

# Maurice Wiles: On Miracles

## I

Maurice Wiles is the Regius Professor of Divinity at Oxford and chairs the Doctrinal Commission of the Church of England.

In *The Remaking of Christian Doctrine* he attempts to rebuild Christian theology in a manner that would render it entirely consistent with uniform laws of nature, as discovered by natural science. In order to do so he is prepared to reject the notion of God's intervention in the world in the form of a miracle. By doing so, he also offers an answer to the Problem of Evil.

He makes God into the architect of the world. God is *Deus ex Machina*. God creates the world and the laws of nature, and then steps back. Having made the world God does not intervene in the world by means of individual acts. He may sustain the world and keep it "running" but he does not intervene in it.

As a solution to the Problem of Evil, this appears to be a form of Manichaeism. That is, God does not intervene in the world because he cannot. He is, therefore, not omnipotent. On the other hand, suppose that Wiles does believe that God is omnipotent, but that for some greater good chooses not to intervene in the world. Then we have the solution, God does not intervene in the world because it is morally wrong for him to intervene in the world. However, it is clear that Wiles is not offering this defence, since he does believe that God would be morally obliged to intervene in the world if he could.

If the direct action of God, independent of secondary causation, is an intelligible concept, then it would appear to have been sparingly and strangely used. Miracles must be by definition, relatively infrequent or else the whole idea of the laws of nature ... would be undermined, and ordered life as we know it would be an impossibility. Yet even so it would seem strange that no miraculous intervention prevented Auschwitz or Hiroshima, while the purposes apparently forwarded by some of the miracles acclaimed in traditional Christian faith seem trivial by comparison.<sup>1</sup>

In fact, Wiles finds the whole notion of miracles evidence of an arbitrary and morally inconsistent being. If God acted in this way, he would not be wholly good. Therefore, the idea that God does not intervene in the world is for Wiles a solution to the problem of evil. It is clear that God does not intervene in the world because he

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<sup>1</sup> Maurice Wiles: *God's Action in the World*



cannot. Wiles denies “God the freedom to act without causal restraint to the world”. God is bound by the laws of nature he has created. Therefore, he is not omnipotent.<sup>2</sup>

## II

It should be clear that, although Wiles is an influential Anglican theologian, his views are not consistent with traditional Christianity – neither with respect to the divinity of Christ, nor with respect to the revelations of the Bible.

Wiles deals explicitly with the issue of Christ’s divinity, and he adopts the Arian heresy<sup>3</sup> – stating that Christ is *not* the son of God.

Wiles does this because he cannot accept that there could have been a breach of the laws of nature. He seeks to reinterpret the doctrines of the incarnation and resurrection in ways that make them consistent with natural science. To do so he claims that Jesus was a human being who expressed “the perfection of human response to God”. This perfection of the human response to God incarnated God in the world.

It is in fact possible to ground this interpretation on the Gospels themselves. In the Gospels Jesus is frequently reported to refer to God as his father, but his answers to the questions posed by the Pharisees and others are characteristically ambiguous. For example,

The messengers made their way to Jesus and said, ‘John the Baptist has sent us to you: he asks, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to expect some other?” ‘ There and then he cured many sufferers from diseases, plagues, and evil spirits; and on many blind people he bestowed sight. Then he gave them his answer: ‘Go’, he said, ‘and tell John what you have seen and heard: how the blind recover their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are made clean, the deaf hear, the dead are raised to life, the poor are haring the good news – and happy is the man who does not find me a stumbling block.’<sup>4</sup>

The ambiguity of such answers indicates that it is possible to believe, on the strength of the Gospels themselves, that Jesus was not co-substantial with God. This is the

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<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that traditional Christian responses to the Problem of Evil emphasis free will and original sin. God’s action in the world may transcend our understanding, but is never arbitrary, and always right since it performed in accordance with divine justice, for none, save Christ, are in fact innocent. This can be pursued in other sections on the problem of evil.

<sup>3</sup> The Arian heresy is named after *Arius* a bishop (presbyter) of Alexandria c.250 – c 336 AD. He maintained that Christ is not the same substance as God the Father. This contradicts the doctrine of the incarnation of Christ. Arianism was declared a heresy by the Council of Nicaea in 325 AD. This established the doctrine of the Trinity, that God, the Son and the Holy Spirit were One Person.

<sup>4</sup> Luke, Chapter 7, verses 20 – 23.



view of the Unitarian church. It is also the view of the Muslim faith – which maintains that Jesus was a prophet, but not God.

However, Wiles does not reject the divinity of Christ because the Bible does not provide evidence for it; he rejects it because he interprets it as in contradiction to the uniformity of nature as exposed by natural science.

Furthermore, it is highly questionable whether this could act as a foundation for Christianity at all. For the Bible clearly describes Jesus performing miracles, and yet Wiles denies that miracles are possible. Some of the miracles described in the Gospels could be interpreted as psychological phenomena. The miracle of the loaves and the fishes is particularly open to this interpretation. One would argue this along the lines that the five thousand or so who attended Jesus's sermon all brought food with them but only brought them out when Jesus started to divide the five loaves and two fishes he and his disciples had with them. However, such an interpretation is contrary to the interpretation an early Christian would have put on this incident, and it is not possible to read all the miraculous events of the Gospels in this way.

The conclusion is that if one adopts Wiles's doctrine, then the Gospels are full of exaggeration and lies.

Therefore, it seems hard to see how Wiles's views can be offered as a theological defence of Christianity.

### III

Suppose, that we would take the radical departure in religion of *starting again!* Could Wiles's interpretation of God's role in the universe play a part in a new religion – one that accorded no special status to the Bible as revelation?

There is nothing inconsistent about Wiles's doctrine, and it will appeal to many who retain a regard for the belief in God, but who cannot comprehend how a moral God could choose to intervene in some cases (say curing a particular invalid at Lourdes) and yet not intervene to prevent the dropping of the bomb on Hiroshima. However, Wiles has pictured a God who acts in creation to create a world, which then runs independently of his intervention. Compare this to a materialist belief that there is no God, but that there exists for all eternity the same amount of substance in the universe that obeys laws of nature that are uniform throughout space and time. Wiles's inclusion of God in the picture adds not one further element of explanation. It would appear to be a redundant hypothesis.



#### IV

Furthermore, it would at best be a hypothesis. The evidence for the existence of God would be provided, presumably, by the evidence for the existence of a designer of the laws of nature – it would rest on the argument from design (the teleological argument). However, Hume has notoriously disposed of this argument, showing that it rests on “a very weak analogy”. This can be explored in another chapter.

There is the question of the extent to which any belief in God rests on faith, religious experience and the miraculous. One interpretation of this is that any religious experience is an experience of the miraculous, and awakens faith. Wiles is wholly outside this tradition. No doubt he could offer a psychological account of religious experiences, which would make them entirely consistent with conditioning and genetic inheritance, but the effect of that would be to expose religion as lacking any objective content.

In terms of the terminology of Hans Frei Maurice Wiles is a “type II” theologian.<sup>5</sup> Such a theology attempts to interpret religion in terms of some other modern point-of-view. If necessary, certain previously strongly held beliefs will be abandoned. Essentially, the strategy is to attempt a compromise with modernity.

Wiles reflects the current crisis in theology resulting from the rise of modernity, which represents a system of belief, exemplified by Natural Science, that would appear to dispense with the need for a God as an explanatory hypothesis. In response, Wiles accepts modernity, in the form of an adherence to the uniformity of nature, and is prepared to reinterpret Christianity in any manner required to achieve consistency. In so doing, it can be argued, that the result is not a recognisably Christian system of belief, and not inherently appealing as a system *per se*. It could be argued that Wiles is adding a further nail to the coffin that Christianity is buried in, not resurrecting it.

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<sup>5</sup> The American theologian Hans Frei in his work *Types of Christian Theology* described five types of modern Christian thinking arising from the current crisis in theology caused by the appearance of a wholly new way of thinking about the world that may be generically called *modernity*.

