

## Background on Miracles

### 1 Why Archbishop Tillotson?

Hume begins with a reference to “an argument against the *real presence*” that he claims to have found in “Dr. Tillotson’s writings.” The real presence is the idea that the body and blood of Christ are really present in the ceremony of the Eucharist. Dr. Tillotson is John Tillotson, the Archbishop of Canterbury, or, in other words, the head of the Church of England, from 1691–3.

The argument that Hume seems to have had in mind is given in a sermon entitled “The Hazard of Being Saved in the Church of Rome.” I have reproduced the relevant part on the other side of this page. It is taken from *The works of the Most Reverend Dr. John Tillotson* London, 1696, pp. 122–3.

### How Hume used his argument

“It may perhaps amuse you to learn the first hint, which suggested to me that argument which you have so strenuously attacked. I was walking in the cloisters of the Jesuits’ College of La Flèche ... and engaged in a conversation with a Jesuit of some parts and learning, who was relating to me, and urging some nonsensical miracle performed in their convent, when I was tempted to dispute against him; and ... this argument immediately occurred to me, and I thought it very much gravelled my companion; but at last he observed to me, that it was impossible for that argument to have any solidity, because it operated equally against the Gospel as the Catholic miracles;— which observation I thought proper to admit as a sufficient answer.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> David Hume, Letter to the Reverend George Campbell. June 7, 1762. Letter 194. In *The Letters of David Hume*. Edited by J.Y.T. Greig. Oxford University Press (1932), pp. 360–1.

The Hazard of being Saved Sermon XI.

4. *The Doctrine of Transubstantiation.* A hard word, but I would to God that were the word of it; the thing is much more difficult. I have taken some pains to consider other Religions that have been in the world, and I must freely declare, that I never yet in any of them met with any Article or Proposition, imposed upon the belief of men, half so unreasonable and hard to be believed as this is: And yet this in the *Romish* Church is esteemed one of the most principal Articles of the Christian Faith; tho' there is no more certain foundation for it in Scripture, than for our Saviour's being substantially changed into all those things which are said of him, as that he is a rock, a vine, a door, and a hundred other things.

But this is not all. This Doctrine hath not only *no christian Foundation* in Scripture, but I have a far heavier charge against it, namely, that it undermines the very foundation of Christianity it self. And surely nothing ought to be admitted to be a part of the *Christian Doctrine* which destroys the reason of our belief of the whole. And that this Doctrine does so, will appear evidently, if we consider what was the main argument which the Apostles used to convince the world of the truth of Christianity; and that was this, *That our blessed Saviour, the Author of this Doctrine, wrought such and such miracles, and particularly that he rose again from the dead.* And this they proved because they were eye-witnesses of his miracles, and had seen him and conversed with him after he was risen from the dead. But what if their senses did deceive them in this matter? then it cannot be denied but that the main proof of Christianity falls to the ground.

Well! We will now suppose (as the Church of Rome does) *Transubstantiation* to have been one principal part of the Christian Doctrine which the Apostles preached. But if this Doctrine be true, then all mens senses are deceived in a plain sensible matter, wherein 'tis as hard for them to be deceived as in any thing in the world: For two things can hardly be imagin'd more different, than a little bit of wafer and the whole body of a man.

So that the Apostles persuading men to believe this Doctrine persuaded them not to trust their senses, and yet the argument which they used to persuade them to this was built upon the direct contrary principle, that *mens senses are to be trusted.* For if they be not, then notwithstanding all the evidence the Apostles offer'd for the resurrection of our Saviour, he might not be risen, and so the faith of Christians was vain. So that they represent the Apostles as absurd as is possible, *viz.* going about to persuade men out of their senses by virtue of an argument, the whole strength whereof depends upon the certainty of sense.

And now the matter is brought to a fair issue; If the testimony of sense be to be relied upon, then *Transubstantiation* is false; If it be not, then no man is sure that Christianity is true. For the utmost assurance that the Apostles had of the truth of Christianity was the testimony of their own senses concerning our Saviour's Miracles, and this testimony every man hath against *Transubstantiation.* From whence it plainly follows, that no man (no not the Apostles themselves) had more reason to believe *Christianity* to be true, than every man hath to believe *Transubstantiation* to be false. And we who did not see our Saviour's Miracles (as the Apostles did) and have only a credible relation of them, but do see the *Sacrament*, have less evidence of the truth of Christianity than of the *Assurance* of *Transubstantiation.* But cannot God impose upon the senses of men, and represent things to them otherwise than they are? Yes, undoubtedly. And if he hath revealed that he doth this, are we not to believe him? Most certainly. But then we ought to be assured that he hath made such a Revelation; which Assurance no man can have, the certainty of sense being taken away. I shall

Sermon XI. in the Church of Rome.

I shall press the business a little farther. Supposing the *Scripture* to be a *Divine Revelation*, and that these words (*This is my Body*) if they be in Scripture, must necessarily be taken in the strict and literal sense; I ask now, what greater evidence any man has that these words (*This is my Body*) are in the Bible, than every man has that the Bread is not chang'd in the Sacrament? Nay no man has so much; for we have only the evidence of one sense that these words are in the Bible, but that the Bread is not chang'd we have the concurring testimony of several of our senses. In a word, if this be once admitted that the *Senses* of all men are deceived in one of the most plain sensible matters that can be, there is no certain means left either to convey or prove a *Divine Revelation* to men; nor is there any way to confute the greatest impostures in the world: For if the clear evidence of all mens senses be not sufficient for this purpose, let any man, if he can, find a better and more convincing argument.

5. I will instance but in one *Doctrine* more; And that shall be, their *Doctrine of deposing Kings* in case of Heresy, and abolishing their Subjects from their Allegiance to them. And this is not a mere *speculative doctrine*, but hath been put in practice many a time by the Bishops of Rome, as every one knows that is vers'd in History. For the troubles and confusions which were occasion'd by this very thing make up a good part of the History of several Ages.

I hope no body expects that I should take the pains to shew that this was not the Doctrine of our Saviour and his Apostles, nor of the Primitive Christians. The *Papists* are many of them so far from pretending this, that in some times and places, when it is not reasonable and for their purpose, we have much a-do to persuade them that ever it was their Doctrine. But if *Transubstantiation* be their Doctrine, this is; for they came both out of the same Forge, I mean the Council of *Lateran* under Pope *Innocent* the Third. And if (as they tell us) *Transubstantiation* was then establish'd so was this. And indeed one would think they were Twins and brought forth at the same time, they are so like one another, both of them so monitiously unreasonable.

II. I come now in the second place to consider some *Practices* of the Church of Rome, which I am afraid will prove as bad as her *Doctrines.* I shall instance in these five.

1. Their celebrating of their Divine service in an *unknown tongue.* And that not only contrary to the practice of the Primitive Church, and to the great end and design of Religious Worship, which is the edification of those who are concerned in it, (and it is hard to imagine how men can be edified by what they do not understand) but likewise in direct contradiction to St. Paul, who hath no less than a whole Chapter wherein he confutes this practice as fully, and condemns it as plainly as any thing is condemn'd in the whole Bible. And they that can have the face to maintain that this practice was not condemn'd by St. Paul, or that it was allowed and us'd in the first Ages of Christianity, need not be ashamed to set up for the defence of any paradox in the World.

2. The Communion in one kind. And that notwithstanding that even by their own acknowledgment our Saviour instituted it in both kinds, and the Primitive Church administr'd it in both kinds. This I must acknowledge is no addition to Christianity but a *superfluous taking away* of an essential part of the Sacrament. For the *Cup* is as essential a part of the institution as the *Bread*; and they might as well, and by the same authority, take away the one as the other, and both as well as either.

3. Their

## 2 Protestants and miracles

### The Royal Touch

James [I, King of England] ... had proclaimed the now familiar doctrine: Since the establishment of Christ's "Church by the Apostles, all miracles, visions, prophecies and appearances of Angels of good Spirits, are ceased: which served only for the first sowing of faith, and planting of the Church". [Marc] Bloch quotes an anonymous letter, sent by an Italian to Rome in October 1603, which clearly shows the painful conflicts produced by the rite of touching for a monarch who believed firmly both in the divine right of kings ... and in the cessation of miracles. While his scrofulous subjects were waiting in an antechamber, James, before touching them, had a sermon preached by a Calvinist minister.

"Then he himself said that he found himself perplexed about what he had to do, that, on the one hand, he did not see how he could cure the sick without a miracle, and miracles had now ceased and were no longer wrought; and so he was afraid of committing some superstition; on the other hand, since this was an ancient custom and beneficial to his subjects, he was resolved to try it, but only by way of prayer, in which he begged everyone to join him. He then touched the sick. ... It was noticed that while the king was making his speech he often turned his eyes towards the Scots ministers who were standing nearby, as if expecting their approval of what he was saying, having beforehand conferred with them on the subject."<sup>2</sup>

### Reverend John Welch [1590s]

Quite apart from his many prophecies, which 'made the people begin to think Mr Welch was an oracle', that he 'walked with God, and kept close with him', Welch won renown for raising the dead. He was living in France when a

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<sup>2</sup> A. P. Walker, "The Cessation of Miracles", in: Allen G. Merkel, Ingrid Debus, editor, *Hermeticism and the Renaissance: intellectual history and the occult in early modern Europe* (Folger Shakespeare Library, 1988), p. 121.

young Scottish gentleman fell ill and died in his house, at least ‘to the apprehension and sense of all spectators’. ... [After three days, the man’s friends] called doctors who ‘pinched him with pincers in the fleshy parts of his body and twisted a bow-string about his head with great force’. No signs of life being forthcoming, ‘the physicians pronounced him stark dead’, but Welch ‘fell down before the pallet and cried to the Lord with all his might for the last time ... till at length the dead youth opened his eyes and cried out to Mr Welch ....

To one ‘popish young gentleman’ who made fun of his godly discourse at a dinner party in Edinburgh castle, Welch announced, ‘observe the work of the Lord upon that profane mocker’ and ‘immediately [he] sank down and died beneath the table, but never returned to life again, to the great astonishment of the company’.<sup>3</sup>

### 3 What Hume meant by “proof”

Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* Footnote §6.

Mr. Locke divides all arguments into demonstrative and probable. In this view, we must say, that it is only probable all men must die, or that the sun will rise to-morrow. But to conform our language more to common use, we ought to divide arguments into *demonstrations*, *proofs*, and *probabilities*. By *proofs* meaning such arguments from experience as leave no room for doubt or opposition.

Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* Book 1 Pt. 3 Sec. 11 Par. 2.

Those philosophers who have divided human reason into *knowledge* and *probability*, and have defined the first to be *that evidence which arises from the comparison of ideas*, are obliged to comprehend all our arguments from causes or effects under the general term of *probability*.

<sup>3</sup> Mary Todd, *The Culture of Protestantism in Early Modern Scotland* (Yale University Press, 2002), p. 397.

But ... in common discourse we readily affirm, that many arguments from causation exceed probability, and may be received as a superior kind of evidence. One would appear ridiculous who would say, that it is only probable the sun will rise to-morrow, or that all men must die; though it is plain we have no further assurance of these facts than what experience affords us. For this reason it would perhaps be more convenient, in order at once to preserve the common signification of words, and mark the several degrees of evidence, to distinguish human reason into three kinds, viz. *that from knowledge, from proofs, and from probabilities*. By knowledge, I mean the assurance arising from the comparison of ideas. By proofs, those arguments which are derived from the relation of cause and effect, and which are entirely free from doubt and uncertainty. By probability, that evidence which is still attended with uncertainty. It is this last species of reasoning I proceed to examine.

John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* Book 4, Ch. 15.

As demonstration is the showing the agreement or disagreement of two ideas, by the intervention of one or more proofs, which have a constant, immutable, and visible connexion one with another; so probability is nothing but the appearance of such an agreement or disagreement, by the intervention of proofs, whose connexion is not constant and immutable, or at least is not perceived to be so, but is, or appears for the most part to be so, and is enough to induce the mind to judge the proposition to be true or false, rather than the contrary. For example: In the demonstration of it a man perceives the certain immutable connexion there is of equality between the three angles of a triangle, and those intermediate ones which are made use of to show their equality to two right ones; ... And thus he has certain knowledge that it is so. But another man, who never took the pains to observe the demonstration, hearing a mathematician, a man of credit, affirm the three angles of a triangle to be equal to two right ones, assents to it, i.e. receives it for true. In which case the foundation of his assent is

the probability of the thing, the proof being such as for the most part carries truth with it: The man, on whose testimony he receives it, not being wont to affirm any thing contrary to, or besides his knowledge, especially in matters of this kind.