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A Changed Understanding of Miracles in Religious Tourism

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In this modern age, an unsceptical acceptance of supernatural events—those which cannot be explained as part of the natural order of things—is less common than it once was. This trend is reflected in the declining frequency of miracle-cures certified by the Medical Bureau at Lourdes. Yet miracles past, and the promise of possible miracles in the present, still attract multitudes of religious pilgrims and tourists to sacred sites all over the world. While the frequency of miracles goes down, the appeal of miracles goes on, and the number of religious visitors has not declined. What role do miracles now play in religious tourism?

The miracles associated with religious pilgrimage and tourism will be distinguished into two categories. *Archaic Miracles* are those that occurred in pre-scientific, often medieval, times. These often involve very implausible stories, and have the air of folklore and fairy-tales. *Modern Age Miracles* occur after the development of science and the Enlightenment commitment to understanding things through reason.

This paper will conclude with a ‘compatibilist solution’ between two seemingly contradictory positions—miracles and science. A miraculous event is often taken as one that is contrary to the laws of nature; while religious sceptics reject miracles as unscientific. Yet the scientific demand for complete explanations is too demanding and may be impossible to satisfy. Inspired by a physicist, Marcel Gliesser, I explain that there are fundamental limits to our understanding of the universe, which implies that mysteries will always remain. However, an inescapable mystery is no support for supernatural explanations. A modern-day pilgrim need not believe in the supernatural to find meaning in unexplained events, but merely needs to recognise that even ordinary things remain fundamentally unexplained. I defend this ‘wonder of existence’ solution to the problem of miracles, and provide examples, and show how this is relevant to religious tourism.

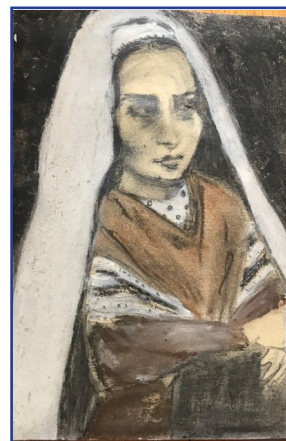
Key Words: miracles, tourism, Lourdes, pilgrimage, science, principle of sufficient reason

Introduction

Interlacing crutches are mounted at the entrance of a cathedral—castaway burdens now on display as proof of unexpected, unexplained healing. Reports from peasant children of their holy visions fill the listener with the awe of mystery. Descriptions of the uncorrupted bodies of those long buried are taken as a ‘sign’ in the narrative of sainthood.

Miracles past, and the promise of possible miracles in the present, attract multitudes of religious pilgrims and tourists to sacred sites all over the world. Not all pilgrims are seeking miracles, of course, but they visit a place because of its association with miracles. The

Image 1: Saint Bernadette of Lourdes, whose uncorrupted body is on display in Nevers, France



Art by Karen Hennig

latest certified miracle at Lourdes was recognised in 2018. While on pilgrimage at Lourdes, a French nun experienced a feeling of well-being, heard a voice, and then walked away from her wheelchair to which she had been bound for 28 years (CNA, 2018). Yet, in this modern age, an unseptic acceptance of supernatural events—those which cannot be explained as part of the natural order of things—is less common than it once was. The numbers of those whose faith allows them to believe in the literal truth of miracles has decreased since pre-scientific medieval times, or even since Victorian times. This trend is manifested in the declining frequency of miracle-cures certified by the Medical Bureau at Lourdes. Historical records reveal that ‘the Lourdes cures have now shrunk to a trickle’ (Francois *et al.*, 2014). Yet, while the frequency of miracles goes down, the appeal of miracles goes on, and the numbers of religious visitors has not declined.

What role do miracles play now in religious tourism? Is it necessary to believe in the supernatural character of miracles for them to have meaning? This paper will argue that it is not unreasonable to go on pilgrimage to Lourdes, thinking merely that miracles are mysterious. Referring to fundamental limits in our understanding of the universe, it will conclude with the recognition of a different understanding of miracles. Miracles are meaningful even without what Spanish philosopher

Miguel de Unamuno referred to as ‘transcendental objective validity’ (Unamuno, 1954:89). That is, there is no need to seek proof of the supernatural. What to some are merely surprising coincidences, can be meaningful to others because of their essentially mysterious inexplicability, according to physicist Marcelo Gleiser (2016). Biologist E.O. Wilson describes how a sense of ‘meaning’ can be ascribed to random events without including supernatural intentions. Non-supernatural events that are random, and hence inexplicable, can nonetheless alter the course of things, and this makes them meaningful ‘insofar as it illuminates humanity and the rest of life’ (Wilson, 2014:13).

Two Kinds of Miracles: Archaic and Modern

For the purposes of this paper, the miracles associated with religious pilgrimage and tourism will be distinguished into two categories. *Archaic Miracles* are those that occurred in pre-scientific, often medieval, times. They often involve very implausible stories that have the air of fairy-tales and folklore. They cannot be tested. *Modern Age Miracles* occur after the development of science and the Enlightenment commitment to understanding things through reason and evidence. This modern historical period has been further subdivided, specifically for Lourdes, into four categories, depending on the changing scientific standards over time (Francois *et al.*, 2014).

Image 2: Camino



Artwork by Karen Hennig

Santiago de Compostela and Archaic Miracles

Pilgrims on the Camino de Santiago, Spain, are familiar with many examples of *Archaic Miracles*. The *Cathedral of Santo Domingo de la Calzada* ceremonially houses chickens in acknowledgement of an eleventh century event where God intervened in earthly affairs in order to overturn an injustice. A young pilgrim boy had been hanged, unjustly, yet remained unharmed after being suspended by his neck for quite some time. When the dinner of the hanging-judge was interrupted with this news, he reacted with sneering scepticism, exclaiming that the boy was no more alive than the chicken on his plate! Miraculously, his chicken dinner sprang to life and clucked around the dining room (Coffey, Davidson & Dunn, 1996).

One stormy winter, in the mountain village of O’Cebreiro, a priest of wavering faith who had got up on the wrong side of the bed that morning in the year 1300, was very reluctantly performing the mass in the presence of only one parishioner. During this particular ceremony, the sacrament of Holy Communion was even more miraculous than usual—where, as Catholics believe, the bread and wine is *transubstantiated* into the body and blood of Jesus (even though this transformation of the underlying substance cannot be perceived by the senses.) This time, they actually took on the sensory form of flesh and blood (Coffey *et al.*, 1996).

The sacred relics of St James himself are surrounded by implausible stories explained as miraculous events. His headless body was somehow transported, in a rudderless boat, from Palestine to the shores of Galicia. 800 years later, his remains were discovered in a field by a hermit who was steered towards them by the kind of guiding star that beggars the laws of physics (Coffey *et al.*, 1996).

These *Archaic Miracles* are marked by the fact that they are often wildly outside the bounds of anything familiar. Their important social role, at the time, was to provide some kind of evidence of God’s existence in the world. However, no empirical proof of them is possible. These cannot be tested for traces of God’s hand in things. Spanish philosopher Unamuno dismisses this type of story as ‘medieval miracle-mongering’ (Unamuno, 1954:88). Their plausibility is further strained by the

fact that there are often multiple versions of each story; and further, that other miraculous locations often relate much the same story. Barcelos, Portugal, for instance, has its own Lazarus-like chicken story, and pilgrims will find chicken icons of all sizes throughout the town. This duplication makes the stories take on the aura of ‘urban legends’ rather than genuine events.

Certainly, there exist true believers in the literal truth of these supposed miracles. However, their role in modern religious tourism must surely be weighed in metaphorical interpretations, and simple appreciation of the fairy-tale-like quality of these miracles with their grand elements of theatre. They are moving. They are inspiring.

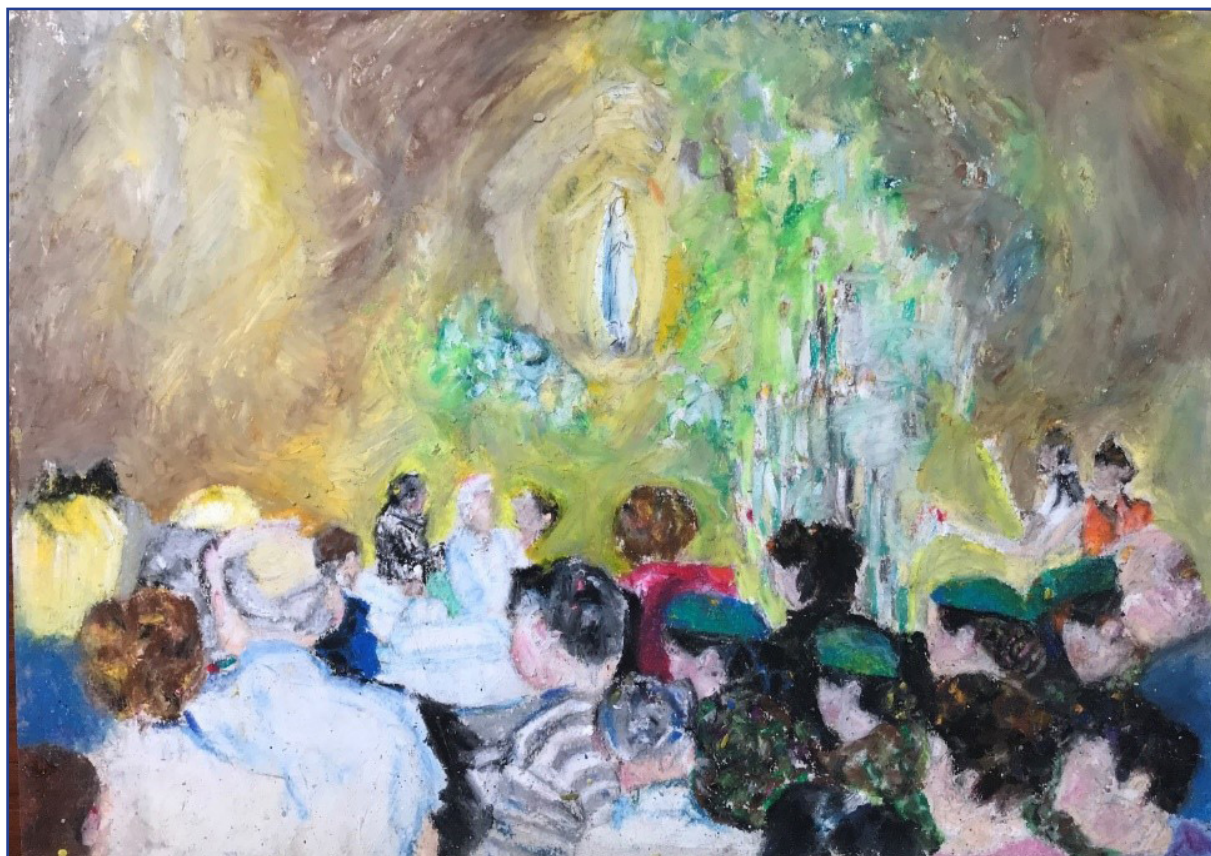
It should be noted that *not all* medieval miracles lie outside the normal course of events. For example, in 1108, a man on pilgrimage prayed to St James that he might have a child. Upon returning home, his wife did indeed get pregnant with a son (Coffey *et al.*, 1996). Note, however, that this kind of miracle, too, could never be tested in a way that could distinguish divine intervention from the routine biological causes.

Lourdes and Modern Age Miracles

Modern Age Miracles, by contrast, do not resemble folk tales. They qualify as miraculous because their explanations are *preternatural*; that is, they are exceptional because they lie outside the *normal* course of nature, but do not *violate* the laws of nature. *Modern Age Miracle* stories can be evaluated with scientific reasoning and are dominated by reports of unexplained medical cures.

The Vatican has a procedure for evaluating medical miracles like those reported in Lourdes, France; or elsewhere, like Sainte Anne-de-Beaupre, Canada. To be recognised as a miracle, it must meet the criteria of authentication, which includes a sudden and sustained recovery from a clearly diagnosed serious illness. The recovery must be associated with prayerful activity, like pilgrimage and sacramental rituals; rather than with medical treatment (West, 1957; Lourdes Sanctuary; Francois *et al.*, 2014). The Lourdes International Medical Bureau examines medical reports, charts, and testimony of the time before the miracle, and after. Since

Image 3: The Lourdes Grotto



Art by Karen Hennig

the 1858 visions of Bernadette Soubirous, there have been *relatively* few cases that are officially recognised as miracles and inexplicably outside the normal course of things. Of the millions of annual pilgrims to Lourdes, 7,000 have claimed to have experienced an unexplained cure since the time of Bernadette's visions (Chrisafis & Torres, 2006). However, only 70 of these have been recognised by the Lourdes medical Bureau (Lourdes Sanctuary). This rigorous weeding is consistent with a sceptical scientific attitude towards the phenomenon and recognises the attempt by the Lourdes Medical Bureau to

rule out trickery, acting, illusion [and] a possible hysterical or delirious pathology (Lourdes Sanctuary).

Yet, the evaluation procedure is open to scepticism about its actual practice. Even the accepted few dozen cases remain unconvincing when examined by other doctors, at other times. Dr. D.J. West, for example, argues that the data he examined, covering the years 1937-1950,

was incomplete, carelessly recorded, and biased towards favouring signs of amelioration in terms of subjective symptoms, rather than any measurable physical improvement (West, 1957:99-120). Recent historians of Lourdes have evaluated a more comprehensive data set, using retrospective diagnosis; and they have come to similar conclusions (Francois *et al.*, 2014). These authors reject the early miracles because of very inaccurate records; and because most of the cures involve recoveries that were not all that improbable, like those from tuberculosis, GI-tract infections, and old injuries that have healed. They also find more recent reports of cures, since 1947, 'dubious' because of 'flimsy data' and a notable 'absence of follow-up' examinations (Francois *et al.*, 2014).

The point, in the argument so far, is not to reject the very possibility of miracles, but to point out that *Modern Age Miracles* are being evaluated by reason and scientific evidence.

Explanations

A common assumption is that for an event to be intelligible, it must have an explanation of *some* kind (an assumption known as the Principle of Sufficient Reason). The Principle of Sufficient Reason claims that everything that happens, happens for a reason. The principle is so basic that if someone were to claim that some things happen for no reason whatsoever, they might be legitimately accused of not making sense. Yet this simple and common demand for explanations ‘yields some of the boldest and most challenging theses in the history of philosophy’ (Melamed & Lin, 2018). Many argue that the ultimate reason must be God, while others seek only materialist explanations within the bounds of physical cause and effect.

A miraculous event is one that cannot be explained easily, either because it is improbably outside the routine course of nature (preternatural), or because it violates the laws of nature (supernatural). The search for explanations of miraculous events thus includes looking outside the laws of nature. Supernatural explanations are therefore often supplied in the form of divine, causal intervention. Consequently, miraculous events are then taken as evidence of God’s presence in the natural world.

There are two questions that can be asked here. First, one can wonder whether there can ever be a limit to the *search* for a natural explanation, and thus never a need to consider a supernatural explanation. This stance is known as ‘scientism.’ Second, one can question the Principle of Sufficient Reason itself and its unsatiable demand for complete explanations.

Science is the Only Way of Knowing

‘Scientism’ is the idea that science is the *only* source of reliable knowledge, and thus all non-scientific explanations must be excluded as possibilities. Alex Rosenberg, a strong defender of scientism, writes that

the methods of science are the only reliable ways to secure knowledge of anything; that science’s description of the world is correct in its fundamentals; ... [and that] Science provides all the significant truths about reality, and knowing such truths is what real understanding is all about (Rosenberg, 2011:6-7).

The idea here is that science is better than anything else at explaining the universe. It has been so successful that no other form of knowledge-seeking can be taken seriously. It has proven itself by its ability to make successful predictions, and to manipulate the world in ways that people desire. Scientists and engineers have landed spacecraft on the moon, sequenced the human genome, and improved human health and longevity. These successes in prediction and control are in stark contrast to other ways of understanding the world, like prayer, economics, morality, art history, or energy chakras.

The temptation to exclude all ways of thinking, other than science, is explained by John Polkinghorne as the product of a

unanimity [that] does not seem to be forthcoming in other domains of human inquiry, such as politics, ethics or religion (Polkinghorne, 1996:3).

Without endorsing this view, he notes that this ability of science to

provide universally satisfactory answers to the questions that it asks ... leads people to see science as real knowledge—indeed, perhaps, the only form of real knowledge (Polkinghorne, 1996:3).

Thus, advocates of scientism desire that its form of knowledge invade all spheres of life. In the scientific worldview there is no free-will, no morality, no god, no sense of Self, no mind, and no purpose or meaning. Because these ideas cannot be explained by science, they must all be the product of confusions, illusions and ‘category-errors.’

The tenets of scientism that Rosenberg champions echo those of logical positivism of nearly a century ago. The logical positivists wanted to find a way for science to exclude any discussion about things that could not be seen, quantified and measured. They developed a principle, known as the ‘Verification Principle of Meaning’ that dismissed as *nonsensical* any claims that could not be traced back to observation or math. They wanted more than to claim that beliefs about God, beauty, morality, etc., were *false*; they insisted that they were *meaningless*. Because science cannot contribute observational evidence on such topics, they must be

dismissed. The scientism of today similarly dismisses many of these same philosophical problems as illusions.

Explanations involving miracles are therefore *rejected from the very start* because that would pre-empt the search for natural explanations, without really providing an explanation at all. Miraculous forces are not considered as a possible mechanism for explaining the unexpected, such as a wildly improbable recovery of some patient from a terminal illness. This is so, even if no other explanation is available. If no explanation in terms of natural mechanisms is available, then one must simply *keep looking* until one is found. The argument has much evidence to support it. This commitment to materialist explanations for all things is a tentative hypothesis that seems to pay off with repeated successes, and this inductively confirms our belief that materialism is most likely true. The materialist paradigm forces scientists to keep looking for natural explanations for those so-called 'miraculous' cures, and they often find them!

For example, Klee relates a case of an apparently miraculous recovery from cancer (Klee, 1997:1-2). In 1968, a man who, twelve years earlier, had been sent home to await his immanent death, walked into a Massachusetts hospital. There was no longer any trace of the multiple malignant tumours that he was earlier diagnosed with. A thorough re-examination of the original tests and samples confirmed the diagnosis that his cancer had indeed been terminal. When faced with cases like this, of apparently inexplicable medical recovery, it is tempting to look for supernatural, miraculous explanations. However, in this case, a commitment to a scientific worldview, with its assumption of materialism, and its insistence on natural explanations, resulted in a scientific breakthrough. Dr. S. Rosenberg's persistent search led to the discovery of the complex human immune system with its cancer-killing capabilities.

The drawback of this approach, however, is that if there were indeed miracles, scientists would never recognise them. The total commitment to materialist explanations is something scientists 'don't ask questions about,' writes Mary Midgley disapprovingly, 'but view it as the general background against which all decent disputes take place' (Midgley, 2014:14).

This patient approach, of waiting for scientific evidence that is sure to come, is adopted by some recent evaluators of the Lourdes miracles (Francois *et al.*, 2014). These authors are not dismissive of the Lourdes miracles, recognising them as 'Uncanny and weird, the cures are currently beyond out ken.' Yet, they write that the miracles are merely 'awaiting a scientific explanation' and they suggest it will come in the form of 'neuropsychiatric phenomena' (Francois *et al.*, 2014).

Asking for Complete Explanations is Demanding Too Much

It might be *impossible* to arrive at a complete explanation. All *complete* explanations have to end somewhere, and yet those endings themselves will remain unexplained. A first century Greek sceptic, named *Agrippa*, famously explained this using a trilemma that now bears his name (see *Wikipedia*). All causal explanations must end in one of three ways. Either (1) they come to a stop by *simply asserting* the existence of things known as *brute facts*, like the existence of matter. One must simply accept the given, because beyond this no further explanation is possible. Or, (2) they *endlessly defer* the final explanation in an infinite causal-chain of what came before. The only other option (3) is to have an explanation end at something which is *self-explanatory*. God is often suggested to fill this role. However, this solution of positing the existence of a self-caused entity is controversial since it involves a circular argument; namely, by answering the need for explanation with something just as mysterious (God), which requires explanation.

Even those defending science as the only route to knowledge must admit the limits of explanation. In response to the ultimate challenge of the Principle of Sufficient Reason, which asks why anything exists at all—rather than nothing, even Rosenberg must reply that there is *no reason* why anything exists at all. Existence itself is just a random event in a multi-universe existence where ours is just one universe among many. The big bang which started our own universe was merely an improbable, uncaused event that just happened for no reason at all (Rosenberg, 2011:36-39). This claim, that science must admit that uncaused events sometimes just happen, is a recognition of the limits of explanation.

Yet Rosenberg feels no lack here. He argues that asking for explanations in this case is analogous to asking why a particular person won a lottery, rather than someone else (Rosenberg, 2011:44). There is no explanation to be had, other than the brute fact of randomness.

Given these ultimate limits on complete explanation, one could wonder whether, perhaps, explanation may only be needed when something is *out of the ordinary*, like sudden medical recoveries, or resurrecting chickens. But this would be overlooking the fact that the sheer existence of things, even ordinary things, is itself an unexplained, wondrous mystery (Spinoza, 1670). Science seems to limit its search for explanation when it arrives at things familiar (Melamed & Lin, 2018). However, hypnosis, the placebo effect, mass hysteria, psychosomatic illness and recovery, and multiple personality, are all familiar occurrences—yet no less mysterious for that. The placebo effect, for example, is when a pill with no measurable, physical healing properties, somehow still manages to relieve real pain and suffering by some mysterious psychological process. While scientists complain that reference to supernatural miracles is no explanation at all, Spinoza reminds us that to simply reference *familiar* brute facts of existence is also an incomplete explanation. They all seem so ordinary—until you think about how extraordinary their mere existence is.

Gleiser has argued that the demand for complete explanations is too much to ask. The directive of scientists to ‘keep looking for explanations until you find them,’ might be impossible to live up to. He illustrates the limits of scientific explanation with many examples of inaccessible knowledge (Gleiser, 2014, 2016). For example, we will never know if our universe is infinite, because we are *necessarily* limited in our possible observations by the distance light has travelled since the Big Bang (Gleiser, 2016:64). Thus, we *cannot* explain what lies beyond this ‘cosmic horizon.’ Searchers also come up short when explanations at the quantum level involve an *essential* randomness that is unexplained, and *perhaps inexplicable* (Gleiser, 2016:60). We also can never know *for certain* how life evolved, because we cannot go back in time to check. Science can only come up with coherent, *possible* explanations (Gleiser, 2016:130).

Gleiser’s strong thesis is that such examples cannot be categorised as merely not-yet-explained, but rather, he writes, they are ‘unexplainable’ and ‘unknowable’ in principle (Gleiser, 2016:17,18). Thus, there is no point in following the strategy of *keep-on-looking* until you find a materialist explanation. For all practical purposes, we can never have total complete explanations for everything. We must relax our demands for such total explanation and be content with what he calls ‘the simple beauty of the unexpected’ (Gleiser, 2016:97).

We limited humans will have to be satisfied with the wonder of existence. Not only are some things unexplainable, but perhaps not all things require an explanation. Gleiser urges us to ‘free’ ourselves from the misplaced need for ‘an explanatory principle for all that happens’ and instead celebrate the mystery of ‘what is beyond our grasp’ (Gleiser, 2016:97). While remaining agnostic, Gleiser uses religious language when describing his ‘spiritual’ experiences in nature (2016: 7); the ‘state of grace’ felt while swimming (2016:79); and the ‘magical’ awe he experiences towards scientific explanations of cosmic creation—even if ultimately limited (2016:96).

Conclusion

If one adopts Gleiser’s advice to give up searching for ultimate explanations that are not forthcoming, one is left with acceptance of essential mysteries. Both *Archaic Miracles* and *Modern Age Miracles* remain wondrous. One’s visit to Lourdes need not be insincere if one does not believe in the supernaturalness of miracles which supposedly occurred there. Pilgrims really do get spiritual relief from their experience (Ferguson, 2014). One can celebrate the sudden, unexpected recovery of the sick—even if it is just a coincidence.

Explanations aimed at debunking miracles often stop in places that are mysterious in their own right—psychosomatic recovery, hypnotic suggestion, and the placebo effect. These events seem to reveal that a person can heal themselves through belief alone, without medicinal or physical treatment. These examples could be added to the kinds of things that Gleiser says are ‘magical enough’ (Gleiser, 2016:96). They heighten our awareness of the mystery of the universe. One must accept the irreducible presence of mystery, and yet make

a reasonable judgement in the absence of evidence. There is no point in searching for complete and total explanations that cannot be had. Neither is there a need to acknowledge a role for the supernatural.

It seems that the Vatican itself is adopting this relaxed attitude towards supernatural explanations for miracles. In 2006, the Bishop of Tarbes and Lourdes, announced less stringent criteria for the official recognition of miracles. In acknowledgment of modern science, miracles can now include healings that are simply ‘unexpected,’ or ‘exceptional,’ and not necessarily supernatural. The bishop is quoted as saying that

We are no longer in the nineteenth century and we need to recognise that. Fundamentally, it remains a matter of faith and prayer (Burke, 2006).

These healings are ‘authentic’ because they are spiritual experiences that instil reverence in a pilgrim; and not because they are exceptions to the laws of nature (Chrisafis & Torres, 2006). This language mirrors that of those quoted earlier in this paper. There is no way to distinguish the supernatural miracle from the *merely* psychological one. West’s criticism, quoted above, of the over-emphasis, when evaluating miracles at Lourdes, on

relief from *merely* subjective symptoms (West, 1957:99-120), would be out of place in today’s Lourdes.

My aim is not to take away from the wonder of miracles, but rather, to expand that wonder to more everyday experiences. When the travel writer Pico Iyer first visited the paradisaical island of Bali, Indonesia, his joyful eagerness made him mistake the toxic chemical smoke of mosquito coils for holy incense; and he experienced a whiff of clove cigarette smoke as the fragrance of flowers. He supposed, however, that these *false* associations were the result of the truly magical context that Bali provides (Iyer, 1989:28). What magic awaits the pilgrim who simply learns to see it that way? The religious tourist can relate to miracles as a kind of ‘emergence of the sacred’ in the world of subjective, human responses to the world. Biologist Ursula Goodenough sees it this way in her sacred attitude towards nature and writes

I take the concept of miracle and use it not as a manifestation of divine intervention but as the astonishing property of emergence (Goodenough, 1998:30).

This emergence cannot be dismissed as illusory any more than one could dismiss beauty, intention, music, morality—and anything else meaningful.

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