

TIME



Can We Still Believe In

Miracles?



■ COVER

THE MESSAGE OF MIRACLES

As the faithful hunger for them, scholars rush to debunk and to doubt. Can we afford to believe?

By NANCY GIBBS

Over the years, the Jernigan family in Raleigh, North Carolina, has tried to help friends cope with sorrow, with sickness, the death of a child, the draining of hope. They know what it's like to fall on their knees and scream in prayer, listening for an answer and hearing only an echo. But they will also talk about miracles and how they can happen, not just long ago but at any time. Their miracle is named Elizabeth.

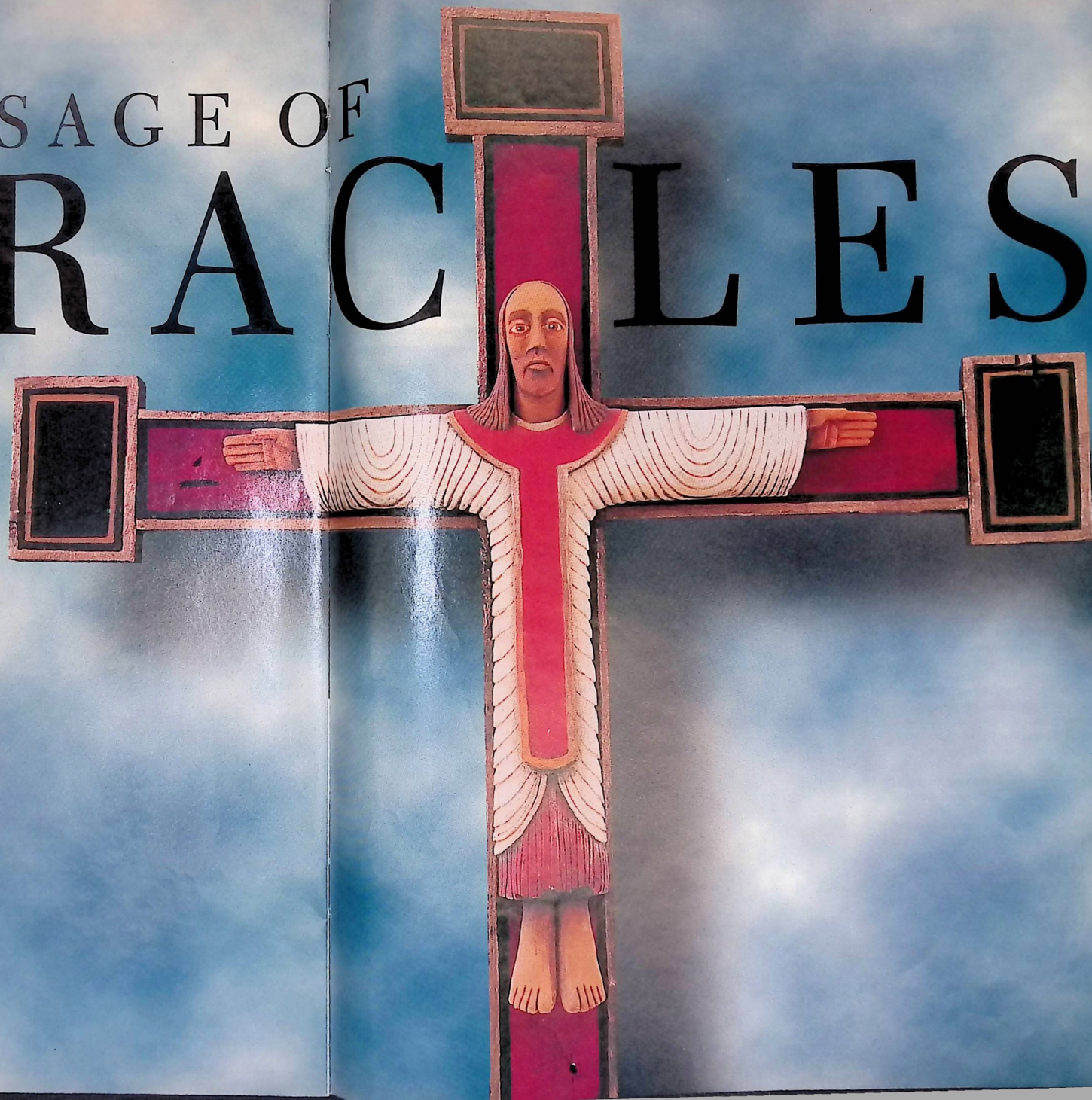
What a problem, what a promise, miracles present to people of faith. These morsels of grace, offered by a merciful God willing to meddle with the laws of his universe, can be blessed and dangerous things. Every religion has its holy moments, its Easter, its Passover, its visions and prophecies. But only in Christendom, a faith built around a core of miracles, is the fight over their meaning so fierce.

"Why does this generation ask for a sign?" an angry Jesus asked, wondering about the hunger for miracles in his own time, though he might as well ask it of ours. Touch me, heal me, the crowds demanded of their Messiah, and so even as he went about touching and healing, he acknowledged that miracles, if produced on demand, could sabotage the faith they were meant to strengthen. For the truly faithful, no miracle is necessary; for those who must doubt, no miracle is sufficient.

Those warnings bear remembering in these days before Easter, when Christians are invited to dwell on the deepest mysteries of faith. Far from being resolved by centuries of scholarship and devotion, the paradox of miracles seems only to deepen. Certainly they occupy a strange place on the spiritual map of America. When *TIME* asked in a poll last week whether people believe in miracles, 69% said yes; and the fastest-growing churches in America are the Charismatic and Pentecostal congregations whose worship revolves around "signs and wonders." Tens of thousands of people gather in a pasture in Georgia or a

THE RISEN CHRIST

Sculptures by Kevin Hanna



COURTESY OF MR. & MRS. ERNEST P. GANTHWAITE

backyard in Lubbock, Texas, because of reports that the Virgin appears in the clouds.

Yet just when the faithful are so eager to embrace the possibility of miracles in everyday life, prominent American theologians are working furiously to disprove the miracles in the Bible. Last month, just in time for Lent, the rebel scholars of the self-appointed Bible tribunal called the Jesus Seminar gathered once again, this time to vote on the most explosive question of Christian faith: Did Jesus literally rise from the dead? That such a vote would even take place says a lot about current Bible scholarship; that the result, by an overwhelming majority, was to announce, No, he did not, shows clearly the chasm that has opened between some professors of Scripture and the true-believing flock.

All parents may be forgiven for viewing their children as miracles, but none more so than Betsy and Leonard Jernigan Jr. One day when their baby Elizabeth was about four months old, her right eyelid began to weaken a bit: the pupil seemed slow to respond to light. Such small signs, and they came and went; she seemed happy and healthy, so her parents expected that the problem would clear up by itself.

It didn't. Soon the eye began to droop and the pupil became fixed. The baby's grandfather, Isaac Manly, a Harvard-trained surgeon, was worried about the child's symptoms but didn't want to frighten her parents. He gently suggested a trip to the ophthalmologist, which led to the pediatrician, then the neurologist. The first time the parents got a hint of what might be wrong was when they took Elizabeth in for tests and glimpsed the diagnosis on the hospital admissions form: "brain tumor."

The quest for an understanding of miracles is by no means confined to Catholic pilgrims or Protestant Fundamentalists or New Age stargazers. Author Dan Wakefield, a lapsed Presbyterian turned Unitarian, sometime TV scriptwriter and now itinerant theological investigator, has just finished a book, *Expect a Miracle* (to be published by HarperSanFrancisco next month). He was amazed by what he learned. "We all read these silly things, the man who saw the Virgin on the fender of his Dodge Dart," he says. "What I found, which is more interesting, is people you'd think of as very conservative."

He recalls a woman in Atlanta whose teenage daughter was hit by a car while Rollerblading. Doctors told the mother there was no hope; the best prognosis they could offer was that her daughter would be able to feed herself someday. "The family were Episcopalians and engaged very seriously in prayer, as did their church and the Sunday school," he says. "Two weeks later

“What was incapable of happening never happened, and what was capable of happening is not a miracle ... Consequently, there are no miracles.” —CICERO

the girl woke up, and she is now back in school. These are not kooks. They only spoke to me because their minister asked them to. The stories I have are not all religious, and they are from all different religions. It is very vast, and serious. People like to dismiss it as the fringe, but there is a real, mainstream thing."

Five churchgoers sit around a table in the rectory of St. George's Episcopal Church in Hawthorne, California. They all hold different views about whether the stories of Christ's miracles are true; they disagree about how much they matter. "Whether those actions actually occurred is somewhat irrelevant to me," observes Alan Roulston, a mechanical engineer. "It's the spirit of the message that is more important."

But as they get to talking, they discover that they all have one thing in common: every one of them believes they have experienced a miracle at some time in their lives and were forever changed by it. Roulston was electrocuted on July 29, 1985. "I took 600 amps of 575 volts—it takes 0.15 amps to kill you," he recalls. "I spent a long time in a burn unit. But I survived, the way sometimes people survive being hit by lightning. So now I understand about people who would like a miracle in their life to show me that God exists."

John Simpson went in for surgery to remove a kidney stone, only to have doctors

find that it had disappeared: he credits a prayer wheel of more than 3,000 people that his wife, a Charismatic, organized. Leslie Smith recalls hurtling down a steep hill on her bike when she was seven years old. She began to slip off the seat—and felt hands lift her back up onto the bike. Dorothy Pederson, the most skeptical in the room, believes a miracle saved her husband's life after a brutal mugging in a hotel room seven years ago. John Lashley has had six strokes and two heart attacks. Twice, he says, he was pronounced dead. "Now, this body of mine has been through an awful lot," he says, "but my faith has

been up to the task in every phase ... because my belief works. The miracle is in what it delivers."

For five days, says Lennie Jernigan, an attorney, "we prayed for our daughter with a passion uncommon to both of us. And we waited for the diagnosis." The parents agreed to exploratory surgery, which carried a 1-in-5 chance of leaving Elizabeth permanently brain damaged. Surgeons removed part of the tumor from the nerve that controls the movement of the right eye. Trying to get at the rest of it was too dangerous. But when they were finished and the pathology reports came back, the news could not possibly have been worse. Their baby was suffering from an extremely rare

malignant meningioma, which has killed everyone who ever had it. Her prognosis: continued growth of the aggressive tumor, grievous paralysis and certain death.

The heartbroken parents prayed for strength and understanding. "Of course there was no explanation," recalls Lennie, "only a stony silence. We prayed for Elizabeth and for ourselves; our friends prayed; our church prayed. Betsy and I merely asked that his will be done. We knew that she could be healed if it were his will, but we were also prepared to accept her death."

Even as the faithful flock to seminars and healing services, the Protestant and Catholic hierarchies treat the subject of miracles with great care. For the minister trying to guide parishioners through the eddies of faith and reason, such stories pose a particular challenge. In many churches, the clergy distrust the miraculous for the very reasons that Jesus did. The preacher who affirms that miracles can indeed happen must also be prepared to explain why they do not. Why do some cancers vanish while others consume? Why do people starve if five loaves could feed 5,000? "Miracles can be like crack; you never quite get enough of them," says Clarence Hardy, minister at the Convent Baptist Church in West Harlem, New York City. "The real test of faith is when there aren't any signs; faith is relatively easy if you're standing in front of a miracle."

The Vatican in particular is exceptionally cautious about granting an event the imprimatur of the church. "Nobody is more demanding than the Roman authorities when it comes to miracles," notes Father John Meier, Bible professor at Catholic University of America in Washington, whose new book, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus, Volume II* (Doubleday; \$35), represents the latest scholarly attempt to meld science and faith. Too often over the centuries, Meier admits, the Catholic Church was taken in by charlatans. When reports spread of statues weeping or crosses bleeding or Jesus appearing on a tortilla, the church is often slow to respond, fearful that the search for a sign will distract from the hard work of faith. "There is a fascination with macabre aspects of religion," Meier explains, "but fascination is the enemy of true faith."

While traditional churches treat miracles gingerly, it is surely no coincidence that the fastest-growing movement in Christendom places miracles squarely at the center of worship. The growth rate of the "post-denominational" churches—the Charismatics and Pentecostals—now surpasses that of the Southern Baptists. Loosely structured, informal, led by powerful "apostles," these churches reject rigid hierarchies and sedate theology. "People don't come to listen," ex-

THE FAITH HEALER



“Christ was either liar, lunatic, or Lord.” —THOMAS AQUINAS

plains Peter Wagner, a professor of church growth at Fuller Theological Seminary, “They come to do.” The miracles take many forms: besides healing, there are members who have visions, or speak in tongues, or collapse on the ground when seized by the power of the Holy Spirit.

“We live in an exceptional time,” says Wagner. “In the Middle Ages in Europe, perhaps, there may have been something comparable. But certainly in the history of the U.S. we have never seen such a frequency of signs and wonders.” And what about disputes among modern scholars? “I don’t pay any attention whatsoever to the challenges, no matter how scholarly they are,” he snaps. “Why should I, when I see healing happening all the time?”

Elizabeth’s grandfather, who practiced medicine for 39 years, recalls his frustration. “Initially, I prayed for guidance that we be led to the right doctors, and for compassionate care, and that our family be upheld in our inevitable suffering. I did not have the faith to pray for healing of this known malignancy.”

But things went from bad to worse. Fluid began accumulating on Elizabeth’s brain; doctors had to keep going in with a large needle to relieve the pressure. She grew lethargic, nauseated. The doctors said she would need more surgery to insert shunts that would drain the fluid. With that operation two days away, the parents tried one last hope. What could it hurt?

The popular interest in miracles, it turns out, comes along just as a generation of Bible scholars is dedicated to disproving them. From both seminaries and secular institutions, scholars are drawing on science, archaeology and modern textual criticism to write a chapter of Christianity that makes little mention of miracles except to reject them. They believe the teachings of Jesus are more important than the teachings about Jesus. In this book there is no virgin birth, no walking on water; the healings amount to parlor tricks, and the Resurrection never happened.

“I don’t think the Bible is literally true,” says Bishop John Spong of the Episcopal diocese of Newark, New Jersey, answering a question scholars have tugged at

THE ANNUNCIATION



for the past 200 years. Spong, who is invariably described as the enfant terrible of liberal Protestant theology, writes books with such titles as *Resurrection: Myth or Reality* and *Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism* that are guaranteed to make

conservatives growl. “The Bible also says the woman is usually the property of a man. I don’t believe that either,” Spong declares. “The Bible says homosexual people should be put to death. I don’t believe that. The Bible says epilepsy is caused by demon possession. I don’t believe that. There are a whole lot of literal concepts out of the Bible that have long ago been abandoned. I’d like to think Christianity is something that would appeal to people who are also well educated and who are modern people.”

The modern skeptics analyze Scripture through the lenses of science, politics and literature. The rationalists study the medical impact of crucifixion and suggest perhaps it induced a deep coma from which Jesus might have revived. They search for evidence of a volcanic eruption that could have caused the Red Sea to part. Perhaps a comet swept across the Bethlehem skies, disguised as the Star in the East. As for the healing, even the enemies of Jesus talked about his miraculous powers, so it would seem churlish for academics, at a distance of 2,000 years, to dismiss them outright. But liberal theologians are prepared to reduce the role of Christ to that of a placebo: people’s belief in his healing power was enough to cure ailments that were psychosomatic to begin with.

All these explanations share the premise that the events in the Bible actually took place. A parallel line of argument holds that the Bible is made up simply of legends crafted by the Gospel writers to serve a political agenda in the early days of the church. Modern archaeology has given contemporary scholars a much richer sense of the Galilean world, the social tensions around Jesus and the political challenges his followers encountered after his Crucifixion.

The chief purveyor of this political revisionism is ex-priest John Dominic Crossan, a professor of biblical studies at Catholic De Paul University. In Crossan’s view, the Gospel accounts are parables about power and authority in the new church. “[Israel] was an occupied country with a lot of poverty, malnutrition and sickness,” he says. “Jesus was ‘healing’ people ideologically, saying the Kingdom of God is against this system. It’s not your fault you’re sick and overworked. Take command of your body and your destiny.”



Not just big, but full, rich, and incredibly lifelike. You literally have to hear the Bose® Wave® radio to believe it. It’s small enough to fit almost anywhere, but its patented acoustic waveguide speaker technology helps it fill the room with big stereo sound.

The Wave® radio is designed for convenience as well as great sound. There’s a handy remote control, pre-set buttons for your favorite stations, and many other features. You can even connect it to a CD or cassette player to enjoy your favorite music.

The Wave® radio is available directly from Bose. For more information, call or return this coupon. Or better yet, call to learn about our in-home trial and our satisfaction guarantee.

Only Bose offers all this advanced technology. And for just \$349. Call 1-800-845-BOSE, ext. RP241A, or send the coupon today. And learn all about a small wonder.

BOSE
Better sound through research®

☐ DAYTIME TELEPHONE ☐ EVENING TELEPHONE
 MR./MRS./MS. NAME (PLEASE PRINT)
 ADDRESS
 CITY STATE ZIP

Call 1-800-845-BOSE, ext. RP241A

Or mail to: Bose Corporation, Dept. CDD-RP241A, The Mountain, Framingham, MA 01701-9168.

**“To me every hour of the light and dark is a miracle,
Every cubic inch of space is a miracle.” —WALT WHITMAN**

A family friend—an Episcopal priest—was staying at the Manlys' house over the weekend before the surgery. Elizabeth's grandmother had been thinking about Jesus' instructions for healing. "Is any sick among you? Let him call for the elders of the church; and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord; and the prayer of faith shall save the sick, and the Lord shall raise him up." After dinner Sunday night, the grandparents asked the priest if he would lead the anointing. He did, leaving the consecrated oil for Betsy to use again and again during the next 48 hours until surgery. And still the family prayed.

To any traditional Christian, no miracle is more important than the Resurrection, the event that lies at the heart of the faith, containing within it the promise of eternal life. "If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain, and your faith is in vain," Paul wrote to the Corinthians. But it was St. Augustine who observed that "on no point does the Christian faith encounter more opposition than on the resurrection of the body." And indeed no assertion of modern biblical scholarship can match, in its capacity to horrify and gall, the statement that Christ never actually rose from the dead.

Yet liberals argue that it is not blasphemy to say the Resurrection never happened, because accounts of Christ's rising are meant metaphorically. In this view, one robs the Bible of its richness and poetry by insisting it should be read literally. Jesus was resurrected in the lives and dreams of his followers; the body of Christ is the church, not a reconstituted physical body. The Resurrection represents an explosion of power, a promise of salvation that does not depend on a literal belief in physical resurrection.

New Testament scholars from this school point out that the Gospel writers made a crucial distinction between flesh and spirit. "They were talking not about the resurrection of the flesh but about the res-

THE VISITATION



urrection of Christ's selfhood, his essence," says Jackson Carroll, a professor of religion and society at Duke Divinity School. "The authors of the New Testament had experiences with an extraordinary person and extraordinary events, and they were trying to find ways to talk about all that. They weren't writing scientific history; they were writing faith history."

Distressing as it is to a conservative

Christian, that kind of reading is mild compared with the pronouncements from the left fringes of contemporary scholarship. The efforts of moderate theologians to find new meanings in Scripture are burdened by the decrees of such groups as the Jesus Seminar, which seem determined to offend at all costs. The seminar is the invention of onetime Protestant clergyman Robert W. Funk, who now runs a Bible think tank, the Westar Institute. Since the mainstream press rarely covers the esoterica of New Testament criticism, he set an irresistible trap: he would gather "eminent" scholars, and they would put the events in the Bible to a vote. He passes around a white plastic container, and each scholar drops in a colored marble: black if he or she is certain the event was fabricated, gray if it probably was, pink if it might actually have occurred, red if it certainly did.

In recent years, the Jesus Seminar weighed Christ's actual words as reported in the Gospels, and agreed that in most cases he never said them. Last fall they considered the Virgin Birth, and 96% agreed it never happened. And last month, just in time for Easter, they took up the subject of the Resurrection. The invitation to reporters promised that the experts "will be drilling close to the nerve of the Christian faith."

Close indeed. The Bible's account of the event that rests at the heart of Christian faith, they concluded, is a poetic rendering of a devout wish but certainly not an authentic record. Crossan, who is co-chairman of the seminar with Funk, argues it this way: since the Crucifixion was conducted by Roman soldiers, he reckons, Jesus' body was most likely left on the Cross or tossed into a shallow grave to be eaten by scavenger dogs, crows or other wild beasts. As for Jesus' family and followers, depicted in the Bible as conducting a decent burial of the body according to Jewish law, "as far as I can see, they ran," Crossan says. "They lost their nerve, though not their faith."

Such speculations inspire fury and passionate denunciation among scholars and

NEW
LIMITED-
TIME OFFER

Bring your IRA to Schwab today and GET A GREAT IRA

You get the investments to fit your goals.

- > Mutual Funds
Over 900 from a variety of well-known fund companies
- > Fixed-Income Securities
Fixed-rate insured CDs
Zero-coupon bonds (STRIPS)
Treasuries
- > Stocks and ADRs

You get control, not sales pressure.

- > Mutual Fund Select List™
- > Mutual Funds Performance Guide™
- > Company Research Reports
- > Investment Guides
- > FundMap™ Mutual Fund Selection Software
- > Local Investing Seminars

You get the convenience you need.

- > 208 branches nationwide
- > Single statement for all your investments
- > 24-hour service, 7 days a week
- > StreetSmart™ Investing Software
- > Automatic Dividend Reinvestment on all stocks—FREE
- > Automatic Investing Plan—FREE
- > TeleBroker® automated quotes and order entry
- > Service in Spanish, Mandarin and Cantonese

And, you get it all at a great, low price.

- > Everyday low commissions on equity trades
- > Schwab Mutual Fund OneSource™ Service. No loads or transaction fees on over 300 mutual funds¹
- > 10% additional discount off everyday low commissions on TeleBroker and StreetSmart trades

WITH A GREAT OFFER.

Now, there are two ways to get a Schwab No-Annual-Fee IRA²

- > **For No Annual Fee in 1995,
deposit \$2,000³**
Special bonus: Mutual Fund Selection
Guide™ FREE.

- > **For No Annual Fee Ever,
deposit \$10,000⁴**
Special bonus: FundMap Retirement
Planning and Mutual Fund Selection
Software for Windows® FREE.

Pick up your special bonus when you open your IRA at any of our 208 local offices.

Or call 1-800-265-5197, ext. 18D

Español: 1-800-257-1019
We're open 'til 7 p.m., April 10-13 and April 17.

國語或粵語:
1-800-662-6068

Charles Schwab
Helping Investors Help Themselves®

A free prospectus containing more complete information including management fees and other expenses for any fund is available through Schwab. Please review the prospectus carefully before investing.

- 1 Certain funds can be purchased without transaction fees but are not no-load funds because they charge 12b-1 fees in excess of 0.25%. Schwab's standard transaction fee will be charged on each redemption of Mutual Fund OneSource fund shares bought with no transaction fee and held for less than 90 days. Schwab reserves the right to assess Schwab's standard transaction fees in the future, should short-term trading become excessive.
- 2 Set-up and maintenance fees for certain assets such as limited partnerships and promissory notes still apply.
- 3 Offer good between March 20 and April 30, 1995. FundMap is available for Windows® only. Please allow two weeks for delivery. Valid only in the United States. Limit one response per customer. Windows® is a registered trademark of Microsoft Corp.
- 4 Offer valid between January 1 and April 30, 1995. FundMap is available for Windows® only. Please allow two weeks for delivery. Valid only in the United States. Limit one response per customer. Windows® is a registered trademark of Microsoft Corp.

©1995 Charles Schwab & Co., Inc. All rights reserved. Member SIPC/NYSE.

believers from the center and right wings of Christendom. To them, the Resurrection, is not just a story about comfort, or power, or hope. It represents the promise that death can be defeated, that hatred cannot ultimately prevail. "If I were an enemy of Christianity, I'd aim right at the Resurrection, because that's the heart of Christianity," the Rev. Billy Graham told TIME last week. Graham rejects the idea that Jesus rose only as a spirit. "I believe he rose bodily. Otherwise you'd have to throw out the Easter story, because he showed the nail prints in his hands. If Christ didn't rise, as Paul said, it all has no meaning."

To the generations of Christians who have tried to invent a demythologized Jesus—the great moral leader and wilderness prophet, inspired but certainly not divine—traditional theologians have always countered with the fact that Jesus himself said he was God's son. C.S. Lewis was blunt in dismissing efforts at compromise. "A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said wouldn't be a great moral teacher. He'd either be a lunatic... or else he'd be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse."

The night before the scheduled shunt surgery, a doctor arrived in Elizabeth's hospital room and removed so much thick, infected fluid from her brain that he asked to postpone the operation for a few days. But 12 hours later, when he returned to do another tap, he could barely find any fluid, and it was totally clear. The doctor was baffled. Elizabeth was back home two days later. "We now know it was one of those lesser miracles that presage a greater miracle," her grandfather says.

A month after the first operation, the same surgeons made a last-ditch effort to remove the rest of the tumor. But when they went into Elizabeth's brain, they couldn't find the lesion. As planned, they removed a section of the nerve that the cancer had invaded, knowing that it would leave her blind in her right eye but agreeing that it represented her best hope of surviving. When the tissue was examined, the pathologist could not find any cancer. Regular CAT scans since then have revealed no evidence of a tumor. The medical community calls what happened "spontaneous resolution." The family call it a miracle. Even a resurrection.

While conservatives dismiss the theology of the Jesus Seminar members, middle-of-the-road Bible professors reject their schol-

Modern Miracles Have Strict Rules

By DAVID VAN BIEMA

MONSIGNOR MICHELE DI RUBERTO SITS IN AN OFFICE IN THE VATICAN SURROUNDED BY 250 red-bound books, each of them a would-be miracle. Of all the faiths that recognize the continuing eruption of the divine in human affairs, Catholicism has gone farthest to systematize that belief; and Di Ruberto, the Under Secretary at the Vatican's Congregation for the Causes of Saints, sits near the pinnacle of miracle verification.

For the 60-year-old priest, the occupation is a necessary step toward a greater goal: the naming of saints. The church assumes that a saint will be active after death; that once in heaven, he or she responds to the prayers of the devout by persuading God to help specific sufferers down below. God responds with miracles; and proponents of a candidate for sainthood must prove to Di Ruberto's satisfaction that their nominee is responsible for one or more.

The paradox of human miracle assessment is that the only way to discern whether a phenomenon is supernatural is by having trained rationalists testify that it outstrips their training. Since most wonders admitted by the modern church are medical cures, it consults with doctors. Di Ruberto has access to a pool of 60—“We've got all the medical branches covered,” says his colleague, Dr. Ennio Ensoli—and assigns each purported miracle to two specialists on the vanquished ailment.

They apply criteria established in the 1700s by Pope Benedict XIV: among them, that the disease was serious; that there was objective proof of its existence; that other treatments failed; and that the cure was rapid and lasting. Any one can be a stumbling block. Pain, explains Ensoli, means little: “Someone might say he feels bad, but how do you measure that?” Leukemia remissions are not considered until they have lasted a decade. A cure attributable to human effort, however prayed for, is insufficient. “Sometimes we have cases that you could call exceptional, but that's not enough,” says Ensoli. “Exceptional doesn't mean inexplicable.”

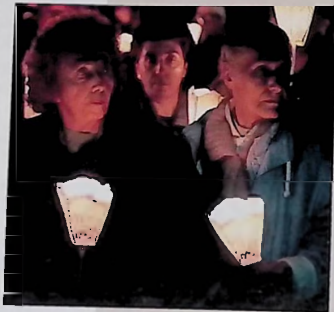
Pilgrims seek the intercession of the Virgin Mary at Lourdes

“Inexplicable,” or *inspiegabile*, is the happy label that Di Ruberto, the doctors and several other clerics in the Vatican's “medical conference” give to a case if it survives their scrutiny. It then passes to a panel of theologians, who must determine whether the inexplicable resulted from prayer. If so, the miracle is usually approved by a caucus of Cardinals and the Pope.

Some find the process all too rigorous. Says Father Paolino Rossi, whose job, in effect, is lobbying for would-be saints from his own Capuchin order: “It's pretty disappointing when you work for years and years and then see the miracle get rejected.” But others suggest it could be stricter still. There is another major miracle-validating body in the Catholic world: the International Medical Committee for the shrine at Lourdes. Since miracles at Lourdes are all ascribed to the intercession of the Virgin Mary, it is not caught up in the saint-making process, which some believe the Pope has running overtime. Roger Pilon, the head of Lourdes' committee, notes that he and his colleagues have not approved a miracle since 1989, while the Vatican recommended 12 in 1994 alone. “Are we too severe?” he wonders out loud. “Are they really using the same criteria?”

Pilon believes that as medical science and psychology uncover rational explanations for more cures, it becomes increasingly difficult to name something a miracle. He regrets the trend and, without relaxing his own stringent standards, suggests that the church give more importance to instances where the divine can be said to have been present in a cure, without being its sole explanation. “Ordinary Christians want to see the action of God,” he says bluntly. “People are hungry for signs.”

—Reported by Greg Burke/Lourdes



“People talk about Bible miracles because there is no miracle in their lives. Cease to gnaw that crust. There is ripe fruit over your head.” —THOREAU

ship. They use the same rigorous standards of inquiry to prove the very assertions that liberals are so quick to reject. First, they argue, the skeptics assume the New Testament was written long after the Crucifixion occurred, and so reflects the agenda and faith of the second generation of Christians, not events as experienced by the original apostles. That whole approach is undercut by the purported discovery announced in January of what would be the oldest manuscript of a Gospel, which dates to A.D. 70, when many eyewitnesses would have been around to protest any inaccuracies.

If scholars need multiple, independent sources to prove that an event occurred, the evidence is much stronger for Jesus' miracles than for many other ancient events that are never challenged, says Murray Harris, a conservative Bible professor at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, Illinois. “We have the empty tomb in all four Gospels, representing three if not four independent sources, and appearances of the risen Christ in three Gospels. And they're clearly not copying one another.” Harris gets impatient with the questioning of the standards of proof applied to the Gospels. “We have only two first century accounts of Hannibal's unlikely crossing of the Alps with 38 elephants in tow, but no one doubts it happened.”

While liberals use first century sociology to prove that the Gospel writers were inventing stories about Jesus to consolidate their power, Harris reaches the opposite conclusion. Why, he asks, were women given such a prominent role, if the accounts of the Resurrection were all made up? In the Gospels they were the first to see the empty tomb; Mary Magdalene received the first appearance. No one would invent the story this way, Harris argues, “given the fact that in Jewish law of the time a woman's testimony was unacceptable except in a few circumstances. This would have been the kiss of death. A fabricator would have had Peter or the disciples at the tomb.”

Finally, he adds, how likely is it that the disciples would have conspired in a fantastic lie for which they would lay down their lives, “and that at no point did

THE INTERCESSION



the truth emerge from the conspirators to blow the story, no leak at any stage?” By all accounts, the disciples came away from the Crucifixion frightened and doubtful about Jesus' Resurrection. And yet their lives were transformed; the cowards became courageous; they established his church in spite of themselves, through grace.

To simply dismiss all the corroborating accounts of the miracles, moderates argue, requires a kind of greasy logic that determines the outcome before the inquiry even begins. If miracles are defined as things that can't possibly happen, then of course the Bible's miracles must not have. “There is an anti-supernaturalist bias,” says Harris. “Even if we had a sworn affidavit from a pathologist that Jesus was alive and well, a person would not believe it if he believed in principle that no dead man could ever rise. No evidence would possibly be sufficient.”

Yet for all the fireworks, some ministers find a value in the provocative new readings of Scripture. A sturdy faith can bear a lot of doubt; believers build muscles by raising questions. But where the inquiry pauses, the challenge begins. “We have to go back to the basics,” argues Billy Graham. “Jesus performed these miracles to prove his divinity, and so I accept them, and I accept them by faith. I can't prove everything scientifically. But when I do accept the Scriptures by faith, it has an impact in my own personal life, and I can apply the principles Jesus taught to everyday life. So to me the miracles of Christ are essential. They are not essential to salvation but to one's Christian living.”

This June, Elizabeth will turn 13. “In the years ahead,” Lennie Jernigan has told people, “if you happen to see a young girl walking down the street with her right eye permanently closed, please don't think that some tragedy has befallen her and extend your sympathy. Instead, have cheerful thoughts, knowing that the Holy Spirit dwells in her, and our God is powerful, benevolent and magnificent.” —Reported by

Jordan Bonfante/Los Angeles, Ratu Kamani/New York, Richard N. Ostling/Chicago and Lisa H. Towle/Raleigh