

# Features

## Christianity and Controversy - 1988

Recently we have been entertained, scandalized, angered or distressed (depending on one's expectations of Christian patriarchs) by some very public controversies in relation to Christian teachings, most spectacularly those concerning the meaning of the belief that Christ 'rose from the dead', and the understanding of Christ as male priest to whose physical likeness all priests should conform. We have even been treated to the amazing and novel appearance of a national media editor as New Age Theologian and Castigator of Those Holding Wrong Views.

In the interests of those who failed to find much real understanding of Christianity in the public debate on the Resurrection, this issue of the ARS REVIEW presents an introductory analysis of the broader issues involved, and two commentaries on the Resurrection which draw attention to basic clarifications which

should represent the minimum level of understanding for any person who wishes to leap into print and instruct the ignorant. For ignorant many of us are, especially perhaps, those legions of Australian 'lay' people who have been protected from the scandal of the mystery of myth, god-talk and the Unconditioned by the condescending notion of the very simple sermon as prime pastoral duty.

However, the Buddha, whose words appear below, could also be said to have believed in the simple sermon, but not the kind of simplicity that leads to the disempowerment of not-seeing and the confusion of the 'wilderness of [uninformed] opinions' that have characterized much public forum theologizing in this country. As Ann Daughtry (and Jeremiah) point out in the last words on Christianity and controversy ... 'Without a vision, the people perish'.

— The Editor

## What the Buddha said to Mālun̄kyaputta about the Unexplained

One of the Buddha's disciples became distracted one day during meditation and decided he had been short-changed by his teacher who had failed to explain ABSOLUTELY EVERYTHING that

Mālun̄kyaputta thought he ought to know...in black and white, yes or no, either/or...

'Sir, when I was all alone meditating, this thought occurred to me: There are these problems unexplained, put aside

and rejected by the Blessed One. Namely,

- (1) is the universe eternal, or
- (2) is it not eternal,
- (3) is the universe finite, or
- (4) is it infinite,
- (5) is soul the same as body, or
- (6) is soul one thing and body another thing,
- (7) does the Tathāgata exist after death, or
- (8) does he not exist after death, or

- (9) does he both (at the same time) exist and not exist after death, or  
 (10) does he both (at the same time) not exist and not not-exist?

These problems the Blessed One does not explain to me. This does not please me, I do not appreciate it. I will go to the Blessed One and ask him about this matter. If the Blessed One explains them to me, then I will continue to follow the holy life under him. If he does not explain them, I will leave the Order and go away.

If the Blessed One knows that the universe is eternal, let him explain it to me so. If the Blessed One knows that the universe is not eternal, let him say so. If the Blessed One does not know whether the universe is eternal or not....then for a person who does not know, it is straightforward to say "I do not know, I do not see".'

'Did I ever tell you, Māluṅkyaputta, "Come, Māluṅkyaputta, lead the holy life under me, I will explain these questions to you?"'

'No, Sir.'

'Even now, Māluṅkyaputta, I do not tell you: "Come and lead the holy life under me, I will explain these questions to you". And you do not tell me either: "Sir, I will lead the holy life under the Blessed One, and he will explain these questions to me". Under these circumstances, you

foolish one, who refuses whom?

Māluṅkyaputta, if anyone says: "I will not lead the holy life under the Blessed One until he explains these questions," he may die with these questions unanswered by the Tathāgata. Suppose, Māluṅkyaputta, a man is wounded by a poisoned arrow, and his friends and relatives bring him to a surgeon. Suppose the man should then say: "I will not let this arrow be taken out until I know who shot me....what his name and family may be; whether he is tall, short, or of medium stature; whether his complexion is black, brown, or golden; from which village, town or city he comes....

Māluṅkyaputta, that man would die without knowing any of these things....

Therefore, Māluṅkyaputta, bear in mind what I have explained as explained, and what I have not explained as unexplained.... Whether the universe is eternal or not....whether the soul is the same as the body or not....whether (etc.)....I have not explained. Why, Māluṅkyaputta, have I not explained them? Because it is not useful, it is not fundamentally connected with the spiritual holy life....that is why I have not told you about them.'

— Shortened extract from Cūḷa-Māluṅkyā-sutta, Majjhima-nikāya, 63  
 Pali Text Society Edition



## Catholic Faith, Modern Doubt and Media Hype - Confessions of a Dogmatic Liberal

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Take a devout and learned exponent of the Catholic faith, an honest tussle in the name of the on-going vitality of that faith with the challenges of modern doubt, add all the hype and ignorance which the media can muster, stir well, and what do you get? You get the recent brouhaha in *The Australian* over the alleged heresies of Fr. David Coffey!

For many theologians outside the Roman Church and a good few within it as well, the belief that an ignominious death was not history's last word about Jesus of Nazareth can be more richly expressed today if the mythological trimmings of 'the physical resurrection' - empty tombs and so forth - are taken *cum grano salis*. And this is a view held not just by theological scholars, but also by biblical scholars sensitive to developments in the traditions lying behind Gospel narratives of the resurrection. It is a mild favouring of such views that has gotten Fr. Coffey into hot water, while the alleged failure of Cardinal Clancy to adequately stamp them out has sent some of his 'conservative' priests scurrying to Rome in protest.

In all of this, the awkward position of the theological *vis a vis* the media and the laity is highlighted. The Roman Church's desire to protect the *depositum fidei* against cold winds from the abyss of modern thought is also seen in its least attractive aspect. All in all, this sordid affair provides a good transect through problems afflicting the modern church, as well as a useful window into the way religion is

understood at the popular level.

In what follows, allow me to set out some dimensions of the problem, and offer one or two ideas about the direction in which a solution might lie. My perspective is that of an Anglican priest in what used to be called the 'liberal Catholic' tradition. I offer these thoughts as one quite confident that true faith is never long free of doubt. Without the spirit evinced by Fr. Coffey and countless other men and women of faith and vision, the first century Church would never have emerged from its roots in the religion of Israel, nor would the Fathers have attempted their once daring syntheses in its early centuries. Fidelity to the ancient roots of faith then means reinventing Christianity for each new context, rather than fleeing the real world in search of some reactionary 'comfort zone'. This is not faith, and it is not Catholic!

Firstly, as to the shape of contemporary theological debate, we might delineate three standard options. There are what we might call conservative, liberal and radical theologians. Conservatives aren't just the Fred Nile types. They account for the majority of Christians, who believe that religious language refers to a supernatural world. For some of them, that world is populated by angels, demons and the souls of the dead. For others at the more liberal end, only by God. In this definition, a fairly critical interpretation of the Bible is not precluded. Archbishop Peter Carnley of Perth, the Bishop of Durham, and Hans

Küng on the other hand are liberals. For them, God is more readily understood as a force active in history and the self. If the supernatural exists at all, it's as a dimension of the natural. Thus, Christians doubting the physical resurrection can fairly be termed liberals. Fewer still populate the radical camp. Don Cupitt from Cambridge is perhaps the most notable, along with the non-cognitivist philosophers of religion. This is Christian Atheism, though perhaps more favourable to religious language and ritual than were the 'death of God theologies' of the 1960's. In a 'man'-made world, God-talk and the forms of religion remain as unique facilitators of the global humanism demanded by our age. Yet for such radicals the objective existence of God is no longer deemed necessary to account for the phenomena of Christianity.

So these are the options: How are they distributed?

Some Roman Catholic theologians occupy the liberal camp, though too much fiddling with the varieties of faith and order will land them in the company of Küng, Schillebeeckx and Boff with the offer of a trip to Rome. Liberal protestants of course have a long pedigree, while (outside Australia) Anglicanism is well represented among the liberals as well. Radicalism, though still rare, does thrive in Anglican soil despite much resistance.

As the theological options go therefore, Fr. Coffey and his ilk are clearly seen to be middle of the road. They have perhaps gone as far as they can go within the Roman fold however.

Yet one could safely say that the subtleties of these distinctions are wasted on media and laity alike.

The media share in the general public ignorance about the ins and outs of Christian thought. This is fuelled by the inexplicable popular attitude about religion that everyone is an expert. As the

late Bishop John Robinson pointed out in his book, *The Human Face of God*, no-one is allowed to count as an expert in the subject of religion. There is a false democratizing, by which matters of fact are mistaken for matters of opinion, and the history of ideas is overlooked in favour of the current politics of ideas. Upon all of this I merely remark, except to say that at least some of the blame for the apparent ignorance of the media about what the professional theologians are thinking must be laid at their own feet. One seldom sees letters to the editor by the theologically literate contributing from their particular perspective to the issues of the day, though in saying this I advocate no persistent and shallow 'theological journalism'. What too of more columns written by the theologically minded? In Brisbane for instance, the best we've had were the gentle and conservative weekly reflections of Bishop Ian Shevill (now deceased) in *The Sunday Mail*. Without debunking the good job done by ABC Religious programming, what would I give for a theological Robin Williams, or - better still - a theological Karl Haas!

This media ignorance is of course only a reflection of the wider ignorance of theology in our society, caused in part I fear by preachers keeping generations of their hearers in the dark. Penny McKibbin is quite right in her editorial to blame much on the simple pastoral sermon, as if thoughts were an inappropriate activity for the Christian.

This dilemma is highlighted in the present crisis of theological education, where the value of a traditional training in academic theology and critical Biblical studies is everywhere in question. The recently suicided Canon Gareth Bennett in England was right at least in this, that theological colleges do tend increasingly to favour the production of 'prancing airheads'. This is not just an Anglican

problem, and some of the conservative Catholics who wrote to *The Australian* accurately spotted the same tendencies within their own fold. (I can vouch for this personally, having done my theology degree jointly with Banyo Seminary in Brisbane.) All this makes things worse rather than better, and indicates to me a loss of nerve. While the Anglican Church is prepared to sacrifice its cherished ideal of an educated clergy to expediency, as it generally has in Australia's past, then the gap between the scholars and the laity will yawn ever wider. Hopefully, other churches are less culpable in this area than mine is.

Failing any improvement in tomorrow's theological education however, the task must fall back to today's preacher. If the preacher has the nowadays-rare distinction to have pushed through a veil of doubt in biblical and theological study and emerged with a deepened and critical faith, then he or she must not hide this light under a bushel! To attain Ricoeur's 'second naivety' should be the goal of academic education for the ordained ministry. Yet all too often the clergy leave their training bewildered at the relevance of subjects and ideas they have studied but failed to internalize. Add to this their busy schedule as parish ministers and you have a recipe for keeping laity in the dark! If clergy do delight in the Gospel in a liberal or radical manner, then they need to come clean. They must bridge the gap between study and pulpit, if the laity are to bridge the gap in religion between heart and mind!

Another issue raised in the Coffey debate is that of the resurgence of conservatism in the Church. Last year was the twenty-fifth anniversary of the publication of *Honest to God*, and in a volume of commemorative essays published by SCM Press called *God's Truth*, the contributors agreed that the controversial sixties are

indeed long gone. Perhaps today's paucity of such lively and sustained debate can be blamed on the cultural anaesthesia of post-modernism? Perhaps the liberal dream has collapsed and people prefer the security of conformity to the heady adventure of creative doubt?

The Roman Church has been particularly plagued by this, in the reactionary movement of Marcel Lefebvre. According to Greg Sheridan in *The Australian* last year, this movement was to be commended for its clarity of focus and the strength of its leadership. Yet to my mind it is an historically naive and escapist mistake, fuelled by invincible ignorance. It shares this quality with the Anglican Catholic Church of Australia, which has recently gone into schism over the issue of women priests versus (allegedly) unbroken Catholic tradition. These and other currents of fundamentalism fear the modern world, and flee its intellectual challenges. Ironically too, with their narrow and literalistic conception of what is admissible as truth they are a great bastion of rationalism! They do not represent the course of strength and faith in the church's present troubles.

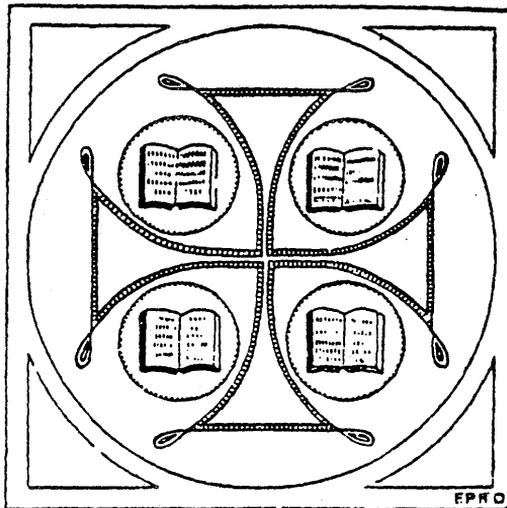
By way of solutions, I reiterate my call for those who are theologically literate to 'come out of the closet' - in the media and especially in the pulpit. The risks entailed by exposing oneself in these ways are far outweighed by the risks of keeping silent.

As to the future of liberal and radical theology, what can be said? As to liberal theology, it is clearly here to stay. Perhaps one day the stifling hegemony of conservative Christianity will be over, and a critical faith will be learned at mother's knee, in Sunday school, and from the pulpit. As for the future of radical theology in the Cupitt mould, perhaps Canon Brian Hebblethwaite can have the last word. At the end of his recent rejoinder to Cupitt, *The Ocean of Truth*, he advocates a

'Gamaliel response'. Gamaliel advocated a wait and see attitude in the Sanhedrin concerning the new 'Christian heresy' (Acts 5:44ff). For Hebblethwaite, the unlikelihood that Cupitt's radical notions will 'infect' general Christian belief and liturgical use in the foreseeable future precludes the need for heresy trials to

expunge them.

What Hebblethwaite didn't say but Gamaliel did however, was that if the movement 'is of God', it will prevail come what may. I strongly suspect therefore that Fr. Coffey and all who share his faith and doubt will one day be vindicated!



## Recent Controversy over the Resurrection

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Even in the best of all possible worlds, sometimes somehow somewhere something would have to go berserk, just to bring the lively spark of the unexpected into the dreamy midst of perfection. In our less than perfect world, it happens more often and for less exalted reasons. In our beloved country, it happened one weekend last October in the columns of a newspaper. *The Australian* went berserk.

Under the banner headline, "Did Christ really rise from dead?", reporter Greg Sheridan put out a piece which, besides attacking Manly theologian David Coffey, portrayed the authorities of the Catholic Church as gormless and many, perhaps most, Catholic priests as unbelievers, at least as far as "the most central doctrine of the Christian faith" was concerned. Gormless: according to the article's final paragraph, "Many Australian Catholics believe that if the Church will not stand up and defend the physical resurrection of Christ, there must be precious little it will stand up and defend." Unbelievers: "On the basis of this evidence, many, perhaps most, Catholic priests do not believe in the physical resurrection of Christ, the central defining doctrine of the Church" (*The Weekend Australian*, October 22-23, 1988, p. 14).

To add insult to injury, the article was topped by a box lauding an apparently bright and certainly conservative doctoral student, Brian Harrison, as "a man who is having one of the most brilliant careers any Australian has yet had in Rome." Not bad for a priest still working towards his doctorate!

All this might have been passed off as a minor journalistic hiccup, if *The Australia-*

*lian* had not consecrated a follow-up editorial to the issue, slating the leadership of the Roman Catholic Church in Australia (October 24th). There was evidence of "a disturbing leadership crisis," over what was described as a matter amounting to "a denial of the most fundamental doctrine of the Catholic Church"; the decay of the Catholic Church's internal coherence was feared, with "grave consequences for Western civilisation". Noting - I suspect with approval - that Christ himself chose fishermen, not professors, as his apostles, the editorial asserted that "Catholics have for centuries been taught that the doctrines of their Church can be known, and known precisely, by any normally intelligent person."

A minor historical footnote throws light on this remarkable outburst. Both Greg Sheridan's article and *The Australian's* editorial were reprinted in full in the November-December 1988 issue of *Fidelity*, the newsletter of the highly conservative John XXIII Fellowship. Odd bedfellows! Later in the issue, *Fidelity* noted:

"The post-Vatican II revival of the Heresy of Modernism has peaked; the mess made in the Church is everywhere apparent. Not everyone is yet ready to admit that the bubble has burst; ... Perhaps our Bishops are the most reluctant of all. Catholics in this country owe a debt of gratitude to our national newspaper, *The Australian*, for its part in 'pricking the bubble'" (p. 35). Well well well!

As normally intelligent persons - and some of us professors - we might be inter-

ested in looking a little more closely at what caused this storm-in-a-teacup. As an Old Testament professor, I certainly do not intend to offer an analysis of David Coffey's position on the resurrection, nor would I dream of assessing the New Testament texts on the empty tomb, and it is not my brief to trace recent scholarship on the resurrection back to Willi Marxsen's *Die Auferstehung Jesu von Nazareth* (1968) or beyond. What I can do, in response to a plea from the editor of the AASR Review, is to indicate the illogical move at the heart of *The Australian's* indignation and look at the resurrection in terms that are intelligible to the normally intelligent.

The illogical move involved is a case of mistaken connection. At the centre of the debate is the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ, without question a central doctrine of the Christian faith. Connected with it in this discussion by the most unfortunate term "physical resurrection", is the fate of the physical remains of Jesus placed in the tomb. By identifying the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ with the fate of his physical remains, questions about the latter suddenly become questions about a central doctrine of the Christian faith.

As I pointed out in a letter to *The Australian*, a simple reflection should make clear that the fate of Christ's body is not identical with the reality of his bodily resurrection. Christ's resurrection is the prototype of the resurrection to come - "the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep" (1 Cor 15:20). Our bodies will have totally disappeared in graveyard or crematorium, yet it is Christian belief that our bodily resurrection will be none the less real for that.

In another scenario, if the Romans had ruthlessly cremated the body of Christ in order to prevent any hero worship at a martyr's shrine, they would not have put the slightest obstacle in the way of the reality of the resurrection.

In itself, the issue of the fate of Christ's historical remains is not connected with the reality of his bodily resurrection. What it is connected to is the nature of the accounts of the empty tomb and their reliability as historical evidence. On those grounds, there can be good reason for teaching that the nature of the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ was such that his physical remains in the tomb were transformed in his resurrection.

More important than this is our understanding of the resurrection itself and the nature of the witness given to it in the gospels.

My understanding of the resurrection of the Lord would require at least: that Jesus Christ, son of God and son of Mary, who died on the cross, was raised to new life, a new life which retained his personal identity and personal integrity, a personal integrity which required both the corporal and spiritual elements that are essential to the fulness of being human.

Negatively, three misunderstandings need to be eliminated. The resurrection is NOT simply Jesus' influence and spirit living on. The resurrection is NOT simply Jesus' spiritual being or soul rising to new life. The resurrection is NOT simply Jesus being brought back to life - that would reduce the resurrection of Jesus to the same level as the son of the widow of Zarephath (1 Kgs 17) or, in the gospels, the son of the widow of Nain, Jairus' daughter, and Lazarus.

Apart from the philosophical reflection that resuscitation - bringing back to life - would fall far short of the radical transformation expected in Christian faith, there is also the witness of the gospel accounts. The appearances of the risen Christ are permeated by a strong emphasis both on the identity of the risen Lord with the crucified Jesus and on the difference between them. The identity is strongest in the emphasis on the continued presence of the wounds (Lk 24:36-43; Jn 20:24-29).

The difference is present in the failure to recognize Jesus (Lk 24:16) or as John puts it: "None of the disciples dared ask him, 'Who are you?' They knew it was the Lord" (Jn 20:12).

The difference is brought out most clearly, however, in the absence of the parameters of space and time in the appearance accounts. It is of the essence of any human life in this world to be bounded by space and time. The risen Lord is not subject to these constraints. He does not return to rejoin his disciples in the sequence of their daily lives: he appears to them. He is there in their midst, and then he is not. He does not have to come and go; he is there and then he is not. There is no question of continuity in space or time between the appearances. To borrow language used elsewhere: the risen Lord appears in this world but his risen existence is not of this world.

The insistence on bodily resurrection is remarkable. Paul brings out the possibility for paradox: sown perishable, raised imperishable; sown physical bodies, raised spiritual bodies (12 Cor 15:42-44) It would seem to have been so much easier to envisage imaginatively the continued existence of unencumbered souls, of liberated spirits. Faith in bodily resurrection is an agreeably strong affirmation of the conviction that matter and spirit are integral to the fullness of the human person. It is a fine example of faith's fidelity to the fleshly companion of our daily lives. In its high regard for the body, it must surely bear witness to Christianity's great debt to its Jewish heritage.

The empty tomb, of itself, is not positive evidence of the resurrection. On finding the tomb empty, Mary Magdalen is portrayed in John's gospel as having drawn a quite different conclusion: "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him" (Jn

20:13). A similar thought is attributed to the chief priests (Mt 28:13).

The empty tomb, in order to serve as evidence of the resurrection, needs interpretation. This is provided by the appearances either of the risen Lord or of angels. It is these appearances - not the absence of the body - which carry conviction (cf., Lk 24:11, 22-24).

The nature of the appearances is important. There are the accounts of the appearance of an angel at the tomb (Mt 28:1-8), or a young man (Mk 16:1-8), or two men/angels (Lk 24:1-11, 22-24), or two angels (Jn 20:11-13). There is one account of an appearance of Jesus near the tomb (Jn 20:14-17); another in close association with it (Mt 28:9-10). There are the accounts of appearances of Jesus with no connection to the empty tomb at all (Mt 28:16-20; Lk 24:13-53; Jn 20:19-21:23; perhaps also Mk 16:9-18). There is also the appearance to Paul on the Damascus Road (Acts 9:3-6). Finally there are the appearances mentioned by Paul which are not narrated in the gospels (1 Cor 15:3-8).

It would seem abundantly clear that the witness to the resurrection could have been given by any of these forms of appearance. The empty tomb is not needed as a witness to the resurrection. Conservatives who insist on an essential link between the empty tomb (or "physical resurrection") and the reality of the bodily resurrection of Christ are making an illogical move and spreading totally unnecessary confusion and doubt.

What is at stake in debates about the empty tomb is a question of the nature of the gospel narratives about it. Were these narratives composed as witnesses to faith or as historical records of events? Such a debate is basically a matter of the exegesis of the gospel texts. It does not involve the reality of the resurrection as such; it does concern the literary genre of the empty tomb accounts. It is a matter for competent exegesis, not for dogmatic assertion.

Those of us who are practitioners of the arts of interpretation will be among the first to recognize the degree to which personal attitudes, outlook, prejudices, etc can bring their weight to bear on the outcome of exegesis. The pendulum of opinion has swung all too often in scholarship for us to be unaware of that. So conservatives have a right to jump up and down about the results of liberal scholarship, if they wish. But they should try and get the issue right: in this case, the issue is not the reality of Christ's resurrection but rather the literary genre of the narratives of the empty tomb.

Of course, literary genre is tied to setting. It is incumbent on those who judge the empty tomb narratives to be primarily witnesses to faith to depict a setting in which such narratives might credibly have emerged. Personally, I have difficulty in conceptualizing such a setting. That is one of the grounds on which I would say that there are good reasons for teaching that the nature of the bodily resurrection of Christ was such that the physical remains of Jesus in the tomb were raised in his resurrection. Perhaps this fear lurks behind the conservative energies directed into this controversy. If that is so, then like all fears it is best addressed openly and directly. Matters are only muddled when central tenets of faith are dragged in where they do not belong.

Putting this in blunt and simple terms: for many, it is difficult to imagine a scenario in which the narratives of the empty tomb are fictive accounts emerging out of faith which does not cast a negative pall over the reliability of the gospel witnesses. In strict logic, only one literary genre would be at stake: the empty tomb narratives. For many people the pall would be felt to extend more widely and cast doubt on the validity of the gospels as witnesses of value concerning Jesus of Nazareth - and consequently as valid

foundation for faith. The nub of the issue in so many of these cases is not the scholarly issue under discussion. but rather fear as to what its consequences might be. A scholar must follow evidence wherever it leads; that is the honesty demanded by our profession. We must also stay within the bounds of our evidence and evaluate accurately the probability of what we advance. That too is part of our honesty. At least at the level of public controversy, one might counsel that the more disturbing the consequences may be seen to be, the more a foundation in solid rather than speculative evidence needs to be adduced.

We must also recognize that, in such a controversy as this, much more is at stake than the literary genre of the empty tomb narratives. The reality is that those who talk about the present-day Roman Catholic church in terms of "the post-Vatican II revival of the Heresy of Modernism" want a very different church from the one that I want, for example. So it is not a question of balanced discussion seeking agreement on matters academic. It is a fight over the face of the future church. If all is fair in love and war, one can hardly hope for a fight over religion to be clean.

Maybe the ideal is hopelessly out of reach, but as a Jesuit, I would like to express a yearning for the position advocated by Ignatius Loyola, the founder of the Jesuit Order:

It should be taken for granted that every good Christian is to be more ready to save a neighbour's proposition than to condemn it. If you cannot save it, then you inquire how the other means it. If the other means it badly, then you can correct your neighbour with charity. If that is not enough, seek all suitable means to bring your neighbour to mean it well and save it from error.

(Spiritual Exercises, §22)

## Let the Resurrection = X

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It might be as well if Christians declared a moratorium on the use of the term "the resurrection". Constant repetition of the word has a way of dispensing us from continuing reflection on the reality. Falling back on the phrase from the past frees us from attempting to express our belief in contemporary language.

So people remain content to think of the resurrection as a one-off event in the past, something that happened to Jesus after his death, a personal triumph of his. Or even as something that Jesus did himself, almost like changing his clothes. Adult Christians, competent enough analysts of the domestic and even global scene, con themselves into thinking that their understanding of "the resurrection" is identical with Christian orthodoxy. Recent controversy goes to show that this is not necessarily so.

So there might be some significant advantages if we found ourselves obliged to substitute some other talk for resurrection-talk.

At least it would stop uncritical or unreflective repetition of a hallowed phrase and oblige us to explain a little what we are talking about. It would undermine any easy assumption that the term "resurrection" conveys in our language, time and culture precisely those things it conveyed in the language, time and culture in which the term was coined. No phrase, however sacred, can touch twentieth century men and women in the same way that it touched our Jewish forebears from whose world it comes. Nor can it affect the different levels of our beings in the same way that it did theirs.

No translation can ring all the bells in the minds of our contemporaries or in the different levels of their humanities - imagination, affectivity, right lobe and left lobe, conscious heights and subconscious depths - that the original term did in those who shared its native environment.

To be obliged to avoid the traditional term until, say, 2000 C.E., would surely heighten our awareness of what is involved in conveying what we Christians believe to Australians in our time and world. We might come to appreciate the size of the task of developing a modern hermeneutic of the resurrection.

What if we were to refer to that happening as, well .... just X?

X stands, in the first place, for mystery. To insist on talking about X might at least reassert the element of mystery that surrounds that event. If every one of what we call God's saving acts has an element of mystery then this, surely must be the most mysterious of all. Christians have proclaimed it as the ultimate in mystery, the climactic, final or eschatological act of God which creates a new order of things that somehow contains everything else that He has to offer.

Simple enough so far? Commonplace even? Perhaps, but we will see in due course the problems that arise when that element of mystery in X is not given the emphasis it demands. Without a proper emphasis on an element so obvious as this it is impossible to begin asking questions or making assertions about such topics as the transformation God brought about in the human being of Jesus or the manner in which Jesus was perceived after his death.

X might be seen, in fact, to evoke the whole sweep of the mystery of salvation. Far from being isolated as a unique, if climactic, moment in the career of Jesus, X would find its proper place at the heart of God's dealings with His people.

X could then be imagined as a kind of double V, one upright on top of another inverted. The upright V would suggest the history of salvation from creation to Jesus. At the top, the wide-open, all-embracing initial creative act of God, imprinting His image on the universe. Then the successive phases of His dealings with humanity and His people in which He brings that image into sharper and sharper focus. The base of the V is that point as fine as the humanity of one first-century Palestinian Jewish male executed by Pilate. In that finest of points the image of God was focussed and expressed with ultimate clarity.

The inverted V would represent the history of salvation from Jesus to the Parousia, in which the previous process is reversed. The image of God focussed in the humanity of Jesus is progressively enlarged as it is projected onto a community that springs from him in the successive stages of its pilgrimage to the ends of the earth to carry on his mission.

Fanciful stuff, certainly. Yet it serves to remind us of another essential and overlooked aspect of X which is the central point in a continuous history. At the centre of the X is a recapitulation of the history of God's people Israel and a reconstitution of God's people as a community that owes its character and cohesion to a shared belief in the God whom Jesus sought, taught, manifested and embodied.

X is essentially a community-founding event. This is the element so clearly asserted in the writings of the New Testament and so regularly overlooked when what is called the "physical" resurrection is trumpeted as the heart of

orthodox Christian belief. Whatever happened to the human being of Jesus and the physical elements of his dead body, something equally important happened to his disciples and the mission for which he was sent.

X must be seen not in physical but in personal, relational terms. The Creed insists that all these things happened not only to Jesus but for us and for our salvation. When we think of X as something that happened to Jesus we act like a woman thinking of her marriage as something that happened to her husband. X must be seen as a moment that set the seal on a relationship already commenced and inaugurated a totally new phase in an unbreakable, on-going and life-giving relationship. God, who entered into a unique relationship with the human race in His union with Jesus in his earthly life cemented that relationship in X and remains present to His people in a continuing presence of Jesus among them.

If X cannot be reduced to something that happened to Jesus it cannot be reduced, either, to an act of God that happened at a unique moment in the past. This would be to limit the marriage to the wedding ceremony, over and done with ages ago. There is an on-going quality to X. God not only inaugurates a relationship, He sustains it and works at it. The relationship between God in Jesus and His people goes on developing. It is always open to further discoveries and surprises.

In fact X was not only community-founding - because of its on-going quality it was community-shaking. The mysterious continuing presence of Jesus obliged his followers first to question and then to relinquish some of their most ingrained assumptions and deepest convictions. They commenced as so many Jewish followers of a Jewish Jesus. They saw themselves, naturally, as a Jewish community, heirs to Israel's heritage. Over a

period of only twenty years those assumptions were surfaced, questioned, and very painfully abandoned. The totally unexpected success of missionary outreach to the pagans forced them to acknowledge that the pagans, too, could become children of Abraham by their belief in Jesus. As if this crisis of identity was not enough their whole view of God underwent a revolutionary development. Their experience of Jesus present in this new way forced them to stretch even the word "God" to lengths inconceivable to other Jews and apply it to the man they had eaten and drunk and prayed with. God, they realized, had shown Himself so clearly in Jesus and identified Himself so thoroughly with him in the exercise of His power that Jesus was acclaimed by God's own title.

X is founding event and on-going relationship. The New Testament bears witness to these two aspects. Not that those writings make any attempt, as later Christian writings did, to describe the moment or process of Jesus' return to new life. They do tell the story of how the first witnesses came to faith but those stories convey at the same time the experience of later Christians who "did not see but believed" of the ways in which they came to faith and of their responses to the presence of Jesus in their different worlds. Even the Gospel narratives which at first sight seem concerned only with the birth of the community in the encounter of individuals or groups with Jesus alive after death are freighted with the experience and even the very language of later Christian communities in prayer, preaching, teaching or self-defence.

Thirty or forty years before those stories appeared in the written Gospels the letters of Paul already provide a very extensive reflection on X as on-going relationship. Paul spells out the implications of X in all the realms of daily living

for communities who lived in a world far different from that which Jesus lived in. He learned from harsh experience the problems that arose in the Greek world when X was presented in resurrection-talk. He was even obliged to take up the question of the kind of body with which the dead rise.

Paul's letters also offer us hints as to the way Christians before him had expressed their faith and responded to the mysterious presence of Jesus. Embedded in his writings we can find brief formulas, short credal phrases hammered out before him, confessions of faith, samples of earlier preaching, liturgical acclamations and hymns in which they articulated their experience and responded to their Lord.

X, clearly, cannot be adequately expressed in any one term. Those earliest witnesses and preachers expressed themselves in a number of terms. It was natural to draw on "fulfilment" terms, phrases that point to X as fulfilment of God's promises to His people. To call X "the resurrection" is to explain that happening as God living up to His promise to raise the just to life. One could equally think of X as the "exaltation" of God's Messiah or his "enthronement at God's right hand" in fulfilment of His promise to invest the Messianic king with God's own regal power, or of the "sending of the Spirit" to begin the era when all God's people were to be endowed with the Spirit of Yahweh previously confined to the powerful deeds of prophets and warriors and kings.

Scholars have tried to trace these different categories through the layers of the New Testament to establish which of these terms was the one first used to articulate the experience of X and the term "resurrection" has as good claims as any. What is more important in our approach to X is to be aware not only of the individual terms but the range of "languages" in

which X came to expression and the aspects they emphasized.

There is the language of the eye-witness which is the simple but absolutely fundamental assertion of an immediate personal or community experience. There is the language of the kerygma, the public proclamation of X as God's offer of salvation. There is the language of the teacher, explaining, spelling out implications, pointing to contemporary relevance, applying to new situations, careful to avoid phrases that invite misunderstanding in a particular environment. There is the language of the apologist responding to Jewish attacks by showing that, if you only read them in a particular way, the Scriptures themselves testify to the Christian claims.

There is the language of people at prayer and worship, the language of poet and song-writer struggling with words and music, symbol and image, rhyme and rhythm, to help people give utterance to what lies deepest in their hearts. And there is the language of the story-teller selecting, bringing out the essentials of the episode, sketching vignettes and shaping dialogue, trying by all the devices he knows to hold the attention of his audience and imprint picture and message on their memories.

Which leads us to the threshold of the Gospel narratives. Before we cross that, however, there are some questions to take up that we are now in a better position to tackle. Now that we have sufficiently emphasized the mysterious nature of X, deed of God the Father to Jesus for us and for our salvation, we can ask how Jesus, so recently and definitely consigned to the tomb, "appeared" to the original eye-witnesses.

With what faculties do humans perceive this Jesus? How much can we say about the human experience of Paul which he expresses in the words, "Have I

not seen the Lord", or of the apostles and the five hundred to whom Jesus, according to the earliest recitation we have, "appeared"? Is it even possible to talk of eye-witnesses - for surely something more than ordinary eye-sight will be required to detect this kind of presence? It cannot be by any ordinary exercise of sight or other senses that one perceives a Jesus who is no longer subject to suffering or death or the limited forms of communication to which mortals are subject. He will hardly "appear" or "be seen" in quite the same way as he did at the beginning of each new day of his earthly life.

Paul, the only New Testament writer to claim to be an eye-witness (though he resolutely refuses to be drawn into any attempt to describe the kind of body he "saw") describes his experience as an act of God who "revealed His Son to me" and thus involved him in the continuance of the mission of Jesus. When we read that Jesus "appeared" we are reading the language used in the Old Testament of God's messengers the angels or of God Himself. In that "appearance" God reveals or discloses His intentions that cannot possibly be understood by human means. The term "appeared" emphasizes a divine initiative and can possibly be translated as "God made Jesus seen".

What has been said of "seeing" will be true of any other kind of ordinary human perception. None of these faculties empowers the human being to recognize this kind of person or this kind of presence. To recognize the Lazarus you knew returned from his stay in the tomb to the dusty routine of daily tasks in this world was doubtless startling and disconcerting but not beyond the range of the senses. Once the shroud had been unwound he was seen and touched and heard and surely smelled. He could have been photographed and interviewed for the television news. But Jesus came to meet

his disciples as a being from another world, changed, freed from the limitations of the past, capable of communicating in a new way. No camera or videotape is capable of capturing and reproducing the signs of this new kind of communication.

What can we say about the genesis of the Easter faith? How did this Easter Jesus take the initiative in these encounters? With what signs did he communicate with them and lead them to recognize his presence? Though we have claimed that ordinary ways of human perception are insufficient for this recognition we can still ask how the gift of faith was mediated, though what human realities it was offered and accepted. After all, what happened was the recognition by a group of women and men friends of a person whom they knew. They asserted that the being they encountered, however mysterious, was somebody with whom they were very familiar and whose way of life and mission they had shared.

What were the psychological processes involved? What was happening in the interim between Good Friday and before any further light had dawned? Was recognition immediate or gradual? Was the process a matter of moments, or hours, or days, or weeks? Were there hesitations, advances and retreats in their assurance?

Don't the Gospels themselves provide the answers to these questions? At first sight the details they offer in the stories of the appearances of Jesus are quite credible. When we compare the stories in the different Gospels, though, we find the details difficult to reconcile. To whom did Jesus appear first? Where did the appearances take place - in Jerusalem or Galilee or both? In what order did these appearances take place?

Each of the evangelists is drawing on materials bequeathed by at least two generations of preachers, teachers, worshippers, apologists and story-tellers. He

may also be drawing on authentic eye-witness testimony but it is never easy to establish those details that are due to clearly remembered eye-witness recollection. We have already been warned that we are not dealing with anything remotely approaching a video-tape replay and that the only eye-witness among the writers of the New Testament books, namely Paul, is noticeably reticent about any details of the shape or form of the Jesus who "appeared" to him.

Each of the evangelists is also shaping the materials to hand so as to convey his distinctive message to his specific audience. Familiarity with the style, language and concerns of each means that we can confidently ascribe some elements of their stories to their individual compositional techniques or pastoral and theological preoccupations. Luke's interest in Jerusalem as centre of God's work of salvation is well known. Jesus "goes up" from Galilee to Jerusalem and from Jerusalem to heaven; the Good News goes out to the ends of the earth from Jerusalem. Luke eliminates references to Galilee in stories of the appearances so as to preserve the centrality of Jerusalem.

It is not difficult to detect some details that are anachronistic and clearly not historical recollection. The very explicit final commission of Jesus to make disciples of all nations cannot be regarded as an explicit utterance on a mountain in Galilee to the assembled apostles without making a nonsense of the history of the twenty years that led up to the Council of Jerusalem at which that "word" of Jesus was finally heard. Items like the Trinitarian formula of baptism in Matthew and the acclamation to Jesus as "My Lord and My God" on the lips of Thomas and John are phrases from the worship of a community at least several decades afterwards.

Other details we can reasonably ascribe to the experience of decades of

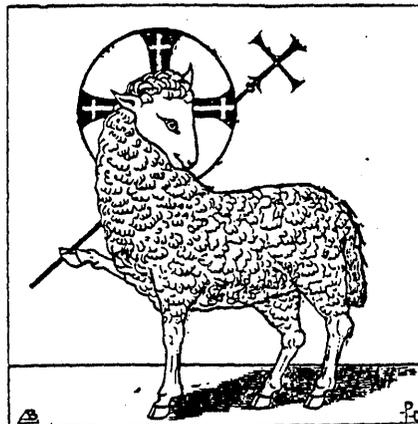
teaching about X. As Paul's experience shows, any teacher who had to teach anything about X to a Greek audience would want to place beyond any shadow of doubt the reality of the humanity of Jesus for fear they would regard him as a disembodied spirit, a soul liberated from the mortal coil that dragged it down. How better emphasize the complete integrity of his humanity than by telling a story in which he shared a meal of fresh fish at the lakeside with his disciples?

It should surely be clear that there is ample room for hypothesis about many matters concerned with the appearances. These extend not only to details of time and place and sequence, of leading roles and persons involved, but to the nature of that recognition, the human psychological realities which mediated it, even the meaning of bodiliness itself. In fact it should also be noted that it is invariably hypothesis that passes, in these matters, for certainty or orthodoxy.

For all their differences the evangelists are at one on some central elements. Matthew, Luke and John each have stories

of appearances of Jesus to individuals or small groups as well as one major "commissioning" appearance. They emphasize the initiative of Jesus who overcomes doubts and hesitations and obstacles to faith, the moment of recognition and its transforming effects, and the involvement in the on-going mission of Jesus which this encounter brings. Each in his own way depicts X as on-going involvement and relationship as well as inaugural moment. In the Emmaus story Luke presents X as continuing encounter of a pilgrim people with a Lord who explains the need of suffering through a new understanding of the Scriptures and the breaking of the bread. In the Thomas episode John shows the blessedness of Christians of later generations who come to faith through the testimony of others. Matthew in his final line shows Jesus as a perpetual presence with his people.

If all those things are what people mean when they talk about "the resurrection" then well and good. Otherwise, let's stay with X.



## Without a Vision the People Perish

Ann Daughtry

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We all know that as long as there are faiths there will be religious controversies, variations of the divine will as it is perceived by different theologians, with or without degrees. At the moment it seems that God cannot make up his mind about the position of women in the Christian Church. The body of Christ in the West is going through an attack of low fever, sweating this problem out, following the Lord miserably, miles behind him as usual.

Am I right to compare our present number one argument to a disease rather than to growing pains? Perhaps it should be considered as a mild form of neurosis, in which the sufferer's ability to function is drained of energy by the mind, arguing back and forth against itself. It's an old complaint: the mighty nervous breakdown triggered off by Luther undermined the patient's strength literally for ages, with relapses occurring right up to the present day. Is there going to be another split in the body's sense of identity, another schism with modernized heresy charges brought by each side? Surely not. In our age of miracles and mass starvation the question of whether or not a woman preaches the sermon or hands you the communion bread is comparatively TRIVIAL!

There, I've been wanting to say that for years. Now my conscience stabs me with the knowledge of all those women who have felt the call of God to take priestly authority and found their vocation denied by the Lord's professional servants. Yes ladies, I believe that it was wrong of them to reject you, and if the burden you carry

for Christ is to open the priesthood to women, then go on. You will overcome. But I don't have such a commission. I am a historian, interested in religion in the nineteenth-century, a period when the Catholic Church decided to turn its back on the question of social justice in favour of a revival of traditional, monarchical charity, and I say to any cell in the mystical Body which is absorbing this now - particularly any large, highly organized male cell - don't waste energy and time on our latest fashionable controversy, don't repeat the behaviour of the past. The Church needs ministers and you have to admit your job is not sought after by young men any more. There's not enough money and power in it. If the Lord of the harvest does what the communists do and sends out women to labour in a man's field, are you going to let the grain rot rather than use them? Think of Peter's net. In a vision he saw it let down from heaven fully of ritually unclean food, and was commanded "Eat!" Naturally as a high-ranking Jewish Christian he refused on the basis of centuries of Old Testament teaching. God's answer was: "What I have sanctified, call not thou unclean!" The Chief Male of All (if that's how you see him) had declared his right to go against tradition and kick the old taboo back into the past. Why don't our leaders have visions too? Can it be that they are closet materialists?

Maybe the answer is that the Almighty does not intervene in our domestic arguments. We are supposed to be adults, perhaps. Or is he withdrawing from us and about to hire the servants of Moham-

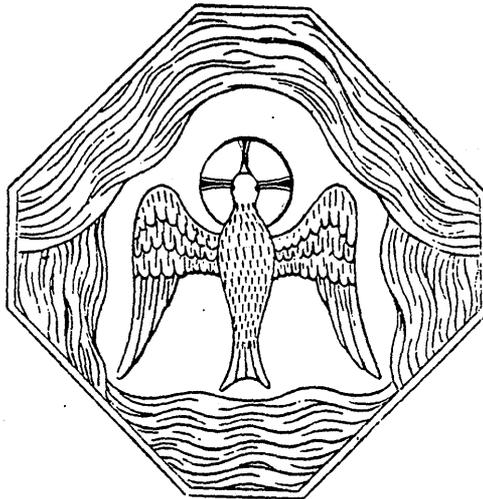
med or the Buddha to bring in his next harvest? Obviously the Marxist team didn't do a thorough job.

It is possible, I suggest, that this God whom I, as a Christian, have been taught to see as intelligent and caring, is also a pragmatist who will employ anyone who can deliver the goods. Somehow he is going to defend the poor of the earth from wholesale exploitation; someone has to make sure that all children are taught to reject problem-solving by deceit and warfare. Perhaps there's a greenie at this moment caught up into the third heaven, receiving divine instructions for the

preservation of the human race.

Or do we all have to wait until the Second Coming? Is that what the Church has to offer the anxious millions? Does she fiddle about with questions of protocol because she knows that it's no use trying to do anything big? Just wait till after Armageddon, my people.

If we really do have to wait for God to break into history and sort us all out, I suggest that one reason will have been the pettiness of Christian thinking. "Without a vision the people perish." (signed) Jeremiah.



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