

## Preface

THIS BOOK IS UNASHAMEDLY a work of systematic theology. By contrast with the focus of New Testament Studies, it is less concerned with historical and exegetical issues pertaining to the interpretation of ancient texts and more concerned to address the constructive work of articulating an understanding of Christian faith in the Resurrection of Christ for today.

New Testament scholars naturally concentrate on the meaning of the texts, and on what went on *behind* the texts, including an understanding of the originative events that produced them. The controlling interest, for example, might be on the nature of the oral processes of the transmission of the traditions about Jesus prior to the production of the first written Gospels, or on what went on in the mind of Saint Paul in writing to the various communities around the Mediterranean with which he had to do. The systematic theologian, by contrast, is more interested, not so much in what lies *behind* the texts as in what goes on in *front* of them. He or she has the task of articulating a coherent statement of faith in the service of the church of today as it seeks to clarify its theological understanding in the context of an increasingly secularized world of scientific materialism.

Obviously, the systematic theologian has necessarily to keep an eye on what current New Testament scholarship has to say specifically about the traditions relating to faith in Jesus' Resurrection; but the reception of the insights of the past concerning the nature of resurrection faith necessarily involves their re-interpretation in the only language we have—the language of contemporary use. And this is not to mention the need to understand the historical tradition of resurrection faith in the light of the contemporary epistemological and cosmological knowledge of the modern world. In the process of the reception of ancient traditions of faith those insights themselves are therefore inevitably changed as we make them our own—in some respects ever so slightly, and in other respects somewhat more dramatically.

We have always to remember that the first generation of Christian believers inhabited a world that was radically different from our own. Theirs was the thought-world of Second Temple Judaism that was informed by a somewhat melodramatic apocalyptic imagination relating to the End of the world. This was entirely different from

contemporary fears of humanly produced catastrophe, whether by nuclear holocaust or the irreparable consequences of global warming. In addition they were immersed in a Hellenistic cultural environment that by the first century had become extraordinarily mixed. In philosophical terms this was a world that was characterized by an amalgam of an inherited Stoic approach to ethical issues with an increasing interest in Platonic epistemological categories. From a contemporary perspective, we can see that Stoicism was on the way out while Platonism was once again coming into dominance. Hence, we speak of it today as the eclectic world of Middle Platonism.

Clearly, this was a world very different from our own. We are no longer Stoics or Middle Platonists in any real sense, let alone in the highly specific way that first-century Christians might have been. Today, the basic insights of Plato do not feed into the thought-world of popular culture in the way they were unwittingly absorbed and presupposed in the first century. As we reconstruct resurrection belief in our own language, we will work in epistemological terms, not in the light of Plato but, much more likely, in the light of Wittgenstein.

While appreciating the importance of Stoic and Platonic thought-forms for understanding Paul, we are therefore faced with articulating an epistemology of faith in the language of today, with as much logical coherence as we are capable of producing. Inevitably, this means using not only the language but the philosophical and cosmological presuppositions of today.

The basic raw experience that triggers the response of faith may be essentially the same across time insofar as it has to do with the same eternal and changeless religious Object, the transcendent and invisible God, and, in the case of Resurrection faith, with the Raised Christ “seated at God’s right hand” (in some sense of this expression). In other words, in faith our concerns still focus upon the same heavenly reality to which the concrete experience of Christ’s “life-giving Spirit” continues to point and bear witness. However, as we make the language of the New Testament our own, and as we inevitably bring a different interpretative grid to the understanding of it, the original insights of the first Christians cannot fail to become *uniquely ours*. Even though we may incorporate much of the same inherited New Testament language into our own interpretation and articulation of the experience of faith, the exact meaning content assigned to that inherited language will necessarily be somewhat different from that of our theological forebears. In the context of a contemporary world-view, we cannot avoid re-interpreting it; we are alert to the “fallacy of direct transference.” This means that, if something is lost in translation, quite a deal will also inevitably be added in the same process.

Not least, as we articulate our faith today, we face the challenge of explaining how it might be possible for people in the twenty-first century to claim, not only an acquaintance with the “life-giving Spirit” of the Raised Christ as the animating Spirit of the Christian community, but how it is possible to identify that Spirit *as* the presence today of the now glorified and exalted Raised *Jesus* by reference to a historical person who

lived some two thousand years ago. This will necessarily also involve us in the task of explaining how it is possible for some people to come to faith, so as to claim an acquaintance with the presence of the Raised Christ, while others do not. Surely few today will be unquestioningly content simply to imagine that some receive “the gift of faith” from God, while others for some inexplicable reason are cruelly deprived of it. In other words, we have to face the challenge of outlining an epistemology of faith that is capable of explaining the apparent ambiguity of the divine disclosure and the accompanying religious freedom that allows some to come to the decision of faith, while others obviously feel entirely comfortable in following alternative this-worldly pursuits.

In addition, we have to come to terms with the apparent universal “availability” of the Raised Christ, whose presence is the subject matter of our knowledge claims in faith, not just in one place, but in principle in any and all places at the same time. Only so can Christians claim to know themselves to be “in Christ” and members of “the Body of Christ” when they are called together into communities of faith today wherever in the world they may happen to find themselves.

This book therefore not only endeavors to understand St Paul in his Jewish Second Temple context and in the Hellenistic context of Middle Platonism; at best this would represent only half of the present theological challenge. In addition we have to address the systematic re-construction of resurrection belief in the context of our own world and in thought-forms that are meaningful today. Only so may we then be in a position to address questions of truth.

} } }

As with the production of the companion volume to this, *Resurrection in Retrospect*, I am very grateful to a number of key people who, since its beginning in 2010, have all helped in one way or another to bring this project to fruition: I am enormously grateful to the then President of the General Theological Seminary in New York, Lang Lowry, and the Interim Dean at the time, Bishop Peter Lee, for inviting me to come out of retirement to teach Systematic Theology at the General Theological Seminary of The Episcopal Church from 2010 to 2013. Likewise, I am grateful to the members of the Systematic Theology classes in those years for their keen enthusiasm and serious dedication to the task not only of wrestling with the complexities thrown up by the New Testament resurrection traditions, but of facing the challenge of producing a systematically coherent statement of faith in the Resurrection of Christ for the church today. I also appreciate the seriousness with which the Adult Education classes of the Episcopal Parish of St. Peter, Morristown, New Jersey, engaged with essentially the same issues between 2014 and 2015, and I especially wish to thank those who attended to the practical logistics relating to this exercise, especially the Reverend Janet Broderick, for being prepared to hire an aged antipodean stranger, and Mikael and Beth Salovaara, and Constance Silverman, who ensured that our “home away from home” was made so comfortable.

PREFACE

In more recent times I have been very grateful for the local encouragement and support of the Warden of John Wollaston Theological College in Perth, Gregory Seach, along with my friends David Wood and Susan Maushart. I am especially grateful to Luke Hoare who has been prepared to spend so much of his time on the painstaking and careful work of copy editing and checking references towards the end of the process. To convert something essentially British into the format of the *Chicago Manual of Style* is no mean accomplishment. For this help I am enormously appreciative.

In relation to the final phase of producing these two books, I wish to express my thanks to Dr. K. C. Hanson and the constantly helpful staff at Wipf and Stock for their obvious dedication to the achievement of excellence in their work. The production of this book and of *Resurrection in Retrospect* at the same time, was a big ask, to which they responded with no apparent sense of pressure; it has been a pleasure to deal with people of such obvious professional competence, infused with palpable generosity of spirit and care.

In and through all this, my loving wife Ann has been a constant support. Almost certainly, I would not have persisted with such a mammoth commitment without her patience and encouragement. Given that, for most of the last decade, she has lived with me despite the constant distraction of the theology of the Resurrection, I know she will now at last appreciate not having to ask “What are you thinking about?” quite so often. I promise that our next years together will be much more relaxed as we enjoy life and behave in the manner of the retired couple we really are.

Meanwhile, I am very grateful to God for the opportunity of being able to tackle some sustained thinking about this most important subject matter of Christian theology, and for all those who, often without being aware of it, have so generously helped and supported me in the course of it.

+Peter Carnley  
East Fremantle, Western Australia  
10 September 2018