

RESURRECTION

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I found what John Polkinghorne had to say in his interview in the *March Reform* extremely interesting, particularly when he was speaking about resurrection. He believes not only that Jesus rose from the dead in a bodily form but also that we will also be resurrected in bodily form. He suggests that ‘in some way the soul might have, in an extraordinary, elaborate sense, doors into the information bearing patterns of the body, which of course dissolve at death. But God remembers it all and God will re-embody it when I am resurrected. That will be the continuity between life in this world and life in the world to come’. Or as he has put it elsewhere, the body has a code or formula expressing its entire nature and structure, and this formula is re-embodyed as a resurrection body in the resurrection world.

This is a fascinating idea. It goes beyond the belief of the process theologians that we all exist eternally after death in the divine memory by adding that God uses that memory to re-embody us – which is much closer to traditional Christian belief. It is not unlike the ‘replica’ theory that I myself once proposed.

There does however seem to me to be a problem in it. Some people die in infancy, some as the result of an accident or war in early adulthood, some in middle age, most in old age. Whatever the age, the information or code or formula is that of the person at that age and in that condition. So a resurrected woman in her eighties dying of cancer will be the same woman in her eighties dying of cancer. And likewise with everyone else. But this cannot be what Polkinghorne intends. Are we, then, in our resurrected state suddenly miraculously to be cured of all diseases, and do we suddenly grow younger or older to some ideal age? All this is no doubt possible, but it complicates the theory to a point at which it ceases, to my mind, to be attractive or even plausible.

The older idea that at death we go to either heaven or hell is even more implausible. For at the end of this life few if any are good enough for heaven or bad enough for hell. We almost all need to develop and change, which means that we must live longer. And this must be in an embodied state in which we interact with one another, making moral choices and thus becoming better (or worse) people. This in turn seems to require another finite life, also bounded by birth and death, for it is

these boundaries that make life serious and urgent. Because of life's finitude we must get on with whatever we are going to do – we are not going to live for ever.

But one more such life will not be enough for most of us. This suggests a series of finite lives, each beginning, morally and spiritually, where the last left off. In other words, some form of reincarnation., or re-embodiment, or indeed multiple resurrection.

At this point I find wisdom in the Buddhist distinction between, on the one hand, the empirical self, which is the conscious surface ego and, on the other hand, a deeper reality within us, which we can call the soul – Buddhists think of it as an ongoing karmic wave. Here our fundamental nature is expressing itself. Such basic dispositional attitudes as a tendency to be compassionate, generous, and forgiving, or to be unloving, grasping, and resentful, and to be open or closed to the divine mystery, can express themselves through a variety of different empirical selves enmeshed in different historico-cultural contexts. They could be lived out, or incarnated, in the lives of, let us say, a male Palestinian peasant of the second century BCE and a female British lawyer of the twenty first century CE. In these extremely different circumstances the same basic dispositional structure would result in very different lives. However, we must not think of the soul, as our more basic nature, as fixed and unchanging. On the contrary, like the empirical self, it is changing in some degree all the time as we respond to life's tasks and experiences. The main distinction, for our present purpose, is that whereas our empirical self can only be described in terms of a particular historico-cultural context, our basic nature or soul can be described independently of the concrete ways in which its basic traits express themselves in particular circumstances.

Where do these reincarnations take place? Not necessarily always in this world. For all we know, there may be many worlds, planets of other stars in other galaxies, on which life is lived in other circumstances. So long as people interact with one another, making moral decisions, and responding in their own way (consciously or unconsciously) to the universal divine reality, they could serve as environments for the growth of the soul.

This means that we have to accept the mortality of our present empirical self. We should think of ourselves as like runners in a relay race. At the moment we carry the torch, we have the responsibility of making our deeper self better or worse as it will be embodied in a future empirical self. In other words, we have to be prepared to

die that someone else, embodying the same deeper self, or soul, may live in the future. This requires nothing less than a transcending of our natural self-centeredness.

But is this compatible with orthodox Christian teaching? Not if that teaching is unchanging and incapable of development. In fact, however, it has always been developing. (Consider, for example, the changing shape of the doctrine of atonement). Multiple resurrection is a new development. It accepts the principle of bodily resurrection, but extends it to allow – surely realistically - for further moral and spiritual development beyond this one short life. And it also accepts the profound Christian principle of total self-giving, trusting only in God.

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