

The role and significance of miracle stories in religions

There is no one role that stories of miracles have in the major world religions, and there is strong disagreement over their significance, even within any one religion. At the outset, it is worth noting that none of the scriptures of Judaism, Christianity and Islam use the word 'miracle' (or equivalent). Instead, all three use words that mean 'wonder', 'power' or, very often, 'sign' to describe those events that we might now judge to be miraculous. So there is even a question over whether a particular story is, in fact, a 'miracle' story.

THE ROLES OF MIRACLE STORIES

Nevertheless, it is fair to say that the understanding of miracles, in most religions, has been dominated by the following three roles, relating to God's activity in history, the life of particular holy men, and divine revelation:

1. Miracles are signs (rather than events that contravene the laws of nature) that demonstrate God's underlying activity in the world and his purposes. They reveal God's character and plan. Miracles performed by individuals illustrate the meaning and impact of their mission. While some miracle stories tell of apparently random demonstrations of power, most tell of events such as healing, rescuing, resurrection, conversion, and so on, and relate to the values of the religion and its understanding of God.
2. Miracles are intended to support the development of religious faith. The performance of the miracle is supposed to demonstrate the truth of what the miracle worker says – the power to work the miracle shows the message comes from God. Miracles can be intended to generate conviction in particular individuals, or they can occur at a historical period in order to establish a religion generally. (Many Protestant Christians argued that God allowed and enabled miracles in the early church, but not since.)
3. Miracle stories are intended to highlight revelation through scripture. The miracles confirm what else is said in scripture, and gives scripture God's seal of approval.

However, (stories of) miracles also function in other ways:

4. They demonstrate the connection of the physical world to a spiritual world.
5. They support the belief that supplicatory prayer can be meaningful.
6. They support the belief in the ability of a personal God to respond to the world.
7. They enhance the reputation of a saint or holy person, proving their connection to God and, in some cases, their status as a protector of a particular geographical area, e.g. a town.
8. Miracle stories also function to move the audience emotionally, as the characters and events described are 'larger than life'.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF MIRACLE STORIES

A debate over the significance of miracle stories marks a number of religions. For example, when early Christian thinkers appealed to the miracles of Jesus and the apostles to try to convince others of the truth of their teachings, they were faced with two powerful objections. First, that the miracles they reported were no more amazing than those reported by believers of pagan religions. Second, that the miracles they reported were the result of sorcery, not the intervention of God. In response, rather than appeal to miracles to support Christian teachings, some early Christian thinkers tried to defend their accounts of miracles by appealing to the truth of the teachings! Others disregarded appeals to miracles entirely.

A similar debate broke out between Protestants and Catholics 1600 years later. Protestants argued that God had restricted miracles to the time of the New Testament, and the Catholic belief in continuing miracles went hand-in-hand with their false belief in saints. Catholics replied that the fact there weren't any Protestant miracles demonstrated that Protestantism was not the true religion.

Similar concerns and disagreements appear in many religions. On a popular level, miracle stories can form an important part of people's religious faith and their attachment to particular beliefs or holy people. On a reflective level, religious thinkers have recognised that appealing to miracles may be no use at all as a form of evidence in support of religious conviction or revelation. Or again, while many of the founders of religion are reported to have performed miracles, they are also reported to have warned against the temptation of seeking miracles. There is no need of such sensationalism in true faith. And so miracles can seem to be both crucial to a religion and beside the point!

What remains untouched by this debate is the idea of miracles as 'signs' of God's activity, purpose and character. In this sense, miracle stories are integral to the nature and message of the religion, e.g. the idea of God as healer or giver of life. These signs are not meant to convert the unbeliever, but are only perceived as signs by those who already believe. They confirm and strengthen faith, but they don't create it. However, some religious thinkers have reservations about thinking of miracles as specific acts of God can undermine the idea that God is active throughout creation. We need to realize that God and the miraculous are present in everything.

MIRACLES AND THE COMPETING TRUTH CLAIMS OF DIFFERENT RELIGIONS

There is a common assumption among many religious believers that only the 'true' religion could have 'true' miracles. Some have maintained that other religions have no miracles, others that the miracles of other religions are 'false' (the product of magic, sorcery, or devils). From a neutral standpoint, it is difficult to agree with any conclusion of this sort. Hume pointed out that every religion proclaims its miracles as indications of the truth of its message (*An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, p. 178). But not every religion can be true. So if miracles support the truth claims of the religion, then the miracle stories of one religion are evidence against the miracle stories of another. On these grounds we should not accept any miracle story as true. An alternative response, of course, is not to appeal to miracles in support of the truth claims of one's religion.

The understanding of miracles as signs provides a different connection between miracles and truth claims. It has been a standard criticism of certain alleged miracle stories (of

other religions, or within one's own) that the story is merely sensationalist, revealing nothing about God, and should therefore be dismissed as ungenune. What kind of God, we may ask, would bring about this kind of event? Debates about the nature of God occur between religions; and one religion may evaluate and criticise the miracle stories of another for failing to accord with God's true nature.

Religious pluralism

But another possible response to the issue of miracle stories across religions is that of religious pluralism. There is no one definition of religious pluralism – it may mean (from weak to strong)

1. merely the fact that more than one religion co-exists in society
2. religious tolerance
3. inter-religious dialogue
4. inter-religious co-operation
5. the belief that religions other than one's own make some valid or true claims
6. the belief that religions make equally valid or true claims.

The first four forms of religious pluralism are compatible with believing that one's own religion is the only true religion. If one believes that miracles support the truth of a religion, it is possible that the miracle stories of other religions lead one to remain open-minded about the possibility that other religions also make true claims, and this open-mindedness may display itself in tolerance, dialogue to discover, and a willingness to co-operate on projects of importance to both religions.

The fifth form of religious pluralism may take the evidence of miracles occurring in other religions to support the claim that they are true in some respects. Further, the miracle stories may promote an understanding of God's character and nature that accord with (some aspect of) one's own religion.

The last form takes the evidence of miracles across religions to indicate that each is true. But it rejects Hume's assumption that they cannot all be true. There is no reason why God should not work miracles within any religion, as each contains a valid (if partial, perhaps) response to the reality of God.