
The Loss of the Supernatural Today

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The author has edited for Foundations' readers the transcript of his address at the 1986 BEC Annual Conference where the overall theme was The Supernatural in Christianity.

As you can see from the title, I have been given a very broad remit. The brief called for a non-academic treatment of a range of important issues, the only topic specifically excluded being that of "supernatural gifts". I can simply say that I have done my best with the resources available to me in local Highland Manses! The first half of the address will look briefly at the claim that society and theology are increasingly secular. The second part will focus on five great areas where biblical supernaturalism is consistently under attack. And the whole gives me the opportunity to indulge some of my favourite quotations!

The term "supernatural" is a controversial and slippery one. The Concise Oxford Dictionary summarises its basic content in ordinary usage: "beyond what nature will account for ... due to or manifesting some agency above the forces of nature, outside the ordinary operation of cause and effect". But I also want to insist at the outset that we must put more content into the term as we lament the loss of the supernatural, because we are not concerned simply to defend the notion of a supernatural realm in some general sense, of "something" or "someone" beyond this world, this life. We assert a full biblical supernaturalism, which proclaims the God of Scripture, the unique, the transcendent, the personal, the speaking God. All that we will maintain and defend in this conference depends on our understanding of His existence and activity.

Secular Society?

While we recognise with gratitude that there are actually real growth points for evangelical religion in Britain today, we know that the general picture is very different. Historians and sociologists chart the way in which the influence of the Christian church has steadily diminished in the last two or three hundred years, a church whose input was so influential in law and politics, in education, in social welfare, and in the moral outlook of society. Bryan Wilson has spoken of the church in Britain functioning "more as a service facility than as an evangelistic agency, more as the provider of occasional and reassuring ritual than as the disseminator of vital knowledge or the exemplar of moral wisdom."¹

The Enlightenment

Historians of thought are in broad agreement as to the decisive shift in the thinking of the West, tracing it back to the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century. Two popular treatments from very different theological perspectives express that agreement. Lesslie Newbigin in *The Other Side of 1984* speaks of the Enlightenment as "the proximate source of our culture",² and Os

Guinness in *The Dust of Death* looks back to this “momentous stage in the journey of the Western mind”. This was the period when the leading thinkers of Europe were confident that darkness was giving way to light as the mysterious was being explained. Important in this was the influence and methodology of developing science, observing phenomena, analysing data and formulating laws. And absolutely critical in the whole ethos was the place given to human reason as against divine revelation. Guinness says that as the century drew to a close, “the break between reason and revelation was finalized, and the battle was joined in terms of ‘Hellene’ versus ‘Hebrew’, light versus darkness, reason versus superstition, philosopher versus priest and men of realism versus purveyors of myth”.³

At first many of these thinkers were Deists, believing in a God who was a first cause, a prime mover, but not necessarily involved in what He had set in motion. But as time went by, less and less need was felt for any God at all. Men dispensed with Him in cosmology, and then in the nineteenth century in geology and biology, and finally the social sciences, sociology and psychology, offered their reductionism. The story moves steadily on to the closed universe and the closed minds of many in our day. There is no-one beyond what they call nature. There is nothing beyond the continuum. Every event has a cause, an explanation, within the system.

Humanism

We thus live in an age where the focus is on this present, physical universe, and where transcendent and eternal assertions are regarded as meaningless or irrelevant. Secularism is the philosophy which is oriented to this world in this time, and it is the dominant world view of modern Western culture. R.C. Sproul has argued that secularism is the umbrella which shields the various non-Christian philosophies beneath it. “Secularism has the necessary common denominator to tie together humanism, pragmatism, relativism, naturalism, pluralism, existentialism, and several other isms.”⁴ Some years ago E.L. Mascall analysed his society in words that are more apposite with every year that passes: “In saying, as I shall, that our present age is radically secularised, I mean that, whatever remnants remain in our national life of the trappings of religion ... the vast majority of men and women today organise their lives on the assumption that the only realities of which they need to take account are those that are perceived by their senses in the brief span of time that lies between their conception in their mother’s womb and their death on the motorway or in the hospital bed. This carries with it two consequences: first, that there is nothing after death that we need bother about ... secondly, that there is nothing during this life that we need bother about except the things of this world.”⁵

I was intrigued recently to read Arthur Holmes’ outline of contemporary humanism, in his *Contours of a World View*, and then to realise that his analysis of seemingly remote philosophies was actually illustrated in a real-life family living near me! He describes four main types of secular humanism. Scientific humanism sees scientific reasoning and application as the culmination of a long process of the evolution of thought and as the key to solving our problems. Romanticist humanism regards man as essentially good, but argues that modern

technology, institutions and pressures have corrupted him. Existentialist humanism is varied, but essentially pessimistic, as we live in a world that gives no guarantees and offers no hope. Marxist humanism focusses on the problem of alienation, as workers are shaped by economic forces they are not allowed to control. Now imagine our family. Dad knows no science, but is convinced that science has disproved religion, and that technology and medicine are on the march to a better world. Mum faces the hum-drum routine of each day with resignation, her youthful hopes and dreams unfulfilled, and certain there is nothing beyond this life. Son is at College and now an avowed Marxist. Teenage daughter is anti-technology, pro-Greenpeace, with a post of an endangered seal taking pride of place in her bedroom.

nothing beyond this life. Although she has never heard the term, her outlook is that of an existentialist humanist. Son is at College and now an avowed Marxist. Teenage daughter is anti-technology, pro-Greenpeace, with a poster of an endangered seal taking pride of place in her bedroom, a romanticist humanist if ever there was one. There they all are, living in the same house!

The Media

How is secular thinking promoted and reinforced in our culture? If time allowed, there are several areas which could merit our attention, among which education for example is of enormous significance. But we will look at one other pervasive influence, that of the media. James Hitchcock, author of *What is Secular Humanism?*, has written: "It is the mass media which, more than anything else, account for the rapid spread of secularism in the late twentieth century." He is including within his definition television, radio, cinema, newspapers and the glossy magazines. "The media", says Hitchcock, "have the power almost to confer existence itself. Unless a belief or an institution receives some recognition, it does not exist."⁶ Through television particularly, secular assumptions, humanistic thinking, hedonistic values, are being pumped into people's homes and minds for several hours every day. And when someone is given valuable resources to make programmes on Christian thought, that someone is a Cupitt.

In *The Christian Mind*, Harry Blamires described the difference between the supernaturalist perspective and the one which comes through the media. He wrote of the former seeing sinners in need of mercy, powerless creatures trying to do without God and making an appalling mess, a world voyaging like a little vessel across the sea of time, a world utterly dependent on God. He asked: "Is that the world represented by our Press and radio and T.V., our journalists and politicians? No ... the world pictured by modern secularism and present to current popular thinking is very different. It is a self-sufficient world. It is a world whose temporality is conclusive and final, whose comprehensiveness of experience embraces all that is and that will ever be. It is a world run by men, possessed by men, dominated by men, its course determined by men."⁷

Secular Theology?

Much contemporary theology is very different from that of the Reformers and their successors, when Scripture was seen as divinely given truth, unchanging

and determinative, and the task of the theologian was to seek to understand and articulate that truth. Clark Pinnock has expressed this in terms of the two poles of the ellipse of Christian theology, God's revelation and the world of human existence. "Theology was conservative with respect to the Word pole, and contemporary only with respect to the modern setting and the problems of communication." But this has changed radically, and Pinnock states that it is human reason or experience which is now taken to be crucial. He points to the influence of Kant and Schleiermacher in the loss of the objective truth content of the Gospel. "The result", he says, "has been a great transformation of classical theology."⁸ Because we have lost the supernatural voice, the transcendent God who has spoken His authoritative Word, we have the vast and complex range of theological thought in our own day. I can now only highlight one or two of the better known names and trends to illustrate the point. Some of the specific issues at stake in the theological debate will be noted in the second part of the address.

Prominent Features

One of the most significant figures in modern theology was Rudolf Bultmann, a man in whom anti-supernaturalism was dramatically apparent. He maintained of course that the Gospel had been presented in mythological terms, because the men who wrote the Bible lived in a pre-scientific age. They believed in a three-decker universe, heaven, earth and hell, and they were fond of supernatural intervention. Modern man cannot believe that, and so we must de-mythologise the Gospel and present it in more acceptable terms. Paul Tillich was another who had a profound influence. He spoke of God not as a transcendent person but as the depth and ground of being. God is just what is most important to you, your ultimate concern. John Robinson was building on the thought of men like these in his million-selling *Honest to God*. He aligned himself with other so-called "thinking theologians" and gave the reason for his programme in the light of contemporary culture. "There is a growing gulf between the traditional orthodox supernaturalism in which our Faith has been framed and the categories which the 'lay' world finds meaningful today." He asserts that the supernatural God is "dead beyond recall".⁹

There are two theological movements of our day which demand mention. The first is 'Process Theology', particularly influential in the United States and increasingly so elsewhere. God is described as 'dipolar' and everything is seen as 'in' God. God and the world are dependent on one another, and so God is in process, growing, developing. This is all very far from traditional views of divine sovereignty and sufficiency. The other movement is 'Liberation Theology', coming especially from Latin America. The philosophy here is Marxist, evangelism is a call to political action, and eschatology is this-worldly. There are now variants of the theology of liberation, Asian, Black, Feminist, and significantly they all speak not only of the theology of liberation but also of the "liberation of theology" from the old constraints, assumptions, dogmas. The politicization of the Gospel seen in liberation theology is an increasing characteristic of theological and ecclesiastical

thought and action in our own land too. The term 'politicization' I recall from Edward Norman's Reith Lectures of 1978, *Christianity and the World Order*: "... the most remarkable of all the changes that have occurred within Christianity during the last twenty years ... By the politicization of religion is meant the internal transformation of the faith itself, so that it comes to be defined in terms of political values ... It is losing sight of its own rootedness in a spiritual tradition; its mind is progressively secularized; its expectations are prompted by worldly changes; and its moral idealism has forfeited transcendence."¹⁰

Media Controversies

Our thoughts will also run to other recent controversies in the media. We remember the furore caused by *The Myth of God Incarnate*. Donald Macleod wrote at the time: "The most urgent and the most demanding problem facing us is this great school of prestigious professional academics deliberately destroying the faith of their fellow-Christians; and aiming to undermine not only our faith in particular doctrines but our faith in the very foundations and possibility of doctrine. They are theological anarchists entrenched in the very citadels of theology."¹¹ Then we had Don Cupitt and the "Sea of Faith" television series. In the accompanying book he summed up the change in Western thinking as "from myths to maths, from animism to mechanism, and from explanation down from above to explanation up from below". Note the crucial contrast: down from above, up from below. Cupitt rejects the supernatural, explanation down from above, and so must begin and end with man. God is just the sum of my human values. He calls on us to discard supernatural theology entirely, and to free ourselves from "nostalgia for a cosmic Father Christmas".¹² Following that we had the controversy surrounding the well publicised views of David Jenkins, Bishop of Durham, especially on topics like the birth and resurrection of our Lord, and these we will take up later. And then most recently of all we have seen the publication of *The Nature of Christian Belief*, and agreed with the criticisms of an ambiguity which sought to allow Anglicans of supernaturalist and anti-supernaturalist persuasions to agree to its wording.

There is one other issue largely neglected by mainstream evangelical theology, but important in contemporary debate, namely the relationship between Christianity and other religions. Theologians who are already uncertain about traditional orthodoxy on God, Christ, Scripture, Salvation and Judgment, are therefore open to other religions, classifying them too as human searches for the divine, and as they become more sympathetic to these religions their theology becomes even less Christian. J.I. Packer has written recently: "It seems fairly clear to me that pressure on conservative theology is still building up from exponents of religious relativism and pluralism ... We may expect a generation of debate on the program of moving through and beyond syncretism to a nobler religion than any that has yet been seen. That notion, which has emerged more than once in liberal circles, looks like an idea whose time, humanly speaking, has come; and countering it, I predict, will be the next round in the church's unending task of defending and propagating the

gospel.’’¹³

Areas Under Attack

Let us turn now to note five critical areas where the supernatural is under attack, and where we are called to reflection and action.

The Cosmos

This is a theme where much is being written, and where I am just going to dip my toe in the water. We have already seen that, in the minds of many people, it is modern science which has made Christianity unbelievable, or at least unnecessary, and which has also caused some theologians to question traditional fundamentals. As we proclaim the truth of Scripture in this area, we begin where the Bible does: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” Against any philosophies which hold to the eternity of matter, or any naturalistic explanations of the origin of the physical universe, we maintain that God is the absolute Creator of all that is, that He created out of nothing, because of His sovereign will, and by the instrumentality of His dynamic Word. That is the answer to the great question: “Why is there something rather than nothing?”

It is also vital to stress the lordship of this God over his creation, against any teaching that he is identical with it, or dependent upon it, or imprisoned within it. He is transcendent over what he brought into being. This King however is also involved through his creation, not only upholding it, but ceaselessly active everywhere within it. We need to hold this against any God-of-the-gaps approaches, where he is seen only in the unknown. And we emphasise it too because many theologians insist that traditional supernaturalist theologies of the Creator and Ruler have lost the immanent and concerned God. But we must refuse to surrender either transcendence or immanence. Both characterise the God of Scripture, the one who is intimately involved in all the detail, as well as sovereign and supreme over the whole.

The lordship of God also means he can intervene dramatically in what we call miracles. Nowadays perhaps scientists are not so rigid in their view of natural law, but in the thinking of many the problem still lies there. But such laws are simply descriptive of the regularities which we observe in the universe, and they allow us to predict what will happen on the basis of precedent. For us, they are God’s customs, his ordinary way of working. But we also believe in a God to whom the universe is always open. To accept the God of Scripture is to accept the possibility of miracle, and to accept the Scriptures of God is to accept the historicity of certain miracles. In the recent Tyndale Fellowship symposium on the miracles of Jesus, William Craig has written: “... if a personal God exists, then he serves as the transcendent cause to produce events in the universe which are incapable of being produced by causes within the universe ... Given a God who conserves the world in being moment by moment, who is omnipotent, and free to act as he wills ... The presupposition against the possibility of miracles survives in theology only as a hangover from an earlier Deist age and ought to be once for all abandoned.”¹⁴

The Bible

We know well the antipathy of secularism to divine revelation and to final truth. Blamires points the contrast: “The popular modern unwillingness to reckon with the authoritative, God-given nature of the Christian Faith is bred of the anti-supernaturalist bias which dominates contemporary thinking, and is indeed native and natural to secularism. It is also nourished by the popular misconception of the nature of truth. Our culture is bedevilled by the it’s-all-a-matter-of-opinion code.” Against this secular view he maintains the givenness of Christian truth. He writes: “To think christianly is to think in terms of Revelation ... It is a religion of acts and facts. Its God is not an abstraction, but a Person — with a right arm and a voice ... The Christian mind has an overriding sense that the truth it clings to is supernaturally grounded, revealed not manufactured, imposed not chosen, authoritative, objective, and irresistible.”¹⁵

But debate over Scripture and revelation is also found within the professing Christian churches. Following the Enlightenment’s stress on reason as against revelation, we had the gradual development of higher criticism, with scholars beginning to look at the Bible in the same way as they would any other book, and applying to its story the kind of canons of historical research and acceptability which they applied to any record of events. Increasingly Scripture was seen as a human book, revealing the way that a religion developed over the centuries. The humanness of the Bible is of course very important. Real people who lived in this world wrote in human language, and each was an individual who made a distinctive contribution. But we recognise a primary authorship. The Scriptures are ‘God-breathed’, and so this book has come from one mind, from above. It is that fundamental which must govern our attitude to the nature, status and purpose of Scripture.

The denial of the supernatural in the revelatory process means the loss of five things. First, you lose history, because you no longer accept that the extraordinary events of Scripture actually happened as recorded. Instead you have stories told later to express important truth in dramatic form. As you reject God’s authorship, you also lose Scripture’s unique authority. James Barr has welcomed the pluralism of modern theology, as theologians come from different perspectives and accept different standards. He insists that those who want to say the Bible is our authority are just sighing nostalgically for old times. “Within this newer context the idea of the ‘authority’ of the Bible has become anachronistic.”¹⁶ Thirdly, you lose unity. Instead of one mind, one author, modern interpretation stresses diversity, so that we hear many voices, from within their own cultural horizons, offering us what may be competing theologies. Then also you lose clarity, perspicuity. As you emphasise humanness and the gulf between biblical culture and ours, you raise doubts about the possibility of the original message of the author reaching us. But God has written a book whose basic message is accessible to ordinary people as they are guided by His illumining Spirit. And finally, appropriately enough you lose finality. Religious pluralism is held to preclude the notion of one final Word from above.

If time allowed, it would be good to think of the supernatural and preaching, because we want to proclaim this Word and see God work through it. For such blessing we are totally dependent on the power of the Holy Spirit. The fire must come from above.

The Saviour

There is no other Christ but the supernatural one. Modern Christology is often focussed in terms of starting-point. Is it to be from above or from below? From above is the way of traditional Christology, accepting that Jesus was the pre-existent Son of God who came from heaven to be incarnate for us. Now many want to begin from below, from the manhood. Though there are orthodox exceptions, such a methodology seldom takes us further than suggestions that Jesus was a man uniquely open to the divine or one who was adopted by God.

Recently the Christological pronouncements of David Jenkins have hit the headlines. He has denied the virgin conception, insisting that the evangelists were writing myth, though another Doctor opened his Gospel with an explicit claim to researched historicity (Luke 1:1-4). Jenkins is failing the Christological test at the first hurdle. As Donald Macleod wrote in the *Banner of Truth* some years ago: "The chief importance of the Virgin Birth, however, in the light of present controversy, probably lies in the fact that it indicates and guarantees as no other doctrine can the status of our Lord as a thoroughly supernatural person ... the Virgin Birth is unambiguous. It immediately identifies itself as a biological absurdity, as supernature, and so long as it is accepted precludes any attempt to account for the life and character of Jesus Christ on naturalistic principles. On the very threshold of Christological study the revelation of God has placed the stumbling-block of the Virgin Birth to offend and to test us — to ascertain whether we are prepared to do justice to His uniqueness."¹⁷

Jenkins has been critical too of the traditional doctrine of the Resurrection of Jesus. If you are interested in following this up, read Murray Harris' Paternoster booklet, *Easter in Durham*, where he quotes and critiques the Bishop. On the TV programme, *Credo*, Jenkins spoke of the Resurrection as a series of events demonstrating the livingness of Jesus and experienced by the disciples. They became aware of His continued livingness as His presence and power were perpetuated in their hearts and minds. Jenkins seems unconcerned about the body of Jesus, whether it was still in the tomb, or had been taken away. Nothing makes more of a mockery of the faith to the man in the street than talk of a resurrection while you still have a corpse. And if the resurrection is what Jenkins insists, then the apostolic verdict is that Christian faith is futile and we are still in our sins (1 Cor. 15:17).

The antithesis between the supernaturalist and anti-supernaturalist perspectives is also highlighted by the Cross. Those who hold to a purely human Christ see this as the great confirmation of their doctrine, with the confusion and desolation of a martyr Christ. But the Scriptural interpretation of that Cross insists on a supernatural Saviour at the heart of a cosmic

conflict. We have the anger of a transcendent Father, the immolation of the Son, the assault of the forces of darkness, and the spoiling of principalities and powers. Only that can make Calvary Good News.

Finally here, it can be taken for granted that the religious and theological pluralism spoken of earlier will consistently deny the uniqueness and exclusiveness of Jesus, as the incarnate Son, and as the way, the truth and the life. John Hick, for example, editor of *The Myth of God Incarnate*, has written much on this theme. For such, Jesus Christ is no longer the only name given for salvation.

The Christian

We know that we have been the recipients of supernatural grace. That meant first a supernatural birth. It was our Lord who spoke to a cultured and religious man, and who used the terminology 'from above' to describe the new birth which Nicodemus needed. No theology here of the essential goodness of man or his natural affinity with God. This is something urgent, radical, sovereign and mysterious. John Murray wrote of the absolute difference between the two kinds of birth: "The natural cannot produce anything but the natural ... The supernatural alone produces the supernatural, and it infallibly secures the supernatural character of its issue."¹⁸ Scripture regularly uses the language of miracle to describe conversion, comparing it with events as stupendous as creation and resurrection. When we ask about miracles today, it is helpful to remember that every conversion is a miracle of invincible divine energy.

The supernatural birth is the beginning of a radically new life. Donald Macleod has issued a plea for a view of the Christian life as "consistently supernatural". The believer is rooted in Christ and nourished by Him. "These things are true all the time, as we face temptation, responsibility and pain."¹⁹ And so my sanctification, my service, my prayer, my perseverance, are all supernaturally empowered. The living God is active in my life, in all its ups and downs. J.I. Packer has recently written: "There are many of us for whom the role model is Joni Eareckson rather than John Wimber. We see the powers of the kingdom operating, but mainly in regeneration, sanctification, the Spirit as a comforter, the transformation of the inner life, rather than in physical miracles which just by happening prevent much of that other kingdom activity whereby people learn to live with their difficulties and glorify God."²⁰

There is a sense in which this supernatural work makes us truly natural. I have just been listening to a tape of Sinclair Ferguson speaking on the subject, "John Owen on the Holy Spirit". Owen teaches that the Spirit in the life of Jesus means that we have perfect holiness married to perfect humanity, and so married together that perfect humanity and perfect holiness are really synonyms for one another. Ferguson takes that as a key to a biblical understanding of what the Holy Spirit really does in men's lives. "The creation of holiness in the believer by the power of the Spirit is synonymous with the creation of a true humanity in the believer by the power of the Holy Spirit."

Supernatural grace makes us natural in the sense that it makes us more like what we should have been, more like what Jesus was. Supernatural grace alone can make us truly human.

The Goal

What of the destiny of the individual and the cosmos? Definitions of secular humanism include the denial of a life beyond this one as a fundamental tenet. For some death is a taboo subject. For others it is to be faced in all its bleakness, as in Bertrand Russell's classic passage in "A Free Man's Worship": "... no fire, no heroism, no intensity of thought and feeling, can preserve an individual life beyond the grave; all the labours of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system."²¹

The Christian churches are seeing a denial of traditional eschatology within their own borders. In a lecture on "Immortality and the Gospel", Bruce Milne has spoken of the lack of supernaturalist, eternal perspectives among the theologians, who in some cases are in danger of moving "from a neglect of immortality to a positive antipathy".²² He justifies this with a study of two highly influential writers, Moltmann and Gutierrez. Milne sees the modern retreat in this area as stemming from the spirit of modern secularism exerting a drag upon the Christian hope, from the impact of Marxist criticism, and from the pre-occupation with the problem of suffering so that the focus on another world is viewed as unworthy and escapist. We do want to affirm practical discipleship in the here and now, but also to insist on personal survival beyond death, on God's guiding of world history to a consummation, on the return of Christ to raise and judge, and on the renewal of creation. Biblical supernaturalism offers eternal hope to a despairing world.

Again it is Blamires who has so superbly expressed the collision between the secular mind rooted in the natural order and the Christian mind with its supernatural orientation: "Ponder the violence of the concealed collision. On the one hand is the assumption that all is over when you die ... that eating, sleeping, growing, learning, breeding and the rest, constitute the total sum of things ... On the other hand is the almost crushing awareness of a spiritual war tearing at the heart of the universe, pushing its ruthless way into the lives of men — stabbing at you now, now, now, in the impulses and choices of every waking moment; the belief that the thoughts and actions of every hour are moulding a soul which is on its way to eternity ... that we are committing ourselves with every breath to salvation or damnation."²³

Concluding Thoughts

The constraints of time have meant a good deal of chopping along the way (most drastically in the treatment of miracles), and this final section will virtually have to disappear. But we cannot leave our subject without at least noting a resurgence of the "supernatural" in one direction — in astrology, magic and the occult. As the supernaturalism of truth and grace is lost, the illegitimate begins to flourish. Guinness' *Dust of Death* is helpful in this area, and David Porter's *Children at Risk* has recently shown how young children

can know a great deal about the occult through fantasy role-playing games. We need to proclaim biblical supernaturalism, with its grace and its hope into the world in which we live. We have looked at that supernaturalism in terms of the Cosmos, the Bible, the Saviour, the Christian, and the Goal, and each one has stressed the 'from above' theme. But notice how earthed each one of them was. God made a world for us, and we are to rest in the sovereignty of the transcendent One who rules from above. From above He has spoken and still speaks to man in human language. From above He came into our world, into flesh. From above the new birth brings the life of God into our hearts. From above He will come and renew creation. The supernatural is so earthed in our world and in our needs. And thus there is nothing more relevant to this planet, to human life here, to men and women in the twentieth century, than true biblical supernaturalism. Without it, we have nothing to say.

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