

# COMMERCIALISATION OF MIRACLES IN THE NIGERIAN CHURCH

*The Reduction of God to 'Deus Ex Machina'*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Christianity today is fraught with many phenomena, such as the proclamation of prosperity gospel, proliferation of churches, commercialisation of miracles, desecration of religious articles, the amalgamation of syncretism and Christian faith, religious extortion, etc. Amongst these many issues, the commercialisation of miracles has assumed an unprecedented level within these few years, which is the consequence of an age infested with the prominence of the emphasis on signs and wonders as the constituting element of Christian spirituality. In fact, what seems to give credence to the authenticity of the call of pastor or supposed "man of God" is the ability to perform miracles. Miracles become the template on which the gathering of Christians are justified as God-centred.

Contemporarily, intimacy with God by many Christians is determined by the number of miracles wrought in our Christian gatherings. God has been reduced to a machine that produces miracles. Thus, God ceases to be God if miracles are not worked or performed. The resulting effect of this hunting desire for miracles has bred the proliferation of Churches. People go from one religious centre to another in search of miracles, even when it means to pay for them. The commercialisation of miracles is a scandal to the Gospel message proclaimed by Jesus and entrusted to His Church. With this established, this paper seeks to understand the true nature of

miracles, and precisely, expose the cankerworm of our age in Christendom: the commercialisation of miracles.

## 2. DELINEATION OF THE CONCEPT: "MIRACLE"

While it is the case that the term, miracle, assumes a religious connotation, its usage cuts across several disciplines. Biblically, there is no term that corresponds to miracles in its strict theological meaning. However, miracle in Hebrew is referred to as *mopet*, which connotes wonder, a sign of God's power and goodness (Ps. 70:71), an omen for the future (Is. 8:18; 20:3), or a warning portent to keep the people away from evil (Ex. 11:9; Ps. 104:5).<sup>1</sup> In its Greek equivalent, the term is rendered as *semeion*, which denotes any divine sign. In both the Hebrew and Greek renditions, the place of divinity is underlined and clear-cut.

### 2.1 THE OLD TESTAMENT UNDERSTANDING OF MIRACLES

In the Old Testament, the occurrences of miracles are stupendously narrated. Miracle was "a sign of God's merciful providence for some specific purpose, which he tried to grasp and understand."<sup>2</sup> In the prophetic era, Miracles were described as the wondrous acts of God which are "intended to draw attention to something beyond themselves that confirm to the Word of God. They are not isolated gestures on the part of God, but play an important part in the execution of the grand design of the Creator for the redemption of His creatures."<sup>3</sup> By this understanding, miracles are revelatory, didactic and salvific.

### 2.2 THE IDEA OF MIRACLES IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

Miracles constitute an important aspect of the ministry of Jesus. While it is the case that various miraculous workings were accounted in the New Testament, their significant connotation must not be lost. In a more profound way, miracles were signs of salvation proclaimed by Jesus. "All the great themes of the prophets and of the messianic activity of Jesus are

expressed in his miracles in a striking series of lessons in action.”<sup>4</sup> The height of the miracles subsumes in the miracle of the resurrection. All miracles and their distinctive meanings find justification in the resurrection experience. Thus, the miracles of Jesus were salvific. “In the Gospel of John, the sign is a guarantee of the divine testimony, a theophany of the glory of the Father in the Son, a symbolic illustration of the Son’s saving work and of his struggle against the prince of darkness and the murderer from the beginning.”<sup>5</sup> In the Acts of the Apostles, at every miraculous encounter, faith is planted in the hearts of many, as they become followers of Christ. In 2 Cor. 12:12, Paul writes that “All the marks characteristic of a true apostle have been at work among you: complete perseverance, signs, marvels, demonstrations of power.”

### 2.3 SCHOLASTIC AND THE CHURCH’S UNDERSTANDING OF MIRACLES

According to St. Thomas Aquinas, miracles “are done by divine agency outside the commonly observed order of things.”<sup>6</sup> In a broad sense, a miracle is an occurrence that defied the laws of nature, and usually arouses awe and wonder. It is a supernatural experience. Thomas Aquinas, adapting the first definition of miracle as proffered by St. Augustine of Hippo, defined a miracle as that which happens beyond the order of created nature.<sup>7</sup> That is, miracles are said to occur when things happen in ways that they naturally would not have. Be it that the occurrence is what naturally could not have happened -as in the case of a dead man rising from the dead-, or that the case is that which could have occurred, but is now occurring in a different way -as is the case of healing someone instantly from a disease that he/she could have recovered from gradually, there is a supernatural intervention in the natural order of things. This order can only be altered by God who designed it. Hence, Aquinas pointed out that miracles are produced by God’s power alone.<sup>8</sup> The foregoing makes it lucid that miracles are solely acts of God and God alone. According to John Hardon, “God can

directly intervene in nature and immediately produce a miraculous effect with no cooperation with his creatures".<sup>9</sup>

The Church's official teaching on miracles is found in the pronouncement of First Vatican Council: "In order that the 'service' of our faith be 'in accord with reason', God willed that to the internal helps of the Holy Spirit, there be joined external proofs of His revelation, i.e., divine deeds, and principally miracles and prophecies. Since these clearly show forth God's omnipotence and infinite knowledge, they are signs of revelation that are most certain and suited to the intelligence of all men. Therefore, not only Moses and the prophets but also and pre-eminently Christ the Lord Himself wrought many obvious miracles and made numerous manifest prophecies."<sup>10</sup> From this declaration, it is clear that miracles are revelatory and confirmatory of God's power over nature.

### 3. THEOLOGICAL PRINCIPLES OF THE CONCEPT, "MIRACLES"

From the exposition thus far, miracles are didactic; they serve in the execution of the over-all design of divine providence for the Redemption of Israel and all humankind. They awaken fundamental religious feelings and attitudes through concrete symbolic representation of the truth.<sup>11</sup> Miracles arouse faith and help in the formation and development of one's faith. They confirm and give credence to the Word of God, as they bear witness to the Word of God.

### 4. MEANING OF *DEUS EX MACHINA*

Etymologically, the phrase *deus ex machina* is from the Latin origin, and means "god out of a/the machine". According to Encyclopedia International, it refers to "any person or thing in a drama or narrative writing introduced by artificial means to provide a quick solution to a difficulty."<sup>12</sup> Thus, to say God is *Deus ex machina* in the context of the topic before us, is to say God is that which is brought into a situation to

give people their desired outcome which would have been improbable without him. It expresses a situation where people want God to perform miracles for them because they need those miracles, even though they have not been in a relationship with him. Their contact with God therefore becomes a means to an end, -a mundane one at that- and not an end in itself. This position attempts to formulate a definition of miracles devoid of its religious undertone. This is because the term 'religion' conveys the idea of a way of life, based on certain beliefs. Hence, this unchristian notion of miracles needs to be corrected, lest the essence for which God works miracles be lost: to improve the relationship between God and man. This now stands as a major reason why clerics now commercialize miracles and lead people astray from the true faith.

## 5. THE COMMERCIALISATION OF MIRACLES: THE REDUCTION OF GOD AS *DEUS EX MACHINA*

The need arose to contextualise this part of this section: and so, the Nigerian experience assumes the platform where we shall stand to consider this matter. The history of religion in Nigeria cannot be complete without an uncompromising, vivid relation of inter-religious crises, the proliferation of religious centres, syncretism with mainstream religions, commercialisation of religions, commercialisation of miracles, amongst other issues. Amongst these issues, two phenomena must be emphasised: the proliferation of Churches and the commercialisation of miracles. These two phenomena can be considered as twins from the same mother, While the proliferation of Churches and its twin, commercialisation of miracles have become issues to grapple with daily, the socio-economic and political situations of the country in the hands of many analysts have been noted as constituting remarkable factors breeding these occurrences.

Carrying alongside its twin, the proliferation of Churches can be seen as a consequence of the impending and incessant search for miracles, and

hence, the commercialisation of miracles. The term, 'commercialisation' is to be understood within the parameters of this paper as the act of buying and selling of miracles. Precisely, it is the trading of miracles. An analogy explicates this understanding: God is conceived as a manufacturer of miracles; the pastors or "supposed men of God" as suppliers, marketers or middlemen; and the Christian faithful as buyers of miracles. Miracles are now considered as commodities to trade with.

The incessant search for miracles from one Church to another propagates and extends the number of Churches around and about us. People search for miracles not for the right reasons, but for the mere fact that they are exonerated from their troubles and quandaries.

### 5.1 COMMERCIALIZATION OF MIRACLES IN MODERN DAY NIGERIA

The description of the events of miracles in Nigeria today is factually that of *deus ex machina*. The situation where miracles are commercialized, presents the case of a sudden and sort of magical remedy to people's mundane problems. This commercialization of miracles manifests itself in multifarious ways. Pastors of souls attach money to the prayers said for worshipers without which no blessing or miracle will manifest until some financial commitments are made. There is the subtle compulsion of people to offer money or some other material things, if the miracles received must abide with them, and not be reversed by God. The so-called seed sowing practice for expected miracles, which has made some to rob themselves of their finances and hard-earned goods is yet another; the practice of offering money to others, or better still, hiring people to engage in spiritual exercises like fasting on one's behalf for whatever reason, so as to get a miracle. The list is endless. The meaning and place of miracles in religion and in soteriology have been change. The loss of the soteriological dimension of miracles by the contemporary Nigerian is lucidly expressed here by Pope Francis when he asserted that "God wants faith, they want

miracles, God wants to save everyone, and they want a Messiah for their own advantage.”<sup>13</sup> This is as a result of misplaced priority. Though the socio-economic situation of the country cannot be stripped of this malaise, it is however not an excuse. This is because religion is not about convenience, but of conviction.<sup>14</sup>

There is also a paradigm shift in the idea of what moves God to work miracle. Miracles, although sometimes worked by God without any request by man, can be solicited from God by man through prayers. Whereas miracles are worked by God when he turns to God faith in prayer, the trend in the contemporary Nigerian society shows that the average contemporary Nigerian believes God works miracles when money is given to a pastor, and even, proportionally directly. Hence, the financial commitment made by Christians in anticipation of a miracle or in gratitude for a miracle received, is highly and falsely emphasized today. Miracle seekers pay more attention to this than to the nurturing of their faith and growth of their prayer life and spirituality. The words of the Holy Father therefore become timely when he said “Miracles happen. But prayer is needed, prayer that is courageous, struggling and persevering, not prayer that is a mere formality.”<sup>15</sup> By qualifying the prayer as a courageous one, the Supreme Pontiff stresses the faith element of prayer in achieving miracles.

All these culminate in the reduction of God to a miracle working machine. People remain connected to God in as much as miracles are wrought. Their faith is built on the tsunami of miracles. In fact, God remains God in as much as miracles are performed. Pastors and Catholic Priests are getting rich as they canvass their way to wealth through the extortion of many whom they have promised miracles. Families have been swindled in the name of working miracles. The sound theology which describes the place of miracles in Christianity has been dashed

away. God has been reduced to a machine that produced miracles. Many Churches are in existence for the show of miracles.

## 5.2 CAUSES OF THE ISSUE OF COMMERCIALIZATION OF MIRACLES

Obiora highlights some high-rated factors as contributing to the proliferation of Churches and the commercialisation of miracles. They include: crass ignorance, fear, despair, unemployment, social and economic difficulties in Nigeria, fear of the unknown and lack of contentment, which are the greatest enemies of man and the obstacles to the mastery of life."<sup>16</sup> Some other factors include:

*Poor Catechesis and Wrong Notion of Christianity:* Scriptures affirm that people perish for lack of knowledge (Hos: 4:6). The average Nigerian who has poor reading culture and insufficient catechesis is ignorant and has no knowledge even of the elementary theology or some of the basic tenets and practices of his religion. Such a person is left at the mercy of the prevalent currents of his time.

*Materialism and Insincerity amongst Pastors:* The inordinate desires of pastors of souls to become unnecessarily rich and affluent has contributed immensely to the situation at hand. These, out of their selfish quest, attach financial commitments on the part of their flocks unnecessarily to miracles, as if it is trade by batter. Either they cajole the flocks to 'sow seeds', or to offer a financial/material appreciation for miracles received. This has over time made the people of God to consciously or unconsciously develop the new, erroneous and fallacious conception about miracles. This is facilitated by some pastors, who take advantage of the pulpit to preach this fallacy.

### 5.3 SOLUTIONS TO THE ISSUE OF COMMERCIALIZATION OF MIRACLES

Some possible solutions to this issue of commercialization of miracles include:

(1) **Proper Catechesis:** With sound knowledge of the Church's doctrine, contemporary Catholics will have the basic theological understanding of their beliefs and practices. It would fortify them against erroneous teachings, even of their pastors and would save them from the influence of other religions.

(2) **Faithfulness to the Gospel and Church's Authority on the Part of Pastors:** The commercialization of miracles and reduction of God to *deus ex machina* is not oblivious to the hierarchy of the Church. Hence, such things have been properly prohibited in one way or the other. Faithfulness to the Magisterium, Local Ordinaries' guidelines and the Gospel message would keep Christians, particularly priests from this act.

## 6. CONCLUSION

During the ministry of Jesus, the Jews requested for signs and wonders. But every time this happened, he repudiated them and turned down their request. This incessant hunger for miracles amongst Christians today constitutes a great mismatch to the whole message of Jesus. The only sign would be the sign of Jonah: which is the sign of repentance. Gospel values are not preached in our Churches today. What constitute Christian message today in many denominations are prosperity gospel and the theme of miracle. All these have birthed proliferation of Churches and its twin, the commercialisation of miracles. So many atrocities have been experienced in Christendom due to the desire for miracles. Many lives have been lost in the name of miracles; many families and businesses have crumbled all in the name of miracles. It is the case that the true

theology about miracles have been lost. However, we must resurrect these theologies and sound it over nooks and crannies.

## END NOTES

<sup>1</sup>S. E.DONLON, "Miracles" Berara I. Marthaler, O.F.M. Conv., (ed.), *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, Second Edition, Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2003:661.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 663.

<sup>3</sup> S. E.DONLON, "Miracles" Berara I. Marthaler, O.F.M. Conv., (ed.), *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, Second Edition, 662.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> J.I DIRVIN, "Miracles (Theology of)", Berara I. Marthaler, O.F.M. Conv., (ed.), *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, Second Edition, Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2003: 665.

<sup>6</sup> St. Thomas Aquinas, in CHARLES HEFLING, "Miracle", *The New Dictionary of Theology*, p. 662.

<sup>7</sup> *Summa Theologiae*, 1, q, 110, a 4

<sup>8</sup> *Summa Theologiae*, III, q 43, a, 2

<sup>9</sup> JOHN. A. HARDON, "The Concept of Miracle from St. Augustine to Modern Apologetics", *Theological Studies*, 15 (1954) p.237.

<sup>10</sup> J.I DIRVIN, "Miracles (Theology of)", Berara I. Marthaler, O.F.M. Conv., (ed.), *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, Second Edition, Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2003: 666.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, p. 663.

<sup>12</sup> "Deus ex machina" in *Encyclopedia International*

<sup>13</sup> POPE FRANCIS, Angelus audience 3rd February 2019.

<sup>14</sup> CATHOLIC BISHOP'S CONFERENCE OF NIGERIA, *Growing a New Nigeria*, (2011), no 30, p. 40.

<sup>15</sup> POPE FRANCIS, Tweet, @ Pontifex, May 24, 2013.

<https://twitter.com/pontifex/status/337870587676487680?lang=en>.

<sup>16</sup> F. K. OBIORA, *The Divine Deceit, Business in Religion*, Enugu: Optimal Publishers, 1999, xvi.