

# The Key Presupposition of Liberal Theology

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## Liberal theology

In this paper I want to draw your attention to an idea about the relationship between religion and science which was a central cause of what is called 'liberal theology' in the West. By this term I mean that movement in the 19<sup>th</sup> century  
10 which calls itself 'Christian theology' although it rejects many doctrines that hitherto generally were considered to be essential to Christianity and which is represented by Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834), Ernst Troeltsch (1865–1923), and Rudolf Bultmann (1884–1976). In particular, it claims that we cannot believe in miracles or, more generally, divine interventions any more.

15 The doctrines about God and salvation which traditional Christian theology considered essential to Christian faith are, as I will explain, rejected in liberal theology. The change from traditional Christian theology to this liberal theology is therefore very big. A liberal theologian might claim that he discovered the true essence of the Christian doctrines and therefore changed their interpretation,  
20 but whatever view you take on this, the change in the beliefs is very big.

Liberal theology has changed dramatically all the mainline Protestant churches, beginning with the German protestant state churches, and later also the Roman Catholic Church. That is, in these churches forms of liberal theology have been accepted by many or by the majority of theology professors and of ministers. It  
25 is no exaggeration that without liberal theology the religion and thinking of large segments of the population could well have developed very differently. And therefore history could well have developed very differently.

## Friedrich Schleiermacher, the church father of the 19<sup>th</sup> century

Friedrich Schleiermacher is sometimes called the 'church father' of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>1</sup> And rightly so, because, while there had been others before him who rejected  
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<sup>1</sup> For example (Lülmann 1907).

ted traditional Christian doctrine in similar ways, Schleiermacher brought liberal theology into faculties of theology of German universities and into the German state churches.

On the 21<sup>st</sup> of January 1787 Schleiermacher, while he was a student of an evangelical seminary, wrote to his father, that he cannot believe any more that Jesus was 'eternal, true God' and that 'his death was a substitutionary atonement'.<sup>2</sup> In later writings he is more articulate about his reasons for rejecting traditional Christian doctrine. His main reason is that belief in miracles is incompatible with science.

If you consider the contemporary state of the natural sciences, what do you expect [...] for our protestant Christianity? Me thinks that we will have to learn to do without what many are still accustomed to regard as inseparably bound to the essence of Christianity. [...] The concept of a miracle will not be able to exist in its present form.<sup>3</sup>

If the church, Schleiermacher thinks, continues to teach that there were divine interventions in the universe, then it will contradict science and hence its doctrine will become untenable, the church will become irrelevant, and theology can no longer have a place in the university. So Schleiermacher's main reason for rejecting Christian doctrine and forming liberal theology is his claim that belief in miracles is incompatible with science. Troeltsch, Bultmann and many others have similar reasons. They say that one 'cannot' believe in miracles any more.

As Schleiermacher did not simply want to say that Christian doctrine is false and that Christianity should therefore be given up, he changed the meanings of the old Christian doctrinal statements. He attributed new meanings to them, which do not contain anything any more that Schleiermacher did not believe. In particular, they do not contain any claims of divine interventions.

## Miracles and divine interventions

I shall now argue that there is no rational reason for the claim that divine interventions are impossible or incompatible with science. For this, first we need to understand what a divine intervention is, and for this we first need an idea of what a causal process is, because divine interventions are interventions *in* causal processes. Examples of causal processes are a rolling billiard ball and a tidal wave. Causal processes have a direction, they are heading in a certain direction. The billiard ball at time t<sub>1</sub> is heading towards falling into the pocket at time t<sub>2</sub>. At time t<sub>1</sub> the billiard ball is in a way programmed so that it will be at

<sup>2</sup> The letter is reprinted in (Schleiermacher 1860, 46f). English translation: <https://postbarthian.com/2016/09/01/schleiermachers-distressing-letter-father/>.

<sup>3</sup> (Schleiermacher 1829, 489f)

certain positions at certain later times if nothing stops it. In Chile on 27 February 2010 at 6:39 UTC, five minutes after the earthquake, there was a tidal wave heading towards arriving in Easter Island on 12:05 UTC. Also a thing's persisting in time is a causal process. The billiard ball's existence and being as it is at t<sub>1</sub> is a cause of its existence at t<sub>2</sub>. Things are, or are constituted by, causal processes.

A divine intervention is an event brought about by God directly which occurs instead of an event which a causal process would have brought about had God not intervened. It is thus an event which God brings about and which stops some causal process. More precisely:

A divine intervention is an event which is brought about by God directly and which is incompatible with an event towards which a causal process was heading.

If God lets Peter walk on water, he brings about his position above the water so that he stays above the water instead of sinking into the water, which is what the causal processes, driven by gravitational force, would lead to. If God raises Jesus from the dead, he makes his body being alive when the causal processes were directed towards the body staying dead and towards decaying.

Miracles are a kind of divine intervention. They are divine interventions through which God shows something to somebody. A different kind of divine interventions would be for example God creating a certain animal so that the existence of that animal is not just the result of causal processes. Schleiermacher and other liberal theologians took miracles to be impossible or incompatible with science because they are divine interventions. So are divine interventions compatible with science?

### **Miracles as 'violations of the laws of nature'**

The most promising way to defend the incompatibility of miracles and science is to say that the laws of nature exclude the existence of divine interventions. Thus David Hume said that miracles would be '*violations of the laws of nature*'. If this were true, that would be a powerful argument against miracles, because all the evidence that supports the the laws of nature that we know today – the experiments and the observations – would at the same time be evidence against the existence of miracles. That evidence would show that there are no miracles without us having to examine the evidence for the alleged miracles. For example, we then do not have to examine how credible the reports of the disciples to have seen the risen Jesus are, how credible the reports about what the disciples said are, etc. We would have a simple, quick, and powerful argument against *all* miracles. Hume himself took his argument to be such an argument:

A miracle is a violation of the laws of nature; and as a firm and unalterable ex-

105 perience has established these laws, the proof against a miracle, from the very nature of the fact, is as entire as any argument from experience can possibly be imagined. (*Enquiry*, § 90)

This is based on the assumption that laws of nature entail *regularities of succession* of the form:

110 Every event of type x is followed by an event of type y.

In addition Hume assumes that (always or necessarily)

Equal events are followed by equal events.

Every event is therefore an element of a regularity of succession, and every event is governed by laws of nature. Now remember, a divine intervention is an event brought about by God directly which occurs instead of an event which a causal process would have brought about had God not intervened. This entails that a divine intervention is an event of type z that follows an event of type x, where events of type x on other occasions are followed by events of type y. So, given the above-mentioned assumptions, a divine intervention is violation of the laws of nature. It is an event about which the laws of nature say that it does not occur.

### What do the laws of nature say?

Let us examine the claim that miracles would be violations of the laws of nature. What do the laws say? What, for example, does the law of gravitation say?

$$F = G \frac{m_1 m_2}{r^2}$$

125 The letter F on the left side of the equation signifies a Newtonian force. On the right side of the equation there are the masses of the bodies, their distance, and the gravitational constant. The law says that for all two bodies there is a certain force pulling to them towards each other. Simply put, the law of gravitation says that all two bodies attract each other to a certain degree, which depends on their masses, their distance, and the gravitational constant. More generally, laws are statements of the following form:

In situations of kind x there are forces of kind y.

135 So does a divine intervention violate such laws? Does it violate what the laws say? The laws say that there are forces of certain kinds in situations of certain kinds. A divine intervention violates that if and only if it abolishes a force. Does it? No. If God makes Peter walk on water, the gravitational force pulling him down is still there. God just counteracts that force by making Peter be above the water. Therefore divine interventions are not violations of the laws of nature.

In order to intervene, God does not need to abolish any forces because forces can be counteracted. That is evident also from the fact that forces can be super-  
140 imposed. If there is a force  $F$  acting on a body, it accelerates the body with  $a=F/m$  only if nothing else is acting on the body. It does not accelerate thus if, for example, another force, an animal, a man, a ghost, or God is acting on the body.

John Stuart Mill therefore wrote:

145 All laws of causation, in consequence of their liability to be counteracted, require to be stated in words affirmative of tendencies only, and not of actual results.<sup>4</sup>

By saying that laws require to be stated in words affirmative ‘not of actual results’, Mill means that laws of nature do not say that all events of type  $s$  are always followed by events of type  $y$ . That is, laws do not entail regularities of succession. The belief in regularities of succession is not supported by the laws and  
150 by observation, it was invented by philosophers without basis in experience. There are no regularities of succession because if at one occasion an event of type  $x$  causes an event of type  $y$ , at another occasion where there is an event of type  $x$ , there may be something which prevents it from causing an event of type  $y$ . What laws do entail are conditional predictions of the following form:

If a situation of kind  $x$  and nothing else is affecting what will follow, then an event of type  $y$  will follow.

That forces can be counteracted reflects something that we know from our ordinary experience of material things. Deterministic philosophers like Thomas  
160 Hobbes and Immanuel Kant taught that physical causal processes are unstoppable. Hobbes claimed: ‘Every event is necessitated by things antecedent.’<sup>5</sup> Kant taught in his principle of causality: ‘Every event is determined by a cause according to constant laws.’<sup>6</sup> That is false because every causal process can be  
165 stopped. It cannot stop by accident, but it can be stopped by something that acts causally upon it. A physical process can be stopped by another physical process, by an animal, or by a human being. And therefore it can also be stopped by God.

Determinists would reply that if a process is stopped by another physical process, that intersection of processes was determined too. It is true that that intersection was also governed by laws of nature. The two processes that run into  
170 each other constitute one bigger process, which is governed by the laws of nature. But still, the possibility of one process being stopped by another shows that physical processes can be stopped. A process stops if there is something that stops it. Bigger processes are not more necessary and unstoppable than  
175 smaller processes, they just require more powerful things to stop them.

<sup>4</sup> (Mill 1843, book III, ch. 10, § 5)

<sup>5</sup> *De corpore*, 9.5.

<sup>6</sup> Kant, *Prolegomena*, § 15.

In summary, divine interventions do not violate the laws of nature, because the laws of nature say only what forces there are in which kind of situation. Forces can be counteracted. Forces can be counteracted by other physical forces, by animals, or by human beings. And of course they can also be counteracted also by  
180 God. The laws say what forces there are. In a miracle God does not annihilate any forces, he just counteracts them. Therefore miracles are not violations of the laws of nature.<sup>7</sup>

The question whether there are divine interventions cannot be answered by just referring to the laws of nature or to some metaphysical principle. It can only be  
185 answered by examining the evidence for particular divine interventions.

Liberal theologians say that we have to revise Christian doctrine because science excludes belief in divine interventions. But science and rationality do no such thing. Divine interventions are perfectly compatible with the laws of nature and with science. Hence there is no reason here for abandoning biblical and tradi-  
190 tional Christian doctrine.

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<sup>7</sup> A more thorough argument for this claim is (Wachter 2015).