

have a dialogue of the deaf, rather than a meeting of minds or a pooling of resources and of insights. The two sides are more complementary than either appears willing to admit; within the one Body they need one another, if the world church is to respond creatively to the challenges of the age. Meanwhile we are grateful to Ronald Preston for setting out so clearly one side of the debate.

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REPORTED MIRACLES: A CRITIQUE OF HUME, by J. Houston, Cambridge University Press, 1994. Pp. 264. Hb: £35.

Houston's carefully matured and judicious book draws its material from historical, theological and philosophical sources, and its potential readership is correspondingly wide. The first five chapters (there are twelve in all) are surveys of major writings on miracles. Chapters 6,7 and 12 are mostly concerned with rebutting theological positions (among others those of MacQuarrie, Barth and Cupitt) which take Hume's scepticism about reported miracles as an established general view; a view moreover that, according to such positions, liberates theology from the embarrassment of defending the real, literal occurrence of miracles, and hence facilitates a radical and possibly fideistic re-think of what religious belief is. But the core of Houston's anti-Humeian argument is in chapters 8 to 11. It is a thought-provoking and well organised case somewhat in the tradition of Swinburne's *The Existence of God*.

As the title indicates, Houston's target is Hume's contention that to a man who proportions his belief to the evidence (Hume's "wise man") a miracle "can never be proved [from historical reports] so as to be the foundation of a system of religion". I and others have argued at some length (and the point seems to have been well taken) that this should be unpacked in the light of the eighteenth century controversy concerning miracles as a coded way of asserting that "the Resurrection cannot be proved in such a way that the wise man must accept it as an established fact which validates the Christian revelation". I mention this unpacking because although Houston quotes Hume's coded version on p.124, it is a real defect in his exposition that the initial chapters are taken up with snapshot accounts of Augustine, Aquinas, Locke, Hume and Bradley/Troeltsch on miracles (much of the material to be little used in the subsequent argument) whereas he makes no mention whatsoever of the highly relevant controversy which took place in England between Locke's writings in the 1690s and Hume's publication in 1748 - a controversy which gave point and significance to Hume's contention about historical evidence. One might almost say - but because of the gap in his historical account Houston does not begin to say - that Hume's "check" is not so much on "all kinds of superstitious delusion" as on all kinds of fundamentalist claims that because the Resurrection is a proved historical event, the rest of the Christian revelation must be believed.

Houston's argument, particularly in chapter 9, is careful and persuasive, and brief comment cannot do justice to it. What one might call

"Hume's norm of historical rationality" is that the historian in search of truth may disregard long-ago stories of wildly improbable or physically impossible events. One of Houston's main themes is that this norm cannot be used effectively against the New Testament miracles unless it is assumed in advance that no God exists who could have acted to produce the reported miracles. Admit the possibility that the theistic God exists; let that possibility gain some probability from the arguments of natural theology, and, as Houston puts it, this "would affect the reasonable assessment of reports of the putative miracle" (p157). We now, as it were, have the possibility, and more than the possibility, of the existence of an all powerful agent capable of causing the physically impossible events. And since the reports of these events are clearly in accord with the known or supposed character and purposes of that agent, it becomes mere atheistic prejudice, not historical wisdom, to disallow the reports on the grounds of the physical impossibility of what is reported.

This argument as developed by Houston is a powerful application of the currently popular cumulative case argument for theism: everything holds together, but nothing quite holds in isolation. But even allowing what many would deny - that natural theology establishes a significant probability for the existence of a theistic God - does this defeat Hume's historical scepticism about physically impossible miracles such as the Resurrection? I am not entirely convinced that it does.

In the first place a huge problem remains about how the theistic God (or any supposed agent not of this spatio-temporal order of being) could act in or upon the physical world in order to effect any change in it. Secondly, and even if questions of divine agency are beyond the intended limits of *Reported Miracles*, there is an uncomfortable sense of circularity in arguing that physically impossible event X, if it took place, would constitute evidence for the existence and revealed character of G, but the existence of G has to be presupposed before the evidence that X took place can be admitted by the wise historian. The apologist may well reply that "has to be presupposed" should read "has already been given a reasonable probability" and this breaks the circularity. But that reading is not yet something upon which all parties to the discussion could agree.

Despite my lingering doubts about whether Hume's scepticism concerning reported miracles has at last been laid to rest, no one can seriously defend his position again without taking account of Houston's argument. It is a pity he himself has taken account of so few pro-Humeian philosophers, in effect only Flew and Mackie, and has made no mention of other recent books on his subject, for example those by R.H. Larmer (1988), Michael Levine (1988) and C.A.J. Coady (1992), even to the extent of including them in his bibliography. The difficulty for Houston is perhaps that he is fighting on two broad fronts: against theologians only too anxious to demythologize their religion in the light of Humeian scepticism and "scientific" incredulity, and against philosophic proponents of such scepticism. He fights well against the theologians, but too much of the philosophical opposition escapes his attention.

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