

WATER INTO WINE? by R.A.H. Larmer. *McGill-Queen's University Press, 1988. £22.50*

'I am a Christian and persuaded of the truth of my beliefs' declares Larmer (p. 111). As might be expected (but not perhaps necessitated by such a declaration in the late twentieth century) Larmer's attitude to miracles is that of someone seeking to find the concept coherent and the evidence for its instantiation satisfactory. He argues one main thesis and a number of subsidiary issues. In some instances the intrinsic triviality of these subsidiary issues, and in others the superficiality of Larmer's replies (particularly to Hume) detract from the force and cogency of his main thesis. The overall result is a book which one is eager to read and anxious to be finished with; which is both adventurous and discriminating.

In his first chapter Larmer arrives at an apparently innocuous definition of miracle as 'an unusual and religiously significant event beyond the power of nature to produce and caused by an agent who transcends nature' (p. 14). His main thesis then appears: 'I will argue that it is entirely conceivable that miracles can occur in a world which behaves, always and everywhere, completely in accordance with the laws of nature' (p. 118). Larmer's argument rests upon distinguishing two aspects of the First Law of Thermodynamics, one of which (P1) is a law of nature, and accords with miracles; the other of which (P2) is *not* a law of nature. It is a 'postulate of physicalism' inconsistent with the occurrence of miracles (physicalism is 'a species of philosophical monism according to which all that exists and is truly real is physical' p. 136 n1). P1 is 'In an isolated system (that is, a system not causally influenced by something other than itself) the total amount of energy remains constant, although its form may change'. P2 is 'Energy can neither be created nor destroyed although its form may change' (p. 24). According to Larmer, P1 is confirmed by experimental evidence and is consistent with, but does not verify, P2, which is itself not confirmed by experimental evidence. The occurrence of miracles is at least partially caused by the over-riding of P2 'by an act of creation or annihilation of mass/energy' (p. 27). These acts of creation involved in miracles do not over-ride the law of nature P1 (nor any other law of nature). Therefore miracles are not violations of laws of nature.

The strategy here is ingenious but questionable. In the first place one notes Larmer's huge contention that it is coherent to suppose, and that there is real evidence to indicate that non-physical agent(s) can and do, not only act, but act to produce or annihilate 'mass/energy'. The trouble is that this contention comes alarmingly close to combatting P2—the postulate of physicalism—with a postulate of super-naturalism. The physicalist might well respond that at least the postulate of physicalism is consistent with the best established natural laws, and is not disconfirmed by any well authenticated observation. The postulate of super-naturalism on the other hand *only* accords with certain ancient myths which appeal to creation *ex nihilo*, and with very few and not very well authenticated observations supposedly identified as the miracles whose credibility Larmer wishes to defend.

Among the numerous subsidiary issues with which Larmer does battle, authentic evidence for the occurrence of miracles is the most important. In

this matter his chief opponent is Hume in Section X of the first *Enquiry*. Larmer rejects Flew's (and my) interpretation of the first part of this chapter as a *check* on superstition rather than an *a priori* proof of the impossibility of miracles. The interpretation is perhaps debatable as an interpretation of Hume, but Larmer's debating leads him to underestimate the force of the Flew-Gaskin interpretation as a critical argument in its own right. What we have argued (whether representing Hume's intentions correctly does not for the moment matter) is that a well investigated belief that events of a certain sort simply do not happen in the ordinary course of nature makes one very sceptical about reports that such events have in fact occurred. Larmer is so myopic about this that he even finds fault (p. 95) with Swinburne's admission that 'our contemporary understanding of what things are physically impossible or possible' acts as a restraint upon what we can accept as well evidenced.

In chapter 4 Larmer effectively disposes of a number of article critics of miracles including McKinnon, Nowell-Smith and Robinson, but at the end of chapter 4 his dismissal of the four so-called *a posteriori* arguments in part 2 of Hume's famous chapter is lamentably superficial: 'This argument has little to recommend it' (p. 105). 'Again this is a very weak argument' (p. 106). His comment (p. 109) concerning the Contrary Miracles Argument suggests both that he has not read the secondary literature and that his historical perspective is somewhat limited: 'very few theologians would be prepared to suggest that God is not active in religion other than Christianity'.

As a whole philosophers interested in the logical mapwork of miracles will find a lot to chew over in this book and Hume scholars some things to reject. Christian apologists would perhaps be better advised to rest their case on the stronger foundation suggested by Swinburne in *The Concept of Miracle* (Macmillan, 1970).

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STUDIES IN CHRISTIAN ETHICS, Vol 1, 1988, T & T Clark, Edinburgh. (£6.95 for subscribers, £7.50 for individual volumes).

Although theological journals are numerous and no reader can keep abreast of all of them, not all branches of theology are equally well served. This new journal fills a gap. It is devoted to Christian ethics and moral theology and is ecumenical. It is the child of the Society for the Study of Christian Ethics, an ecumenical society which brings together people of all Christian denominations who have an interest, whether academic or practical, in this field. The society meets annually to listen to and discuss papers on topics of mutual interest. To begin with the journal will appear once a year and will be related to the theme of the annual meeting of the society. The first issue is devoted to Christian ethics in the context of ecumenical dialogue. A great deal of dialogue has focussed on doctrinal and institutional issues, little on obstacles to unity which might arise because of differences in moral teaching or method. Four papers by internationally known scholars, each from a different communion, address aspects of this theme. The scholars are Richard McCormick, a Roman Catholic; Dietrich Ritschl, a Lutheran; John Howard Yoder, a Mennonite; and Oliver O'Donovan, an Anglican. Their papers were first read to the Society at its 1987 meeting. As well as the main articles there are substantial book reviews. So the journal has got off to a good start and promises well for the future.

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