

The Resurrection and Moral Theology: Does It Make Any Difference?

Anthony J. Kelly CSsR

Abstract: *The following is an excerpt from the forthcoming book, *The Resurrection-Effect in Christian Life and Thought*. In a concluding chapter, the strange absence of reference to the resurrection in ethical and moral deliberations is considered. Here, we take up this question and consider more positively the resurrection-effect in the theory and practice of Christian morality, and in the discernment of the ethical values which profoundly influence world history.*

Key Words: Jesus Christ – resurrection; Christian ethics; moral theology; human rights; social justice; natural law

1. A QUESTION

We begin with a question: How does the resurrection affect moral theology and Christian ethics? Brian Johnstone is one of the few who have addressed this question.¹ He points out that in neither Protestant nor Catholic versions of Christian ethics is the resurrection a central feature but has at most an extrinsically supportive or motivational role. A significant exception is Oliver O'Donovan's *Resurrection and the Moral Order* as it offers an outline of an evangelical ethics.² But even here, the resurrection functions as a reinstatement of the moral order of the world, rather than radically refashioning it. In another key entirely, F.-X. Durrwell's seminal *The Resurrection*³ is rich in spiritual vision but pretends to no practical ethical, let alone political, application. More recently, N.T. Wright in his monumental *The Resurrection of the Son of God*⁴ certainly brings out the political importance of resurrection faith in New Testament times,⁵ but without making any contemporary ethical applications. The discipline of moral theology is especially intent on the articulation and global application of human values, and to this end appeals to various versions of the venerable "natural law" tradition. The resurrection, however, appears to be somewhat extrinsic to such concerns. Should it make a difference? For example, is the "nature" underpinning "natural law" in any way affected

¹ Brian V. Johnstone, "Transformation Ethics: The Moral Implications of the Resurrection", in Stephen T. Davis, Daniel Kendall, and Gerald O'Collins (eds.), *The Resurrection: An Interdisciplinary Symposium on the Resurrection of Jesus* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 339-360.

² Oliver O'Donovan, *Resurrection and the Moral Order: An Outline for Evangelical Ethics* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1986).

³ F.-X. Durrwell, *The Resurrection: A Biblical Study*. Trans. Rosemary Sheed (London and New York: Sheed and Ward, 1960).

⁴ N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2003).

⁵ Wright, *Resurrection*, 563-584, 719-736.

by the transformative event of the resurrection? Is the focal event in the life of faith to be methodologically excluded or deferred, or regarded as of merely motivational significance when it comes down to the practical realities of the moral life?

2. STRANGE STIRRINGS

The effect of resurrection of the Crucified appears to be only faintly registered in theology's moral deliberations. An obvious factor in this situation is the dominance of an abstract, a-historical form of reason over any sense of particularised reality; and the resurrection, despite its cosmic and universal significance, is a very particular phenomenon. A generalised notion of "religious experience" is surely helpful for interfaith exchanges on the need for shared global responsibility in issues such as peace, justice and the meaning of life. But something is amiss if the Christian contribution to such dialogue bypasses the originality and uniqueness of the event that gave rise to the Christian tradition itself. In the resurrection, the crucified One is disclosed—transformed himself and transforming others, in the power of a self-giving love greater than the death-dealing powers of the world. It is this phenomenon that saturates Christian existence. It precedes any philosophical or theological system, and eludes any common pattern of religious experience. It is the self-disclosive, revelatory event that calls forth faith and moral responsibility.

How, then, does this focal Christian phenomenon affect the method and content of Christian moral reflection? How is the resurrection an intrinsic factor in the style, mood and rationality of Christian morality. Many answers are possible. But theologians may well be apprehensive, fearing a narrowing of perspective. Engagement with values of the secular world might be weakened by what is so peculiar to the Christian tradition. But there is another side to this: the secular world itself is showing an awareness, however unnamed, of a new moral conscience in regard to the victims of history. This is an unprecedented contemporary phenomenon. As Girard observes, "No historical period, no society we know, has ever spoken of victims...you will not find anything anywhere that even remotely resembles our modern concern for victims... It is the secular face of Christian love."⁶ This new development in moral sensitivity gives a fresh hearing to voices from the underside of the "success stories" that have dominated history. Despite the nihilistic relativism and moral confusions of the age, there is obviously something else at work. It is a powerful factor in any form of social and political awareness. Could it be, then, that the resurrection of the crucified Jesus, far from being a distraction from secular morality, is in fact its missing foundation?

3. THE MISSING FOUNDATION

One of the most noble carriers of what Girard termed the "secular face of Christian love" was the United Nations' *Universal Declaration on Human Rights* (UNDHR) in 1948. It underpins the various commitments to restorative justice present in the (usually Western) political process today.⁷ Recognition of the dispossessions suffered by indigenous peoples in the colonial period, claims of poor countries for cancellation of debts, and even the

⁶ René Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2001), 161.

⁷ For a thorough and stimulating study (not yet published), see Peter Stork, *Human Rights in Crisis: Is There no Answer to Human Violence? A Cultural Critique in Conversation with René Girard and Raymund Schwager*. (Australian Catholic University. Dissertation, 2006).

present awakening to ecological values, are all part of the picture. The once marginalised are now within the frame. With the collapse of totalitarian regimes has come a deep suspicion of any self-glorifying version of the history of any particular nation, society or culture. Whether the response is one of authentic compassion or not, the cry of victims cannot be easily dismissed.

As a result, conscience stirs with a refreshed sense of justice. Typically it speaks in the name of a more inclusive common good, in the language of universal rights, and political and economic emancipation. Theologically speaking, this is evidence of a “searching Christology” that will find its fullest meaning in the God revealed in the crucified and risen Victim. It suggests, in a field of mustard seeds, how the Gospel slowly permeates the world, sprouting in the stony ground of the violence inherent in any human culture. The reign of God over a new, reconciled humanity does not lack its signs.

In this context, Michael Ignatieff has made a perceptive observation regarding this extraordinary development in the history of moral conscience:

Rights are universal because they define the universal interests of the powerless—namely that power be exercised over them in ways that respect their autonomy as [moral] agents...[Rights] represent a revolutionary creed, since they make a radical demand of all human groups that they serve the interests of the individuals that compose them.⁸

The powerless who effectively had no legal status are being recognised as having inviolable human rights. Those who in effect possessed no autonomy in the political world begin to enjoy an institutional recognition of their human dignity. The affirmation of human rights is, therefore, a “revolutionary creed”. Any community must now conceive of the common good in a more inclusive way: those who in the past had been left out of political calculation demand now to be acknowledged.

While it is true that the terrible toll of the victims of totalitarian regimes have pricked the conscience of the international community, that conscience has not been uniformly reformed. The moral revolution that was hoped for has been frustrated in innumerable instances. One example is the prevalence of a spurious language of victimhood. Claiming “victim status” has now become a familiar manipulative technique in politics. A contributing factor in this distortion is the missing element in the UNDHR itself. As its framers admitted, there was no accompanying declaration of responsibilities—on the part of persons, groups or institutions—to assume the duty of implementing the basic rights in question. Another document was promised, but never appeared.⁹ With no reasoned grounding of universal human rights in universal responsibility, rights-language can be simply taken over by a consumerist culture. If that is the case, the appeal to rights is no more than a political machination, a useful rhetoric for the exercise of power. It balloons out into an uncontrolled assertion of rights, individual or corporate, against others, without any commitment to the common good and of responsibility for the truly powerless. And so it happens that the originally noble conception of human rights for all is trivialised, liable to exploitation by the politically adept few. Shared responsibility for the most vulnerable and powerless is thus compromised. A study by L. C. Keith sought to assess how much belonging to the *International Covenant on Civil and Political*

⁸ Michael Ignatieff, “Attack on Human Rights”, *Foreign Affairs* 80.6 (2001): 102-116. For a major study, Michael Ignatieff, *Human Rights as Politics and Idolatry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

⁹ See Mary Ann Glendon, *A World Made New: Eleanor Roosevelt and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (New York: Random House, 2001), 36.

Rights affected the promotion of human rights.¹⁰ After examining a hundred and seventy eight countries over an eighteen-year period, his conclusions were not optimistic: observable impact was minimal.

Yet there is still that stirring of conscience. Despite the waning of what was once termed “Christian civilisation”, it would seem that the paschal mystery of Christ’s death and resurrection is in fact penetrating human history in a surprising way. Even though the moral and philosophical foundation of human rights remains largely unarticulated, even if a kind of cultural amnesia with regard to the historical sources of social meaning and values is often lamented, the resurrection-effect has had its influence. There is a sense, however inarticulate and obscure, that, in the end, the proud are scattered in the conceit of their hearts, the mighty are toppled from their thrones, and the lowly, from the underside of history, are lifted up (Lk 1:52-53).

The moral precariousness of this new conscience with regard to the poor and the powerless provokes a fresh theological reception of the resurrection as the focal Christian phenomenon. For it is the self-disclosure of the truth “that will make you free” (Jn 8:32). The stone rejected by the builders of fortresses against the outsider has been made the chief corner-stone of a dwelling open to all (1 Pt 2:4-8// Mt 21:42; Mk 12:11; Ac 4:11. Cf. Ps 117: 22). A pacific humanity is in-the-making. Domination, exploitation and envy have no place in a culture of peace; while love of the other, forgiveness and reconciliation, solidarity with the suffering, are the necessary values. Paul’s words have a striking modern relevance: “Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. ... do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as depends on you, live peaceably with all” (Rom 12:17-19; cf. 14:13). How can we express more exactly the connection of a pacific humanity with the resurrection of the crucified Jesus?

The very gap in the UNDHR Declaration and the current confusion as to what constitutes the basis of human rights is an open door for Christian theology, inviting it to recover a distinctive voice. The message would be something like this: Jesus’ rising from the dead undermines the history of mutual blaming and victimisation. For he freely exposed himself to the violence of cultural forces in order to disrupt, once and for all, the old world order based on the victimisation of others. His resurrection is not a new thought, but an irruptive and communicative event. It has its effect in a human community transformed into the image of the self-giving love of God. Jesus is glorified, not so as to glorify the role of the victim, but to unmask the victimising dynamics latent in all societies. The resurrection of this victim has a disturbing but liberating effect in the human community. It demands to be taken as the decisive influence in human relationships, the inexhaustible inspiration of responsibility for those victimised by suffering and oppression. Those who have suffered (victims, martyrs), and those who have caused such suffering (the enemy), are alike enfolded in the originary compassion and forgiveness embodied in the risen One.

4. PROVOCATION AND PRAXIS

How Christian moral theology might respond practically to the provocation of the resurrection is a continuing challenge. At issue is a social praxis explicitly focused on the resurrection of the Crucified. Liberation and Political theologies, along with the Church’s

¹⁰ L. C. Keith, “The United Nations Covenant on Civil and Political Rights: Does it Make a Difference in Human Rights Behavior?” *Journal for Peace Research* 36.1 (1999): 95-118.

growing body of social teaching, certainly express a Christian solidarity with the weak and the oppressed. The more realistic the understanding and more practical the application of this sense of Christian solidarity, the more a problem emerges. Any reference to the resurrection can appear as a way of evading the hard, demanding edge of social responsibilities. But need this be so? I would suggest that the resurrection not only does not distract from social responsibilities, but also is exactly what a socially and politically concerned Christian morality most needs.

In the self-disclosures of the risen Victim, his disciples receive their mission. They are sent out to work for transformation of the world in the light and in the power of what has already been anticipated in Christ's rising from the dead. However this mission is expressed, it must evidence compassion and responsibility for those who, like the Crucified, have suffered under the death-dealing power of the world. It proclaims a liberation that death is powerless to inhibit. Such a mission refreshes its energies in continuing prayer—that the name of the God who raised up Jesus be hallowed; that the kingdom of such a God will come; and that the life-giving will of the Father of Jesus will be done—now on earth, as in the heaven of God's intention "in the beginning". Thus, the "resurrectional" act of God is the source, inspiration and hope of "resurrectional" praxis intent on uplifting the suffering other. It finds expression in the moral imperatives of peace, justice and human dignity.

Jesus' rising from the dead is an expansive event. In the protological and eschatological dimensions of God's saving action, the first and last word is peace and reconciliation. The beginning and the end are not caught up in the continuing dialectic of conflict between good and evil. To grasp that is to see that the "other," however malevolent, death-dealing, indifferent—or simply "different"—is not a terminal threat to Christian integrity. All are destined to belong in Christ and to find their reconciliation in him. The "other" can never be sacrificed for the sake of "me" or "us". "We", in the most comprehensive sense, belong together.

The Gospel is clearly quite aware of the contrary option: Caiaphas is prepared to sacrifice Jesus for the stability of the political and religious order (Jn 11:50), just as Pilate consigns him to death for reasons of the imperial *pax Romana*. Political accommodations of that type presume a certain conception of peace. But it is ever fragile and elusive, achievable only through calculations of a balance of power. But when is power ever content with a balance? Rivals must remain a threat; and if a threat, there is really no place for them in any future desirable state of affairs. They do not belong with "us" in what is coming to be. In contrast, the resurrection of crucified Jesus embodies peace as the reconciliatory event which has already occurred.¹¹ God has acted by vindicating the Victim. For the sake of an all-inclusive salvation, Jesus had chosen the way of powerlessness, in contrast to the way of power and domination of others. In the vulnerability of love, he had given himself over to the peace that only God can give. Such love and such peace are the radical subversion of "the way things are" and of the authority of "the powers that be". The inviolable, religiously-sanctioned, social and political order thus had reason to fear. The kind of future that Jesus embodied inspired the conviction that the mighty are to be toppled from their thrones and the lowly and despised raised up (Lk 1:52-53). The event of Christ's resurrection changed this hope from the apparently naïve and impractical idea—which caused him to be its chief casualty—to an eschatological vindication of his way of seeing and imagining the world. Consequently, the

¹¹ See William Bole, Drew Anderson, and Robert Hennemeyer, *Forgiveness in International Politics* (Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2004).

resurrection-event is a “given” in all the labour of peace-making. In this regard, the risen Jesus is peace-in-person. He comes in the Trinitarian vitality of self-giving love, as the way and the truth in which reconciliation is offered to the world. Though his resurrection, the divine persons are disclosed to the world of violence as being from and for each other in a dynamic of mutual love. Such a divine unity, eternally differentiated and eternally achieved in self-giving love, is the all-encompassing original and final truth. Outside and apart from this source and exemplar, any hope for reconciliation or peace-making activity is deprived of its ultimate support.

The theological horizon must unfold, therefore, in an open-ness to the phenomenon of the resurrection. It saturates all moral existence. It is the revelation, from beginning to end, of a communication demanding the re-ordering of all human and religious values. God is revealed in action. The Spirit of the resurrection counters the idolatrous pretensions of any totalitarian ideology, along with the violence and victimisation it demands. A new covenant is written into the flesh and blood of the risen Victim. In him is disclosed God’s unconditional love for the world—even at the point of maximum evil. The event of this gift of the new covenant, already realised in Christ and communicated in his Spirit, renders obsolete the contractual calculations that structure a world against the weak for the advantage of the powerful. By raising the crucified Victim from the dead, the God of this covenant exposes the flimsy power-deals made for the purpose of dominating others. The endless dialectic of competitive identities, of the self asserting itself over the other, is negated at root. An empty tomb becomes a troubling space at the heart of any “order” and “peace” founded on the domination of the poor and the powerless. This stone, rejected by the builders of self-serving societies, has become the chief corner-stone for a civilisation of peace and ultimate reconciliation.

An alternative form of justice is engendered. The kind of politics intent merely on restoring the balance of entitlements in a radically diseased and violent world is called into question. Once the resurrection has occurred, that “world is passing away” (1 Jn 2:17). In the new aeon already begun, justice is newly defined through the vindication of the crucified Victim. Justice, in such a light, must become the expression of the moral imagination of love. It promotes solidarity with all victims. It realises that reconciliation of enemies is the only way forward. It dares to see forgiveness as a practical option.

5. RESURRECTION AND NATURAL LAW

Problems, of course, abound. The political and social seductions of the death penalty are perennial. New issues arise related to torturing enemies for the sake of national security. The conditions legitimating war in defence of national or regional interests are the subject of endless deliberation. Is there a point when all such options appear as counsels of desperation in a world where nothing has really changed, and no real change is possible? And is that point found precisely in the resurrection of the crucified Jesus? Whatever the complexity acknowledged by moral prudence in the instances just named, that prudence remains questionable if it used to guide human conduct in the world without any recognition of how God has decisively acted within and for it. For the prudence appropriate to a post-resurrectional world is a practical anticipation of eschatological peace. It guides a vision of human community in which the victimisation of some is not the precondition of lasting life for others. The divinely-given victim has unmasked the assumption that making victims is the prelude to peace. His resurrection reveals the

ultimate fruitfulness of sharing in his self-giving love.¹² This is to say that the resurrection-event inspires the creativity of a new manner of conceiving the common good. Such a new social imagination draws its inspiration, not from some utopian dream, but from the event that changed everything. To meet the challenges involved cannot but be experienced as a terrible risk. The moral life is left with no support other than the way the true God has acted. If that is true, if the source, form and goal of life have been finally revealed in this manner, how can Christian morality not “risk” itself on the belief that what it holds to be true is, as a fundamental fact, really true?

However implicitly Christ’s paschal mystery has been at work in the long struggle for emancipation from the oppressions of poverty, powerlessness and degradation, it demands a fresh consideration. In the face of the disillusionment and impotence, all the passionate energies of liberation, all the courageous critique of the way things are, do not finally rely on some mythic symbol or on an ever-deferred future. That future is already inscribed into the reality of history.¹³ It is the source of an impetus to something more; and more worthy of God’s transformative judgment on human and cosmic history. To this degree, the work of liberation is not first of all the efforts of some courageous but limited few human beings concerned to free their fellows, but a sharing in the divine liberative freedom already enacted and at work in the resurrection of Jesus. The compassionate freedom of the transcendent Other, unrestrained by human violence and death, is in act. As a result, it is no more a matter of some, however enlightened and empowered, pitting themselves against recalcitrant others, but of sharing in the self-giving love of the Other whose grace embraces all. In this way, the unknowable future can be approached only through what has already anticipated it. The assurance of what is to come and of what is already in-the-making is earthed in the singularity of the resurrection-event. The enormous excess of evil, increasingly apparent in its global proportions, is met by another excess, that of the love, stronger than any death we know. It has already raised up the Crucified, and made him the source of life to the full (Jn 10:10). At that crucial juncture, the sting of death’s power of death is drawn. The great prophets and martyrs who have given their lives for others are present to the world in the God to whom all are forever alive (Mk 12:18-27; Mt 22:23-33; Lk 20:27-38).¹⁴ The “natural law” built on a communication of global moral values need not be continually mocked by the excess of evil. It is a way of hopeful moral thinking within a history in which the ultimate vindication of human values has occurred in Christ. In a singularly evocative passage, Vatican II’s *Gaudium et Spes* points theology in the right direction:

We know neither the moment of the consummation of the earth or of the human, nor the way the universe will be transformed. The form of this world, distorted by sin, is passing away; and we are taught that God is preparing a new dwelling and a new earth in which righteousness dwells, whose happiness will fill and surpass all the desires for peace arising in human hearts...

When we have spread on earth the fruits of our nature and our enterprise—human dignity, fraternal communion, and freedom—according to the command of the Lord and in his Spirit, we will find them once again, cleansed this time from stain of sin, illuminated and transfigured, when Christ presents to his Father an eternal and

¹² Johnstone notes that for Aquinas (cf. STh 2-2, q. 39) war is treated in the context of charity, not justice!

¹³ Denis Edwards, “Resurrection and the Costs of Evolution: A Dialogue with Rahner on Non-Interventionist Theology,” *Theological Studies* 67 (2006): 816-833, especially 827-833.

¹⁴ See James Alison, *Raising Abel: The Recovery of the Eschatological Imagination* (New York: Crossroad, 1996), 34-41, for a profound exegesis of this text.

universal kingdom... Here on earth the kingdom is mysteriously present; when the Lord comes, it will enter into its perfection.¹⁵

Since it values human dignity, community and freedom that have a future, it is “natural” for moral theology to expand its solidarity with all humanity, aspiring to an ultimate good that is not ever at the perverse mercy of evil. Thus, the resurrection-event is productive of a universalising, inclusive form of moral reasoning, not as a “second best”, but as pertaining to the universal significance of the resurrection itself. “Natural Law”, in this sense, is the eschatological law of humanity on its path to transformation—and to resurrection in Christ. It remains a mode of ethical thinking within the world of violence and evil. But it sees further. It looks through the recognition of the rights and dignity of all to glimpse the destiny of everyone as called to participate in the communion of eternal life.

The “supernatural” event of the resurrection occurs within a world built on the assumption that the dead stay dead, and that victory belongs to the powerful. Yet it affects the natural moral law, not as an extrinsic motivation, but as inexhaustibly productive force. It animates moral reasoning, in this respect, as an expression of hope: the values it appeals to and meaning of personal existence it promotes energise self-transcendence to point where each one can be a redemptive presence in the community, and each community a creator of a more human future. The last word is not left to death, and to the powers that use the threat of death for their purposes. It does its work, not beholden to an ontology of violence—allowing at best for a balance of power—but within a patient ontology of peace and of the eternal life in which all that is best in human existence will find its future in transforming love of God. In such moral thinking, the resurrection is pre-eminently the “God Effect.”¹⁶ Moral theologians and Christian ethicists may well observe a certain *disciplina arcani* regarding the resurrection in the secular contexts of many of their ethical deliberations. But this does not mean, nor must it mean, a methodological exclusion of the significance of God’s victory over evil in raising Jesus from the tomb. Detached from this event that makes all the difference, Christian moral discourse, however it might attempt to be relevant to a culture that is cut off from its Christian roots, would become irrelevant to what is most fundamental to its vision of the world and its future. At the price of its authenticity, Christian theology cannot pretend that the resurrection has not happened.

Author: Anthony Kelly CSsR is a professor of theology at Australian Catholic University and a member of the International Theological Commission. His most recent book is *Eschatology and Hope* (Orbis, 2006).

Email: a.kelly@acu.edu.au

¹⁵ Vatican II, *The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, Gaudium et Spes*, §39, in Austin P. Flannery OP (ed.), *Documents of Vatican II: New Revised Edition* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1984), 938.

¹⁶ Kevin Hart, *The Trespass of the Sign. Deconstruction, Theology and Philosophy* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), 273-298.