

## Commentary on Mark Crooks’s Essay, “On the Psychology of Demon Possession: The Occult Personality”

John Warwick Montgomery

*University of Bedfordshire*

The present short commentary on Crooks’s essay focuses on Crooks’s methodological distinction between proper empirical, scientific method and the so-called “religion of science.” It argues that only when this distinction is maintained can one avoid a metaphysical positivism that makes impossible any scholarly evaluation of occult phenomena.

I am neither a psychologist nor a psychiatrist, but, on the basis of my books *Principalities and Powers: The World of the Occult* and *Demon Possession*, cited by Mark Crooks in his article under discussion, I have been asked to provide a brief comment concerning it. As a philosopher and professor of law, my remarks will necessarily focus on epistemology and standards of evidence, especially as applied to occult and allegedly supernatural phenomena.

In my view, the most important single contribution of Crooks’s article lies in his preference for factual evidence over metaphysical opinion. He rightly holds that — at least since the eighteenth-century so-called Enlightenment — naturalistic worldviews have become a new orthodoxy. To admit anything beyond the naturalistically “normal” identifies one as a naïve obscurantist, deserving of ostracism from the scientific community. To accept any explanations beyond the naturalistic is a mark of political incorrectness and the kiss of academic death.

Crooks, on the other hand, understands the vital distinction between scientific method — relying on empirical, factual evidence no matter the consequences — and what has been termed “the religion of science”: the metaphysical commitment to naturalistic explanations, even when the evidence does not offer sufficient support for them. Crooks is a serious empiricist. If the data require, or even favor, non-naturalistic explanations of occult phenomena, he prefers to go with the evidence rather than forcing the data to fit a preconceived naturalistic universe.

Examples abound throughout the Crooks essay. His critiques of McNamara's "positive possession" and the views of Davies, of Randi, and of Carl Sagan are particularly telling. Let me reinforce the Sagan analysis by material from my most recent work, *Defending the Gospel in Legal Style*.<sup>1</sup>

I deal with Sagan's adage, "Extraordinary claims require extraordinary proof" — an assertion which, if correct, would justify limiting the analysis of occult phenomena such as demon possession to reductionistic naturalism regardless of the weight of the evidence for a non-naturalistic explanation of such occurrences. (In the following lengthy quotation, read "occult" for "religious" or "theological," and "veridical occult phenomenon" for "miracle.")

When one passes into the realm of religious commitment, does one not face insuperable problems not to be found in the legal realm — since religious decisions are of an eternal dimension? Can the unbeliever not argue that it is simply impossible in principle for evidence — any evidence — to justify religious commitment?

Historically, this style of argument has been presented in different guises. Going back to late classical times is the axiom, "the finite is not capable of the infinite";<sup>2</sup> the world is incapable of the presence of the absolute, so no amount of evidence could ever demonstrate the presence of the infinite in our finite world. The fallacy of this argument (applicable not only to a divine Incarnation and an infallible Bible, but also to the real presence of Christ in the Holy Eucharist) is simply that, *qua* human beings, we have no idea what God is or is not capable of, so we have no business ruling out events *a priori*. It may well be that the reverse of the aphorism is true: *infinitum capax finiti!* Only a factual investigation of the world to see if God has entered it will ever answer the question.

Then there is Lessing's "ditch": the claim that the accidental facts of history can never attain or justify the absolute truths of reason. Here, a serious category mistake has been made. If the "absolute truths of reason" are purely formal, lacking entirely in content, then they have nothing to do with Christian religious claims at all. If, however, they are factual in nature, then only factual investigation and probability reasoning could justify them. But this is exactly what historical proof consists of: probable evidence for historical occurrences. If, for example, God became man in Jesus Christ, that contention is as capable of historical investigation as are any other purported occurrences.

David Hume argued that no miracle could ever be demonstrated, since (on the basis of "uniform experience") it would always be more miraculous that one claiming a miracle or providing evidence for it were not deceiving or deceived than that the miracle actually happened. Miracle arguments (such as the case for the resurrection of Christ) are therefore impossible from the outset. But Hume's position has been thoroughly refuted — and not just by Christian philosophers.<sup>3</sup> The intractable problem with the Humean argument is that it is perfectly circular: to be sure, if nature is completely uniform (i.e., if natural laws are never broken), miracles do

---

<sup>1</sup> Montgomery, J.W. (2017). *Defending the gospel in legal style* (pp. 26–30). Bonn: Verlag für Kultur und Wissenschaft.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Peter Bruns (1999). *Finitum non capax infiniti: Ein antiochenisches Axiom in der Inkarnationslehre Babais des Grossen (nach 628)*. *Oriens Christianus*, 83, 46–71.

<sup>3</sup> Earman, J. (2000). *Hume's abject failure: The argument against miracles*. New York: Oxford University Press.

not occur. *But that is precisely the question requiring an answer!* And the only way properly to respond is by engaging in serious factual investigation of given miracle claims. One cannot short-circuit the miracles issue by a priori pontifications about the nature of the universe. Indeed, . . . in an Einsteinian, relativistic universe, no event can be excluded on principle: everything is subject to empirical investigation.

But the most influential current argument against the effectiveness of religious claims based on historical evidence is that represented by the adage, “Extraordinary claims require extraordinary proof” — a saying popularized by the late Carl Sagan but which apparently originated with sociologist Marcello Truzzi.<sup>4</sup> Does not this declaration constitute an obvious truth militating against all miracle claims — and in particular the resurrection of Christ? Since a miracle is maximally “extraordinary,” would not the evidence required to demonstrate it have to be maximally extraordinary as well?

In a word, the answer is No! Why? In line with what we have noted above, the Truzzi–Sagan tag would have meaning if, and only if, one knew the fabric of the universe — its cosmic laws and what therefore can and cannot happen; but in Einsteinian, relativistic terms, no one has such knowledge, so no one can rationally determine the probabilities for or against a given event: only factual investigation permits one to conclude that event *x* did or event *y* did not occur. . . .

But what about the very concept of a “miracle”? Is not the notion in itself so extraordinary that no amount of evidence could properly count to prove it? Here we must distinguish *mechanism* from *factuality*. The mechanism of a miracle is indeed beyond our ken — but that is irrelevant to whether or not such an event occurs. As long ago as the 18th century, Thomas Sherlock, Master of London’s Temple Church and pastor to barristers, noted that the case for the resurrection of Jesus Christ does not depend on our comprehension of how resurrections occur but squarely on whether there is sufficient evidence that Jesus died on the Cross and that following his death he showed himself physically alive to sound witnesses.<sup>5</sup> There is thus nothing “extraordinary” about determining that Jesus rose from the dead: one need only show (a) that he died and (b) that later he was physically alive — determinations which we make every day (though in reverse order).

Are we saying that miracle evidence should be accepted as readily as non-miracle evidence? The visions of Fatima and the appearance of the Angel Moroni to Joseph Smith on the same basis as Lincoln’s assassination and Hitler’s *Anschluss*? We are saying simply that the standard of proof does not depend on the frequency of the event (since all historical events are unique) nor on the characterisation of the event as “miraculous” or “non-miraculous.” The standard of proof depends, in all instances, on the quality of the evidence in behalf of the claimed event — that and nothing more; that and nothing less. If one were to claim that a peach can be miraculously turned into a cumquat, he or she would have to show, by ordinary scientific means, that there is a peach present at the outset, and, then, afterwards, a cumquat. For a resurrection from the dead: the same kind of testimony is required as for any other historical event — in this instance, that the object of the miracle was in fact dead and then, afterwards, physically alive. The issue of proof

---

<sup>4</sup>See Montgomery, J.W. (2011). Apologetics insights from the thought of I. J. Good. *Philosophia Christi*, 13, 203–212.

<sup>5</sup>Sherlock, T. (1729). *Tryal of the witnesses of the resurrection of Jesus*. London: J. Roberts. Sherlock’s book is photolithographically reproduced in the revised edition of Montgomery, J.W. (1980). *Jurisprudence: A Book of Readings*. Strasbourg: International Scholarly Publishers.

is not in any way metaphysical: one relies on sound historical investigation of the testimony to miracle claims of past events (or sound contemporary scientific investigation, in the case of the peach). The nature of the claim determines the method of proof, and the standard will be that appropriate to parallel determinations in the same realm.

But let us conclude with the essence of Crooks's argument, in his own words:

Realize that a worldview, positivist or otherwise, by its nature cannot be logically entailed by empirical data as such. There is also the complementary suggestion that otherwise successful naturalistic explanations do not receive such validation from their embedding worldview. Thus the post-Enlightenment interpretive paradigm, as such, that did away with "explanatory gremlins" (e.g., demons) has never been experimentally or theoretically established. The only reason it seems to have been so is that the success of naturalistic explanations in the physical sciences seems to necessitate a monopolistic reductionist scheme.

If psychologists, parapsychologists, psychiatrists, and historians of ideas were to pay just a modicum of attention to Crooks's seminal essay, those fields of scientific investigation would have the perspective essential for a return to a genuine empirical examination of reality. The result would be a wondrous turnabout, not merely in the investigation of occult phenomena and of the personalities of those suffering such deleterious experiences, but across the entire gamut of scientific endeavor.