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Contents

- 1 Nigeria's Gas Diplomacy and Regional Development in West Africa: The Role of Gas Supply Agreements—Balogun, Wasiu A., PhD 1
- 2 Morphophonemics of Àlágò Noun Plural Formation—Ogah, Ashikeni Thomas, PhD, Umaru, Yakubu Jacob, PhD & Amende, A. Charles 17
- 3 Appraisal of Indigenous Nigeria Press in Nationalism and Renaissance (1914–1960)—Suleiman, Hassan Biodun, PhD 27
- 4 Buchi Emecheta's Fictional World and Her Concerns—Sunday Bami 37
- 5 Stylistic Study of Some Syntactic Phenomena in Shaykh Muhammad Nasir Kabara's Panegyric Odes—Salat, Abubakar Abdulahi 56
- 6 Waste Management Practices in Urban Ibadan: A Critical Review—Yusuf, Olanrewaju, PhD 77
- 7 The Disposal of German Properties in the Cameroons Province of Nigeria in the Interwar Years—Muojama, Olisa Godson 92
- 8 Sociolect as a Strategic Communication Tool among Lagos Youth—Adeyemo, Julius Abioye PhD 106
- 9 Social Issues in Mukoma Wa Ngugi's *Nairobi Heat*—Lawal, Muhammed Adeyemi 118
- 10 Migration as a Response to Environmental Push and Pull Factors: A Case Study of the Shuwa Arab Migration into Borno—Modu, Ibrahim A., Mohammed, Abubakar & Warasini, H. Tsingari 129
- 11 Curtailing the Menace of Kidnapping and Ritual Killings in Nigeria—Ishola, Tajudeen Odebode, PhD & Suleiman, Abdulsalam B., PhD 135
- 12 The Adversities of Maternal Healthcare Services Encountered by Displaced Persons in some IDP Camps in Borno—Saidu, Amina Ramat, PhD 149
- 13 Gender Apartheid: Re-examining the Security of the Oppressor and the Oppressed in Nigeria—Agbaje, Funmilayo Idowu 156
- 14 Religiosity, Spirituality and the Miraculous Utopian in Africa: Further Reflections on David Hume's Proposal on Miracle—Olatade, Damilola Peter 166
- 15 Amotekun Corps Operations in Southwestern Nigeria: The Prospects beyond the Controversies—Oladejo, Olanrewaju Abdulwasii, PhD 177
- 16 A Redesign of Punk Fashion for Delight—Bello, Zainab 200
- 17 Nationalists Utterances, Nigeria Nation and Engendered Insurgency: A Case of if the Foundation be Destroyed, What Can the Righteous Do?—Aliu, Olayinka, PhD & Okutepa, Alhaji Momoh 210

14

Religiosity, Spirituality and the Miraculous Utopian in Africa: Further Reflections on David Hume's Proposal on Miracle

Olatade, Damilola Peter

Abstract

There is a high sense of religiosity in contemporary Africa to the extent that there is almost a synonymy between spirituality and religiosity. Spirituality, the underlying canon of religion seems to have been neglected, as the surge in the demand for miraculous deeds continue to surface among contemporary Africans. The need to check and revisit the narratives on miracles and its detrimental effect on society is the onus of this research. Via the method of critical analysis, this paper argues, using the proposal of David Hume, as its framework that excessive reliance on miracles portends a grim scientific future for Africans. The claims to the miraculous are not empirically verifiable yet it has generated a wide followership in African churches and mosques. The position and the arguments of the Scottish scholar David Hume will be used to examine whether or not, claims to the miraculous are at best circumspect. Since the sciences have been conceived strictly as disciplines that engage in physical assessment, the responsibility therefore falls on the humanities to disclose how the quest for miracles can prove detrimental not only to religion and spirituality itself, but to social well-being and harmony of people in Africa.

Keywords: Africans, Hume, miracles, religion, spirituality

Sometime in 2017, a Nigerian Pentecostal church founder based in Kenya pronounced that: "...the spirit of the Lord lies in the breast of a lady even when you are young. You suck the breast so you can get the fulfilling of the Lord. The more you suck the breast, the more you get the fulfilling of the Lord" (Zimbabwe today, 2017). Whatever scriptural verse(s) that foreground(s) his contention, it is the case that his church will be full of patronage. For there are strands of believers who do not mind going through this sort of "sexual abuse" so long as the "result" is the favorable and expected. They may even flood the church premises for healing and breakthroughs. This is the case because Pentecostalism arose in Africa as a beacon of hope for the hoi-polloi, an aftermath of the "economic crises of the 1980s and the subsequent (Structural Adjustment Programmes) that led to the worsening material condition of life for many people at this time" (Freeman, 1999: 12). Africans hoped that economic development through collective worship may be attained, albeit gradually, through this means. In spite of the implicit responsibility and trust placed on the shoulders of the Pentecostal movement, there have been reports of sexual abuses as guises for miracles and healings. Nigerian pastors especially, have regurgitated strange itineraries for advancing the Gospel. There are countless Nigerian men of God both within and outside Nigeria that are warped in scandalous charges bordering on illicit sex, mutilation, sexual assault, rape, human trafficking, blackmailing, and the most grievous of all – homicide (Daily post, 2017:2).

The theme of this paper is to make a critical investigation of David Hume's claims to miracles and to ascertain the synchrony between it and spirituality in Africa. However, it needs to be mentioned that this is not the first work on the subject matter. Several scholars and theologians had hitherto been bothered about the notion of miracle as well. Among those who had expressed skepticism on the subject of the miraculous, David Hume's assertion cannot be undermined. While most of the scholars on the subject have assented to Hume's position or even tried to modify it, this work, commences from the metaphysical underpinning to show that critics and apologists of miracles possess a parochial outlook on the subject.

In the attempt to realise its thrust, this essay has four parts, the first being the introduction. The second section of this work focuses on the meaning and nature of miracles. It brings to the fore, why people perceive some occurrences in nature as miracles. The third section of the work evinces the claims of David Hume who denies the reality of miracles and any justification so advanced. This part of the essay is a critique of Hume's assertion on miracles. It also shows the metaphysical basis of monotheistic faiths and the basic assumption overlooked by Hume and other scholars. The fourth section concludes this essay.

On the Meaning and Nature of Miracle

Miracles are the acts that are supposedly powered by divine intervention. This account for reasons that Wayne Gruydem views a miraculous act as “a less common kind of God’s activity in which God rouses people’s awe and wonder and bears witness to himself” (Gruydem, 1994:46). So through the divine medium, miracles function as a spectacular manifestation of God’s direct intervention in promoting a divine plan, and to inspire religious sentiments (Schlesinger, 2010:398). A miracle must be an extraordinary and unusual activity contrary to natural and/or empirical expectations. Necessarily, the notion of miracles invites the discourse on Divine Action, since God is construed as the acting agent. The divine action takes places in several ways chiefly among this include; God’s action of creating and sustaining the world, and particularly the notion that distinguishes between general and particular acts of providence. Consequently, particular providence has affinity to miracles as God acts at particular times and places to achieve specific ends. This end affirms “the narratives of the Hebrew Bible, for example, on how it portrays God as engaging human beings through a series of revelatory and redemptive actions in history. God calls Abraham and his descendants into a covenant relation; God rescues the Hebrew people from slavery in Egypt and gives the law at Sinai; God raises up kings and prophets; God acts in myriad ways to judge, sustain, and redeem his people through all the vicissitudes of their history” (Tracy, 2010:309). This is the principle of divine action that most theistic religions, which especially Christianity and Islam incorporate much into their history, and because each tradition develops these stories in a different ways, they generate distinctive understandings of God’s purposes and identity.

Jesus was believed to have performed many miracles in his lifetime. The first miracle Jesus performed was when he turned water into wine at the wedding feast in Cana. This was believed to be a supernatural marvelous feat. Among many other miracles performed by Jesus were two unrelated events but with similar results. Jesus was said to have raised a widow’s son from the dead in Nain (Luke 7:11-17), as well as raised Lazarus from the dead in Bethany (John 11:1-45). Both accounts are regarded as miraculous, especially that of Lazarus who had been dead for four days.

Aside from the miracles that Jesus supposedly performed, contemporary Pentecostal gatherings have produced a monumental number of other individuals who claim to perform miracles in the name of Jesus. Conversely, while Jesus called onto God, the father, when performing his miracles, miracle performers after him engaged in their own miraculous activities in the name of Jesus, the only begotten son. The similarity in both is that they seem to call unto a higher authority either for authenticity or for some powers (Afisi, 2018:4). Miracles are metaphysical activities with which recourse is made to

God, Spirits, Magic, witchcraft and destiny while explaining the forces of nature.

Hume on Miracles

For Hume, two conditions must hold for claims to be miraculous. These conditions are corollaries of his definition of miracles. Hume defines a miracle as “a transgression of a law of nature by a particular volition of the deity, or by interposition of some invisible agent” (Hume, 2007: 114). From this excerpt, two conditions are evident about miracles for Hume:

- That miracles smash an established law of nature; and
- That a deity or invisible agent (perhaps God) is the cause of this contradiction.

From these, Hume pursues his argument to the uttermost end. His skepticism about the testimony of miracles is set out in the section X of his *Enquiry*. However, even this section is a consequence of his treatment of the idea of probability which occupied his attention in section VI. This is made explicit on the subject of miracles in the following words:

A wise man, therefore, proportions his belief to the evidence. . . All probability, then, supposes an opposition of experiments and observations, where the one side is found to overbalance the other, and to produce a degree of evidence, proportioned to the superiority (Hume, 2007: 111).

In the case of miracles, he pleads that the general principle present in the above excerpt be applied. This would mean that the credit we give to reports of miracles should be in proportion to their experienced reliability. This basic principle for assessing testimony of miracles furthers into “the opposition of contrary testimony; . . . the character or number of the witnesses; . . . the manner of their delivering their testimony; or . . . the union of all these circumstances’ (Hume, 2007: 112-3). Some or a combination of all of these for David Hume serves as a basis for the assessment of the justification of miracles. With all of these in place, David Hume thereby proceeds to deploy some arguments against miracles for failing to meet up with any of these paragons.

First, no miracle in history has in fact been sufficiently well attested by sufficiently many reliable witnesses (Hume, 2007: 116). Secondly, the pleasant passion of surprise and wonder makes miracle stories particularly prone to invention and fantasy, all the more so if they are propagated to promote religion (Hume, 2007:117-9). As the history of forged miracles amply demonstrates, a religious person may lie “for the sake of promoting so holy a cause’, or out of vanity, or he may be gullible or swayed by eloquence (since many renounce their reason in questions of religion). Thirdly, miracle stories almost all “abound amongst ignorant and barbarous nations’,

suggesting that they are indeed products of imagination rather than provable fact (Hume, 2007: 119-121). Finally, if a miracle is supposed to establish the religion (or sect) to which it is attributed, and since the various religions are incompatible, it follows that the evidence for any miracle will be opposed by the evidence in favour of the far greater number of miracles reported in other religions. Hume illustrates this point (Hume, 2007: 123-4) with some apparently well-evidenced miracles that he is confident may be ousted. In his own words:

That no testimony is sufficient to establish a miracle, unless the testimony be of such a kind, that its falsehood would be more miraculous, than the fact, which it endeavors to establish: And even in that case there is a mutual destruction of arguments, and the superior only gives us an assurance suitable to that degree of force, which remains, after deducting the inferior.”* When any one tells me, that he saw a dead man restored to life, I immediately consider with myself, whether it be more probable, that this person should either deceive or be deceived, or that the fact, which he relates, should really have happened. I weigh the one miracle against the other; and according to the superiority, which I discover, I pronounce my decision, and always reject the greater miracle. If the falsehood of his testimony would be more miraculous, than the event which he relates; then, and not till then, can he pretend to command my belief or opinion (Hume, 2007:116).

It is obvious from the synopsis of the position of David Hume on the subject matter that miracles could be chimerical (Hajek, 2007). This does not however mean that his assessment is void of fallacies.

A Critical Examination of Hume’s Notion of Miracles

The first grouse against David Hume derives from his definition of miracle as “a transgression of a law of nature by a particular volition of the deity, or by interposition of some invisible agent” (Hume, 2007: 114). It needs to be asked at what point a law of nature is transgressed. To know this would surely demand an understanding of the law of nature. It is in this mould that Murray and Rea (2008:201) tinker on: “what would it take for an event to transgress a law of nature? To answer this question, we will first have to know what a law of nature is.” However, Hume’s objection that a law of nature is transgressed seems to imply that humans have infallible knowledge of them and these laws are not subject to modification as a result of deeper research in recent times. If one were to have lived some four centuries ago, the knowledge of the laws of nature then would be the norm. However, the history of physics for instance is replete with instances of revolutions. This is also echoed by Alfred North Whitehead that “Science is even more changeable than theology. No man of science could subscribe without qualification to Galileo’s beliefs, or to Newton’s beliefs, or to all his own scientific beliefs of ten years ago” (Whitehead, 1948:182). This is intended to show to Hume that firstly, we do not have full knowledge of the operation of nature. In other

words, there is no epistemic justification that we possess a full grasp of the workings of nature.

Secondly, Hume's skepticism on the justification of miracles, from his treatment of probability informs that we are supposed to believe repeated sensory experience over testimonial evidence and evidence from singular experiences. This is a corollary from his notion that:

A wise man, therefore, proportions his belief to the evidence. . . All probability, then, supposes an opposition of experiments and observations, where the one side is found to overbalance the other, and to produce a degree of evidence, proportioned to the superiority (Hume, 2007: 111).

This outlook is also suspect. For it will make changeability, growth and revolution in science otiose. Murray and Rea stamp their feet against this implication of David Hume's position in their words:

Such a principle would not only be problematic for scorekeepers at record breaking sports events; it would also be problematic for scientists confronted with evidence challenging long-held scientific theories. Any long-held scientific theory is long held because the predictions made by the theory are confirmed through repeated, uniform experience. Yet many such theories ultimately proved to be false when later experiments upended certain other predictions. If Hume were right, such experiments and their results would have to be rejected since they amount to nothing more than single experiences which don't cohere with past uniform experience (Murray & Rea, 2008:203).

This is the soundest objection against Hume. The idea of proportioning our belief to repeated evidence is not novel at all. A believer in the reality of miracles may object Hume's conception of miracles and the standard for adjudging a miraculous event from a monotheistic angle. Hume fails to acknowledge existence of what these apologists may term "indirect evidence" (Murray and Rea, 2008:204). This is a development from his claims that when one claims a miracle, it is always more likely that one's belief about the laws of nature are actually mistaken than seeing an event transgressing an established law of nature. David Hume's aim is showing that we are never rationally entitled to believe that an event is genuinely anomalous. And since all miraculous events are anomalous, we are never entitled to believe that an event was miraculous (Murray & Rea, 2008:204). To explain how the *indirect evidence* works, imagine that the Biblical story of the Exodus is true. Imagine that you are one of the Hebrews standing on the eastern banks of the Red Sea after it has closed over the armies of Pharaoh, securing your safe passage from Egypt it would be more rational for you to assume that the events you witnessed were consistent with the laws of nature rather than miraculous violations of those laws. In this case, there is a great deal of indirect evidence that tips the balance in favor of the claim that a genuine miracle occurred. Of course, it is possible that the events just witnessed were the result of ordinary

law-like processes. But it would be such a colossal coincidence for these events to unfold naturally (i.e. non-miraculously) in just the way necessary to allow our escape, that it would be unreasonable to believe that this is in fact what happened. This objection would be valid *if and only if* the story was true. However, the truth in this matter is marred by the authorship of the said book and the reliability of the inspiration ascribed to Moses. David Hume's objection therefore still persists.

The fourth objection concerns the Hume's idea that Supernatural agency (may be God) is directly responsible for breaking an established law. This is conceived by Hume and his proponents on the subject of miracle to mean that it is better to believe that an anomalous event occurred than to point to a causal agency in the divine. Remember that this anomalous event could be a magical act. Christopher Hitchens for instance is one of those who defended this position employing the Ockham's Razor. Speaking on Ockham, Hitchens harps: "he devised a "principle of economy," popularly known as "Ockham's razor," which relied for its effect on disposing of unnecessary assumptions and accepting the first sufficient explanation or cause: "Do not multiply entities beyond necessity." This principle extends itself: "Everything which is explained through positing something different from the act of understanding," he wrote, "can be explained without positing such a distinct thing." (Hitchens, 2007) For Hitchens, that an anomalous event occurred is a simpler explanation to a supernaturally-caused one. He insists that "Once again the razor of Ockham is clean and decisive. When two explanations are offered, it is advisable to discard the one that explains the least, or explains nothing at all, or raises more questions than it answers" (Hitchens, 2007:99). Murray and Rea (2008) articulate a very sound objection. We turn again to the Red Sea instance.

Consider the above example of the parting of the Red Sea again. Without taking any stand on the historicity of the event, we can still note that if we were present for the occurrence of the event, none of us would think it more plausible that this event is to be explained by no-cause rather than a supernatural cause. While supernatural causes might seem to be more complex and a less natural extension of our modes of scientific reasoning, in this very context it seems highly plausible that the event was caused by a supernatural agent looking to rescue the Israelites. To believe otherwise would be to believe that the event was a coincidence of monumental proportions (Murray and Rea, 2008:206).

The problem with the above excerpt however, is that we cannot establish the existence of this divine being who is said to be the direct causal agency. The miracle apologist would then have to be wary of ascribing potency to a more or less non-existent agency. This objection is defective and Hume's argument still persists.

The fifth rebuttal of Hume's skepticism about the testimony of miracles, takes us again to the definition of miracle as an event that breaks an

established law of nature. Richard Purtill (1978) raises this objection that a law which may be broken fails to be a law:

The United States . . . has a large set of laws regulating human behavior, but occasionally exceptional procedures are introduced, like presidential pardons. A miracle may be compared to a presidential pardon, in that the origin of the pardon is outside the ordinary legal procedures. It is unpredictable, and plays no role in the maneuvering of a lawyer in the court, since it cannot be brought about by the means available to him during a court procedure. Similarly, the creation of miracles is not within the scope of a scientist's activities. Yet, a presidential pardon does not constitute a violation of the legal system: it is not illegal, it is *outside* the legal system. In a comparable manner a miracle does not violate, but is outside, the system of nature's laws (Purtill, 1978:70).

Despite the depth and originality of Purtill's (1978) objection, it could still be pointed out that while the causal agency in the legal procedure is known and established even by law, Hume and his proponents could respond that there is no way we can be sure that a divine agency is responsible for an acclaimed miracle. This argument rests on skepticism about the possibility of necessary connection between events.

It is obvious from all of the foregoing objections raised against Hume's negation of miracles that his treatment of the subject still leaves much to be desired. Given the objections raised, does it mean that miracles should be tolerated? This essay objects and will give a much deeper assessment of why a justification of miracles is phantasmagoric. In the end, it would reveal that miracles are but chimerical (in agreement with Hume).

The monotheistic faith that put much emphasis on miracles is Christianity. In fact, miracles without Christianity cannot be conceived. Miracles are intended to strengthen the belief of the Christian in the Almighty. We shall show that ontological supernaturalism which is a consequent of metaphysics of substance that dates back to the era of Aristotle informs the monotheistic notion of God and miracles. The earlier part of this work had hinted on the meaning of ontological supernaturalism and its affinity to miracles. The task here would be to show that miracle is no more than an elevation of magic to a divinely-caused status.

Platonic and Aristotelian metaphysics gave a push to the idea of God in Christendom, which also filtered into Islam. Neo-Platonism, especially as articulated in the works of Plotinus (Anthony, 2006:106-9) informs the doctrine of emanationism among Islamic scholars like Al-Kindi, Avicenna etc. What is the notion of God from the metaphysics of the ancients? In other words, "The problem here lies in the sort of metaphysics that informs religious beliefs and practices, and the philosophical presuppositions that motivate and influence its own coming to terms with self-understanding" (Masong, 2013:12).

One may argue that, ontologically speaking, there are two types of metaphysics that inform the conceptual articulation of religion: metaphysics of substance and metaphysics of event (Masong, 2013:14). According to Whitehead (1978), these two metaphysics are the deliverances of an integral experience. We all experience that some things change while others do not, some things move while others do not: Being and becoming, substance and process. Most process philosophers argue that the history of Western philosophy has given undue importance to substance over process, Being over becoming, especially among those philosophical systems where movement, change, and transformation are nothing but attributes, effects, or derivatives of what is permanent or changeless. To a certain degree, substance metaphysics owes its success to the mode of thinking that cultivates such a mentality, that is to say, in ancient times, perfection was synonymous to changelessness (Masong, 2013:14). This notion of perfection and its synonymy with changelessness served as the backdrop for monotheistic theologies. Kenneth Masong (2013:15) notifies us that:

When this metaphysics entered the domain of religion, there was an almost perfect fit, especially with the rise of religious monotheism. As the ideas of Being, immutability, and impassibility suggest perfection, the concepts of movement, change, and becoming inversely suggest imperfection. The metaphysical search for the unchanging ground of changing reality became a religious search for an ultimate ground, which was found in the arms of an impassible, omniscient, and omnipotent God. When substance metaphysics found its ultimate category in the concept of Being, religion found its religious ultimate in the God that put on the attributes of Being itself.

The above is a clear instance of how ontology (philosophy) serves as a tool for the rational explanation of religion. The metaphysics of Aristotle for instance was employed very much in the cosmological arguments for the existence of God by St. Thomas Aquinas (It is an open secret that the latter attempted to canonize the former as a saint). John Ferguson in a related development comments: "...and it remains one of the paradoxes of history that the immeasurably subtle medieval scholastics found it possible to identify this *dieu fainéant* with the ever working Father proclaimed by Jesus, whose very name is love, and who is there, caring, if even a sparrow falls to the ground" (Ferguson, 1972:124). God became the Ultimate Being, the Unmoved Mover and from then on the history of metaphysics and religion has followed the track of what Heidegger would later call onto-theology, the forgetting of the ontological difference between Being as it is in itself and God (Heidegger, 2002).

This foray into the nexus between the metaphysics of substance and monotheistic faiths is very crucial for this study. The idea of a divine who once in a while bends the strict laws of nature for the convenience and adoration from his adherents informs a kind of thinking that is synonymous

with the people of a particular era and how they conceived the divine. All the claims made by monotheistic religions from the parting of the red sea to the crucifixion and death of the most popular Jew among Christians are not alien to religious cultures that had existed hitherto. More so, monotheism, conceived as “the belief in only one God” (Cayne, 1992:647) did not originate before the Jews. From his findings, Sergei Tokarev blurts:

Judaism was thus the first religion in history to declare consistent and principled monotheism, and to put it into practice. The trend towards monotheism also existed in the Egyptian, Babylonian and Iranian religions, and this trend was always the reflection of political centralisation and the autocratic power of the king. Attempts to introduce monotheism were resisted each time by the priests of local cults and other centrifugal forces. This time the Jerusalem priesthood was able to establish strict monotheism because the priesthood of the Jerusalem Temple had a monopoly on power, had no strong rivals, and had the support of the kings, Persian and other (Tokarev, 1989:234).

It was this monotheistic background that Christianity and later on, Islam built their superstructure on, with the former corpulent enough to admit miracle which the latter is skeptical on. The need to then make all events that persist beyond human cognition, demanding awe and surprise, derived from the divine thereby shifts magic as miracle.

Conclusion

The justification for miraculous experiences has received commendable attention from David Hume up to the present century. Most treatments of the subject take without due analysis, ontological supernaturalism for granted. Both the apologists and non-apologists on the justification of miracles do not take seriously the underlying metaphysics that informed the notion of the divine in the monotheistic faith that takes this belief strongly. It is proposed here that an epistemic justification for the belief in miracles is elusive and inconclusive. If however, we discover that there are some realities that alter the laws of nature, then it could simply be that our knowledge of the laws of nature is limited and still in a “process” of flux and continuity towards novelty. Hence, a justification for belief or testimony of miracles is otiose. More so, in a religious country like Nigeria where miracles have been used to sway the minds of the people to commit abominable acts, a lot is yet to be said on the matter. Here is a country where dubious people who claim to be called by God overnight are countless; the gap between magic and miracle has also become fused. Most of these charlatans amass themselves with much trickery enough to be called magicians; and they perform wonders in the name of Yahweh. For the unsuspecting audience, of course this would be a miracle, but a miracle created by their uncritical and dogmatic minds.

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