

Intimations of Resurrection—An Anthropological View

ALOYSIUS MICHAEL, S. J.*

A recent phenomenon in theology is an anthropological emphasis which is actually an outgrowth of the Christological viewpoint that sees Christ as man-become-God. This "ascension of man" gives depth and validity to the anthropological inquiry that seeks to show that Resurrection is rooted in our own personal experience and in that of humankind. "If the Resurrection of Jesus is to be proclaimed credibly at the present day as a fundamental dogma of Christianity, then (logically) we must establish the *a priori* horizon within which it can 'dawn' intelligibly and credibly...a mutual relation between actual experience and the establishment of its possibility is a constant feature of man's mental life."¹

Discussion of miracles in the past centered most often on the prodigy aspect (*téras*) of the happening which was the result of the intervention of God who suspended the law of nature. But now our perspective has considerably changed; we do not any more stress the suspension of the natural law, because the possibility of a miracle occurring exists in the very nature of indeterminate matter as created by God. In a similar way we seek a new dimension in the understanding of Christ's Resurrection based on a theological anthropology which does not have the last word in theology but certainly lays the ground-work.

We admit that Christ's Resurrection is a meta-historical fact, and as a historical fact it cannot be directly found in our human experience; and yet that is no reason why we should not look into and examine our experience because every genuine human experience reflects the mysteries of our faith, and the mystery of God is not an intrusion into our human reality, but rather it presupposes a capacity and a receptivity in the human being. We pursue this approach because "when we speak of the all-embracing mystery we do little more than repeat, somewhat tediously, what has already been said. But the truth of faith can only be retained by continuous new efforts in its regard. Here too it is true to say that one can only possess the past by making the present one's own."²

* Fr Michael is Flannery Professor in the Religious Studies Department of Gonzaga University, Spokane, U.S.A.

¹ K. Rahner, "Resurrection of Christ," in *Sacramentum Mundi*, Vol. V, London, 1970, p. 323.

² K. Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, Vol. IV, Baltimore, 1966, p. 105.

“ This does not mean that the ancient formulas which answer the question are eliminated or discarded as antiquated or even false. God forbid!...the ancient formula is not merely the end. It is also the starting-point of a spiritual movement of departure and return which is our only guarantee—or better, hope—of having *understood* the ancient formula. For no understanding is possible anywhere if what is understood remains fixed and frozen and is not launched into the movement of that nameless mystery which is vehicle of all understanding.”³

Man becomes all things (*quoddammodo omnia*) through his intellection and willing. In his self-reflection he can stand out of himself (*ex-sistere*) and transcend himself. This capacity of man to be both subject and object points up his transcendence over himself and not merely over the rest of the world. “The transcendence of man can also be seen in his action—as Blondel showed—which must always point beyond itself...the transcendental view of man takes the wholeness which it offers to thought and action more seriously than does any other humanism.”⁴

Historical and theological anthropology will show us how man was always in search of his transcendence. When primitive man worshipped the spirit of his ancestors, he was thereby hoping that one day he himself would be in the land of the spirits. In the Vedas we see man reaching out to God through sacrificial offerings, hoping thus to find himself again. In the Upanishads in which ancient Hindu religious thought reaches its high point, we come across seers searching to find ways to the Absolute. The Advaitin (the monist), for whom the ultimate reality is one, seeks to merge with the nameless One, thereby ensuring his transcendence for ever. The Dvaitin (the dualist), who believes there are other finite realities distinct from the infinite reality, seeks union with God, not in the unity of the One but in the unity of the One-in-many.

In Mesopotamia, knowledge of life after death was at its best ambivalent; there is, however, a trace that leads one to believe that the Mesopotamians believed in something that lived after death. But this trace gets adulterated as demonology takes over. The hunger for life after death is well expressed in the Epic of Gilgamesh. “The Mesopotamians felt the anguish of death, of an end beyond focus. Gilgamesh fails in his quest, but his odyssey is expressive of every search for a life after death. In this sense the poem is revealing of its background: the Assyrian-Babylonian philosophers could not yet find a solution, but neither could they bear the traditional idea of a dissolution of the personality at the moment of death...if the view of the Mesopotamian world is pessimistic, it is because it cannot be anything else: the hope of immortality is there but latent.”⁵

³ K. Rahner, *op. cit.*, pp. 105-106.

⁴ N. Schiffrers, “Religion I. A.,” in *Sacramentum Mundi*, Vol. V, p. 250.

⁵ E. Croatto, “The Hope of Immortality in the Main Cosmologies of the East,” in *Concilium*, Vol. 10, No. 6, December 1970, p. 24.

Achilles, Hercules, and Aqhat in the myth of Ugarit—all of them basically long for immortality but choose or are content with fame because they do not hope to achieve immortality.⁶

The elaborate costly burial of the Egyptian kings and nobles points up to the hope of life after death, but this hope was reserved for the rich and the powerful. But eventually the idea that all men, not only the Pharaohs, could share in immortality emerges. In the thought of Zoroaster, salvation and hence immortality is not merely individualistic but universal and cosmic.

Now we turn to a consideration of the Old Testament anthropology regarding immortality because of its connection with the Resurrection of Christ. In earlier times, the Old Testament writers did not conceive of the Resurrection of the body but not for the reasons the Greek philosophy advanced. Unlike the Greeks who held that man is composed of body and soul, the Hebrews of old believed that man is a body given life by the "spirit" of God. Therefore without the body there is no soul. In Sheol there are no souls; nevertheless something of the man survives there. Those in Sheol are separated from Yahweh and this is the depth of evil for man. Hence long life is better since man can praise God in life but not after death. This is the problem that causes anguish in Job. With Ezekiel we have the nation coming to life again in the imagery of the dead bones which at the prophecy of Ezekiel were covered with flesh and overlaid with skin (see Ezek. 37: 1-14).

"For the notion of resurrection the idea of a personal survival and reward was necessary. That idea is present very frequently in the *Book of Wisdom* and in a way unknown previously in the Old Testament. There is no express mention of the resurrection itself in the book, so we have drawn upon two sets of data for deducing it. The first is the author's very semitic anthropology, and the fact that immortality is always presented as a reward for holiness."⁷

Most of the writers⁸ deal with the Resurrection of Christ from the vantage point of what actually happened after Christ rose from the dead. We are not concerned here with the post-Resurrection period, but as we did until now, we want to concentrate on the pre-Resurrection period in the Gospels (which, of course, were written after that great event) in order to show how the actual Resurrection was the culmination and summation of what was hoped for. Again the perspective is anthropological and not dogmatic.

We have abundant references to life after death in the Gospels and the sayings are attributed to Christ himself. The Sermon on the Mount is an eloquent testimony to the kingdom of heaven that is to come, that is to be possessed by the poor, the sorrowful, the merciful,

⁶ See E. Croatto, *art. cit.*, pp. 24-26.

⁷ R. Taylor, "The Eschatological Meaning of Life and Death in the Book of Wisdom I-V" in *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovaniensis*, Jan.-March 1966, p. 131.

⁸ See Guardini, *The Lord*, London, 1959, pp. 403-415.

the pure and the peace-makers (see Matt. 5: 3-12). The wide gate leads to perdition and the narrow one leads to life (see Matt. 7: 13-14). Perdition and life are totally opposed. Life is a rich concept and in the synoptic use it is overlaid with the conception of life of the Old Testament writers which is an expression of the fullness of life with moral integrity. The synoptics do not have any regard to the fulfilment of life in this life; its fullness is to come after death.

The story of Lazarus and the rich man shows the contrast between life here below and the life beyond death. "One day he poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried, and in Hades, where he was in torment, he looked up; and there, far away, was Abraham with Lazarus close beside him" (Luke 16:22-24). The rich man realizes that Abraham cannot do anything for him, but his mind turns towards those who are still on earth, his brothers whom he wants to warn about this "place of torment."

Jesus on the Cross promises the thief, who prayed that he be remembered "when you come to your throne" (Luke 23: 42), that he will be with him in paradise.

Religious history and anthropology underline the fact that "man is a being who looks to the future which is his fulfilment. Because man is a unity, he cannot at all events spontaneously think of his fulfilment, this goal of life, simply as a fulfilment of his 'soul'. His life is oriented toward fulfilment as a man even if he cannot imagine such a fulfilment or can more easily conceive certain features of it (e.g., fulfilment of personal spirit as such) than others."⁹ This looking toward the future is what we might call the "anonymous hope" of Resurrection typified in the ancient Egyptian and Mesopotamian, Hindu and Hebrew anthropologies. When at the end of such a reflection we bring in the actual historical fact of the Resurrection of Christ, grasped in faith, then the Resurrection of Christ and our own will not appear to be an intrusion into this world, but fit in with the whole pattern of man's thinking and aspiration, both of which ultimately come from God. Our experience and that of the humanity in which we recognize our spiritual transcendence square with the Christian eschatological hope which finds fruition in Resurrection. From this perspective, therefore, the actual historical Resurrection of Christ acquires for us greater strength and validity because credibility and faith are two sides of a coin.

⁹ K. Rahner, "Resurrection of Christ," in *Sacramentum Mundi*, Vol. V, London, 1970, p. 323.