

Dr. Tillotson's Argument

In the first paragraph of his chapter "Of Miracles," Hume refers to "an argument against the *real presence*" that, he claims, is found in the writings of Dr. Tillotson. He says that he will produce a more general argument against miracles that has the same basic structure.

Who is Tillotson and what is his argument?

Hume is referring to John Tillotson, the Archbishop of Canterbury from 1691-1694. The "real presence" refers to the doctrine of transubstantiation, whereby a religious ritual transforms otherwise ordinary bread and wine into the body and blood of Jesus Christ in order to be consumed as part of the communion ceremony.

This is a topic on which protestants and catholics disagreed. The Roman Catholic church maintained that priests could make the miracle of transubstantiation happen on a weekly basis. Protestants denied that this was so.

I think the sermon that Hume is referring to is the one entitled "The Hazards of Being Saved in the Church of Rome."¹ I will put what I think is the relevant part on the next page.

Tillotson's argument is that belief in transubstantiation involves contradictory thoughts. On the one hand, the chief reason to believe that Jesus was divine is the eyewitness testimony of the apostles who saw him rise from the dead. On the other hand, the doctrine of transubstantiation requires that you disbelieve your senses: the thing that looks and tastes like bread is really something completely different.

¹ John Tillotson, "The Hazard of Being Saved in the Church of Rome," in *The Works of the Most Reverend Dr. John Tillotson* (London, 1696).

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; 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 certain 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 *falsehood of Transubstantiation.*

But cannot God impose upon the senses of men?