

God's Activity in Today's World: A Review Essay on *The Kingdom Triangle*
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Many readers of this journal will recall Alvin Plantinga's passionate pleas to Christian philosophers more than two decades ago.¹ Among other things, Plantinga argued frequently and passionately that we need to set our own philosophical agendas and curtail our heavy dependence on responding with knee-jerk reactions to non-Christian scholars. Rather, we need to pursue Christian concerns, including the development of positive statements and defenses of cardinal doctrines.

The resulting movement, inspired by Plantinga and others, has led to an incredible torrent of publications, debates, and careful restatements of Christian beliefs. New ground was broken in many areas of research. We have yet to see the end of this ongoing influence. There continues to be a real need today for Christian philosophers to maintain this mindset and to push ahead in the defense of Christian theism.

One of the many areas being addressed of late is that of God's silence.² Does God make himself known to us, even today? If he does so, how might this occur? Are there certain necessary and sufficient conditions for such visitations? Does God ever act in a miraculous manner?

Paul Moser holds that God does indeed supply ample evidence that he is alive and well, but it might not be the sorts of manifestations that we expect. God reveals himself personally, but not for the sole purpose of providing signs, arguments, or proofs. Rather, God desires to be our first priority, the Lord of our lives. Therefore, any interaction with us would most likely be for the purpose of developing a loving relationship with him. Solitary proofs, to the contrary, could

actually work against the goal of a personal connection. Such filial knowledge of God is available to every sincere seeker, according to God's time table.³

Sometimes it seems that the tentacles of Plantinga's admonitions are reaching into philosophical contexts that we never thought were possible. That an imminent epistemologist like Moser is devoting so much study and energy to God's filial work in humans would simply have been amazing prior to Plantinga's advice. Moser is hardly following the train of secular philosophers here! Rather, he is doing exceptionally sophisticated work, all the while making statements that professional philosophers would hardly have touched years ago.

I would suggest that similar moves are also being made throughout the evangelical philosophical community. A recent example is the publication in 2007 of J.P. Moreland's provocative volume, *Kingdom Triangle*.⁴ Here another very sophisticated and influential philosopher tackles the incursion of God's Kingdom into the human realm. Like Plantinga, Moreland sounds the trumpet, by beginning (Preface, 14) and ending (Conclusion, 196) his text with a call to act: "Join me in the revolution. This is your opportunity. Seize it and rejoice in it." (99)

All three angles of the triangle, but especially the third, produce profound insights. Moreland's vision could serve as another, further call to a philosophical reawakening. Like C.S. Lewis,⁵ he envisions the reign of an earlier paradigm, one that was far more faithful not only to reality and Scripture, but one that inaugurated a fuller, classical lifestyle that is far deeper (Moreland would say "thicker") than that of the contemporary competition.

The purpose of the remainder of this essay is to explore Moreland's text. While I intend to summarize briefly Moreland's notion of the current crisis along with the first two underpinnings, my primary interest in this article is the third foundation. Is it possible that God is

actively and miraculously present in the world today? Could it be possible, contrary to everything we hear from naturalistic scholars, that this is really a supernatural universe? Dare we really believe this, even in the deepest recesses of our hearts?

The Contemporary Worldview Crisis

This volume could never be confused for a contentless romp through a Christian theme park. In Part 1, entitled "Assessing the Crisis of Our Age," Moreland introduces in Chapter 1 the "three-way worldview struggle" raging in our culture today between scientific naturalism, postmodernism, and what he calls "ethical monotheism," especially Christianity (22). He holds that there is at present a widespread hunger for ultimate meaning in life, such as that which is contributed by objective values, God, and an afterlife (21). Only what Moreland terms a "thick" world offers such beliefs, standards, and benefits. On the other hand, a "thin" world offers "no objective value, purpose, or meaning" at least in any ultimate sense, no God, and no life after death (26-29).

Thus Moreland argues that Christianity offers such a thick world, while naturalism and postmodernism fail to do so. In Chapter 2, he finds that naturalism, for example, fails to supply adequate answers in the following six areas: the need for free will to ground our lives, real intrinsic values that can be known, the ability to acknowledge the reality of evil and offer hope, the intrinsic value of human beings, the need for purpose and goals that are relevant to the human life, and a satisfying answer to the question of why I should be moral (48-58). Later, Moreland argues that naturalism is unable to account for the empirical data that are available to us (195-199). He concludes boldly that, "naturalism is exposed as the shallow, destructive fraud that really is." (59)

The other contemporary rival to Christianity is the loose coalition of assorted ideas known as postmodernism, producing a movement that infects not only society as a whole, but even a growing number of Christian intellectuals (67). Chapter 3 analyzes some of its key suppositions (77-85), with Moreland asking the same five questions that he had already asked of naturalism. He finds that post-modernist claims crumble, in that they are misleading, self-contradictory, and end up espousing untenable positions (85-88). Moreland concludes that “postmodernism is a form of intellectual pacifism that, at the end of the day, recommends backgammon while the barbarians are at the gate.” While perhaps comforting in some areas, “postmodernism is the cure that kills the patient, the military strategy that concedes defeat before the first shot is fired, the ideology that undermines its own claims to allegiance.” (88)

In light of the two worldviews of naturalism and postmodernism, Moreland turns in Chapter 4 (“From Drama to Deadness in Five Steps”) to the “crucial paradigm shifts that greased the skids from a thick world to a thin one” (91). He notes five such fatal moves from classical concepts to radically new ones. Religion has become chiefly a matter of faith rather than of knowledge. The notion of living the good life shifted from its classical mooring of flourishing in intellectual and moral virtue to captivation by visions of transitory notions of personal happiness. The modern move scraps the classical concept of moral knowledge in favor of the current notion that we can act however we choose, as long as we do not harm others. Classical freedom to do what one ought has become the right to do what one wants. Lastly, the modern stance has migrated from the classical notion of tolerating *persons* to the recent sense of allowing almost any and all *ideas* to prevail (91-104).

In these ways, then, Moreland judges that our society is presently experiencing a philosophical, theological, and moral crisis of immense proportions. The result is a worldview that is not tethered to the moorings of reality in either head or heart.

The Three Angles of the Triangle

Moreland's first foundation involves the rediscovery of real knowledge. In a packed Chapter 5 entitled "The Recovery of Knowledge," he encourages his readers to return to the first four centuries of church history, when apologetic reasoning successfully introduced Christianity into the Roman Empire. The result was that the church was able "to outthink her critics." Their refreshing appeal was to ground Christianity in knowledge, rather than on unsubstantiated faith statements (111-112). So "the crisis of knowledge in our time" is a challenge to the church to return to grounding faith in what we can know (114).

After a rather lengthy list of many biblical texts that call for this sort of thinking (114-120), Moreland delineates the types and nature of knowledge, reminding us that it does not require absolute certainty. He includes a brief but valuable defense of particularism over against skepticism, closing the chapter with three suggestions for growing in confidence regarding God and his truth (120-137). His invitation to his reader is to move forward as a "part of the recovery movement" in order to regain an emphasis on the nature of knowledge (137).

Moreland's second foundation is to progress beyond knowledge alone to a path of spiritual formation. He calls us to abandon the "empty self" with its individualistic, infantile, narcissistic, and passive tendencies, in favor of experiencing the richness of God's present Kingdom (141-149). This involves self-denial and reliance upon God. In this endeavor he

recommends and follows a number of recent thinkers who have encouraged the practice of a large number of spiritual disciplines, as enumerated in their writings.⁶

Moreland's third foundation is restoring the miraculous power of the Kingdom of God. A huge shift in the population of Christianity is occurring in the world today. In an article in *The Washington Times*, Richard Spencer reports that millions of recent conversions to Christianity in communist China mean that believers now outnumber national members of the Communist Party!⁷ In 1960, evangelicals in the West outnumbered other evangelicals around the world by a margin of 2:1. But by 2000, Western evangelicals were themselves outnumbered 4:1, with this figure projected to reach 7:1 by next year (167)!

What accounts for this incredible increase of Christians in the larger world? According to Penn State University's distinguished historian Philip Jenkins, this explosive growth is due to "the critical idea that God intervenes daily in everyday life," including the occurrence of miraculous events.⁸ Spencer agrees that the unprecedented growth of Christianity in China is connected directly to the belief that God is actively healing people today.⁹

Moreland produces many reports of such supernatural activities. These include the ending of a drought in answer to a Christian missionaries' prayer in a Buddhist village in Thailand, resulting in 134 families becoming Christians; specific healings that occurred on the spot, such as the softball-shaped hernia protruding from a child's abdomen that disappeared before the eyes of the two Western missionaries who were praying; significant numbers of demonic deliverances; and even a raising of a dead individual (165-186).

Perhaps the most frequent retort, even from believers, is that these reports always seem to occur in the Third World, where uneducated people *expect* the supernatural to happen.¹⁰ How come we cannot witness such things in the U.S.?

To be sure, Moreland does report several such healing occurrences in this country, as well. In one case, a serious cancer that reportedly had been given only a slight chance of being healed disappeared completely after prayer, as confirmed by a scheduled test just one week later (184-185). In another situation, a machine fell on a man, fracturing both hands as well as his chest bones. He was rushed to a medical facility where a physician x-rayed him and scheduled him for surgery the very next day. That night a group of believers came to the man's house and prayed for him. The next day new x-rays were made just before the surgery, which found that not only that the bones were healed, but there were not even any fracture lines (135-136)!

A last case involved a man known to Moreland with a medically-diagnosed disease that caused him to have to sleep sitting up in a chair for the past nine years, never once being able to sleep entirely through the night. While at a Bible study where no one except his wife knew about his illness, a visiting missionary accurately singled out his condition and told the story that caused it, which not even his wife knew. The missionary laid hands on him and prayed. Subsequently, his physician diagnosed the disease as healed. During the three full years from that day until the writing of the story, he had never missed a night's sleep (170-171).

Then a further complaint will be that these claims are hearsay and/or too old to be scientifically corroborated. Interestingly, Moreland thinks that when miracles do occur, those who observe the event do not stop to gather evidence, even though it may be available (185). I will turn to this objection in the next section. It seems that there are plenty of corroborated healing cases in the U. S. alone.

Confirmed U. S. Cases

Some would have us believe that the majority of American intellectuals reject the supernatural. However, a 2005 Harris Poll indicated that from individuals with a high school education or less (86%) to those with postgraduate degrees (69%), more than two-thirds of the respondents still believed in God. The results were a little lower regarding those who believed in an afterlife (74%-53%), but still comprised a majority. While 83% of those with less education believed that miracles occur, among only those with postgraduate degrees, 50% still affirmed these supernatural events!¹¹

Why do the majority of Americans, even those with postgraduate degrees, still think that miracles occur? There is certainly a correlation between those who think that they have actually seen a miracle and the larger number of those who believe in these events without having experienced one. In another survey, of those who said that they believed in miracles (“fully 80 percent”), almost half of these (37%) said that they had actually experienced one.¹² Empirical testing could indicate more exactly such a correlation, but it is virtually undeniable that, given the logical entailment of their own testimony, having personally witnessed a miracle should also affect the answer to the further question of whether miracles occur today. And assuming that many of those who think that they have experienced a miracle very frequently tell others, then presumably, a decent number of those who say miracles occur today will either think that they have seen at least one, or that they know someone who has done so.

To the extent that we can trust such surveys, therefore, a majority of even contemporary Americans believe in miracles. And this is approximately the case even if we count only those with graduate degrees. Further, much of this overall belief is made up of those who either think

they personally witnessed a miracle, or know somebody who did. In other words, they will not deny their own experience, or that of others whom they trust.

On a philosophical note, there is nothing inherently faulty about this sort of reasoning. We regularly accept our own sense data, all the more so when there is additional evidence in its favor. Just because it could possibly entail a miracle, should we therefore reject it? It seems that, unless we already know the certainty of a worldview that denies the miraculous, we cannot reject it out of hand.¹³ Therefore, contrary evidence aside, those who have experienced incredible events in the context of religious meaning can fairly describe such events as miracles, as argued variously and in more than one context by philosophers like Richard Swinburne¹⁴ and Eleonore Stump.¹⁵

While researching the question of the silence of God, I discovered a number of recent, well-evidenced healing cases, most including careful documentation. I will reproduce here just a few of these,¹⁶ in order to argue that such accounts are not reserved only for a Third World context.

After noticing a puzzling lump, a middle-aged man from Michigan visited his doctor. Two separate biopsies confirmed the verdict of a rare, aggressive, and highly lethal cancer. Surgery was needed immediately. Family, friends, and the man's church set up a prayer chain and started praying vigorously. The operation was performed and the results took several weeks to return from the lab. In spite of the two positive biopsies, not a single cancer cell was discovered in the tumor! Almost eight years later, no further signs have appeared. The family physician has copies of both the two positive biopsies, as well as the final report of a benign tumor!

A nurse was diagnosed with level-4 cancer and told that she most likely had only a few months to live. The night before surgery, a group of church elders visited her in the hospital room, placed their hands on her, and prayed passionately. Immediately after the prayer, the nurse could no longer feel the main tumor, which was very large. Thinking she just was not touching the right place, she went to sleep. The surgery was performed the next day. However, the chief surgeon later reported that there was no tumor where it was supposed to be, and a four hour scheduled surgery was over in a very short time. A full seven years later, the cancer has never reappeared. Three of the four major physicians from the surgery, all specialists, confided privately that the case had absolutely no medical explanation, and two put their comments in writing, both using the word “miracle.”

A very young boy in Florida was diagnosed with leukemia. The night before the first treatment, the elders at his church circled him and prayed for his healing. The next day, a final blood test at the hospital showed no hint of the dreaded disease. The chief physician suspected that an abnormality occurred in the testing, and ordered another blood test a few days later. Again there was no trace of the disease! The fellow is today close to graduating from college and has never had another difficulty ever since. I have personally interviewed the physician, who freely volunteered all these details, and termed the occurrence a medical miracle.

Another woman in the northeastern US was also diagnosed with terminal, level-4 pancreatic cancer. Her cancer had spread to several other major areas. Her oncologist told her that surgery could not fix the problem. She was told to prepare for what would probably be two to three months to live. I joined those who were praying for her.

A call a short time later from the woman’s husband indicated that oddly, she had begun to feel much better. At first it was just a few small things, but the good news increased. Upon

visiting her oncologist, she was told that these sorts of things happened from time to time. But at her insistence, her physician ordered some tests. After full blood work, a CT scan, and even another biopsy of the tissue, the cancer could not be located. Seven years later, no further problems have developed.¹⁷

One question to ask is how many such testimonies will it take before we are at least *open* to God's supernatural intervention in the world today? And what if these sorts of cases could be combined with other varieties of seemingly supernatural occurrences? Strangely enough, research indicates that our views on these issues are often more dependent on our personal outlooks and even our emotions than on the actual evidence. We cannot pursue this complicated topic here, but suffice it to say that even very strong evidence frequently fails to produce the kind of result that we might think.¹⁸

Conclusion

Aslan may indeed be on the move! But for too long, the church has stood fragmented by too much turf-guarding. Moreland calls for a revolution--one that unites three major legs of the *Kingdom Triangle*. He calls for a major impact on our knowledge, our personal discipline and practice, along with restoring the transforming and miraculous power of God's Kingdom. On the last topic, it often seems as if we are like those who witness the supernatural, but attribute it to thunder (John 12:29)! One can of course quibble with this or that point, but hopefully by now, the value of Moreland's thesis will be obvious. I will just add one last personal note: as one of my very dearest friends in the world, I will say forthrightly that JP not only believes the content in this book, but he really, truly lives it. In recent years I have witnessed the incredible step-by-

step process by which he has exhibited the marks of someone who has sat at the feet of his Lord.
May we all accept the Lord's offer to get to know him.

End Notes

¹ For example, Alvin Plantinga, "Advice to Christian Philosophers," *Faith and Philosophy*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (July 1984).

² For several enlightening perspectives, see Daniel Howard-Snyder and Paul Moser, Editors, *Divine Hiddenness: New Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Paul Moser, *The Elusive God: Reorienting Religious Epistemology* (N.Y.: Cambridge University Press, 2008); for a popular overview, see Paul Moser, *Why Isn't God More Obvious? Finding the God Who Hides and Seeks* (Norcross, GA: Ravi Zacharias International Ministries, 2000).

³ Moser, *Why Isn't God More Obvious?*, especially 2, 11, 13, 17, 19-20, 26, 30, 34, 55, 58. For further implications of some of these ideas, see Joe Gorra's very recent interview with Moser, at the Evangelical Philosophical Society's blog, <http://www.epsociety.org/blog/2008/12/interview-with-paul-k-moser-kerygmatic.asp>.

⁴ J. P. Moreland, *Kingdom Triangle: Recover the Christian Mind, Renovate the Soul, Restore the Spirit's Power* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007). Subsequent parenthetical page references are from this text.

⁵ C.S. Lewis, *The Discarded Image: An Introduction to Medieval and Renaissance Literature* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1964).

⁶ For example, Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988); Willard, *The Renovation of the Heart: Putting on the Character of Christ* (Colorado Springs: Nav-Press, 2002); Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth* (New York: Harper and Row, 1978); Foster, *Freedom of Simplicity* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1981); Foster, *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1992); Henri Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart* (Minneapolis: Seabury, 1981).

⁷ Richard Spencer, "Millions All over China Convert to Christianity," *The Washington Times* (August 3, 2005), A-1, A-11.

⁸ Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 1-3, 13.

⁹ Spencer, A-1, A-11.

¹⁰ Strangely enough, this is reminiscent of David Hume's complaints in Part II of his famous essay, "Of Miracles," in *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Section X.

¹¹ "The Religious and Other Beliefs of Americans, 2005," Harris Interactive, December 14, 2005, available from: http://www.harrisinteractive.com/harris_poll/index.asp?PID=618, accessed January 28, 2008.

¹² Bill Newcott, "The Mystery of Miracles," *The AARP Magazine*, January/February, 2009, available at: http://www.aarpmagazine.org/people/mystery_of_miracles.html?print=yes, accessed on January 28, 2008.

¹³ Stephen E. Parrish, *God and Necessity: A Defense of Classical Theism* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1997), especially 156-157.

¹⁴ Richard Swinburne, *The Concept of Miracle* (London: Macmillan; N.Y.: St. Martin's Press, 1970), for example, 32, 70.

¹⁵ Eleonore Stump, "Petitionary Prayer," in Richard Swinburne, editor, *Miracles* (N.Y.: Macmillan, 1989), 167-188.

¹⁶ As is customary, I will purposely change enough details to preclude the identification of these individuals.

¹⁷ I am still gathering data on this last case. For an extended treatment of this subject as well as the times when prayer is not answered as we would like, see my forthcoming volume, tentatively titled, *Why is God Ignoring Me?* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 2010).

¹⁸ Recently, some colleagues and I have finished a multi-year research project and are preparing to publish the results of two rigorous, empirical studies that provide much evidence for this thesis.