

Atheism after Christendom - an extract

Interlude RESURRECTION

To be modern is to celebrate the Sovereignty of the Self. So far, I have argued that atheism inevitably asserts itself as the default belief system of modernity, a natural expression of its cultural egocentricity. Unfortunately the spirit of modernity also manifests itself in a radical rejection of that which is genuinely other. The aggressive rejection of God is a necessary consequence of this almost militant rejection of otherness. Even so, modernity is not to be lamented as an exclusively destructive force. The present argument is simply that the modern mindset, though ‘tuned in’ to an infinity of wonder to which humanity might otherwise have remained oblivious, can for that very reason blind humanity to other sources of infinite wonder and hope. Resurrection, as the beating heart of Christian practical and political hope, is destined to remain incomprehensible to those captivated by the spirit of modernity.

The model of thought in which a thinking subject observes, examines and patiently reflects upon the nature of another object, is very much a modern innovation. Apart from the helpful clarity of thought this distinction offered, it can sometimes have the effect of alienating us from the otherness of the objects we consider, be they people, events, texts, or inanimate things. The position from which I (the subject) observe facts (the objects) is a point of cool, unpolluted detachment. I am a spectator. These things are fundamentally external to me, separate from me, and I can understand them perfectly well from my current, isolated viewing platform, ‘outside’ the things I observe. For some branches of scientific observation, this is perfectly sufficient. It is problematic however, when grappling with questions like resurrection that involve my own personal being.

To restrict consideration of the resurrection to its historicity, its scientific possibility, its ethical or political implications, its social effects, even its personal transformative impact, is destined to remain a mechanical, two-dimensional exercise, conducted at a safe distance from the event reported in New Testament documents. Such considerations, though necessary are not sufficiently attuned to the nature of the event. Resurrection is always, invariably and irreducibly resurrection-as-it-impacts-me. If it is true, resurrection is self-involving because it entails at least some form of personal experience of death in all its horror, and something happening within the experience of death. Throughout history, philosophers have issued the challenge to take death seriously, because doing so can deepen appreciation and understanding of existence. To consider resurrection, however, not only requires that we consider our own death. It is a doctrine most fully comprehended by those who already inhabit the experience of this-worldly manifestations of death.

Resurrection is an event in the darkest, bleakest and loneliest moment of human desolation: In the abysmal, stateless, agonizing silence – there, without consolation, without meaning, without love, there and precisely there, in the place of absolute loss, where anything and everything is cruelly engulfed by the darkest, coldest nothing. An emptiness unsympathetic and infinite, where there is nothing but nothing, reveals itself as the origin and the end, the alpha and the omega of human existence. Millions throughout history have no doubt experienced something of this sheer absence, and though they have tasted it this side of the grave, the only language available should they attempt to describe it, is language associated with death. Resurrection is not an antidote to such comfortless experiences, nor does it offer any short cut around them, nor even a happy ending to them. Resurrection, if it is to have any genuine force in relation to death, is something beginning inside death. Those who believe well in resurrection believe that – precisely in the midst of such inconsolable, impersonal and all-encompassing nothingness, there is something. Resurrection is the emergence of ‘something’ out of the dark, abysmal ‘nothing’.

The modernist reaction to such claims is to extract this ‘something’ away from its context, and abstract it away from the experience of death. This ‘something’ may then be defined, categorised, and analysed, until eventually an objective and rational assessment can be made from a safe distance. The explosive, disruptive charge that makes this unquenchable ‘something’ what it is, is thereby ignored. Resurrection thus evades modern attempts to classify it.

Alternative approaches to engaging with the scriptures reporting the resurrection are available: to ‘enter into’ a text, to encounter its impact in one’s inner being, rather than observing it safely from outside. To hear the voice of a text is not simply to try to extract the correct meaning out of it, but to enter fully enough into the author’s world to see what that author is pointing towards. To view resurrection from the perspective of the scriptures is to enter a region undergoing an earthquake. The closer one comes to the authors, the nearer one comes to the epicentre. This earthquake destroys the myth of a detached, dispassionate observer. This is – at root - what makes scripture ‘holy’: it is a place where the reader is exposed to radical otherness. Here is the distinct possibility that the reader’s entire worldview will come crashing down.

However, to believe in the resurrection cannot be to live in a perpetual state of existential crisis. Nor can Christian believers presume that, having once experienced the traumatic destruction of their worldview, they are destined to remain in a permanent state of wounded openness. (The histories of Israel and of the church show this clearly enough.) Rather, the resurrection-shaped life is one in which believers do not ‘get over’ the dark experiences of nothingness, so much as ‘get used to’ them. In so doing, the character is formed and re-formed in relation to otherness. Some contemporary writers have claimed that the harrowing exposure to nothingness, though it leaves its wound, does not leave the believer in a state of despair.

At the personal level, for instance, the philosopher Gillian Rose (1947-1995) paints a chilling picture of human hope in her reflections on death in *Love’s Work: A Reckoning with Life*, a rigorous autobiographical engagement with death in light of her advanced state of ovarian cancer. ‘Keep your mind in hell and despair not,’ is the book’s epigram, highlighting how love is found in facing head-on and holding the gaze of the horror that often surfaces in the course of life. The result is a readiness to become fully human by a profound but hard-won openness to that which is truly other: ‘To grow in love-ability is to accept the boundaries of oneself and others, while remaining vulnerable, woundable, around the boundaries. Acknowledgement of conditionality is the only unconditionality of human love.’ This belief gave personal expression to Rose’s philosophical research, in particular her controversial re-interpretation of Hegel. As argued in chapter 3 above, Hegelian ‘dialectic’ (thesis, antithesis, synthesis), has been extremely influential – especially when applied to history. Traditionally, Hegel is criticised for seeking to conquer otherness, bringing otherness into my world of comfortable familiarity by means of ‘synthesis’. Rose, however, offers a different reading of Hegel. It is precisely the event of synthesis – the point of conflict between my world and that of otherness – that constitutes life in the midst of a broken world. The most natural reaction when faced with the threat of otherness is to retreat into a secure environment: hurrying towards the consolation of a satisfactory but premature synthesis, hiding from the disturbance of otherness, avoiding the pain of being broken and remade. On the other hand, ‘love’s work’, for Rose, is to battle with the pain and suffering interwoven throughout lived experience. This, it seems, is precisely what Hegel meant with his call to ‘tarry with the negative’.

The Marxist literary critic, Terry Eagleton, offers a political interpretation of resurrection along precisely the same lines. The sinful, fallen world described by the New Testament is often grossly caricatured as the individual’s spiritual status in heavenly eyes. Eagleton puts flesh onto the notion of fallenness as ‘the lamentable state of humanity.’ That is, ‘the prevalence of greed, idolatry, pollution, the depth of our instinct to dominate and possess, the dull persistence of injustice and

exploitation, the chronic anxiety which leads us to hate and maim, the sickness, suffering and despair which Jesus seems to associate with evil.’

The human experience of nothingness often arises from the human capacity to inflict horrors upon one another: The unacknowledged greed in which wealth is venerated and increasing power is conferred upon those that are already excessively wealthy; the necessity to keep the economic machine running smoothly by exploiting poverty-stricken workers, enforcing migrations, tolerating preventable child mortality; the political short-termism, that keeps world leaders so obsessed with the next election that the major long-term issues set to engulf humanity in ecological terror can never be truly addressed; the militant nationalism and worship of Mars that transform the horrors of violence, war and military aggression into virtues; the cult of celebrity, in which hero-status is achieved not by discipline, moral exertion or genuine self-sacrifice, but by luck-of-the-draw; the corporate erosion of education systems, the dehumanising mechanics of the divorce industry, the reverse-Darwinism of advertising environment in which humans devolve into consumers; the list could go on, but must climax with the corporate, political and media propaganda that shelter privileged westerners from seeing all this as the true state of the world, along with the cowardice, apathy and indifference that feed our contentment with these delusions. The insurmountable power of these faceless and soulless forces that grind the humanity out of the human condition are precisely the forces the church once meant when it spoke of original sin. These are what Saint Paul referred to as the ‘spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.’ This is not to deny their spiritual reality (or their capacity to reach into the human spirit) but to draw attention to the sheer weight of the forces that shape human fate but cannot be overthrown by human force.

Regardless of how Christian believers may wish to justify seeking power in order to fight for a better world, the point of Christianity is precisely that such power games are incapable of winning justice. This is why, as Eagleton states,

The only authentic image of this violently loving God is a tortured and executed political criminal, who dies in an act of solidarity with that the Bible calls the anawim, meaning the destitute and dispossessed. Crucifixion was reserved by the Romans for political offences alone. The anawim, in Pauline phrase, are the shit of the earth – the scum and refuse of society who constitute the cornerstone of the new form of human life known as the kingdom of God. Jesus himself is consistently presented as their representative. His death and descent into a hell is a voyage of madness, terror, absurdity, and self-dispossession, since only a revolution that cuts that deep can answer to our human condition.

There is no vitriolic celebration here, as though Christians armed with fairy tale beliefs about resurrection need no longer worry about death. Here is the unnerving reminder that the Christ who said, ‘follow me,’ was on his way to the cross. Christian belief is not the suicidal abandonment of the preciousness of life, but the knowledge that the insurmountable ‘powers that be’ will only be truly countered with self-sacrifice. The image of the church as the ‘Body of Christ’ is worth reconsidering in this light: the body of Christ is the tortured, mutilated corpse epitomising failure and shame. If this, according to Saint Paul, is the body in which Christ lives by his spirit, then the church’s experience of resurrection is to be found by following this Christ into the abyss. For Eagleton, Jesus’ descent into hell was a descent into precisely this absurdity:

Only through such an openness to our own finitude, our frailty, our mortality, only by preserving ... steadfast fidelity to failure... can any human power prove durable. Only through this impossible, stonily disenchanting realism, staring the medusa’s head, (of the monstrous, traumatic, obscene real, of the crucifixion) full in the face, can any sort of resurrection be possible. Only by accepting this as the very last word, seeing everything else as so much sentimental garbage, ideological illusion, false utopia, bogus consolation, ludicrously upbeat idealism, only then may it prove not to be quite

the last word after all. The New Testament is a brutal destroyer of human illusions. If you follow Jesus and you don't end up dead, it appears you have some explaining to do.

In both Eagleton and Rose then, we see the determination to take death (in its personal and political manifestations) with utmost seriousness. In this light, Christianity is not primarily an attempt to make a better world. In the first instance, it is the readiness to engage with otherness in its most disturbing manifestations, and to engage with it in the most personally open manner. At root, belief in resurrection is radical openness to radical otherness. This brings us all the way back to the nature of faith that underlies the covenants of scripture. Not faith in some divinity who promises happiness because he can perform miracles and offer life after death. In the case of Abraham, as we saw in the previous chapter, faith was the ability to endure the hardships, the difficulties and the tragedies of the present on the basis of the divine promise. It is little surprise that the original covenant forming the basis of Old and New Testaments, comes to Abraham as he undergoes a 'deep and terrifying darkness.' Faith is the ability to 'tarry with the negative', to live with the intolerable.

All of this is to say that Christian faith has little to do with intellectual assent to the existence of a divine being. At its basis is the formation of communities of people struggling in the midst of fear, injustice and pain, seeking liberation not by use of physical force against the powers pressing in upon them, but rather, through the blood, sweat and tears of radical openness towards the other. This hard-won radical openness is called, 'faith' and the otherness discovered is a source of loving transformation. In sum, Christians believe that resurrection is discovered most fully by those whose situation is most frightful. As Eagleton points out, '[t]he trouble with the Dawkinses of this world ... is that they do not find themselves in a frightful situation at all ... beyond the fact that there are a lot of semideranged people called believers all around the place.'

In this respect the New Atheists and their followers come remarkably close to the position of the Sadducees of the first century. The Sadducees did not believe in resurrection, as is well known, but their non-belief had little to do with intellectual capacities or liberal sensitivities. The Sadducees were drawn from the wealthy and privileged elite of Judean society and benefited from the Roman imperial regime from which so many others suffered. They knew well enough, that the Jewish beliefs in resurrection entailed the breaking up of the current order, and the establishment of a new order according to the revolutionary expectations of a feral underclass. Their refusal to believe in resurrection arose naturally from a desire to conserve their own privilege against any form of otherness that threatened it.

Resurrection is always, resurrection-as-it-affects-me.

Modern attempts to 'understand' resurrection usually consider it only from a safe distance, a position of detachment.

Resurrection begins in the experience of the nothingness of death. To enter into this nothingness is a disturbing experience.

Gillian Rose showed how her own struggle to face the otherness of death as it really is, to 'tarry with the negative'.

Terry Eagleton implies that the injustices of the world constitute a form of death, and shows that radical Christianity faces the otherness of the world as it really is.

Exposure to the monstrous nothingness of death is a necessary part of believing in resurrection.

The resurrection is only properly considered when the world is seen for what it is: the horrors of injustice that modern history has learned to disguise; the stark reality of death as the ultimate hindrance to progress. The practice of openness to others and to the world is not simply another set of moral commands, a hermeneutic strategy for reading scripture, or a set of ideal values to apply. Being open is not something that an individual can one day decide to start doing. To engage with otherness is not an ability that can be turned on and off at will. The capacity to engage well with

otherness is, from the Christian perspective, a mere symptom. It is the manifestation of those who genuinely believe in the resurrection of Christ: of those who face the reality, the mortality, the fallibility and vulnerability of their own existence in the fullest sense; of those who see the injustices, the degradations, the dehumanising political realities of the world as they really are; of those who – despite the horrific state of the world – cling to the belief that hope is every bit as real and is to be lived out in the form of radical, self-giving love as personified in Jesus of Nazareth.

Christian belief in resurrection is, of course, rooted in the historical resurrection of Jesus. This is not merely an event that could have happened to anyone, since Jesus is portrayed as the pre-existent logos, the reason why the universe behaves as it does, present from the beginning, an agent of creation, the source and the enlightenment of human life. So begins the Gospel of John whose introduction climaxes with the claim that this pre-existent logos became a human being, the Word became flesh. So when this embodied universal logos takes human flesh, does he take charge of his people as would be expected, i.e., like a cosmic emperor? The Christian story is that Jesus was a peasant who showed that leadership need not be authoritarian, that power need not be coercive, that greatness need not be success. Instead he shows a counter-intuitive way of life, marked by brutal fragility, unmitigated political love in the face of constant frustration and ultimately disastrous failure, but a way of life in which something monumental takes place on the far side of failure. Theologians have sometimes referred to the day of resurrection as the eighth day of creation, where a specific moment in time and space has an impact upon every time and space. What kind of impact?

Resurrection Power

The nature of resurrection described above, does not suggest itself as a source of power useful for those seeking to run a successful empire. Hardly surprising then, that throughout the Christendom era, resurrection has been more popularly conceived simply as proof that an omnipotent God can do the impossible, that he can forgive sins, and that he can offer life after death. The personal trauma and the political revolution that belief in resurrection entails have rarely featured in the Christian story told by the oppressive powers of Christendom. Post-Christendom believers are not so much concerned with the actual abuses of power that the church has committed throughout history, but with seeking to resist the trust in the kind of power that is open to abuse in the first place. The power dynamic arising from belief in resurrection is drastically incompatible with models of Christianity that seek to harness secular forms of power for the sake of goodness. The Christian drive to establish justice by first gaining political, cultural or social power is a dubious exercise because it abandons all belief in resurrection. It rejects the perilous, life-threatening, failure-prone life-style of Jesus of Nazareth through which God – finally – reveals his true power at work. If God cannot be trusted to save the world from a position of utter powerlessness, so the logic runs, then we must give him a helping hand by first manoeuvring ourselves into positions of power from which we can then seek his blessing on our well-meaning action. Christendom is the name of any version of Christianity that has no stomach for genuine resurrection.

Beyond Theism

In order to get to grips with what resurrection says about how a divinity may exert alternative forms of power in the created order, an alternative framework of imagination is required. For the most part, Christian and Atheist alike assume that a god who is active and present in the universe must, of necessity, be the god of theism, i.e., the counterpart of the god of deism, both of whom were invented in the seventeenth century. Deism is the product of a world in which authority was being slowly withdrawn from the pope in Rome to the princes of individual nations. This was the era of the ‘religious war’ at the end of which God had to be promoted to a realm where he could cause no more bloodshed on earth. The result was deism – with a God who wound the world up and left it to tick, a divinity with the good sense not to meddle in the world of politics and social order.

Theism was a Christian reaction to deism, defending the existence of a God who micromanages the universe, who answers prayers, who communes with believers and is active in the life of the world and the church. Always and everywhere, however, the god of theism was rooted in the Christendom picture of an omnipotent, omnipresent, omni-benevolent, praise-hungry cosmic emperor. This was also a god filtered through the new view of the universe unveiled by the Scientific Revolution. The Newtonian worldview determined the character of this God: the laws of nature were absolute – and the theist God was compelled either to obey or to suspend them. This was a God whose action in the world could sometimes be viewed as ‘interfering’, flouting the very laws by which he expected all his creatures to live. Divine involvement in the created order, then, was ‘supernatural’ whenever it was inexplicable.

Being supernatural, his divine providence was a matter of invisibly and miraculously controlling every minute action and reaction across the universe – which of course, leaves him responsible for every evil as well as every good. However, he was exonerated from committing the evils that beset humanity on all sides, by providing his worshippers with the trump card: ‘God moves in a mysterious way, his wonders to perform.’ Though this phrase offers an important insight, many distort its logic along these lines: If we question why an all-powerful and all-loving God seems to act in ways that are inconsistent with any sane notion of good behaviour, it is only because our minds are too limited to understand. We must simply tolerate injustice, disaster and downright evil, because – although God causes all these things – his ways are ‘mysterious’ to our pathetically finite minds. Theism is thus a life-support system for the Christendom God whose hideous character is beyond reproach, enabling him to survive artificially throughout the modern era. Little wonder that atheists of every brand would like to see the machine switched off.

This is certainly not a conventional portrayal of theism. Most view theism simply as the belief that God is active in the world. More precisely, however, theism is a belief about God’s relationship to the world. As such, theism is welded to a particular set of beliefs about what the world is – and it is those beliefs that are problematic. Theism is the name of a God who created and is intimately involved in a world from which otherness is systematically excluded. As shown in chapter 3, the world of modernity is a world constructed around the ego of the free-thinking individual. Any God at home in such a world is clearly an object of human imagination – a God created in humanity’s own image. Is such a God active in the world? Then he is able to act only in ways that humanity is able to imagine. Is this a powerful God? Then his power is simply human power multiplied into infinitely greater proportions, i.e., power limited to the confines of omnipotence. Is this a God who speaks? Then what can we hope to hear but the echo of our own voice? The God of theism is a modern God for a modern world, best laid to rest in the graveyard of modernity.

If, in a post-modern, post-Christendom era, we feel compelled to use the word theism to describe belief in an active God, it must be a theism drastically re-defined. Otherwise, we run into the inescapable problems so effectively highlighted by modern atheisms: Is God all-powerful, all-loving, and active in the world? If so, then this God not only allows but causes suffering and is a grotesque, malevolent supernatural demon masquerading as a benevolent do-gooder. There are alternatives.

An ‘Ontological’ Dimension

If – in accordance with the Newtonian Worldview – the universe we inhabit is a three-dimensional entity, those things we cannot explain must automatically be supernatural. However, the contemporary physicists proposing ‘string theory’ currently subscribe to the belief that our universe has eleven dimensions. Actions in one dimension spill over to affect those in another. In which case, those who wish to believe in a creator God might similarly imagine that he could create multiple dimensions through which he makes his presence felt. These would be dimensions that span every corner of time and space, a thoroughly natural, pre-planned, fundamental, ever-present

strand of a complex created order. If we are to believe in a god of providence, a God who is active in the world and has universal, overriding power and authority, it is perfectly conceivable that he expresses his universal being through a particular channel of influence. That is, through a particular dimension. Such a dimension of the universe could, I propose, be described with a term borrowed from philosophers.

Ontology is the study (logos) of being (ontos) which underlies all existence. It asks the question of why anything at all simply 'is'. If the universe is a given, some branches of human enquiry explore how it came to exist, whereas ontology is concerned with the prior fact that it exists in the first place. What does it mean that there is anything at all? What is 'is'? Even if nothing exists, it still exists! Such concerns are so fundamental, so basic, so foundational to who we are – they are often seen as an irrelevance or abstraction. Ontology then, highlights the relevance of the most obvious, deeply rooted, but ill-considered dimension of the universe: that it 'is'.

If there is an ontological dimension woven through the fabric of the universe, to be a human being in the fullest sense is to access this dimension. I am by no means suggesting that God's own being is exhausted by this dimension, or that this dimension is identified with God himself. Rather, I claim that such a dimension may exist – and will write below as though it does exist. If it does, then by entering this dimension at divine invitation, this God may be actively encountered. This, in fact, is close to the dynamic of Sabbath celebration in Hebrew Scriptures – that to celebrate Sabbath is, in the first instance, to stop (shavat, in Hebrew). As one psalmist put it, 'Stop faffing, and know that I am God.' In the struggle for existence, in the hyper-active carrot and stick busyness of living and surviving, to celebrate Sabbath is to stop and to be reoriented within the purposes of God. Rabbi Abraham Herschel described Sabbath as 'a palace in time', into which we may dare to enter and face the depths of our own humanity. Ontology principally addresses not what we do or think or strive towards, but who we become in the process of doing and thinking and striving.

The way I use the term ontology assumes the picture of human being I have advanced in chapter 3, that to be human is to be engaged most openly with that which is genuinely 'other'. To enter the ontological dimension is to enter a 'palace in time', a temple in which we stop to become attuned to sheer otherness. To abide with the intolerable otherness of other people, of the world we know, and of the universe beyond our knowing. I claim that whatever and whoever we encounter in this dimension, may have the capacity to effect other dimensions of our life and world. This encounter is the true context for what Christians describe as worship.

Conclusion

If the resurrection offers a means of exerting force in the world, it need not be the coercive power generally associated with the politics of the Christendom order. A creator God may leave the universe to run itself – though remaining present and active to it through an ontological dimension. Events that appear miraculous may simply have their natural cause in this ontological dimension. This dimension, though in a sense 'hidden' beyond the scope of modern (though not necessarily future) physics, is at the same time universally accessible to human beings. However, as I claimed in the first part of this interlude, resurrection power cannot be seized to serve some other end, because to believe in resurrection is a profoundly disruptive, traumatic, life-altering endeavour.

If, to believe in the resurrection is to enter an ontological dimension, it is an activity beset with paradox. To engage with the otherness encountered in such a dimension, is at once both attractive and repulsive, the most natural thing in the world and the most counter-intuitive, the most sensible and the most senseless, strange and yet familiar, captivating and yet liberating, terrifying and yet comforting. Christians believe that resurrection is rooted in a historical event, that was hidden from the public eye and that took place on the Sabbath in the 'middle of time.' All valid Christian belief revolves around this event located like a black hole at the centre of history.

1. Gillian Rose, *Love's Work: A Reckoning with Life* (London: Schocken, 1996), p. 105.
2. G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit* (trans. A.V. Miller; Oxford: University Press, 1977), p. 805.
3. Eagleton, *Reason, Faith and Revolution*, p. 33.
4. Eagleton, *Reason, Faith and Revolution*, p. 23.
5. Eagleton, *Reason, Faith and Revolution*, pp. 37-38.
6. These words form the opening line of a hymn penned in 1773 by William Cowper, shortly before his attempted suicide.
7. See further below.
8. Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Man* (London: Farrar, Strauss, Giroux, 2005) p. 4.
9. The German title of Hans Conzelmann's commentary of the Gospel of Saint Luke, was 'Die Mitte Der Zeit.'