PERSONAL RESURRECTION INTO THE MYSTICAL BODY OF CHRIST

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IN HIS BOOK *A Theology for the Social Gospel*, Walter Rauschenbusch claimed that the traditional focus of Christianity in Western civilisation has been on the need of the individual human being to be redeemed from the effects of sin in and through the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus as the incarnate Word of God. Much more attention, however, needed to be directed towards the strictly social implications of the message of Jesus. For, in his preaching, Jesus addressed the ongoing need for the reform of the sinful structures of society as well as his listeners' need for redemption from their personal sins.[1] Likewise, Gustavo Gutiérrez, in *A Theology of Liberation*, emphasized the implications of the message of Jesus for the poor and oppressed of Latin America in their continuing struggle for liberation from unjust economic, political and social structures.[2] Yet, despite the broad influence of these different forms of reform-minded theology within Protestant and Roman Catholic circles, and despite the socially orientated focus of *Gaudium et spes* and other Vatican II documents, the average contemporary Christian still seems likely to be more focused on his or her personal salvation than on anything else.

For example, many Christians believe that at the time of the last judgment they will possess a transformed version of the physical body that they had during their earthly lives. Relatively little attention is thereby given to the companion notion of resurrection of the body as full incorporation into the mystical body of Christ at the end of their lives and,

[1] Walter Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel* (New York: Abingdon, 1917), 1–9, 95–109, 118–130.
[2] Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics and Salvation,* translated by Coridad Inda and John Eagleson (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1988), 97–105, 174.

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above all, at the end of the world. Admittedly, in the post-resurrection gospel narratives, Jesus appears to his astonished disciples looking and acting very much as he did during his earthly life. He unexpectedly appears and disappears in a way that indicates that he is living a different kind of life from the one he lived before his passion and death. But bodily continuity rather than discontinuity still seems to be characteristic of Jesus' post-resurrection appearances to the disciples. Hence, should not Christians also expect to live a bodily life after death much like the one we enjoy here and now, but free of the pain and suffering that is inevitably part of earthly life? But, if that be the case, what will our relations to others be within the risen life?

In the epistles of St Paul there exists persistent ambiguity about the conditions of life after death, both for Christ and for Christians. In 1 Corinthians 15:35–49, for example, Paul does not elaborate on the difference between the corruptible natural body and the incorruptible spiritual body of those who have been raised with Christ to a new life. Yet in Colossians 1:18 Paul describes Christ as 'head of the body, the church' and in Ephesians 1:23 the Church itself is described as 'the fullness of him who fills all in all'. Thus the Church as the mystical body of Christ is somehow identical with the whole of a transformed creation, and Christians who belong to the Church as members of the mystical body of Christ are active participants in a transformed cosmic reality. Perhaps the difficulty in sorting out what is said both in the gospel narratives and in the writings of St Paul about Christ's resurrection and life after death for Christians is to be found in an ambiguity about what is meant by the term *body*. Is it primarily an individual reality (a physical organism) and secondarily a collective reality (a community or other organized group of individuals), or is the reverse the case, or is it finally both an individual and a collective reality?

Rethinking the Notion of Body

By way of preliminary definition, I propose that a body, whether it be the body of an individual entity or the socially organized 'body' of a human community or physical environment, is an organic unity of interrelated parts or members. By organic unity, I mean a unity that is relatively stable and yet capable of change or evolution over time, given changes in its constituent parts or members or changes in the external environment.

For example, genes are molecules that convey genetic information to a cell or mini-organism. Evelyn Fox Keller, in her book *The Century of the*

Gene, notes that in the early years of the twentieth century, genes were conceived of as being like atoms in the physical sciences: inanimate and unchanging entities. But further investigation by molecular biologists revealed that genes evolve in their pattern of individual self-organization over time; they undergo 'mutations' in their normal mode of operation. Mutations, in turn, give rise to evolutionary growth within organisms with the Darwinian principle of natural selection working to weed out unfavourable mutations and preserve favourable ones within a given organism.[3] So genes are themselves more like mini-organisms with a developmental mode of operation than mini-things with a relatively fixed mode of operation.

Moreover even atoms turn out to be dynamic unities of subatomic components. Is a subatomic particle a mini-thing or a momentary energy-event with different characteristics depending upon external circumstances? Did atoms originate strictly by chance in the early stages of cosmic evolution, or was there some innate principle of self-organization within each atom so that in its self-constitution it became different from other

[3] Evelyn Fox Keller, *The Century of the Gene* (Cambridge, Ma: Harvard UP, 2000), 38: 'The notion that mechanisms for evolvability could themselves have evolved is a serious provocation for neo-Darwinian theory, for it carries the heretical implication that organisms provide not just the passive substrate of evolution but their own motors of change; it suggests that they have become equipped with a kind of agency in their own evolution. It also strongly implies the operation of selection on levels higher than the gene, and higher even than the individual organism.'

atoms? These are still unresolved questions within contemporary physics. But the fact that they remain unresolved allows us to surmise from a philosophical perspective that what appears to be the case within physical reality may in fact not be the case.

The world in which we human beings live is, contrary to common-sense experience, largely constituted by dynamically interrelated processes rather than by determinate individual things. Admittedly, from moment to moment, we perceive things with stable patterns of existence and activity. But upon further reflection we realise that what we perceive here and now is only the latest moment in an ongoing process that continues to evolve, so to speak, behind the scenes. Every living thing has a definite lifespan in which it initially grows and then, over time, declines in energy levels until it dies. Even composite inanimate things, both natural and man-made, have a limited time-span or duration; in time they wear out and fall apart.

What, then, is the difference between individual and socially organized bodies? I tentatively propose that individual bodies and socially constituted ones are alike in so far as both are time-bound processes or systems of dynamically interrelated parts or members. At the same time, individual and social bodies are different from one another in the way that they are said to relate to one another. That is, within the classical Aristotelian–Thomistic world-view, every entity, however large or small, has its proper place within the pre-established hierarchical order of being. There are strict divisions between non-life, life and rational life. But within a process- or systems-orientated world-view (in which Becoming has ontological priority over Being),[4] less complex lower-order processes exist not for themselves but for eventual inclusion into more complex higher-order processes within the natural order. There are, for example, many sub-processes or subsystems constantly at work within the human body (for example the circulatory system of the blood, the cardiovascular system, the nervous system, the pulmonary system, and so on). But they do not function for their own sake (even though each has its own distinctive mode of operation), but for the sake of the overall life-process proper to a human being.

[4] My reference here is to the philosophical cosmology of Alfred North Whitehead. Convinced that the Aristotelian–Thomistic metaphysics of Being no longer applied to the presuppositions and methodology of modern natural science, Whitehead conceived a metaphysics of Becoming in which the elemental units of reality are mini-organisms (rather than inert bits of matter) that spontaneously organize into hierarchically ordered processes and systems ranging from atoms and molecules to communities and physical environments.

And a human being, in turn, finds himself or herself necessarily involved with other socially constituted bodies simply to survive and prosper in this world. As the poet John Donne wrote: 'No man is an *Iland*, intire of itselfe …. Any Mans *death* diminishes *me*, because I am involved in *Mankinde*; And therefore never send to know for whom the *bell* tolls; It tolls for *thee*.'[5] But beyond being a member of the human community, each human being is also participant in the more comprehensive process or system proper to this earth as a systematically organized unity of interrelated parts or members. With our increasing ecological awareness of our interdependence with other creatures within the cosmic process, we find ourselves ever more forcefully reminded that we are only a single component, albeit an important component, in a vast network of dynamically interrelated sub-processes or subsystems that sustain the world in which we live.

Within this process- or systems-orientated understanding of physical reality, personal resurrection as resurrection into the socially organized reality of the mystical body of Christ makes perfect sense. This is not to deny, of course, that through incorporation into the mystical body of Christ a human being likewise achieves a new individual identity as a transformed human being, but only to deny that personal self-fulfilment is the ultimate goal of incorporation into the mystical body of Christ. An attitude of practical self-denial rather than theoretical self-fulfilment would seem to be the necessary prerequisite for full membership in that higher-order socially constituted psycho-physical reality.

Practical self-denial rather than theoretical self-fulfilment

A Systems-Orientated Approach to the God–World Relationship

In Genesis, God is pictured as a transcendent individual entity creating individual human beings—Adam and Eve—'in our image, according to our likeness' (1:26). Yet Ephesians 1 and Colossians 1, as already noted, seem to envision a more socially orientated God–world relationship. That is, Jesus as the Risen Lord is the head of the Church, understood not simply as a limited institutional reality but as a symbol for creation as a whole, equivalently the corporate image of God.

Colin Gunton, in his book *The One, the Three and the Many*, reflects this line of thought when he claims that the doctrine of the Trinity, with

[5] John Donne, 'Meditation 17. Nunc lento sonitu', in *Selected Prose*, edited by Neil Rhodes (London: Penguin, 1987), 126.

its emphasis on the ongoing *perichoretic* relations of the three divine persons within the divine life, is the much-needed key to a more sensible understanding of relations between human beings in our contemporary, highly individualistic, secular culture.[6] Western civilisation seems to be overly focused on the protection of individual rights at the expense of any strong sense of the common good:

> The modern individualistic concept of freedom tends to separate the person from other people, rather than simply distinguishing them from each other in relation. That is to say, it is essentially and irremediably non-relational.[7]

Gunton explains his understanding of *perichoresis*:

> In its origins, the concept was a way of showing the ontological interdependence and reciprocity of the three persons of the Trinity: how they were only what they were by virtue of their interrelation and interanimation, so that for God to be did not involve an absolute simplicity but a unity deriving from a dynamic plurality of persons.[8]

Thomas Aquinas in his *Summa theologiae* similarly described the divine persons as 'subsistent relations' vis-à-vis one another:

> Relation in God is not as an accident in a subject, but is the divine essence itself; and so it is subsistent, for the divine essence subsists …. Therefore a divine person signifies a relation as subsisting.[9]

I should like to argue that the three divine persons are one God in so far as they co-constitute a *divine life-system*: the divine persons, in virtue of their subsistent relations to one another, co-constitute their corporate reality as 'a never-ending communitarian process or system'.[10]

Furthermore, in line with the contemporary understanding of *panentheism* (the idea that all things exist in God but remain distinct from God in their own specific mode of operation), I propose that the divine persons, in their perichoretic relations to one another, provide what

[6] Colin E. Gunton, *The One, the Three and the Many: God, Creation and the Culture of Modernity* (Cambridge: CUP, 1993), 155–179.
[7] Gunton, *The One, the Three and the Many*, 64.
[8] Gunton, *The One, the Three and the Many*, 152.
[9] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae,* 1, q. 29, art. 4.
[10] Joseph A. Bracken, *The World in the Trinity: Open-Ended Systems in Science and Religion* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2014), 8.

physicists describe as the primordial energy-field within which the Big Bang took place and the world of creation originally came into existence. Hence, the world of creation is a vast, but still finite, sub-process or subsystem within the primordial divine life-system proper to the divine persons. The overarching God–world relationship is thus a socially constituted reality with the divine life-system as the origin and final goal of a hierarchically ordered evolutionary process constituting the world in which we human beings live.

The Two Natures of Christ

As I have explained at greater length in a recently published book, the doctrine of the incarnation is the key to understanding this process-orientated Trinitarian God–world relationship, as well as belief in the resurrection of Jesus on Easter Sunday and in our own eventual resurrection.[11] I begin my defence of this threefold proposal by citing the text of the Council of Chalcedon in AD 451:

> We confess one and the same Christ, the Son, the Lord, the Only-Begotten, in two natures unconfused, unchangeable, undivided and inseparable. The differences of nature will never be abolished by their being united, but rather the properties of each remain unimpaired, both coming together in one person and substance, not parted or divided among two persons, but in one and the same only-begotten Son, the divine Word, the Lord Jesus Christ.[12]

The workings of Jesus' human nature are not absorbed into the divine nature that he shares with the Father and the Holy Spirit. Nor, vice versa, are the workings of his divine nature eclipsed by his mode of operation as a human being. Jesus is 'one person and substance, not parted or divided among two persons'.

Yet how such a juncture of the divine and the human in the life of Jesus is rationally possible is not readily explained in the categories of Aristotelian–Thomistic metaphysics. For, if the 'nature' of an individual entity is its substantial form and if the entity can have only one substantial form,[13] then the claim that Jesus has two natures, one divine and one human, with each operative independently of the other, seems

[11] Bracken, *World in the Trinity*, 115–135.
[12] *The Teaching of the Catholic Church,* edited by Josef Neuner, Heinrich Roos and Karl Rahner, translated by Geoffrey Stevens (Staten Island: Society of Saint Paul, 1967), 154 n. 302.
[13] Aquinas, *Summa theologiae,* 1, q. 76, art. 4. See also John Goyette, 'St Thomas on the Unity of Substantial Form', *Nova et Vetera* (English edn), 7/4 (2009), 781–790.

impossible to justify. The doctrine of the incarnation, however, makes quite good sense within a systems-orientated understanding of reality such as I have sketched above. Jesus is only one person, who exercises existence and activity simultaneously within two distinct but dynamically interrelated life-systems, the one proper to his life with the Father and the Son within the divine life-system, and the other proper to the human life-system that he shares with all other human beings. So everything that he does is the conjoint effect of the workings of his divinity and humanity at the same time.

Yet, in their concrete working together from moment to moment, sometimes the divinity is more manifest in what Jesus says and does than his humanity, and at other times the humanity is more apparent than his divinity. For example, during his earthly life the humanity of Jesus was more in evidence than his divinity. Like every other human being, he regularly felt hungry and tired, encouraged or discouraged by what was happening around him. Likewise, in his final days on earth he experienced great physical pain, considerable anxiety and eventually an agonizing death.

In his resurrection and periodic appearances to his disciples on Easter Sunday and afterwards, however, Jesus' divinity was more in evidence than his humanity. For example, when Jesus appeared to his disciples on Easter Sunday, they did not immediately recognise him. He was a total stranger until something that he said or did made them realise who he was. One thinks of his appearance to Mary Magdalene (John 20:11–18), his appearance to the two disciples on the way to Emmaus (Luke 23:13–35), the appearance to the seven disciples at the Sea of Tiberias (John 21:1–14) and Jesus' commissioning of the disciples before his ascension (Matthew 28:16–17).

Christians down through the centuries have likewise faced the issue of the mysterious co-working of the divinity and humanity of Jesus in their communal celebration of the Eucharist. Without it, how can one reasonably believe that bread and wine can truly become the Body and Blood of the Risen Lord? And given that the Eucharist is celebrated at various times and places every day around the world, how can Jesus in his humanity be present in the consecrated bread and wine in each eucharistic celebration except in virtue of his divinity that transcends the limitations of space and time in its mode of operation in this world?

Not just the eucharistic ritual, of course, but all the sacraments of the Church reflect the mysterious co-working of the divine and the human,

first in Jesus and then in the lives of individual Christians. For example, readily available oil and water are used in the sacrament of baptism to symbolize incorporation into the spiritual reality of the mystical body of Christ. Likewise, one receives the forgiveness of sins through a fellow human being who, as an *alter Christus*, incarnates the enduring love of God for oneself at just this point in space and time.

The Descent into Hell

The risen Jesus appeared to his disciples on Easter Sunday, no longer simply as the person he was before his passion and death on the cross but as the Cosmic Christ, the Lord of the universe. The very fact that his appearances to the disciples were difficult to describe in common-sense terms is an indication that his divinity had assumed an ascendancy over his humanity from the first moment of his risen life onwards. Moreover, between the time of his death and his appearance to the disciples, a dramatic event had taken place. In the words of the Apostles' Creed, 'he descended into hell'. As I see it, this descent was necessary for him to take on the role of the Cosmic Christ.

Christ's Descent into Limbo, *by Jan Brueghel the Elder and Hans Rottenhammer, 1597*

Karl Rahner imaginatively described the experience of Jesus as descending into hell on Holy Saturday thus:

> He descended into this state of death. He endured the nadir of human existence, the ultimate fall into immeasurable depths to which it is subject. And because he submitted to this fate, yielding himself into the hands of his Father, his entry into this eternal love was initially experienced by him as a collapse into the darkness and anonymity of death, into the real and genuine state of being dead.[14]

Elsewhere, in a book entitled *On the Theology of Death*, Rahner explored the significance of this traumatic event of first dying and then descending into hell as the ground of being for creation as a whole. Thereby Christ became the innermost centre of creation and was intimately linked both with all human beings and with the rest of the world of creation.[15]

I myself argue that in order fully to incorporate his own and our humanity into his divinity, Jesus had first to experience death like everyone else, namely, as the moment when one faces the inevitable incompleteness or finitude of human life so as to accept it for what it is and thereby transcend it through accepting the gift of eternal life offered by the three divine persons. But Jesus, in his descent into hell, also had the further task of experiencing at first hand the finitude and incompleteness of the cosmic process as a whole so as to transcend it by incorporating the world of creation into his divinity and the life of the Trinity.

Thereby Jesus was able to offer the gift of eternal life not just to human beings but to all the creatures of this world in accordance with their finite capacity to accept it. In any event, on Easter Sunday morning, in his appearances to his disciples, Jesus was not simply a miraculously transformed human being who was fully recovered from his harrowing torture and death on Good Friday, but the Lord of Creation, the head of the mystical body: that is, not just the institutional Church, nor even Christianity as a world religion, but the whole of creation in so far as it actively participates with Jesus as the Incarnate Word in the fullness of the divine life.

[14] Karl Rahner, 'He Descended into Hell', in *Theological Investigations*, volume 7, *Further Theology of the Spiritual Life 1*, translated by David Bourke (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1971), 145–150, here 149.
[15] Karl Rahner, *On the Theology of Death*, translated by W. J. O'Hara (New York: Herder and Herder, 1967), 64–67.

Resurrection into the Mystical Body

Accordingly, human beings are likewise resurrected, not so much as miraculously transformed individuals, although that too will be the case, but as self-giving participants in the mystical body of Christ that embraces in the first place all of humanity but likewise the whole of creation. Like Jesus the 'pioneer and perfecter of our faith' (Hebrews 12:2), human beings will no longer be constrained by the limitations of life in a physical body, with its needs for food, clothing, sleep and relaxation, even though they will still be recognisable to one another as the individuals that they were in their earthly lives. Their primary reality, however, will be to co-exist with Jesus in a vastly larger corporate reality embracing the whole of creation. The inevitable price of incorporation into this higher-order social reality, of course, will be a reordering of one's sense of personal identity, away from preoccupation with the self and its individual needs and desires, and towards the common good of life together in a cosmic community.

Perhaps this will be too high a price to pay for some individuals as they face the challenge of a dramatic shift of values upon their initial entry into eternal life. If this should turn out to be the case, it may be possible for these benighted persons to live apart from those who have accepted the gift of eternal life and are happily living in communion with the risen Jesus, the Father and the Holy Spirit. They may find themselves forming a 'counter-community', a mixed group of people, all of whom are totally absorbed in taking care of their own perceived needs and desires, and who find life with one another a curse rather than a blessing. One thinks immediately of Jean Paul Sartre's sardonic comment: 'Hell is other people'.[16] Yet one can also conjecture that, in due time, many, perhaps all, of the inhabitants of this counter-community would see the error of their ways, recognise the limitations of life divorced from any positive affective contact with other people, and convert to the attitude of self-giving love that is requisite for participation in eternal life as a constituent member of the mystical body of Christ.

I began by referring to the writings of Walter Rauschenbusch and Gustavo Gutiérrez, both of whom urge increased attention to the economic, political and social implications of the gospel message. Yet I also noted that the focus of many—if not most—Christians, both clerical and lay,

[16] See Jean Paul Sartre, *No Exit*, a play first performed in 1944 at the Théâtre du Vieux-Columbier in Paris. The three performers find themselves in Hell but, to their surprise, encounter not physical torture by devils but mental torment in their painful dealings with one another.

still seems to be located in a much more individualistic approach to Christian life, in which one's primary task is to do what is right and, at the moment of death, to attain eternal salvation. There is nothing intrinsically reproachable in this attitude towards life but, as Rauschenbusch and Gutiérrez argue in their different ways, it prescinds from the full reality of one's responsibility to others, especially to those who are in need of help.

Hence, I have tried here to rethink belief in the resurrection of the body in a more explicitly social context, first proposing that the term *body* itself should be understood in a process-orientated way. The human body and all individual physical bodies are not fixed individual things but ongoing dynamic unities of interrelated components that are themselves interactive sub-processes within the life-system proper to a given entity. Collective bodies are also dynamic unities of interrelated components, but these components are individual entities or self-sustaining processes in their own right. Seen in this light, the mystical body of Christ is a transcendent socially organized reality that includes not only all human beings but all the creatures of this world.

Jesus is the head of the mystical body or the Lord of creation. But to achieve that new ontological status, Jesus not only experienced concretely the finitude or incompleteness of human life in his passion and death on the cross but also, in his descent into hell on Holy Saturday, the finitude and incompleteness of the cosmic process as a whole apart from reference to God as Creator of the universe. Only in virtue of this double insight into the finitude of human and creaturely existence was Jesus, in his humanity, ultimately free from his own needs and desires, and ready wholeheartedly to embrace participation in the higher-order existence and activity of the divine life-system that was his by reason of his divinity as one of the three divine persons. This was not an easy task for Jesus. One senses the intensity of his humanly self-denying decision in Luke's

account of the agony in the garden when he prays: 'Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done' (Luke 22:42).

In similar fashion I argued that the doctrine of the resurrection of the body for individual Christians should be better understood as full participation in the mystical body of Christ rather than as a personal accomplishment upon entrance into eternal life. This is not to deny that one will also experience eternal life in a transformed human condition, free from all the constraints of bodily life in this world. But the focus of attention, one's *raison d'être* for survival after the cessation of earthly life, is to understand and appreciate first what one contributed to human life while in this world, and then what one will continue to contribute in one's risen life to the growth and ongoing prosperity of an enduring socially orientated reality much bigger than oneself as an individual.

Will this dramatic rethinking of the meaning and value of Christian belief in the resurrection of the body and eternal life lead to any significant changes in the thinking and behaviour of ordinary Christians in the individualistic culture of contemporary Western society? That remains to be seen. But, on the assumption that what one sees as one's ultimate goal in life normally has a significant effect on how one deals with reality from day to day, it seems to be an enterprise worth undertaking. In any case, *Gaudium et spes* and papal encyclicals both before and after Vatican II make clear that each of us as a faithful Christian, and all of us together as members of the mystical body of Christ, are called to live lives of service to others, 'just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many' (Matthew 20:28).

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