

Narrator ([00:00](#)):

Yale Podcast Network. Welcome to the podcast, a Yale Divinity School podcast series focusing on issues related to religion, culture, and politics. In this episode, YDS alum, Emily Judd interviews Carlos Air Professor of History and Religious studies at Yale University. Professor ER compares the history of Protestant and Catholic views on miracles.

Carlos Eire ([00:25](#)):

Catholics claimed that these were of divine origin. Protestants, however, believe that all such phenomena were demonically induced. He shares the history of near death experiences. These accounts began to surface when cardiopulmonary resuscitation, better known as CPR, started to be applied to people whose hearts had stopped beating.

Narrator ([00:52](#)):

And Professor Eire weighs in on hot button issues, including the celibacy rule for Catholic priests.

Carlos Eire ([00:58](#)):

One of the reasons for this ruling, which was initiated about a thousand years ago, was fear that the priestly profession would become hereditary.

Emily Judd ([01:17](#)):

I would like to speak with you about your latest book. It's titled, they Flew a History of the Impossible and you've had this lifelong interest in the history of the supernatural. And in this book, you recover the history of Christians who miraculously defied gravity by levitating or by locating that as being in two places at once. And you argue that these miraculous events were not fringe beliefs, but they were credible to Christians in the 16th and 17th centuries. Some historians, these supernatural claims as lies, but you argue that they should be studied. Why is that?

Carlos Eire ([02:00](#)):

Well, I think very basic principle of historiography writing history, you weigh the evidence and you don't dismiss certain kinds of evidence offhand because of some ideological, much less some metaphysical objections to the information conveyed by credible eyewitnesses. So we have all these records, not just in Western history or Christian history. This is a worldwide phenomenon in religion. So what I argue and they flew, which focuses on cases in the 16th and 17th century, is that a system had been set up rational, logical system that one might call empirical, as in the science that was emerging at this very same time, which was that in canonization inquests, part of the inquest that makes the testimony difficult to dismiss is the fact that those who were testifying had to swear that they were telling the truth much as in a court of law to this very day here in the United States. Right? I swear to tell the truth, nothing but the truth except the penalty was not some fine or jail time for lying, but hell, hell or a very long stint in purgatory for Catholics.

([04:10](#)):

And these people who are testifying, all of them, if not the vast majority believe in hell as real. And many of them are deeply religious people whose belief in hell is very deep. Can 100% of these testimonies be dismissed offhand just because what they're reporting contradicts modern day expectations about religious phenomena? I was trained to dismiss all these things, but as I age, as I matured as a historian, I grew increasingly uncomfortable with such blanket dismissals of evidence, especially when I started working with canonization inquests. And I should add that it's not only Catholics who believed that these things happened, Protestants also believed that these things happened. But the difference between

Protestant and Catholic take on these miracles is that Catholics claimed that these were of divine origin for the most part, at least the ones that I'm focusing on. And they flow Protestants, however, believe that all such phenomena were demonically induced so that it was the work of Satan.

Emily Judd ([05:56](#)):

When you mention you as a historian could not, as you became older, could not dismiss all this historical evidence and this eye witness testimony, how many eyewitnesses are we talking about? Is it like two or three? And what makes this credible? The eyewitness is credible.

Carlos Eire ([06:22](#)):

When you add it up, it's hundreds and it's not just those that are found in the what is now on the archival record, those are in the hundreds and nobody has ever quantified it. I was not able to. There are other accounts outside of the inquests that also say that in some cases, hundreds of people at the very same time saw this happen.

Emily Judd ([06:55](#)):

You mentioned the different perceptions of levitation, the Protestant explanation that it's a demonic source, and then the Catholic version as well, that it's divine. And you also write about the Protestant cessation of miracles, which is essentially that, and I think you can better explain it, but that after the apostolic period in the Protestant doctrine, miracles no longer happen. So if there was something miraculous happening, it would have to be demonic then. But can you explain that theological belief in how it differs from Catholic or orthodox Christianity?

Carlos Eire ([07:49](#)):

Right. Well, the difference is stark because in both Catholic and orthodox Christianity, it's an unbroken record to millennia of not just people believing in miracles, but saying, I saw it happen or it happened. The Protestant denial of divinely caused miracles can be easily explained as a polemical necessity because almost from day one Luther comes on the scene, Catholic polemicists who are arguing against Luther and other Protestants are constantly raising the issue of the lack of miracles among Protestants. Where are your miracles? Conversely, Protestants are convinced that we're talking about the 16th and 17th century Protestants are convinced the Catholic church is not only not the true church, but it's demonic. I mean Luther as early as 1521 is calling the Pope the antichrist. So also from the polemical perspective, Protestants find it necessary to say that all of the miracles, 100% of the miracles being claimed by the Catholic church have to be demonic.

Emily Judd ([09:42](#)):

The Protestants today, do you think that that is still the dominant perspective on miracles?

Carlos Eire ([09:51](#)):

I think it is, but it's waning and certainly beginning in the 18th century and especially in the 19th century, miracles work their way back into several branches of the Protestant family. So that healing miracles not only became a possibility, but in some of these other denominations, other than the main ones, healing miracles became common. And as a matter of fact, a distinguishing feature of some forms of evangelical or Pentecostal Protestantism, so that by the time I was a child, I could see here in the United States on television, faith, healers, healing people live being broadcast live. I still remember Oral Roberts and Earnest Ainsley healing people. Ainsley would slay people with the spirit and instantly cure them and they would collapse on stage and then leap up, throw their crutches away. But yeah, this return of the miraculous, the Protestantism began in the 18th centuries, what science or medicine, modern science and

modern medicine cannot fix. People still want some kind of fix, and that's I think one of the main reasons that miraculous cures came back into Protestantism

Emily Judd ([11:35](#)):

In general, after all the work that you've done in research, especially for the flu, how do you think Christians today should change the way that they think about the miraculous?

Carlos Eire ([11:50](#)):

Well, I think the miraculous doesn't confine itself to healing. I think there's plenty of evidence of this and whether or not it becomes an actual doctrine that some denomination pronounces, everybody's supposed to believe it, that this is possible, that's not likely to happen. But I think an openness to the weirdness of reality coupled with a knowledge of the limits of modern science and modern scientific equipment to measure certain things that, I mean, if you're a traditional Christian, you have to believe that there is a spiritual and divine dimension and that we human beings are not just lumps of very, very complicated matter that just originated by accident. That's not a Christian view of reality.

Emily Judd ([13:01](#)):

I'm thinking also of near death experiences.

Carlos Eire ([13:05](#)):

Oh yes. Which

Emily Judd ([13:07](#)):

I do oftentimes I'll see on social media there. And to be honest, I've seen it a lot from the Protestant or evangelical communities, people talking about near death experiences and type of miraculous way that someone was able to escape death.

Carlos Eire ([13:29](#)):

Well, the funny thing about near death experiences is that prior to the 1970s, there are so few accounts of near death experiences. These accounts began to surface when cardiopulmonary resuscitation, better known as CPR, started to be applied to people whose hearts had stopped beating. So CPR is the door to this vast, vast number of accounts of near death experiences that we now have, which transcend not only denominational affiliation among Christians, but transcend religious beliefs. I only started doing research on near death experiences two years ago. I wish I had done it years ago.

Emily Judd ([14:32](#)):

What have you found so far?

Carlos Eire ([14:35](#)):

What I have found is that the testimonies, of course, what people experience varies and there are a good number of people who have very negative near death experiences. So the evidence, again, back to evidence, I'm a historian, so I tend to think in those terms rather than a philosophical or theological argument. I focus on evidence. The evidence is there. There's a commonality to the experience people have, especially the tunnel experience going through a tunnel. Also, the out of body dimension of the experience where they can see themselves, for instance, on the operating table or at the accident next to the car that hit them and so on, so forth. And those carry through what people see at the other end varies.

Emily Judd ([15:40](#)):

One focus of your scholarly work has been on the Protestant and Catholic reformations, and I would like to take it to the present in the current Christian religious landscape. Do you see any reformations on the horizon?

Carlos Eire ([15:57](#)):

It's kind of across all denominational lines with one big difference among Orthodox and Catholic. The official teachings and the accepted rituals and symbols are not likely to change, but there are people who want them to change. And there also the so-called hot button issues that affect all Christian denominations, women, clergy, LGBT, clergy, same sex marriage, and so on and so forth. The Catholic church and the Orthodox Church are not likely to change, but there have already been major reformations across all Protestant denominations on some of these issues. The Pew Foundation, which runs all these polls and so on, has been tracing the steady decline in membership of many of the mainline Protestant churches, particularly because of these issues over these issues and new churches have been created, or new branches of established denominations keep being created precisely because of these social political issues are so divisive. And Protestantism by its very nature, allows for this to happen as the history of Protestantism, as the history of descent turning into a of some kind, the creation of some other branch of the family. So yeah, there are plenty of reformations going on Catholics who want to reform the Catholic church according to their view of what's correct, naturally frustrated because the structure of a Catholic church does not allow for such things to happen.

Emily Judd ([18:20](#)):

Well, one thing that has shocked me as a Catholic is this movement in the United States for the traditional Latin mass to come back. And I think I'm a bit biased because I've never attended one before. I've only ever had the second post-second Vatican two type of service. But I don't know, would you consider that a reformation? Because I believe it's popular in certain circles.

Carlos Eire ([18:59](#)):

Yeah, and it is a reformation of sorts. If you think of the main argument of the initial Protestant reformation was, let's go back to the early church. That's our model. So these traditionalist Catholics are asking for the church to do the same thing and given the fact that they're traditional, they're not about to start their own Catholic church. But yes, the appeal of the old Latin liturgy or the pre Vatican two liturgies, I think it's very strong because it's linked to other issues about doctrinal continuity.

Emily Judd ([19:56](#)):

You had mentioned, for instance, some hot button issues and just when I think about reformation or different movements, especially in the Catholic church, the priests being able to marry.

Carlos Eire ([20:11](#)):

Yeah,

Emily Judd ([20:13](#)):

Yeah. That now I think is more prominent than before. It is interesting because for instance, maybe the more conservative, and I don't really like to use that word, but conservative Catholics or traditional Catholics would want to go back to the Latin mass or thing Latin. I believe the mass started in the fourth century, so back then, but I believe, and I think it was Professor Theresa Berger had told me a little bit of the history when priests in the Catholic church stopped being able to marry, and it was in the medieval

time maybe. So I find it interesting. I think the traditionalists would say, no, no, but we need to, the priests should not be married. But that was something that 1000 years of the church had gone by and priests were being married or were married now.

Carlos Eire ([21:11](#)):

Yeah. I'm just

Emily Judd ([21:11](#)):

Curious if you have any thoughts on that.

Carlos Eire ([21:13](#)):

Well, from what I have read about the origins of clerical celibacy, of course it's an attempt to imitate monasticism, the turn secular clergy more into a monastic lifestyle. But one of the reasons for this ruling, which was initiated about a thousand years ago, was fear that the priestly profession would become hereditary, especially because back then, much more so than now, church was linked to property, to lots of property, and there were fears that something to the equivalent of the noble class would be created in the church. That's one that there's also the attitudes towards sexuality also play a key role in this, and that might be one of the hottest of all hot button issues. Anything has to do with sex in the Catholic church. It's

Emily Judd ([22:44](#)):

Unfortunate,

Carlos Eire ([22:46](#)):

But it's there. It's undeniable.

Emily Judd ([22:49](#)):

As a historian who has focused on religious history, how have you been able to keep the distinction between your personal faith and your academic work?

Carlos Eire ([23:02](#)):

I don't find it difficult at all because it's basically just an extension of being a Christian in the world. The way one has to navigate through academia as a scholar is not much different from the way you have to navigate through the world just as a person in a religiously pluralist and secularist society. So I've never found it difficult. I've always seen it as a very, very good extension of my vocation. My vocation. Being a historian and a teacher, I just put things out there rationally, coolly, subtly. I put the truth out for people to examine and deal with on their own terms. Of course, I taught at a state university for 15 years, the University of Virginia, where you're not supposed to bring religion into the classroom. Even though we had a religious studies department that was not. So students sometimes would ask me, so what are you anyway?

([24:52](#)):

What church do you belong to? Are you a Christian? Are you a believer? I would say, yeah, but ask me after you graduated, what my affiliation is, I'm not going to tell you now, and only one student took me up on this, came back and asked me, what are you? Anyway, so here at Yale I've, I came with that attitude. I was so used to it, and actually that one student who came back was here at Yale my first or second year here. But after that I said, well, I was given the chair in Catholic Studies, and it's kind of hard to hide what your denomination is if you've got the chair in Catholic Studies. So it gave me more freedom to be who I am more openly, and I've had some very, very interesting experiences.

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Emily Judd ([26:00](#)):

Well, professor Aero, I just want to say thank you so much for joining the podcast.

Narrator ([26:05](#)):

Thank

Carlos Eire ([26:05](#)):

You. Thank you very much.

Narrator ([26:08](#)):

Thanks for listening today. We hope you'll tune in again for the next episode of the YDS Quad Cast.