

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.”¹

¹ 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.

4. *The Doctrine of Transubstantiation.* A hard word, but I would to God that were the work 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; and 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 itself. 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 water 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 reformation 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 Sacraments, have less evidence of the truth of Christianity than of the falsehood of *Transubstantiation.* But cannot God impose upon the senses of men, and represent things to them otherwife 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

I shall press the business a little farther. Supporting 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 grossest 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 apostolic Keys* in case of Heresy, and absolving 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 ado 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 monstrously 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 condemned in the whole Bible. And they that can have the face to maintain that this practice was not condemned by St. Paul, or that it was allowed and used 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 administered it in both kinds. This I must acknowledge is no addition to Christianity but a sacrilegious 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