

THEOLOGICAL TRENDS

THE RESURRECTION

AS ONE MIGHT expect of the event which above all others is central to the christian faith, theological discussion of the resurrection serves to focus the issues in at least two areas of biblical theology which have been major battlefields in recent years. On the one hand, it is the area where Bultmannian thought reaches the point where it must either transform the believer's whole attitude to the events of the gospel or be rejected as not ultimately satisfying the needs of faith. This controversy is, on the whole, between the liberal protestant attitude and the catholic-minded, though some members of the catholic communion will sometimes be found to be straying – bewilderment or determination in their eyes – considerably nearer the enemy lines than their senior officers would expect. On the other hand, the gospel narratives of the resurrection provide the perfect bone of contention between the older school of exegetes, who insist on the historical exactitude of the gospels, and the newer school, which holds that the evangelists sit far more lightly to detailed factual accuracy of reporting, and centre their interest on theological interpretation. This controversy is fought out (if that is the correct description of a situation in which each side merely holds its ground and asserts the error of the other, with barely any interchange or alteration of position) far more within the bastion of orthodoxy itself.

Demythologisation of the resurrection

The large-scale application in recent years of Bultmann's general exegetical and theological principles to the resurrection seems to date from a statement which he made in a lecture at Heidelberg in 1960: 'To believe in the Christ present in the Kerygma is the meaning of the Easter faith'.¹ This position was not, of course, new. In *Kerygma and Myth*, he had written: 'The faith of Easter is just this – faith in the Word of preaching'.² To Bultmann, investigation into the Christ of history is no more than a means to the encounter with Christ in the present; it is quite irrelevant whether any bodily resurrection happened or not. It could not in fact have happened, though he will concede that a 'series of subjective visions' may have occurred. But in any case, 'objective investigation can lead only to the Christ of *Historie*; it is totally unable to reach the Christ of *Geschichte*'.³

¹ Quoted in Moule, C.D.F. (ed): *Significance of the Message of the Resurrection* (London, 1967), p 18.

² Ed. H. W. Bartsch, translated by R. H. Fuller, (London, 1953), p 41.

³ Owen, H. P.: *Revelation and Existence, a study in the theology of R. Bultmann* (Cardiff, 1957), p 28. In his clear analysis, the author defines *Historie* as of what is wholly in the past and so dead, while *Geschichte* is concerned with what 'both lies in the past and has existential significance for the present' (p 25). Faith is concerned, then, only with the Christ of *Geschichte*.

The Bultmannian approach to the resurrection was developed in a highly controversial series of lectures given at Münster in 1967/8 by Willi Marxsen. The presupposition behind his investigation is that the more our faith is a leap in the dark, and the less evidence there is to make it reasonable, the higher the quality of that faith is, for it must be founded on experience of Christ now, not relying on the irrelevancies of *Historie*. Faith must be a miracle, and faith which relies on the evidence of signs and wonders is precisely a barrier to real faith.⁴ Since the evangelists could not therefore have intended to provide us with evidence of signs and wonders, and thus lead us into the mistake of relying on them, the gospel accounts of the resurrection appearances are so many protestations of faith and of experience of Jesus; the evangelists are, in the enthusiastic sense, testifying, witnessing to their experience of the risen Christ. And to express this experience of Christ today as 'Jesus is risen' is only one of many possible expressions of the christian hope for the future, merely using myth to express what could also – though less colourfully and so less effectively – be conveyed by 'still he comes today';⁵ or even without any explicit reference to Christ, in the words of Heinrich Rendtorff on his deathbed, 'I shall be safe'.⁶ Even in the New Testament, the statement of belief in Jesus' resurrection is only one possible way among many of expressing faith. In the Letter to the Hebrews the idea does not occur at all, being replaced by that of exaltation, sitting down at the right hand of God: this is also the central concept of the very early hymn enshrined in Philippians.⁷ In Matthew we find side by side, providing two originally independent and self-sufficient statements of belief, the story of the empty tomb and the saying, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me'.⁸ In early Paul it is the expectation that Christ will soon come again which is uppermost; in John the notion of a saving transformation which has already occurred through Christ.

In Marxsen's scheme of things it is essentially faith which comes first, and the genesis of the centrality of the resurrection is outlined thus:

Someone discovers in a miraculous way that Jesus evokes faith even after his death. He now asks what makes it possible for him to find faith in this way. The reason is that the Jesus who died is alive. He did not remain among the dead. But if one wanted to claim that a dead person was alive, then the notion of the resurrection of the dead was ready to hand. So one made use of it. In so doing there was no need to pin oneself down to a particular form of this idea, at least not at the beginning . . . If the idea of the resurrection eventually won the ascendancy, towing the other ideas in its wake, it must not be forgotten that it was a later development.⁹

⁴ Marxsen, W.: *The Resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth* (London, 1970), p 153.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p 141.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p 188.

⁷ Phil 2, 5-11.

⁸ Mt 28, 18.

⁹ Marxsen, *op. cit.*, pp 138, 147.

In what might well have been a commentary on this statement, Moule, in the introduction to the book he edited on the resurrection,¹⁰ remarks that it is not really sufficient to say that the idea of the resurrection of the dead was ready to hand, for the pharisees envisaged the permanent raising to unending life only in the general resurrection at the eschaton (though they knew of miraculous returns to this life, such as that worked by Elijah on the widow of Zarephthah's son).¹¹ But the fundamental cleavage, as he points out, is between those who say that the resurrection is the expression of an already existing faith, and those who say it is the cause. In the former category fall Marxsen and Bultmann. Perhaps worth quoting as an extreme form of this position, garish in its popularity, is that of the quondam bishop of Woolwich (to be distinguished, as Mr Hyde from Dr Jekyll, from the Dean of Trinity, Cambridge). J. A. T. Robinson describes the resurrection experience thus:

And then IT happened. It came to them – or rather, as they could only describe it, HE came to them. The life they had known and shared was not buried with him but alive in them. Jesus was not a dead memory but a living presence . . . But the empty tomb is not the resurrection any more than the shell of the cocoon is the butterfly . . . Precisely what happened to the body we shall never know.¹²

In all this there are clearly several issues at stake. The first is that of the nature of faith and the part played in its genesis by various elements, particularly the motives of credibility and the unaccountable experience which transforms the willingness to believe into belief itself. For the followers of Bultmann, as for many brands of revivalist preacher, faith is a sudden and inexplicable seizing-hold-of, like the rushing down of the Spirit of God in the Old Testament upon judges and prophets. Little or no psychological preparation is required, and accordingly the motives of credibility lose their importance. It may be – though I doubt it, even for the United States with their striking recrudescence of devotion to the Spirit¹³ – that a majority of people reach faith in the first place through this experience rather than through learning about God and the Jesus of the gospels. But at least later the motives of credibility must surely play their part.¹⁴

A second issue is that of *Historie* and *Geschichte*. It seems to me that a basic logical fallacy, of the type pilloried by Lewis Carroll in *Through the Looking Glass*, is involved here. It is practically a claim of smoke without fire. If the christian hope has any reference to the Christ of *Geschichte*, if the conviction that 'I shall be safe' has any dependence on him, there must be some reason

¹⁰ See note 1. An essay by Marxsen is included in the book.

¹¹ 1 Kg 17, 17 ff.

¹² *But That I Can't Believe* (London, 1967), pp 37–40.

¹³ See *Time Magazine*, June 21 1971, 'The Jesus Revolution', pp 32–43.

¹⁴ This is primarily a discussion in the field of fundamental theology. Cf Schlette, H. R.: *Epiphanie als Geschichte* (Munich, 1966), and discussion in *Orientierung* of 15 May, 1967, pp 108–112.

for his position. The Christ of *Geschichte* would not be what he is, were it not for the factual history of two thousand years ago. When Bultmann qualifies this as *Historie*, he is simply using the word as a value word to make a value-judgment. Of course, *if* the events in Palestine at this time are *Historie*, they are dead history; but it is mere sleight of hand to define them as *Historie* and then claim them to be dead history. This is surely the whole issue at stake. One can just as well claim that the events were vitally important for the significance of Jesus today.

Quite another question is whether and to what extent the events are described in a mythical fashion. Myth is 'the use of imagery to express the other-worldly in terms of this world, and the divine in terms of human life, the other side in terms of this side. For instance, divine transcendence is expressed as spatial distance'.¹⁵ Now it is surely acceptable to all that some mythological terms must be used to describe the other-worldly, whether these be 'Son of Man', with reference to Daniel's vision, or 'Jesus Christ, superstar', with reference to a more modern mythology. But to say that an event is described mythologically is only to say that the significance of the event is being written into the description of the event, and is quite different from saying that the event itself is a mere myth or did not happen. Different mythologies can be used to describe the same event, and the use of several, such as resurrection, exaltation at the right hand of God, expectation of a coming in power, to describe the event which is the foundation of the christian hope does not mean that no such event occurred. Nor, for that matter, is Marxsen justified in claiming that the mythology of 'resurrection' was 'a later development'. The telling of the story of the empty tomb may be later (which is no proof that the story itself is later, though it does suggest that less importance was attached to it at first). But although he can quote other formulations as occurring in pre-pauline hymns incorporated in Paul's letters, he omits to mention that the terminology of 'resurrection' also occurs in first Corinthians as belonging to an ancient credal formula which was already part of the tradition memorized by converts.¹⁶

A third issue will be dealt with at greater length later. It is the fundamental one: did the evangelists really think that they were only expressing their faith in the present power of Jesus, or did they consider that in presenting the accounts of the resurrection appearances they were presenting the events which were the basis and foundation of their faith? It is surely crucial that our faith should be in continuity with theirs and that we should discern and follow their intentions.

And the Bones of Jesus?

Before going on to what must be the central point of our investigation, the testing of theories against the ultimate criterion of the gospel texts, we must examine the further point, what must have happened to Jesus' body? At one

¹⁵ Bultmann, *Kerygma and Myth*, p 10, note 2.

¹⁶ 1 Cor 15.

level this can be investigated with the gospels as the point of departure. At another level, it is important to investigate the importance itself of this point, for it has been widely asserted that it would make no difference to faith if the bones of Jesus were one day to be found in Palestine.¹⁷ At first sight this assertion is stunning, the direct contradiction of the naive view of the resurrection. But the position changes when one considers that Jesus did not come *back* to life but rose to new life. There is a vast difference between the resurrection of Lazarus, who rose from the dead to the same sort of bodily existence and presumably died later, and Christ's resurrection to a new and transformed life. The details of this transformation of the life-principle are less important here,¹⁸ but clearly his life was not subject to the normal limitations of human life, nor was his bodily movement so restricted, nor does he seem to have been subject to the normal requirements of nourishment. He had, indeed, a body; but what is a 'spiritual' body? Must it be in continuity with the body of flesh which precedes the resurrection? If so, in what sense are our bodies going to be in continuity, when all the molecules of our bodies have been used for other purposes? Some molecules must have gone to compose several people. Are there, indeed, enough molecules to go round all the people who will have to rise again? If the risen body has no molecules, in what sense is it a body? What precisely is meant by the resurrection of *the body*? In any case, some sort of answer must be given to these questions before it is assumed *a priori* – that is, apart from the gospel accounts – that Jesus' body must have been removed by God from the tomb for him to have risen to new life.¹⁹

The theological arguments in this matter are difficult to evaluate. In the interesting radio dialogue between Professors Lampe and MacKinnon,²⁰ the former, though maintaining the reality of the resurrection appearances, does not consider the tomb to be empty. Paul, at any rate, he maintains, did not know about the story; the argument from silence is very strong: the story of the empty tomb would have strengthened Paul's arguments about the physical reality of the resurrection.²¹ Further, argues Lampe, Paul's analogy with what he considers to happen in the case of the germination of a grain of wheat: 'the thing that you sow is not what is going to come; you sow a bare grain, say of wheat or something like that, and then God gives it the

¹⁷ 'It is ultimately a matter of indifference as to whether or not the bones of Jesus lie somewhere in Palestine'. (Neville Clarke, in *Significance of the Message of the Resurrection*, p 97.)

¹⁸ See the present writer's article in *Clergy Review*, 53 (1968), pp 251–8.

¹⁹ The discussion of G. G. O'Collins, 'Is the Resurrection an "historical" event?', in the *Heythrop Journal* 8 (1967), pp 381–387, is centred more on the philosophical question whether a process whose *terminus ad quem* is outside our space-time continuum – as Jesus' body ends up not subject to the limitations of our space-time continuum – can be called an historical event in the sense in which he defines it, than upon the historical question of what occurred on Easter Sunday.

²⁰ G. W. H. Lampe and D. M. MacKinnon, *The Resurrection* (London, 1966).

²¹ 1 Cor 15.

sort of body that he has chosen',²² excludes the idea of the spiritual body being in flesh-and-blood continuity with the earthly body. But here Professor Lampe is, I think, trying to press Paul to a clear answer where he can in fact only stutter in bewilderment and wonder. What Paul seems to be trying to express is that there is an analogy and some sort of continuity between the body now and the spiritual body of the resurrection. There is similarity and difference between the various sorts of 'fleshes' which he mentions, the 'flesh' of men, beasts, birds and fish, and the same is true of the brightnesses of sun, moon and stars; perhaps the best term for these is analogical similarity. The continuity can be deduced from 'whatever you sow in the ground has to die before it is given new life':²³ the 'it' remains constant. But how far this continuity reaches and in what it consists does not seem to me at all clear in Paul's mind.

Paul is concerned chiefly with the quality of the risen body of the christian, not with that of Christ himself; though what he says of the christian of course applies also to Christ, since the risen Christ is the first-fruits and model of the risen christian. He details four attributes of the risen body: it is imperishable, powerful, spiritual and glorious. All these combine to mean that the risen body is somehow transformed by God and brought into closer union with God, transferred, as it were, into the sphere of the divine. For all these attributes are true primarily of God himself. In the Book of Wisdom, where first such thoughts are voiced, imperishability belongs to God alone, and is his prerogative. Similarly, 'spiritual' means for Paul 'caught up into God', for actions are spiritual just in so far as they are under the influence of the Spirit of God (in Paul's healthy anthropology, 'spiritual' has no over-tones of 'soulful' or of a tenuously physical substance, but is uniquely related to the Spirit of God). Where the Spirit of God is, there inevitably is the third attribute, power; for the Spirit, from the first mention of it being given to men, is something which gives them power to carry out a task given by God; so, in the christian life on earth, it gives power to live as sons of God. Finally, glory is most clearly of all the prerogative of God; it is nothing to do with worldly reputation or fame, but is the awesome quality which belongs to God in the highest heavens. But Paul cannot make clear – or at least he does not – where the old physical qualities of the earthly body fit in.

More daunting is Professor Lampe's contention that if the tomb was empty, Christ's resurrection is not the pledge of ours. Our bodies corrupt before resurrection, and it would seem that if the tomb was empty Christ's did not. But even this is not acceptable; though the reason for it being unacceptable does not ease any difficulties for the advocates of any sort of bodily resurrection. The naive theory that Jesus died but his body did not corrupt would be regarded nowadays as a contradiction in terms. Corruption is the medical criterion of death, irreversible damage to the brain-cells, by which their structure changes (corrupts) within two minutes of the cessation of the flow

²² 1 Cor 15, 37.

²³ 1 Cor 15, 36.

of blood to the brain. If there is not this corruption then we have a case of suspended animation rather than true death. If Jesus really died, then his body really corrupted. Was this process miraculously nullified at the resurrection or does corruption of the flesh-and-blood body not attain the spiritual body of the resurrection? In either case Lampe's argument is not cogent, for, no less than ours, Jesus' body corrupted before his resurrection.

Advances in chemistry and biology since the dawn of the scientific era have made it difficult to say much about the risen body. Further, one must query the limitations of Paul's anthropology. It is primarily the person who rises again; the doctrine of the resurrection of the body is formulated to stress that it is the whole person who rises, not just a neo-platonic soul. This is an emphasis congenial both to Paul's semitic anthropology of the whole man, according to which it is impossible to envisage a disembodied soul in the platonic sense, and to modern thought. But the formidable problems of space and matter involved²⁴ raise the question, in what sense the body can be said to rise again. And in this case the same problem applies to Christ, 'the first born from the dead',²⁵ or the 'first-fruits' of the resurrection.²⁶ In the present state of knowledge, then, it does not seem to me possible to say that if the bones of Jesus were one day to be found in Palestine one would have to conclude that the resurrection was not a historical event, that the resurrection appearances were not objective occurrences. Relevant here are the remarks of Michael Simpson S.J. on symbolic and non-symbolic language.²⁷ If we press symbolic language too far, or treat it as non-symbolic, we miss the meaning and reach only confusion.

The Task

It remains, and this will be the task of a second article, to examine the gospel and other New Testament texts on the resurrection and the resurrection appearances. We must discover what the evangelists considered to have happened, and how they interpreted the events.

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²⁴ Cf also K. Rahner, *On the Theology of Death* (London, 1961).

²⁵ Col 1, 18.

²⁶ 1 Cor 15, 23.

²⁷ *Death and Eternal Life* (Dublin, 1971), pp 60-65.