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Alain Sandrier, *Les Lumières du miracle*. Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2015. 467 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography, and index. €78.00 (hb) ISBN 978-2-8124-3885-1; €39.00 (pb) ISBN 978-2-8124-3884-4.

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This erudite and convincing book provides a conceptual map to guide readers through eighteenth-century French attitudes toward the miraculous. Surveying works by writers both famous and obscure, both miracle believers and deniers, Alain Sandrier traces the intellectual strategies and common points of reference that structure the Enlightenment-era contribution to the very long Christian argument about divine intervention in the temporal world. This proves an ambitious undertaking, because, as the author notes, there is hardly any eighteenth-century genre in which miracles did not appear, whether as stories for edification, illustrations of popular credulity, or thorny problems for nascent disciplines of science, medicine, and history.

Traditional historical narratives might contrast a miracle-believing past with a miracle-denying modernity and suggest that the frontier between those worldviews was definitively crossed in the Enlightenment era. Sandrier challenges that by-now dated view, writing that “le siècle des Lumières ne fut pas tant le siècle de la remise en cause radicale des miracles, comme on peut l’imaginer un peu facilement, que celui de leurs expérimentations dans un espace discursif de plus en plus laïcisé” (p.12). Exploring the discursive space in which miracles appeared and cataloguing the categories and themes that organized it, this work concludes that the culture of miracles not only survived but remained vibrant across the eighteenth century. New miracle claims emerged regularly, and some continued to earn recognition from ecclesiastical authorities. At the same time, ideas that undermined the traditional authority of miracles increasingly found their way into printed texts addressed to a large public that was increasingly invited to apply critical reasoning to miracle claims. Over the course of the century, the result was that miracles “[ont] subi une acculturation philosophique” and emerged groomed for the manners of a new Catholic piety, “moins austère et moins dogmatique” (p. 432). Sandrier’s book is thus a contribution to recent writing about the Enlightenment that highlights the complexity and vitality of eighteenth-century religious debate, and questions how “radical” the century’s religious transformation actually was.[1]

Under the umbrella of this long evolution, the great interest of Sandrier’s work is likely to be the way he brings specific focus to two “moments privilégiés” when debates about the miraculous crystallized within the context of polarizing conflicts. The first of these moments was the 1730s, when the proliferation of miracles around the St. Médard tomb of François Pâris spawned a veritable “querelle des miracles” among French Catholics. The second moment was the 1760s, when the entire Christian tradition of the miraculous came into the crosshairs of militant philosophes. The book does not argue that the first moment caused the second. Rather, it seeks to illuminate the underlying themes and approaches that linked a sectarian struggle in the French church to a more thoroughgoing challenge to Christian authority one generation later.

To begin this thematic approach, chapter one addresses the difficulty of defining miracles and specifying their relationship to nature. An inherited medieval tradition defined a miracle as an effect surpassing any natural cause and thus having divine origin, but early modern natural philosophy had rendered that definition profoundly unstable. Since nature's powers were uncertain, attempts to define miracles in would-be authoritative sources such as theological dictionaries tended to devolve into defenses against perceived miracle deniers. Theologians like the Benedictine Dom Calmet constructed their definitions of miracles in order to draw a protective barrier around biblical and patristic miracles, aiming—and usually failing—to protect them from the corrosive impact of Cartesianism. While the difficulty of defining miracles was not new in the eighteenth century, Sandrier argues convincingly that the mushrooming of Jansenist miracle claims in the 1730s introduced new urgency to the problem. Jansenists sought to enlist the miraculous to defend their proscribed doctrine. Orthodox writers, in turn, were forced to walk a fine line, refuting claims that God was interceding on the Jansenists' behalf while defending the possibility that God still did speak through miracles. Ultimately, the confrontation of these views in a vast polemical literature invited readers to scrutinize not just the so-called miracles of the convulsionary movement but the entire biblical tradition of miracles.

Miracles might also be defined by type, and in the second half of the chapter, Sandrier turns to consider miracle style in the eighteenth century. What kind of events generated new miracle claims or received official acknowledgement as miracles? He finds that forms of the miraculous that had been highly significant in prior centuries, especially Eucharistic miracles, were decidedly “out” in the eighteenth century, as were apparitions and resurrections. Conversely, miracles of healing came to predominate numerically, suggesting they were more in tune with the taste of the age. Miracles of healing rested on the lower end of the hierarchy of miracles set out by Aquinas, where the lines between natural effects and miracles were particularly blurry. As a result, the debate about miracles opened space within what had been a theological issue for the developing expertise of physicians and scientists. Sandrier concludes the chapter with a look at the reflections of eighteenth-century practitioners on the limits of nature, considering the anti-convulsionary Jansenist physician Philippe Hecquet, Genevan naturalist Charles Bonnet, and the famous Franz Anton Mesmer.

Chapter two, “Le Miracle en débat,” highlights two themes that oriented eighteenth-century polemic about the miraculous. The first, unexpectedly, was the temporary resurrection of the devil as a force in the material world. Looking for a means to discredit Jansenist miracles, the orthodox theologian Dom Louis-Bernard La Taste determined to attribute the whole affair, including physical cures, to Lucifer. The decision created “curieuses distortions” (p. 111) in the argument over miracles by reopening the recourse to the preternatural in theological circles that had distanced themselves from that model for decades. More familiar, and more durably influential, was the second theme Sandrier examines: the question of the reliability of eyewitness testimony. This important and fascinating section of the book opens with an account of the confrontation between Jansenists and their opponents, the first recording hundreds of eyewitness accounts of miracles like the lawyers they often were, the others developing strategies of “cross-examination” for miracle claims that, not surprisingly, tended to discredit witness accounts. How, after all, could a Christian rely on accounts of miracles delivered by others, given human passions and interests? This question leads Sandrier first to delve into the role of miracle testimony in the “Prades affair,” whereby the unfortunate young Abbé Jean-Martin de Prades, collaborator of the Encyclopedists, was forced into exile after his good-faith attempts to resolve such questions in favor of biblical miracles were misconstrued.^[2] The chapter concludes by weighing the impact of David Hume's skepticism about miracles, which Sandrier concludes French readers knew through the response written by George Campbell. By following the problem of eyewitness testimony of miracles across decades when it became central to intellectual controversies of various kinds, he is able to show, among other things, how Orthodox Catholic theologians were constrained to embrace “philosophical” ideas.

Chapter three, “La Vertu des saints,” seeks to identify norms governing the presentation of miracle stories in hagiography, the “natural habitat” of the miraculous in Tridentine Catholicism. The cult of the

saints remained crucial to eighteenth-century piety, and indeed the pace of canonizations and beatifications quickened during the first two-thirds of the century. Regardless, the century saw significant changes in the economy of sainthood. The Vatican, under the leadership of Pope Benedict XIV, concluded an ongoing project to rationalize the process of canonization. Miracles remained a compulsory component of the saintly *cursus honorum*. But, by mid-century, the processes for evaluating a candidate for sainthood showed both the higher level of scrutiny to which miracle claims had been subject since the Reformation and growing unease with exotic supernatural events like bilocation and levitation. Investigators sought a restrained and tasteful list of posthumous healing miracles. Sandrier evaluates a sample of saints' lives published in the century, and concludes that while the *vita* remained an important genre, miracles were toned down and made ancillary to a life of humility and good works. Sandrier also examines how the saint's life genre invited satire, most memorably in the hands of Voltaire.

Chapter four, "La Négation du miracle," traces the logics by which the miraculous was dismissed and denied during the eighteenth century. Pausing to note that authorities often snuffed out miracle claims in their infancy to preserve public order, Sandrier briefly analyzes an underground tradition of popular resistance to "the culture of miracles." Here his sources are glazier and diarist Jacques-Louis Ménétra and the peasant-turned-librarian Valentin Jamerey-Duval. These rare voices give glimpses of an attitude among the unlettered that dismissed some miracles as tools used by unprincipled clerics to extract money from the credulous poor. While this view attached miracle claims to a critique of social domination, Sandrier concludes that it did not go so far as negating the possibility of miracles. Such a tradition did of course exist, but it emerges here as the preserve of educated elites. Sandrier follows other scholars in proposing a relay between the miracle thinking of the early Enlightenment (here, specifically Spinoza and Fontenelle) and the anti-religious eruption of the 1760s by means of clandestine texts composed in the first half of the eighteenth century.

Upon analysis of these clandestine texts, Sandrier discerns three common forms of argument that link the negation of miracles into something like a continuous Enlightenment tradition nourished within a multinational Republic of Letters. The first form of anti-miracle argument was materialist and Deist: miracles were contraventions of the law of nature, absurd if one considered God the author of nature and impossible if one believed that nature followed ineluctable laws. The second was, broadly speaking, historical: received testimony of miracles was unreliable, and even miracle stories in Scripture demanded careful consideration of the rhetorical contexts in which they were embedded. Finally, a third strategy concluded that the miraculous was a "signe équivoque incapable de server aucune cause" (p. 338). This last strain surged, in particular, in reflections on the miracles attributed to Jesus in the New Testament, which writers found bizarre and random when subjected to scrutiny. Why raise Lazarus rather than some other, more important person? Why send the possessed man's demons into a herd of swine, and what about the poor swineherd's loss? Notable in this chapter is Sandrier's long consideration of the work of Thomas Woolston, the obscure English cleric whose *Six Discourses on the Miracles of our Saviour* (1727-9) profoundly shaped the views of Voltaire, who cited him frequently, and according to Sandrier, also bore a family resemblance to those of Rousseau, who never explicitly acknowledged him (pp. 284-301). Purporting to mount a Christian argument in favor of an allegorical interpretation of Christ's miracles, Woolston penned what was *read* as a devastating rationalist critique of the miracle stories of the New Testament, arguably the keystone of the entire edifice of Christian belief in the supernatural. Sandrier's pages on Woolston, his indecipherable intentions, and his unquestionable influence on French readers (his work was translated in 1753) are among the most compelling in the book.

Chapter five, "Fabuleux Miracles," sets out to survey the representation of miracles in images, fiction, and theater. The section on images is very brief because, paradoxically, the representation of biblical miracles was so common a theme of religious art in the eighteenth century. Diderot's critique of a canvas depicting the intercession of Saint-Genevieve for the Salon of 1763, where the operative question was not about representing miracles but about capturing the pallor of corpses, suggests that the

representational codes developed in the aftermath of Trent remained normative throughout the century. The second part of the chapter explores miracles in fiction, in which authors borrowed the form of the miracle story to draw attention to issues of storytelling and credibility. Finally, the third part of the chapter turns to the theater, where Sandrier finds surprisingly few miracles in the genre that specialized in conjuring illusions. The classical sources for most tragedies did not lend themselves to explorations of the miraculous, and Jesuit scholastic tragedies rarely focused on miracles and consigned miraculous events to offstage. The most notable example of the use of theatrical machines to make a miracle visible was the opera *Jephté*, staged in Paris beginning in 1732. But *Jephté* enlisted the miraculous for purposes other than religious edification. The librettist gave the somber tale a happy ending, specifying that a spectacular ball of fire would intercede at the last moment to prevent the human sacrifice that is a part of the biblical story. Although the opera was successful with the public, including a rapturous Rousseau, religious authorities were scandalized by a choice that cheapened the miraculous by exploiting it for entertainment.

A synopsis of the book does not, I fear, do justice to its actual value for readers. It is marked throughout by patient, detailed, and often witty analysis of texts and authors, as well as concern for the contexts in which works were created. This means it is not easy to extract easily summarized narrative arguments of change over time from its pages. The book's thematic organization makes sense, but has the consequence that some authors, texts, and issues come up several times in different chapters. But by virtue of the same method, Sandrier succeeds in evoking a satisfying sense of the various discursive fields that ensured the culture of miracles would change and survive. This will make his book a useful companion to historians interested in Enlightenment-era religion and the long-term destiny of the supernatural.

NOTES

[1] For review articles that assess the ways that religion has returned to Enlightenment historiography over the past two decades, see Simon Grote, "Religion and Enlightenment," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 75:1 (January 2014): 137-160; Charly Coleman, "Resacralizing the World: The Fate of Secularization in Enlightenment Historiography," *Journal of Modern History* 82: 2 (June 2010): 368-395; and Jonathan Sheehan, "Enlightenment, Religion and the Enigma of Secularization," *American Historical Review* 108:4 (October 2003): 1061-1080.

[2] The Prades affair has been the subject of a recent monograph by Jeffrey D. Burson, *The Rise and Fall of Theological Enlightenment: Jean-Martin de Prades and Ideological Polarization in Eighteenth-Century France*. Foreword by Dale Van Kley (Notre Dame, Ind.: Notre Dame Press, 2010).

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