Banning the Supernatural: Why Historians Must Not Rule Out the Action of God in History
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Scholarly history as written today, and for the past forty years, has banned everything supernatural as though it were an intellectual plague. The very possibility of action by God in history has become academically taboo. This prohibition applies not only to miracles and apparitions, but even to the power of prayer. So universal is this ban, so chilling its effect even on the minds of historians who personally believe in the supernatural, that its imposition has gone virtually unchallenged during the past forty years. Indeed, in all honesty I must say that since I began writing scholarly Catholic history fourteen years ago I have found no other contemporary historian who writes in defiance of this ban.

This situation cannot be allowed to continue. For our Christian and Catholic faith is pre-eminently an historical faith. We believe that God, the Creator and Sustainer of the universe, entered history, incarnate as the man Jesus Christ, at a particular time and place. No other religion has ever claimed that. In G. K. Chesterton’s words:

Right in the middle of all these things stands up an enormous exception. . . nothing less than the loud assertion that this mysterious maker of the world has visited his world in person. It declares that really and even recently, or right in the middle of historic times, there did walk into the world this original invisible being, about whom the thinkers make theories and the mythologists hand down myths; the Man Who Made the World. That such a higher personality exists behind all things had indeed always been implied by all the best thinkers, as well as by all the most beautiful legends. But nothing of this sort had ever been implied in any of them. It is simply false to say that the other sages and heroes had claimed to be that mysterious master and maker, of whom the world had dreamed and disputed. Not one of them had ever claimed to be anything of the sort. Not one of their sects or schools had ever claimed that they had claimed to be anything of the sort. The most that any religious prophet had said was that he was the true servant of such a being. The most that any visionary had ever said was that men might catch glimpses of the glory of that spiritual being; or much more often of lesser spiritual beings. The most that any primitive myth had ever suggested was that the Creator was present at the Creation. But that the Creator was present at scenes a little subsequent to the supper parties of Horace, and talked with tax col-
lectors and government officials in the detailed daily life of the Roman Empire, and that this fact continued to be firmly asserted by the whole of that great civilization for more than a thousand years—that is something utterly unlike anything else. . . . It makes nothing but dust and nonsense of comparative religion.¹

If that is our faith, we should never allow ourselves to be persuaded or pressured to consent to any field of study—especially history—being declared off limits to it. Rather we should say, with Dom Prosper Gueranger:

History ought to be Christian, if it is to be true; for Christianity is the truth complete; and every historical system which disregards the supernatural order in its explanation and evaluation of the facts, is a false system which explains nothing, and which leaves the annals of humanity in chaos and a permanent contradiction with all the ideas that reason forms on the destinies of our race here below.²

From the first Catholic historian, Eusebius of Caesarea, through St. Augustine's magisterial City of God to Caesar Baronius, the first modern Catholic historian and Bossuet's Discours sur l'histoire universelle, and on down to the middle of this twentieth century with the works of Belloc, Chesterton, and William Thomas Walsh, strong and indeed mighty voices were always heard telling history from the Catholic viewpoint, which puts God and His Son and the Church He founded at the center of history. But the last great avowedly Catholic historian, Christopher Dawson, was much more cautious, seeking academic acceptance as he was for his presentation of Christian culture; and since Dawson, even Catholic historians have generally accepted, without even a protest, the academic ban on the supernatural, which consequently now reigns supreme.

Let us look at seven examples of how it works.

The first concerns the great Old Testament prophet Isaiah. An hypothesis elaborately built up over the past hundred years and now generally accepted by both Scripture scholars and ancient historians, holds that there were two, or possibly even three Isaiahs. Though this hypothesis is defended by linguistic and literary-critical arguments with which I am not fully competent to deal, even a cursory reading of the works of its advocates shows their principal premise to be that prophecy which actually predicts the future (and which therefore, if more than mere coincidence, must be of supernatural origin) cannot occur. A writing which names, as Isaiah does, a deliverer 175 years in the future (King Cyrus of Persia) must, by definition, have been written after that deliverer actually came. In a rare recognition of the fact that Catholics believe God does know the future and sometimes reveals this knowledge to men, the Jerusalem Bible's Introduction to the Prophets states:
Almighty God could, of course, have conveyed the prophet into the distant future, severing him from his own time, transforming his imagery and cast of thought. This would mean, however, a duplication of the author’s personality and a disregard for his contemporaries—to whom, after all, he was sent—for which the Bible provides no parallel.

This astonishing statement not only disregards the continuity of history (why would Isaiah’s personality be “duplicated” by receiving a revelation?) and the self-evident utility of prophecy which comes true, but is flatly wrong in asserting that such prophecy is found only in Isaiah. Jeremiah correctly predicted the fall of Babylon; Daniel correctly predicted the eventual total ruin and desolation of Babylon and Tyre; Jesus Himself predicted that within the lifetime of some of his hearers the Temple of Jerusalem would be totally destroyed, as it was forty years later. But reason and even common sense must give way, it seems, in the face of anything or anyone challenging the ban on the supernatural.

No such simple solution as multiplying the prophet is available for scholars studying the New Testament from the anti-supernatural position. The Gospels in particular are full of miracles, and above all point to the Great Miracle, the Incarnation itself, crowned by the Resurrection. The extraordinary, long-continued and still vehement campaign against their authenticity as history constitutes the second and most important example of scholarly prejudice against the supernatural.

It is understandable, though very sad, to see Catholic historians and teachers, overwhelmed by the blizzard of destructive criticism of the New Testament in general and the Gospels in particular, seeking refuge in the dictum that the Gospels were not intended to be history, but works of faith. Of course they were and are more than histories, but they are not less than history. The events they describe really happened. They pass all the critical tests historians apply to contested early documents. Internal, external, and manuscript evidence prove at least two of them (Matthew and John) to have been written by those apostles, who were eye-witnesses. The four Gospels confirm each other on all major points, while differing enough on details to make it clear they were not copied from each other. The chronological systems by which Luke and John date events at the beginning of Christ’s public ministry, beginning at completely different starting points, converge on precisely the same year, 27-28 A.D. Their story is independently verified by a non-Christian source in the Old Slavonic edition of Josephus’s *The Jewish War.*

But if one accepts the Gospels as authentic historical documents, confirming and reinforcing one another, they are more likely to command belief in the supernatural events they describe. So it is that any arguments challenging their authenticity become academically correct, while those sustaining their authenticity are not to be heard.
A third example of the rejection of the supernatural in modern history is provided by the extensive historical literature on St. Joan of Arc. We are fortunate in possessing an unusually large volume of contemporary documentary evidence on St. Joan, notably the complete transcript of her trial for heresy in 1431 which led to her conviction and death at the stake. The fundamental issue in her trial and in her mission was whether it was in fact of supernatural origin. Her prosecutor, Bishop Pierre Cauchon of Beauvais, assembled an enormous staff consisting of a cardinal, six bishops, 32 doctors of theology, 16 bachelors of theology, seven doctors of medicine, and 103 other associates, all to prepare questions for and to interrogate this illiterate 19-year-old peasant girl, who was not allowed a single counsellor. The principal purpose of these 165 prosecutors was to prove Joan a fraud and impostor, or at least a psychologically unbalanced person suffering from auditory hallucinations. By universal agreement, they failed. Most modern historians writing of Joan lack the will or the courage to affirm a belief in the objective reality of her “voices,” but the best of them firmly reject all alternative explanations of them, which logically leave no choice but to believe she spoke the truth. The fashionable and fanciful psychological and physiological explanations bear almost no resemblance to the real Joan, whom we know so well from the memoirs of her contemporaries and especially from her trial transcript.

The fourth example comes from the early life of the great Queen Isabel the Catholic of Spain, when she was still only a princess of Castile. In 1466 the Marques of Villena, the most powerful nobleman in Castile, pressured Isabel’s hapless and incompetent half-brother, King Henry IV, into ordering her to marry Villena’s own brother, Pedro Giron, a man of the vilest reputation. Villena even persuaded the Pope (Paul II) to agree to the marriage by dispensing Giron from his obligation of celibacy as a soldier-monk of the Order of Calatrava (though he had hardly been known for observance of that obligation). Isabel, just 15 years old, her father dead and her mother insane, had nowhere to turn for help or protection, but to God. And to God she went.

For a full day and night she was on her knees, praying, over and over, that God would not let this obscene union happen, but prevent it by taking either Giron’s life or hers. Giron was riding northward to claim his bride. He would arrive and marry her in less than a month. But on the road, immediately after her day of prayer, he sickened, and in three days he died.

There is no lack of contemporary documentation for these events. All the major chroniclers of the time mention the planned marriage, Isabel’s reaction, and the death of Giron following so swiftly upon her prayers. One modern historian, commenting on the manuscript of my biography of Queen Isabel, which included an account of these events with a brief reminder of the power of prayer, said it made him “very uneasy.” The great taboo had been violated.

The fifth example—actually a group of examples—concerns the modern
apparitions of the Blessed Virgin Mary which are best authenticated historically: Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico in 1531, Our Lady of Lourdes in 1858, and Our Lady of Fatima in 1917. These apparitions were accompanied by some of the most spectacular visible miracles since Christ was on earth: the portrait of Our Lady of Guadalupe which may still be seen in Mexico City, whose survival and composition cannot be naturally explained,\textsuperscript{10} which was followed by nine million baptisms of Indians in the next fifteen years; the spring opened by St. Bernadette Soubirous at Lourdes at the Blessed Virgin Mary’s command, with its hundreds of carefully investigated, scientifically verified miracles of healing;\textsuperscript{11} and the “dance” of the sun in the sky at Fatima in Portugal on October 13, 1917 which was seen by thousands of people and cannot be naturally explained, after the Blessed Virgin Mary had warned the Fatima children on July 13 that an evil coming out of Russia would sweep the world and bring much suffering to the Church.\textsuperscript{12} But one will find little if any reference to these events, well authenticated as they are, in general histories of Mexico, France, Portugal, and the West; if a reference is made, it is always condescending and superficial, without any indication that the apparitions and associated miracles could actually have happened. The report on the nine million baptisms in Robert Ricard’s history of the conversion of Mexico makes no mention of Our Lady of Guadalupe.\textsuperscript{13} Until the appearance of my 1917: \textit{Red Banners, White Mantle}, no history including substantial material on World War I, the Communist Revolution in Russia, and other political events of 1917 had mentioned the apparitions at Fatima.

The sixth example concerns not the action of God, but of the Devil—if possible even more a taboo subject among late twentieth century historians than God. It is the death—or, rather, the repeated failure to die—of the so-called monk Rasputin in Petrograd (now again St. Petersburg), then the capital of Russia, in December 1916. Rasputin had gained almost complete personal ascendancy over the mind of the Tsaritsa Alexandra and through her, over her weak husband Nicholas II, last of the Tsars. Rasputin’s domination and known evil character destroyed much of the popular respect for the Tsar and thus helped bring about the Communist revolution in Russia. Unable to break Rasputin’s grip on the all-powerful Tsar in the midst of a world war, a group of Russian patriots decided that their only recourse was to kill Rasputin. Through almost all of the night of December 30, they tried to do so.

The events of that horrifying night are amply documented. We have two first-hand accounts by eyewitnesses, Prince Felix Yusupov and Vladimir Purishkevich.\textsuperscript{14} There was also a written report on the autopsy of Rasputin’s body when it was recovered from under the ice of the Neva River, read and commented upon at the time, though it has since disappeared. Rasputin had eaten three cakes and drunk two glasses of Madeira wine, each containing a lethal dose of cyanide—one of the fastest-acting and deadliest poisons known—prepared by a doctor. He had been shot near the heart and in the neck, both wounds later pronounced mortal by
medical examiners. He had been beaten over the head with a two-pound lead weighted stick, and his head was broken by impact with one of the supports of the bridge over which he was thrown into the Neva River, bound hand and foot. By then he had died six to eight times. But he was still alive and breathing and struggling to escape under the water and the ice, before his lungs filled with water and he drowned.

Rasputin's previous behavior as well as his survival of so many deaths that night strongly indicate demonic possession. Though most historians writing about Russia during 1916 and 1917 refer to Rasputin's death, and some describe it at length, not one even mentions the possibility of demonic possession. Yet the evidence for supernatural action is so strong that only one major historian, Richard Pipes, tries to offer a rationalistic explanation. He cites the statement in the vanished autopsy report that no poison was found in the body, declaring that this shows that no poison had been administered (but a power capable of blocking the action of cyanide could do so by removing it as well as simply neutralizing it) while ignoring the report's avowal, also vouched for by those who read it prior to its disappearance, that the body did have water in its lungs and hence that Rasputin was still alive when he went under the ice.

The seventh and final example brings us almost to the present: the fall of the Soviet Union and its Communist system of power, which Alexander Solzhenitsyn once called "inhumanly strong," devised by Lenin and apparently unbreakable. As late as the beginning of the year the Communist collapse began, 1989, not a single authority on the Soviet Union—and from a lifetime during which I have done much work in Soviet studies, I knew of most of them—ever thought that this system would fall so soon, so quickly, with so little loss of life. It is very hard to find any natural explanation to account for it. I believe it to have been a specific answer to prayer—the prayers especially of the Slavic Pope John Paul II, and of the millions of Catholic and Orthodox Christian victims of the system whom it had imprisoned.

At one critical moment in the last stage of the collapse, the failure of the August 1991 coup to overthrow Gorbachev and restore full Communist power in the Soviet Union, an important incident occurred which appears to have been the direct result of the power of prayer. On the third night of the coup, its makers sent helicopters to land on the roof of the Russian parliament building where Boris Yeltsin and his supporters held out against them. Tens of thousands of people had surrounded the building with a human chain that soldiers, trucks and tanks would not cross. But they had no anti-aircraft weapons. Nothing could stop the helicopters from landing on the roof but a downpour of rain. Father Gleb Yakunin, a survivor of the Soviet prison camps, a devotee of Our Lady of Fatima, stepped forward and prayed for rain and a downpour of rain came. The helicopters did not land on the roof of the parliament building.
General Konstantin Kobets, chairman of the Russian parliamentary commis-
sion building, was convinced that this rain came in direct response to Father
Yakunin’s prayer. But no Christian historian has dared to suggest even the possi-
bility. It was left to journalist David Remnick, a Jew, to speak of “the blessed
rain” on this extraordinary occasion.18

Reviewing these examples, and the state of mind they reflect among both
non-Christian and Christian historians, is not intended to suggest that Christian
historians should fall into the opposite error of undue credulity, as some always
cautioned against undue credulity. There are many more spurious apparitions and
alleged miracles than genuine ones. Historians must apply all genuine critical
standards of scholarship when dealing with these reports. But the arbitrary a pri-
ori assumption that apparitions and miracles and the Incarnation itself could not
have happened, that historical events never transcend the natural order, is not a
critical standard. It is a flagrant bias which ought to be firmly rejected.

Jettisoning this prejudice is a reasonable and fair position to demand even from
non-Christian historians. For the Christian historian it is nothing less than a duty.

The Christian has not only a duty to believe, but also a duty to confess what
he believes. This double obligation, founded in the doctrine of the Apostle
[Paul] (Rom. X, 10), is the more binding in ages of naturalism, and the
Christian historian ought to understand that it is not enough for him to declare
his belief, in passages here and there in his book, if its Christian character then
immediately disappears.19

Notes
4. Bishop Papias of Hierapolis in Asia Minor, writing about 125 A.D. within
living memory of the evangelists, who is quoted verbatim in the history of
Eusebius of Caesarea, testifies that these gospels were written by the apostles
whose name they bear. The Apostle John’s own scribe bears personal witness to
the authorship of John’s Gospel (John 19:32-37). The Rylands papyrus shows
John’s Gospel to have been circulated as far away as Upper Egypt by about 130
A.D. Tresmontant’s recent work on the Gospel of Matthew (to be published early
in 1996 by Christendom Press) provides the clearest evidence yet for its having
been originally written in Hebrew or Aramaic.
5. Giuseppe Ricciotti, The Life of Christ (Milwaukee, 1947), 157-161; M. J.


7. A notable recent example is the violently hostile academic reaction to Rev. Jose O’Callaghan’s discovery of a fragment of the Gospel of Mark in the Dead Sea scrolls, probably dateable to about 50 A.D. and in any case before 68—much earlier than “higher critics” of the New Testament had believed that gospel was written.

8. See especially Frances Gies, *Joan of Arc; the Legend and the Reality* (New York, 1982), 23-28, and Victoria Sackville-West, *Saint Joan of Arc* (New York, 1938), 343-356. Sackville-West, a non-Catholic but also not a professional historian, in a fascinating passage admits that, as between “the scientific and the religious” explanations, “I have been painfully torn myself. There are moments when I am not at all sure that the religious line of approach may not, in the end, prove right.” (op. Cit., 345). Rare was the historian in 1938—and still rarer the historian today—who would admit to entertaining such a thought; and even Sackville-West in the end did not accept it.


11. See the excellent summary of the manner in which reported miracles of healing at Lourdes are investigated, and some of the most striking cases, in Zsolt Aradi, *The Book of Miracles* (New York, 1956), 216-230.


14. Yusupov’s account was translated into English and published in London in 1927 under the title *Rasputin: His Malignant Influence and His Assassination*.

15. For example, Bernard Pares, *The Fall of the Russian Monarchy* (New York,


