

The Stigmata, Rainbow Bodies, and Hume's Argument Against Miracles

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Abstract: The testimony that Jesus rose from the dead or that St. Francis miraculously received stigmata is supposed to vindicate Christianity over other religious traditions. Similarly, the rainbow bodies of important spiritual exemplars in Tibetan Buddhism can be taken to justify the Buddhist tradition over its counterparts. What should we believe when the evidence suggests that the competing miracle claims contained in two different religious contexts both happened? One of David Hume's arguments against miracles is that the competing testimonies in diverse religious traditions cancel each other out. In this paper, we argue against Hume. Specifically, we argue that there is logical space for thinking that Buddhist and Christian miracle claims are not competing but must be understood as consistent.

Keywords: Rainbow Body, Hume, Miracles

When it comes to religious apologetics, one strategy typically employed to show why one religious tradition is superior to another is to deploy evidence for a miracle. For example, Christians, for almost two millennia, have argued that Jesus of Nazareth was resurrected from the dead. The testimony of the miraculous is supposed to help vindicate Christianity's overall message; it is why we should take it seriously as a religion. Nonetheless, what we see is that other religious traditions also make claims of the miraculous, and they, too, argue that these miracles vindicate their tradition. David Hume finds this puzzling. Hume argues that competing miracle claims in diverse religious traditions cancel each other. A Christian's claim that Jesus rose from the dead is no better supported than the Tibetan

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Buddhist, who claims that a spiritual exemplar has been reduced to a rainbow body. Both religions can't be true. The vindication of one religious tradition is, then, short-lived.

In this paper, we argue against Hume. Specifically, we argue that the testimonies of miracles occurring within two diverse religious traditions do not necessarily cancel one another. To establish our thesis, we situate Hume's argument by briefly addressing the evidence for miracle claims in Christianity and Buddhism. Second, we explicate and extend Hume's argument. Third, we synthesise the central theses of Classical Theism and Buddhism to lay the foundation for a narrative that shows how miracle reports from two diverse religious traditions can be true.

Miracles

Without getting into the details as to why, most New Testament historians affirm the following as facts:

Fact 1: Jesus died by crucifixion.

Fact 2: Jesus was buried in a tomb by Joseph of Arimathea.

Fact 3: The tomb became empty.

Fact 4: The disciples sincerely believed that Jesus had risen from the dead.

Fact 5: Saul, an early persecutor of the Church, claimed to have had an encounter with the risen Jesus that changed the trajectory of his life (Habermas, 2023).

Looking for a unified and simple theory which explains these facts, Christian apologists have argued that the hypothesis that God raised Jesus from the dead has the most explanatory virtues. The primary alternative to the resurrection hypothesis would be a hallucination theory. The story goes like this: The disciples firmly believed that Jesus was Israel's Messiah. Moreover, the disciples did not know how to handle seeing their beloved messiah die. Cognitive dissonance kicked in, and the disciples, individually and at times corporately, hallucinated the resurrected Jesus. Christian apologists, however, are quick to point out that discussion of group hallucinations is nearly absent

from the peer-reviewed psychology literature (Licona, 484-485, 2010). Meaning that while group hallucinations are not impossible, the likelihood of it happening is very improbable.

Moreover, outside of cases of severe mental illness and or drug intake, hallucinations usually happen with only one of the senses. A hallucination through only one of the senses doesn't predict the degree of certainty the Apostles seemingly had. Finally, apologists point out that the hallucination hypothesis does not explain the empty tomb.

It isn't just the resurrection of Jesus that Christians appeal to vindicate the teachings of Jesus. Some Christian saints have been said to possess the stigmata (i.e., the wounds of Christ). For example, according to St. Bonaventure, there were many eyewitnesses to St. Francis possessing the stigmata. Bonaventure states that among the witnesses, various cardinals claimed to have seen the stigmata. Pope Alexander also claimed to be an eyewitness; at the time of his death, over 50 brothers and St. Clare were witnesses to it (Bonaventure, 2010).

Now, we have a few options. We can argue that Bonaventure was a bad academic and didn't correctly vet his sources. This seems implausible, however, once you become familiar with Bonaventure's work. We could think Bonaventure was lying. Once again, this will seem implausible to many of his readers. One might also think that Bonaventure's sources were mistaken. Maybe what the eyewitnesses saw was a man who had leprosy. And it just so happened that he had leprosy where the wounds of Christ were believed to be. But you also might think this is all implausible. The eyewitnesses would have worked with people who possessed leprosy. Therefore, they would be able to recognize it in Francis. The leprosy didn't spread. Was it such that there happened to be leprosy only on the relevant parts of Francis' body such that it looked like he had the stigmata? This seems all too serendipitous. If one isn't already a committed naturalist, it doesn't seem like a stretch to argue that a supernatural event occurred.

Rainbow bodies

In Tibetan circles, it isn't unheard of that a moral exemplar becomes a *rainbow body*. Roughly, the phenomenon goes as follows: After dying, the moral exemplar's body shrinks for several days. By

the end of the week, the body completely disappears. What remains is the hair of the dead and a rainbow appearing above their location.

According to Dale Allison, we see accounts like these in Tibetan scholars like Chogyam Trungpa and religious leaders like the Dalai Lama (Allison, p. 504, 2021). At the start of the millennium, Francis Tiso, a Catholic priest and scholar, travelled to Tibet to investigate the claims that a spiritual exemplar named Khenpo Cho became a rainbow body (Allison, p. 505, 2021; Tiso, 2016). Tiso accessed firsthand witnesses to the apparent rainbow body phenomenon. Tiso left unsure what to make of the incident. It could be that the Buddhist monks he interviewed colluded and made the story up. It could be that all of the monks were mistaken or deceived. However, to complicate the story further, there were even monks who claimed that Khenpo appeared to them after his ascension into the light (Tiso, 60, 2016).

Using the principle of charity, we should give the Tibetan monks and their collaborated testimony the benefit of the doubt. Until we are given further reason to doubt the monks, we should assume that the facts surrounding Khenpo are what they appear to be. And given that the hallucination hypotheses aren't plausible, we are left with the need to take the testimony seriously.

Cue David Hume. Hume famously argues against the rationality of believing in miracles. His overall argument goes something like this: miracles are a violation of the laws of nature and, as such, are extraordinarily improbable (Hume, 2001). Since we should always believe what is more probable, believing that a miracle occurred isn't rational.³ Hume follows up his reasoning by giving four additional problems. The one relevant to our purposes goes as follows:

Every miracle, therefore, pretended to have been wrought in any of these religions (and all of them abound in miracles), as its direct scope is to establish the particular system to which it is attributed; so has it the same force, though more indirectly, to overthrow every other system. In destroying a rival system, it likewise destroys the credit of those miracles, on

³ There is a debate in the literature on whether Hume was showing that it was epistemically impossible to rationally believe that a miracle occurred. The traditional view sees Hume as doing just this. The view is represented by Earman (2000). For a non-traditional interpretation of Hume, see Sobel (1987).

which that system was established; so that all the prodigies of different religions are to be regarded as contrary facts, and the evidence of these prodigies, whether weak or strong, as opposite each other...This argument may appear over subtle and refined; but is not in reality different from the reasoning of a judge, who supposes, that the credit of two witnesses, maintaining a crime against any one, is destroyed by the testimony of two others...(Hume, 2001).

According to the Humean scholar, John Earman, 'Hume's version of the argument begins with the observation that the various religions of the world have incompatible doctrines at their cores...Each religion claims to be supported by miracles. But, Hume maintains, the miracles that support one religion undermine the others, and the testimonies to the miracles of different religions undermine each other' (Earman, p. 68, 2000). In our case, the objection goes like this: Buddhism and Christianity are diverse religious traditions. They aren't simply diverse; their essential propositional content is inconsistent, or at least, so it seems. At best, there is an exclusive disjunction between Buddhism and Christianity. Nonetheless, both make claims to the miraculous. The Christian might emphasize the resurrection of Jesus or a Saint's stigmata, while the Buddhist might appeal to rainbow bodies. These miracles are said to vindicate the life teachings of an exemplar. Since there is no real way to discern between the relevant testimonies, we must assume that one miracle claim washes out the other. As Alexander George puts it, 'If these are really two distinct foundations [competing testimony claims] how are they to be weighed against one another, and what sense does such weighing even have? Hume felt the problem and proposed a solution: there is only one foundation of credibility, for the evidential strength of testimony ultimately depends on common observation' (George, p. 16, 2016). This leaves us without a reason to prefer one religious tradition over another.

The Synthesis

Not so fast. McNabb and Baldwin argue that Classical Theism is consistent with what they call Mere Buddhism (McNabb and Baldwin, 2022). By Classical Theism, McNabb and Baldwin mean to endorse the thesis that God exists and that He is metaphysically simple (i.e., not made up of metaphysical parts or properties), immutable (i.e. doesn't change), and impassible (i.e., it impossible to cause change in God). McNabb and Baldwin take Mere Buddhism's central metaphysical theses to be the

impermanence thesis and the interdependent thesis. Roughly, the former says that subtle change in S entails substantial change, such that S doesn't retain its identity from moment to moment. The latter states that all things are causally and conceptually dependent on other things. This leads to the view that all things ultimately lack *svabhāva* (intrinsic nature).⁴

Assuming these theses are true, theism seems far off. How can God be lacking intrinsic nature? Since all things are impermanent and dependent, that would include God as well, right? There are classical theistic traditions that don't consider God to be a thing. In fact, the neo-Platonic tradition considers God to be no-thing and above being. If a thing is that which can possess a property and God lacks any property altogether, then God shouldn't be considered within the realm of things. Rather, He is what makes possible the realm of existent things and is therefore, the explanandum of *all* things. Since the aforementioned theses are restricted to the realm of things, God need not apply. It is important to point out that McNabb and Baldwin are not arguing that it is plausible to read Buddhist texts as consistent with Classical Theism. Rather, what they seek to establish is there being logical and metaphysical space to affirm both the metaphysical theses of Buddhism and Classical Theism.

One problem McNabb and Baldwin engage with is that the Buddhist might not restrict the theses to 'things' but to Being simpliciter. For instance, Masao Abe maintains that the Buddhist doctrine of dependent origination implies that 'there can be absolutely nothing whatsoever that is real and eternal – behind this actual world' and that nothingness (*śūnyatā*) must be understood as absolute, as tantamount to the double negation of both Platonic Being and becoming.' In this case, the inconsistency emerges. Being can't be always changing and dependent (Abe, 139-48, 1997). God then, at least the Classical glossing, is inconsistent with Buddhism.

⁴ Burton uses 'entity' in David Burton, *Emptiness Appraised: A Critical Study of Nagarjuna's Philosophy* (London: Routledge Press, 2015), 36. Westerhoff uses the word 'object' in Jan Westerhoff, *Nāgārjuna's Madhyamaka: A Philosophical Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 26. Garfield uses the word 'phenomena' in Jay Garfield, *Engaging Buddhism: Why It Matters to Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 2. Garfield also at times uses the word 'thing' for object.

McNabb and Baldwin develop various responses to this objection. One response relates to the Buddha's disinterest in metaphysics and not seeing the relevant debates as pertinent to realization (McNabb and Baldwin, 29-32, 2022). In this way, McNabb and Baldwin suggest that a Buddhist Theist might follow the Buddha and argue that if the Buddha wasn't interested in heavy metaphysical claims, the Buddhist Theist needn't feel obligated to endorse that interdependence and impermeant theses apply to that which is beyond the realm of existent things. However, we think they could offer an additional response if they availed themselves to the skillful means hermeneutic of *The Lotus Sutra*. To be clear, the response we are about to propose was not featured in McNabb and Baldwin's *Classical Theism and Buddhism*. However, we think the response fits well with their prior work and could contribute to their overall project.

Skillful Means

As the Buddhist tradition continued to develop, especially its in Mahayana form, there emerged tensions between what the older sources of Buddhism taught and what developed Buddhist traditions began to teach. Springing from this milieu, *The Lotus Sutra*, at least assuming a pluralist interpretation of the text,⁵ teaches that although there are various paths to Buddhahood there really is just one Buddha-vehicle (*yāna*) by which we may attain enlightenment. A variety of teachings and methods are preached so that all living beings may attain enlightenment, but really there is just the wisdom of the one Buddha-vehicle. Viewed one way, all Buddhist teachings are relative, temporary, and transient, and, insofar as they enable practitioners to achieve enlightenment, they are *upāya*, that is, expedient or skillful means (to enlightenment). Viewed another way, the one Buddha-vehicle is the final absolute truth on which all Buddha-vehicles depend and by which they are unified (Kato and Yoshirō, 1975). The skillful means hermeneutic offered the Buddhist a way to make sense of the apparent contradictions. The hermeneutic would have us see the previous teaching as expedient teaching. That is, the previous teaching was given to further a particular end for a particular time and

⁵ As one reviewer points out, there is a hierachal interpretation of the skillful means hermeneutic where skillful means comes in degrees. On this view, there is a best skillful means, where the best skillful means is the only path to Buddhahood. We don't have this interpretation of *The Lotus Sutra* in mind. You therefore can qualify our thesis in such a way that it assumes as pluralist reading *The Lotus Sutra*.

for a particular people. Nonetheless, the true interpretation of these texts is now being known (O'Leary, 2010). In the same way we might explain complicated physics to a child using half-truths and analogies (at least until the child's mind develops further), we can see previous Buddhist teaching doing much of the same. The one Buddha-vehicle teachings of *The Lotus Sutra* do not preclude or rule out the truth of Theism.

Utilizing the skillful means hermeneutic, we can then argue that if the Buddha did apply the aforementioned theses to being simpliciter, he did so as a skillful means to enable less spiritually developed minds to draw closer to enlightenment. The Buddhist who wants to be a classical theist can avail herself of her own Buddhist hermeneutic to argue that Buddhism is indeed metaphysically consistent with the sort of theism that denies that God is a thing.

Similarly, she might take this approach to more broadly understand the Buddhist tradition's rejection of theism. The authors of the early Buddhist literature understood that if theism were explicitly endorsed, their early readers would imagine God to be an anthropomorphic deity. The early Buddhists did not want to confuse their audience about God. It was easier at the time to deny the existence of gods than articulate the permanent bliss which grounds all impermanent and interdependent things. Once again, the Buddhist who wants to be a Classical Theist can pull from her Buddhist resources to argue that there is logical space to be both a Classical Theist and a Mere Buddhist. While it is true that theism is not consistent with non-theism, we have argued that if Buddhism is understood in the aforementioned way, Buddhism doesn't have to be considered as an exemplar of non-theism, there is space for logical and metaphysical convergence.

The Narrative

Let's go back to Hume. Here is a narrative that can dissolve the worry that miracles in competing religious traditions *necessarily* cancel each other. Let's say that the God of Classical Theism exists. He has made Himself known to some degree throughout most cultures in human history. Following Vatican II, (*Ad Gentes*, 1965) we can say that God has a secret presence in these religious traditions. God's secret presence isn't always seen in the same way. For example, some religious believers might recognize God without even recognizing His Divinity. They might, nonetheless, believe in pure

and perfected conscious bliss. Or perhaps they know Him by understanding that He is the force that is responsible for the true nature of all substances. Throughout religious contexts, God leaves each culture with truths that ultimately point to Him. This includes God-giving cultures basic ethical frameworks which enable the community to draw closer to Him.

In McNabb and Baldwin's work, they argue that we can read the problem of samsara in a theistic context. The standard soteriological problem in Buddhism goes as follows: All things are without *svabhāva* (McNabb and Baldwin, 90-92, 2022). Much of suffering emerges, however, when we treat things as possessing intrinsic nature. We treat things as dependent and permanent features of ultimate reality. What ends the cycle of suffering is the right realization that all things are ultimately empty. Once this realization is had, suffering ceases or at least, significantly decreases.

This isn't that different from what the theist says. We can understand samsara in a theistic context: God, as a no-thing, is the ultimate reality. Nonetheless, we see ourselves as ultimate. We search for the ever-changing and the ever-dependent without even recognizing that we are already connected to what we desire. We get in trouble when we fail to apply the interdependence and impermanence theses to ourselves. We fail to recognize that our fleeting existence is radically contingent on that which is Pure Existence.

Again, the soteriological systems can be rendered consistent with one another. And if Classical Theism is true, God might reward believers in different religious contexts for obtaining the right realization. In a Buddhist context, God might turn an enlightened exemplar into a rainbow body, so Tibetan locals would take the Buddhist soteriological message seriously. Nonetheless, the God of Classical Theism could also resurrect the Son of God to vindicate His teachings and identity. Moreover, He can also cause exemplars in the mold of Christ to possess the same wounds of Christ. In each case, God is encouraging the religious on their spiritual journey. The miracles do not necessarily cancel each other out. Plausibly, the miracle claims can support each other in a broader narrative.

Of course, one might argue that all we have done is shown that it is epistemically possible that Buddhism and theism are consistent or that it is epistemically possible for one to think Buddhist and

Christian miracles can be genuine and not cancel each other out. To clarify, the aim of this paper, is in some sense, epistemic in nature, as Hume's arguments against miracles are epistemic arguments. We seek to resolve the epistemic tension raised by Hume by way of showing that there is a way to interpret Buddhism and Christianity where it would be false to say that miracle claims happening in diverse religious contexts cancel each other out. This move is only possible however, due to the fact that, as discussed earlier, the metaphysics of theism can be rendered or interpreted consistent with Buddhism. Having said all of this, Hume's argument is very quick and he doesn't take the sort of narrative or model defended here into account. Because of this, it seems like Hume's argument needs more development.

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