

# **Dr. Robert C. Newman, Miracles, Session 3, Science and Liberalism on Miracles**

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This is our course, The Miraculous and the Miracles of Jesus, and what we might call Unit Module 3, whatever you want to call it, Science and the Rise of Liberalism. So let's go have a look at that. We start with the Renaissance.

The Greek classical authors were rediscovered by Western Europe with the fall of Constantinople by the Turks as refugees fled to the West. Europeans thus became aware of what these ancient authors really thought and taught, correcting distorted information that had come down through the Middle Ages and the less distorted material transmitted from Spain through Arabic translations. This material included philosophy, science, ethics, history, government, medicine, rhetoric, drama, and poetry, as well as pagan religion and magic.

The upshot was a great stimulus to European universities, and there was a growing interest in the ancient Greek and Hebrew languages. It helped the Europeans to see their own culture in a wider context than medieval Christianity, Islam, and Judaism, but it also reintroduced a number of ancient heresies. Scholars became aware of the nature of miracle accounts from ancient paganism.

Also, about this time, we have the Reformation, a rediscovery of the gospel of God's grace, which had been confused and deluded by centuries of ignorance of God's word due to low levels of literacy, syncretism with local paganisms and worldly society, and institutional momentum of the Catholic Church and monasticism. This led to a renewed interest in what the Bible actually taught as opposed to how it had come to be understood through the filters of centuries of medieval Catholicism. One result of this study was a realization that medieval and modern Catholic miracles had a different flavor than those of the Bible.

Since Catholicism taught that miracles continued in connection with the lives of especially holy people, there was a tendency to reject the continuation of miracles. Think a little about medieval science. Some of the medieval universities had done rather impressive work in physics, showing us that Aristotle was mistaken about the motion of objects on earth, but it was the work of Copernicus, Galileo, and Kepler which showed that Aristotle's earth-centered cosmology was wrong, and paved the way for the rise of modern science.

Nicolaus Copernicus, 1473-1543, aware of the astronomical speculation of the ancient world, noted that a great simplification of the technique of calculating the position of the planets could be obtained if it was assumed they rotated about the sun rather than rotating about the earth. Galileo, 1564-1642, the first to apply the

newly invented telescope to looking at the heavens, showed that neither the sun nor moon were perfect, as Aristotle had claimed, and that a planetary system of moons revolved around the planet Jupiter so that everything did not revolve around the earth. Johannes Kepler, 1571-1630, used the vast observational data compiled by his mentor Tycho Brahe to show that the planets did indeed revolve around the sun and that their motions could be described by several laws.

That brings us to Isaac Newton, 1642-1727. Newton, one of the most brilliant minds in history, designed a new type of telescope, discovered that a glass prism would separate white light into its various colored components, invented a new type of mathematics, and showed that Kepler's laws of planetary motions could be explained by a very general set of laws of motion which applied to all objects on the earth, plus a force called gravity which attracts all massive objects to one another. The contemporary poet Alexander Pope wrote about Newton, nature, and nature's laws, which lay hidden night.

God said, Let Newton be, and all was light. Newton's influence. Newton himself was a professing Christian, although of an Aryan sort, that is, that did not believe in a deity of Jesus.

He believed in God, the creator, who could miraculously intervene in nature, and he spent a good deal of his time researching biblical prophecy. But many who came after him felt that he explained so much of reality in terms of law that God was not needed. This led to the Deist movement in England and later the Philosophes movement in France, which was popularized by the authors of the great French Encyclopedia.

THE RISE OF THEOLOGICAL LIBERALISM Spinoza, Hume, and Kant, these three men paved the way for theological liberalism by providing philosophical justification for the rejection of the miraculous. Benedict Spinoza, David Hume, and Immanuel Kant. We'll look at their arguments in greater detail later.

Benedict Spinoza lived from 1632 to 1677. Spinoza, adopting a pantheistic outlook, argued that nature and God were two different words for the same thing, that natural law and God's decrees were likewise the same, that God's decrees are unchangeable, and therefore miracles are impossible by definition. David Hume, 1711-1776, attacked miracles from an empirical point of view.

He argued that our natural laws are based on firm and unalterable experience and that miracles, by definition, violate natural law. Therefore, we ought never to accept a miraculous explanation for an event unless a non-miraculous explanation would be even more unlikely. Immanuel Kant, 1724-1804, argued that man has access only to appearances and not to things as they really are, so that all theology and metaphysics were unwarranted speculation.

Only practical reason had a right to postulate the existence of God, freedom, and immortality, leading to a moral religion of duty only. Such a religion, a form of deism, needs no attestation by miracles, which are thus irrelevant to everyday life, except perhaps to encourage the common people to practice morality when they cannot be brought to do so from better motives. Theological liberalism, as we call it today, is an outgrowth within Protestant circles of the forces sketched above.

First, a Protestant revulsion against Catholic miracle accounts. Two, a scientific disdain for reports of irregular and superstitious events. Three, a philosophical feeling that miracles are either deductively impossible, inductively unwarranted, or practically irrelevant.

And four, a deistic belief that real religion was moral rather than revelational. Theological liberalism arose in 19th-century Germany as a more Christian alternative to British deism and French atheism. It sought to preserve the moral character of Christianity and the better teachings of the Bible, especially the New Testament and the life of Jesus.

It is seen in the attempts to rewrite the life of Jesus along liberal lines, also to avoid the miraculous in sacred history by redating biblical books, postulating diverse sources and editors, having prophecy written after the event, and admitting fictitious narratives and false authorship into scripture. The spread of liberalism. Liberalism spread from Germany into Britain and the United States in the latter part of the 19th century with considerable help from Darwinism.

It came to dominate first the universities, then the theological seminaries, and finally the mainline denominations. It is the orthodoxy of most intellectual and cultural leaders in the United States and Europe today. It has also influenced on similar circles in most of the older mission fields.

The influence of liberalism. Liberalism has never been as popular among the common people in the United States as among the leadership. Still, it has considerable influence by way of mixture, even among more conservative Christian groups.

Various cults and new age groups have accepted many of its teachings, and orthodox Christians have sometimes overreacted in responding to liberalism. Well, that's a quick tour of the rise of science and theological liberalism, and you can see then the influence there of the rejection of the miraculous, which is, after all, the topic of our lectures here, the miraculous. Okay, that went faster than I thought it would, but that was three.

Four is... That thing's still not working.