

# Theological Reflection

## Religion as a Human Creation

### 2. Death and Resurrection

Dinah Livingstone ponders a classic Christian doctrine.

‘Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies it remains alone, but if it dies it bears much fruit’ (John 12:23). Jesus says this in his final week in Jerusalem when he is about to be arrested and crucified. For his disciples and friends his death was traumatic. In Luke’s account of the two on the road to Emmaus they tell the stranger on the way: ‘We had hoped he was the one to redeem Israel’ (Luke 24:21). At their journey’s end they invite the stranger to have supper with them. He takes bread, blesses and breaks it and gives it to them. Then ‘they recognised him and he vanished from their sight.’ This is a story of one of a number of sightings of Jesus risen from the dead. The earliest list we have is given by Paul in his letter to the Corinthians (1Cor 15:3), in which he repeatedly uses the term *ὤφθη* (*ophthe*: ‘was seen’), including for his own vision on the Damascus road. The original text of Mark the first gospel, as it appears in both the Codex Sinaiticus and Vaticanus, has no resurrection appearances at all. The disciples had to make sense of Jesus’ execution as a criminal. They became convinced that in some way he was still alive, and came up with fertile and poetic ideas. They created the Christ Epic. They resurrected him as Christ.

Today we often hear people saying they admire the ethics of kindness Jesus taught but all that stuff about Christ the Lord was a later accretion which we can do without. A recent

best-selling novel by Philip Pullman was even called *The Good Man Jesus and the Scoundrel Christ*. However, if we regard the *whole* supernatural realm as the creation of the human poetic genius, then the Christ Epic can be seen as an outstanding manifestation of that genius which has certainly been very fruitful. Great art is often created out of trauma, a descent into the depths of human experience and recapitulating it in the poem (or other work of art). From the trauma of Jesus’ death his followers produced this great cosmic Epic. And the making (*poiesis*) of the Epic mirrored its content. When Jesus died they had gone down into the depths of desolation and disappointment and come up with the Epic, and the Epic itself was of Christ the divine Word going down into the depths of humiliation and death and coming up again, alive and triumphant.



William Blake: *Christ Rising*

The poem or early Christian hymn (Phil 2:6-11) that Paul quotes in his letter to the Philippians focuses on the *shape* of the drama. The movement is *down* and then *up* of Christ, one who was ‘in the form of God’, ‘emptying himself’ down to Earth, not only being born as a human child but assuming humanity even in its most painful mortality, death on a Cross, becoming ‘like us in all things...’, a fellow creature. Then this humanity *in Christ* is *highly exalted*. Christ Jesus:

who, though he was in the form of God,  
did not regard equality with God  
as something to be exploited,  
but emptied himself,  
taking the form of a slave,  
being born in human likeness.  
And being found in human form,  
he humbled himself  
and became obedient to death –  
even death on a cross.  
Therefore God also highly exalted him...

Ephesians (4:8) gives us a 'christological' gloss  
on Psalm 68:18:

When he ascended on high,  
he led captivity captive  
and gave gifts to humanity.  
When it says 'He ascended',  
what does it mean  
but that he had also descended  
into the lowest parts of the Earth?

In another great poem of the Christ Epic, in  
Colossians, by his death and resurrection Christ  
becomes 'the beginning, the firstborn from the  
dead' (Col.1:18). He is the protagonist, the  
prototype, the namesake hero of a new humanity  
incorporated 'in Christ'. For 'in him all fullness  
was pleased to dwell.'

## Two 'Takes' on the Drama

We can briefly consider a 'take' on this drama  
which now seems alien to many people today  
– the theme of sacrifice, which gives rise to  
cognitive and cultural dissonance in our very  
different world, unless it becomes *self-*  
sacrifice for a noble cause. Then we look at  
another 'take' on the drama – the theme of a  
new humanity in Christ – which remains  
potent and inspiring and turns out to be  
another poetic version of Jesus' proclamation  
of the reign of God coming on Earth with its  
ethic of kindness.

### *Sacrifice*

The Letter to the Hebrews presents Jesus' death  
as perfecting and superseding the Jewish Temple  
cult; with Jesus as both high priest and victim of  
the ultimate sacrifice, able to offer 'satisfaction'  
to God. In the Temple a constant stream of  
animals were ritually killed and indeed animal  
and human sacrifices were prevalent throughout  
the ancient world. However, today many people

find killing people or animals to honour or  
placate a god repugnant, and they are repelled  
and bemused by the idea of Jesus' death as a  
'ransom' paid to God or devil. Recently the  
*Hampstead and Highgate Express* reported that  
a man, whose father had died in the Hampstead  
Royal Free Hospital, came from Kenya to  
sacrifice a ram in the hospital's multi-faith chapel  
to enable his father's spirit to rest in peace. The  
hospital Health and Safety authorities prevented  
him, saying animals were not allowed in the  
chapel except for guide dogs and therapy pets.

That was not how Jesus saw his own death.  
As Jesuit theologian Jon Sobrino says in his  
book *Jesus the Liberator*:

Let it be said from the start that the historical  
Jesus did not interpret his death in terms of  
salvation, in terms of the soteriological models  
later developed by the New Testament, such  
as expiatory sacrifice or vicarious satisfaction.

However, *self-sacrifice* by speaking out for a  
good reason and clashing with the powers-that-  
be *can* be seen as what led to Jesus' death and  
the deaths of many who have followed him, for  
example, the recently beatified Archbishop  
Romero (see article p. 4), who was murdered at  
Mass a few days after he preached a sermon in  
his San Salvador cathedral, saying: 'I beg you, I  
beseech you, I order you: Stop the repression!' He  
is one of the twentieth-century martyrs  
whose statues stand above the Great West Door  
of Westminster Abbey. Self-giving out of love or  
fellow feeling for others means living and dying  
generously. 'Greater love has no one than  
this...' Generosity is related to *generate*. Such a  
death can be like the seed that falls into the  
ground, dies and generates much fruit.

### *A New Humanity*

Paul's trauma was his conversion experience. In  
the story in Acts, he hears a voice on the road to  
Damascus: 'Why are you persecuting *me*?' He  
asks: 'Who are you?' The reply is: 'I am Jesus  
whom you are persecuting.' Trauma led to  
insight and in his first letter to the Corinthians (1  
Cor 11:23) Paul recalls that 'the Lord Jesus on  
the night when he was betrayed took bread...  
broke it and said: "This is my body..." So Paul  
concludes: 'We who are many are one body,  
because we all share the same bread' (1 Cor  
10:17). 'For just as the body is one and has many

members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ' (1 Cor 12:12). Christ is the name for the new liberated humanity. Of course, at the moment we humans do not all share the same bread. Some of us starve and some of us have too much. The Eucharist is a sign that the new humanity has been inaugurated as a project *now* but it has *not yet* fully come about. The Eucharist 'proclaims the Lord's death till he comes'.

Jesus had given a version of the whole of humanity as himself in the story in Matthew's gospel of the judgment of the nations (Mt 25:34). He says to those on his right hand:

I was hungry and you gave me food. I was thirsty and you gave me drink... Truly I tell you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters you did it to me.

Though Paul seldom quotes Jesus' actual words, when he is telling the people he is writing to what 'newness of life' in Christ means, he constantly reminds them to behave kindly, gently and with fellow feeling.

In one of his earliest epistles, to the Galatians (reiterated in the later Colossians), Paul declares: 'There is no longer Jew nor Greek, no longer slave or free, no longer male and female, for you are all one in Christ' (Gal 3:28). In his book *Inventing the Individual* (reviewed on p. 23) Larry Siedentrop quotes this and points out what a revolutionary idea it was. He argues that this declaration of the moral equality of every human individual kickstarted ideas of humanism and that, contrary to the eighteenth-century Enlightenment view, so fiercely anti-religious particularly in France, 'secularism is the embodiment of Christian moral intuitions'.

Actually, we find that Paul's vision of the new liberated humanity in Christ is more far-reaching than his application of it in some of his instructions to his Christian communities on how to behave (women or slaves, for example). But the vision remains. In the Pauline epistles (whether written by him or members of his 'school') the theme of fullness, fulfilment, recurs constantly. In Ephesians (1:10) God's 'plan for the fullness of time' is to 'recapitulate' (ἀνακεφαλαιώσασθαι: *anakephalaiosasthai*) all things in Christ, things in heaven and things on

Earth. The new humanity in Christ is 'built together as a dwelling place for God' (2:22) and must grow until we reach 'the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ' (4:13) for 'in him the whole fullness of godhead dwells bodily' (Col 2:9) This is an early expression of the full-blown Chalcedon statement that Christ is one person, true God and true man with both a divine and a human mind. As such a person appears to be psychologically impossible, it becomes the tipping point dropping us in it: the realisation that supernatural deities are mythical and 'reside in the human breast'. We have here the poetic creation of an epic hero whose mysterious being is an immensely rich imaginative paradox and the seed of humanism.

Jesus dies like the grain of wheat falling into the earth and producing 'much fruit'. Christ Jesus rises as a new humanity aspiring to 'the whole fullness'. The fruit, the fulfilment, is a sane and kindly humanism. The risen Christ is the 'first fruits', an 'earnest' of that fulfilment, the protagonist, the leading idea, the risen Word. As usual the human poetic genius gets there first, here with the Christ Epic. The risen Christ becomes the *project* of a kind humanity, one body all sharing the same bread, our common treasury. This has inspired many struggles, both personal and political, but 'the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ' has not yet been fully achieved. It is another version – vision – of what Jesus himself preached, the reign of God coming on Earth. But as there is no supernatural being to bring it about we have to keep on trying to do it ourselves.

## The Rising Up of Christ

We have space here only to mention two examples when the Christ Epic inspired people to struggle for a better world.

In the English Revolution of 1649 the Diggers occupied land on St George's Hill in Surrey to grow food on it. Their purpose, said their spokesman Gerrard Winstanley, was to 'lay the foundation of making the Earth a Common Treasury for all'. In his tract *The New Law of Righteousness*, published in the same year, Winstanley describes this action as 'the rising up of Christ in sons and daughters'. He develops this theology in copious other writings.



John Piper: *The Risen Christ at Emmaus*. Mosaic 1961. St Paul's Church, Harlow

Twentieth century liberation theology holds that Christ is to be found today first and foremost in 'the crucified people', those who suffer oppression, injustice or great hardship. This theology inspired the *Peasant Mass* of the Nicaraguan Revolution of 1979. Just as the Diggers had spoken of their action as 'the rising up of Christ in sons and daughters', the creed of the *Misa campesina* identifies the suffering people with the crucified Christ, and their struggle for a better life with his resurrection:

I trust in you, comrade,  
 human Christ, Christ the worker,  
 death you've overcome.  
 Your fearful suffering  
 formed the new humanity  
 born for freedom.  
 You are rising now  
 each time we raise an arm  
 to defend the people  
 from profiteering dominion,  
 because you're living on the farm,  
 in the factory and in school;

Your struggle carries on,  
 I trust in your resurrection.

## Ongoing

People keep struggling for a kinder world. There are some advances and many disappointments. One gain, frequently cited by Don Cupitt, is the National Health Service. But when Gandhi was asked what he thought of Western civilisation, he replied: 'It would be a good idea.' We still have a long way to go.

And in our personal lives we may suffer difficulties, pain and sorrow and try to get up and go on, or fall short of what we should like to be and do and resolve to 'turn over a new leaf', or feel ashamed and have a change of heart. Night-fall and sleep then waking in the morning to a new day is like a little death and resurrection. Christ's descent to the depths, then rising again high above thrones, dominations, principalities and powers is an Epic about ourselves whose outcome is ongoing.