

THEOLOGY AND THE NATURAL SCIENCES

- Topic: "Is Richard Dawkins a Prophetic Voice?"
 Convener: Vincent A. Pizzuto, University of San Francisco
 Moderator: Ilia Delio, Woodstock Theological Center, Georgetown University
 Presenter: James Wiseman, The Catholic University of America
 Respondent: Michael Barnes, University of Dayton

After acknowledging the deficiencies in Richard Dawkins' best-selling book *The God Delusion*, James Wiseman selected three topics from that work that could usefully lead theologians to reflect on the way they deal with them themselves. Concerning miracles, Wiseman clarified his use of the term with reference to the three-part definition offered by John Meier in his multi-volume study of the historical Jesus. With that clarification in place, he asked first whether one could define "miracle" in such a way that a cure deemed miraculous might also, in principle, be open to a medical explanation. He next inquired about the practical implications (especially for preaching) of the fact that certain New Testament accounts crucial for earlier dogmatic formulations are now understood very differently.

On the topic of divine simplicity, he suggested that we would do well to take seriously Philip Hefner's point that we cannot assume "the God's-eye view" that would reveal the exact way in which divine being interacts with matter. Wiseman rightly acknowledged that such theological views would certainly not satisfy Dawkins, but made clear that in the final analysis both he and his fellow atheists are faced with ultimate mystery no less than are theologians. To insist that God is pure spirit, necessarily not composed of diverse parts and in this sense "simple," it is altogether impossible, Wiseman cautions, for us very "unsimple" human beings to comprehend how God could create and preserve our mammoth universe.

Finally, Wiseman briefly addressed the way in which doctrinal disputes within Christianity have at times fostered violence, but he also showed that there have been recent recognitions of legitimate diversity in the way different churches express the faith. In particular, he pointed to the November 11, 1984, Common Christological Doctrine that was signed by Pope John Paul II and Mar Dinkha IV, the patriarch of the Assyrian Church of the East, affirming that the two churches confessed the same doctrine concerning the divinity and humanity of Christ. While Wiseman lamented that it took well more than one and a half millennia until a pope finally recognized that the Christology of the Assyrian Church of the East is not really at odds with what the Roman Catholic Church has long taught, it nevertheless demonstrates ways in which the churches are addressing controversy peacefully and constructively.

In response, Michael H. Barnes noted that the core issue regarding miracles is directly related to the extent and validity of naturalism. Barnes identified Dawkins' own view of "metaphysical naturalism," which maintains that nature is all that exists, and thus there is no supernatural reality or dimension. Within this

construct of reality, miracles can be nothing other than superstition. Barnes then goes on to discuss several other approaches to miracles among Christian theologians before focusing on just two basic alternatives—a God who intervenes or a God who creates and empowers without further specific interventions. The latter, he noted, fits more easily with a God who is absolutely simple and changeless. Nevertheless, Barnes pointed out that Catholics and most Christians are divided over the adequacy for religious imagination and life of an image of God as changeless and simple, but that such divisions are often more personal than theological and do not lead to derision, much less violence.

A lively exchange among the group participants followed after these presentations, much of which focused around the questions of the meaning and historical veracity of miracles, as reported in the Scriptures and throughout Christian history. Especially debated was the relative importance of affirming the historicity of the Resurrection.

VINCENT A. PIZZUTO
University of San Francisco
San Francisco, California