

---

*Miracles in Enlightenment England* by Jane Shaw

New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 2006. Pp. x + 244. ISBN 0-300-11272-6. Cloth \$45.00, £25.00

---

*Reviewed by*  
Stephen Brogan  
Birkbeck College, University of London  
stephen.brogan@btinternet.com

In this lucid and engaging book, Jane Shaw argues that during the war of ideas in revolutionary and post-revolutionary England the debate concerning miracles was not the result of abstract, intellectual theorizing. Rather, in her narrative, she privileges the large number of religious sects that appeared during the 1640s and 1650s which emphasized the ability of certain individuals to have unmediated contact with God; this new phenomenon then produced a proliferation of miracles, especially miraculous healing. This social reading of events she calls the study of ‘lived religion’ rather than ‘popular religion’; ‘lived religion’ is an anthropological term that she has borrowed from historians of American religion such as David Hall [see 1997] and Robert Orsi [see 1985], and it is defined by Shaw as beginning ‘with practice in the dynamic sense’ and then proceeding ‘to draw out the theological (and other) meanings of that practice within a specific context’ [10]. By focusing on the reality of religious practices as far as is possible, she then demonstrates that doctrine both emerges from and informs practice. Contested practices were debated by participants and their audiences, both of which included intellectuals. Shaw’s thesis is validated by her thorough use of case studies and a cogent discussion of the flaws within many of the secondary sources.

This is an ambitious book because scholars of intellectual history have tended both to ignore lived religion and to take the Protestant doctrine of the cessation of miracles at face value. Shaw’s privileging of lived religion means that she is able to explain the importance of religion to all strata of society on an everyday basis. Within this context, it then becomes apparent that early modern miracles had a far wider audience than might have hitherto been thought. At the centre of this debate were radicals and Independents interested

© 2007 Institute for Research in Classical Philosophy and Science

All rights reserved

ISSN 1549-4497 (online)

ISSN 1549-4470 (print)

ISSN 1549-4489 (CD-ROM)

*Aestimatio* 4 (2007) 93-98

in miracles as a validation of their sects; Latitudinarians interested in the boundary between reason and revelation, the natural and the supernatural; and those such as the Presbyterians who disavowed miracles on theological grounds. Beyond this centre was an outer ring of participants that operated within the public sphere, people who read and discussed pamphlets and visited miracle sites. The wider the audience, she argues, the wider the spectrum of opinions was concerning miracles; and thus she demonstrates convincingly that there was an intra-Protestant debate concerning whether the age of miracles had passed. Whilst the official Anglican view maintained that the age of miracles had passed, this debate was largely unresolved, she argues, and was partly the result of an anxiety concerning the Popish nature of miracles. She therefore cautions against confusing prescription with practice.

Her book is divided into eight chapters. The first sets the context for her study. The second, 'Protestantism and Miracles', discusses the debate concerning the cessation of miracles and the revival of healing practices according to Biblical injunction. She describes how the Baptists, by rejecting Roman and Anglican customs, created new liturgical healing practices: ritual was rigorously based on scripture (James 5); the site was the home or the place where a small congregation gathered, and not a church or shrine; and the object was either the holy oil or the Word in the material form of the Bible. Thus were miracles recast in a Protestant sectarian image.

The third chapter, 'Miracle Workers and Healers' discusses the Quakers and the royal touch ceremony whereby the English sovereign healed scrofula (known as the 'King's Evil') by the ritualistic laying on of hands. Quakers are contrasted with Baptists, and seen to be less organized and not following scripture with equal rigor; they are mystical and claim power directly from God; and so were criticized for undermining the resurrection and for appearing Popish. The analysis of the royal touch relies on earlier treatments by Raymond Crawford [see 1911] and Marc Bloch [see 1973], and like many scholars Shaw emphasizes the political value of the ceremony to the restored Charles II. Her account of the decline of the ceremony focuses on James II's return to a more Roman ritual, and the undermining of divine right ideology that occurred in 1688 and 1714, when the direct line of succession was broken. And yet politics depends upon a belief system, and so Charles II could only use the ceremony to his

advantage if enough people believed in the possibility of his curing their scrofula. Furthermore, it would be interesting to know whether any of those who supported the new regimes in 1688 and 1714 argued that providence was working through Parliament, which would then suggest in turn that the monarch could remain thaumaturgical. The popularity of the healing ceremony during the reign of Queen Anne also undermines Shaw's thesis with regard to 1688.

In her fourth chapter, 'Valentine Greatrakes and the New Philosophy', Shaw explains that Greatrakes, the Irish stroker and healer, was not motivated by sectarian imperatives but rather by altruism. However, he did address the issue of why 'God should now cure diseases in an extraordinary manner' [83] and gave three reasons: to prove His existence in an age of atheism, to be merciful to humankind, and to contrast true Protestant miracles with Popish shams. Greatrakes was a successful, high profile healer, and his work was investigated by the newly formed Royal Society, a process that took the debate beyond doctrine into natural philosophy. Shaw describes the disagreement between Henry Stubbe and Robert Boyle, and explains that the natural philosophers investigated Greatrakes *via* a process of scrupulous observation; and so the miraculous was treated as the physical. Boyle was present when Greatrakes healed a tinker, and even put on the Irishman's glove and stroked the tinker. The natural philosophers advocated the recruiting of honest, reliable witnesses as well as the recording of events in objective language as a method for collecting dependable evidence that proved the truth of the healings.

This is a stimulating chapter, but it is a shame that Shaw did not discuss the issues within the context of changing attitudes to magic. Boyle was presumably interested in the glove because Greatrakes wore it during healings, and because, as part of his empirical investigation, the scientist wanted to determine where the healing powers resided. She could also have said more about why the Royal Society prioritized the natural world over the supernatural, despite Joseph Glanvill's scientific investigations into the spirit world as recorded in his *Sadducismus Triumphatus* [1681]. Although some of its members were interested in the supernatural, the Society's prioritizing of the natural world was probably due to its understanding that magic was capricious, whereas nature obeyed rules and so was more discernible through observation. However, Shaw concludes that the corollary of this scientific debate was the discussion of the nature of God.

Chapter 5, ‘Fasting Women’, discusses female prophets, particularly the case of Martha Taylor, who continued to fast after the Restoration when radical sects were persecuted. Taylor was observed fasting in bed between 1667–1669 by various teams of women in order to ascertain whether this was a genuine case or a fraud, and Shaw connects her analysis to Laura Gowing’s work [2003] on the body. Writing about pregnancy, Gowing argues that uncertainties concerning women’s bodies led to the production of stories and claims that were an attempt to make sense of the mysterious, and Shaw demonstrates convincingly that this applied to the prodigiously abstinent female body too. Taylor did not claim to be performing a miracle; and aside from one comment from Hobbes, who wrote that it was for the church to decide whether the matter was or was not miraculous, the feat of endurance seems to have been understood as preternatural rather than supernatural. In other words, it was her remarkable body—literally a body of evidence—that seemed to fascinate visitors and observers, and not her piety.

‘Perfectly Protestant Miracles’, Shaw’s sixth chapter, is a discussion of the cases that did claim to be miraculous, and of the importance of faith and reading the Bible as pre-requisites for the miraculous. Protestant miracles did not require intermediary figures, external trappings, or petitionary prayer; and were usually sited within the home. As such, they were earthbound miracles: that is, the power of God visited temporarily the everyday lives of Protestants as a result of their being the elect; and so this contrasted with Catholic miracles, which relied on trappings and intermediaries in order that earthbound issues could come to God’s notice in heaven. Again, these remarkable events precipitated a discussion of the nature of God: James Welwood MD, discussing a healing, wrote that,

if it be said why should God work such a miracle, if it be any?...I must own...that if I do not know all the secrets of Nature, I do much less know the secrets of the Author of Nature. [132]

The four case studies that Shaw discusses suggest, she argues, that there was a heightened awareness of the morality of those involved in healings, and hence of the nation too; and a profound interest in the relationship between reason and revelation.

Chapter 7, 'Miracles and the Philosophers', contains a discussion of the French Prophets, the sceptical reading of miracles as exemplified by Hume, and the apologists' response. Shaw accounts for the unpopularity of the French Prophets by referring to the emergence of polite society which viewed their extremism as vulgar. It is axiomatic that the 18th century experienced the emergence of polite society and so Shaw seems to understand magic and politeness as existing in a negative correlation. Yet she does not define or map politeness or describe its limitations, but seems instead to accept it as an absolute. Nor has she addressed the problem of politeness and Methodism, which saw belief in magic flourish in a sectarian Whig ghetto, and so undermines the politeness hypothesis.<sup>1</sup>

In her conclusion, Shaw describes how scepticism travelled from the domain of deists and free thinkers to a wider elite culture, but cautions in a healthy manner against understanding this as an orderly cultural division. Reactions to the Lisbon Earthquake in 1755 demonstrated that ideas regarding providence were very much alive. Key to Shaw's book is the argument that a range of attitudes towards miracles existed in mid 18th-century England, and that Hume's work appeared at a late stage in the debate. Arguing against a process of teleological secularization, she borrows from the sociologist David Martin and suggests a pattern of successive Christianizations and recoils.

This book is important because it makes a valuable contribution to the current reassessment of the Enlightenment. It provides great insight into the place of spiritual healing within English society at this time, and hence too into the discourse concerning faith and authority. Whilst it will appeal to those interested in ideas, science, and philosophy, Shaw is at her best when analyzing her case studies in lived religion. It is to be regretted that she did not use visual sources to enhance her work, and there is a factual error on page 147: *Sadducismus Triumphatus* was written by Joseph Glanvill, not Henry More. But this book engages with a fascinating subject, miracles in the Age of Reason; and it is to be hoped that it will inspire further work within this field.

---

<sup>1</sup> For her brief discussion of Methodism, see 178–179.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bloch, M. 1973. *The Royal Touch*. J. E. Anderson trans. London.  
First published as *Les Rois Thaumaturges: Étude sur le caractère attribuée à la Puissance Royale particulièrement en France et en Angleterre*. Strasburg/Paris.
- Crawford, R. 1911. *The King's Evil*. Oxford.
- Glanvill, J. 1681. *Sadducismus Triumphatus*. London.
- Gowing, L. 2003. *Common Bodies: Women, Touch and Power in Seventeenth Century England*. New Haven/London.
- Hall, D. D. 1997. ed. *Lived Religion in America: Towards a History of Practice*. Princeton.
- Martin, D. 2005. *On Secularisation: Towards a Revised General Theory*. Aldershot, UK/Burlington, VT.
- Orsi, R. A. 1985. *The Madonna of 115th Street*. New Haven/London.