

Hobbes and the cessation of miracles

1 Hobbes

“Seeing therefore miracles now cease, we have no sign left, whereby to acknowledge the pretended revelations or inspirations of any private man; nor obligation to give ear to any doctrine, farther than it is conformable to the Holy Scriptures, which since the time of our Saviour, supply the place, and sufficiently recompense the want of all other prophecy ...” (32.9)

“...if we see not, but only hear tell of a miracle, we are to consult the lawful Church ... how far we are to give credit to the relators of it. And this is chiefly the case of men, that in these days live under Christian sovereigns. For in these times, I do not know one man, that ever saw any such wonderous work, done by the charm, or at the word, or prayer of a man, that a man endued but with a mediocrity of reason, would think supernatural ...” (37.13)

“... there was true prophesy and true prophets in the church of God, from Abraham down to our Saviour After our Saviour’s time, till the death of St. John the apostle, there were true prophets in the church of Christ, prophets to whom God spake supernaturally, and testified the truth of their mission by miracles. ... Of this kind I deny there has been any since the death of St. John the Evangelist. If any man find fault with this, he ought to name some man or other, whom we are bound to acknowledge that they have done a miracle, cast out a devil, or cured any disease by the sole invocation of the Divine Majesty.” (EW 4, p. 326)

2 James I and the royal touch

Macbeth, IV.iii

Malcolm. Well, more anon. Comes the King forth
I pray you?

Doctor. Ay Sir: there are a crew of wretched Soules

That stay his Cure: their malady convinces
The great assay of Art. But at his touch,
Such sanctity hath Heaven given his hand,
They presently amend.

Malcolm. I thanke you Doctor

Macduff. What's the Disease he meanes?

Malcolm. Tis call'd the Euill.
A most myraculous worke in this good King,
Which often since my heere remaine in England,
I haue seene him do: How he solicates heauen
Himselfe best knowes: but strangely visited people
All swolne and Vlcerous, pittifull to the eye,
The meere dispaire of Surgery, he cures,
Hanging a golden stampe about their neckes,
Put on with holy Prayers, and 'tis spoken
To the succeeding Royalty he leaues
The healing Benediction. With this strange vertue,
He hath a heauenly guift of Prophetie,
And sundry Blessings hang about his Throne,

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.”¹

3 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 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’.²

4 Archbishop Tillotson

The selection on the next pages is from a sermon, “The Hazard of Being Saved in the Church of Rome” from *The Works of the Most Reverend Dr. John Tillotson*

¹ 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.

² Mary Todd, *The Culture of Protestantism in Early Modern Scotland* (Yale University Press, 2002), p. 397.

(London, 1696) pp. 122-3. This sermon lives on in the first paragraph of Hume's celebrated chapter on miracles in *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*.

There is, in Dr. Tillotson's writings, an argument against the *real presence*, which is as concise, and elegant, and strong as any argument can possibly be supposed against a doctrine, so little worthy of a serious refutation. It is acknowledged on all hands, says that learned prelate, that the authority, either of the scripture or of tradition, is founded merely in the testimony of the apostles, who were eye-witnesses to those miracles of our Saviour, by which he proved his divine mission. Our evidence, then, for the truth of the *Christian* religion is less than the evidence for the truth of our senses; because, even in the first authors of our religion, it was no greater; and it is evident it must diminish in passing from them to their disciples; nor can any one rest such confidence in their testimony, as in the immediate object of his senses. But a weaker evidence can never destroy a stronger; and therefore, were the doctrine of the real presence ever so clearly revealed in scripture, it were directly contrary to the rules of just reasoning to give our assent to it. It contradicts sense, though both the scripture and tradition, on which it is supposed to be built, carry not such evidence with them as sense; when they are considered merely as external evidences, and are not brought home to every one's breast, by the immediate operation of the Holy Spirit.

Nothing is so convenient as a decisive argument of this kind, which must at least silence the most arrogant bigotry and superstition, and free us from their impertinent solicitations. I flatter myself, that I have discovered an argument of a like nature, which, if just, will, with the wise and learned, be an everlasting check to all kinds of superstitious delusion, and consequently, will be useful as long as the world endures. For so long, I presume, will the accounts of miracles and prodigies be found in all history, sacred and profane.

4. *The Doctrine of Transubstantiation.* A hard word, but I would to God that were the worst 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 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

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

