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# The Meaning of the Resurrection

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All the statements of the theology of the cross bear the key-signature of the resurrection. Without this key-signature, however, they lose their validity and meaning. To speak theologically of the cross of Jesus is therewith at the same time to speak of the resurrection, for the latter alone is the root and driving force of the message of the cross.—  
 PROF. WALTER KÜNNETH, *The Theology of the Resurrection* (1965), p. 152.

'The Christian faith is Resurrection Theism', so said Michael Ramsay, over two decades ago.<sup>1</sup> However, owing to the rather popular misconstruction of 'theism'<sup>2</sup> it might more adequately be called 'Resurrection Personalism'. For, an ontological personalism can quite easily surmount the objections urged by some against theism.<sup>3</sup> The Christian faith, then, is resurrection personalism, and not to be confused with resurrection subjectivism, i.e. Streeter's 'telegram theory'<sup>3</sup> or Leslie Weatherhead's theory of 'apparitions',<sup>4</sup> or any merely psychological theory which would hold to a psychological theory of the resurrection, without a related objective historical datum.

To the early Church, the resurrection was not the great question to be debated, but the great certainty to be proclaimed. If Christ be not risen, then, 'we are of all men most miserable' (1 Cor. 15:14, 19). To the early Church this was the great absolute of history, and the point at which absolute mystery's disclosure, meaning and significance was anchored. 'History', said John R. Mumaw, 'was reshaped by the "finger of God"'. History was redirected by a single event . . . The resurrection occurred as a *terminal event* . . . The resurrection

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<sup>1</sup> A. M. Ramsay, *The Resurrection of Christ*. This work is not wholly free from positivism.

<sup>2</sup> J. A. T. Robinson, *Honest to God* (London, S.C.M., 1963 ff.), Ch. 2, 'End of Theism?'

<sup>3</sup> B. H. Streeter's article on Jesus in *Cambridge Ancient History*.

<sup>4</sup> L. Weatherhead, *The Resurrection of Christ* (London, Hodder & Stoughton).

formed a *theological* base.<sup>5</sup> Thenceforth no vague theological speculation about the Spirit ; for the Spirit has declared itself in the power to raise Jesus from the dead.

The modern temper in India (under the influence of some *avant-garde* Western theologians) might find the resurrection difficult to accept on two fronts: (a) the scientific-secular front and (b) on the historical, inter-religious, contra-mythico-mystical front.

The concept of the secular is ambivalent and may refer to either the political or the ideological secularity. Purely political considerations cannot pronounce on the truth value of the resurrection datum either as history or its meaning. But secularity as referring to theological models for interpretation of the secular, viz. religionless Christianity or secular Christianity, avers that on grounds of scientific order, and the requirements of 'form-criticism', the resurrection *event* is an impossible notion. The Easter resurrection emphasis can, no doubt, be overdone. Although the New Testament was shaped in radiance of post-resurrection confidence, it is necessary not to detach this from the total life of Jesus. But in order to recognize the need to restore this balance, need one go as far as some 'Christian' secular and situation theologians, by holding to the subjective experience and denying the historical event of the resurrection? Ronald Gregor Smith<sup>6</sup> without adducing a single reason goes too far. Quoting Karl Barth, Smith writes: "One could think of a New Testament which contained only the Easter story and the Easter message; but not a New Testament without them."<sup>7</sup> I can only regard this as a polemical and senseless exaggeration.<sup>8</sup> Continues Ronald Gregor Smith, 'we may freely say that the bones of Jesus lie somewhere in Palestine'.<sup>9</sup>

## I

It is interesting to note that exponents of secular or religionless Christianity (1) fail entirely to distinguish two different levels or components in the discussion of 'secular', viz. the political, and the other ideological or the philosophical level. (2) In wanting to get rid of 'religion', they have not defined 'religion' to which they would apply, as it were, Occam's razor in their exposition of Christian truth. (3) Their decided preference for a historico-minimal treatment of the resurrection sides with a naturalist-positivist interpretation of science. Now, if some cogent reason was offered—by theologians themselves—

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<sup>5</sup> J. R. Mumaw, *The Resurrection Life* (Scottsdale Pa, Herald Press, 1965), p. 9.

<sup>6</sup> R. G. Smith, *Secular Christianity* (London, Collins, 1966).

<sup>7</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, III/2, p. 446.

<sup>8</sup> R. G. Smith, *op. cit.*, pp. 100-101.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 103, italics mine.

for this, it would be worth considering the decision they favour for such an interpretation of science; and the consequent historico-minimal treatment of the resurrection of Jesus. But there is an entire absence of awareness that the treatment of the uniformity of nature and macroscopic law, though expressed exactly alike (i.e. in mathematical formulation) by all rival schools of the philosophy of scientific interpretation, afford several clear options of interpretation.

For instance, uniformity of nature and law (the two are not identical in the logic of scientific thought) have been interpreted in different ways as (i) an absolute objective ontologically related construct which is determinate (Einstein);<sup>10</sup> (ii) an absolute objective ontologically related construct which is indeterminate (Jeans and Eddington)<sup>11</sup>—and ontologically personal; (iii) a phenomenological determinative construct (a logical possibility, an advocate of which I do not know any); (iv) a phenomenological indeterminate construct (Hobson);<sup>12</sup> (v) an objective but positivistically interpreted construct (Bertrand Russell,<sup>13</sup> Hans Reisenbach,<sup>14</sup> Philip Frank,<sup>15</sup> etc.). It is interesting to notice that Einstein's biographer and exponent Frank—he taught Einstein's mathematical theory at M.I.T.—draws non-idealistic, but rather positivistic conclusions from the same theory! The point I am making is that the much ado to get rid of the resurrection datum on grounds of science is a *non sequitur*.<sup>16</sup>

This being the case, in the context of the Church's task related to a developing scientific, neo-Hindu (Islamic, Buddhist, etc.) temper post-science, it must be borne in mind that science does not *ipso facto* rule out the resurrection. Not a few princes—the very makers<sup>17</sup> of modern science (F.R.S. men indeed! )—of Newtonian and post-Einsteinian physics have accepted the resurrection of Jesus as an objective historical reality.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. the discussion ed. P. A. Schlipp, *The Philosophy of Albert Einstein*.

<sup>11</sup> James Jeans, *Mysterious Universe*; A. S. Eddington, *Philosophy of Physical Science*. More generally cf. Aliotta, *The Idealistic Reaction against Science*. And popularly, C. E. M. Joad, *Philosophy of Science*.

<sup>12</sup> Hobson's Gifford Lectures: *The Domain of Natural Science*.

<sup>13</sup> Of B. Russell's many books cf. *Human Knowledge, Its Scope and Limits*.

<sup>14</sup> H. Reisenbach, *Rise of Scientific Philosophy*.

<sup>15</sup> Philip Frank, *The Philosophy of Science*.

<sup>16</sup> Owing to the brevity of the present paper, lest we run away with the impression that those qualified to speak about the philosophy of science show a drift towards a positivistic interpretation, let us note this: their best spokesman Bertrand Russell is not able to offer a solution to the crucial question of mental philosophy. Here 'neutral monism' screens the real issue. Prof. John Laird has raised some pertinent questions which any positivist philosophy of science must face, cf. his paper on Russell's mental philosophy in *The Philosophy of Bertrand Russell* ed. P. A. Schlipp.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. the chapter on 'The Royal Society' in Bronowski and Mazlish's, *The Western Intellectual Tradition*.

So they have been able to accept a full-blooded interpretation of the Christian faith. Which interpretation of science one shall choose has extra physico-mathematical reasons. Such latter reasons, although unknown to the scientist concerned and which perhaps prompt his decision, are related to his pre-disposition, temperament, religious or anti-religious training, etc. (Such factors will not imply a total determinism, but constitute a serious influence in the decision process). Needless to say the discussion so far has been very limited, i.e. to the philosophies of scientific interpretation with a slant on physics and mathematics. But we know from the interpretation of science from the side of the theological sciences, viz. biology, i.e. *Le Compte du Nouy*,<sup>18</sup> Teilhard de Chardin, etc., that the case for a Christian interpretation is more open. I trust that enough has been said to expose the rather lopsided positivist prejudice of theological scholars—be they New Testament men—who would advocate a minimal interpretation of the resurrection centred faith.

## II

The alleged ground for a minimal historical interpretation on grounds of 'form-criticism' is a technical subject in itself. It is too easily forgotten that form critics having themselves gone over Bultmann's path have urged a more affirmative acceptance of the resurrection data as history, i.e. C. H. Dodd, Walter Künneth, Oscar Cullmann, Vincent Taylor, etc. Professor Walter Künneth<sup>19</sup> in his magnificent book,<sup>20</sup> *The Theology of the Resurrection* (pp. 23-71), has rendered singular service by piecing together Bultmann's construction and subjecting it to critical examination. He concludes: 'The assumption that the resurrection of Jesus is endangered by changes in the world-picture is based upon a serious misunderstanding both of the character of the resurrection and also of the possibilities of scientific knowledge. Bultmann's fundamental error is thus to be seen in his confusing of "world-picture" with "world-view".'<sup>21</sup> C. H. Dodd in a rather technical essay, '... The Risen Christ: An Essay in Form-Criticism of the Gospels',<sup>22</sup> concludes: 'It has not been unusual to apply the term "myth" somewhat loosely to the resurrection-narratives of

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<sup>18</sup> With a bit of modification in the light of more recent advances in science, the basic thesis of the earlier part of *Le Compte du Nouy's Human Destiny* is still relevant, and unduly neglected.

<sup>19</sup> Walter Künneth is Professor of New Testament in the University of Erlangen and has been in the thick of the Bultmann debate.

<sup>20</sup> Künneth's book first came out in 1933. The English translation is from the new 1951 German edition, W. Künneth, *The Theology of the Resurrection* (London, S.C.M., 1965).

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 68.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. ed. D. E. Nineham, *Studies in the Gospels* (Oxford, 1955), pp. 9-35.

the Gospels as a whole. The foregoing investigation will have shown that, so far as the narratives of the appearances of the risen Christ are concerned, form-criticism offers no ground to justify the use of the term (myth) . . . They merit the same degree of critical consideration, not only in their aspect as witness to the faith of the early Church, but also as ostensible records of things that happened.<sup>23</sup>

If the resurrection, then, is historically true (in the opinion of at least some who have taken form-criticism seriously) there is an answer to the prayer of the *rishis*: *asato mā sad gamaya, tamaso mā jyotir gamaya, mr̥tyor mā amṛtam gamaya*.<sup>24</sup> Though, of course, the Christian idea of the resurrection is not to be equated with the idea of immortality as an inherent human propensity.<sup>25</sup> Christian experience and mysticism rooted in the reality of Christ's physical resurrection is the ground of Christian confidence, hope, joy and power. It is power for the tasks of identity in difference in the pluralistic, sociological, political and religious configurations of the Indian, Asian and world environment. By its power and in its strength we can grow open to face the needs of others and be thrown open to all human situations of work, service, worship and witness. Participating in Christ the first fruits of (a past historical, and a future possible general) resurrection impels us to be open to all human requirements, with the openness of Jesus the Christ, who was not only the man for others but was the redemptive messianic God-man for others. The resurrection faith gives a sense of identity and anchorage, so that one does not lose a sense of identity and selfhood, direction and purpose or suffer dissipation of meaning in the *process* of inter-human participation, for the Lord himself is risen—risen indeed!

### III

The whole point in raising the unwarranted nature of the so-called scientific ground for a minimal treatment of the resurrection was to show that it rests on a misunderstanding of science. Moreover, if such a minimal approach is followed it completely cuts off the historic and historical pivotal point of incommensurate and differentiable nature of the Gospel, the crux of Christianity in non-Christian-Christian communication. When Dr. S. Radhakrishnan, as President of India, inaugurated the St. Mira's College in Poona, he spoke of the emptiness of modern man. He said that modern man in Germany was devoid of a sense of meaning and purpose, and that this nihilistic mentality was creeping into India. He went on to say

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<sup>23</sup> Cf. C. H. Dodd in (edit. D. E. Nineham) *Studies in the Gospels*, p. 35.

<sup>24</sup> 'From the unseen lead me to the seen, from darkness lead me to light, from death lead me to immortality.'

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Oscar Cullmann, *Immortality of the Soul or the Resurrection of the Dead* (London, Epworth, 1958).

that death is not all, but there is a power to give energy and purpose and meaning to life. Then he quoted the Pauline text of thanksgiving for Jesus' victory over death (Mahatma Gandhi by contrast hardly mentioned the subject of Jesus' physical resurrection). However, if the full historical weight of the resurrection is squarely faced, Hindu mysticism is incommensurate with Christian experience and understanding—i.e. the denotative fact or event of the resurrection and the connotative significance of its meaning. But Dr. Radhakrishnan, in a manner so typical of his erudition, smothered that text by a wholly interesting but unrelated series of texts from the Gita, the Koran, etc.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, although the resurrection idea is totally absent from traditional Hinduism, neo-Hinduism through some of its exponents shows that the resurrection has some appeal to the Hindu mind. Swami Paramahansa Yogananda (the founder of the Self-realization Fellowship, California, U.S.A.) goes so far, in his autobiography, as to claim 'Rama raised from the Dead' and 'The Resurrection of Yuktishwar'.<sup>27</sup> This raises the need for historical cross-examination. It raises the need to test and explore the uniqueness of the resurrection of Jesus as a singularly outstanding component of his person. For, when Edward Gibbon says that Christianity spread in the Roman Empire because of the following causes:<sup>28</sup> (1) enthusiasm, (2) belief in immortality, (3) miracles, (4) ethics, (5) organization, it is to put the cart before the horse. For, an explanation of the generation of enthusiasm, ethical living, organization, etc., from dispirited, depressed and cowardly disciples is required. Historical inquiry drives one to take the Book of Acts and the New Testament Epistles more seriously, with their historically coherent and confident assumption of the resurrection of Jesus.

If the resurrection is historically untrue, the honest thing would be to plainly give it up.<sup>29</sup> In this case, there is no

<sup>26</sup> For a similar echo from Dr. S. Radhakrishnan, where again the resurrection is lightly passed off, cf. his *Religion in a Changing World* (London, Allen & Unwin, 1967), p. 65.

<sup>27</sup> P. Yogananda, *Autobiography of a Yogi* (Indian Edition), Chapters 32, 43.

<sup>28</sup> In his *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Ch. 15, Gibbon says: The faith spread due to (1) the 'intolerant zeal' of Christians. (2) 'The doctrine of a future life, improved by every additional circumstance which could give weight and efficacy to that important truth.' (3) 'Miraculous powers of the early Church. (4) 'The pure and austere morals of the Christians.' (5) 'The union and discipline of the Christian republic . . .'

<sup>29</sup> The older rationalist attack (pre-form critical) on the resurrection was demolished by Frank Morrison's best seller, *Who Moved the Stone?* The best survey and refutation of the older line of attack is to be found in the chapter, 'The Resurrection of Christ: An Apologetic for this Era Demanding Historic Certainty', in Wilbur M. Smith's *Therefore Stand* (Boston, Wilde & Co.). On the newer line of attack and refutation cf. Walter Künneth, etc. There is material for a comprehensive apologetic. But none has so far been synthesized.

divine answer to Governor Sarojini Naidu's heart-rending cry after the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi: 'Like Christ of old on the third day . . . My father, do not rest. Do not allow us to rest. Keep us to our pledge. Give us strength to fulfil our promise . . . You, whose life was so powerful, make it so powerful in your death.'<sup>30</sup> What the resurrection means to those who are gripped by its truth comes out in clear contrast in the experience of Pandita Ramabai who might be acclaimed as the mother of modern India.<sup>31</sup> As her age advanced, and as her daughter shaped up well in regard to administrative and spiritual potential, the Pandita and the model Mukti community fully expected Manoramabai to bear the burden of the chief office. Manoramabai's most unexpected death at the great mission hospital in Miraj could have been a shattering blow to Pandita Ramabai. Messages of consolation came flooding in. But here exactly the transcendent resurrection personalism came into personal faith and meaning for Pandita Ramabai. Instead of seeking consolation for herself, she sought to console others. She immediately dashed off a tract in Marathi, which was immediately printed off at the Mukti Press and widely distributed to console her condolers. 'We have', she declared, 'been told that each person who is born has to be born 8,400,000 times and die 8,400,000 times. Each time in birth sorrow and each time in death sorrow, therefore, people say they obtain salvation (*mōksha*) by doing good deeds to wipe out sins . . . The wages of his ancestral and personal sin is sorrow tears and death . . . To redeem man from the ditch of sin and sorrow, our Father God sent His only begotten true incarnation (*avatar*) Jesus Christ to the world . . . After suffering death for our sins Jesus rose again from the dead. Now those who put their trust in him will get life eternal.'<sup>32</sup> The rest of this tract of Ramabai was New Testament assurances of the love of God and the resurrection—quoted in her Marathi translation from the Greek, specially 1 Cor. 15.

#### IV

To gather some points of the meaning of the resurrection then, we may say firstly that the resurrection is a historic and historical event at the very least, but it has supra-historical

<sup>30</sup> Sarojini Naidu's radio broadcast from Delhi Station, 1st Feb., 1948, cf. Siddhantha and Deb, *English Prose Selections* (Indian) (Macmillan, 1959), pp. 1-7.

<sup>31</sup> This is suggested by Padmini Sen Gupta, an authority on the biography of India's great women. Asia Publishing House has published her biographies of *Sarojini Naidu*, *Pandita Ramabai*, etc.

<sup>32</sup> I have translated the substantial passage of Pandita Ramabai's tract, which will be found in the 'selections' of Ramabai, in the *Confession of Faith Series of the C.I.S.R.S.* The Biblical passages cited by Ramabai were: John 3:16; 1 Tim. 1:15, 16; 1 Cor. 15:1, 3, 20, 35, 39, 42, 50, 54, 57; Phil. 3:20; 1 Thess. 4:13-18; Titus 2:11-14; John 11:25-26, 14:1-3.



overtones (i.e. it is not only preternatural but is a meta-historical pointer). By virtue of its centrality to the Christian faith, it symbolizes the Christian evaluation of the bodily and the material. So, in our time, it can integrate the personal with a sense of meaning, purpose, and offer the directive *telos*, as priorities are sought for social and material concern for nation-building and world peace.

The resurrection moreover is the seal of approval on God's anointed, and hence it is the ground of our confidence in God and his Christ, whose atoning work covers all who would personally respond to this offer of the divinely initiated salvation. 'The realization', says Walter Künneth, 'of salvation is grounded in God's act of the resurrection, changes the situation of man, not indeed empirically but fundamentally and existentially.'<sup>33</sup>

The resurrection is the ground for our hope and joy in life and witness and nothing can take away the triumph of Christ's resurrection. For, even without their awareness, the triumph of modern achievements repose in the teleological reality disclosed in the death and resurrection of Jesus. To reinforce this point from Künneth: "*When the resurrection and creation are related together* we are very forcibly struck by the uniqueness of the fact of the resurrection, and of the Christology which is built upon it. *The resurrection is the very heart of cosmic Christology.* For this reason, in so far as the concept of creation cannot be properly developed save on Christological lines, the created world must be oriented towards the raising of Christ. *The orientation of all creation towards the resurrection as its fulfilment determines the real fundamental character of creation and provides a Christian doctrine of creation with its deepest meaning . . . Three distinct lines of thought will serve to prove the orientation of creation towards the resurrection. We must deal first with the incompleteness of the first creation; then we must clarify the concept of the "fallen" world. Finally we must show that the resurrection world is the fulfilment of creation . . . This created world has its existence not in itself but in the Creator's Christ-bound activity and in its own orientation towards this Christ.*"<sup>34</sup>

The resurrection further has a corporate significance. This event produced the Church. The Church, then, must be the continuing community of witness to the factual event of the physical or bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ, and his glorious transfigurative spiritual majesty with earnest expectation of his *parousia*. Unlike other social groups, the fellowship of the Church coheres around the testimony, witness and experience of the risen Christ. This knowledge is therefore the focus of

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<sup>33</sup> Walter Künneth, *The Theology of the Resurrection* (London, S.C.M., 1965), p. 159.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 164-165, italics original.

any possible revived renewal and dynamic openness of the Church. Where there is evidence of introverted stagnation and isolation, it is a challenge and call for the Church to more deeply experience the power of the risen one.

When the truth of the resurrection dawns on human personality it brings, and ought to bring over and over again, the assurance of Christ and his forgiving peace, freedom (*mōksha*) in the midst of life's circumstances and a fearless openness in Christ, to all human needs in the midst of the many calls and demands of life.

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