EVOlutionary biology points to the way competition, predation, death and extinction are built into the 3.8 billion year history of life. This intensifies the old problem of how we think about God and God’s action in the context of suffering and loss. One aspect of this discussion is that of miracles. Does God sometimes overturn or bypass the laws of nature? If so, then why not more often? The Christian tradition of miracles can seem to suggest that God occasionally and arbitrarily intervenes to save people while allowing others to perish.

In this article, I will ask how the Christian tradition of miracles is to be understood: Does it mean that God is to be thought of as miraculously intervening in the natural world to preserve some from tsunamis while allowing others to suffer them? Or are we to think of God, even the God who works miracles, as respecting and working consistently in and through the processes of the natural world? Much of the pastoral practice of the church reinforces the idea of a God who can and does intervene in an occasional way to overturn nature. I believe that an alternative theology is needed, and will suggest an approach to a theology of miracles that does not involve an interventionist view of God.

With Johann Baptist Metz I believe that the miracles that are crucial to the Christian tradition are those connected with the coming of revelation in Jesus Christ (Metz 1975, 962). I will begin with a brief exploration of miracles in the life of Jesus, using the historical work of John Meier. Then I will turn to the classical treatment of miracles in the work of Aquinas. This will lead into a discussion of
every evangelist in redactional summaries, and Josephus, all attest to Jesus as a miracle worker. In considering multiple attestation of literary forms, he finds that miracles are attested to in exorcism stories, healing stories, nature miracles, summary statements, parables, dispute stories and in Jesus’ mandate to the disciples. The criterion of coherence also plays an important role. Meier finds coherence between Jesus’ exorcisms and his sayings, between his healings and sayings, and between the signs and discourses in the Gospel of John. In general, Jesus’ miracles are coherent with the picture of one who gained a large number of disciples and aroused much interest.

The criterion of discontinuity (between Jesus and both Judaism and early Christianity) is of limited value, since there are accounts of both Jewish and early Christian miracle workers. What is distinctive of Jesus, however, is the combination of preacher, parabler, proclaimer of the kingdom, plus miracle worker actualizing his own proclamation. Meier finds the criterion of embarrassment (where the Christian community preserves material it finds awkward) has a limited but significant use in the Beelzebul incident, where Jesus’ exorcisms lead to the charge of him being in league with the devil (Mark 3:20-30; Matt 12:22-32). Finally Meier turns to the criterion of consistency with Jesus’ rejection and death: he finds that the miracles fit well with his execution, in that they would have stirred up excitement and thus been an aggravating circumstance contributing to his death.

The application of these criteria to the general question of Jesus as a miracle worker leads Meier to an unambiguous conclusion: ‘Viewed globally, the tradition of Jesus’ miracles is more firmly supported by the criteria of historicity than are a number of other well-known and readily accepted traditions about his life and ministry….If the miracle tradition from Jesus’ public ministry were to be rejected in toto as unhistorical, so should every other Gospel tradition about him’ (Meier 1994, 630). According to Meier, then, Jesus did see himself and was seen by others as a wonder worker in the cause of the Reign of God.

In his detailed discussion of the healing of Bartimaeus, Meier finds that the application of criteria suggests that the Bartimaeus story is one of the strongest candidates for the report of a specific miracle going back to the historical Jesus’ (Meier 1994, 690). In his analysis of the Lazarus story, he finds it impossible to say exactly what happened, but he does think it reflects early material, and that it is likely that this story ‘goes back ultimately to some event involving Lazarus, a disciple of Jesus, and that this event was believed by Jesus’ disciples even during his lifetime to be a miracle of raising the dead.’ (Meier 1994, 831). Meier’s treatment of the walking on the water leads him to the conclusion that ‘the walking on the water is most likely from start to finish a creation of the early church, a christological confession in narrative form’ (Meier 1994, 921). He sees it as a narrative comment on the feeding of the five thousand, which would have symbolized and expressed the eucharistic experience of the early Christians: ‘What I am suggesting is that, to a small church struggling in the night of a hostile world and feeling bereft of Christ’s presence, the walking on the water likewise symbolized the experience of Christ in the eucharist’ (Meier 1994, 923).

This sample of some of Meier’s insights and results leads me to conclude that we do need to think of Jesus as a miracle worker, whose healing ministry proclaims and anticipates the coming Reign of God. We do need...
to think of him as bringing healing to individuals like Bartimaeus. It seems he was thought of as restoring Lazarus to life, although we cannot know whether Lazarus was clinically dead in today’s terms. We need not think of him as walking on the water during his lifetime, but can see this as expressing the action of the risen Christ, perhaps in and through the eucharistic experience of the early church. I will take this as a reasonable assessment of the data that a theology of miracles needs to address and begin this work with insights from Thomas Aquinas.

Aquinas on the Dignity of Secondary Causes

For Aquinas, God’s nature is to exist, and God’s proper effect is to cause existence (esse) in all other things. God causes this effect in creatures not just when they begin to exist, but at every moment in which they are maintained in existence. Because nothing is more deeply interior to an entity than its existence, God must exist in all things and be present to them at their most interior level (Summa theologiae 1a.8.1). All things exist only as created by God ex nihilo. All things depend on God entirely for their existence at every point. They find in God not only the cause of their being (efficient cause), but their end (final cause). God’s providence governs all creatures towards their end which is participation in the goodness of God.

According to Aquinas, God commonly works through creatures that are themselves truly causal. He calls these secondary causes. God is the primary cause who is always providentially at work in all created causes. It is by God’s power that every other power acts (De potentia 3.7). While God enables creaturally causes to exist and to have effect, Aquinas sees secondary causes as genuinely causal in their own right. It is through these secondary causes that God cares for creation: ‘Divine Providence works through intermediaries. For God governs the lower though the higher, not from any impotence on his part, but from the abundance of his goodness imparting to creatures the dignity of causing.’ (Summa theologiae 1a.22.3). God respects the dignity of secondary causes, and bestows on them their own integrity.

Aquinas thus opposes the view, sometimes called Occasionalism, which sees God as the only real cause at work in the universe. He is also opposes what will come to be called Deism, the idea that God is involved in creating things at the beginning, but takes no further part in the functioning of the universe. For him God’s providence and God’s government are always and everywhere at work, taking effect through the range of secondary causes. He challenges those who would say that God acts alone without intermediaries:

But this is impossible, and first because it would deprive creation of its pattern of cause and effect, which in turn would imply lack of power in the creator, since an agent’s power is the source of its giving an effect a causative capability. It is impossible, secondly, because if the active powers that are observed in creatures accomplished nothing, there would be no point to their have received such powers. Indeed if all creatures are utterly devoid of any activity of their own, then they themselves would seem to have a pointless existence, since everything exists for the sake of its operation (Summa theologiae 1a.105.6).

To the argument that God works through secondary causes because God wants creatures to have the dignity of genuine causes, Aquinas adds two further arguments. First, God’s creative power would be diminished if God did not enable creatures to participate in causing. Second, if created causative powers do not genuinely accomplish their operations they would seem to have a pointless existence. They would lack meaning and integrity.

These arguments can be brought to bear on contemporary controversies. The proponents of ‘intelligent design,’ for example, seek to show that there are instances of ‘irreducible complexity’ in the natural world that cannot be accounted for by Darwinian evolution, and that require the intervention of a designer...
It seems to me that one who thinks like Aquinas would not be inclined to support this line of thought. Aquinas would find no need to search for a place where God intervenes as designer because God is found in every dimension of creation: God ‘acts interiorly in all things,’ because ‘God is the cause of esse, which is innermost in all things’ (Summa theologiae 1a.105.6). In today’s context, it would be consistent with Aquinas to see God’s creativity finding its most profound expression in evolutionary history, by enabling creaturely processes to have their own dignity and integrity as genuine causes of novelty in the world. It is worth noting that this is not necessarily the position of all contemporary followers of Aquinas. W. Norris Clarke, a well-regarded Thomist philosopher, is remarkably sympathetic to ‘irreducible complexity’ (Clarke 2001, 255). My reading of Aquinas suggests, by contrast, that it reflects all the more glory to God if God enables life to evolve through natural processes, which have their own integrity, and which are to be accounted for empirically by the natural sciences, including Darwinian evolutionary theory.

How does Aquinas think about miracles? He tells us that miracles have as their purpose the manifestation of God’s grace (Summa theologiae 1a.104.3). They are signs of grace and manifestations of the Spirit (1 Cor 12:7). Like most people of faith of the thirteenth century, Aquinas takes it for granted that miracles occur. He notes that the word miracle comes from the word admiratio, suggesting the wonder that accompanies the experience of something whose cause is hidden from us (Summa theologiae 1a.105.7).

A real miracle, he tells us, has its cause absolutely hidden, because its cause is God. He sees miracles as involving the action of God replacing secondary causes. They are ‘exceptions to the pattern in nature’ (Summa theologiae 1a.105.7 ad1). They occur in a manner that ‘surpasses the capabilities of nature’ (Summa theologiae 1a.105.7 ad 2). A miracle can exceed the capability of nature in three ways: in the kind of thing done; in the person who does it; and in the manner and order in which it is done (Summa Theologiae 1a.105.8). In every case, a miracle is an event that occurs only through God’s action, and without a secondary cause:

Thus if we look to the world’s order as it depends on the first cause, God cannot act against it, because then he would be doing something contrary to his foreknowledge, his will or his goodness. But if we take the order in things as it depends upon any of the secondary causes, then God can act apart from it; he is not subject to that order but rather it is subject to him, as issuing from him not out of necessity of nature, but be decision of his will. He could in fact have established another sort of pattern in the world; hence when he so wills, he can act apart from the given order, producing, for example, the effects of secondary causes without them or some effects that surpass the powers of these causes (Summa theologiae 1a.105.6).

As Brian Davies puts it, for Aquinas, a miracle occurs because of what is not present, a secondary cause (Davies 1992, 174). He sees two theses flowing from Aquinas’s view of miracles. First, no one but God can work a miracle. In so far as holy people are involved, it is not that they work miracles, but that God brings about miracles at their request (Summa theologiae 1a.110.4 ad 10). Second, in working miracles God does not do violence to the natural order. All the events that occur in the universe are the effect of God’s will. If God brings about something miraculous in the natural order this is no more a violation of the natural order than the fact that the order exists in the first place (Davies 1992, 173).

I think Davies is right to insist that for Aquinas, God’s miracles surpass the natural order but do not do violence to it. What is not explored by Aquinas, however, is the possibility that God may so respect the unfolding of the processes of the natural order that even in miracles God works in and through the laws of nature. What if God, out of loving fidelity to creatures, always waits patiently on the un-
folding of creaturely processes as God waits upon human freedom? What if God works consistently through secondary causes? I find Aquinas’s concept of primary and secondary causality indispensable and foundational in the current dialogue between science and theology, and the same is true of his view of God’s respect for the integrity of secondary causes. I also embrace his view of miracles as wonderful manifestations of the Spirit. But I will depart from his view that in miracles God replaces secondary causes, to explore the idea that miracles might be seen as wonderful manifestations of the Spirit that occur through secondary causes. God’s respect for the integrity of secondary causes, so clearly defended by Aquinas, may mean that even in miracles God acts in and through the law of nature. Taking this proposal further will mean attempting to clarify what is meant by these laws of nature.

The Laws of Nature

In a series of articles, cosmologist and philosopher William Stoeger has explored the meaning and ontological status of the laws of nature (Stoeger 1993, 1999, 2001). I will focus on three questions addressed in his work. The first asks: To what extent do well-confirmed scientific theories, and the laws of nature they embody, describe what occurs in reality? Stoeger accepts that some theories, which because of their success have the status of laws, offer a detailed model of fundamental patterns of order and causal influence observed in the physical and chemical world. These theories have been molded, modified and refined through continual observation and experiment. Such theories and their laws have a ‘very strong basis’ in observed reality (Stoeger 1993, 223).

But Stoeger insists that our observations do not reveal the whole of the reality under scrutiny. Some aspects, even some of the most fundamental, remain hidden. Science focuses on stable and characteristic features that are accessible to it. It seeks what is universalizable and what is relevant to the questions of the scientist. It isolates and simplifies aspects of reality and models them with concepts such as mass and velocity. The design of a research programme and the interpretation of its results are limited by the heuristic anticipation of the researcher. Much of the reality of the matter under observation is missed.

Even with physical levels that seem well modeled in laws and theories, there is much that escapes comprehension, including aspects of the quantum level of reality. In the physics of complex systems, ‘order and chaos nourish one another with a strange reciprocity’ (Stoeger 1993, 224). The turbulence of flowing fluids is difficult to model in detail or to compress algorithmically. These problems only increase in biology, neurophysiology, psychology, economics, politics and sociology, where reality escapes all attempts to describe it in the law-like and rigidly predictable ways of physics and mathematics. Stoeger concludes that there is an enormous difference between using the language of laws of nature to speak of scientific theories, which are always partial and limited, and using this same language to point to the relationships, processes and causal interconnections of the natural world itself.

A second, related question concerns the function of the laws of nature: Do they prescribe the way reality behaves or merely describe it? They certainly describe the behaviour of the natural world in certain circumstances and attribute this behaviour to particular causes and influences. But do the laws force or constrain the behaviour? While it is common to assume that they do, Stoeger argues that the laws cannot be said to be the source of the behaviour. They simply model or describe it. Of course, one reason why the laws of nature have been assumed to be prescriptive is that they were originally thought of as God’s laws, governing the physical world as God’s commandments govern human conduct.

Stoeger sees the laws of nature as human
descriptions of observed regularities: ‘In a way, saying that something is a “law of nature” is simply a way of indicating that it is so fundamental to the description of the detailed workings of physical, chemical or biological systems that it never is observed not to hold when those systems are properly isolated and simplified and certain conditions are fulfilled’ (Stoeger 1993, 225). There is no reason to assume that the law is the cause of the regularity that is observed. It is a description of the regularity and of its fundamental character.

There are times when a source of behaviour is found to be grounded in the next level of physical process and structure, as when the laws of chemical reactions are explained at the level of atomic structure. These deeper explanatory connections can provide intermediate, detailed descriptions that causally link phenomena that had seemed unconnected, but they never explain completely why reality is the way it is: ‘Rather, they explain that, since it is this way, it has to have these relationships with what appear to be more fundamental realities’ (Stoeger 1993, 225). The models give the appearance of imparting necessity, but this apparent necessity does not come from the models, but is hidden in the observed entities and their regularities. The ultimate source of the regularity we observe is not the model we articulate. The model itself does not tell us why this model holds and not some other. While the theories and laws of nature can describe reality well and point to intermediate causal connections between different levels of reality, they do not prescribe reality. They do not cause it to be the way it is.

The third question concerns the independent existence of our models and laws: Do they have an existence outside our minds? Are they more than our approximations of what is manifest in the physical phenomena being observed? Stoeger is opposed to the Platonic view that would give these laws an independent and pre-existing reality. He finds no scientific or philosophical reason to see the laws of nature as constituting an underlying plan or pattern of physical reality: ‘The most we can say is that there are regularities and interrelationships in reality as it is in itself—a fundamental order—which are imperfectly reflected in our models and laws’ (Stoeger 1993, 221). These models are in some cases highly successful, but they remain imperfect and limited. The models represent in an idealized way the structures and relationships between the phenomena under study, but they always leave a great deal out:

It is an illusion to believe that these incredibly rich representations of the phenomena are unconstructed isomorphisms we merely discover in the real world. Instead they are constructed—painstakingly so—and there is no evidence that they are isomorphic with structures in the real world as it is in itself (Stoeger 1993, 216).

Our scientific models are the result of imaginative and conceptual abstraction guided by continued observation and experiment. There is no justification for the idea that they correspond in a direct way to the entities, structures and relationships of physical reality as it is in itself.

This whole line of argument means that there is a need to distinguish between two possible meanings of the laws of nature: ‘We may mean the regularities, relationships, processes and structures in nature: (1) as we know, understand and model them; or (2) as they actually function in reality, which is much, much more than we know, understand or have adequately modeled’ (Stoeger 1999, 130). The laws of nature as we know them are provisional, imperfect and limited, and not well equipped to deal with important areas of life, including not only the metaphysical, but also the mental, the interpersonal, the aesthetic and the religious. The existence of parts of reality that defy scientific analysis, such as personal relationships or deeply held values, is an indication, not that these phenomena are illusory, but that the laws of nature, meaning the natural sciences as we know them, do not model or describe central aspects of reality (Stoeger 1999, 134-5).
This clarification has important consequences for a theology of miracles. It means that a marvelous manifestation of the Spirit, such as an act of healing, may take us beyond the laws of nature understood in the first sense—as our limited models of reality. But it may not be beyond the laws of nature understood in the second sense, as the relationships and processes that function in reality, which are more than we have fully understood or adequately modeled. And, of course, all of these patterns of relationship and causality that escape our present models are, theologically, secondary causes. This opens us the possibility that miracles may occur through a whole range of secondary causes that our current science cannot model or cannot model well.

A Theological Approach

Johann Baptiste Metz offers a further insight into miracles by insisting that they function symbolically. They are not only signs but also mediations of the coming Reign of God. They display the Reign of God as ‘actually and effectively present’ (Metz 1975, 963). Metz approaches miracles from the perspective of human intersubjectivity. The miracles of the Gospels are not the reports of detached observers, but the testimony of believers. They are of their very nature signs, signs that bear on salvation. It is of the essence of miracles that they are attested to by those who are subjectively affected by them. Within the dynamics of faith, they contain a promise and a call. A miracle does not compel assent. It is not experienced in the way of the methodical observation of the natural sciences. It is a sign that summons a person to commitment to the way of the Reign of God.

Rahner’s approach is similar. He sees a miracle as a sign and manifestation of God’s salvific activity in revelation and grace. It is a manifestation in historical tangibility of grace that is addressed to specific persons. Miracles are specific, directed towards particular addressees: ‘They are not facta bruta but an address to a knowing subject in a quite definitive historical situation’ (Rahner 1978, 258). A miracle occurs in a theological sense when someone experiences God’s self-communication in a particular configuration of events, in such a way that God’s self-communication participates immediately in the event. In such a miraculous event, God’s self-communication comes to appearance and witnesses to itself (Rahner 1978, 261). It is a wonderful call of God in and through specific events.

What is needed to experience the miraculous, Rahner says, is ‘a person who is willing to allow himself to be called in the depths of his existence, who is free and open to the singularly wonderful in his life’ (Rahner 1978, 263). The recipient needs a willingness to believe, to have eyes to see and ears to hear. Such a person keeps alive a humble and receptive wonder in the concrete events of her existence. She can find in historical events a call from God and be empowered and obligated by them to a historical dialogue with God. This is, after all, the Gospel presupposition for a miracle: ‘Your faith has made you whole.’

Rahner suggests the idea proposed here, that we can do without the notion of miracles violating the laws of nature. He points to the multi-layered nature of our experience of the world. The more fundamental levels of reality are subsumed into the higher without violating what is proper to the lower but becoming something new. So the physical is subsumed into the chemical and the biological, and in us the material, chemical and biological is subsumed into human freedom, without losing the integrity of the lower levels. Rahner sees something analogous happening with regard to God’s action in the world. The natural world, with its processes and laws, is created by God as part of the process of God’s self-bestowal to the world. It is not that God creates a world that is other from God so that, in order to communicate, God needs to intervene in the world from time to time. Rather the natural world, with its processes and laws, exists within God’s one act of self-bestowal. The laws of nature are part of God’s own self-
giving. They are an element within grace (Rahner 1978, 261). God does not need to break these laws or overturn them in order to communicate to human persons in specific circumstances. The natural world with its laws is the means of God’s self-revelation. God can give marvelous signs of grace to God’s people without violating natural laws.

Rahner’s thought here can be further developed by the distinction Stoeger makes between the two meanings of the laws of nature. It is not simply the natural world as our theories model it that is the vehicle for God’s self-communication. It is the far more mysterious world of nature itself, much of which is beyond our understanding and modeling, which is the vehicle of God’s self-manifestations. And, in terms of Aquinas’s theology, this is all the world of secondary causes. If a miracle is a wonderful manifestation and sign of God’s grace, there is every reason to think it can take effect in the natural world, some of which is beyond our modeling, but which has its own God-given integrity as a world of interacting secondary causes. God’s grace takes effect in a way that fully respects the integrity of nature at the physical and biological level as well as at the level of human freedom.

This line of thought suggests that miracles are marvels of God’s gracious self-communication that occur in different ways. Some may occur at levels beyond the laws we know at present governing physics, chemistry and biology. A person suffering from cancer might pray with her community for healing from a cancer and find herself miraculously restored to health. This need not be taken as God acting in an interventionist way without secondary causes. It may well be God acting in and through secondary causes that we do not fully understand. It may be that science will one day understand more clearly how common prayer, or human solidarity and love, can sometimes contribute to biological healing. Other miracles may occur in ways that are consistent with contemporary science. A person cured from illness, in a way that science can explain, who finds God providentially at work in this cure, so that it becomes for her a call and address by God, might well see this as a miracle, a wonderful manifestation and sign of the Spirit of God. A person might receive, as a gift, the capacity to make peace in a damaged relationship and experience this as a miracle of grace. Such events do not impact on any known law of nature, but they are marvelous manifestation of the Spirit.

The proposal I have made is to extend Aquinas’s view of God’s respect for secondary causes to suggest that we might be able to think of God working consistently through secondary causes, even when God works miracles in our lives. This puts me in the company of Pope John XXII. When Aquinas’s canonization was being discussed, the paucity of miracles was raised as an objection, and the pope is said to have replied that every question Thomas Aquinas answered was a miracle (Tugwell 1988, 259). Certainly, Aquinas’s body of work, the Spirit-led expression of his faith, hope and love and the integrity of his commitment to truth, constitutes a miracle in the sense proposed here, as a marvelous manifestation of the Spirit.

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It seems to me that many educated people in the Western world view religious belief with a certain wistful wariness. They would like some sort of faith, but feel that it is only to be had on terms which amount to intellectual suicide. They can neither accept the idea of God nor quite leave it alone. I want to try to show that although faith goes beyond what is logically demonstrable—and what worthwhile view of reality does not!—yet it is capable of rational motivation. Christians do not have to close their minds, nor are they faced with the dilemma of having to choose between ancient faith and modern knowledge. They can hold both together. Revelation is not the presentation of unchallengeable dogmas for reception by the unquestioning faithful. Rather it is the record of those transparent events or persons in which the divine will and presence have been most clearly discernible. […]

The laws of chemistry are always operative, but their nature may most clearly be perceived in those well-chosen and contrived events we call experiments. God is always present and active in our world, but it may well be that he is most clearly to be seen in the particularities of what the Judaeo-Christian tradition calls salvation history. That history is exceptional in the clarity with which the divine can be recognised through it, not in an implied absence of God from other times and places. The need to seek God where he can most clearly be seen has the consequence that the unique is not to be excluded from our consideration.