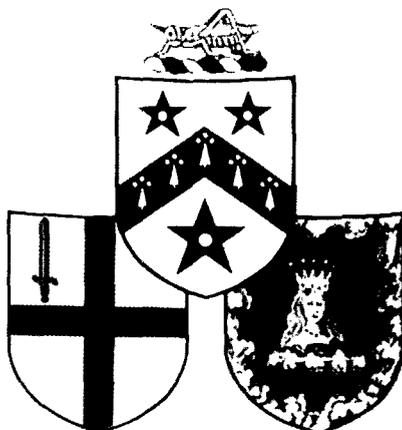


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THE MYTHS OF CHRISTIANITY

Lecture 5

THE MYTH OF RESURRECTION

by

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The Myth of the Resurrection

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One of the problems people have with Christian beliefs is that they do not know what they are for. They may know what the belief is, but they are not sure what it is meant to do or why it is important to hold it. After all, everyone has beliefs of one sort or another, but people usually understand what they are for and how they work. For example, if a friend is accused of some crime or offence, they say, "I believe in Simon and I know he is incapable of an act like that". A belief of this sort is an act of trust, a conviction about the character of another person that you act upon. And it can be tested, it can be verified or falsified. In the case of Simon, who has been accused of embezzling funds from the charity of which he is treasurer, there is a solid chance that his innocence will be proved or his guilt established. If he is declared innocent, our trust in him, our belief in his honesty, will be vindicated; if he is proved guilty, our trust in him will be broken. Whatever happens to it, we at least know what our belief in Simon is about and we know what it would take to vindicate or destroy it.

So there is a logic behind belief in people which we can all understand: it is about placing our trust in them, sometimes in a risky way. Trust is important in day to day living. We can't spend our time constantly testing the honesty and the trustworthiness of our friends, so we go on our intuitions, our hunches about them, our experience, the knowledge we have built up about them over the years. That kind of trust is the reality that undergirds all our important relationships. Come to think of it, it is the basis of almost every aspect of our lives: many of the things we do are based on assumptions that are acts of trust or belief. Apart from trusting our friends, we put our trust in surgeons when we have an operation - that's a very radical sort of trust, because we allow them to anaesthetise us and cut us open and mess about with our insides. Less momentously, though perhaps more grudgingly today, we trust the transport system. When I get on the train at Edinburgh for King's Cross, I believe that I'll be taken to London, not Lowestoft. All these cases, though they are examples of belief, are based on experience, experience of the trustworthiness of the Health Service or the Railway Company, so that I am prepared to put myself in their hands for a heart operation or a trip to London.

But how do religious beliefs operate, how do they work? There seem to be two difficulties with them. First of all, it is not easy either to falsify or to verify them. We can take steps to verify Simon's honesty; we can test the trustworthiness of a surgeon by various means, including the number of people who leave his operating theatre alive rather than dead; and we can study the claims made by the train companies about how many of their trains made it to London on time last year. How do we verify the existence of God, or even falsify it, for that matter? You can get round that difficulty, to some extent, by saying you choose to trust your intuition, or you are persuaded by the philosophical arguments that deal with the matter, or you have decided to bet on the possibility, following Pascal on the grounds that if you win you win everything, and if you lose you only lose nothing. Pascal's wager is superficially seductive, but on closer analysis it leaves lots of questions. What God are we betting on? Our understanding of God and God's role in the life of the universe has shifted radically over the centuries. So what God on whose existence are we going to bet? If believing in God is to hold in our minds the conviction that there is a superhuman being to whom we give that name, it is still legitimate to ask: 'So what? What difference does it make?' After all, according to the Letter of James, even 'the devils believe, and tremble'.¹

¹ Letter of James, 2.19.

So it is entirely appropriate to ask this other question of belief: what's the point, what difference does it make, what is its cash value, to use an expression from William James?

If we think of miracles, for instance, which many people proudly claim to believe in, as though some special virtue were attached to such a belief: what difference does it make to believe in them? Leaving aside for the moment whether Jesus actually performed any, what would be the point in believing that he did, what would the belief be for? In an earlier period of theological history, people used Jesus' miracles in a practical way as evidence of his divinity, but that is a perilous enterprise for us to engage in today and few apologists for orthodox Christianity proffer it in serious debate. Apart from the healing miracles, which can be made to fit our understanding of the psycho-somatic nature of the human being, most interpreters now allocate the miracles of Jesus to the world-view of his time and accord them little significance in the lives of modern believers.

After all, miracles of the sort described in the New Testament continue to occur, but not where we live and rarely to people like us. If a statue starts weeping in Sicily or an impression of the face of Jesus appears in the sky above a motel in El Paso, supernatural claims are made for these events and large crowds gather, but most of us will look for natural explanations for the incidents, including straightforward fraud. It does not follow, however, that we will want to dismiss those who believe in a supernatural cause for these events as primitive or ignorant. We understand well enough that people have always occupied different places in their understanding of things. I cannot grudge those who believe in it, the comfort or excitement of a magical world-view; but I cannot hold it myself, not because I am a representative of faithless scepticism, but because I have inherited a different way of looking at things and it would be dishonest of me to abandon it or exclude religion from its consequential effects. In this area, we have to pick our way along a defile between cultural arrogance and superiority, on the one hand, and honest acceptance of our own cognitive situation, on the other. It is reminiscent of Thomas Kuhn's dilemma when he was comparing Aristotle's Physics to Newton's. It was a liberating moment for him when he realised that Aristotle's Physics were a valid interpretation of the way things were in the universe, but that it was superseded by a later account that was a better fit. The miraculous way of looking at things is still held by some people with perfect integrity today, just as it was once possible to hold an honest belief in Ptolemaic astronomy. But once a particular society has shifted to a different scheme of interpretation, a different paradigm of understanding, why do some people hold it to be virtuous or faithful to cleave to remnants of the old world-view in the religious department? I can appreciate the argument from preference or cultural weariness here, but not the claim of faithfulness. Some people just don't like new things: they prefer stage coaches to steam trains, ocean liners to jumbo jets, coal fires to central heating. It is not difficult to sympathise with this kind of weariness with change and the endless successiveness of history. When we encounter this kind of nostalgia among our friends, we smile, shrug our shoulders and say something to the effect that James is just a young fogey who doesn't like the modern world. All of that we can negotiate and even appreciate as having a certain kind of counter-cultural attractiveness to it.

The stakes shoot up when we enter the religious end of the argument. People might prefer steam trains to diesels for romantic reasons, but it would be wrong of them to claim the virtue of faithfulness for doing so. They are exercising a preference, that's all. We might offer a similarly relaxed attitude to people who said that they preferred the religious world-view of earlier societies to the scientific world view of their own; or that they liked the drama and unexpectedness of medieval consciousness, with its sense of encircling spiritual forces out to infest and entrap the unwary human; and they might even persuade themselves that they were inhabiting it. Of course, we know that they are incapable of entering the consciousness of a French peasant of a thousand years ago; and if they pulled off the trick

it would probably scare them witless. These are games we play, choices we make; and it is all right, as long as we don't exert spiritual blackmail on those who choose not to play the game.

The point I am labouring here is that the scheme of interpretation that presents Jesus as a visitant from a supernatural realm who performed wonders, including raising the dead and walking on the water of the Sea of Galilee, is just that: a scheme of interpretation, a way of responding to events that was congruent with a particular stage of understanding and development. In that world people regularly witnessed miracles, encountered ghosts, were infested by demons and knew of men who had been turned into wolves during the full moon. That was how most people interpreted what was happening around them. David Hume understood what was going on:

'We are placed in this world, as in a great theatre, where the true springs and causes of every event are entirely concealed from us; nor have we either sufficient wisdom to foresee, or power to prevent those ills, with which we are continually threatened. We hang in perpetual suspense between life and death, health and sickness, plenty and want; which are distributed amongst the human species by secret and unknown causes, whose operation is oft unexpected, and always unaccountable. These unknown causes, then, become the constant object of our hope and fear; and while the passions are kept in perpetual alarm by an anxious expectation of the events, the imagination is equally employed in forming ideas of those powers, on which we have so entire a dependence'.²

What Hume called our 'ideas of those powers on which we have so entire a dependence' have been in permanent flux, as the history of our species, including its ideas, so clearly illustrates. If we are wise, we won't sneer at earlier ideas about the powers that control us, but nor will we accord them virtue just because they came before us. Apart from school boards in the buckle of the Bible Belt in the USA, most people in our world accept the narrative metaphor of evolution as the best way of accounting for things on planet earth. Who knows, a better way of stating the situation may come along, but most of us operate within the Darwinian paradigm fairly successfully today. What, then, is the point of insisting that the now abandoned paradigm of Creationism is true? Why is it held to be virtuous to go on *believing* it, or any of the other elements from previous ways of explaining things?

The immediate reason is that in religious discourse we have accorded a particularly privileged status to the documents that narrate the old paradigm. The traditional way of putting this is to say they are 'inspired' or dictated by God and are therefore deemed to be beyond correction. There is an inevitable circularity in this argument: we believe the bible, because it tells us that it is the word of God and God cannot be wrong. A deeper reason for holding to a previous understanding of things is probably rooted in our psychological need for certainty, even if we manufacture the certainty ourselves. We are unhappy with the fluidity and impermanence of the explanations that are around today. Something in us wants more than this kind of experimental provisionality. If we are not careful, this is the kind of need that can seduce us into falling for dictators and their grand schemes, even if they are only American tele-evangelists. There is no doubt that grand, totalising claims can rescue us, for a time, from anguish and *ennui* and make living worthwhile again, but that is why they are so dangerous. When they fail us, usually because we discover more honest ways of understanding the world, we can be left with an utter contempt for all religion.

Let me return to my question. For the sake of argument, let us suppose that we persuaded ourselves to believe in Creationism or that Jesus materially multiplied five small loaves and three small fish into enough food for more than 5000. Will believing these things make any difference to us or make us better people? Is there some virtue in believing things that accord with a previous world-view precisely because they are contrary to the present

² David Hume, *The Natural History of Religion*, edited by H.E.Root, Stanford, 1957, section III.

state of knowledge in our culture? Is there a believing muscle we exercise by persuading ourselves to entertain fabulous possibilities? Christian doctrinal beliefs are mainly about the interpretation of distant events that are beyond our ability to falsify or verify, so we can't resolve the issue by any obvious test. There seem to be two options for us: We can either get ourselves embroiled in the factual detail of claim and counter claim; or we can resolve the issue by the paradigm test. We admit that the challenge of Jesus is completely enmeshed in a world-view we can no longer accept, but we decide that its cultural envelope is incidental to its main message, which we can still make use of today. If we take that approach, it means that for us a Christian belief is not a device for containing obsolete interpretations of the universe, but is an action indicator. This means that Christianity is not an organisation for the reproduction of antique mental furniture, but is a movement that presents a fundamental moral challenge to humanity. Christianity is not a way of explaining the world; it is a way of disturbing the world. So the only test left is the difference a belief makes, the cash value test.

This approach is particularly important when we come to consider the central or constitutive Christian belief, which is the doctrine of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. At first sight it seems to be an either/or issue: he either rose from the dead or he didn't, so make your choice. However, if the approach I have been adopting has any integrity to it, there is likely to be more to the issue than either persuading ourselves to install an old piece of mental furniture in our minds or rejecting it out of hand without a moment's further thought. We might be persuaded of the physical fact of the resurrection without it making the slightest difference to our actual lives.

Theologians can be quite subtle in talking about the resurrection today. A parallel with the puzzle presented by the existence of the universe might help here. If the Big Bang theory is a hypothetical way of accounting for the origin of the universe, we could say that we have no direct access to whatever it was, but only to its effects in a universe that still appears to be expanding. In other words, we read back from the present to the past and offer our best guess as to what got the universe going. By analogy, we could say that some kind of decisive event got the Christian movement going. Something happened to the disciples of Jesus to change them from the demoralised followers of a fallen leader into people of courage who now proclaimed the message of the one they had earlier deserted. The earliest account we have of the resurrection is from Paul, in the First Letter to the Corinthians, chapter 15:

[15:1] Now I would remind you, brothers and sisters, of the good news that I proclaimed to you, which you in turn received, in which also you stand, [2] through which also you are being saved, if you hold firmly to the message that I proclaimed to you--unless you have come to believe in vain:

[3] For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, [4] and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, [5] and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. [6] Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. [7] Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. [8] Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. [9] For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. [10] But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them--though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me. [11] Whether then it was I or they, so we proclaim and so you have come to believe.

In many ways, verse eight is the most significant part of Paul's statement: 'Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me'. In a previous lecture in this series I spent some

time thinking about the story of Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus. He was riding along when a light from outside blinds him and a voice commands him to cease his persecution of the followers of Jesus. We read in the following verses that a follower of Jesus named Ananias comes to him and ministers to him, restoring his sight, and Saul, now to be called Paul, becomes a Christian apostle. There is no doubt that something happened to Saul of Tarsus that turned him into the formative genius behind the early theological understanding of Jesus. We can accept all that, we can even accept the apparently miraculous blindness that afflicted him, but we approach the event from within a different interpretative framework. Saul's passionate vehemence against the followers of Jesus would suggest that his attention had already been arrested by the movement he was persecuting. This is a common phenomenon. We know enough about bigotry to understand something of its causality and one of its roots is fear or anxiety. The classic way to deal with this kind of discomfort is to externalise or project it onto someone you can punish for the distress you feel about your own unadmitted longings. The blindness was psychogenic, a somatic expression of the turmoil in his soul, as he refused to acknowledge, refused to see, what his own heart was telling him: that Jesus of Nazareth had captured him for himself and would, if surrendered to, take over his entire life. The story of Paul's conversion can be accounted for without recourse to supernatural agency; it was a struggle that was resolved within his own heart. That change was the real miracle we call the resurrection and Paul's account is the closest we can get to the originating event. Later writers, the more restrained of whom got into the official New Testament, set out to satisfy human curiosity with more detailed descriptions of the event. One, called the Gospel of Peter, actually describes the event, the stone rolling away by itself and three men emerging from the tomb, two of them helping the other, and the cross following.³

These attempts to describe the event of the resurrection are, for their day, not unlike the attempts by scientists to picture the moment before the Big Bang. They are attempts to explain the originating event that is hidden from them by reading backwards from the reality that is before them and positing an explanation. This retrospective method is also true in theology and it is already fairly clear in the way the gospels were written. The resurrection moment was the time when the penny finally dropped for the disciples and they discovered who Jesus was. Though the gospels appear to follow a chronological sequence, from birth to death, they are packed with coded as well as with overt claims about the significance of Jesus from the very beginning. In his narrative Mark signals the identity of Jesus at his baptism; Matthew and Luke from his birth; and John goes back to eternity in his prologue. We have to ask ourselves today, therefore: if that is how they expressed the significance of Jesus for them in their words, how might we do it today in ours?

I have found an approach proposed by a previous Gresham Professor of Divinity to be very helpful. It was difficult to get my head round it at first, but when I did, I saw that it had real power of application in many situations. It comes from the seventh century in a dispute between Jains and Buddhists. In both of these traditions, there is an ultimate truth called nirvana that is essentially one, even though it may be referred to by various names. This led Haribhadra, a Jain, to what has been called "the logic of nirvana" and it goes like this: *'If nirvana turns out to be nirvana, it is nirvana that nirvana turns out to be, even though you and I may have been thinking about it in approximate and opposing ways. If the Earth turns out to be spherical, it is spherical that the Earth turns out to be, even though you hold that it is round and I hold that it is flat. We are both wrong, but at least we are approximately wrong about something. We may argue, as Haribhadra did, and try to convince each other; and, in the end, one position may be more approximately right than the other. But it will still be about a spherical Earth that flat Earthers and round Earthers happen to be arguing. On the basis of this 'logic of Nirvana', Haribhadra concluded that "It is impossible for thoughtful*

³ Cited in John Dominic Crossan, *The Birth of Christianity*, Harper San Francisco, 1999, p.488.

people to quarrel over the way in which one expresses one's loyalty to this truth. It follows also, in his view, that anyone who points the way (however approximately) to what is truly the case must be honoured...⁴ In other words, thoughtful people should not quarrel over the different ways in which they express their loyalty to truth, because, if they are being honest, their disagreements are at least about something real and all genuine attempts to struggle for truth must be honoured. This sounds like a different version of Kuhnian paradigm theory. Aristotle was not bad Newton, but a different approximation to an understanding of the reality that was in front of them both. Applying the logic of nirvana to the resurrection means that, whatever it is, it cannot be threatened or damaged by what we make of it. Whatever the originating event was and however we interpret it, all that we see is its consequence in the lives of those who encountered it. As I have already suggested, the resurrection is like the Big Bang which scientists hypothesise as the originating event in the life of the universe; it is not available to us except by guess work and theory. Just as scientists engage in backwards interpretation, by reading the effect that is the universe back to the unimaginable moment of its beginning; so theologians have read back from the transformation of the disciples to a hypothesis as to what caused it. We could say, therefore, that there are two resurrections, but only one is available to us. The first is the originating event, the mythic resurrection, the big bang that ignited the Christian movement; the second is the effectual resurrection, which is the continuing impact of Jesus upon history. The interesting thing about the Resurrection is not what was claimed, but who made the claim. The people who had deserted Jesus in fear and fled from his dying, somewhere found the courage to proclaim the meaning of his life; and that transformation, that turnaround, is what we mean by Resurrection. I would say that the Resurrection of Jesus is best understood, best used, as a symbol or sign of the human possibility of transformation. Albert Camus wrote that, *"In the midst of winter I finally learned that there was in me an invincible summer"*. That is the resurrection voice, calling us from despair and all its defeats to the possibility of transformation. The logic of resurrection can be experienced at both the personal and the social level; and one can lead to another.

I could suggest many examples of the transformative resurrection at work, including the long struggle against Apartheid in South Africa. But the example I want to offer is from the Civil Rights movement in the US, because in its origins it is a fascinating combination of personal change leading to social and political action. The campaign to give Afro Americans full civil and human rights began as an act of personal transformation in the black community itself. It all began when one tired black woman in Montgomery, Alabama, Rosa Parks, refused to go to the back of the bus. She was sitting on the front seat of the black section and was asked to give that seat up to a white man who got on at a later stop. She refused, a policeman was called and she was arrested. The day after Rosa Park's arrest, Martin Luther King called a meeting. A leaflet was sent out to 50,000 black people. It said: *"Don't ride the bus to work, to town, to school, or any place Monday, December 5. A negro woman has been arrested and put in jail because she refused to give up her bus seat. Come to a mass meeting Monday at 7pm at the Holt Street Baptist Church for further instructions"*. This was the beginning of the famous bus boycott that changed American history. It was as simple as that. They knew they would have to pay for their refusal to submit any longer to their own daily humiliation; they knew they would have to face hatred and persecution; but something dropped away from them, some burden of fear or timidity or resignation. To adapt the resurrection metaphor, a whole people walked out of the tomb of segregation, because a woman had the courage to refuse to go to the back of the bus.

Resurrection is the refusal to be imprisoned any longer by history and its long hatreds; it is the determination to take the first step out of the tomb. Resurrection is a refusal to be gripped for ever by the fingers of winter, whatever our winter may be. It may be a personal

⁴ John Bowker, *Is God a Virus?* SPCK, London, 1995, p.176.

circumstance that immobilises us, or a social evil that confronts us: whatever it is, we simply refuse any longer to accept it, because the logic of resurrection calls us to action. It follows, therefore, that if we say we believe in the resurrection, it only has meaning if we are people who believe in the possibility of transformed lives, transformed attitudes and transformed societies. The action is the proof of the belief. So I end with what may appear to be a paradox: I can say I believe in that resurrection then, the Jesus resurrection, because I see resurrections now, see stones rolled away and new possibilities rising from old attitudes. My belief in resurrection means that I have to commit myself to the possibility of transformation, and, however feeble I feel, take the first faltering step towards change. That means continuing to struggle with the intractability of my own nature; more importantly, it means joining with others in action to bring new life to human communities that are still held in the grip of winter, and there are lots of frozen churches and deep frozen human institutions that need thawing out with resurrection fire.

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