

# THE MYSTERY OF GOD

ONE OF OUR MOST frequently-used religious words is ‘God’. We often use it so matter-of-factly that we can give the impression we understand this God we are talking about very well. Familiarity breeds complacency. We need to keep reminding ourselves that God is totally other than we are, God is spiritual, God is the ultimate mystery. If we can say anything at all about God it is because God has revealed to us something of himself and his plans.

Indeed, there are lots of things we can say about God based on what God has revealed to us of himself. But significant and all as what we know of God is—and there are whole libraries of books and articles on the subject—the insights we have are but glimpses into the mystery of God. We can say what we can say about God because our God is personal and our God speaks to us—our God is a God who speaks. He speaks his Word to us, he communicates himself personally to us. But even so God is far more hidden than revealed—ininitely more hidden. God lifts the veil of the mystery of himself just a little. This is not because God is stingy with his self-revelation—on the contrary, it is because God dwells ‘in unapproachable light, whom no-one has ever seen or can see’ (1Tim 6:16). God is too bright for us, beyond what we human beings are able to contemplate.

God speaks to us human beings in ways that we can understand. God communicates with us: ‘In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets’ (Heb 1:1). All the Old Testament is the record of God’s self-communication to the People of God preserved in the writings of inspired authors. ‘But in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son’ (Heb. 1:2). In Christ Jesus God communicates himself fully: ‘He [Christ] reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature’ (Heb 1:3). Christ is the Word of God (Jn 1:1)—

in this Word God expresses himself fully—and the ‘Word was made flesh and dwelt amongst us...we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father’ (Jn 1:14). ‘No one has ever seen God; the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known. (Jn 1:18). ‘He who sees me sees the Father; I and the Father are one’ (Jn 14:9).

Pope Benedict XVI has written:

God has become quite concrete in Christ, but in this way his mystery has also become still greater. God is always infinitely greater than all our concepts and all our images and names.’ (Pope Benedict XVI in JF Thornton and SB Varenne (eds.) 2007: *The Essential Pope Benedict XVI*, p.10.)

John the Evangelist conveyed something of his ecstatic joy when he wrote (1Jn 1-4):

Something which has existed since the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our own eyes, which we have watched and touched with our own hands, the Word of life—this is our theme.

That life was made visible; we saw it and are giving our testimony, declaring to you the eternal life, which was present to the Father and has been revealed to us.

We are declaring to you what we have seen and heard, so that you too may share our life. Our life is shared with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.

We are writing this to you so that our joy may be complete.

Our knowledge of God is always mediated—God is spiritual, not visible to our bodily senses, and we come to know God, to encounter God, to hear God’s voice, through things, persons and events of our experience and our world. In other words, all God’s self-revelation to us has a ‘sacramental character’ (cf. John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio* par. 13). A sacrament is a reality of our world imbued with the hidden presence of God (cf. Paul VI, open-

ing address before the second session of Vatican II).

The Word of God, the Son of God become man, the Word made flesh and come to dwell amongst us, is the great sacrament and symbol of God's presence with us. In Jesus God became 'Emmanuel'—God-with-us—and the disciples walked and talked with him and observed him in his ministry and heard his preaching. We now do not experience Jesus of Nazareth in the flesh as the first disciples did, but we are invited to continue to make personal contact with him in his Church, which is the Body of Christ, and in his word.

The word of God as we read it in the Scriptures and as we hear it proclaimed in the Church also is sacramental (cf. Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini*, the post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation on the Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church, 30<sup>th</sup> September 2010, par. 56):

We come to see that at the heart of the sacramentality of the word of God is the mystery of the Incarnation itself: 'the Word became flesh' (Jn 1:14), the reality of the revealed mystery is offered to us in the 'flesh' of the Son. The Word of God can be perceived by faith through the 'sign' of human words and actions. Faith acknowledges God's Word by accepting the words and actions by which he makes himself known to us. (*Verbum Domini*, *loc. cit.*)

God speaks to us in the Scriptures, he communicates with us, reveals himself to us through the written word of God, and especially as it is read in Church. Through his word God discloses—lifts the veil on—the mystery of himself.

It has been suggested that the most far-reaching reform of Vatican II was the reinstatement of the word of God in Catholicism, the three-year cycle of readings in the Lectionary being a product of that reform. When we consider what God is doing when we ponder the word and when we hear the word in the sacred liturgy we can see why this might be so.

God reveals himself also in his creation—revelation is cosmic as well as historical (in the history of the People of God and in the person of Jesus Christ). God created the world. Nature is God's handiwork and thus it manifests his goodness and glory. 'Through the grandeur and beauty of the creatures we may, by analogy, contemplate their author' (Wis. 13:5). Or, in the words of the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins: 'The world is charged with the grandeur of God [...] There lives the dearest freshness deep down things' (*God's Grandeur*).

At times in the history of Christianity 'divine revelation' has been understood as the communication of information that can be expressed in propositions—this is called the 'propositional theory' of revelation. In contemporary theology, reflected in the *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation* of Vatican II, revelation is understood as God's gracious personal *self*-revelation, and only secondarily as a communication of information.

It is cause for our joy that God, without losing anything of his mystery, reveals himself, communicates himself, speaks, listens and answers, inviting us to live more deeply in his company as friends.

—Barry Brundell MSC, Editor

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*Everyone is aware of the great impulse which the Dogmatic Constitution [of Vatican II] Dei Verbum gave to the revival of interest in the word of God in the life of the Church, to theological reflection on divine revelation and to the study of sacred Scripture.*

—Benedict XVI, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Verbum Domini*, 30th September 2010, par. 8.

# THEOLOGY AND GOD

JEAN RICHARD MSC

## WHAT IS THEOLOGY?

### Faith Seeking Understanding

According to the classical formula, theology is ‘faith seeking understanding’. One might also say that it is ‘the understanding of the faith’. True, one can believe without understanding. One can believe without knowing any theology and thus without any understanding of the faith. Some would even say that this is true faith. It would be blind faith (believing without seeing) which Christ lauded in his words to the apostle Thomas: ‘Blessed are they who have not seen and yet believe’ (Jn 20 :29). Others speak in similar manner in saying that faith concerns God and the divine, and we cannot understand God. All attempts at understanding the faith would be illusory, even a perversion of faith. And so some extoll the faith of simple people who believe spontaneously, without reflection, without questioning and without experiencing any doubts.

But what is to be done when questions begin to be asked and doubts begin to arise? Should one set them aside, repel them as temptations of the devil which endanger the faith and threaten to destroy it? Whence comes such questioning of the faith? From the outside, from sources hostile to the faith? Do they not rather come from the life, from the vitality of the faith itself? Does not growth in faith demand and call for a more adequate expression?

To clarify, it will be useful to distinguish on the one hand the content of the faith itself and on the other the differing expressions of this content. We might also speak of the divine mystery itself on the one hand and the human language in which this mystery is expressed on the other. It is one thing to close oneself to the revelation of the divine mystery; it is another to question one or other ex-

pressions of this mystery.

Saint Paul spoke of how, as he grew older, he had to abandon childish language in order to adopt the language of an adult (1 Cor. 13 :11). One can say the same about growing in faith: some expressions of the faith seem more and more inadequate. We cannot entertain them any longer.

### An Interpretation of the Faith

What is to be done, then? Should one reject everything—‘throw out the baby with the bath water’? This is what many of our contemporaries have done: they were educated in the Christian faith but have subsequently rejected it entirely. They have come to realise the inadequacies of the faith (the formulas of faith) of their childhood. They have concluded that faith is something for children and that they must move on now that they have reached adulthood, the age of critical reasoning.

But it is possible to adopt another attitude, and this is where theology comes in. It is prompted by an intuition that there is something more than the formulas of faith, that there is something that is beyond the formulas. The formulas are no more than expressions of the content of the faith, of the mystery of the faith. They are symbols of the faith and like all symbols they point to things beyond themselves; they point to mystery, more or less adequately.

The task of theology, then, is to ‘understand’—not God, but the symbolic language of the faith, perceiving its deep significance. Evidently it will never be able to clarify the mystery itself and present it in its pure divine state, beyond all linguistic and symbolic expression. Rather we might say that the task of the theologian is to translate into another language that is more accessible today what Christian tradition has been expressing in the lan-

guage that belonged to former times. Thus the theologian is an interpreter. And like all interpreters, the theologian re-expresses in more familiar language what has already been said in a language that has become foreign and incomprehensible. Thus the language will be different, but the content signified must be the same. Such is both the task and the risk of all theology.

**An Auto-interpretation of the Faith**

One might think that we are speaking of something objective that comes to us from outside us and which we must examine attentively in order to recognise the mystery hidden under the expressions which convey it to us. Indeed, this is how we normally think. God reveals his mystery from on high through the mediation of messengers who express it in human language. Our part, then, is to receive the message and make it our own.

But we might interpret the process of revelation and faith in another way. I say advisedly ‘interpret’, for we are offering one possible theological interpretation among others. In this interpretation that I prefer, faith arises from the human consciousness, in the human consciousness, under the inspiration of God. That is to say that the transcendence of the faith (its supernatural character) consists in an auto- or self-transcendence of the human consciousness. For this consciousness is not purely human. It is also divine since there is in it an element of transcendence. In other words, there is in us more than ourselves.

All this considerably modifies our understanding of the interpretation of the faith. It is no longer simply an interpretation of a message that comes to us from on high. In this new perspective, to interpret the faith is to interpret oneself in one’s transcendent, divine, dimension. It is to interpret one’s own religious consciousness in the depths of oneself. This religious interpretation of oneself signifies a coming to awareness of one’s own spiritual, divine, depth.

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**An Interpretation for the Community of Believers**

What we have said concerning the auto-interpretation of the faith could give the impression that we do theology only for ourselves, in order to understand more ourselves in our religious dimension. Theology could then be seen as something of a psychoanalysis of the faith.

But theology is much more important than that. It is not something engaged in for itself alone, it is for the whole community of believers. Theologians carry out a significant function in the Christian community; they have a pastoral responsibility to perform in this community. Which means that not only do they take responsibility for giving answers to their own questions; they must also take up those of the community and try to respond to them as well as they can, even though they may be able to do no more than indicate some possible paths to a solution.

This has always been true, but it is especially so today. For we are living in a time of religious crisis. The more pessimistic commentators claim that religion is on the way out. Churches are becoming more and more empty; prayer and even any thought of God is less and less a part of people’s lives.

If we are to find a remedy we must first enquire into the causes of the illness, what has provoked the crisis. In the West it is clearly a striving for liberation from the domination exercised by the Church in times past over the lives of people. This negative reaction to the

Church has been intensified recently by the scandals that have damaged the Church. All that is quite true. It is to be noted, however, that what is understood as ‘Church’ here are the upper levels of the Church hierarchy, the clergy. When people speak of ‘the Church’ they usually mean the hierarchy, those who govern the Church.

But the Church is also and above all the Christian community. That is the true basis of the Church. If there is to be a renewal, a happy resolution of the crisis, it is from this community that it will come. Special attention needs to be paid to the spiritual situation of the Christian community. For that is where the fundamental problem is located. And that problem is, in short, the problem of a community of faith in a context of modernity.

The modern world has gained its autonomy in diverse sectors of human life: science, art, morality, law, the economy, politics. All these spheres of human life have become independent, removed from all religious influence. That is to say that people now live in a non-religious world, a secular world. The immediate consequence of this situation is what we might term religious and spiritual anemia. In short, people gradually lose all religious sense, all religious awareness. They have nothing against religion, they are simply indifferent to it. Religion has no significance for them any more, no importance, no place in their lives. Religion is not what they rely on to find the meaning of their lives.

What happens with theology, then? We can reply to this question in two ways. We might anticipate that theology itself will be carried along on the wave of secularisation. We note, indeed, that not just churches and major seminaries are closing—the same is occurring with faculties and departments of theology around us in Québec.

This negative trend is not the only one possible. We might hope for a resurgence of religious consciousness in new forms. In this eventuality the role of theology becomes primor-

dial. I am making a plea now for a new relevance, a new urgent need for theology. Theology would take upon itself a two-fold task, a critical and a positive task. The critical task, that of discernment, would consist in showing that there is a religious language that is obsolete and must be abandoned because it conceals rather than clarifies the true spiritual content of faith. The positive task would then be that of enabling the religious consciousness to rediscover the sources of inspiration, which for us Christians are the Gospel and the living tradition that flows from it.

### **An Interpretation in the Believing Community**

We have mentioned a necessary interpretation of the faith. Interpretation is called for each time that the Christian message is to be communicated in a culture that is different from those of the Christian origins. Such is the case in all the different epochs of the history of the Church. It needs to be done again today, in our modern period, all the more so as modernity constitutes a cultural change that is quite radical. Indeed, the move to modernity entails among other things a move into a secular, non-religious, culture. Interpretation of the Christian message thus needs to be more radical than it has been in the past in order to maintain what is essential to the faith in another form of cultural expression. Some people have even gone so far as to advocate a Christianity without religion.

Faced with the great variety of interpretations of Christianity today—and the great diversity of theologies—the question arises concerning the criteria of interpretation: what are the criteria for discerning valid interpretations from those that are not such? By ‘valid interpretations’ I mean those that truly transmit the content of the faith, as opposed to those which point us in a direction that conflicts with the Gospel. I will offer three criteria in response to this question.

(1) The first criterion is that of conformity with the biblical sources of Christian faith. An

interpretation will be authentic if it conforms to the Gospel, which allows us to engage with the Gospel as the life-giving source of faith. In short, one may declare authentic an interpretation that provides access to the Gospel, by contrast with one that distances us from the Gospel. For example, to advocate violence or vengeance is certainly not in conformity with the Sermon on the Mount. Likewise, to present Christ Jesus as nothing more than a prophet does not take account of the fact that according to the faith Christ lives in us by his Spirit. He does not only communicate his word, his message, to us, but his divine life itself.

(2) The second criterion is the faith of the Christian community in our time, that of our community in which we speak as theologians. We used to say in the Introit of the Mass for Doctors of the Church *‘In medio Ecclesiae aperuit os suum’* (‘He opened his mouth in the midst of the Church’). The same applies today. We do not speak from outside the community to critique its beliefs, but from within this same community. That means that we share its faith which is ours too, and that we work in the midst of this community to give it life, to enable it to meet today’s challenges. Thus the faith of the community is the criterion for our interpretations: the ones that support that faith are those that are authentic and legitimate.

(3) Finally we make mention of the criterion that often is presented in the first place, that of the Magisterium of the Church, especially the Magisterium of Rome. It is true that the Magisterium has the responsibility for safeguarding the ‘deposit of faith’. But we need to heed it as a pastoral magisterium, to be of service to the faith of the Christian community. In short, it is not so much over the deposit of faith that it needs to keep guard (in order to avoid any deformation) as over the faith of the believers, to ensure that they receive the nourishment needed for their spiritual life and growth. In actual fact, it will not be the authority of Rome that will judge the authenticity of our preaching and catechesis. Rather, we must see to it that it occurs at the level of our own

communities. Hence it is much to be desired that in the meetings of our pastoral teams some time be set aside for speaking of faith questions that arise in our communities and of the responses that we offer in our teaching.

## WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BELIEVE IN GOD?

### Beyond Theism and Atheism

With regard to belief in God, the first question that arises is that of the existence of God. The question is still raised and argued about today, especially in the United States, where it has become the accepted thing despite the motto *‘In God we trust’*. There are several apostles of atheism (e.g. Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*) mostly from the ranks of the scientists. They show easily enough that science can adequately explain natural phenomena. And so we do not need that First Cause called ‘God’ in order to explain anything—we can do without it.

At the present time there is another type of atheism which this time comes from philosophy. I am thinking particularly of two French philosophers, Luc Ferry et André Comte-Sponville. For them the question is not whether we can explain (scientifically) the world without God, but whether human life has any meaning without God. They call themselves atheists without trying to show that God does not exist. God and religion do not mean anything to them; they go their way without God. But they do not deny all meaning of life. Further, they do not deny the spiritual dimension of life. They aim, however, to establish this spirituality, this meaning of life on a purely philosophical foundation, not a religious one.

Faced with this resurgence of atheism in our time—one might equally say, faced with this retreat of belief in God—we need to consider again the problematic of theism and atheism. This debate of belief and unbelief can no longer be seen as a battle for or against God, as if the atheists were the agents of Satan, enemies of God. It is clear that we need to get

beyond this overly simplistic problematic. We will do so if we look for the element of truth in atheism, what gives atheists grounds for rejecting belief in God—which is not the same thing as to oppose God as such. At the same time we need to ask ourselves what is the element of error, the element of illusion in belief in God, or what is often considered to be belief in God. We should then reach a position beyond theism and atheism. Which does not mean that we will reach a consensus between believers and unbelievers. The aim would be rather to establish a common ground which will allow dialogue and discussion.

### **God is not a Being Among Others**

Let us take the first type of atheism. It obliges us to deepen our thinking about God and to go beyond the idea of God that we usually entertain. We have to admit that the idea of a God who is First Cause of the world does not stand up, at least if one understands the First Cause as a cause that is above the others, to be numbered among the others, in addition to the others, as the first link in the chain of causes. This is a notion that we must obviously abandon.

When this is understood we are led to a still more radical conclusion. Namely that God is not ‘a being’ in addition to the others, a being that is to be numbered with the others. Peter, James and I, we make three; but Peter, James, I and God do not make four. In this very precise sense God does not exist, that is to say God is not an existing individual being in addition to all others.

When one thinks about it, one clearly sees that it cannot be so. God is, by definition, the infinite. God would not be such if God were no more than a being over and above all others. As infinite, God is not a being among others, superior to the others. In other words, God is not in this sense the ‘Supreme Being’, God is ‘the entirety of being’, or ‘being itself’.

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### **The Reality of God: the Self-transcendence of our Being**

We have said that God does not exist in the strict and precise meaning of the term ‘exist’, since God is not, strictly speaking, and ‘existing being’, an individual being to be numbered with the others. That does not mean, however, that God is not real—on the contrary. And this is what we must consider now: what is the reality of God?

We have given some indication of it already when speaking of faith as the self-transcendence of the human consciousness. We said that there is in us more than ourselves. This ‘more’ than ourselves that we are, this transcendence that we are conscious of in our inner selves, is the divine in us, that which is the origin of the thought of God. We see thus that God is not a being other than us; God is one with us. But God does not reduce himself to us, that is, to the natural and rational part of our being, of which we have mastery. God identifies himself rather with the transcendent dimension of our being, what in us is from above and which gives itself to us.

Our language conveys something of this when we speak of ‘the voice of conscience’. That interior voice is not the voice of a being other than ourselves. Yet it imposes itself on us, we do not control it. It often commands things that we do not like. It reproaches us for things that we have done willingly. It is interesting to note then that this voice of conscience is often called ‘the voice of God in us’. It is indeed the voice of our own conscience, but it is precisely the transcendent dimension of our being, of what in us is beyond us and what is in us that imposes itself on us.

### **God as Objectivisation of Human Self-transcendence**

Here we have the origin of the thought of God in us. It is an objectivisation (a personification) of that transcendent dimension that we perceive in ourselves.

This is a normal process of our spirit, to

distinguish, to separate things that are in fact indissolubly united. For example, when I speak of the brown colour of the table where I am writing, I objectivise in my thought this colour, I speak of it as if it were an object different from the table. And yet the two, the colour and the table, are one. They are never separated: the colour is always the colour of something, and every visible thing has a colour. If we distinguish in this way things that in reality are one, it is in order to be more aware of them, to clarify the awareness that we have of them.

And so it is with our religious awareness, our awareness of God. We have a confused awareness of a transcendent dimension, of a certain transcendence within ourselves. We have a confused awareness that there is in us 'more than ourselves', or again, as André Gounelle likes to say, that there is in us 'other than ourselves'. But this is no more than a confused, implicit awareness that is not yet actualised, made explicit. One might then say that this is an awareness that is not yet aware of itself. This awareness becomes explicit and actual as religious awareness when the thought of God arises.

In this way we objectify, we place before ourselves (*ob-jectum*), we represent (make present) what is nothing more, in essence, than an aspect of ourselves, the transcendent aspect of our being. God is thus conceived of as a representation of the religious awareness. The thought of God is thus a human projection, a projection of human self-transcendence. This is what atheism, especially with Feuerbach, has perceived, and it is what the believer must also take into account. The difference between the two positions consists in this: the atheist thinks that belief in God is pure projection, pure illusion, pure invention of human desire (wishful thinking); while the believer is conscious of the real foundation at the base of this projection (or representation), the foundation which is precisely human self-transcendence.

Thus we pass beyond the opposition between believers and unbelievers. More exactly,

we adopt a position beyond theism and atheism as we recognise the element of truth in each of these two positions. The atheist recognises the projections that all thought of God entails; he fails, however, to recognise the transcendent foundation at the basis of this projection. The believer, on his part, is well aware of this transcendent foundation, of the transcendence which is expressed in the thought of God; he is mistaken, however, when he takes literally the representation of God, as if God were a particular being located somewhere (or nowhere) beyond the world.

### **To Believe in God**

Now we can express more clearly what 'To believe in God' signifies. To put it negatively, we must say that to believe in God does not signify believing that there exists beyond the world a being who is at the origin of all things and rules over all things. Positively, we must see the two aspects of this belief, or faith, in God: the more fundamental aspect of awareness of transcendence, and the more formal aspect of religious language.

(1) To believe in God involves first of all the awareness, the recognition of a transcendence. It is the recognition of a reality superior *to us*, about which we have spoken in terms of self-transcendence, of a reality superior *in us*.

We spoke about it then as something which is interior to us and imposes itself on us. This is how we habitually interpret the voice of conscience within us, a voice that makes demands, a voice that commands. But there are also other aspects of this voice of conscience. It is also a reassuring voice, a loving voice that assures us that we are loved in spite of all. To believe in God is fundamentally, then, to recognise and to have confidence in this voice of conscience within us. It is to recognise its demands and not to believe that we are the sole masters who have the right to distinguish good and evil according to our good pleasure. It is also to have confidence, to recognise that we are accepted, loved, despite all that is detestable and unacceptable in us. It is, as Paul

Tillich says, 'to accept being accepted despite all that is unacceptable in us'.

Returning now to the second type of atheism that we spoke about earlier, we can indeed, with Luc Ferry, speak of all this in terms of the 'meaning of life'. It is to recognise an aspect of transcendence in such a meaning of life. We are not the sole masters of the meaning of our life, as if we were the ones who give the total meaning to our life. Rather, the believer thinks that this superior reality in us that we have called 'the voice of conscience' is itself the principle of meaning, since it assures us that there is a meaning, and that we are 'called' to make actual that meaning in our life and in the world. This is what we call 'our vocation'. Each is called in this way by his own conscience. It does not signify that the meaning comes down to us from on high already predetermined, complete. In its transcendent dimension our conscience is simply the principle of meaning. It is our task then to make explicit and actual the meaning in our life.

(2) That is the most fundamental aspect of believing in God, what we have called conscience, the recognition of transcendence. Let us now turn to the other aspect, the more formal aspect, the religious expression (religious language) of this transcendence.

It is the objectivisation of the self-transcendent conscience. This objectivisation of the sense of transcendence becomes real in religious language. Instead of objectivisation, we might speak of personification of the awareness of transcendence, for religious language is personalist language in which the di-

vine transcendence is represented with a personal face, the face of 'God'.

We can see why it should be so. For thinking of God in a representation of a person is not just to think of God in Godself. It is to represent God in relation to us, in a personal relation with us. The voice of conscience thus expresses itself under the form of a God who gives commandments. But it is also, and above all, the voice of a loving God who offers to make a covenant with humankind. The decalogue is written in the context of the Covenant. Hence the importance of the Word of God in the religious language, which is for us the biblical language. The God of the Bible, the Judeo-Christian God, is a God who speaks to express his love and his will, to reveal his purposes for the world and our lives, to give meaning to history and to each of our lives.

In view of this second aspect of belief in God the question becomes: does religious language still have any significance for us? It is not a question of knowing whether the things it refers to really exist or not, but whether this language signifies, represents for us what it ought to express, our sense of transcendence. For many of our contemporaries the language of religion has become totally foreign and so they do not make use of it any more. Others reject it because they interpret it literally as though we were speaking of imaginary things floating somewhere above our heads. But for the believer, this language is always significant, nourishing, dynamising, since it gives access to the vitalising tide of transcendence which lives in us.

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*Dear friends, our meeting confirms in a meaningful way how much the Church needs the competent and faithful reflection of theologians on the Mystery of the God of Jesus Christ and of his Church. Without healthy and vigorous theological reflection the Church runs the risk of not fully expressing the harmony between faith and reason. At the same time, without the faithful experience of communion with the Church and adherence to her Magisterium, which is the vital space of her existence, theology would not succeed in explaining the gift of faith adequately.*

**—Benedict XVI to members of the International Pontifical Theological Commission, Friday, 2 December 2011.**

# SOME REPRESENTATIVE WORKS ON THE RESURRECTION

GERALD O'COLLINS SJ

**W**E WOULD COME up with a tediously long list if we were to reply comprehensively to the question: what have they been saying about the resurrection of Jesus in the last ten years? In any case many authors go over the same ground and do not add very much either to the debates about the resurrection or to the conclusions that can be reached. Hence I have decided to select nine books that have significant things to say, either positively or negatively, about the resurrection and the possibility of Easter faith and hope. This representative sample will bring readers into the current state of resurrection studies.

In presenting these nine works, I do not intend to take readers through them in complete detail and provide full-length book reports. Instead, I shall choose and highlight significant features that should interest students of the resurrection.

## *Some Positive Contributions*

**Anthony Kelly, *The Resurrection Effect: Transforming Christian Life and Thought* (2008)**

Anthony Kelly deserves to lead the team of those who have contributed positively to the study of resurrection.<sup>1</sup> He brings together biblical, theological and philosophical thinking to show how the resurrection of Jesus 'saturates' the whole of Christian faith and should transform the life and thought of believers. As *the* key to God's relationship with Jesus and human beings, the resurrection eludes any pre-

cise definitions that would pin it down. Rather it provides the broadest horizon within which we can recognize what human life ultimately means, how we should live, and what we can expect from the God who raised Jesus from the dead.

This latest plea for the utter centrality of Easter faith follows earlier attempts to focus Christian thinking and life on the resurrection of the crucified Jesus. In the run up to the Second Vatican Council, François-Xavier Durrwell helped to 'rehabilitate' Easter as the central mystery of Christianity.<sup>2</sup> In the postconciliar years some writers, like the Lutheran Wolfhart Pannenberg and myself,<sup>3</sup> tried again to revitalize theology and its various specializations by recalling where they should constantly go to draw meaning, values and guidelines: the light of the first Easter Sunday.

But the strange neglect of the resurrection persists. Sadly, leading figures in liberation theology have reflected only a little on Christ's rising from the dead.<sup>4</sup> Themes other than the resurrection continue to engage the attention of Catholic moral theologians, and, even more surprisingly, the resurrection can be seriously neglected by those who write in the area of sacramental theology.<sup>5</sup> We will return later in this book to ways in which Easter faith should enliven those two branches of theology, as well as liberation theology itself. Here I wish only to endorse Kelly's call to engage ourselves much more fully with the resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

\* \* \*

**N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (2003)**

A magisterial volume by N. T. Wright offers over eight hundred pages in response to basic questions about the origins of Christianity and the resurrection of Jesus.<sup>6</sup> What did the first Christians mean when they proclaimed that Jesus of Nazareth had been raised from the dead? Where does the historical evidence lead us when we investigate what precisely happened at the first Easter? What should be said about believing today in Jesus' resurrection?

The historical and biblical strength of this book emerges right from the first two hundred pages that map ancient beliefs about life beyond death in both pagan and Jewish worlds. Wright takes us through a panorama of what Greeks and Romans held about where souls went after death. The pagan world assumed that resurrection was impossible. Among the Jews, earlier hints (*e.g.*, Isa 26:19; Ezek 37:1–14; and Hos 6:1–2; 13:14) developed, and, in response to the deaths of those martyred in God's cause, became a full-blown belief in coming resurrection (Dan 12:2–3; 2 Macc 7). Of course, some like the Sadducees rejected any life beyond death worth speaking of, and others expected only a disembodied immortality. But by the time of Jesus 'most Jews believed in resurrection.'<sup>7</sup> They expected a general resurrection at the end of the present age: that is to say, a newly embodied life at the end of history. But no one imagined that any individual had already been raised from the dead or would be raised in anticipation of the last day. Here one should note that Hosea 6:1–2 ('us') and 13:14 ('them') speak in the plural and of a community resurrection, and not in the singular or of an individual's resurrection. Nor was there any agreement among those who believed that (general) resurrection would eventually happen as to what it would be like. Would it involve being woken from the sleep of death to 'shine' forever like the stars and 'the brightness of the sky' (Dan 12) or to enjoy a reassembled body and the restoration of



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limbs cut off by executioners (2 Macc 7)?

On two scores, as Wright shows, Christian faith in resurrection had no strict precedent even in Judaism. First, it proclaimed that one individual (Jesus) had been raised from the dead in anticipation of the general resurrection at the end of all history. Belief in Jesus' resurrection could not have been generated by prior Jewish beliefs or study of the biblical texts expressing those beliefs. Second, the other striking difference appears in a distinctively Christian consensus about the nature of resurrection. The newly embodied life of the resurrected Jesus involved a glorious transformation of his human existence, the 'spiritual body' of 1 Corinthians 15. That made Christians agree in expecting *that* kind of risen existence for themselves. Thus when compared with Jewish hopes for resurrection, the Easter message of Paul and other early Christian witnesses contained two strikingly new elements.

Through the heart of his book Wright deploys the historical data that support accepting the appearances of the risen Christ and the discovery of his empty tomb. Those two events prompted the resurrection faith in Jesus as the messianic Son of God, a faith that set Christianity going and provided its essential shape. Wright traces to the third century the trajectory of Easter faith and resurrection hope triggered by Jesus' own victory over death.

In such a monumental study different readers will have their favorite sections. I was particularly struck by what Wright wrote on the Easter stories we read in the closing chapters of the four Gospels. They contain surprising,

even strange, features.<sup>8</sup> For example, up to the death and burial of Jesus, all four Gospels constantly quote and echo the Jewish scriptures. A familiar theme in Matthew is his ‘all this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet(s),’ to which the evangelist then attaches one or more biblical citations. Surprisingly such biblical ‘embroidery’ does not show up in his final, Easter chapter. The other evangelists also leave their Easter narratives biblically ‘unadorned.’ A second unexpected feature is the absence of personal hope in the Easter stories. Elsewhere the New Testament writers repeatedly express their own hope for risen life when they refer to the resurrection of Jesus. A classic example of this connection being made comes in 1 Corinthians 15, a letter written years before any of the Gospels took their final shape. These and further strange silences and unexpected features of the Easter chapters in the Gospels should encourage us to agree with Wright that the substance of these chapters represents a very old telling of the discovery of the empty tomb and of Jesus’ encounters with the disciples—a time before biblical and theological reflection began working on connections and implications to be drawn from that discovery and those appearances. There is a haunting, ancient simplicity in the Easter stories that speaks for their credibility.

**Richard Swinburne, *The Resurrection of God Incarnate* (2003)**

Like Wright, Richard Swinburne is concerned to put a case for faith in Jesus’ resurrection from the dead.<sup>9</sup> Being a philosopher rather than a biblical scholar or historian, he takes a ‘broader’ approach and concludes that there is a high probability that Jesus rose from the dead. This ‘broad’ approach involves four major steps: (a) God, being perfectly good and perfectly powerful, had serious reasons for ‘intervening’ in human history by becoming incarnate. (b) Since the life and teaching of Jesus show him to have been the incarnate Son of God, we can conclude that he was uniquely

the kind of person God could be expected to have raised from the dead. (c) In making his case, Swinburne paints with broad sweeps of the brush, but also introduces some specific questions and arguments. (d) He draws together his case by concluding with a calculus of logical probability. It expresses in a formal manner his previous steps, and aims at showing how it is very probable that the resurrection happened. I know of no other book on the resurrection that ends in such a mathematical way with twelve pages of axioms, theorems and an apparatus of calculus.

Let me comment on each of the four steps. As regards (a), the suffering and sinning of human beings make it plausible that in his infinite love God would act by personally coming on the scene to set right a tragic situation. After all, John wrote: ‘God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life’ (John 3:16). Nevertheless, the incarnation did not *have to happen*. God might have dealt in other ways with the tragedy of human sinning and suffering, or—to use Swinburne’s way of putting things—have ‘fulfilled’ the divine ‘obligations’<sup>10</sup> in ways other than the incarnation. In the light of the divine freedom, may one allege that, given the human predicament, the incarnation was highly probable?

Here I must also express a quibble about the language of ‘intervention’ that Swinburne (and others) constantly use. To call the incarnation an ‘intervention’ can too easily suggest an ‘outsider’ God, who comes on the scene for the first time, even a kind of ‘meddlesome’ God. This is inappropriate language when we recall that God is always intimately present everywhere and in every situation, from moment to moment sustaining in being everything that is. It would be less misleading to characterize the incarnation as a ‘special divine act,’ or, together with the resurrection, as ‘the special divine act’ that differs qualitatively from other special divine acts, like miracles.<sup>11</sup>

Here too I must also protest against

Swinburne ‘reducing’ the resurrection to the category of ‘miracle’ and describing ‘miracles’ as ‘violations of natural laws.’<sup>12</sup> First, the resurrection of Jesus should not be called a miracle or even a super-miracle. Miracles, like the healing miracles of Jesus, are, to be sure, signs of what he wishes to do for us in the final kingdom (in the perfect bodily ‘healing’ of the resurrection). Nevertheless, they happened and happen within our historical world of space and time, even if they point to what is to come. The resurrection of Jesus goes beyond any such miracles; it was and is the real beginning of the world to come, the event that initiates a sequence of final events that will fulfill and complete his personal rising from the dead (1 Cor 15:20–28). Second, ‘violate’ has four meanings, all of them negative and even ugly: (i) disregard or fail to comply with; (ii) treat with disrespect; (iii) disturb or break in upon; (iv) assault sexually. Presumably Swinburne uses ‘violate’ in sense (i). But when working miracles occasionally and for good reasons, God is surely better described as suspending or overriding the normal working of natural laws. Since it is God who created the precise shape and functions of the laws of nature, it looks odd to speak of God ‘disregarding’ or ‘failing to comply with’ them. ‘Suspending’ or ‘overriding’ seems more appropriate language.

As regards Swinburne’s second step (b), what he calls ‘the marks of an incarnate God,’ or ‘the life required of an incarnate God,’ are found exemplified in Jesus. He was the one and only prophet to satisfy the requirements for being and being recognized as God incarnate. Obviously Swinburne cannot go into much detail about the life, preaching, claims, miraculous deeds of Jesus, and what that all implied about his personal identity. But, as I argue in the next chapter, a good case can be made for concluding that, when revealing the divine mystery and working for the salvation of human beings, Jesus gave the impression of claiming to be on a par with God. To put matters the way Swinburne does, Jesus was indeed the kind of person whom God could

be expected to raise from the dead. I would prefer to say that Jesus, while being rejected and crucified as a blasphemer and threat to the public order, was in fact so truly identified with God and the divine cause that one would expect God to vindicate him in resurrection. Luke cites in Acts 2:17 a psalm that suggests what one might, or even should, expect from God after the execution of Jesus: ‘You will not abandon my soul to Hades, or let your Holy One experience corruption’ (Ps 16:9).

(c) Swinburne introduces something valuable in certain specific questions and arguments. He names, for instance, the new celebration of *Sunday* as a question to be answered. Why did the Jewish disciples of Jesus, his first disciples, no longer give priority to the Jewish Sabbath or Saturday and turn ‘the first day of the week’ or Sunday into *the* day for meeting and celebrating the Eucharist (which, after all, was instituted at the Last Supper seemingly on the day that we call Thursday)? What made them hold Sunday so special that they changed not only their manner of worship (1 Cor 11:23–26) but also their special day for worship? An obvious answer is close at hand for this momentous switch away from the Sabbath, the day which God was understood to have assigned for rest and worship. Sunday was the day when the tomb of Jesus was discovered to be open and empty and the day when the disciples first encountered him risen from the dead.

Swinburne also spends a chapter examining and refuting five rival theories of what happened to Jesus: for instance, that Jesus did not die on the cross but was taken down alive and recovered, or that he did die and was buried, but his body was then removed by friends. As regards the first theory, which sensationalist but totally unscholarly writers revive every year or so, Swinburne points to several large difficulties it faces: for example, if Jesus continued to live on, ‘is it really plausible to suppose that he would have taken no further interest in the mushrooming movement which his passion and apparent resurrection had in-

spired? Would he (in view of what we know about him from the Gospels) really have colluded with such massive deception?<sup>13</sup>

What of the theory that friends (*e.g.*, the female disciples) removed the body of Jesus from the tomb where Joseph of Arimathea had given him burial, took the body for proper burial elsewhere (*e.g.*, in Nazareth), and concealed this act from most of the disciples. But why would such disciples have wanted to conceal from the other disciples what they had done out of devotion to Jesus? Even more importantly, could they have been able to keep secret their actions in removing the body from the tomb, transporting it somewhere else, and giving it honorable burial there? As Swinburne remarks, ‘even if they had tried to keep the theft secret from the other disciples, it is most unlikely that they would have succeeded.’<sup>14</sup>

In an appendix Swinburne assigns numerical values to the various probabilities involved in his four-step argument. He maintains that, if these values do not ‘exaggerate the force of the arguments by which they are supported,...it is indeed very probable that Jesus was God incarnate who rose from the dead.’<sup>15</sup> In view of the Trinitarian faith which Swinburne accepts, it would be preferable to speak of Jesus being *the Son of God incarnate* who rose from the dead. But, more importantly, while appreciating Swinburne’s vigorous defense of the resurrection, I wonder how many people could come to believe in the resurrection simply on the basis of numerical values, which they might assign to probabilities constituting various steps in the arguments that they develop from the historical testimony of the New Testament. Personal factors and experience, not to mention, the influence of the Holy Spirit, feed into the making of Easter faith, as I will argue in a later chapter.

**Sandra Schneiders, *Written that You May Believe: Encountering Jesus in the Fourth Gospel* (2003)**

Unlike the three authors we have just examined, Sandra Schneiders did not write her

acclaimed book on John’s Gospel precisely as a work on the resurrection.<sup>16</sup> But the subtitle could easily have been ‘encountering the *risen* Jesus in and through the Fourth Gospel’ (emphasis mine). The book shares the aim of John’s Gospel: to prompt its readers into encountering and believing in the risen Jesus. To be sure, the Fourth Gospel assigns only two chapters out of twenty-one to the Easter story. But, as Schneiders points out, ‘the Johannine resurrection narrative is one of the literary jewels of the New Testament.’<sup>17</sup> What is more, the Jesus of the entire Fourth Gospel is no mere historical memory but a living presence. Right through the whole text and especially in the stories of various representative individuals who meet Jesus, readers are invited not to return to the past but to relate here and now in faith to the risen Jesus. The story of the man born blind (John 9:1-41), in particular, synthesizes the challenge of seeing the risen Christ with the eyes of faith and committing oneself to him.<sup>18</sup> In the text such episodes belong to the history of the pre-Easter Jesus, but they move beyond the past to put the timeless questions: do you here and now experience in Jesus the One who is utterly true and good and brings us the face of God? If so, are you willing to become his disciple, and so ‘find life in his name’ (John 20:31)?

The presence of the risen Christ permeates the Fourth Gospel, not least the story of the raising of Lazarus (John 11:1-53).<sup>19</sup> It is faith in Jesus as the resurrection and the life (John 11:25) that allows Martha, Mary, and other disciples to face and cope with death in their own families and the prospect of death themselves.

The risen and glorious Jesus remains intimately present in and among his community of friends (John 15:15). In the struggles and disappointments of their lives and ministry, experiences of the glorified Jesus will be actualized over and over again when they hear the word proclaimed ‘It is the Lord’ and sit down at table with him (John 21:1-14).

Schneiders joins forces with the Fourth

Gospel to remind us that the resurrection of Jesus is something much more than a matter of historical debate; it involves an existential issue, a spiritual challenge, and a personal relationship. In the haunting words with which Albert Schweitzer ended his 1906 classic,

He comes to us as One unknown, without a name, as of old, by the lakeside, He came to those men who knew Him not. He speaks to us the same word: 'Follow thou me!' and sets us to the tasks which He has to fulfil for our time. He commands. And to those who obey Him, whether they be wise or simple, He will reveal Himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in His fellowship, and, as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their experience Who He is.<sup>20</sup>

In recent years the western world has witnessed a growing interest in personal religious experience and various forms of spirituality, including alternative spiritualities not embodied in nor often addressed by traditional religion. Reading Schneiders's book on encountering Jesus and re-reading what Schweitzer wrote a hundred years ago suggest that, unless we take up again the experiential reference of resurrection faith as proposed by John's Gospel, we will fail to provide what is urgently needed: a revival of that Easter spirituality, which can provide life and life in abundance.

**T. Peters, et al., eds., *Resurrection: Theological and Scientific Assessments* 2002**

The fifth and final book to be considered among 'the positive contributions' is a theological and scientific study of bodily resurrection produced by an international team.<sup>21</sup> In 1987, after a study week at the papal summer residence in Castel Gandolfo involving theologians, philosophers, and scientists, John Paul II wrote to the director of the Vatican Observatory encouraging such dialogue and raising a series of striking questions on how the findings of modern science might enrich our understanding of some Christian beliefs. What, for instance, are the implications of science

for faith in the life of the world to come? *Resurrection: Theological and Scientific Assessments* responded to this question by bringing together distinguished scientists and theologians to explore, in the light of the laws of nature, belief in bodily resurrection.

Through a meeting in Heidelberg in 2001 and a series of conferences elsewhere, the three editors gathered a seminar team that represented research and teaching faculty in physics, biology, neuroscience, biblical studies, Egyptology, church history, philosophy, and systematic theology. The eighteen contributors (ten from Germany, six from the USA, and one each from England and South Africa) pursued the question: how should we assess the resurrection of Christ and our own future resurrection religiously and scientifically?

One of the editors, Ted Peters, not only skillfully introduces the book by summarizing the particular issues to be handled but also draws together in a conclusion some major conceptual challenges. How, for instance, can faith in the resurrection present (a) the nature of the risen body and (b) the preservation of personal identity in the resurrection? Peters quotes at the end the radiant lines of Rabindranath Tagore: 'Death is not extinguishing the light; it is only putting out the lamp because the dawn has come.'

While the 'Big Bang' cosmology seems to favour the biblical doctrine of the first creation, two major scientific scenarios for the future threaten the Easter promise of the new creation to come. In a masterly chapter, 'Bodily Resurrection, Eschatology, and Scientific Cosmology,' Robert Russell faces the two scenarios for cosmic death: the universe will either freeze itself out of existence or collapse back into a dense fireball. But we may not presume that the laws of nature, which have governed the past and continue to govern the present, will also necessarily govern the future. In the ongoing history of the cosmos, God is free to act in new ways and transform the laws that he has created. Christian hope rests on something radically new, which we have

already glimpsed in the resurrection of Christ himself.

John Polkinghorne, familiar to many through working on science and religion and winning the Templeton Prize in 2002, shows how the final hope of Christians cannot be truly maintained by those who play down the empty tomb and bodily resurrection. That hope involves, along with a personal and spiritual continuity, some element of material continuity between the pre-resurrection and the post-resurrection Jesus. Those who disagree end up arguing for a ‘full’ tomb, which means an ‘empty’ Christian faith. They also have to reckon with the clear evidence that all four Gospels found it very important that the tomb of Jesus was empty. In some real sense, a genuine resurrection must be bodily. The message of the empty tomb also reinforces the sense of a redemption that enjoys a cosmic scope; in other words, the resurrection brings the well founded expectation of a ‘new heaven’ and a ‘new earth.’

Among the many fine chapters in this book let me also mention those by Brian Daley (on early Christian ways of articulating faith in the resurrection), Nancey Murphy (on the resurrection and personal identity), and Noreen Herzfeld. She demolishes as science fiction the thesis of cybernetic immortality that reduces the human self to mere information patterns.

All in all, this valuable dialogue between scientists and theologians illuminates the Christian hope that the end of the world will bring the healing and transformation of our personal history and the renewal of all things. It translates into modern terms the link St Paul had drawn in Romans 8 and 1 Corinthians 15 between (a) the resurrection of Jesus, (b) the bodily resurrection of human beings, and (c) the new creation of the whole universe.

The five books chosen for this sample of positive contributions to resurrection studies represent distinct fields: theology (Kelly), biblical studies (Wright), philosophy (Swinburne), spirituality (Schneiders), and science (Peters, Russell, and Welker). Before

turning now to two works that fail to advance the cause of resurrection studies, let me first recall two learned but ambivalent books that provoke a ‘yes, but’ reaction.

### *Betwixt and Between*

After co-authoring a major commentary on Matthew’s Gospel and publishing other significant works on the New Testament, Dale Allison has long ago established himself as not only a notable, learned biblical scholar but also at times a provocatively independent interpreter. Not surprisingly he was chosen to write the entry on Jesus for the 2006 edition of the *Encyclopedia of Religion*.<sup>22</sup> His *Resurrecting Jesus*,<sup>23</sup> despite its title, also contains essays on other topics. But it belongs in this chapter, since it contains nearly two hundred pages on the Easter appearances, the empty tomb, and the whole question of historical research and belief in the resurrection.

After the death of Jesus, something happened to set the Christian movement going.

What was it? After stating the orthodox belief that defends the reality of the empty tomb and the objectivity of Jesus’ post-resurrection appearances, Allison takes us through six rival theories (*e.g.*, hallucination, deliberate deception, and so forth), indicating their exponents and noting various difficulties that tell against these theories (199–213). He skillfully groups together these hypotheses and alerts readers to their origins, import, and weaknesses.

Over specific questions connected with the resurrection, Allison engages with N. T. Wright and Richard Swinburne, as well as with me (mainly on the issue of bereavement experiences, of which we will speak below). He probes Wright’s claim that the resurrection of Jesus is the best historical explanation of the biblical evidence (345–50). Like many others (including myself in *Easter Faith*),<sup>24</sup> Allison insists that we all evaluate questions about the resurrection from within our own world-views. Background theories (about such matters as

accepting or denying the possibility of special divine actions and, indeed, about the existence and nature of God) can be decisive (346–50; see 340–44). Hence Allison ‘understands’ why Swinburne, ‘in his recent defense of the resurrection, commences by first seeking to establish the existence of a certain sort of God and the likelihood of such a God communicating with and redeeming the human race’ (341). Allison also joins with Swinburne in putting the question: was Jesus someone who ‘should have been raised from the dead’ (349). In other words, when reflecting on the resurrection, we also need to assess the teaching and actions of Jesus. Allison draws together the two requirements: ‘if judgment about the resurrection cannot be isolated from one’s worldview, it equally cannot be isolated from one’s estimation of the pre-Easter Jesus’ (350).

In some sections Allison shows himself at his incisive best: for instance, in an excursus eliminating the arguments of John Dominic Crossan (and others) and defending the historicity of the burial story and Joseph of Arimathea’s central role in it (352–63). He rightly observes that the historicity of the burial story always plays some role in evaluating the historicity of the empty tomb story. It is not that the former ‘proves’ the latter. But, as Dan Kendall and I wrote, ‘for a critical assessment of the New Testament traditions about the empty tomb much depends on one’s evaluation of the burial story.’<sup>25</sup> Our article took aim at the questionable case Crossan made against the historicity of the burial story that we find in Mark 15:42–47. As Allison was to do, we concluded that Crossan ‘has done nothing to undermine its historical credibility, which remains accepted by very many biblical scholars from Bultmann to Fitzmyer and beyond.’<sup>26</sup> As far as I know, my article with Kendall and then Allison’s excursus are the only detailed examinations and rejections of the way Crossan dismissed the story of Jesus’ historical burial by Joseph of Arimathea. Given Allison’s penchant for adequate and even extensive documentation, it is a little strange that

he made no mention of the article I published with Kendall.

In general, Allison’s documentation is breathtaking: 692 footnotes for his 178 pages on the resurrection, and many of these footnotes contain multiple references. Unlike some scholarly books, his index of names includes the authors of books and articles that appear only in the footnotes. Again unlike some modern scholars, Allison does not limit himself to recent years when citing writers who meet with his approval or disapproval. His exceptionally wide reading enables him to quote nineteenth-century or even earlier works that express with clarity, and at times elegance, notions that Allison endorses or deplors.

But, regrettably, when comparing the post-resurrection appearances with reports of people experiencing their beloved dead and, in particular, alleged collective experiences of that kind, he introduces in an undifferentiated way references to a mass of literature, some of it unreliable popular publications, some of it coming from parapsychologists of the nineteenth and twentieth century, and some of it not dealing, at least directly, with the matter in question, the experiences of *bereaved* persons (269–75, 278–84). It almost seems as if the sheer quantity of the references replaces the quality of the argument. Apropos of ‘reports of collective apparitions,’ Allison notes that they are ‘prominent in the literature of parapsychology but not in normal psychology’ (279, n. 292). That should have warned him against introducing, as he does, references to a number of long-discredited parapsychologists. Very many scholars, including professional psychologists, find only pseudo-science in the works of parapsychologists.

But let me come to the heart of my ‘quarrel’ with Allison. He scrutinizes carefully the New Testament data about the appearances of the risen Jesus (or, as he and others call them, ‘christophanies’) (232–69) and the discovery of the empty tomb (299–337). As regards the former, he states what ‘appears to be the facts’ ‘several people reported christophanies,’ and

‘Jesus ostensibly appeared on more than one occasion to more than one person’ (269). Reviewing the arguments *against* and *for* the historicity of the empty tomb (300–11 and 311–31, respectively), he tentatively concludes that the story of the empty tomb is ‘more likely to be history than legend’ (344). As a biblical scholar, Allison feels himself at an impasse: historical reasoning cannot by itself decide the issue and produce certain conclusions about the alleged resurrection of Jesus. The evidence seems inconclusive. In Allison’s words, ‘historical criticism cannot judge the extraordinary experiences of the disciples to be true or false, or attribute them either to the Spirit of God *or to psychology*’ (342, n. 564; emphasis mine). Yet it is to psychology and reports of bereavement experiences that Allison himself turns.

Encouraged by his own experience of a deceased friend and by experiences of his deceased father that happened to several members of his immediate family (275–77), Allison moves to interpret the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus as instances of such bereavement experiences. He presses ‘the similarities between reports of postmortem encounters with Jesus and visions of the recently departed’ (364), and never pauses to review the dissimilarities.<sup>27</sup> He ignores, for instance, the way the bereaved who have enjoyed such visions do *not* claim that their dear departed are risen from the dead and that their graves have been found empty. Where the Easter narratives do not supply some alleged feature of the bereaved disciples’ mourning experience (for instance, the anger that they ‘must’ have felt), Allison supplies it himself: they ‘would not have been human if they had not felt anger and resentment toward those they held responsible for crucifying the man to whom they were devoted’ (372).

Allison concludes his book with twelve pages on ‘the disciples and bereavement’ (364–75). Some final words sum up his thesis: ‘shortly after his death, the followers of Jesus saw him again, sensed his invisible presence, overcame their guilt by finding sense in

his tragic end, idealized and internalized their teacher, and remembered his words and deeds’ (375). This summary reduces all that happened after the death and burial of Jesus to what happened on the side of the bereaved disciples, to their subjective experience, and to their activity. They ‘saw him again’ and ‘sensed his invisible presence,’ rather than the risen Jesus himself taking the initiative to ‘appear’ to them (1 Cor 15:5–8). They ‘overcame their guilt by finding sense in his tragic end,’ rather than the risen Jesus and the Holy Spirit conveying to them forgiveness (e.g. John 21:15–19) and insight (e.g. John 16:13). They ‘idealized and internalized their teacher,’ rather than their risen Lord encountering them and enabling them to ‘live in him’ and ‘abide’ in his love (e.g. John 15:1–10). They ‘remembered his words and deeds,’ rather than the Holy Spirit coming to ‘teach’ them everything and ‘remind’ them of all that Jesus had said and done (e.g. John 14:25).

This one-sided privileging of the disciples’ experience and activity runs dead contrary to the primacy of the divine initiative that pervasively shapes the Easter narratives and theology of Paul and the evangelists. It also leaves behind Allison’s own theological tradition.<sup>28</sup> The leaders of the Protestant Reformation rightly highlighted God’s prior activity in Christ and the Holy Spirit over anything that human beings, including the first disciples, might by themselves see, sense, overcome, find, idealize, internalize, and remember. In Allison’s version of things, the coming to Easter faith and the foundation of the Christian Church looks very much like a human ‘work.’ Allison properly recognizes that the findings of historical research, even that practiced by someone as expert as himself, are insufficient in themselves to bring him or anyone else to faith in the risen Jesus. Once or twice he recalls the setting in which such faith flourishes and grows, the Christian community at worship on Easter Sunday (xi, 352). The Easter faith of generations of worshipping and practicing believers provides what Allison

looks for: the experiential and religious ‘warrant’ for accepting that God has raised Jesus from the dead (342). A pity that he did not turn in that direction rather than use (or misuse?) psychology and engage in what amounts to a serious ‘reduction’ of the New Testament’s message of the resurrection. If one might adapt some words of St Paul (1 Cor 15:54–55), ‘resurrection has been swallowed up in psychology. Where, O resurrection, is your victory? Where, O resurrection is your sting?’

Allison begins with a moving ‘confession,’ in which he shows his longing to endorse a faith that holds that Jesus was truly resurrected from the dead (213–19). But, bewitched by possible analogies with bereavement experiences, he ends with his own version of psychological reductionism. In an appendix I explore the bereavement analogy, which is both like and unlike the Easter experiences of the first disciples.

**Daniel Smith, *Revisiting the Empty Tomb: The Early History of Easter* (2010)**

In a recent book Daniel Smith takes on a more limited project than Allison but practices a similar (yet not identical) form of reductionism: it draws not on modern psychological research into the experiences of bereaved persons, but on a mass of ‘assumption’ stories from Greco-Roman and Jewish sources that are supposed to unlock the ‘real’ meaning of the empty tomb story in Mark 16:1–8.<sup>29</sup> Let us see some of the details.

Smith limits himself to (a) exploring the tradition of Jesus’ empty tomb (as he reconstructs its religious background) and the tradition of the post-resurrection appearances, and to (b) accounting for the differences of perspective between these two traditions. He explains the differences by arguing that the empty tomb tradition did not originate as a way of stating that Jesus had been raised from the dead but as a ‘disappearance’ tradition or a way of expressing that Jesus had been assumed from the tomb into heaven and would be seen again at the *parousia*. He associates the earli-

est form of the disappearance tradition as he finds it in Mark 16:1–8 with, for instance, the disappearance of Elijah in 2 Kings 2. One might raise a doubt here: Elijah, unlike Jesus, had not died and been buried before being assumed.

Smith has studied assiduously many ancient texts that seem relevant to his argument, along with modern authors who comment on them. He notes significant differences between Jewish accounts of assumption (through which Elijah and others escape from death by being ‘taken up’ with a view to their eschatological functions to come) and Greco-Roman stories. The latter usually involved an apotheosis in which some hero was taken alive into the presence of the gods or else his spirit ascended while his dead body was buried.

Smith recognizes that we have something unique in the case of Jesus: Christian belief in him involved *both* resurrection *and* assumption/ascension (e.g., Phil 2:9; 1 Tim 3:16). But he never acknowledges a key difficulty thrown up by the cases he cites of Herakles, Romulus, and other such heroes and heroines. Unlike Jesus (who lived and died shortly before the New Testament came into existence), they were understood to have lived in a very distant past, and—one can reasonably maintain—most probably never existed at all. A similar difficulty also affects the way in which Elijah and other ancient biblical figures might be pressed into service as parallels for the traditions that arose about what happened to Jesus. Whatever one’s verdict on the historical reality of these ancient figures, they certainly did not exist, as Jesus did, within living memory.

Smith does not refer to Richard Bauckham’s *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*,<sup>30</sup> a work that might have qualified his willingness to credit the New Testament authors and their sources with a high degree of creativity.’ Bauckham recognizes how the period between Jesus and the final composition of Mark and the other Gospels was spanned by the continued presence and testimony of some who had participated in the history of Jesus: namely,

such original eyewitnesses as Peter, Mary Magdalene, and the sons of Zebedee. They played a central and authoritative role in guiding the transmission of the traditions about Jesus and would not have tolerated ‘creative’ innovations. Bauckham’s historical reconstruction of the role of the original eyewitnesses does not allow for the kind of imaginative developments Smith alleges. Smith imagines Mark and/or his sources fashioning, on the basis of a saying from ‘Q’: ‘You will not see me’ (Matt 23:39; Luke 13:35), an empty tomb tradition that involved not resurrection from the dead but Jesus being taken up into heaven.

Dealing with this and other texts from the sayings-source used by Matthew and Luke, Smith (like many others) writes of those (in the plural) who compiled Q and, to support his theory of an ‘assumption,’ speculates about their theology and community life. But surely it was entirely possible that it was only one individual who put Q together? After all, it was only one individual, Luke, who put together the third Gospel—not to mention the case of other Gospels.

Smith offers various helpful insights when treating details in the Easter chapters of Luke and Matthew. But the arguments in favor of his central theme (that, as we move from Mark to John, we see a progressive accommodation of a disappearance/assumption tradition, first found in Mark, to an appearance/resurrection tradition) do not convince.

To begin with, the Greco-Roman material used to support Smith’s interpretation of Mark 16:1–8 as a disappearance/assumption story seems largely irrelevant to a Gospel that most scholars interpret against a Jewish background. This evangelist sets the story of Jesus within the framework of Jewish salvation history; his text is permeated with quotation and echoes of the Jewish scriptures, as he goes about illustrating how Jesus fulfilled various Jewish motifs. Greco-Roman motifs do not provide a key, let alone a master-key, for interpreting what Mark wrote either in his final chapter or

in the rest of his Gospel. Paul Danove, in a literary and rhetorical study of this Gospel, finds little or no evidence of Greco-Roman influence.<sup>31</sup> Years ago, in a paper that anticipated the thesis of Smith’s book, Adela Yarbro Collins ‘explained’ Mark’s empty tomb story largely on the basis of Greco-Roman ideas of a notable figure being translated into heaven. But she had to admit that ‘it is hard to find’ in Mark much influence from Greco-Roman sources.<sup>32</sup>

Second, as we move from Mark to John, we do find a progressive linking of two traditions. But it is one that links the tradition of the discovery of the empty tomb (entailing Jesus’ resurrection from the dead, not his assumption into heaven) with the tradition of his appearances to individuals and groups.

Third, the central statement in the Easter chapter of Mark is ‘he has been raised’ from the dead (along with ‘he is going before you into Galilee and there you will see him’), not ‘he has been taken up into heaven’ (and ‘you will see him again at the parousia’). Smith tries hard to explain (or explain away?) Mark’s text in favor of his disappearance/assumption thesis, but the arguments seem contrived. The language of ‘assumption’ or ‘ascension’ turns up elsewhere in the New Testament (e.g., Phil 2:9; 1 Tim 3:16), but not in Mark 16.

### *Two Books on the Fringe*

#### **Geza Vermes. *The Resurrection* (2008)**

Geza Vermes secured his place in the modern history of biblical studies through (a) *Jesus the Jew*, which prompted many Christian scholars into taking seriously the Jewishness of Jesus and the Gospels, and (b) *The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls in English*,<sup>33</sup> which helped curb bizarre theories that misuse the Scrolls. But *The Resurrection* fails on two accounts.<sup>34</sup> First, Vermes is a less reliable guide to Jewish views on the afterlife than Jon Levenson and Alan Segal.<sup>35</sup> Second, Vermes’s thesis, that Jesus ‘rose’ only in the sense of being loved by his followers who ‘felt’ that he

was still with them, is no more convincing now than what his friend Paul Winter (whom Vermes cites on this point) wrote years ago.<sup>36</sup> According to this thesis, what happened after the death and burial of Jesus was merely a change in the disciples, not a new, transformed life for Jesus himself. In these terms, ‘resurrection’ is not a fact about Jesus himself, but simply a fact about his disciples, past and present.

The basic problem with any such change of heart thesis is that it must deny the obvious meaning of what the New Testament authors repeatedly say and say in a variety of ways. Let me take just one example, the formula of proclamation cited by Paul: ‘I handed on to you what I also received that Christ *died* for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that he *was buried*, and that he *has been raised*, and that he *appeared* to Cephas [= Peter], then to the Twelve’ (1 Cor 15: 3–5). In this formula, Christ is the subject of all four verbs, the last two (‘has been raised’ and ‘appeared’) being just as informative as the first two (‘died’ and ‘was buried’). In the case of both pairs of verbs, the second verb explains and supports what the first claims. We know that Christ died because he was buried; burial is a certain pointer to death. We know that Christ has been raised because he appeared bodily alive to a number of individuals and groups; dead persons do not appear like that.

For all the moving sincerity with which Vermes and his dead friend Winter have put forward their thesis, they must suppose that Paul and other New Testament writers, although seeming to claim some new fact about Jesus (his personal resurrection from death to new life), were using a deceptive form of discourse and ‘merely’ talking about a fresh love that now possessed their hearts. They spoke only of themselves, not of a new event affecting Jesus himself.

En route to his epilogue (‘Resurrection [Merely] in the Hearts of Men’), Vermes not only illustrates his rich historical knowledge but also makes judgments that invite challenge.

First, while rightly observing that the theme of resurrection does not enjoy a central place in the preaching of Jesus, he ignores some texts which *imply* resurrection: ‘many will come from the east and the west and sit down with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven’ (Matt 8: 11). How will the patriarchs and those many others who join them at the final feast of the kingdom do so unless they have been raised from the dead? The longest passage explicitly concerned with resurrection comes in Jesus’ debate with some Sadducees (Mark 12: 18–27). Vermes asserts that ‘most critical commentators rightly assume’ that this story is ‘inauthentic’ and ‘probably reflects by anticipation’ later conflicts between Sadducees and Christians.<sup>37</sup> Sampling some critical commentators on Mark, I found that, while Adela Yarbro Collins agrees with Vermes, John Donahue, Joel Marcus, John Meier and Francis Moloney hold that the dispute on resurrection goes back in its substance to the historical ministry of Jesus. In any case all five scholars argue for their position and do not simply ‘assume’ that the passage is authentic or inauthentic.<sup>38</sup>

Vermes spends a chapter on the predictions made by Jesus about his coming death and resurrection and concludes that they are ‘authentic’ (he meant to write ‘inauthentic’).<sup>39</sup> In so joining Rudolf Bultmann and dismissing the historicity of the three predictions in Mark (8: 31; 9: 31; 10: 33–34) as prophecies after the event, Vermes fails to notice that one early and pervasive Christian interpretation of Jesus’ death is missing. It is *not* stated that ‘the Son of Man must suffer and be killed *for us and for our sins* and then rise again.’ Nor do these three predictions include one enormously important detail, the killing by crucifixion. These omissions support the (now widely held) view that the passion predictions are by no means free inventions and contain an historical kernel: Jesus anticipated his violent death and hoped for a divine vindication through resurrection.

When discussing a resurrection text from

late in the first century, John 6: 54 ('he who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life and I will raise him up on the last day'), Vermes speaks of 'eating of blood' (surely it should be 'drinking of blood?'), dismisses this as a 'cannibalistic allegory' (introduced by a Gentile Christian), and appeals to a council held in Jerusalem around AD 50 and its injunction about 'abstaining from blood' (Acts 15: 20).<sup>40</sup> But Vermes says nothing about a letter from the 50s where Paul, a Jewish Christian *par excellence*, provides the earliest account of the Eucharist and writes of 'drinking' the Lord's 'blood' (1 Cor 11: 25–26).

In short, for an historical account of the resurrection in the New Testament, read N. T. Wright's *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (dismissed by Vermes as 'faith wrapped in scholarship'<sup>41</sup>), and query the claim made on the dust jacket that Vermes has been 'the greatest Jesus scholar of his generation.' Such praise belongs rather to Raymond Brown, John Meier, or others.

**Philip Pullman, *The Good Man Jesus and the Scoundrel Christ* (2010)**

Every year or so sensationalist books debunking the resurrection of Jesus are published. They often make a great splash but normally leave hardly a ripple. Some of them rehash an old theory about Jesus being taken down alive from the cross. They differ by dispatching him to continue his life in various parts of the world, like France, Rome, the Dead Sea Community, or India. Apropos of the Indian connection, with his 1894 book, *The Unknown Life of Jesus Christ*, Nicolas Notovitch fashioned the first part of the legend: Jesus, he alleged, spent some pre-ministry years in India.<sup>42</sup> The second half of the legend was created by Mirza Ghulam Ahmad; in an 1899 work (in Urdu) he asserted that Jesus was saved from the cross, went to Kashmir, and eventually died there at the age of 120 in Srinagar, where tourists are still shown his 'grave.' Without a shred of evidence in its support, this whole story was simply made up, spread among a gullible pub-

lic, and is due to be rehashed any year now.

Let me, however, speak of a book that was the talk of the town at Easter 2010 and eliminated the resurrection of Jesus as a case of deliberate deception: Philip Pullman's *The Good Man Jesus and the Scoundrel Christ*.<sup>43</sup> Pullman invests Jesus with a twin called 'Christ,' who becomes more and more alienated from his brother and led astray by a mysterious, demonic 'stranger.' Eventually Christ plays the part of Judas in being paid to lead a guard to Jesus and identify him with a kiss. In Pullman's version, Christ does not then give way to remorse but agrees to do something worse by masquerading as his dead brother and deceiving people into thinking that Jesus has risen from the dead. After Jesus has been buried by Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, 'the stranger' organizes several men to remove the body of Jesus during the night of Saturday/Sunday. He persuades Christ to return the next morning and play the part of the 'risen' Jesus.

Mary Magdalene, who has discovered the tomb to be open and empty, then meets and talks with the twin brother of the dead Jesus. She thinks she has seen the risen Jesus and runs to announce the wonderful news to the other disciples. Later the same day, the disciples set off as a group for a village called Emmaus. Christ joins them on the road. They reach the village at night and invite him to join them for a meal. A disciple called Cleopas brings a lamp close to the face of Christ and takes him to be the risen Jesus. Christ plays out the deception and encourages the disciples to identify him as his twin brother raised from the dead.<sup>44</sup>

Many of those who reviewed Pullman's book found little plausibility in the way he 'explains' the empty tomb and the Easter appearances. Right from New Testament times, skeptics have repeatedly accounted for the emptiness of Jesus' tomb by alleging that his body had been removed by friend or foe (e.g., Matt 28:11–15). The only new twist added by Pullman comes when he attributes the re-

moval of the corpse to a sinister ‘stranger’ who is intent on creating organized Christianity.

As regards the post-resurrection situation presented by Paul and the Gospels, Pullman ignores the appearance(s) of the risen Jesus in Galilee (Matt 28:16–20; John 21; and implied by Mark 16:7), the appearance to Peter (1 Cor 15:5; Luke 24:34), the appearance to ‘more than five hundred’ disciples (1 Cor 15:6), the appearance to James and then to ‘all the apostles’ (1 Cor 15:7), and the appearance to Paul (1 Cor 9:1; 15:8; Gal 1:12, 15–16; Acts 9; 22; 26). Pullman selects the appearance to Mary Magdalene (John 20:11–19) and the Emmaus Story (Luke 24:13–35), and rewrites them. He not only remains silent about so much testimony to post-resurrection appearances but also leaves us with a strange puzzle. Could the early Christian witnesses have lived such heroic lives and spread the message of Jesus with so much effective devotion, if all that lay behind their missionary outreach were two episodes in which first a credulous woman (Mary Magdalene) and then a group (the disciples at Emmaus) mistook the identity of someone they met?

Pullman’s version of what happened after the death and burial of Jesus is so contrived and plays so fast and loose with the evidence that it loses even its superficial plausibility. At the end does he turn the greatest story ever told into the greatest puzzle ever imagined? The ‘reconstruction’ proposed by Pullman, the body of Jesus being spirited away and then

one individual and one group misidentifying his twin as if he were Jesus risen from the dead, is historically speaking quite implausible. To be sure, Pullman has written a work of historical fiction. But, by its nature, *historical* fiction should be plausible, even and especially from an historical point of view.

History shows us an *effect*, the propagation of the Christian message and community throughout the world, a propagation that took place despite ruthless persecutions and other terrible setbacks. If Christ did not personally rise from the dead, what else might have *caused* this visible and public effect in world history, the development and massive presence of the Christian religion? Pullman asks us to believe that this effect was brought about by (a) fraud (namely, the theft of Jesus’ body), and (b) a mistaken identification, deliberately provoked by a twin of Jesus masquerading as his dead brother brought back to life. That such an odd turn of events was sufficient to cause the rise and spread of Christianity will convince only the credulous, and those who cannot imagine that there is a God who raised Jesus from the dead and gave him a new and glorious life.

Such then are nine works that have been published in the first decade of the twenty-first century and that represent current writing on the resurrection. In my forthcoming book, to be published early in 2012 by Paulist Press (Mahwah, NJ), *Believing in the Resurrection*, I turn to what I want to say about Easter faith, both biblically and theologically.

## NOTES

This article is the opening chapter of Gerald’s next book that Paulist Press (Mahwah, NJ) are to publish early in 2012, entitled *Believing In the Resurrection*. 1 A. J. Kelly, *The Resurrection Effect: Transforming Christian Life and Thought* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008); see my review, *Theological Studies* 70 (2009): 478–80.

2 F.-X. Durrwell, *The Resurrection*, trans. Rosemary Sheed (London and New York: Sheed and

Ward, 1960). Years later Durrwell took up again the main themes of *The Resurrection in Christ Our Passover: The Indispensable Role of the Resurrection in Our Salvation*, trans. John F. Craghan (Liguori, MI: Liguori Publications, 2004).

3 See, e.g., W. Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, trans. G. W. Bromiley, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1991–98); G. O’Collins, *Jesus Risen: An Historical, Fundamental and Systematic Examination of Christ’s Resurrection* (New

York/Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1987).

4 Even if Jon Sobrino has reflected on the resurrection (see O'Collins, *Jesus Risen*, 94-97), the way liberation theologians have generally neglected that theme is reflected by the fact that resurrection is not mentioned in the index to Christopher Rowland, ed., *Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

5 On the way moral theologians and sacramental theologians neglect the resurrection, see Kelly, *Resurrection Effect*, 159-68 and 5, respectively.

6 N. T. Wright, *Christian Origins and the Question of God*, vol. 3, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003); see my review, *The Tablet*, April 19, 2003, 28-29.

7 Wright, *The Resurrection*, 205; 'most' may be too strong, but certainly many Jews at the time of Jesus (like the Pharisees) believed in resurrection.

8 *Ibid.*, 585-615. Kelly was also struck by Wright's theme of the surprising items in the Easter narratives of the Gospels, but he regrets Wright's failure to reflect on the resurrection as a phenomenon that saturates the whole life of faith (*Resurrection Effect*, 4, 61-52).

9 R. Swinburne, *The Resurrection of God Incarnate* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

10 *Ibid.*, 33-34.

11 On divine activity and special divine acts, see G. O'Collins, *Christology: A Biblical, Historical, and Systematic Study of Jesus* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn, 2009), 112-18; and id., *Rethinking Fundamental Theology Toward a New Fundamental Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 22-29.

12 Swinburne, *The Resurrection*, 186, 190. On p. 31 Swinburne speaks of 'suspending' the laws of nature, but at once returns to the language of 'the violation of the natural laws.' Kelly is also troubled by the way Swinburne presents the resurrection as a 'super-miracle' in a world of natural laws: 'the idea of a new creation is not evident' (Kelly, *Resurrection Effect*, 8).

13 *Ibid.*, 174-75. See also G. O'Collins and D. Kendall, 'On Reissuing Venturini,' *Gregorianum* 75 (1994): 241-54; reprinted in G. O'Collins and D. Kendall, *Focus on Jesus* (Leominster, UK : Gracewing, 1996), 153-75.

14 Swinburne, *The Resurrection*, 184.

15 *Ibid.*, 215.

16 S. M. Schneiders, *Written that You May Be-*

*lieve: Encountering Jesus in the Fourth Gospel* (New York: Crossroad, revised & expanded edn., 2003).

17 *Ibid.*, 57.

18 *Ibid.*, 149-70.

19 *Ibid.*, 171-83.

20 A. Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede*, trans. W. Montgomery (London: A. & C. Black, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn., 1954; orig. German 1906), 401.

21 T. Peters, R. J. Russell and M. Welker eds., *Resurrection: Theological and Scientific Assessments* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2002).

22 'Jesus,' in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Lindsay Jones, vol. 7 (Detroit: Macmillan, 2006), 4843-52.

23 D. C. Allison, *Resurrecting Jesus: The Earliest Christian Tradition and Its Interpreters* (New York/London: T. & T. Clark, 2005); hereafter references to this book will be given intratextually.

24 G. O'Collins, *Easter Faith: Believing in the Risen Jesus* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2003), 1-24.

25 G. O'Collins and D. Kendall, 'Did Joseph of Arimathea Exist?,' *Biblica* 75 (1994), 235-41.

26 *Ibid.*, 241.

27 For a detailed discussion of the similarities and dissimilarities in the analogy proposed by Allison and others, see the appendix below, 'Easter Appearances and Bereavement Experiences,' and O'Collins, *Christology*, 97-100.

28 Towards the end Allison talks about handing the discussion over to 'the philosophers and theologians, among whose lofty company' he is 'not privileged to dwell' (351). Some dialogue with them might have stopped Allison from dismissing resurrection as 'the recovery' of one's 'current flesh and bones' (344; see 219-28).

29 D. A. Smith, *Revisiting the Empty Tomb: The Early History of Easter* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010).

30 R. Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2006).

31 P. L. Danove, *The End of Mark's Story: A Methodological Study* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1993).

32 A. Yarbro Collins, 'The Empty Tomb in the Gospel According to Mark,' in *Hermes and Athena*, ed. E. Stump and T. P. Flint (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993), 107-

40, at 130-31. In her *Mark: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), she wrote of ‘the possibility of the influence on Mark 16:1–8 of ancient notions of the translation or transference of a body of a favored person to the ends of the earth or to heaven, where he or she is made immortal. Ancient notions of deification or apotheosis may also have influenced the story of the empty tomb.’ She concluded: ‘The author of Mark was probably aware of the idea that some Roman emperors had ascended into heaven and become gods. He may also have known that their deifications were modeled on that of Romulus’ (791-92, 793; emphasis mine). No evidence is cited to show any such ‘awareness’ on the part of the evangelist; what was stated as ‘possible’ becomes ‘probable’—once again without any evidence being produced.

33 G. Vermes, *Jesus the Jew: A Historian’s Reading* (London: Collins, 1973); *id.*, *The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls in English* (New York/London: Allen Lane/Penguin, 1997; orig. edn., 1962).

34 G. Vermes, *The Resurrection* (New York: Doubleday, 2008).

35 K. J. Madigan and J. D. Levenson *Resurrection: The Power of God for Christians and Jews* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2008); see also Alan Segal, *Life After Death: A History of*

*the Afterlife in the Religions of the West* (New York: Doubleday, 2004).

36 P. Winter, *On the Trial of Jesus* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2nd edn, 1974), 208.

37 Vermes, *Resurrection*, 65.

38 Yarbro Collins, *Mark*, 558-59; J. R. Donahue, ‘A Neglected Factor in the Theology of Mark,’ *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 101 (1982): 563-94, at 575-76; J. Marcus, *Mark 8-16* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2009), 826-36, at 830; J. P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, vol. 3 (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 431-44; F. J. Moloney, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2002), 237, fn. 117.

39 Vermes, *Resurrection*, 82.

40 *Ibid.*, 68.

41 *Ibid.*, 153.

42 N. Notovitch, *The Unknown Life of Jesus Christ*, trans. J. H. Connelly and L. Landsberg (New York: G. W. Dillingham, 1894).

43 P. Pullman, *The Good Man Jesus and the Scoundrel Christ* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2010). On this book see G. O’Collins, *Philip Pullman’s Jesus* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2010).

44 Pullman did not first create the ‘theory’ that credited Jesus with a twin brother who faked his resurrection; it had been proposed some years earlier; see Allison, *Resurrecting Jesus*, 213, n. 60.

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*‘If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain... and you are still in your sins’ (1 Cor 15: 14-17). With these strong words from the First Letter to the Corinthians, St Paul makes clear the decisive importance he attributes to the Resurrection of Jesus. In this event, in fact, lies the solution to the problem posed by the drama of the Cross. The Cross alone could not explain the Christian faith, indeed it would remain a tragedy, an indication of the absurdity of being. The Paschal Mystery consists in the fact that the Crucified man ‘was raised on the third day, in accordance with the Scriptures’ (1 Cor 15: 4), as proto-Christian tradition attests. This is the keystone of Pauline Christology: everything rotates around this gravitational centre. The whole teaching of Paul the Apostle starts from, and arrives at, the mystery of him whom the Father raised from the dead. The Resurrection is a fundamental fact, almost a prior axiom (cf. 1 Cor 15: 12), on the basis of which Paul can formulate his synthetic proclamation (kerygma). He who was crucified and who thus manifested God’s immense love for man, is risen again, and is alive among us.*

—Benedict XVI, General Audience, Wednesday 5th November, 2008.

# INTERPRETING THE BOOK OF REVELATION

SIMON STEVENS

21 MAY, 2011: Judgment Day—again! While Howard Camping’s calculation of the date for Judgment Day, or more accurately his *third* calculation of the date of Judgment Day—May 21, 1988, and September 6, 1994 also having passed, reluctantly it would seem, without a gnashing of teeth—does not draw specifically on John’s *Revelation*; its apocalyptic overtones are all sourced through Biblical ‘interpretation’.

The challenge of interpreting *Revelation* today stands as a symbol of modern interpretative practice. One might say if you can come through the hermeneutical minefield that is John’s *Revelation* you can take on anything. Its seeming distance from modern sensibility, the violence of its imagery, extremity of its vilification, its high context symbolism and its refusal to sit easily within one genre, ensure that the scholar must bring to the fray an array of methodologies and strategies ‘in order to see clearly what God wanted to communicate to us.’<sup>1</sup>

Yet contemporary society with all its modern sensibility churns out apocalypses by the hundreds. In the imagery of the recent conclusion to the Harry Potter saga one can see direct echoes of the language of John’s *Revelation*. Harry’s journey and final battle is full of graphic physical violence, extreme vilification of the ‘enemy’ and high context symbolism. The by-line for the final film: ‘It all ends’, makes its point clear enough, combined with a series of teaser posters of a devastated London and a burning Hogwarts, we were being prepared for a journey redolent with symbol, and catharsis. Reception of the film would say that it delivered. Yet the text of *Revelation*, which shares much in common with our con-

cerns, remains distant. How is this so?

*Revelation*’s apparent ‘meaninglessness’<sup>2</sup> can be ‘a mind-boggling experience’<sup>3</sup> that takes us into a ‘strange, bizarre new world.’<sup>4</sup> Yet given the initial shock can be overwhelming, such a reaction is a powerful affirmation of *Dei Verbum*’s insistence that ‘God speaks in Sacred Scripture through men in human fashion.’<sup>5</sup> Its ‘arcane symbols’<sup>6</sup> evoke a response that ‘the book simply does not make sense’<sup>7</sup> and provides a test case for exegetes to ‘carefully investigate what meaning the sacred writers *really* intended, and what God wanted to manifest by means of their words’<sup>8</sup> [my emphasis]. Therein lies the rub. What did John *really* intend?

To seek ‘what the sacred writers *really* intended,’ any interpretation of *Revelation* must take on *Dei Verbum*’s exhortation: ‘attention should be given...to ‘literary forms’...which are variously historical, prophetic, poetic... [and] to the customary and characteristic styles of feeling, speaking and narrating which prevailed at the time of the sacred writer.’<sup>9</sup>

Over the last forty years there has been a wealth of scholarship that has tried to bring to the populist fascination with this text an understanding with ‘attention...to ‘literary forms’ that elicits neither ‘one of two extremes: some simply avoid it in despair; others take an exaggerated interest in it, thinking to find here all the keys to the end of the world.’<sup>10</sup>

This conversation with our world and scripture as illustrated with *Revelation* can be said to be reflective of the world’s use of scripture in general. Any creation of meaning for readers stems from their view of their own world. So one must journey to our world and

begin with what one knows: our world. How we ‘use the Bible to inform our world’<sup>11</sup> is as equally important as being informed about the Bible’s world. So let’s begin with how our culture views it.

### ***Why are we Fascinated with Revelation?***

‘The complexity of the book and its language has given rise to a bewildering variety of approaches and conclusions’<sup>12</sup> which has created ‘a yawning chasm, between scholarly and devotional interest, an abyss out of which all sorts of beasts have emerged.’<sup>13</sup> Over the forty-year period striding the advent of the third Millennium, popular culture has time and again used Revelation to flush out the real antichrist and beast that lurks around the corner (always) in someone else’s heart. Napoleon, Hitler, Stalin, Saddam, Gaddafi and of late Osama have all got a jersey, along with the Pope (probably all of them) and even Enron.

Furthermore, along with Nostradamus, Mayan calendars, sunspots, asteroids and the Dresden Codex (I don’t even know what this is!) John’s *Revelation* has provided the main blue-print for how the end of days will pan out. Its language was the powerhouse of the framework for the Branch Davidians in Waco suggesting that ‘those involved in such movements understand the power of this literature better than do dispassionate exegetical inquiries.’<sup>14</sup>

In popular culture from *The Omen (I–IV)* to Hal Lindsey’s *The Late Great Planet Earth* or more recently the *Left Behind* series, we have, as a culture, sought to recapture or impose the essence of John’s *Revelation* on our own time. We will even go so far as to allow Arnie Schwarzenegger to fire an M203 grenade launcher at Satan—which didn’t work—forcing a later impalement on the sword protruding from a fallen statue of *Michael the Archangel* in the oh-so-creatively titled ‘blockbuster’ *End of Days* released in 1999. Why do we do this?

We do it because the book is popular. It



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has been from the start, as it began its life as the first ‘popular’ Christian literature due to its ‘promising deliverance to a church labouring under vicious persecution.’<sup>15</sup> *Revelation* became more so as the popular culture appropriated John’s images and symbols for more literal interpretation.

Augustine was one of the first to warn against the ‘ridiculous tales’ that had been extrapolated from the text suggesting in *City of God* ‘that the prophecies are not meant to be taken literally.’<sup>16</sup> This didn’t stop Joachim of Fiore from developing the ‘direct prediction’ hermeneutic which meant that ‘instead of treating each of *Revelation*’s prophesies as an analogy with a moral interpretation...each image [stood] as a specific prophecy predicting a future event.’<sup>17</sup> So 11<sup>th</sup> century!

We also do this because we still love it; *Revelation* draws us because its symbolic language is so powerful, graphic and extreme. Such language offers answers which we choose to interpret as literal. The power of the text—its language and imagery, its didactic symbolism and implicit ritual, with all its explicit mysticism—led to people’s adoption of *Revelation* as a blue-print. Within Trainor’s framework of how to view the Bible, a blue-print provides a ‘simple and universal solution’<sup>18</sup> that allows us to believe ‘that God has programmed everything in the Bible’<sup>19</sup> and as such denies ‘this world is an important area for God’s self-revelation.’<sup>20</sup>

*Revelation*’s language is its enduring legacy. People ask of it as they ask of no other book in the Second Testament: ‘Is what it says

in the *Book of Revelations* [*sic*] real? Will it come true?' And as such it is a bookend to *Genesis*. As happened with *Genesis* and evolution, so too with *Revelation* and current political events 'the interpreter goes through the Bible and locates all the places where the present practice... seem to be evident.'<sup>21</sup> This approach, where one gathers 'a 'tissue' of quotes, to offer self-evident teaching',<sup>22</sup> turns the Bible into 'a source of 'proof-texts',<sup>23</sup> disregarding any reference to context.

The seemingly extreme symbolic language of both texts arouses in us the need to know what is *really* happening in these texts. The challenge laid down in *Dei Verbum* is to avoid seeking a simple literal sense but instead to seek what 'the sacred writer intended to express and actually expressed in particular circumstances by using contemporary literary forms in accordance with the situation of his own time and culture.'<sup>24</sup>

I am always struck that no-one ever asks of the message of the other Second Testament books: 'Is it true that God created us as unique beings and loves each one of us, and all we need to do is love each other?' I suppose there's no copy in it.

I am suggesting that part of our fascination lies in *Revelation's* sensational and extreme nature. Like the old journalistic adage, *Revelation* pulls the punters because it contains all the elements of sensational story: blasphemous religion, direct reportage, nobility, mystery, crime, and sex all contained in one little book. No wonder it made the canon!

I could spend the rest of this article drawing the correspondences (in fact it could be a good PhD). But instead I will just make the claim that the reason why we are still fascinated by it, why it matches our expectations of 'blockbuster' material, how we are still drawn into it for meaning, is that it is still able to fulfil the purpose for which it was written in its original context.

\* \* \*

### *Literature Frameworks: Genre and Symbolism*

I have been referring to John's *Revelation* by the English translation from its Latin title *Revelatio*. However, if one uses the *Koine* Greek original the title is *Apocalypse*. They both mean 'unveiling'. I have avoided the use of the Greek term so far as it is a heavily-laden word. In common parlance it has lost all reference to any sense of unveiling and common English usage refers to the end of the world. I use the term 'apocalypse' now to discuss the genre of literature to which John's book gives its name, but by no means is John's *Apocalypse* the first occurrence of such. The Bible, both First and Second Testaments contain what has come to be termed apocalyptic literature and such 'literature is an example of the adage that 'man's [*sic*] extremity is God's opportunity'.<sup>25</sup> Raymond Brown insists that the term *Apocalypse* be used because it 'has the advantage of catching the esoteric character of the genre.'<sup>26</sup>

This extreme genre includes, most notably, the *Book of Daniel* from the first testament as well as second testament era apocalyptic literature such as Mark 3 (the Olivet Prophecy), 1 Corinthians 15:20-28, 2 Corinthians 5:1-3, 1 Thessalonians 4:15-18, 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12 and even 1 Peter. The popularity of this genre can be seen in the range from the Apocrypha such as *The Ascension of Isaiah*, *Apocalypse of Peter*, *Apocalypse of Paul*, *Apocalypse of Thomas*, and *Christian Sibyllines*.

Yet it is from John's *Revelation* that the genre gets its name and it is through hindsight that we have amassed a definition of the genre. Indeed, 'The application of the term to a group of works similar to the apocalypse apparently did not occur until the patristic writers of the second century and later began using it this way.'<sup>27</sup>

Characteristics of apocalypses are that they are often pseudonymous, yet named after ancient heroes. They are set as if written in the

past, thus making their ‘predictions’ up to the present time spot on, and are to a certain extent anachronistic. Yet they contain a timeline of the past and speak of ‘what must take place’ (Rev 1:1). Such texts are full of beasts and monsters which have correspondence to the author’s contemporary political identities. The apocalypse is framed narratively but representing a vision or dream which is guided by an angel or supernatural guide. Finally, what is revealed is the cosmology of the author.

Most important of all, the language of this genre is highly symbolic. It is this which makes much of it unintelligible to modern readers. These symbols are grounded solidly in the world of John’s hearers. Firstly, in many aspects of the Jewish faith: the liturgical Temple practice (bowls, trumpets, smoke), numerology or *gematria* of numbers and names (7 for perfection and fullness, 666 a gematrial reading of Nero) and the all too many allusions to the First Testament (Daniel, Egypt plagues, Jezebel, Babylon and Exile), all of which still had power due to the continuing belief in the authority and reliability of the prophets of the Jewish Bible.<sup>28</sup> White gowns, Lamb and last days refer to the second source—Christian Liturgy—while finally the world of the hearers was reflected in popular images from the Greco-Roman world of empire (purple silk, seven hills) and cosmic combat of Near East myth (rebellion, dragon, beasts, kings, gods, banquets and temples). Such rich symbolic and polyvalent references are typical of high context literature, the result of living in a high context culture: ‘In a high context society, little needs to be said to set off a range of associations in a reader; a great deal is thus invested in every detail of a text and a writer will not need to explain a great deal.’<sup>29</sup>

However John’s *Revelation*, though the template text for the definition of apocalypse, is not pure apocalypse and like most great art is a hybrid as ‘it violates the rules in some way,’<sup>30</sup> creating an intertextuality that opens the ‘text to multiple interpretations,’<sup>31</sup> thus cre-

ating another barrier to easy contemporary analysis.

The genre boundaries blur right from the beginning because, while the bulk of the text clearly is connected and alludes to the First Testament apocalyptic writing, it is also framed by a series of the much overlooked letters, and it is this more than the genre which points to the social context in which John’s Revelation was conceived.

### ***Social Frameworks: Letters***

Indeed: ‘the opening of the Apocalypse is so intertextual that it frustrates the reader who tries to categorize the book in a single genre.’<sup>32</sup> The letters to the seven churches are themselves a possible development of the Pauline style of communicating with a community, building upon urgings by Paul to the Colossians, ‘And when this letter has been read among you, have it read also in the church of the Laodiceans; and see you read also the letter from Laodicea’ (Col 4:16).

John of Patmos streamlines and multiplies this interconnectedness of communities. Instead of mail-merging, making each letter seem unique while having the main revelation the same for all, John has sent a bulk mail-out, where his inclusion of each of the letters enables each of the other communities to hear the others’ status in the eyes of John, eliciting an ‘eaves-dropping’ effect which enhances his symbolic message. The letters make clear that this wide ranging community has a story that must be listened to.

### ***Social Frameworks: Liturgy***

It is in the frame of the letters and the social context they suggest that the real impact of *Revelation*’s expressive language hits home. While the connection and allusions to the First Testament are important and keep the scholars in work, it is the insistence on the performance of the letter from the very first that creates a performance/ritual setting for the *hear-*

ing of the text: ‘Blessed is he who reads aloud the words of the prophesy, and blessed are those who hear, and keep what is written herein; for the time is near’ (Rev 1:3). One should therefore focus on ‘the first ‘hearers’ rather than the first ‘readers’.’<sup>33</sup>

Adela Yarbo Collins’ analysis of how the *Apocalypse* creates its effect in her *Crisis and Catharsis*, demonstrates that ‘the *Apocalypse* handles skilfully the hearer’s thoughts, attitudes and feelings by the use of effective symbols and a narrative plot that invites imaginative participation.’<sup>34</sup> This is powerfully and eerily demonstrated in Dale Martin’s Yale lecture 23 *Apocalypse and Resistance* at the 31 minute mark. Martin creates a re-enactment of the fourth chapter, The Heavenly Worship, where a tripartite chorus of his students takes on the roles of the four living creatures, the elders and seven Angels and cycle through the chants of The Heavenly Worship for a solid three minutes, building to a crescendo of adulation. His aim was to make them feel weird, experience a tingle, and that is as it should be because the text is more than a blue-print (his words) and if you see it as that you ‘kinda miss the point.’<sup>35</sup> *Revelation* needs to be performed, to be breathed in its entirety, as the all-singing all-dancing extravaganza it is: ‘it really is like a stage show, except the stage is the whole cosmos.’<sup>36</sup> It is within this framework of cacophonous symbolism that the beauty of the seventh seal lies: ‘When the Lamb opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour’ (Rev 8:1). Given what has gone before and what is to come here indeed is a dramatic pause that in the reading would not only have allowed participants to catch their breath but creates, aurally, a blissful moment in paradise. ‘The drama of the moment is intensified by the solemn silence in heaven.’<sup>37</sup> In such a way the text creates a cathartic effect through use of ‘symbol language that keeps a close link between ideas, images and sense experience’<sup>38</sup> and, Collins argues, ‘the emotions of the audience are purged in the sense that their feelings of fear and pity

are intensified and given objective expression. The feelings are thus brought to consciousness and become less threatening.’<sup>39</sup>

It is not being suggested that *Revelation* was a script but ‘the recognition of formality, fixity, and repetition as strategies which characterise the process of ritualization helps us to recognise the *Apocalypse* as a text which stands betwixt and between orality and textuality.’<sup>40</sup> Our removal from this world, the world that is more than text, is another example of the barriers that exist between *Revelation* and today’s audience.

### Revelation Redux

We are drawn to *Revelation*’s implicit liturgical incarnation and symbolic language even though we are not conscious of it. Caught in the ‘Cocktail Party effect’ (multiple stimuli but only one receiving channel) and given ‘a hybrid genre containing a mixture of conventions [that] offers multiple possibilities to readers who must foreground one set of conventions and background the others.’<sup>41</sup> We find its polyvalent symbols redolent with esoteric and exotic possibilities and we focus on one genre approach or one set of symbols, losing the whole in the detail. ‘Many weird and unconventional readings of *Revelation* have emerged because people have begun with a detail, with which they have become obsessed, before they have appreciated the book as a whole.’<sup>42</sup>

We seek from it and it is still able to fulfil—through a process of contextualisation, a sense of mystery and glory over-coming fear and pity—the purpose for which it was written in its original context. For ‘revelation yields not the solution to a problem, the answer to a difficult question, but the unveiling of a mystery.’<sup>43</sup> In our own context, with our own culture we create art, film and story, just as highly contextual, just as redolent with symbol, and catharsis which tries to recapture that world that *Revelation* is, that is more than text, a world that makes incarnate fear and through symbolic language leads us to a

shadow of a silence. Yet the art, film and story of our society, such as Harry Potter and other texts, while they mimic the form of *Revelation*, can't capture that sense of mystery as they are also driven to provide solution and happy endings.

We must extrapolate what we have discovered here in *Revelation* to the whole of scripture. This initial conversation between revelation and culture must broaden out to a circle of conversation for 'no less serious attention must be given to the content and unity of the

whole of Scripture if the meaning of the sacred texts is to be correctly worked out.'<sup>44</sup>

*Revelation* is an important text because not only through an engagement with it in its context can we begin to discern its real meaning but such a process brings insight which allows us to begin a continuous process of conversation with both scripture as a whole and most importantly with our world, so that 'The Bible is used in such a way that it can . . . reveal our world as the arena of God's self-communication.'<sup>45</sup>

### NOTES

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11 Michael Trainor, 'Scripture: five ways Australian Christians use the Bible' *Reo : a journal of theology and ministry*, 8, (autumn 1998), 7.

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35 Dale Martin, Yale lecture 23-*Apocalypse and Resistance*:34:23 <http://academicearth.org/lectures/apocalypse-and-resistance> .

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# THE MOVEMENT FOR SAME-SEX MARRIAGE

BRIAN LEWIS

**T**HE MOVEMENT FOR the legalisation of same-sex marriage has today become a prominent aspect of western culture. Twenty or thirty years ago the idea was virtually unknown. It speaks volumes for the cultural power of the gay and lesbian movement that today not only is same-sex 'marriage' legally recognised in many European countries and in some states in America and Canada but also is set to become law fairly commonly elsewhere, including possibly in Australia. In February 2011, the Prime Minister called on parliamentarians to gauge the views of their constituents on 'ways to achieve equal treatment for same-sex couples, including marriage'. In the United States of America 'defense of marriage' amendments have been passed in Hawaii and in twenty-nine other States. Five other States and the District of Columbia permit same-sex marriage.

In Australia, since 13<sup>th</sup> August 2004, the Federal Marriage Amendment Act, which amended the Marriage Act of 1961, banned same-sex marriages from being performed or recognised in Australia. However, all levels of Australian Government do recognise cohabiting same-sex couples as *de facto* couples, having the same rights as cohabiting heterosexual couples under state law. In November 2008, the Federal Parliament passed laws that recognised same-sex couples in federal law, offering them the same rights as unmarried heterosexual couples in such areas as taxation, social security and health, aged care and employment. This means that same-sex couples who can prove that they are in a *de facto* relationship have most of the rights of married couples since 1 July 2009.

A further development is that in New South

Wales, Tasmania and Victoria, same-sex couples can access domestic partnership registries, and civil partnerships are performed in the Australian Capital Territory. However, even though there is equality of rights, Australia does not have a national registered partnership or civil union scheme.

The argument generally advanced for same-sex marriage rests upon the demand for equality, irrespective of gender. The claim is made that every member of the human community has the same basic rights, including that of marriage, and thus, if justice is to be served, no discrimination against any member of society, particularly persons engaged in loving, committed and stable relationships, should be permitted. This is a familiar current assertion, but little attempt is made to discuss the existence of such a right for all and to consider other important issues, such as the nature of marriage, the question of children and the impact on the public interest and the common good.

After clarifying what is possible for Australian civil law to do as regards legalising same-sex civil unions short of supporting civil marriage, this article tackles the fundamental issue of re-defining traditional marriage as a secular reality.

## *1. Legalising Same-Sex Civil Unions without using the term Marriage*

In Australia federalism involves both independent action by states and territories, with oversight by the Federal Government, and action at the Commonwealth level. As has already been mentioned, under Australian law *de facto* relationships are recognised as well as marriage. Federal law covers marriage,

whereas state and territory laws are largely responsible for *de facto* relationships. In the light of this, the proposal has been made by priest and lawyer, Frank Brennan, that the states and territories should legalise same-sex civil unions or partnerships without changing the nature of state-recognised marriage. He says: ‘Just as the states and territories deal with *de facto* relationships, the best way to proceed is for all the states and territories to give recognition to same-sex civil unions’ (Brennan 2011). This would involve the granting of the same rights enjoyed by heterosexual couples under state law but would not use the term marriage.

Such a resolution could satisfy the activists’ call for ‘equality’ and ‘non-discrimination’ under the law. If civil partnerships carried the same rights as civil marriage, though the name would be different, there would hardly be a reasonable case for the claim of injustice to gays and lesbians involved in a loving, stable relationship. They ought to be able to live freely in society as respectable citizens and with the approval of the law. Furthermore, it is difficult to see how this legal non-discriminatory protection for same-sex couples would lead, as some have claimed, to a lessening of respect for marriage or undermine public morality. Arguably the public interest and the common good would not thereby be threatened.

Legalising same-sex civil partnerships without any reference to marriage would seem to be a simpler and a viable alternative to same-sex marriage, but it is doubtful whether this would be acceptable to gay and lesbian activists. Some authors make the claim that the fact that most same-sex ‘marriage’ advocates refuse to accept civil unions and domestic partnership programs under which the benefits of marriage are extended, but which do not use the label ‘marriage’, is clear evidence that most of those seeking legal recognition of same-sex partnerships on the pretext of gaining civil benefits were in fact seeking public approval of homosexual conduct historically con-



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demned as immoral. This view is contentious but needs to be taken seriously and considered in public debate.

## ***2. Extending the Definition of Marriage to Include Same-Sex Unions***

Protagonists of change do not allege that same sex unions approximate to marriage in the traditional sense. Rather, they want marriage to be understood in broad terms as a stable bond between two persons bound by a faithful and self-giving love, who work together as equals to create a life together with all its shared joys and burdens and to form an enduring bond and a social identity. This broad or generic definition of marriage, according to this approach, would then have two species: same-sex unions between couples joined by mutual committed and fruitful (at least for the persons themselves and their outreach to others) love, and heterosexual conjugal, procreative marriage (marriage in the traditional sense). This is an enormous step for an understanding of marriage as it has been long accepted without question in the western world. Let us look at this more closely.

Traditional marriage in the west may be defined in broad terms as (1) the socially sanctioned union of man and woman, (2) that reproduces the family. We will consider these two aspects.

1. Marriage is the state of being united to a person of the opposite sex as a husband or wife in a consensual and contractual arrangement recognised by law (Merriam-Webster

Dictionary). In Australian law currently in force, 'Marriage means the union of a man and a woman to the exclusion of all others, voluntarily entered into for life' (Marriage Legislation Amendment Act, 2004).

This pretty generally accepted understanding of marriage has been influenced by a number of factors before being enshrined in civil law. In the West the most important has undoubtedly been the Bible. In the Bible marriage is ultimately based on the creation stories of Genesis, wherein God reveals his plans for the human race. 'Yahweh God said: 'It is not good that man should be alone. I will make him a helpmate...' (Genesis 2, 18ff). 'Male and female he made them. God blessed them, saying to them, 'Be fruitful, multiply...' (Genesis, 1:27-28). In a patriarchal society like Israel the prime focus in the way marriage was lived was the preservation of the male's clan. This explains the great value of children, especially sons, and the disvalue of female sterility. For the prophets of Israel, marriage is so important in God's plan that it is chosen as a symbol of the *covenant* between Yahweh and Israel (Hosea 2, Isaiah 54:4-5, Jeremiah 2:2, 3:20).

In the New Testament Jesus responds to the Pharisees' question about divorce by recalling the teaching of Genesis. 'Have you not read that the Creator from the beginning *made them male and female* and that he said: *This is why a man must leave father and mother, and cling to his wife, and that the two become one body?*' He concludes with an uncompromising affirmation of the indissolubility of marriage, 'They are no longer two, therefore, but one body. So then, what God has united, man must not divide' (Matt 19:5-6).

Reflecting the Old Testament, the Pauline writings see marriage as Jesus understands it to be so important that it is a fitting symbol of the union of Christ with his Church (Ephesians 5:21-33).

Christianity was further assured of its understanding of marriage as between a man and a woman by what it saw as the frequent con-

demnation in the Bible of homosexual actions (See for example Leviticus 18:22; 20:13, Genesis 19:4-14. Romans 1:26ff; 1Corinthians 6:9ff). Today among contemporary Protestant biblical scholars there is a lively debate over the meaning of these texts. For instance, Robert Gagnon contends that the Bible unequivocally defines same-sex intercourse as sin and that there are no valid hermeneutical arguments to interpret the texts in any other way. Others disagree and argue that it is all a matter of interpretation. Among Catholic biblical experts, Richard Hays comes to much the same conclusion as Gagnon, but others tend to interpret the texts through the prism of their own interpretative values (Keenan 2003, 127).

2. The second dimension in the traditional definition of marriage relates to the link between marriage and the family. There is no doubt that same-sex persons can come to love one another in a self-giving, committed and lasting relationship. The issue is: if it can be established that marriage involves an inherent link to children, can the notion of marriage be extended to embrace such relationships?

Those seeking change argue that there is no inherent and necessary connection between marriage and children. If that were the case then those who do not want or who cannot have children would not be able to marry. Yet such couples have never been prevented from marrying despite infertility or any other condition. That being so, why should gays and lesbians be considered unable to get married. Inability to have children can be no obstacle.

However, this argument that, since infertile couples can marry, marriage is not intrinsically connected to procreation, can be shown not to hold water. In the first place, when a married couple express their love in marital intercourse they perform a biological action (mating) which makes them 'one flesh', one body, a biological unity (literally one organism). It is a specific action, the only kind of action that can create a child as the fruit of their mutual love. Conjugal intercourse between a man and a woman establishes a real

biological unity of a unique kind. This is not to say that their action is purely biological. As persons, their action is an interpersonal act; it is one integral act, though composed of different elements: physical, emotional, spiritual. But as a specific kind of biological communion their sexual expression of love makes them one single procreative principle and establishes the kind of multi-tiered relationship – biological, emotional, spiritual – they consented to in getting married. As the tradition puts it, the fundamental, though not exclusive, purpose of marriage is the procreation and education of children (*e.g.*, Aquinas, *passim*).

Contrary to what same-sex activists often allege, the sexual-biological unity that forms the basis of marriage is not a mere means to the extrinsic end of procreation. It is rather an end in itself. ‘The union of the spouses to one another in a relationship whose distinctive structure is what it is because of its aptness for procreation and the rearing of children is no mere instrumental good, but rather is good in itself – an intrinsic fulfilment of those united in the relationship.’ Nor is marriage a sexual relationship that is equivalent to any other sexual relationship having no inherent connection to procreation. When a man and a woman marry they commit themselves to each other in the kind of community that would be fulfilled by procreating and educating children. In this way ‘the biological unity established and renewed in sexual intercourse is the beginning or embodiment of that community we know as marriage’ (Lee, George and Bradley 2011, 3).

Not every conjugal act leads to the procreation of a child; in fact most do not. But the action that is proper to marriage, conjugal intercourse, is open to all married men and women. That is why even married couples who for whatever reason cannot have children can still fulfil the meaning and purpose of marriage. They can form together a biological unit, that is, they can perform the type of act that can result in procreation, even though conditions of procreation outside their control can-

not or in fact do not occur. And secondly, they can form the kind of multi-layered community—bodily, emotional and spiritual—that would be naturally fulfilled by the bearing and raising of children—even though in their case this does not or cannot happen.

Secondly, this conjugal community is extended and brought naturally to fulfilment by children. The child is not a mere product, but rather the expression and ultimate crown of the mutual love of the spouses, who now become parents and collaborate in raising the child. Parenthood is not, however, an altogether distinct relationship. Rather parenthood naturally fulfils and enriches the relationship already existing in the community of marriage. The one relationship flows naturally out of the other (Lee, George and Bradley 2011, 3). From the child’s point of view, it can be argued that children have an inherent need, and indeed a right, to be reared by the parents who gave them life. They need a mother and a father in different ways at different times of their lives, and not only as role models. The breakdown of many marriages in modern society and the unfortunate effects of this upon children, who are thereby sadly deprived of the ministrations of a father and a mother, cannot rightly be used as an argument to justify same-sex parenting, for this would inflict the same deprivation upon the child, who would have no possibility of being reared by both a father and a mother.

No matter how committed they are to one another emotionally and even spiritually, same-sex couples simply cannot achieve the type of biological union that is the foundation of marriage and that would naturally be completed by the bearing and rearing of children. Homosexual intimacies, however mutually satisfying they may be for them, may be expressive of their love and may nourish their love but they cannot make them biologically one procreative principle and hence cannot form the basis of a relationship embracing all levels of their personality that is the prerogative of marriage. Same-sex couples can make arrangements for one of them to bear a child by IVF

or surrogacy and they can commit to working together to rear the child, but this is parenthood in a very loose sense and it bears no intrinsic link to procreation. Nor can it satisfy the needs and the rights of children. Such a relationship cannot rightly be called marriage. In reaching this conclusion, there is no unjust discrimination against them, because same-sex couples are unable to form together the kind of community that marriage is. They have no right to marriage, because there is no object

for such a right. Here the objective sought evaporates in the very attempt to attain it.

The foregoing arguments lead to the conclusion that the Federal Government ought not to change the federal law regarding marriage as it currently stands. It has a grave moral obligation to safeguard the social institution of marriage as a community of a man and a woman inherently oriented to procreation and education of children. This is a requirement of truth and the common good of the state.

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*At the same time, we must recognize that the family is today under threat in many ways. Where a materialistic vision and an individualistic approach to life reign, there develops a tendency to question the fundamental truths and values on which marriage and the family are based. Elsewhere it is harsh material conditions, outright poverty, or the dispersion brought about by armed conflict, which prevents the family from fulfilling its mission with dignity.*

*As members of the one human race, ever more conscious of our interdependence, and united as believers, though belonging to different religious traditions, we must work together so that civil society may recognize and safeguard the sacredness of human life at every stage and promote the family as the one way to defend human dignity.*

**—John Paul II to the participants in the Interreligious Colloquium: Marriage and Family in Today's World, 23 September 1994**

# CARDINAL PATRICK MORAN AND SOCIAL WELFARE

## *A Snapshot 1884 – 1911*

SOPHIE McGRATH RSM

**I**N ALL CULTURES in the history of humankind religion and government of the people have been intertwined in numerous ways. This is certainly true of the Christian Church throughout the world in the various cultural settings in which it was established. Historically Church and State have interacted particularly in the area of social welfare.

We know from the Book of Acts that very early in its history Christianity was involved in social welfare work, initially focusing on widows and orphans. This concern was central to the Jewish tradition out of which Christianity emerged and Jesus Christ developed it further with his basic commandment of ‘love of neighbour as one’s self’ as well as his strong personal identity with ‘the Other’ in his life, ‘inasmuch as you did it to one of these the least of my brethren, you did it to me.’ This was reinforced in the touching account of final judgment in the Gospel of Matthew (ch. 25 vv 31-40) which includes Jesus, the Son of Man, declaring:

Come, you whom my Father has blessed, take for your heritage the kingdom prepared for you since the foundation of the world: For I was hungry and you gave me food; I was thirsty and you gave me drink; I was a stranger and you made me welcome; naked and you clothed me; sick and you visited me; in prison and you came to see me.

The narrative goes on: ‘Then the virtuous will say to him in reply: ‘Lord when did we see you hungry and feed you; or thirsty and give you drink? When did we see you a stranger and made you welcome; naked and clothe you; sick or imprison and go to see you?’” And the re-

sponse comes: ‘I tell you solemnly, in so far as you did this to one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did it to me.’

This was the underpinning of the social welfare policies of the Church up to the Reformation and continued in the Catholic tradition as well as the other Christian denominations which emerged from the 16<sup>th</sup> century and was consequently basic to the founding social welfare history of Australia. Cardinal Patrick Francis Moran embraced this tradition strongly as is evident in his leadership as a newly appointed bishop in Ireland and later in Australia.

### *Irish Beginnings*

Moran was a brilliant student, educated at the Irish College in Rome and ordained priest in 1853. After serving at his Alma Mater in Rome he returned to Ireland in 1866 where he was secretary to Archbishop Cullen until appointed coadjutor-bishop of the Diocese of Ossory in March 1872.<sup>1</sup> During his first weeks in office as coadjutor-bishop Moran supervised in Kilkenny the foundation of a refuge for women being driven to prostitution through poverty, and established an industrial school for neglected children.<sup>2</sup>

After the death of the incumbent bishop of Ossory in August 1872, only five months after his appointment as a coadjutor, Moran succeeded to the See of Ossory. With enhanced authority, among many other things, he turned his attention to considering ways of improving the condition of the Kilkenny workhouse; particularly he was concerned for the welfare of the children there. Having heard that the

Limerick workhouse had been turned from a hell to a heaven by the introduction of nuns, he arranged for a group of nuns to take charge of the Kilkenny work house residing there as nurses and schoolteachers.<sup>3</sup>

By 1873 Moran had visited every parish in his diocese and in September of that year the new industrial school for poor and neglected children was ready for occupation. It offered basic education and training in work skills and was funded by local contributions which Moran had managed to solicit. Running costs for such schools were only partly offset by capitation grants from the government.<sup>4</sup>

This strong response to and ongoing concern for the social welfare needs of his diocese in Ireland was to inform Moran's leadership in Australia when he was appointed Archbishop of Sydney on 25 January 1884 arriving there on 8 September that year. In 1885 he was summoned to Rome with the expectation of being asked to take the See of Dublin, about which he was not enthusiastic, instead, however, he was appointed a Cardinal. According to Tony Cahill: 'Far from a consolation prize, this was both a confirmation of Moran's high standing in Rome and an affirmation of (Pope) Leo XIII's belief in the importance of the new worlds.'<sup>5</sup>

### *Australian Mission*

Moran was also appointed the Pope's representative in Australia. Rome had wanted a plenary council to be held in Australia since the 1870s in order to consolidate the widespread structure of the Church across the various states. Moran moved on this and before his death in 1911 had presided over three plenary councils. Cahill comments: 'Moran acted skillfully and decisively and the three councils in a period of economic development and vital political change laid the foundations of the national (Catholic) Church in the twentieth century.' This provided the foundation for the Australian Catholic Church's extensive social welfare service to Australian society.<sup>6</sup>

As is well known the Australian colonies



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had a long history of sectarian conflict before Moran's arrival. Moran's Irish experience of the proselytising of Catholic children by Protestant agencies made him deeply distrustful of the policies of other Christian denominations in the educational and welfare areas. In the 1880s he rejected offers from the Anglican Bishop Barry to cooperate for common Christian objectives, and he also resisted pressure from the governor Lord Carrington, who made similar suggestions. Both of these men had liberal leanings and Barry was strongly evangelical.<sup>7</sup>

The historian Stuart Piggin in his meticulously researched book *Spirit, Word and World, Evangelical Christianity in Australia*, commented that 'though the evangelicals were in possession of God's instrument to restore a broken world' it was not so much them as the liberals 'who were confident in the middle years of the nineteenth century that they would inherit the earth.' Piggin goes on to explain:

The liberal ideal was one of religious and political liberty for all, based on a capitalist economy and an educated population, united in a common citizenship with a representative government in a beneficent state. For the most part, evangelicals responded to this strategy to reform society by identifying with it. Evangelicals made good capitalists and liberals. Liberals, capitalists and evangelicals shared the same core values: frugality, moderation, sobriety and hard work. They tended to identify the same enemies: intemperance, sloth and Catholicism in both its Roman and Anglican forms.

Piggin points out that Liberals, however,

objected strongly to the factionalisation of the Christians. To the liberals sectarianism was the bane of progress and the liberals opposed its intrusion into the political and social realms, especially the realm of education. But, as Piggan observes, ‘even here the liberals were more opposed to Anglo Catholics and Roman Catholics than to Protestants.’ He also notes that ‘in the colonies, liberals who decried sectarianism were not above using it for political advantage.’<sup>8</sup>

### *Religion Bulwark of Civilisation*

Religion certainly played a significant part in Moran’s social welfare philosophy. Moran saw religion to be central to the welfare of the human person and the bulwark of civilization. This conviction is repeated again and again in various guises in his letters and diary as well as his public addresses. A powerful perception of the importance of religion in the humanising of a community of persons is evident in Moran’s homily on the occasion of the Silver Jubilee of MM Clare Dunphy, a founding pioneer of the Sisters of Mercy, Parramatta, who had worked in the Killkenny Workhouse in Ireland. Moran recalled the horror of the workhouse before the Sisters moved in. He said: ‘I was struck with amazement and anguish at seeing the terrible conditions of the poor people huddled together without a single spark of religion to cheer, to console or to comfort.’<sup>9</sup>

For Moran the Catholic Christian religious tradition was warm, reassuring and encouraging, bringing with it, too, the supportive doctrine of the Communion of Saints, which taught that those who had died and those who were still pilgrims on earth are united in love and can support one another in prayer. From Moran’s perspective, for Catholic children to be deprived of their religious inheritance was to be deplored as much as their being deprived of food, drink and shelter. This attitude was found also in the wider Catholic community as shown by a Mrs Power who presented a paper on ‘Boarded-Out Children’ at the 1904

Australasian Catholic Congress in Melbourne. She deplored the case of a Protestant foster-parent adopting a Catholic baby and having the claim confirmed by a judge. Mrs Power protested: ‘The consideration of the few shillings saved by the Department would not justify the violation of a great principle. Nor should the affection of the person desirous of adopting the child be a reason for depriving the child of the only heritage left to it by its parents—the Catholic Faith.’<sup>10</sup>

### *Church and State*

Moran was strongly supportive of the separation of church and state. Although he had had first hand experience in Italy of democratic revolutions out of control and anti-clerical socialism in Europe, he was very much aware of the past tragedies resulting from the too close alliance between Church and State. In his inaugural discourse at the 1900 Australasian Catholic Congress, as he reflected upon the 19<sup>th</sup> century, he observed:

And now were you to ask what great things in this century of ours have been achieved by Holy Church in her dealings with the statesmen and civil powers of this world, I would without hesitation reply that in most countries the Catholic Church has been freed from the trammels and fetters by which she has been held captive under State control in a sort of honourable bondage and which could not fail to impede in a thousand ways the free and beneficial exercise of her divine mission. This of itself would suffice as a record of success and should be regarded as a happy achievement.....<sup>11</sup>

Also among the achievements of the 19<sup>th</sup> century he included ‘a most remarkable and widespread manifestation of true Catholic charity ...’<sup>12</sup> Indeed, as can be seen from the NSW Statistical Registers, there was an enormous increase in the establishment and development of Catholic welfare institutions during Moran’s time of leadership in Australia.<sup>13</sup> The final report of the 1900 Australasian Catholic Congress stated:

The Social work of the (Catholic) Church in Australia is shown by its benevolent and charitable institutions, providing for every form of human suffering and misery *e.g.* hospitals for the sick, the convalescent, the consumptive and the dying; asylums for the aged and the poor; asylums for the insane; maternity hospitals, founding hospitals, houses of refuge, orphanages; industrial training schools for girls and boys; reformatory schools; institutions for the deaf, dumb and blind; the relief of the poor in their own home by the St Vincent de Paul Society; the visiting and reforming of the criminal classes in the jail.<sup>14</sup>

### *State Aid*

While Moran regarded separation of Church and State as mutually beneficial he was acutely aware that, among other things, they had joint responsibilities in social welfare matters. At the 1900 Congress he proposed the resolution: 'That Charitable Institutions promoted by the Catholic Church are justly entitled to the recognition and aid of the State; and that it is untrue to assert that Catholics would be opposed to the inspection of the government of any charitable institutions so assisted.'<sup>15</sup> This was to continue as a constant mantra for Moran as he opened and blessed one charitable institution after another. The Catholic Church was doing its part without discrimination against other religions, what was the State doing?

Stuart Piggan points out in his history of evangelicalism in Australia that the factionalism, which absorbed so much of the evangelical's attention, distracted them from giving adequate attention to the problems of 'the world'. In fact, this greatly bothered conscientious evangelicals such as the Rev. J. Kemp Bruce who made the following comments in his inaugural address as moderator at the forty-first Annual Session of the Presbyterian Assembly in 1906:

To me it is a very sad and very humbling thing that practically the whole of distinctively Church work done for the relief of poverty, helplessness and suffering should be in the hands of one Church. Verily she is wise in her genera-

tion. The appeal she makes to the age, wisely perhaps, is not to the intellectual, but to the sympathetic side of human nature. Her orphanages, her rescue work and her hospitals are at once her glory and her strength. So long as we leave to her a duty laid upon us by our Lord, so long must we expect to see her ranks recruited from Protestant men and women; to whose cries in childhood's helplessness and in mankind's suffering and degradation we, as a Church, have turned a deaf ear ... We are the losers because we have so largely forgotten the words: 'Inasmuch as ye did it unto one of the least of these my brethren, even the least, ye did it to Me.'<sup>16</sup>

The Rev. J. Kemp Bruce's assertion that the Catholic Church was the main religious denominational provider of social welfare was supported by the statistical data published in the Freeman's Journal on 27 October 1910 concerning the growth of the Catholic Church in the Sydney Archdiocese from 1884 to 1910 during Moran's watch. From this it can be seen that the 100% increase in growth of schools and charitable institutions was enabled by an increase in religious sisters from 199 to 1300 and religious brothers from 78 to 220. These significantly provided the personnel for the many large Catholic orphanages which were established at this time when there was increasing criticism of the inadequacies of such large institutions and the trend was for the 'boarding-out' system. Moran, however, saw the religious congregations as ideally placed to provide for children in need, especially for their religious education.

The historian Patrick O'Farrell was not impressed with Moran's record and judged that 'lucid looking back on what had been done was rare indeed in Moran's days.' According to O'Farrell 'the tenor of the Australian church, as Moran left it in 1911 was one of mindless pragmatism.'<sup>17</sup> Philip Ayers in his study of Moran disagrees with this, pointing to the intellectual scope of the three Australasian Congresses of 1900, 1904 and 1909.<sup>18</sup>

### *The Congresses and Social Issues*

Certainly the very idea and projected intellec-

tual scope of the Australasian Catholic Congresses was daring and impressive, even if the end product was of uneven quality. It is also significant that the Congresses did not continue after the passing of Moran, whose original idea it was and who hosted the 1900 and 1909 ones, and of Archbishop Carr of Melbourne, who enthusiastically hosted the 1904 Congress. Indeed, Moran observed at the opening of the 1909 Congress in Sydney:

Nine years ago, the First Congress was held here. It was an untried and, perhaps, hazardous experiment, for our Australian Church was young, and had few of those resources to rely upon which are the strength of the Catholic Congresses in Germany and other countries. Nevertheless, it was pre-eminently successful. His Grace the Archbishop of Melbourne ... was pleased at a later period to declare that 'the results of that first Congress were manifest, prompt and far-reaching.'

Each of the Congresses highlighted social issues. The Social Questions section of the 1900 Congress ranged across such topics as intemperance, divorce, treatment of prisoners, benefit guilds, conditions of town life, and the tension between capital and labour. There is generally evident a sympathetic attitude rather than a judgmental one to those falling into a category needing the support of the wider society. An exemplary case is Judge Heydon in his paper titled 'How to deal with Our Criminals', where, after giving a detailed, insightful account of the various methods of dealing with criminals around the world, he finishes his paper:

The essence of Christianity is Charity, and the broad Christian answer (apparently vague, sentimental and unpractical, and yet really and truly going to the very root of the matter, and fruitful to the highest degree) which a Christian will make to the question 'How should we treat our criminals?' will be 'We must learn to love them.'<sup>19</sup>

The 1904 Congress had a separate section from that titled Social Questions which was headed 'Charitable Organisations'. While in this there was a specific paper titled 'Work of the

Good Shepherd Sisters in Australia' most of the papers focused on preventive measures to combat known social problems. Apart from the usual attention given to the matter of temperance, the accent was on preventive activities such as the care of seamen and the development young men's societies as well as boys' clubs and benefit societies. The St Vincent de Paul Society's many activities were also reported upon with special highlighting of the importance of libraries as a work of the Society.<sup>20</sup>

The 1909 Congress again featured two sections, one on Social Questions and the other on Religious and Charitable Organisations containing a paper titled 'Our Duty to the Catholic Deaf and Dumb' by the Dominican Sisters.<sup>21</sup> The Social Questions section addressed, among those issues usually considered such as temperance, two significant new ones: 'The problem of the Immigrant in Australia' and 'The Industrial and Social Condition of women in the Australian Commonwealth' which was discovered by the women historians Kay Daniels and Mary Murnane in the 1970s and included in a book of documents on women's history across the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>22</sup>

### *The Wider Church*

Moran was very conscious of the universal nature of the Catholic Church and took enormous interest in its activities throughout the world including its social welfare projects and particularly State and Church relations in various countries. He was eager to benefit from the experience of others. Apart from this broadness of vision, through his huge extended family (both his parents had had previous marriages) he had strong personal relations with many religious congregations, who would, if possible, cooperate in his missionary efforts in the New World. An important case was the Dominican Sisters from Cabra in Ireland whom he asked to take responsibility for the education of the blind, deaf and dumb Catholic children in Australia, encouraging them in their efforts to acquire the best professional training.<sup>23</sup>

It is clear that Moran presided over the development of many, diverse social welfare services that required leadership, personnel, infrastructure and ongoing support from the wider community. To this end Moran worked tirelessly for unity in the Church. He exhorted clergy and laity:

The title *Servus servorum Dei* assumed by the Sovereign Pontiff is not a mere empty name. The whole purpose of every rank of the sacred ministry from the highest to the lowest is one of service, to give Glory to God by bringing the blessings of Redemption within the reach of men. Thus as a matter of duty, the Priest must be united to his people. And the faithful should be united to their Priest ... He is their leader in the pilgrimage of life. The whole career of the Priest is inspired and quickened by the heroism of devoted charity in self-sacrifice for the people: it becomes their duty to make a return of devotedness and affection in his regard.<sup>24</sup>

Indeed the implementation of Moran's social welfare policies would have been impos-

sible without this unity. The leadership of Moran supported by that of the religious congregations could have achieved little without the generous cooperation of the Catholic laity and, indeed, numerous non-Catholics. The three elements of bishop, religious and laity provided the infrastructure, personnel and funding for the implementation of Moran's social welfare policies. Alas, however, without State support they proved inadequate to cope with the pressing demands on the Catholic welfare system. Throughout Moran's leadership the State stubbornly resisted even his most reasonable requests. Sectarianism and various conflicting views on both institutional child care and religious education muddied the discourse. Whatever their inadequacies in practice, however, there is no doubt that Moran's policies in the area of social welfare were wide ranging and pro-active and a challenge to the State and other Christian denominations.

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# PREPARING TO CELEBRATE THE LITURGY OF THE WORD

January — April 2012

*From the Solemnity of Mary the Mother of Jesus (New Year's Day) to the Fourth Sunday  
of Easter in Year B*

Prepared by Michael Trainor

## PART ONE: OVERVIEW OF THE READINGS

The following is a brief overview of the Liturgy of the Word for major celebrations proclaimed from the Solemnity of Mary the Mother of Jesus (New Year's Day) to the Fourth Sunday of Easter in Year B. Please feel free to use or adapt these reflections, with the customary acknowledgement of source.

As we move into a new year we continue celebrating the Season of Christmas. *The Feast of the Epiphany* (January 8) allows us to celebrate Jesus who is the focus of every person's deep but perhaps unexpressed quest. Mt's magi are gospel characters that help us focus on those people and events that encourage us to search for Jesus more deeply in our lives, church and world. This search allows us to pick up a similar thread in the opening scene of John's gospel as we return to *Ordinary Time* readings on January 15. Potential disciples seek Jesus, too. But they need a guide.

On the Sunday following (OT 3) we finally return to the gospel of Year B, *The Gospel According to Mark*. Mk's gospel is written for a struggling urban gathering of Jesus disciples possibly in Rome around 70 CE. Mark seeks to address serious issues concerned with fidelity to Jesus, internal division and religious compromise that have seen some of Mark's Jesus householders placed under arrest, even executed. The struggles and divisions experienced by Mark's first century household in a world of political and religious tensions reflect our own. This makes Mark's gospel as

relevant for Australian Christians in 2012 as it was for Roman followers of Jesus in the first century CE.

In the **readings for Ordinary Time** (from January 22, OT 3) the gospel selection from Mark continues with Jesus' call of his first disciples and 'the first days' of his healing and teaching ministry. His proclamation in word and deed reveals that God is present and active amongst human beings, especially revealed in Jesus' response to the rejected and excluded. The first readings in February echo similar themes about God's action amongst the Israelite people in their life struggles (Job, OT 5), purity sanctions (Leviticus, OT 6) and exilic experience (Hosea, OT 8). The second readings are drawn from Paul's writings to the Corinthian followers of Jesus. He writes to encourage their unity (OT 6), and offer an appreciation of God's utter commitment to humanity in Jesus (OT 7), the source of everything (OT 8). Before we begin Lent, all the readings over *Ordinary Time* in this early part of the year are replete with rich themes that reflect on the heart of faith in God and Jesus.

*During Lent*, the scripture readings invite particular focus as we prepare for the highlight of the liturgical year, Holy Week.

The **first readings** of the first three Sundays of Lent celebrate an aspect of salvation history: God's initiative in committing to a liberating covenant with all of the cosmos (Lent 1), Abraham's faith (Lent 2), and God's re-

sponse to the desert wandering Israelites (Lent 3).

The **second reading** over these first three Sundays continue to proclaim aspects that reflect on the mystery of God: liberating love (Lent 1), total commitment to humanity (Lent 2) and God's expression in Jesus (Lent 3). The Gospels of the first two Sundays take up the classical themes of Lent as reflected through Mark's Gospel: Jesus' Baptism (Lent 1) and Transfiguration (Lent 2)

The **Gospel readings from John** over Lent 3-5 emphasise the religious and faith-filled dynamic that comes through people's encounters with John's figure of Jesus. Though alternative extracts are offered (and a brief word on each is added below), the usually preferred

readings are from Jn 4, Jn 9, and Jn 11. These readings are central for our reflection and celebration of Lent and touch at the most essential aspects of religious living: our thirst for God (in the story of the woman at the well, Lent 3), our need for spiritual insight into God's life within that will deeply touch our hearts (in the story of the man born blind, Lent 4), and our search for ultimate life (the raising of Lazarus, Lent 5).

The **First Testament readings** (Old Testament) for Lent 3-5 explore themes linked to John's Gospel and form part of the story of the Israelite community (water, light, life). The second readings (Rom and Eph) continue to celebrate aspects of the mystery of God reflected in Jesus.

### *Readings of the central Liturgical Celebrations of Holy Week.*

The two gospel readings from Passion Sunday and Easter allow us to reflect on Jesus from Mark's perspective. These readings offer us the climax of Mark's Gospel: Jesus, the abandoned and lonely one—isolated from his family and disciples, even experiencing abandonment from God ('My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?')—enters into his suffering and death with fidelity. Nothing sways him from his commitment to God, despite abandonment. Passion Sunday invites us to enter into Mark's narrative of the suffering and dying Jesus, be with him and identify with how he is misunderstood and rejected.

In the Easter Gospel notice how the angelic young man points the women to the place of solitude, absence and isolation: the empty tomb: 'He has been raised. He is not here. See / contemplate, where they laid him!' The tomb is the symbol of emptiness and 'nothingness.' It is, in many respects, our own lives as we struggle with life's emptiness and, at times, spiritual darkness. The tomb's contemplation prepares for God's act, for resurrection. In

other words, for Mark's household of disciples and our own, failure rather than success lays the possibility of the future encounter with the resurrected Jesus. When one is left with nothing, what is there left?

This view of Mark's Gospel at the beginning and end of Holy Week create a contrasting frame to what occurs in the Gospel readings in the middle of Holy Week, with the Mass of the Lord's Supper and the Celebration of the Lord's Passion. Here John's Gospel is the centre-piece. Rather than Mark's solitary figure, we have John's Jesus who is confident, aware of God's presence and in charge of the events that surround his passion. He commissions his disciples to lead through service (*Holy Thursday*). The passion in John's Gospel (on *Good Friday*) is the moment of victory, glorification and enthronement. It is as though, for John, the faithful reader cannot distinguish between Jesus' death and Resurrection. They are two aspects of the one event celebrated in the Passion.

## PART TWO: NOTES ON THE READINGS

**January 1—New Year's Day: Solemnity of Mary, Mother of Jesus.** *Nm 6:22-27.* God's blessing is poured out upon a priestly people. *Gal 4:4-7.* Paul affirms Jesus' human birth through Mary and his subjugation to life's limitations. Through Jesus we come to know that our relationship to God is the same as his. *Lk 2:16-21.* The shepherds come to see the child lying in a place of feeding. *Theme—God's Blessing.* The blessing of the first reading could be the heart of our celebration at the beginning of this New Year. What is it that we seek from God? What is the blessing we would like God to pour upon us, our family, friends, church and world?

**January 8—Epiphany.** *Is 60:1-6.* The people of God will be blest with God's light and they will attract to themselves all the nations of the earth. *Eph 3:2-3, 5-6.* God's gift of solidarity with humanity ('grace') is now affirmed and revealed, even to the most unexpected of peoples ('Gentiles'). *Mt 2:1-12.* The magi, kingly servants, seek out Jesus through their observance of the heavens and their consultation of the Jewish scriptures. *Theme—The Search.* Every person is on a search. The ultimate search is for God. Epiphany celebrates and affirms our ongoing search for God revealed in Jesus. The search becomes affirmed and clarified through meditating on our history, the cosmos, the heavens and Scripture:

**January 15—Ordinary Time 2.** *1 Sam 3:3-10, 19.* The young Samuel encounters God but needs wise counsel from an elder to truly hear God's call. *1 Cor 6:13-15, 17-20.* Paul affirms the importance and centrality of physical corporeality for religious life. We live not an angelic but human existence. *Jn 1:35-42.* This is the second reading from Jn's Gospel in a year of Mk. Here, John the Baptist's disciples are directed to Jesus who invites them to come and stay with him. *Theme—Encountering God.* Friendship with God lies at the heart of life and discipleship. Samuel (first reading) hears God's call but needs help to recognise it; John the Baptist's disciples see Jesus but need help to follow him. They also need direction to become his followers. The readings invite our encounter with a companionable God revealed in Jesus. We, like the Baptist's disciples, are invited to 'come and stay' with him.

**January 22—Ordinary Time 3.** *Jonah 3:1-5, 10.* Jonah calls on the people of Nineveh to repent,

and, to his surprise, they do! *1 Cor 7:29-31.* Paul reminds his listeners that there is a larger context by which life is lived—God. *Mk 1:14-20.* Jesus' first words in Mk's gospel encourage a change of attitude ('repent') and an openness to God's call ('believe in the gospel') revealed in Jesus. These become the essential qualities of discipleship throughout the whole of Mk's gospel. *Theme—Openness.* Both Jonah and Mark encourage a spirit of repentance. This is not the breast-beating attitude of one who should feel guilty or a sense of permanent moral corruption. Rather 'repentance' (*metanoia*, in Mk's Greek) is an attitude of the person who is open to change, especially of the heart, so that God's project (as expressed by Paul) can shape one's life.

**January 29—Ordinary Time 4** *Dt 18:15-20.* God promises the people a prophet who will lead and instruct them about what is important and essential. *1 Cor 7:17, 32-35.* Paul wants his people to live happily without worry. This attitude, revealed by God, shapes every relationship. *Mk 1:21-28.* Jesus exercises his authority of healing over an unclean spirit within a religious setting. *Theme—Happiness.* The second reading offers a way of confirming that God's intention, as perceived by Paul, was to live without worry. The gospel offers a dramatic form of God's intention of human liberation through Jesus' act of exorcism. What would be the equivalent to those realities today that keep us locked into worry, and from which we need healing and liberation?

**February 5—Ordinary Time 5:** *Job 7:1-4, 6-7.* Job laments the struggles of daily life. *1 Cor 9:16-19, 22-23.* Paul reflects on his mission for all. *Mk 1:29-39.* A daily snap-shot of Jesus' healing ministry in the opening chapter of Mk. *Theme—Daily Living:* Struggle, boredom and toil are part of daily living. Job reflects upon such a life and Jesus ministers healing within this context. These images, drawn from Job and Mk, provide a way of celebrating human existence, honouring people's struggles and recognizing the possibility of God's healing presence through the faith community.

**February 12—Ordinary Time 6.** *Lev 13:1-2, 45-46.* Purity regulations especially for contractible skin conditions are spelt out to protect the sanctity of a close-knit community. *1 Cor 10:23-11:1.* Unity rather than individuality should guide the actions of those in the faith community. *Mk 1:40-45.* Je-

sus heals a person with chronic psoriasis and overcomes the regulations that keep people from community *Theme—Healing in Community*. The faith community is a tangible expression and experience of how barriers are overcome. How is it expressed locally? Who are modelling ways of overcoming oppression and exclusion? Who are our healers today?

**February 19—Ordinary Time 7** : *Is 43:18-19, 20-22, 24-25*. God's power and transcendence is announced; God can do something new, even blot out sin. *2 Cor 1:18-22*. God is utterly faithful. Jesus is God's *Yes* and *Amen*. *Mk 2:1-12*. God's authority to heal and forgive is revealed through Jesus in a religious setting, the synagogue. *Theme—God's Nature*: God's fidelity, presence, and desire to heal surface in our readings (especially the gospel). They offer an opportunity to reflect on the nature of God, completely 'turned towards' humanity and creation in loving desire. These images subvert conventional attributes sometimes ascribed to God that still dominate.

**February 26—Lent 1** *Gen 9:8-15*. In the story of Noah, God formally establishes a covenant of love with creation and humanity. *1 Pet 3:18-22*. The writer reflects on the image of 'water' from the story of Noah and applies it to the act of baptism. *Mk 1:12-15*. The first words of Jesus in *Mk*, highlighting the essential characteristics of discipleship, especially the ability to be totally open (translated as 'conversion'). *Theme—Openness*. This first week of Lent invites us to a profound openness to God and the whole of creation. How can this openness be tangibly expressed? Who locally expresses such openness?

**March 4—Lent 2** : *Gen 22:1-2,9-13,15-18*. The great ancestor of the monotheistic religions (Judaism, Islam and Christianity), Abraham, demonstrates his absolute faith in God. *Rom 8:31-35, 37*. Paul celebrates God's loving commitment to us, revealed in Jesus. *Mk 9:2-10*. In the face of imminent suffering and death, Jesus communes with God and is transfigured *Theme—Faith*: Trust in God is reflected in the way we are with others. Abraham and Jesus exercise a profound faith in their God. What are signs around us of people showing similar faith? What keeps us from trusting God completely?

**March 11—Lent 3**: *Ex 20:1-7*. God reveals to Moses the ten great words by which Israel's covenant with God will be lived out. At the heart of these commandments are implications for relating

with God and other people. *1 Cor 1:18, 22-25*. Through Jesus' death, God subverts the conventional wisdom about power and privilege. *Jn 4*. A Samaritan woman seeks water to quench her thirst. Jesus offers himself as the real source of life, the eternal water. [Alternative *Jn 2:13-25*. Jesus' confronts the religious leaders and their institutions that prevent people drawing close to God. The renewal of the temple anticipates the renewal that will come about through the 'temple' of Jesus' body.] *Theme—Covenant Renewal*. God's fidelity to Israel (first reading) is echoed by Jesus' fidelity to God who draws out the woman's desire for God. This religious desire lies at the heart of everyone and is the basis for a renewed covenantal life with God. Lent becomes a time to ponder our covenant with God and affirm ways of deepening it.

**March 18—Lent 4**: *2 Chron 36:14-17, 19-23*. A snapshot of the events surrounding Israel's exile, couched in theological terms. *Eph 2:4-10*. The writer celebrates God's grace of liberation to us revealed through Jesus. *Jn 9*. One of the great dramatic stories in the gospels: the story of the gradual insight into Jesus of a man born blind [Alternative *Jn 3:14-21*. The key statement of John's theodicy: God is in love with creation and us.] *Theme—God's love*: The teaching of *Jn*, which summarises God's disposition towards creation and humanity, urges our response to God. Lent provides the moment to articulate this response, especially through deeds of penance, the sacrament of reconciliation or communal rites of penance. These acts open our eyes to deeply see God.

**March 25—Lent 5** *Jer 31:31-34*. God promises to offer a totally revolutionary new covenant, one which will be inscribed in the human heart, where people will 'know' God. *Heb 5:7-9*. Jesus 'cries loudly' to God and becomes 'the source of salvation.' *Jn 11*. Jesus offers us eternal life. He raises Lazarus from death. [Alternative *Jn 12: 20-33*. Jesus invites those who follow him to know that suffering and death await him, and through his death he will glorify God.] *Theme—Jesus' Life*. The second reading and gospel invite a focus on Jesus, his utter fidelity to God brings him to cry loudly (Heb) and to recognise that suffering and death are paths to life with God. Who suffers and cries aloud today in our midst? Who seek to truly be alive in our communities and churches? What brings tears to our eyes?

**April 1—Passion**: *Mk 11:1-10*. Jesus' disciples

welcome him into Jerusalem. *Is 50:4-7*. God's servant is attentive and trusts God, despite rejection and suffering. *Phil 2:6-11*. One of the great songs of Holy Week: Jesus is God's servant, who chooses to be like all human beings, and God exalts him. *Mk 14-15*. The climax of Mk, the passion story of Jesus' suffering and ultimate abandonment. *Theme—Abandonment*. Jesus comes to claim his people as their leader and his leadership is one of suffering; Jesus' who dies abandoned is able to identify with all who feel abandoned, desolate and lonely. Mk's Jesus is not an exalted figure, but misunderstood and rejected. The passion story from Mk offers an opportunity to identify with Jesus in this week, and to be with those who experience abandonment and isolation in our world. What is the loneliness that I experience?

**April 5—The Lord's Supper:** *Exodus 12:1-8, 11-14*. The first Passover is remembered: God delivers Israel through the blood of the Passover Lamb. *1 Cor 11:23-26*. Paul reminds the divided Christians at Corinth about what lies at the heart of celebrating the Lord's Supper. *Jn 13:1-15*. In the act of washing his disciples' feet, John's Jesus offers the model of active, community service. *Theme—Service*: This celebration reaches into the heart of every parish and faith community: selfless service focused on the Eucharist. How can we celebrate this happening in our midst and encourage it to deepen?

**April 6—Good Friday:** *Is 52:13-53:12*. This is the climactic 'servant song' celebrating the vicarious nature of the servant's suffering, for the welfare of all. *Heb 4:14-16; 5:7-9*. Jesus is compassionate High Priest, with God, who knows our sufferings and weaknesses. *Jn 18:1-19:42*. This passion narrative, unlike Mk's, is a true celebration of victory over death. In fourteen dramatic scenes Jesus is presented as Lamb, judge, victor, source of Church's life. *Theme—Victory*: Jesus, as the Passover Lamb who brings people to life, is victorious over death. Rather than a sombre or mournful liturgy, the readings encourage a confidence in God who is able to bring victory from death. This is a much-needed focus in a world preoccupied with war and retaliation. What are the suffering and death-dealing experiences from which I seek release by the God of Jesus?

**April 7/8—Easter: Feast of the Resurrection:** *Mk 16:1-8*. This is the most important gospel proclamation in the whole year: Mark's Jesus is resur-

rected and the women are encouraged to ponder the place of emptiness, the tomb (see above). Resurrection occurs in the most unlikely setting and moment—the place of death and hopelessness. How would I like God to bring me to life?

**April 15—Easter 2:** *Acts 4:32-35*. The power of the resurrection is evident in the fledgling Christian community of Jerusalem. *1 Jn 5:1-6*. Faith in Jesus and his resurrection makes us 'begotten by God.' We are in tune with God and experience God's life within. *Jn 20:19-31*. The resurrected Jesus offers his frightened disciples peace. He empowers them with authority to forgive sin. *Theme—Forgiveness*. The resurrected Jesus continues to breathe into his community today the spirit of peace and forgiveness. Where is this seen, identified and celebrated? What is my sin from which I seek forgiveness and release?

**April 22—Easter 3.** *Acts 3:13-15, 17-19*. Peter's first sermon to the Jerusalemites is a summary of the gospel of Luke (the writer of *Acts*) and an invitation to a spirit of ongoing 'conversion.' *1 Jn 2:1-5*. Even sin cannot separate us from God because of Jesus' advocacy. *Lk 24:35-48*. The risen Jesus appears in the midst of his frightened disciples and eats a meal with them. The evangelist underscores the reality of the resurrection. *Theme—Reality of Resurrection*. In Luke's gospel, the disciples first think that they are seeing a ghost (in Greek 'phantasmos') when Jesus appears among them. The resurrection is not a myth or invention by well-meaning believers. That Jesus rose from death is a historical truth. It is a reality that affects our being, the universe and the soul of our communities. What are some of the signs of resurrectional life in our midst? What can we celebrate?

**April 29—Easter 4:** *Acts 4: 8-12*. Peter announces to all (and us): An experience of goodness and healing is an encounter with the Risen Jesus. *1 Jn 3: 1-2*. We are God's beloved daughters and sons; God will be revealed to us fully, transparently, happily. *Jn 10: 11-18*. Jesus is like a shepherd to us. He cares about us, protects us, loves us and 'knows' us, that is, is intimately close to us. *Theme—God's Closeness*. God is revealed through Jesus who is present in our world through signs of goodness and acts of kindness (First reading). God's intimacy with us revealed through Jesus (gospel) makes us whole and happy. What images of God do I find sustaining? What helps me deepen my friendship with Jesus?

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