

## Natural Theology

### Abstract:

Why and how Christianity could talk about God without using the category of the Supernatural: the article looks at the conceptual background of Jesus' day, the need to abandon the supernatural, some previous attempts to do this, the issues raised and how we could deal with them.

### Keywords:

Supernatural

Miracles

Allegory

Apologetics

Science

Dualism

## Natural Christianity

*"I don't believe in ghosts—ever!" ....*

*....."The trouble is: Are there ghosts, Piggy? Or beasts?"*

*"Course there aren't."*

*"Why not?"*

*"'Cos things wouldn't make sense. Houses an' streets, an'—TV—they wouldn't work."*

*(Piggy and Ralph in William Golding: Lord of the Flies)*

## Talking about God

I suggest that we don't need the supernatural to talk about God.

First, the prefix "super-" tends to imply that there is some extending scale which includes both natural and divine. A good example is "Superman" who is like earthly human beings – able to love, with vulnerabilities – yet who can do more than them – leap tall buildings at a single bound, fly faster than a speeding bullet; God is not Superman or super-superman or ....

Second, the concept of the supernatural begs the question of the relationship between God and the natural (or created) world – either by setting the "supernatural" within or against nature. It is precisely this relationship which needs to be considered: does God do things which "break" the laws of nature God created / set up?

## **The conceptual background of Jesus' day**

The Bible records examples of “supernatural” powers not coming from – indeed opposed to – God. Saul uses the witch of Endor to conjure the ghosts of the dead<sup>1</sup>. Paul “heals” a slave girl possessed by a spirit of divination<sup>2</sup>. There are of course many more examples of “supernatural” power seen as coming from God: all of Jesus’ miracles!

Aristotle proposed a series of concentric spheres, in a multi-layer universe where higher layers were for “higher beings”: the further from earth, the less reliant on a physical state (less subject to generation and corruption), and the more superior / purer<sup>3</sup>. This is the multi-decker universe identified by Bultmann, where God is in the top layer, angels and heavenly beings in intermediate decks, then the earth and human beings, and then demons and hell in lower decks beneath earth.

Probably this can be over-laboured: all language is metaphorical, and all language about God is analogical or mythic. When Jesus is described as “being lifted up... to heaven”<sup>4</sup>, it is hard to think of alternative language which would be any clearer: if the writer(s) had, avoiding a spatial metaphor, said: “faded away” it would not have helped. Nevertheless, his disciples are said to be gazing up into the sky and in the twenty-first century we would not think that movement in this direction took you any closer to God.

What we now think of as probable mental illness and/or epilepsy were characterised in the ancient world as possession by demons; things like hearing voices were considered to be signs of privileged communication; dreams were God, or the gods, talking to us<sup>5</sup>.

It seems that there were other wonder workers roughly contemporary with Jesus: exorcists and magic workers are mentioned in Acts<sup>6</sup>; Honi the Circle Drawer is mentioned in the Mishnah<sup>7</sup>, and may be the same person as Onias, mentioned and apparently accepted by Josephus<sup>8</sup> (otherwise sceptical of most claimed miracle workers). In the wider world of antiquity, Oracles were consulted as speaking for the gods or Fate, and miracles expected of heroes<sup>9</sup>.

Although Aristotle, Pliny the Elder, and other Classical philosophers studied nature, they did so from a pre-scientific point of view: that beyond explanation was attributed to divine or supernatural intervention. This is not just the case in the Classical ancient world; it seems to be a feature of, for example, Norse/Germanic mythology, and Sanskrit/Hindu mythology, and indeed of Witchcraft/Voodoo in West Africa and the Caribbean. This observation takes us, in a decidedly scientific age, to thinking about our own stance.

## **Why bother?**

- 1 Adopting an approach which rejects the supernatural is more in line with our own experience:
  - 1.1 Our own culture has adopted a scientific orientation, so we need to take it more seriously – not least from an apologetic point of view. Science is empirical and thus excludes, amongst other things, mental events, moral truths, and free will (if they exist – all questions beyond the scope of this piece). It is about describing how

things are and how they work, but it is not about how we should live: that you can't argue from an 'is' to an 'ought' has long been well established<sup>10</sup>. Moreover, science is itself provisional – its descriptions are not final and will likely be superseded by better explanations and descriptions as science progresses. Finally science itself is not value-free – it is culturally and economically determined. Nevertheless it would be foolish for theology to ignore the claims of science not only about the world as it is, but also on peoples' hearts and minds.

- 1.2 Those who claim that they have experienced a miracle or something supernatural are all too frequently discredited. There is a perfectly respectable strand of thinking linking Christianity and experience (starting, in modern times, with Schleiermacher) but the ground between religious experience and the whacky needs to be navigated carefully.<sup>11</sup>
- 1.3 There has been some playing with the removal of the supernatural in literature. So, a recent production of Macbeth has cut the witches<sup>12</sup>, and although some may think the play loses something of drama, it still works perfectly well – Macbeth and Lady Macbeth are driven by greed by each other with or without the witches.
- 2 Dualism has apparently always been attractive – from Zoroastrianism and Gnosticism in the ancient world, to Harry Potter or many horror films in the present day. Orthodox Christianity, on the other hand, asserts that there is only God and God's world (cf Isaiah 45 v 7 I form the light and create the darkness). Not using the supernatural as a category is a complete way of making sure that we emphasise this.
  - 2.1 The Bible seems, in places, ambivalent about whether other gods exist eg “God of gods”<sup>13</sup>; the removal of the supernatural therefore makes it clear that God is God alone : there is God and there is God's creation and that is it.
  - 2.2 That which is usually seen as supernatural is actually part of creation: orthodox Christianity (and Judaism and Islam) are clear that God created everything: angels, demons, heaven, earth, and hell<sup>14</sup>.
  - 2.3 There is a temptation to personify and externalise the evil we see and feel. The removal of the supernatural faces the reality that evil comes from us. Jesus challenges us to face this in his comments on Jewish dietary laws<sup>15</sup>
- 3 Miracles suggest – on religion's own terms – that God sets up a world which follows rules and natural laws and then arbitrarily breaks them. Instead, without the supernatural, without miracles, God chooses to obey God's own laws.
  - 3.1 Removing the supernatural also removes the temptation to wait for God to perform miracles. The industry round the National Lottery is about hoping that some massively unlikely event will change our lives; it is a short step from that to hoping that God will perform a miracle, and from that to attempting to persuade God to do so, either through prayer or miracle-working evangelists or even by paying.<sup>16</sup>
- 4 Not invoking the supernatural places us firmly in creation – there is nothing beyond it, apart from God, for us to be linked to or appeal to.
  - 4.1 One of the recent strengths of Christianity (and dealing with a previous weakness) has been its thinking on our stewardship of the created order.

- 4.2 More deeply, seeing human beings not so much as the pinnacle of the observable creation but as part of the animal kingdom helps us to understand ourselves better, as well as to deal with other animals better. The removal of the category of the supernatural takes away the possibility of a hierarchy with less sentient beings lower, and more sentient beings higher on some notional ladder.<sup>17</sup>

### Alternative formulations:

There have been many attempts to deal with these issues over Christian history; I select three:

#### A. Allegory

There is some in the New Testament itself;<sup>18</sup> Clement of Alexandria (150-215?) seems to have been the first Christian writer to “baptise” the allegorical method but applied it unsystematically. Origen’s (184-254?) agenda was missional – to give credibility in the eyes of the Greek world to the Jewish or Christian faiths and scriptures. Without this Christianity would always be marginal and ridiculous. There is of course a strand in Christian thinking which asserts that we should stand by “foolishness”,<sup>19</sup> against worldly wisdom; but as well as the soundness of this, there may also be a taking enjoyment in being odd or different, of not engaging with the world as it is, and also, paradoxically of being defined by the world – the test of rightness becomes opposition from everyone else.

Origen claims that many of the events recounted in the Scriptures, if they are interpreted in the literal, or fleshly, sense, are impossible or nonsensical. “The reader must endeavour to grasp the entire meaning, connecting by an intellectual process the account of what is literally impossible with the parts that are not impossible but historically true, these being interpreted allegorically in common with the part which, so far as the letter goes, did not happen at all.”<sup>20</sup> The historical claims are in fact set aside as secondary – if their truth claims are contested, they are not defended. What really matter, claims Origen, are the intellectual/spiritual truths about Jesus to which the narratives (interpreted allegorically) points. Indeed Origen suggests that the difficulties with the apparently historical claims are put there by God as obstacles in order to direct us to a “loftier and more sublime road. .... All this, as we have remarked, was done by the Holy Spirit in order that, seeing those events which lie on the surface can be neither true nor useful, we may be led to the investigation of that truth which is more deeply concealed, and to the ascertaining of a meaning worthy of God in those Scriptures which we believe to be inspired by Him.”<sup>21</sup> (Origen does not arbitrarily choose allegorical meanings but derives them from elsewhere in Scripture with the single interpretative framework that the whole of Scripture points to Jesus.)

#### B. Rudolf Bultmann (1884-1976)

introduced demythologisation, an approach interpreting the mythological elements in the New Testament existentially. Bultmann contended that only faith in the *kerygma*, or proclamation, of the New Testament was necessary for Christian faith, not any particular facts regarding the historical Jesus.”<sup>22</sup>

“We cannot use electric lights and radios and, in the event of illness, avail ourselves of modern medical and clinical means and at the same time believe in the spirit and wonder world of the New Testament.”<sup>23</sup>

“Can the Christian proclamation today expect men and women to acknowledge the mythical world picture as true? To do so would be both pointless and impossible. It would be pointless because there is nothing specifically Christian about the mythical world picture, which is simply the world picture of a time now past which was not yet formed by scientific thinking. It would be impossible because no one can appropriate a world picture by sheer resolve, since it is already given with one’s historical situation.”<sup>24</sup>

C. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881 - 1955)

was perhaps the first theologian to reframe theology in the light of (then) modern scientific thinking about evolution.<sup>25 26</sup> He sets out a cosmic theology with a “sweeping account of the unfolding of the cosmos and the evolution of matter to humanity and ultimately to a reunion with Christ (the Omega Point).”<sup>27</sup>

This links the material with the spiritual in a way which does away with anything supernatural, but retains personality : “The Universal Energy must be a Thinking Energy if it is not to be less highly evolved than the ends animated by its action. And consequently ... the attributes of cosmic value with which it is surrounded in our modern eyes do not affect in the slightest the necessity obliging us to recognise in it a transcendent form of Personality.”<sup>28</sup> (NB Teilhard de Chardin’s thinking has been criticised by some scientists!)

### **My proposal**

Making this move would not be without problems, but I think we can deal with the issues created. (NB There is little point in attempting a middle approach under which God intervenes occasionally – this would not do justice to the claims on either side.)

- 1 There is the general difficulty of setting back (not aside) a significant part of Scripture. However, in a genuine conversation with Scripture, there will be room both for interpreters to critique (and re-interpret?) the writers/redactors of the Biblical books (who are already in conversation with each other)<sup>29</sup> and also for Scripture to challenge us.
- 2 We would need to articulate an “edition” of Christianity without the miracles – but then the miracles are problematic anyway. Some people are healed or rescued or fed and others not, apparently portraying a God who is arbitrary or capricious. Some miracles have adverse consequences for others: there are two miraculous rescues from gaol in Acts<sup>30</sup>: gaolers were answerable with their lives for the safe-keeping of the ir prisoners; so in the escape of Peter the gaolers are executed, whereas in the escape of Paul the gaolers, about to commit suicide, are converted to Christianity.<sup>31</sup>

- 2.1 in the Gospels many people witness the miracles of Jesus, but actually only a small number come to follow Jesus – the miracles don't produce faith (and Wrede's idea of the Messianic Secret is an attempt to solve this issue) but result from faith: 'when you believe, then you see these events in a new light'. Perhaps our version of this is the ability to speak sincerely about the miracles of modern science and modern medicine.
  - 2.2 Christianity without miracles (understood as supernatural events) doesn't completely solve problem of theodicy but it does solve the problem of God acting arbitrarily.
  - 2.3 I say 'an "edition" of Christianity' because every account of Christianity is an edition, each with different aspects foregrounded, and each framed by human activity.
- 3 We would need to part with angels and all the angelic host; these are an import to Judaism after the Exile – but they do guarantee our individuality before God (Matthew 18:10 each child has their guardian angel who looks continually on the face of God); here as elsewhere, the function of the myth is valuable, but perhaps the myth itself no longer stands up and we should feel as free to deal with this as those felt who imported it in the first place.
  - 4 We would need to rethink our language around the concept of "soul" – but then it would probably have been alien to Jesus. The traditional Jewish world view was that a person was spirit (breath of life) and body united. That a person had a body (temporary and unsatisfactory) and an (immortal and perfectable) soul comes out of Greek philosophy, though it did enter Jewish thinking via, for example, Philo. Given the way in which this Greek thinking has become embedded in our own western culture, it might be hard to get people to rethink, but perhaps also healthy and helpful to remove the privileging of a disembodied soul with all the hidden hostility to flesh and matter which lies behind that. A genuinely natural Christianity would properly value us as embodied – a thought which is supported by the doctrine of the incarnation. The Te Deum has: "You did not abhor the Virgin's womb"; to say this at all is to betray the thought that Jesus or God might have abhorred the Virgin's womb, and indeed everything fleshy; it is also to undermine that thought, but not sufficiently completely.
  - 5 We would need to do some rethinking about revelation, since God could not be thought of as speaking to us through dreams or angels or any unusual intervention in the natural world. But I am not arguing for abandoning the notion of God's revelation: God reveals Godself, recorded in Scripture and elsewhere, in the prophets, in history (including modern history and modern society) seen with the eyes of faith, in Jesus, in the Church, in fellow human beings (after all, made in the image of God) and in Creation as a whole. Revelation is what God does always and everywhere with God's creation.

Nor am I discarding the notion of God as necessary and creation as contingent: a sharper contrast between the whole created order on the one hand, and the Creator on the other, with no intermediate beings who are more heavenly (or divine?) than us, actually sets both in a more proper place and perspective.

- 6 Virgin birth/divine fatherhood narratives were applied to others in the ancient world (eg Hercules/Herakles), so that its uniqueness applied to Jesus is not the issue. What is perhaps uniquely effective and positive about the Virgin Birth is that it affirms Jesus' nature as both divine and human from the start – avoiding all the Christological heresies.
- 7 The most important issue is how we think of the Resurrection. Seeing it as a miracle like the other miracles confuses and downgrades the Resurrection; it is better to make a distinction between the miracles – which are all temporary (the crowd fed will be hungry again, Jairus' daughter and Lazarus rescued from death will die again) – and the Resurrection – which is permanent (“Christ raised from the dead dies no more; death has no more dominion over him”<sup>32</sup>). The Resurrection is not a miracle, but demands a new conceptual framework : “Indeed, the simple truth is that the resurrection cannot be accommodated in any way of understanding the world except one of which it is the starting point.... If it is true, it has to be the starting point of a wholly new way of understanding the cosmos and the human situation in the cosmos.”<sup>33 34</sup>

## Conclusion

In arguing for an edition of Christianity founded on the Resurrection but without the supernatural, I am attempting to steer a way between those who dismiss Christianity as ridiculously unbelievable, those who reinterpret it in a non-realistic way (the so-called radical or progressive theologians), and modern ultra-conservative interpretations of Christianity<sup>35</sup>. Perhaps it will allow Christianity's claims to be heard and make their challenge in our own world?

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*The Feast of the Epiphany 2025*

## Author Biography

**Richard Pratt** is Archdeacon of West Cumberland, in the Diocese of Carlisle, UK; the Archdeaconry covers the west coast of Cumbria.

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<sup>1</sup> Sam 28:7 ff

<sup>2</sup> Acts 16:16-21

<sup>3</sup> Aristotle : On the Heavens

<sup>4</sup> Acts 1:9-11

<sup>5</sup> Matthew 1:20; 2:12; 2:19-22; 27:19

<sup>6</sup> Acts 8:9 ff, 16:16 ff, 19:13 ff

<sup>7</sup> Taanit 3:8

<sup>8</sup> Josephus : Antiquities 14.2.1.21

<sup>9</sup>eg Wendy Cotter: *Miracles in Greco-Roman Antiquity: A Sourcebook for the Study of New Testament Miracle Stories* (Routledge 1999)

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- <sup>10</sup>Hume : A Treatise of Human Nature; G E Moore : Principia Ethica
- <sup>11</sup>cf Ian Stevenson's research into psychical/mystical events (Reincarnation and Biology (Praeger 1997); etc); also: Ian Hick : Death and Eternal Life (Macmillan 1985); Hugh Montefiore : The Paranormal (Upfront 2002)
- <sup>12</sup>Michael Boyd's RSC production of 2011
- <sup>13</sup>Deut 10:17, Josh 22:22, Ps 82:1, Ps 86:8, Ps 95:3, etc; also Job 1:6, 2:1
- <sup>14</sup>cf John Robinson: In the End, God (James Clarke 2011) – in which he argues that heaven, and the new heaven and new earth of Revelation, are just as created as earth.
- <sup>15</sup>Mark 7:14-19 // Matt 15:15-20
- <sup>16</sup>There is quite a literature about this behaviour – which seems to occur in, for example, Africa and America, and in, for example, Christianity and Mormonism.
- <sup>17</sup>Aristotle's view, mentioned above
- <sup>18</sup>Galatians 4:21-24, where the writer offers an allegorical interpretation of Genesis 16:1-6 – the story of Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar.
- <sup>19</sup>I Corinthians 1:23
- <sup>20</sup>Origen : Treatise on First Principles : in ed Coakley and Sterk : Readings in World Christian History (Orbis 2013), p 75
- <sup>21</sup>Origen : Treatise on First Principles : Bk 4 Section 15
- <sup>22</sup>Cross, F. L., ed. The Oxford dictionary of the Christian Church. New York (OUP 2005) *article: Bultmann, Rudolf*
- <sup>23</sup>Bultmann : New Testament and Mythology and Other Basic Writings (Fortress Press 1984) p 4 This quotation surprisingly parallels my quotation from Lord of the Flies.
- <sup>24</sup>Bultmann : New Testament and Mythology: p 3
- <sup>25</sup>see: ed Michael S Northcott and R J Berry : Theology after Darwin (Paternoster 2009); and also the writings of Simon Conway Morris.
- <sup>26</sup>see also my article on Darwin: <https://www.prattt.org/wp-content/uploads/Digging-deeper-than-Dawkins.doc>
- <sup>27</sup>Wikipedia article on Peirre Teilhard de Chardin
- <sup>28</sup> Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger (later Pope Benedict XVI) quoting Teilhard de Chardin approvingly in : Introduction To Christianity, (Ignatius Press 2010)
- <sup>29</sup>One of the irritating things about more conservative interpretations of the Bible is that in attempting to make the Bible speak with a clear (and single) voice, they flatten this conversation.
- <sup>30</sup>Acts 12:1-19; 16:25 ff
- <sup>31</sup>cf the very interesting science fiction story 'Hell is the absence of God' in Ted Chiang: Arrival (Picador 2015) Chiang's conceit in the story is that angels exist and make regular visits to earth to do miracles which turn out well for some but badly for others.
- <sup>32</sup>Romans 6:9 – so it can be argued that the Biblical writers themselves make a distinction between the Resurrection and other miracles.
- <sup>33</sup>Newbiggin: To Tell the Truth: The Gospel as Public Truth (SPCK 1991)
- <sup>34</sup>Although cf : Pannenberg who argues that the Resurrection is open to empirical enquiry: Jesus: God and Man (eg SCM 2010); and also Maurice Casey : Jesus of Nazareth (T & T Clark, Continuum 2010)
- <sup>35</sup>The very fundamentalist approach of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries stems from American conservative Evangelicals 1910-1915 : ed Dixon & Torrey: The Fundamentals: A Testimony of Truth (Testimony Publishing Company 1917)