Charismata: The Protestant Polemic on Postbiblical Miracles* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993).