THEOLOGICAL TRENDS

JESUS IN CURRENT THEOLOGY III
CHRIST'S RESURRECTION AND OUR IMAGINATION

CHRISTOLOGY HAS lately become an area top-heavy with debates. Should we discard traditional language about Jesus Christ as one person in two natures? Or will that move entail no clear gain in objectivity and a sure loss in understanding? How should the virginal conception of Jesus be interpreted? Was he aware of his divine sonship? If so, what form did this consciousness take? Did he anticipate and evaluate his death before those final hours in Jerusalem when he was rushed breathlessly to death?

Often these debates have proved useful. On a few occasions we can only watch them with sad and wondering eyes. But no one should ever let them block off the two 'simple yet formidable questions' which 'we ought always to put to ourselves: Who is Christ in himself? Who is Christ for me?'[1]

My previous two articles[2] adhered rather closely to the usual agenda of these debates about Jesus. In this piece I plan to break up and develop a theme to which insufficient attention has been paid: Christ's resurrection and our imagination. Some fresh approaches here could help towards discovering anew who the risen Christ is – both 'in himself' and 'for me'.

In *Christ Sein* Hans Küng sometimes shows himself ready to exclude the imagination from participating in certain theological struggles. He insists, for instance, that Christ's resurrection involves a radical transformation into a life which is 'utterly other' and simply unimaginable. 'Here neither our eyes nor our fantasy can help us further. They can only lead us astray. The reality of the resurrection is completely unclear and unimaginable'.[3]

Undoubtedly the imagination can lead us at times into a mess. That happens when we use images in misguided attempts to explain or describe otherworldly realities. This is probably what Küng wishes to warn his readers against. At the same time, there is value to be found in the view with which William Blake so identified himself, that truth is perceptible to the imagination rather than to the mind. Will our common fantasy help us here? Can we let some images prompt useful intuitions, provided we check any impulse to indulge bizarre efforts at describing precisely what risen life would look like? If we refuse to be daunted by possible vetos from theolo-

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1 Pope Paul VI, at a general audience in Rome on 3 November, 1976.

2 Cf *The Way*, vol 16 (October, 1976), pp 291–308, and vol 17 (January, 1977), pp 51–64.

3 Küng, H.: *Christ Sein* (Munich, 1974), p 339; unfortunately the English translation, *On Being a Christian* (London, 1977), has not yet reached me.

gians, what hints might we glean from a more imaginative approach to Christ's resurrection and our own resurrection?

A great deal is at stake here. The possibility of introducing a theme into our prayer seems linked with the possibility of exercising our imagination about it. Even if images appear to contribute relatively little to our prayer at a given moment, nevertheless, we can hardly pray about something unless our imagination can get hold of it. To parody Wittgenstein: 'Whereof we have no imagination, thereof we have no prayer'. Many find it easier to contemplate the life and passion of Jesus rather than his resurrection. Their imagination gets left out in the cold, once they move beyond Good Friday.

Amos Wilder recently observed: 'Imagination is a necessary component of all profound knowing and celebration . . . It is at the level of the imagination that any full engagement with life takes place'.[4] His remarks bear on prayer. It could well be that the lack of images to shape and motivate contemplation of the resurrection has stopped many from celebrating profoundly that mystery in their prayer and becoming fully engaged with it.

Artists and contemplatives

Art and contemplation suggest two avenues. First of all, painters and sculptors can entice us to reflect on the risen life more imaginatively and with less cool rationalism. Great artists create symbols through which we can share an experience. They invite us to renew in our imagination the work of their imagination. In dealing with the human body artists as different as El Greco and Rodin discover and set free a kind of second body. They go behind the familiar appearance of the human body to re-express it in a new way. They disengage from the organic, material bodies before them – not mere replicas in which we can discern a likeness – but hidden things of splendour and beauty. They discover an inner glory in their subjects and, as it were, transcribe them into another world. The creative intuitions and hands of the artists liberate a new life within ordinary life. Art, in short, sublimates the dull-looking reality of human bodies.

St Paul repeatedly speaks of God the Father as having raised Jesus from the dead (Gal 1, 1; 1 Thess 1, 9ff; Rom 10, 9, etc). He cautions the Corinthians against fornication by recalling their bodily destiny: 'God raised the Lord and will also raise us up by his power' (1 Cor 6, 14). Dare we represent God the Father as the supreme artist who has discovered and set free Jesus's final bodily glory and will do the same for us? In sublimating in this way his crucified Son he promises to transcribe us into the splendour and beauty of what Paul calls the 'spiritual body' (1 Cor 15, 44). Some minds at least can move with natural ease from the lesser wonder of artistic creation to the greater wonder of God's new creation. The resurrection is seen as nothing less than the great artist discovering and disengaging our hidden body of glory.

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[4] *Theopoetic* (Philadelphia, 1976), p 2.

Paul encourages such an imaginative leap from the lesser to the greater, when he recalls an analogy from his jewish background. Even dull readers, he expects, can marvel at the growth from grain to harvest:

> Someone will ask, how are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come? You foolish man! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. And what you sow is not the body which is to be, but a bare kernel, perhaps of wheat or of some other grain. But God gives it a body as he has chosen, and to each kind of seed its own body (1 Cor 15, 35–38).

Here Paul invites his readers – for all their foolishness – to make the leap from the lesser miracle of harvest to the greater wonder of the risen life:

> So it is with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body (1 Cor 15, 42–44).

In his preaching Jesus never observes, 'The spiritual, risen body will be like unto . . .' Nevertheless, his parables and, in general, his teaching anticipate the route of the pauline imagination in 1 Corinthians – a movement from the lesser to the greater. Marriage feasts symbolize the big party God will throw at the end of time. Travellers turning up late at night and looking for food suggest the nature of prayer to God. A father's loving welcome to a renegade son serves to picture the divine mercy. Sunshine and rain reflect God's free generosity to all alike – the just and the unjust, the good and the evil. Over and over again Jesus asks his listeners to let the ordinary things and events around them become the means for understanding and accepting God's activity on their behalf.

Of course, our greater knowledge of botany can get in the way of entering enthusiastically into Paul's particular example. Genetics, fertilisers and tractors have sapped the wonder of the harvest. All the same, we may substitute other examples and imitate Paul and Jesus in jumping from the ordinary or extraordinary things of human experience to the objects of our faith and hope. In particular, the ways great artists render the human body can make some sense of what risen existence could be like.

Reflection on genuine contemplatives, ascetics and mystics may also yield a hard nugget of imaginative truth about resurrection life. True contemplatives and ascetics, both christian and non-christian, give up a number of normal human activities. They substitute hours of prayer for usual occupations. They may sleep less than others. They often engage in fasting. Many renounce marriage. Some stay in one place. All in all, they abandon much that seems to make earthly existence worthwhile. Yet far from living less than others, they appear in some ways to live more. Their asceticism looks like a putting to death. But at least in the case of genuine ascetics and con-

templatives this apparent 'mortification' is really a 'vivification'. Remarkable powers of energy and spiritual insight are released. Pain and fear lose their grip. A new freedom arises to overcome the limitations of ordinary lives. The mind and will function in ways that go beyond what men and women normally experience.

I am thinking here not just of extraordinary phenomena like ecstasy, second sight or the power to work miracles. The story of such a non-visionary and down to earth person as Dietrich Bonhoeffer shows how this deeply prayerful and self-disciplined man, while seeming to live 'less', in fact lived 'more'. The 'mortification' that was truly a 'vivification' comes through the material he wrote as a prisoner in a Nazi gaol. A luminous freedom shone round him at the end. The prison doctor who witnessed the execution on a spring morning in 1945 wrote later:

> On the morning of that day between five and six o'clock the prisoners . . . were taken from their cells, and the verdicts of the court martial read out to them. Through the half-open door in one room of the huts I saw Pastor Bonhoeffer, before taking off his prison garb, kneeling on the floor praying fervently to his God. I was most deeply moved by the way this lovable man prayed, so devout and so certain that God heard his prayer. At the place of execution, he again said a short prayer and then climbed the steps to the gallows, brave and composed. His death ensued after a few seconds. In the almost fifty years that I worked as a doctor, I have hardly ever seen a man die so entirely submissive to the will of God.[5]

Events like these let our thoughts dart forward to the risen life. The resurrected shape of things to come casts its light before it.

Like countless contemplatives, ascetics and mystics, Jesus passed by much that seems to make human life valuable. He never married, confined his active career to a year or two spent in a pocket handkerchief country, and cut sleep short to spend hours in prayer, while the world which he challenged to repent rapidly turned dangerous. In lots of ways Jesus came across as someone who lived 'less' than others – that 'son of man' who had 'nowhere to lay his head' (Mt 8, 20). Yet he was remembered as the one from whom power came forth to heal people (Mk 5, 30). Even if no evangelist ever described his physical appearance, nevertheless, they recalled one occasion during his ministry when bright glory shone through Jesus:

> And after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart by themselves; and he was transfigured before them, and his garments became glistening, intensely white, as no fuller on earth could bleach them (Mk 9, 2ff).

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[5] Bethge, E.: *Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (New York, 1970), pp 830–31.

In brief, such luminous and powerful moments in the lives of people like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Teresa of Avila or Francis of Assisi – not to mention Jesus himself – can offer memorable glimpses of what resurrection life might be like. These occasions form living parables when the gap between the here and the hereafter closes a little and we can say, 'The resurrection will be like unto the moment when . . .'[6]

Physics and biology

Science delivers some satisfactory possibilities in our quest for images of the resurrection. First, the surprising fact that seemingly inert matter contains such immense energy holds out one approach. Nuclear physics vindicated the truth of Einstein's equation: Energy equals mass by the speed of light squared ($E = MC^2$). Can we put aside any qualms, take advantage of this wonder of nature and once again move from the lesser to the greater in picturing the resurrection? As man has learnt to set free stunning amounts of power from tiny pieces of matter, so God took the dead Jesus and liberated him to be the Risen Lord, one powerfully present to all times and places. In a sense, unintended by the author, St Paul's words apply here: 'It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power' (1 Cor 15, 43). An apparently weak lump of matter can explode with such energy. Is it too much to use this 'miracle' of nuclear physics as an image of Jesus being utterly 'weak' in death and then transformed to such power through his resurrection? Reason may tug at our elbow and say that this use of our imagination is absurd. But a hundred years ago, or even less, reason would have declared Einstein's equation absurd.

We may also be able to respond with sympathy and understanding to suggestions coming from modern biology. Once upon a time men naively assumed a far-reaching autonomy and stability for the human body. They had not yet discovered that our life is a dynamic process of constant circulation between our bodies and our environment. Xavier Léon-Dufour puts it this way:

> In the universe there circulates a total body of 'materials' which are the object of unceasing exchanges. For example, of the sixty million, million cells which compose the human organism, five hundred million are renewed every day. . . *My body* is the universe received and made particular in this instant by myself.[7]

To adapt John Donne's words, no body is an island.

Now the point of comparison with the resurrection is this. In being raised from the dead, Jesus was liberated to enter into a web of relationships 'with

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[6] In a somewhat different way J. Guitton develops the images drawn from the work of artists and the lives of the saints. See his 'Epistémologie de la résurrection. Concepts préalables et programme de recherches', in *Resurrexit*, ed. E. Dhanis (Rome, 1974), pp 108–30.

[7] *Resurrection and the Message of Easter* (London, 1974), p 239.

the universe of men and things'.[8] Such language may seem an improbable piece of religious poetry. Yet talk about millions of cells being exchanged every day between the human body and the universe, probably still sounds to many like an improbable piece of biological poetry. Can we make the leap from the lesser marvel to the greater one – from the world of interrelated organisms to the risen Christ's intense interrelationship with the entire universe? In his bodiliness he was freed from the ordinary limitation of space, time and matter to enjoy relations with all times and places. What is true of all resurrected persons holds true all the more of Jesus Christ: no risen body is an island.

Here one crashes up against a difficulty I raised in my *The Easter Jesus*.[9] The images drawn from physics and biology high-light the *transformation* effected through resurrection. Matter becomes energy. A network of organic relationships with the world is uniquely enhanced. The more profound the transformation brought about by resurrection, the more problematic becomes the task of illustrating the *continuity* between the new risen life and the old earthly existence. If our images prove successful in suggesting Christ's transformation, the identification between the risen Christ and the earthly Jesus becomes doubtful. Yet the risen Lord never says, 'I was Jesus', still less, 'I come in place of Jesus'. But he announces, 'It is I myself' (Lk 24, 39). Can modern science provide some help towards coping, not only with the transformation but also with the continuity involved in resurrection?

A footnote tucked away at the back of Léon-Dufour's book lets a possible answer emerge.[10] What keeps human organisms intact and preserves their continuity, despite the astonishing ebb and flow of cells, is their genetic structure. At that level what supports an enduring identity is something quite small, if extraordinarily complex: a pattern of coded macromolecules. The point of comparison would be this. An invisible factor, the structure of our genetic constitution, preserves our continuity in the face of a rapid flux of materials. Likewise the continuity between our ante-mortem and post-mortem existence rests on God's action in raising and enhancing such an element of structure. An invisible formula (a lesser marvel) can keep identity intact in the face of the massive changes demanded by our present organic existence. Can we toy with the notion of a greater marvel – God resurrecting, and transmuting some such formula in ways that will make the wonders of modern physics and biology seem like child's play?

Thus far I have been pressing the case for engaging our imagination when we tackle the question: What could the resurrection possibly be like? The style of argument adopted by Jesus and – at times – by St Paul can encourage this approach. So too does Plato. After pages of close debate about philosophical issues he introduced myths into several of his great dialogues.

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[8] *Ibid.*, p 240.

[9] *The Easter Jesus* (London, 1973), p 114.

[10] *Resurrection, and the Message of Easter*, p 321 fn 42.

He did this, I suspect, not to round matters off with a 'mere' literary device, but to coax his audience into some primordial insights. Plato's practice implies that poetic visions, no less than philosophical argumentation, can lead us into the truth. We should engage the imagination as a partner in our search for religious understanding and not dismiss it as a threat to clear thinking.

Some readers, however, may hold that with the resurrection, if anywhere, we should be content to accept God's astonishing power and leave it quietly at that. We might want to take our cue from that haunting remark of St Ignatius of Antioch, 'Christ rose in the silence of God'. Surely our awed silence is preferable here to ceaseless chatter? We may feel like that astronaut who remarked about his colleague, 'Yes, he's all right, if a bit inclined to throw his weightlessness about'. Is the whole range of comparisons – from nuclear physics to St Paul's reflections on the harvest – ultimately weightless? After all, the resurrection is the mysterious object of faith and not a theme of scientific knowledge.

Finally readers must decide for themselves whether the images proposed above do in fact enlighten and strengthen their resurrection belief. Only they can tell if the comparisons drawn from art, contemplation, nuclear physics and biology actually work.

At the same time, from its beginnings christian literature has favoured efforts to apprehend divine mysteries through images drawn from the world of our senses. Ignatius of Antioch may warn us to be cautiously quiet about the resurrection. Nevertheless, the same bishop in the following terms asks the roman christians not to block his martyrdom: 'Let me be the food of wild beasts, for they shall bring me to God. I am God's wheat, and the teeth of beasts will grind me into Christ's pure bread'. This is lively imagery to express what he calls his 'approaching birth' into real life when he will be 'truly man' and 'see the pure Light'. Ignatius endorses both approaches to the resurrection – imaginative boldness, no less than reverent restraint.

Some readers, however, may flinch from examples which draw on 'things out there' and have a strong imaginative impact. They may, instead, be helped by some suggestions coming from modern philosophy which touch experiences 'in here'. Admittedly the images so far introduced, especially those from modern science, have a strong *physical* flavour. Several hints from the philosophers look more to the human *person*. These possibilities may soften prejudices against trying to throw light on the resurrection. Let me suggest four such approaches – under the headings of 'love', 'freedom', 'thought', and 'sex'.

Love, freedom, thought and sex

First of all, *love*. The language of 'forever'. Gabriel Marcel has been invoked here a thousand times. But one more time will not hurt. His reflections on love eloquently supported the conclusion, 'To love someone is to say, "You will not die".' Love does not tolerate limits imposed by time or

death. We would find it unaccountably odd of parents to assure their children, 'We shall love you all but only for fifteen years'. What would we make of children who told their parents, 'We shall forget you, once you are dead'? We could only shake our heads in puzzlement over a lover who said to his beloved, 'I will love you for five years'. Genuine love is committed and committing to the language of 'forever'.

This love of men and women hints at the divine love exhibited in the resurrection. For God the Father to say, 'This is the Son whom I love' (see Mk 1, 11; 9, 7) was to say, 'He will not die' or, rather, 'I will not abandon him to death' (Acts 2, 25–31). Human beings speak brave words of love, but know their weakness in the face of death. The Father's word of love, however, was powerful when he spoke it over the corpse laid to rest near Calvary: 'You will not die forever'.

St John points us in this direction. The second half of his gospel focuses on the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus. It is precisely then that the language of love comes to the fore. Chapters 13–20 use the word 'love' (both noun and verb) four times as often as do chapters 1–12. As the crucifixion looms over us and the resurrection happens, the evangelist reaches naturally for love-language. We can adapt a famous text of the gospel to express our point: Having always loved his Son who was in the world, the Father now showed the full extent of his love (13, 1). The truth Marcel enunciated reached its classic fulfilment when the Father's love raised the dead Jesus to a new life of glory.[11]

In short, one might echo St Augustine and cry out here: 'Give me a lover and he will understand the resurrection'.

Freedom holds out other possible ways of pondering the resurrection. In *The Easter Jesus* I developed one such approach: 'The risen man finds himself permanently liberated from all perverse, death-dealing forces, be they death itself, sin, suffering and oppression of various kinds'. As well as this 'freedom *from*', I noted a 'freedom *for*' which resurrection brings. The risen Christ

> has ceased to be an object in our world which can be sought out and confronted at will. As the Damascus-road event dramatically illustrates, Christ has become free to present himself or not. With sovereign freedom he initiates the episode and of his own accord emerges from his hiddenness to show himself where and to whom he wishes.[12]

Both these points touched *Christ's* new freedom. But we can also think of the *Father's* freedom. Let me explain.

For years we may wonder whether we live truly free lives. The opportunity

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[11] For the purposes of the argument I have taken the resurrection within the love-dialogue between Father and Son. I recognize that St John in places (2, 19; 10, 17ff) names Jesus as the agent of his own resurrection.

[12] *The Easter Jesus* (London, 1973), p 115.

– or even better the invitation – to do something *new* can restore our confidence that we have not lost the courage to exercise our liberty. Some people can feel a pressing personal need to break loose and prove their freedom to themselves. Doing something new and, as far as they are concerned, unique, can happily meet that need.

Now it would be bizarre to portray God the Father experiencing some pressing personal need to exercise his freedom and then meeting that need by raising Jesus from the dead. All the same, the resurrection presents us with God doing something utterly new and quite unique. Easter Sunday witnesses to the creative liberty of God. The God who freely called all things into existence now freely calls back, into a new existence, a human being who once was and now lives no more. The wonder of the original creation recedes before the wonder of the new creation. The fresh and final future to which Christ's resurrection testifies lets us see the over-riding freedom of God who promises, 'Behold, I make all things new' (Apoc 21, 5).

To sum up. We can turn to advantage contemporary convictions about the high value of freedom, and the need to keep freedom alive. God asserts a unique divine freedom through an astonishingly new act, the resurrection of the crucified Jesus.

Teilhardian terminology provides another avenue for approaching the resurrection. The mutation from the biosphere to the noosphere is a lesser image of the greater mutation – from the noosphere to what can be called the pneumatosphere, or realm of the spirit. The first mutation brought the appearance of *thought*. Human thought can embrace the universe. It can reach out instantly across millions of miles of space or back through endless centuries of time. But human *activity* fails to keep pace with thought. Our actions remain pinned down and engulfed by the universe. The transformation which came with the appearance of thought has not yet occurred for human activity. Can we imagine resurrection as a mutation from the noosphere to the pneumatosphere, such as will bring for human action the kind of metamorphosis which has already taken place for human thought?

Lastly, human *sexuality* helps to make sense of the resurrection. All too often, of course, the christian Church and – for that matter – other religious groups – have had to face the perversions to which sinful men and women have put their sexuality. It is hardly to be expected that believers will leap headlong to embrace sex as a symbol of the resurrection. For its part, modern science has been busy dismantling taboos about sexuality, as well as trivialising that whole dimension of human existence. The successors of Kinsey would not normally care to classify and research *vestigia resurrectionis* (traces of the resurrection) in their chosen area of specialization.

Even if neither religion nor science is likely to favour his observations, Jean Guitton has rightly singled out two aspects of sexual life which come across as *vestigia resurrectionis*: union and ecstasy. Sexual love means leaving the limits of one's own existence and being united in peaceful ecstasy with another. Resurrection entails a transformation that maximizes both elements.

The risen person in an enduring ecstasy breaks free to enjoy union with God and the world. The mystical tradition of Christianity long ago pressed the Canticle of Canticles into service and drew from sexual love images for expressing higher forms of prayer life. I can still remember my astonishment when I flicked through a book by St Bernard and struck headings like 'Between the breasts of the beloved'. 'The kiss of the mouth', 'the bedchamber of the Bridegroom' and other exotic phrases fill out Bernard's picture of what the spiritual marriage between Christ and the christian means. He saw such mystic experiences on earth as anticipating heavenly glory. The marriage which starts here would be consummated hereafter. Bernard had scriptural warrant for such imagery – not just the Canticle of Canticles but the vision in the Apocalypse: 'I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband' (21, 2). Guitton would invite us to take a cue from Bernard and the bible and find in the ecstatic union of sexual love some memorable *vestigia resurrectionis*.

This article has indicated possibilities which may have enough variety and vitality to get our imaginations to work on the resurrection. Such an exercise of our fantasy may happily let the paschal mystery more fully engage our life of prayer. That will mean facing more successfully two ultimate questions that shape our existence: Who is the risen Christ in himself? Who is the risen Christ for me?

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