

A Philosophical Appraisal of Miracle in the Light of Its Multiple Claims in the Contemporary Nigerian Society

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Abstract

A miracle is an extraordinary event in the physical world that apparently surpasses all known human or natural power and is beyond any natural or scientific explanation. The problem of the unending multiplicity of churches in the contemporary Nigerian society can be traced to the multiple claims of miracles by Christian religious ministers. This paper presents an unbiased philosophical assessment of the concept of miracle with particular reference to Christian religion so as to determine the veracity of these claims. Employing a critical expository method, the paper examines the concept miracle from its etymology to its exclusive and inclusive meanings. It also examines the criteria for accepting miracles in the strict sense as well as some philosophical positions on miracles including some denials of its possibility. In reviewing the many claims of miracles, both the frivolous claims and the authenticated instances that confirm its possibility, the paper equivocally affirmed the reality of miracles but decried the many false claims of it by some contemporary Nigerian religious ministers who stage-manage fake “miracles”. In conclusion the paper affirmed that most of the publicized apparently miraculous events in many contemporary Christian denominations in Nigeria are not miracles in the strict sense.

Keywords: Miracle, Magic, Contemporary Nigerian Churches, Philosophical Appraisal.

1. Introduction

The clamour for miracles in virtually all situations in life is an everyday phenomenon in contemporary Nigerian society which is perpetuated by the numerous miracle claims by religious ministers. These multiple miracle claims among adherents of different religious confessions have raised the question of the possibility of an authentic miracle. The noticeable effect of miracle claims in present day Nigerian society is seen in the multiplicity of religious denominations, religious houses, shrines, churches, prayer houses, imposing billboards and posters, crusades, miracle programmes, miracle displaying television channels, radio and television miracle advertisement jingles and promos for personal, family and village deliverance programmes, etc.

These multiple claims and promos leave the average believer in God confused and bemused thus raising the question of the authenticity of these claims. It is a known truth that many people have been defrauded in the name of receiving these promised miracles.

Philosophy of Religion champions an investigation into the reality of these so called miracles, it raises questions such as: what really is a miracle? Is it possible to have a true miracle? How does one recognize a miracle if one were to take place, i.e., what are the criteria for recognizing an authentic miracle? How are miracles different from other seemingly extraordinary events like magic?

This paper employing a critical expository method will consider the above issues with particular reference to the Christian religion. The paper will further critically examine some frivolous miracle claims in many Nigerian Christian Churches, crusades and programmes with the aim of determining their authenticity. The work will also examine some philosophical positions on miracle consisting of acceptance and denial of miracles, some authenticated miracles in history as well as its effects in the life of believers.

In conclusion the work affirms the possibility of miracles but insists that most of the highly publicized so-called miracles in many religious gatherings in Nigeria are either staged-managed, fake, explainable or unauthenticated and thus do not qualify as miracles in the strict and exclusive sense.

2. What is a Miracle?

Etymologically the word miracle is derived from the Latin words *miraculum*, *mirari* and *mirus*. *Miraculum* which means ‘to wonder at’, ‘an object of wonder’ is derived from *mirari* which means ‘to marvel’, ‘to be astonished’, ‘to wonder at’ which is in turn derived from *mirus* meaning ‘wonderful’ ‘astonishing’ ‘amazing’. From the root words, therefore, a miracle signifies any amazing, astonishing, marvelous or wonderful event or thing. The New Testament of the Christian Bible employs four Greek words to designate the concept of miracle namely; *semeion* (sign), *terata* (wonder, potent), *dunameis* (mighty works) and *erga* (works). The Latin words *miraculum*, *mirari* and *mirus* are not proper translations of *semeion*, *erga* and *dunameis* which are works or signs that point to the divine origin of Jesus Christ. The Latin translations merely emphasize the marvelous nature of these signs and works of Jesus. It is from this Latin translation that the English word miracle is based thus emphasizing the amazing or extraordinary nature of these works or signs.

One may define a miracle as an effect or extraordinary event in the physical world which surpasses all

known human or natural power and is beyond any natural or scientific explanation. Such an effect or event is attributed to a Supernatural Being, God or gods. (www.dictionary.com) According to Merriam Webster Dictionary, “a miracle is an extraordinary event manifesting divine intervention in human affairs” (www.merriam-webster.com).

Miracle in the exclusive or strict sense is a mysterious intervention of a Supernatural Being or deity in the world which suspends or disregards the natural sequence of things and accomplishes an effect that cannot be naturally or scientifically explained.

A miracle in a strict, exclusive sense operates outside any known or existing natural or scientific law. This is because if it can be explained by any of such known laws it cannot be called a miracle in the strict sense however astonishing it may be.

In the same exclusive sense Fisher defines a miracles as “an event which the forces of nature - including the natural powers of man - cannot of themselves produce, and which must, therefore, be referred to supernatural agencies (9). Following Fisher’s line of thought Jackson sees miracle as “a divine operation that transcends what is normally perceived as natural law; it cannot be explained upon any natural basis” (www.christianwuriier.com).

Examples of miracles in the strict sense include the Virgin conception and birth of Jesus Christ, the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, the healing of a blind man with mere words, the feeding of the five thousand with five loaves and few fish, spontaneous healing of a terminally sick person solely by prayer, etc. Hence miracle in the exclusive or strict sense consists of an unnatural phenomenon which raises people’s eyebrows, causing disbelief from critical minds with regard to its possibility.

In a more inclusive, extensive or informal sense the word miracle is often used to designate any beneficial event of extraordinary nature but not naturally or scientifically unexplainable nor contrary to natural laws. Such informally miraculous occurrences may include surviving a ghastly motor accident, or fire incident, recovering from a serious illness, being successful in a very difficult examination where many people failed. Hence in the extensive usage the word miracle incorporates a lot of favours received from God even if they are naturally explainable.

Articulating the exclusive and inclusive senses of miracle St. Thomas Aquinas noted three degree and orders of miracles all having the same source, God. According to him, “the highest degree in miracles comprises those works wherein something is done by God, that nature can never do; for instance, that two bodies occupy the same place, that the sun recede or stand still, that the sea be divided and make way to passerby....The second degree in miracles belongs to those whereby God does something that nature can do, but not in the same order, thus it is a work of nature that animal live, see and work but that an animal live after being dead, see after being blind, walk after being lame, this nature cannot do, but God does these things sometimes by a miracle....The third degree of miracles is when God does what is wont to be done by the operation of nature, but without the operation of the natural principles: for instance when by the power of God a man is cured of a fever that nature is able to cure; or when it rains without the operation of the principles of nature.” (*Summa Contra Gentiles* 111, 101. Cf. also *Summa Theologiae* I Q.105,Art.8).

St. Augustine holds that one miracle is not greater than another. He says, “In miraculous deeds, the whole measure of the deed is the power of the doer” (*Epist. ad Volusian. cxxx vii*). Aquinas disagrees with this view holding that “a thing is called a miracle by comparison with the power of nature which it surpasses. So the more the power of nature which it surpassed, the greater the miracle.” (*Summa Theologiae* I, Q.105, Art 8).

3. Criteria for Accepting Miracles

Miracle in the more inclusive and extensive senses admits any strange or extraordinary event as miraculous although it may be capable of normal or scientific explanation. This brings in a lot of things as miracles as long as they are astonishing and not common place events. In this sense almost every favour can be called a miracle. This brings us to the criteria for accepting anything or event as a miracle in the strict sense of the word. Many scholars (Aquinas, H.D Lewis, C.S. Hefling, A.H Larmer, W. Jackson, etc.) among other things, agree that for there to be a miracle in the strict and exclusive sense two basic criteria must be met, namely: it must break all known natural laws, secondly it must be an act of God i.e., it must not be ascribed to any natural power but to a Supernatural power or God.

With regard to the first criteria H.D Lewis says “a miracle must involve, as one condition a total break in the normal or natural continuity of events. It would, in that case, defy all normal explanation. It would not happen in accordance with any law or regularity in the course of things. It would supersede or suspend such laws. That above all, is what makes it a miracle” (301). Thus anything or event we can explain its occurrence by referring to any known natural or scientific law cannot be called a miracle. Miracle in the strict sense must be beyond human explanation by reference to natural law.

Another criteria for accepting a miracle as pointed out above is that it must be above the power of all created beings to perform. The occurrence of a miracle requires divine intervention or at least some supernatural factor in which God is involved either directly or indirectly through angels, saints or some human agents.

In affirming the two criteria for accepting a miracle St. Thomas Aquinas says “A miracle so called is when something is done outside the order of nature. But it is not enough for a miracle if something is done outside the order of any particular nature, for otherwise anyone would perform a miracle by throwing a stone upwards, as such a thing is outside the order of the stone’s nature. So for a miracle is required that it be against the order of the whole created nature. But God alone can do this, because, whatever an angel or any other creature does by its own power is according to the order of created nature, and thus it is not a miracle. Hence God alone can work miracles.” (*Summa Theologiae* 1.Q.110, Art.4).

Agreeing with Aquinas Hefling says; “A miracle is an astonishing event, astonishing because it is extraordinary and extraordinary because what has occurred is or involves a breach of the usual natural order. Nature ‘on its own’ does not bring forth miracles; if they occur, the law of nature must, by way of exception, have been suspended or overridden and such a suspension can only be ascribed directly or indirectly to God. (661- 662).

When we analyze the above two criteria, they raise more questions and demand more explanations. The seemingly strange, extraordinary or marvelous events of today may appear so to us because of our limited knowledge in various fields of study or experience. This makes these occurrences appear to break all laws of nature, but this may not be so, we cannot claim to know all laws of nature, scientists are still discovering previously unknown natural laws and are using them to advance the development of the human society. The newly discovered natural laws, like the law of relativity by Einstein, have offered explanations to previously unexplainable miraculous events. One may ask whether it is not possible that some miraculous events of today which are so because they are out of accord with the natural laws our limited knowledge are aware of may not fall into a continuity or intelligible patterns of events when in future our limited knowledge becomes more comprehensive. Many of the things we behold in our cotemporary world as ordinary occurrences might have seemed miraculous to a primitive man or our great grandparents. Such things and technologies include aero planes, wireless telecoms, televisions, fax machines, video calls, drugs, hospital equipments, etc. Even in our world of today many people who lack some requisite knowledge in medicine, computer technology, aeronautic engineering etc. still consider advanced products in these fields of study as miraculous.

The above objection can prompt one to reject miracles in the strict sense. One may argue that we have no reason to claim that anything is in principle beyond explanation. We may not have the explanation today, we may have it tomorrow. Even if we may never have it, that shows how limited we are, if we know and understand all natural laws we will surely have natural explanation for the so called miraculous events. Hence, there may be strange, out of place or astonishing events, we may argue, but none is inherently unaccountable. There must be some explanation for everything.

With regards to the second criteria which require that a miracle must be an act of God, that it must involve divine intervention directly or indirectly. The questions raised here are; is it in keeping with the nature of God and all his known attributes and perfections to be inconsistent, to break the laws of nature ordained by him, to disrupt or suspend the natural continuity or regularity of events? Does such intervention not imply some imperfection in God who in his perfection is supposed to have made all things perfect? Is it in accordance with the dignity and wisdom of God that he should suspend laws made by him in order to answer prayer?

Though God’s intervention in nature may not make any religious sense to an unbeliever, but for a believer God’s love for his children in need and the supremacy of his power are enough reasons for him to intervene in history. Intervention does not necessarily imply a prior mistake. The dynamism of natural events can introduce new things that may need to be worked upon. The world is continually being renewed, it is progressive and its development is an ongoing process, thus it is in this scheme of events of renewing the world that a miracle finds its place and becomes reasonable.

4. Miracles and Magic

From the etymological definition of miracle as something astonishing, amazing, wonderful and marvelous, it may appear that magic is apparently synonymous with miracle. This notion is wrong because magical acts do not pass the criteria of miracle. Magical acts do not surpass the laws of nature nor are they the acts of a Supernatural Being or God. Whereas miracles are acts performed by God directly or through the mediation of secondary causes, magic consists of the use of means intended to bring occult forces under control in order to influence events. According to Merrifield, magic “is intended to operate through impersonal forces of sympathy or by controlling supernatural beings” (68). Corroborating this view Versnel holds that magic “is manipulative as the process is in the hands of the user, ‘instrumental coercive manipulation’... magic is a technical exercise that often requires professional skills to fulfill an action” (177-195).

Considering the effects of miracles and those of magic, both can produce similar effects but by different means and source of power. For example, both the staff of Pharaoh’s magicians and the staff of Moses could turn into snakes (Exodus 7:8-13), one is considered a magic and the later a miracle. It is the means by which the staffs became snakes and the power behind the occurrence that constitute the fundamental difference. Whereas

Pharaoh's magicians employed their secret arts while uttering some incantations, Moses simply dropped his staff without recourse to any of these means used in sorcery, witchcraft or animism. Thus as Noegel will affirm, in miracles which are acts of a Supernatural Being, God does not need magical rituals to act (45-59).

Uduigwomen, citing McDowell and Geisler summarily presented some major differences between a true miracle and magic. These include:

1. While miracle is under Gods control, magic is under man's control
2. Miracle is done at Gods will while magic is done at man's will.
3. Miracles are not naturally repeatable whereas magic are naturally repeatable.
4. True miracle excludes every form of deception and manipulation while magic involves these
5. Miracles are unusual but not odd whereas magic is unusual and odd. (170)

From the foregoing we can conclude that though miracles and magic may be both amazing they are distinguished mostly from the means used in accomplishing them, the source of power behind their accomplishment and the purpose of their performance.

5. Philosophical Positions on the Possibility and Credibility of Miracles.

Owing to the non-natural nature of miracles as well as the many spurious claims of it, some philosophers have risen in defense of miracles as well as in objection to its possibility and existence.

Both St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas equivocally affirmed the possibility and existence of miracles. This affirmation is hinged on the existence of God who is absolutely powerful and who can intervene in nature to accomplish a purpose commensurate with his goodness and justice. For St. Augustine a miracle "is something difficult, which seldom occurs, surpassing the faculty of nature, and going far beyond our hopes as to compel our astonishment." (*De Utilitate Credendi* xvi). Confirming Gods power to intervene in the order of nature Augustine says; "where God does anything against that order of nature which we know and are accustomed to observe, we call it miracle" (*Contra Faust* xxvi, 3). Joining Augustine to confirm God as the author of miracles as well as the reality of miracles St. Thomas Aquinas says "... miracle is so called as being full of wonders, as having a cause absolutely hidden from all; and this cause is God. Wherefore those things which God does outside those causes which we know, are called miracles (*Summa Theologiae* I,Q.105, Art 7).

Confirming both the reality and possibility of miracles as Gods intervention in the world Aquinas further says; "it is not against the principle of craftsmanship if a craftsman brings about a change in what he makes, even after giving it its first form". For Augustine and Aquinas therefore, miracle can happen and miracles do happen.

Philosophers like Bonaventure, Descartes, Taylor, Williams Paley and Copleston hold that the possibility of miracle becomes evident when we accept the existence of God who is all powerful in his nature. A rejection of any proof of Gods existence as well the possibility of his existence will imply a denial of the existence of miracle as well as the possibility of having one. Taylor and Copleston offered a proof of Gods existence with arguments from religious experiences like miracle. Williams Paley rejects the argument that ascribing a miracle to God may indicate a lack of foresight, or power or both. He says "In what ways can a revelation be made but by miracles? In none which we are able to conceive"(12). Hence ascribing miracles to God is not impious neither do they imply any limit to his power or knowledge. Miracles are both signs of Gods approval and evidence of his benevolent foresight.

There are also philosophers who reject both the possibility and the existence of miracle, these include; Spinoza, Voltaire, Hume, Kierkegaard, James Keller etc. Some of these philosophers while not denying the existence of God assert that the very fact that God exist makes a miracle impossible. According to Baruch Spinoza it is impossible for miracles to occur because nature cannot be contravened but "preserves a fixed and immutable course" consequently a miracle which violates the laws of nature is "a sheer absurdity" (123, 128). Spinoza holds that the will of God is identical with the laws of nature and that necessarily, God's will is inviolable. He argues therefore, that if miracles consist of violation of the laws of nature then a miracle cannot happen. Spinoza's argument can be said to be faulty from its foundation, his identification of the laws of nature with the will of God is incorrect.

A similar faulty argument accruing from the wrong definition of miracles is Voltaire's assertion that "a miracle is the violation of mathematical, divine, immutable, eternal laws. By the very exposition itself, a miracle is a contradiction in terms; a law cannot at the same time be immutable and violated" (272). One will accept this argument only when Voltaire's definition of miracles is accepted. Voltaire's more subtle argument with regards to the impossibility of a miracle is found in his entry "Miracles" contained in his *Philosophical Dictionary*. According to him; "it is impossible a being infinitely wise can have made laws to violate them. He could not... derange the machine, but with a view of making it work better, but it is evident that God, all wise and Omnipotent, originally made this immense machine, the universe, as good and perfect as He was able; if He saw that some imperfections will arise from the nature of matter, He provided for that at the beginning; and accordingly, He will never change anything in it" (273). It is the view of Voltaire, therefore, that to ascribe miracles to God would indicate lack of foresight or of power or both. This objection could be answered by the

position of Williams Paley put forth above.

The most frontal attack on the possibility, reality and rational credibility of miracles is that articulated by David Hume. Hume ended the first part of his essay "Of miracles" with a general maxim that, "no testimony is sufficient to establish a miracle unless the testimony be of such a kind that its falsehood would be more miraculous than the fact, which it endeavor to establish." (86-87).

In the second part of the same essay Hume posited four arguments against miracle insisting that there never was a miraculous event established on evidence so full as to amount to an "entire proof" (88). Hume's four arguments are argument from inauspicious conditions, argument from the passion of surprise and wonder, argument from ignorance and barbarism and argument from parity (*Stanford Encyclopedia*). With regard to the first argument Hume lists credibility, reputation and general acceptability as conditions necessary to accept the testimony of miracle. He says, "there is none to be found, in all history, any miracle attested by a sufficient number of men, of such unquestioned good sense, education and learning, as to secure us against all delusion in themselves; of such undoubted integrity, as to place them beyond all suspicion of any design to deceive others; of such credit and reputation in the eyes of mankind as to have a great deal to lose in case of their being detected in any falsehood". (88)

With regard to the second argument Hume speaks of the natural tendency in man to be attracted by tales of unusual occurrences. This passion of surprise and wonder is ordinarily being exploited by religious people who tell captivating stories of miraculous events to promote the cause of their religion. He says; "if the spirit of religion joins itself to love of wonder, there is an end of common sense; and human testimony, in these circumstance, loses all pretensions to authority. A religionist may be an enthusiast, and imagine, he sees what has no reality. He may know his narrative to be false and yet persevere in it, with the best intentions in the world, for the sake of promoting so holy a cause" (89)

Hume's third particular argument, from ignorance and barbarism holds that miracle stories are most popular among backward cultures whose failure to understand secondary causes lying behind phenomena makes them vulnerable to frivolous stories. (90-91).

With regards to the fourth and final argument Hume argues that different religions that promote mutually exclusive doctrines supported and validated by miracles contradict the beliefs of each other. It means they disprove the miracle of each other to assert their own authenticity. It then means their miracles which they disprove cannot be true. He then says because of their lack of agreement the miraculous claims of the different religions should be rejected as products of delusion intended to deceive and convince the ignorant. (92-93).

Omorgbe, after rejecting the arguments of Hume (213-223) exposed its inconsistency with Hume's analysis of the principle of causality and the uniformity of nature. He finally affirmed that "a miracle is an unusual occurrence which defies any scientific explanation in terms of the known laws of nature. To deny the logical possibility of such occurrence is to claim a comprehensive and thorough knowledge of nature. The continuous advancement of science shows the limitations of man's knowledge at any given time" (220). Hence one must situate every claim of miracle in its time and circumstance to accept it as possible and real.

6. The Multiple Miracle Claims in the Contemporary Nigerian Churches.

In the contemporary Nigerian Society the love of and quest for miracles in virtually everything is the order is the day. This hunger for miracles not only promotes the multiplicity of churches specializing in performing miracles but also a culture of laziness, superstition and mobility of worshippers who change places of worship with questionable regularity in search of miracles. It is common place in Nigeria of today to be overwhelmed in public places by the sight of billboards, banners, posters and fliers publishing crusades, programs and churches where miracles take place. The social, print and electronic media are not left out as potent medium in this advertisement for miracles. Many television channels are devoted to the promise and display of unauthenticated and apparently stage-managed miracles.

Among the miracles advertised in these churches and programs include, miracles of fruit of the womb, deliverance from demonic possession and obsession, family root healing, promise of life partners, employment, admission into institution of learning, raising the dead, healings (of cancer, fibroid, stroke, painful menstruation, diabetes, blindness, dumbness and lameness), miraculous promotion in places of work, open doors to wealth, miraculous appointment into political offices, etc. The scenario created by this abuse of miracles has created both excitement and skepticism. While some people keep running from one church to another in search of miracles many others are skeptical about these claims especially as it is known that people have to pay money in order to receive these miracles. The incredulous see these so-called miracle centers as mere business centers set up to exploit the gullible members of the society.

Nkem Ikeke, with a sense of skepticism listed some miracles of Nigerian pastors that are too good to be true. Among these is the claim by pastor Chris Okafor of the Mountain Miracle and Liberation Ministries (Liberation City) of raising a six month old baby back to life on Sunday, February 7, 2016. Though some received the news with wild jubilation always seen in such a gathering, many critical observers queried the miracle, raising

questions as to the identity of the child's parents, their address, the sickness the child suffered from before death, the hospital where the child was confirmed dead, etc.

Other such questionable "Miracles" include that of a pastor of Jesus City Mountain, Asero in Abeokuta, Ogun State who claimed to have commanded angels to send airtime to his members' phones during a revival service. Some member who lifted up their phones as he ordered testified to receiving the supernatural airtime as the pastor prayed. It was also claimed that an 11 years old girl turned into a python during a crusade organized by an Abuja-based prophet Joshua Iginla of Champion Royal Assembly Church.

There are series of unauthenticated instances of miracles which are stage-managed by Nigerian pastors. Most of these are well organized to deceive the unsuspecting and gullible worshippers. In 2016 the police in Enugu State arrested an alleged notorious syndicate which specialized in going round churches helping pastors to fake miracles. Uzodinma Emmanuel reported in *Daily Post* newspaper of August 21, 2016 of the confession of the syndicate while in police custody. According to one of them, they can be detailed to go to any state, connected by a link man in the church or ministry who informs them of the nature of job to be done at the programme. "they usually state their names, nature of problem and other necessary information which is given to the pastor of the church/ministry for his guidance during the prophetic hours," with such information the pastor will prophecy and they will confirm it as true, then they will be prayed for and they will instantly testify their healing or the end of their problem.

Several questions have continuously been raised as to the credibility of the claimed miracles by many Nigerian so-called men of God who advertize miracles on television screens, pages of newspaper, radio jingles, road side billboards, banners and posters. *Saturday Vanguard* newspaper correspondents of September 27, 2014 ran a horrifying review of the miracle centre of T.B Joshua a popular Nigerian prophet and pastor of Synagogue Church of All Nation (SCOAN) titled "How real are T.B Joshua's miracles?" One of those who sought miracle there made this assertion after a horrible experience, "Since then, I have decided not to go back to that man's church because there's nothing called miracle there, what you see there are all stage-managed miracles." Another *Saturday Vanguard* publication described as absurd some testimonies from a two-day program of the Lord Chosen Charismatic Revival Church. Some of such testimonies include "The Lord Chosen" changing the sex of the baby in the womb from a baby girl to a baby boy, the cripple throwing away their crutches and walking home healed, receiving admission letter into higher institution miraculously, restoring a missing kidney in a man who came with one that disappeared mysteriously, etc. These so-called miracles testified to during the program makes the whole concept of miracle look very ridiculous as there were no attempts to bring an unbiased assessor to investigate the veracity of these claims.

Stories of miracle claims have raised mega churches in Nigeria as thousands of people flock to these venues expecting miracles even for what they can accomplish without needing a miracle. There are churches in every nook and cranny of the country with men of God advertising miracles and with many using diabolical means to hold the unsuspecting congregation spellbound. Some use magic, sorcery and witchcraft to accomplish these prodigies of deception. These fake, stage-managed and frivolous miracle claims have raised more questions than answers with regard to the reality of miracles as well as the veracity and credibility of these claims thereby making critical worshippers reluctant to accept anything as a miracle.

7. Are There Authenticated Miracles in our Contemporary Time?

A denial or rejection of miracles in our contemporary time because of the bastardization of miracles will be inappropriate. The question as to whether outside the biblical times miracles still do happen, more so in our contemporary time, can be answered in the affirmative. To deny the possibility and reality of miracles in our time is a denial of the power and goodness of God in our time. Miracles are acts of God not only to confirm the truth and holiness of his message and messenger but also for the benefit of his children in need of his favours.

There may be very many fake and fraudulent miracle claims in our time, that does not mean there are no genuine miracles which have been verified and authenticated using the above criteria of determining a miracle. Our rejection or denial of many so-called miracle claims is not only because many are stage-managed but more so because many have not been authenticated using the criteria outlined above. Many of them may fall under the classification of magic, sorcery and witchcraft, and many though amazing, may be scientifically or naturally explainable. Hence it is only when such act or event are unexplainable and is proved to be an act of God either directly or through his messenger that such can be called a miracle. There are many miraculous occurrences confirmed by the Catholic Church which have been attested to and proven beyond every reasonable doubt. The Catholic Church has very stringent requirements in approving the authenticity of a miracle. This process is overseen, by the Congregation for the Causes of Saints. This Congregation is constituted of renowned experts from every field of human learning especially in the sciences and particularly in the medical field. This body receives claims of miracles from across the world, it demands different kinds of evidence, analyses these facts from different perspectives before affirming whether it is explainable scientifically, socially, religiously, etc. When it has no natural explanation from all these perspectives of human learning, it is declared supernatural and

miraculous.

Some authenticated miracles in the Catholic church includes the Marian apparitions at Lourdes and Fatima, some Eucharistic miracles, the stigmata witnessed in the body of some saintly people, the bodily incorruptibility of some saintly persons after death, several healing miracles, etc. Saintly people who have been beatified or canonized as Saints in the Catholic Church are required to have “intercessory” powers, which mean people can pray through them for God’s favours which may include cures of serious medical problem. To be considered miraculous, a cure which comes after the believer had prayed through the potential saint, must be instantaneous, or sudden, complete and permanent, and without scientific explanation (*Los Angeles Times*).

Dr Raffaello Cortesini, a heart-transplant specialist who was the president of the board for two decades affirmed in *Los Angeles Times* that he has seen many miracles authenticated, more than 250 that met the criteria for miraculous cures. He attests to “cases of tumors that vanished and cerebral lobes that regenerated, cervical cancers cured overnight, expired heart and brains pumping back to life.” The archives at Lourdes custodies authenticated list of healing miracles received from the apparition ground at Lourdes (*The Miracle Hunter*).

Among the many modern miracles recognized by the Catholic Church as authentic after passing the test of the above criteria include: The healing of a French nun Sr. Marie Simon-Pierre of Parkinson’s disease attributed to the intercession of Pope John Paul II in 2011 and the spontaneous, instantaneous and permanent healing of a Costa Rican woman’s brain injury after praying to John Paul II in 2013. These miracles were spontaneous, instantaneous and complete healing. Doctors affirmed them saying “We don’t have any natural explanation of what happened” (www.livescience.com).

The Catholic Church has authenticated miracles in the lives of the Saints including the miraculous gift of stigmata, prophecy, levitation; mystical knowledge, etc. With regard to stigmata, Joan Carroll Cruz writes “Stigmatists are those saints and holy persons whose bodies bore wounds corresponding to those suffered by our Lord during his passion and crucifixion.” (*Mysteries* 216) According to Cruz some of those persons have five wounds while some have only the one at the shoulder or the marks of the crown and some the mark of scourging etc. Many Saints in the history of the Church have experienced this gift which involve a life of sorrow till death, they include: St. Francis of Assisi and in recent times St. Gemma a 20th century mystic and most recently Padre Pio an Italian Capuchin monk who was also blessed with the gifts of miraculous cures, perfume odor and bilocation. According to medical report “After 45 years, the longest record for any stigmatist, the wounds were the very same in character as when they appeared on his body, September 20, 1918.” (Carty 287). Investigation to prove the authenticity of this non-natural phenomenon ruled out personal intervention, hypnotism, auto-suggestion and other functions of the mind before they were accepted as credible.

Cruz also documented in her book *The Incorruptibles* authenticated miraculous preservation of the bodies of some saints which could not decay years after their death and burial. Among such saints are St. Catherine Labore, St. Bernadette Soubirous (the visionary at Lourdes) and St. Charbel Makhlouf (who was buried without a coffin according to the rule of his religious order), whose body “which has remained perfectly lifelike and flexible for more than seventy years, constantly emits a blood-like fluid, which has been acknowledged as truly prodigious”(35). Apart from miracles attested to have been perform through saintly persons, authenticated miracles have also been ascribed to miraculous image of Jesus, Mary and some Saints as well as the Eucharist and relics of saints though many of such claims are products of over piety and emotions but there are many credible instances as recorded by Cruz in her books, *Eucharistic Miracles*, *Miraculous Images of our Lady* and *Relics*. Such miracles investigated and proven to be credible include: the Eucharistic miracle of Lanciano and that of Oviedo. miraculous images of Our Lady of Guadalupe, Our Lady of Czestochowa, and Our Lady of Perpetual Help (*Miraculous Images* 238,1-32).

One will therefore affirm after such quantum of authenticated miracles attested to by expert theologians, scientists and medical professionals that genuine miracles do happen. Some of these credible miracles include: spiritual (instantaneous and sudden conversion), physical, emotional and mental healings; extraordinary occurrences in the lives of saintly people in the form of spiritual gifts; marvelous phenomenon in places of worship to build faith and other favours spontaneously received by devotees after prayers. These prove the power and goodness of God in our time.

8. A Philosophical Appraisal of Miracles

A sound philosophical appraisal of miracle should be a product of a valid consideration of its possibility, reality, necessity and morality. One will then ask: philosophically speaking, are miracles possible? Is it possible to violate the laws of nature which is required to have a miracle? Can the law of nature be suspended for any reason? Considering the attributes of God one of which is his absolute power, it is possible to suspend the laws of nature because with God all things are possible. There are no impossibilities before an Almighty God. But are miracles necessary? Is there any reason so necessary that God has to violate the laws he had made in his perfection? Philosophically is it wise? Does it not betray an element of imperfection on the part of God, who in realizing his mistake made in creation has dimmed it fit to intervene through miracle to correct the error? One may answer

that miracles may be necessary in some instances for the good of man.

Human value surpasses the value of all created things, the laws are made for the good of man and not man for the laws. Man's limited knowledge sees the natural laws as static but they may be dynamic. Development in modern science hints on the possibility of genuine novelty in the universe. Hence as Helfing affirms, "mechanistic determinism that was once thought inseparable from scientific knowledge as such has begun to be dismantled by science itself. The classified laws of physics once construed as expressing what cannot possibly be otherwise are coming to be recognized instead as expressing possibilities that are regularly verified" (663). It then means that if man's knowledge were to be comprehensive he will have a better understanding of the laws of nature and thus comprehend God's miraculous acts in the universe. One may therefore affirm that miracles are needed for the good of man and the betterment of the human society.

Another consideration is the morality of miracles. Are miracles morally justified? Do miracles not show that God loves some people more than others? Do they not portray God as whimsical, arbitrary and even tyrannical? As long as miracles are not the general rule but rare occurrences meant to accomplish special purpose they can be morally and intellectually justified. God in his infinite knowledge thinks about the overall purpose and goal of all creatures as well as the general goal of mankind and thus he performs miracles to fit into this ultimate goal. Hence in the plan of God no one is really treated unfairly. Miracles are therefore morally justified.

Finally an appraisal of the reality of miracles asks whether miracles do really happen. Irrespective of the so many stage-managed and fake miracles claimed by Nigerian ministers of religion, there are true and genuine miracles that have been authenticated as credible. Thus there are many miraculous occurrences that have passed the test set by the criteria of accepting miracles in the strict sense. Hence miracles do happen. There are real miracles proven to be acts of God which are beyond any natural explanation. Some of these have come in the form of spontaneous, instantaneous and complete healing of terminal sicknesses considered hopeless but which disappeared after prayer.

9. CONCLUSION

The common notion about miracle among contemporary Nigerian Christians make miracle look like a common place phenomenon. This is because when one considers the number of new generation/Pentecostal churches and fellowships which serve as breeding grounds for miracles, they far outnumber institution of learning in Nigeria. If these churches, crusades, fellowships produce miracles as they claim, then miracles will become everyday occurrences and hence there will be nothing miraculous about them. They will no longer be *miraculum* (amazing, astonishing, wonderful, and marvelous) since they happen every day and everywhere. Waking up from sleep after the unconscious moments of the night is a divine favour which virtually everyone enjoys, but we do not call it a miracle because we do not consider it amazing or astonishing, it is a common place occurrence. In Nigeria miracles have been made to look ordinary. Many of the so-called miracles are explainable naturally, many are stage-managed, manipulated through hypnotism, and auto-suggestion and many are products of magic, witchcraft and sorcery.

This work unequivocally affirms the possibility and reality of miracles in the strict sense as an effect or extraordinary event which surpasses all natural powers and is beyond any natural explanation. This astonishing, extraordinary occurrence must be an act of God either directly or indirectly. The work rejects the false claims that have bastardized the notion and made it ordinary rather than extraordinary. It is the position of this work that since most of the miracle claims in the contemporary Nigerian society can be naturally or scientifically explained they do not qualify to be called miracles in the strict and exclusive sense. Occurrences like surviving ghastly motor accident, giving birth after many years of childless marriage, passing examination, being healed of a serious sickness, etc. may be special acts of God; they are divine favours wonderful in the extensive sense but not miracles in the exclusive sense.

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