

# HOPE AND RESURRECTION

By M. SHARON BURNS

EVERYONE OF us is always old enough to die: the octogenarian grown wise, the man in his prime, the baby at birth. Whatever the shape and style our lives may take because of culture or cult, genes or generation, the mysterious leveller, death, is present in every living moment. Everyone of us knows it is natural to die: that death is absolutely universal, that death is part of living. Death gnaws away at our life, biologically, gradually, or strikes us suddenly from without. In a real sense, death from an accident is no less natural than death from old age; for human life is such that death, whether it strike from outside or erode from within, is natural to the human being. It is natural for finite creatures to live under this twofold shadow of death. A human being's life, in the words of Martin Heidegger, is a 'being-towards-death'. No less existentially, but more dramatically, novelist André Malraux says something similar through one of his protagonists:

You know what they say: 'It takes nine months to create a man, and only a single day to destroy him'. We both of us have known the truth of this as well as any one could ever know it. . . . Listen, May: it does not take nine months to make a man, it takes fifty years — fifty years of sacrifice, of determination, of — so many things! And when that man has been achieved, when there is no childishness left in him, nor any adolescence, when he is truly utterly, a man — the only thing he is good for is to die.<sup>1</sup>

The inevitability of death is the most wrenching reminder of our finitude: to exist is to go to meet one's death. Yet, in its total human and existential meaning, death remains unnatural. The protesting and inescapable horror of death which abides in everyone of us is a wise and true intuition, as Shakespeare sublimely remind us:

Ay, but to die and go we know not where;  
To lie in cold obstruction and to rot;  
This sensible warm motion to become  
A kneaded clod . . .

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The weariest and most loathed worldly life  
 That age, ache, penury and imprisonment  
 Can lay on nature, is a paradise  
 To what we fear of death. (*Measure for Measure*, III, I)

Even those who face their end with noble tranquillity, who reveal a truly extraordinary ability to rise above the natural dread of death, simply teach us that death deprives the human person of that fulness of maturity manifesting itself in the living out of immortality. As Karl Rahner so powerfully puts it: 'It is only because we have become immortal in our life that death with its menacing and impenetrable mask of destructivity is for us so deadly'.<sup>2</sup> In this sense, a dumb animal dies less a death than a human being. For it is only the human being who can affirm his or her own death and say 'I die': with acceptance and with hope. This is to be above death, to be above time, though born in it. Finitude contradicts the very essence of the human being who is an infinite longing and search for self-transcendence, and who lives incessantly on the verge of 'something more'.

The contradiction between a person's finitude as symbolized most fully by death, and the drive towards infinity, that is, towards resurrection and everlasting life, gives rise to the paradox of human existence. It is one which demands that reflective individuals take a decisive stance towards life in terms of death. Death means either the definitive end of life or the beginning of fuller life. In fact, at least in our western world there are only two basic stances towards death: the 'humanistic' acceptance of death's finality, or the christian belief in resurrection.

### *Humanism*

The attitude which opts for an autonomous existence limiting life's possibilities to this world, may take one of two forms: a fatalistic or heroic despair in the face of life's absurdity, or a human hope in the power of a 'this-worldly' experience to satisfy our need for self-transcendence. Death places before us the option between not hoping, or hoping in a transcendence that will take us beyond the boundaries of this world. The choice we make will define the meaning of our own existence. To live without hope is to take the position of Jean-Paul Sartre, from which death is seen to make the life of the statesman and the drunkard equally pointless. To live with hope in a kind of this-worldly transcendence is to look for fulfilment

through human aspiration and extraordinary experience. Indeed, we *can* find fulfilment: for instance, in someone to love, some cause to live for, some hope to cherish. The humanistic stance, whether exemplified in those who struggle without hope in the face of the absurd, who are content with a finite foundation for their hope, can and does produce, as Albert Camus notes, today's 'secular saints'.

### *The christian attitude*

But there are others for whom a humanistic, this-worldly, transcendence cannot offer the fulfilment they seek: people who in their decisive stance towards life and death make an equally courageous choice, the risk of faith. For these, transcendence demands that they break through the bounds of what 'can be seen', to that area entered only through faith, grasped by a hope in the things that no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor heart conceived (1 Cor 2, 9; cf Isai 64, 4). Such a hope endures not because of the evidence of 'things seen', but because of faith in a promise of resurrection, and in the testimony of human beings who staked their lives upon the reality of that promise.

To speak of such a disposition of mind and heart, to believe and hope in what cannot be empirically verified, is to fly in the face of the current intellectual climate which regards as real only that which is tangible and demonstrable. Yet such a choice requires no apology. As a modern philosopher has observed: 'Mankind continues to be cramped enough by the limits of worldly existence to warrant asking if there is conceivably a more commodious existence'.<sup>3</sup> Such a belief in resurrection is not unreasonable. In fact, christian hope, based on the promise of resurrection, has produced a powerful historical dynamism which permeates contemporary humanism, in that this contains within itself an implicit demand for resurrection. Whether hope is an authentic attitude towards life, or 'utter foolishness' (cf 1 Cor 1, 18-25) is ultimately dependent upon whether there is something to hope for beyond death. Although the christian conception of after-life has often resembled the pre-christian notion of Hades or Sheol — one which seems to be more 'after' than 'life' — the New Testament speaks of something much more startling: resurrection. It proclaims that in death, life is not ended but transformed. Resurrection in the gospels is described as triumph over death. In the world after Jesus Christ, is it possible to believe in the goodness and the graciousness of being without believing in resurrection? The answer, even for the humanist, should be 'No', if

humanism would follow to its ultimate conclusion the logic of its own position. In an age after Christ, there cannot be hope without resurrection, as Paul argues with such impassioned conviction (1 Cor 15). The dynamic that Christ introduced into the world has created a belief in the dignity of every human person and the infinite power of human love. One cannot conceive that the human being in his goodness and love will suffer total annihilation. Christian humanism is a fuller, more complete humanism because it conquers death, as any true humanism must.

The foundation for this christian hope is the rock-like tradition of the promise of a resurrected God: 'I came that they may have life and have it to the full' (Jn 10, 10); 'Whoever believes in me, though he should die, will come to life' (Jn 11, 26); 'For where I go, you also shall be' (Jn 14, 3). As the greek orthodox theologian Paul Eudokimov has noted, the atheism of the Soviet anti-God militants, in its fidelity to the historic interest inherent in russian thought, is centred in only one negation, since this is *historic*: 'Christ has not risen'.<sup>4</sup> Dostoevsky, great lover of Christ, senses the same absolute centrality of the resurrection to the christian life. In *The Possessed* he illustrates the conscience of the disbeliever:

I have no higher idea than disbelief in God, I have all history of mankind on my side . . . there was a day on earth, and in the midst of the earth there stood three crosses. The day ended; both died and passed away and found neither Paradise nor resurrection.<sup>5</sup>

Such disbelief was well understood by St Paul. As he wrote to his corinthian converts:

If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is void of content and your faith is empty too. Indeed we should then be exposed as false witnesses of God, for we have borne witness before him that he raised up Christ; but he certainly did not raise him up if the dead are not raised. . . . If our hopes in Christ are limited to this life only, we of all men are most to be pitied. . . . If the dead are not raised, 'Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die' (1 Cor, 15, 14-19. 32).

To opt for the christian view of life is to accept totally, in faith and hope, the central belief of this tradition: everything in the christian life implies a reference to resurrection — Christ's and our own. Death for Christ meant not the end of his destiny, but rather a 'brutal interruption of biological life'.<sup>6</sup> His resurrection, unlike those of Lazarus and the daughter of Jairus, once and for all proclaims

that death is not the end but the beginning, the beginning of a new life. At the resurrection, Christ appeared more alive than ever. And before he died, when he declared that he had power to lay down his life and take it up again (Jn 10, 18), he promised, 'I came that they might have life and have it to the full' (Jn 10, 10). A person's attitude toward death as the end or the beginning of a full life will diffuse itself throughout his conscious hours and in the dreams and depths of his subconscious, often to explode into acute awareness when tragedy and loss make him 'die a little' before his final hour. Whether atheistic humanist or believing Christian, a human being's confrontation of death determines the personal attitude towards life.

### *The hope of the humanist*

Let us consider a few instances of the humanist's attempt to live with the realization of death's inevitability and life's limits narrowed to this world. Since the human being is a creature of finite possibility but infinite desire, perhaps the most obvious case of this-worldly transcendence and fulfilment is human love. A human is a being, incomplete, incapable of wholeness without an other. When someone outside the self takes such complete possession of that self, to the extent that one can become fully absorbed with this other, only then is the exquisite joy of self-giving and one-ness truly experienced. For this reason, love uses the language of infinity — it never tires of saying 'forever . . .' (It was indeed with such accents that God spoke to his people through the sorrowing prophet Hosea:

I will betroth you to myself for ever,  
betroth you with integrity and justice,  
with tenderness and love;  
I will betroth you to myself with faithfulness,  
and you will come to know Yahweh. Hos 2, 19-20)

Romantic love *can* help one experience intensely the fulfilment of self-transcendence. But once love settles into friendship and companionship, then its power to engross ecstatically declines. Nor does it detract from the human happiness that such friendship and companionship give, to admit that they cannot completely satisfy: human beings, even lovers, will always desire additional reasons for living.

Commitment to a cause can be one of these reasons; it represents for many humanists a way to this-worldly transcendence and fulfilment. At the same time, if such a one should achieve his goal of

living or even dying — for a cause (cf Rom 4, 7), he realizes that in death his cause ends — for him — in annihilation. Even should it be perpetuated by others, at life's last moment he knows that his own crusading self will soon be no more than an echo in the world.

Human hope in the future, one's own and humankind's, is also a means of this worldly-transcendence. Parents, for example, feel, consciously or unconsciously, that they 'live on' in their children and grandchildren, 'to the third and fourth generation' and beyond. The roman poet Horace, tried to persuade himself that he was achieving immortality through his poetry: *Exegi monumentum aere perennius* — 'I have built a monument (to myself) more lasting than bronze'. Hopeful expectations concerning the future can give much meaning to one's strivings. Hope on a very human level has a redeeming power. Yet such hope is no more than a 'calculation of probabilities', as Gabriel Marcel puts it. It is at best a kind of optimism, a conviction based on available data that everything will be fine or will be better. Christian hope is supernatural, pointing to faith and a promise that transcends the evidence, good or bad. To most young people (though their numbers seem to be diminishing) whose lives consist more of potential and promise than of actualization and disillusionment, the hope based on human reasons comes quite naturally. As the years pass, however, it becomes more difficult to sustain. As time begins to run out, and one's youthful hopes remain unfulfilled, while possibilities narrow as limitations spread, one begins to wonder whether cherished expectations and hope for self-fulfilment will ever come to pass. Not only one's hope for oneself, family and friends, but hope for the world begins to wane, as newer and more sophisticated problems supplant those which an earlier generation struggled to solve.

Seemingly insurmountable personal and collective difficulties raise the question whether natural hope can really be sustained with no recourse beyond the limits of the 'seen' world. This kind of question is at the centre of the debate carried on by philosophers and theologians, Marxists and Christians, on hope and the future.<sup>7</sup> The answer must be found by every human being in the depths of their own hearts. Evidently many humanists are capable of sustaining such a hope. For persons who in faith and through reason refuse to be confined to the restricted circle of secular existence, their alternative to scepticism and despair is a hope that looks to 'things unseen' and to belief in their reality. This is the stance of the Christian.

*Christian hope*

The hope of Christians is no naïve optimism, no blind leap into the dark of future-life; it has its heartfelt reasons. However different it may be from a natural hope or optimism, it must still have the same psychic structure of all human hope. It must be intelligible: that is, it must be possible to verify it against reality. In this sense, it is as much a task and a challenge as a gift. So we read in the first Letter of Peter: 'Always have an answer ready for people who ask you the reason for the hope that you all have' (1 Pet 3, 12). Yet hope's reasons are often less than compelling. 'Christian hope remains a risk which enjoys no more visible, inner-worldly security than the faith in which it is grounded'.<sup>8</sup> Both the Christian and the unbelieving humanist share in common the risk of reality. To venture on the way of christian hope presupposes the gift of faith. Such hope requires us to place our security in Christ's fidelity to his promise, so that we who believe will not finally be disappointed (cf Rom 5, 5).

To St Paul, the faith of Abraham was a kind of prophetic outline of our christian faith: one that is inextricably related to hope. The object of the Christian's faith, like that of Abraham, is the power of God who could give life to the dead. Abraham's supernatural hope was born of the death of human hope: 'Hoping against hope, Abraham believed . . .' (Rom 4, 18). He who cherished the promise of life that leapt from his aged loins and his wife's dead womb, could only believe and 'hope against hope', when he was asked by God to sacrifice to death this very life — his only son, Isaac. How could this ancient nomad find meaning in such a contradiction? The author of the Letter to the Hebrews tells us. 'Abraham considered that God was able to raise men even from the dead — and from the dead, he did, in a sense, receive him back' (Heb 11, 19).

The Christian, too, is one who simultaneously 'hopes against hope' and endures in suffering (Rom 12, 12). 'His hope is a crucified hope, which knows the onset of multiform despair'.<sup>9</sup> Crucified hope can take the form of 'partial deaths' (cf Rom 8, 34-36). A person often 'dies a little' in the midst of life: from betrayals and divorce, from loneliness and loss, from homosexuality, from cancer. Or crucified hope may linger on, suspecting that those scholars may be right who, in the name of 'secular theology', explain that the essential christian faith does *not* involve hoping for life beyond death. The deterioration or destruction of individual christian communities can crucify hope. Yet such crucified hope is hope fulfilled, for every

christian community or movement is the result of tears shed in common, of a bankruptcy faced in the fellowship of hearts who have survived defeat.<sup>10</sup>

How can the believer muster the courage to grow through such doubts, to rise from such 'deaths'? Paul Tillich answers: 'It is the Church under the Cross which alone can do this, the Church which preaches the Crucified who cried to God who remained his God after the God of confidence had left him in the darkness of doubt and meaninglessness'.<sup>11</sup> The cross is immensely significant for our hope. From it we learn what Jesus's share in our mortal fate really means. From his cry on the cross we learn not only of his physical pain but of his radical loneliness and complete abandonment to his Father's will. The believer, destined to die, knows that his 'fragile freedom represents an unavoidable risk to his salvation and that *faith itself* will not allow him to make human calculations as to his personal fate after death'.<sup>12</sup> What happens when one enters the fate of death? Faced with this question we all must admit our ignorance, for we are all on this side of death and no one really knows the answer.<sup>13</sup> With this uncertainty, we live out the drama of our existence, taking it into our own hands courageously in order to abandon ourselves completely to God's promise of resurrection.

Being totally unable to render our existence secure, we can only hope for a new life. But since death is the last hindrance to hope, the human creature's infinite desire for fulfilment can be answered only by resurrection. The reasons spring from the very essence of our humanness. As a human being my capacity for not being satisfied with any phase of my development is boundless. I am always aware that the 'I' of the present moment can always be transcended. More than this, I am aware of my own finiteness only because through reason and imagination I can rise above it to a point out of which the finite is seen as finite. 'I saw God in a point', wrote the mystic: the *ictus oculi*, 'the twinkling of an eye', 'when the dead shall be raised imperishable' (1 Cor 15, 52). In this awareness of actual finitude is implied the awareness of an ever expanding potential. Such potential implies that I belong to a sphere that lies above and beyond this incomplete state which I happen to be. The completion of my very being calls for unlimited transcendence, for perfect union of body and spirit: in a word, for resurrection. It is worth noting that modern anthropology, existentialist philosophy, and the psychological theorizing in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* of William James, are all strongly supportive of the biblical view of embodied



spirit, against the graeco-roman dualism. Such reasoning by implication may sound like a begging of the question: 'I experience such infinite desires, such incompleteness, therefore there must be fulfilment of such'. However, such a transition does not represent an act of empirically verifiable knowledge; rather it represents an act of courageous hope: 'It must be so'.

It is an act of hope based on faith in the Son of God, who said to the unbelieving Sadducees regarding the resurrection of the dead: 'Have you not read what was said to you by God, I am the God of Abraham and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob? He is not God of the dead of the living' (Mt 22, 31-33): the language of a faith reaching from the psalmist to Thérèse of Lisieux: 'I do not die. I enter into life'.

He is not God of the dead but of the living. To believe in the God of Abraham and the God of Jesus Christ is to believe in the personal call of each one of us to eternal life. And if we find it hard to imagine that God could love us too much or consider us so lovable as to destine us for resurrection, we too must take to heart Jesus's reproach to the Sadducees: 'You are wrong, because you fail to understand the scriptures and the power of God' (Mt 22, 29). Faith in the power of God, for whom nothing is impossible, leads us to hope that through our daily deaths we can rise to a fuller life, and through our bodily death we shall enter into everlasting life.

### *Fruitful hope*

Christianity, with its belief in resurrection and the transcendent meaning of life and death, yields the highest motivation for responsible action. The Christian feels compelled to prove his or her hope in action rather than let it deteriorate into a patient resignation in the face of poverty, oppression, and suffering. Understood rightly, the gospel message of resurrection and God's coming kingdom is not opium but dynamite. Ultimate courage in the face of death demands that the Christian use that courage to overcome evil in this life. Christian hope inspires commitment to others, even to the laying down of one's life. Not even death itself can break down this kind of hope.

In this life there is no such thing as a perfect christian hope that always remains fresh and vibrant, with no doubt to weaken it. Shaken by the on-rush of evil — by the de-humanization of fellow human beings, devaluation of morals in society, irrational violence

everywhere in the world — one can break under the strain of hoping. And yet the Christian, like the Church, must ever revive the hope that fails or falters. Always we must struggle with the almost unbearable tension between what we have and what we hope for. What we have is so fleeting, what we hope for so infinitely fulfilling, as so many of the traditional liturgical prayers remind us. In the very act of such hope we are raised to fuller life.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> *Man's Estate* (London, 1961), part 7, Kobe.

<sup>2</sup> 'The Life of the Dead', in *Death and Hope*, ed. H. M. Cargas and A. White (New York, 1970), p 53.

<sup>3</sup> Houston Smith, 'The Reach and the Grasp: Transcendence today', in *Transcendence*, ed. H. W. Richardson and D. R. Cutler (Boston, 1969), p 9.

<sup>4</sup> *The Struggle with God*, tr. Sr Gertrude S.P. (New Jersey, 1966), p 65.

<sup>5</sup> Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Possessed*, tr. C. Garnett (New York, 1936), pp 628-9.

<sup>6</sup> R. Troisfontaines, *I do not die*, tr. F. E. Albert (New York, 1970), p 279.

<sup>7</sup> Cf Ernst Bloch, *A Philosophy of the Future* (New York, 1970); Jurgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope* (New York, 1967).

<sup>8</sup> Gerald O'Collins, *Man and his new hopes* (New York, 1969), p 174.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p 163.

<sup>10</sup> Erigen Rosenstock-Huessy, *The Christian Future* (New York, 1946), p 90.

<sup>11</sup> Paul Tillich, *Courage to be* (London, 1952), p 188.

<sup>12</sup> Juan Alfaro, 'Christian hopes and the hopes of mankind', in *Concilium*, vol 9, no 6 (London, 1970), p 67.

<sup>13</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, tr. J. R. Foster (New York, 1970), p 227.