

A Sentence Outline of *Miracles*

by Anne Carter

1. The Scope of This Book: The question of whether miracles occur can never be answered simply by experience, because seeing is not believing. Our senses are not infallible. What we learn from experience depends on our philosophy. Neither can history prove or disprove the miraculous. The philosophical question must come first.
2. The Naturalist and the Supernaturalist: The term “miracle” is used to mean an interference with nature by supernatural power. A “naturalist” believes that a great process of “becoming” exists on its own in space or time and that nothing else exists—this single total reality he calls nature. The supernaturalist believes that one thing exists on its own and has produced a framework of space and time and the events which fill them, which he calls nature, and believes that the primary being may have produced other natures. If naturalism is true, then miracles are impossible because there is nothing outside nature to come in. If supernaturalism is true, miracles may or may not occur. So our first choice is between naturalism and supernaturalism.
3. The Cardinal Difficulty of Naturalism: If naturalism is true, every finite thing or event must be in principle explicable in terms of the total system. If one thing exists which cannot be given that kind of explanation, then naturalism is in ruins. The whole idea of nature depends on our thinking, not vice-versa. Reasoning is the prime reality on which the attribution of reality to everything else rests.
4. Nature and Supernature: Acts of reasoning are not interlocked with the total interlocking system of nature as all its other items are interlocked with one another. The knowledge of a thing is not one of the thing’s parts. Something beyond nature operates whenever we reason. Rational thoughts induce and enable us to alter the course of nature. Nature is quite powerless to produce rational thought. It does not follow that rational thought exists absolutely on its own. It might be independent of nature by being dependent on something else. What exists on its own must have existed from all eternity and must exist incessantly—human minds, then, are not the only supernatural entities that exist. Each has come into nature from supernature. Human thought is not God’s, but God-kindled. To believe that nature produced God or the human mind is absurd. To believe that the two are both independently self-existent is impossible. So, God created nature.
5. A Further Difficulty in Naturalism: Besides reasoning about matters of fact, men also make moral judgments. Moral judgments raise the same sort of difficulty for naturalism as any other thoughts. If we are to continue to make moral judgments we must believe that the conscience of man is not a product of nature. It can be valid only if it is an offshoot of some absolute moral wisdom, a moral wisdom which exists absolutely “on its own”.
6. Answers to Misgivings: The rational and moral element in each human mind is a point of force from the supernatural working its way into nature. A man’s rational thinking is just so much of his share in eternal reason as the state of his brain allows to become operative. A nation’s moral outlooks is just so much of its share in eternal moral wisdom as its history, etc, lets through. To some people the great trouble about any argument for the supernatural is the fact that an argument should be needed at all. If so stupendous a thing exists, shouldn’t it be totally obvious? The fact which is in one respect the most obvious and primary fact, and through which alone you have access to all other facts, may be precisely the one that is most easily forgotten because it is so near and so obvious. Also, the state of affairs by which ordinary people can discover the supernatural only by abstruse reasoning is recent and abnormal, Plain men are being forced to bear burdens which plain men were never expected to bear before—we must get the truth for ourselves or go without it.
7. A Chapter of Red Herrings: From the admission that God exists and is the author of nature, it by no means follows that miracles must or can occur. The case against miracles relies on two different grounds—you either think that the character of God or the character of nature excludes them. The first superficial argument against the miraculous is that people could believe in olden

times because they didn't know the laws of nature. But mere experience, even if prolonged, can't tell us whether the thing is possible. When a thing professes from the very outset to be a unique invasion of nature by something from the outside, increasing knowledge of nature can never make it more or less credible than it was at the beginning. The second superficial argument is that people could believe in miracles back then because they had a false conception of the universe, but now that we know the real immensity of the universe it becomes ludicrous to believe that God would be concerned with us, But no Christian ever supposed we did merit God's concern, and the size of something tells us nothing about its value,

8. Miracles and the Laws of Nature: The question is whether nature can be known to be of such a kind that supernatural interference with her are impossible. Three conceptions of the "laws of nature" have been held: 1) they are mere brute facts, 2) they are applications on the law of averages, 3) that the fundamental laws of physics are really what we call "necessary truths". It is inaccurate to define a miracle as something that breaks the laws of nature. A miracle is not the suspension of the pattern to which events conform, but the feeding of new events into that pattern. A miracle is not an event without cause or results. Its cause is the activity of God and its results follow according to natural law. The reason people find it intolerable is that they start by taking nature to be the whole of reality. Nature and the new even introduced into it by miracle are related by their common origin in God. The rightful demand that all reality be consistent and systematic doesn't exclude miracles—it reminds us that miracles must, like all events, be revelations of the total harmony of all that exists. By calling them miracles, we don't mean that they are contradictions; we mean that, left to her own resources, nature could never produce them.

9. A Chapter Not Strictly Necessary: Another objection to the miraculous is a desire that nature should exist "on her own." The idea that she has been made and can on her own be altered by God may seem to take away all her spontaneity, But to say that God has created her is not to say that she is unreal, but precisely that she is real. Nature is by human (and probably divine) standards partly good and partly evil. The same tang runs though both her corruptions and excellences, You must have experienced the flavor from beyond the world before you can be aware of the flavor of nature—to treat her as Everything is to lose the whole pleasure of her.

10. Horrid Red Things: There is no security against miracles to be found by the study of nature. But on the other hand, miracles cannot be left out of Christianity. A naturalistic Christianity leaves out all that is specifically Christian. Everything about Christianity seems to presuppose a conception of reality which the increase of our knowledge has been refuting for the last two thousand years, and this causes many to feel contempt about Christian writings. The core of Christianity always remains entirely miraculous or supernatural. There is a difference between thinking and imagining: 1) Thought is distinct from the imagination which accompanies it, 2) Thought may be sound even when the false images that accompany it are mistaken for true ones, 3) **Anyone** who talks about things that can't be seen or touched must inevitably talk as if they could be. Christian doctrines have always been statements about spiritual reality, not specimens of primitive physical science. There is a difference between "explaining" and "explaining away" which is manifested in two ways: 1) Some conclude that when something is meant "metaphorically" it is hardly meant at all, 2) The Biblical statements concern both the supernatural reality and the historical events which its eruption into nature have produced.

11. Christianity and Religion: Popular "religion" excludes miracles because it excludes the "living God" of Christianity and believes instead in a kind of God who obviously would not do miracles. This may be called "pantheism" It is the permanent, natural bent of the human mind. The Christian has to correct the natural expectations of the pantheist and offer something more difficult. The pantheist sees the universe as a medium instead of an entity and sees God as present but diffused everywhere. He sees us all as parts of God and believes god to be equally present in evil and good, and therefore indifferent to both. The Christian, on the other hand, counters that God is present at every point of space and time and locally present in none. We are dependent on God and related to Him as the "made" to the "maker". God is present in a different way in man than He is in matter, and is present differently in some men than in others, and present differently in Jesus than in anyone else.

12. The Propriety of Miracles: Many feel that miracles interrupt the orderly march of events and steady development of nature, which seems more impressive than any miracle. But this belief is founded on an error. There are rules behind the rules and unity which is deeper than uniformity—superficial orthodoxies may be broken without impairing the deeper regularities. If miracles do occur, then we may be sure that not to have wrought them would be the real inconsistency.

13. On Probability: Since miracles have shown to be possible, we must find a criterion to judge any particular story of the miraculous—a criterion of probability. The modern historian will accept the most improbably “natural” explanations rather than say a miracle occurred. We are concerned here with historical probability rather than antecedent probability of chances. Men believe in the uniformity of nature because they are creatures of habit, because it is helpful to us when planning our lives, and because we are influenced by the innate sense of fitness of it. This same sense of “innate fitness” is the criterion by which we can judge the intrinsic probability of an alleged miracle.

14. The Grand Miracle: The central miracle asserted by Christians is the incarnation—God becoming man. All other miracles must harmonize with this grand miracle. Several difficulties appear: 1) What is meant by “God becoming man”? 2) If the redemption of man is the beginning of nature’s redemption, doesn’t this mean that man is the most important thing in nature? One important hypothesis can clear things up if accepted—that God was not simply “incarnate” in Jesus, God actually descended Himself. The doctrine of incarnation interacts with the composite nature of man, the pattern of descent and reascension, selectiveness, and vicariousness. We must also ask how the nature created by God came to need redemption, and whether incarnation was occasioned by the fall or would have occurred even if it hadn’t been required for redemption. The Christian doctrine involves a particular view of death. Opposed to the lofty idea that “death doesn’t matter” is the view that death is the greatest evil of all. Human death is a result of human sin—man was created immune from death and will be redeemed from it. Man has a human nature which he is not totally at home with because it is not his original state. The miracle of incarnation is credible because it illuminates and orders all other phenomena explains our laughter and our logic, our fear of the dead and our knowledge that it is somehow good to die. It makes sense of the rest of our lives.

15. Miracles of the Old Creation: The fitness of Christian miracles and their difference from mythological miracles lies in the fact that they show invasion by a power which is not alien. The miracles of Christ can be classified in two ways: The first system would be 1) miracles of fertility, 2) miracles of healing, 3) miracles of destruction, 4) miracles of dominion over the inorganic, 5) miracles of reversal, 6) miracles of perfecting or glorification. The second system yields two classes: 1) miracles of the old creation and 2) miracles of the new creation. Miracles of the old creation reproduce operations we have already seen on a larger scale. Miracles of the new creation focus on those which are still to come. The authenticity of both is attested by the style.

16. Miracles of the New Creation: To preach Christianity meant primarily to preach the resurrection—not the action of rising from the dead, but the state of having risen. The resurrection was not regarded as evidence for the immortality of the soul—it was the beginning of something new, a New Creation. The miracles of the new creation point us to a new state of affairs where there will be the perfect expression of a spiritual state.

17. Epilogue: We must always be aware of the “hangover” of naturalism into every conversation and reading—we must re-educate ourselves and work to eradicate the whole type of thought in which we have been brought up. The concept of “everythingism” (the belief that everything must be self-existent, more important than any particular thing and must contain all particular things) is a dangerous one. All things are not one but we must beware of the gravitation of the mind back to its habitual outlook. Secondly, we should not expect a miracle unless we are living at a point of great spiritual import.