
BACKGROUND TO MODERN THEOLOGY ESSAY

MOORE THEOLOGICAL COLLEGE ~ BACHELOR OF DIVINITY

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SUBJECT: Background to Modern Theology (CT402)

TITLE: Compare the use of the idea of the resurrection in the writings of Barth and Moltmann

NO OF WORDS: 2010

DATE DUE: Wednesday, 4 October 2000

DATE SUBMITTED: Wednesday, 11 October 2000

SYNOPSIS

Both Barth and Moltmann claim that the resurrection is at the heart of the Christian message. Yet, both theologians are not prepared to place the resurrection in the same category as history, either in an attempt to avoid the lifelessness of relegating it to a past event, or due to claims of its lack of admissibility as evidence in the court of science. This denial of the objectivity leads to deeper misunderstandings of the resurrection. Moltmann claims that the resurrection is a process not a fact, and thus is the means by which God works through history to liberate his fallen world from the effects of sin. Barth claims that the resurrection adds nothing to our reconciliation, but rather is the means by which God revealed his finished work to the first disciples. Both positions fail to sufficiently emphasise the objective revivification of Jesus Christ that was necessary for him to succeed in his mission by conquering death and the devil, being exalted from his humiliation.

*“If Christ has not been raised,
our preaching is useless and so is your faith”¹*

THE RESURRECTION OF JESUS CHRIST has proven to be one of the more controversial elements of the Christian faith. Whilst the *meaning* of the death of Jesus of Nazareth is by no means unanimous amongst scholars, the *history* of the event stands generally uncontested. However, for the resurrection, both the meaning *and* historicity have numerous interpretations.

Two notable interpretations of the resurrection are those of Barth and Moltmann. For both scholars, the resurrection stands at the heart of the Christian faith.² Yet, their understanding of both the historicity and the meaning differs at several points.

1. THE HISTORICITY OF THE RESURRECTION

The first major area where the theologians before us have spoken of the resurrection is in terms of its historicity. Both Barth and Moltmann do not regard the resurrection of Jesus Christ as historical in the same sense as the crucifixion. The basis for this distinction is their understanding of ‘history’.

For Barth, the main issue that disqualifies the resurrection from the category of history is that it was only seen by insiders. Unlike the crucifixion, which was witnessed by both friend and foe, the resurrection accounts were only made by Christians. Thus, since the resurrection cannot meet the high standard of proof required in the scientific-historical world, such as impartiality, it is not worthy of that label.³

¹ I Corinthians 15:14.

² K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics I/2* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1956), 114. J. Moltmann, 'The Resurrection of Christ: Hope for the World,' chap. in *Resurrection Reconsidered* (Oxford: Oneworld Pubns, 1996), 73.

³ K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV/2* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1958), 150.

Moltmann, on the other hand, avoids discussion of the historicity since he considers the 'critical historical method' as inappropriate for an event such as the resurrection. The best that history can do is to compare one historical event with another in order to determine its historicity. But, he asks, what do you do with the resurrection, an event that is without parallel? Furthermore, he maintains that history is in no position to comment about 'the activity of a transcendent God in history generally'.⁴

Additionally, both Barth and Moltmann also have other reasons to avoid speaking of the historicity of the resurrection. Moltmann does not want to confine the resurrection to one point in time, since he regards the resurrection as continuing in some sense into present and future time. For, he claims that when we say something is historical, we rob the event of its living character. Thus, when we say that Jesus *was* raised in 33AD, we objectify the facts, translating it 'into some sort of security according to which we control things or facts'.⁵

Barth also resists using the category of 'history' for the resurrection because he wishes to focus on the *revelation* of the risen Christ to the apostles, rather than the *revivification* of Jesus. For, he understands the resurrection as nothing more than an event of divine communication to the first Christians. It revealed to them that the incarnation and passion of Christ achieved reconciliation between God and man.⁶ It told them that atonement had successfully taken place.

So, how is it that Moltmann and Barth can appear to deny the historicity of the resurrection, yet still consider it central to the Christian faith? The answer is that they are prepared to regard it as a genuine event, but not 'history'.

⁴ J. Moltmann, 'The Resurrection of Christ: Hope for the World,' chap. in *Resurrection Reconsidered* (Oxford: Oneworld Pubns, 1996), 79.

⁵ J. Moltmann, 'Resurrection as Hope,' *Harvard Theological Review* 61 (April 1968), 141.

⁶ Barth, *Church Dogmatics I/2*, 111.

Barth is prepared to say that the resurrection really happened, and occurred in a 'real part of human time'.⁷ Yet, it was the *revelation* of the risen Christ that happened at that observable moment, not the revivification of Jesus. So on that basis, he is prepared so say that the resurrection is true, even though the evidence of it in the New Testament is 'fragmentary and contradictory'.⁸ For, it is possible for the risen Christ to even appear simultaneously in more than one location without compromising the truth of the resurrection.

Likewise, Moltmann claims that the resurrection is real. However, his interpretation of reality appears to be one step further from Barth's. Jesus did rise from the dead. However, the truth of this fact was only made clear to individuals by way of a vision, an 'inward experience'.⁹

Yet, was it a *bodily* resurrection? Would it matter if we found the bones of Jesus of Nazareth? It is at this point that our two theologians seem to differ. The earlier Barth seemed to be ambivalent to whether the tomb was empty or not.¹⁰ However, in his later Church Dogmatics, he is prepared to defend the New Testament's claim, stating that whilst it was not to be equated with the resurrection, it nonetheless was an 'indispensable sign' of 'the appearance of the living'.¹¹ Thus, it would appear that whether or not the resurrection accounts have the status of history, he still believes that Jesus of Nazareth came back to life in some sense.

However, Moltmann not only discounts the resurrection as history, he also denies its factuality. He claims that:

⁷ Barth, *Church Dogmatics I/2*, 114.

⁸ K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics III/2* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1960), 452.

⁹ Moltmann, 'The Resurrection of Christ,' 75.

¹⁰ K. Barth, *The Resurrection of the Dead* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1933), 142ff.

¹¹ Barth, *Church Dogmatics III/2*, 453.

When we talk about Christ's resurrection from the dead we are not talking about a fact. We are talking about a process.¹²

Thus, Jesus did not rise from the dead in the first century. He is in the *process* of being raised from the dead. When Moltmann speaks of the resurrection of Jesus, he is referring to an event that began at the crucifixion, and continues to extend throughout time. The empty tomb is irrelevant. Speaking against statements made by critics that claim otherwise, Otto states that:

[s]uch comments provide examples of the failure to understand Moltmann's basic nonontological epistemological stance, featuring the processive character of reality, the ontology of the not-yet, and the lack of a finalized, objective fact in any sense of the word...¹³

2. THE MEANING AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE RESURRECTION

Barth and Moltmann's views on the resurrection are by no means limited to its historicity. Indeed, the issue of historicity is closely related to their understandings of the meaning and significance of the event.

For Barth, the resurrection is simply the revelation of the objective results of reconciliation between God and humanity, as achieved through the incarnation and crucifixion of Jesus. Indeed, he claims that '[t]he resurrection can give nothing new to Him who is the eternal Word of the Father; but it makes visible what is proper to Him, His glory'¹⁴

This statement demonstrates a central aspect of Barth's view of reconciliation. As Klooster has noted, since Barth rejects any distinction between Jesus' person and work, it follows that 'the very being of Jesus Christ is his work',¹⁵ and thus 'he does not look upon the states of humiliation and

¹² Moltmann, 'The Resurrection of Christ,' 80.

¹³ R. Otto, 'The Resurrection in Jurgen Moltmann,' *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 35 (March 1992), 85.

¹⁴ Barth, *Church Dogmatics I/2*, 111.

¹⁵ F. Klooster, 'Karl Barth's Doctrine of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ,' *Westminster Theological Journal* 24 (May 1962), 160.

exaltation as real *states* in relation to the law... [but] two facets of one event'.¹⁶ Thus, nothing happened in the resurrection that had not already happened in the incarnation or crucifixion.

To state this is not to downplay the significance Barth places on the resurrection. Without the resurrection, humanity would never know of the work of Christ. It was primarily through the revelation of the risen Christ that the now reconciled world could respond in faith to Jesus Christ.

Yet, this revelation of the risen Christ is not limited to the forty days after the crucifixion. This revelation continues today as it is revealed to Christians when they read of the risen Christ in the Bible. Thus, 'the resurrection of Jesus is not a fact belonging to the past'.¹⁷

For Moltmann, the idea of the continuation of the resurrection is central to his theology of hope, the heart of his thinking. The resurrection is 'a confronting event which discloses the future and opens up history... the foundation and promise of eternal life in the midst of this history of death'.¹⁸

In proposing this interpretation, he refutes the traditional Christian 'idealist teaching of the immortality of the soul',¹⁹ choosing instead to retrieve the original thinking by focussing on the vision of hope of Jewish apocalypticism.²⁰ Their central concern was not immortality, but the theodicy question. They wanted to know 'when will God show himself in his divinity and fulfil his promises'.²¹

Moltmann claims that the early Christians continued in this concern. When Paul spoke of the resurrection of the dead, he did so not to address immortality, but rather to show the victory of God's righteousness, 'an answer to the theodicy question'.²² It was only when the early fathers

¹⁶ Klooster, *Karl Barth's Doctrine of the Resurrection of,* 160.

¹⁷ Barth, *Church Dogmatics I/2*, 115.

¹⁸ Moltmann, 'The Resurrection of Christ,' 80.

¹⁹ Moltmann, 'Resurrection as Hope,' 129.

²⁰ Moltmann, 'Resurrection as Hope,' 131.

²¹ Moltmann, 'Resurrection as Hope,' 131.

²² Moltmann, 'Resurrection as Hope,' 132.

overemphasised God's judicial nature that they turned to personal justification. To fully understand the resurrection one must return to the focus of those who waited for the resurrection and saw it in Jesus.

Yet, just how has the resurrection answered the theodicy question? We can know that there *is* a basis for hope since God has recreated all things. The resurrection is not about the restoration of life, as much as the recreation of life. As Jesus was reborn at the resurrection, so too is his creation. The resurrection shows that 'Jesus himself has been translated into the future of the new.'²³ Thus, '[h]e represents this future and at the same time mediates it'.²⁴

Thus, the resurrection not only reveals the results of Jesus' incarnation and crucifixion, (as Barth would concur), it also *mediates* salvation. This salvation is the hope for the future. This is the answer to the theodicy question.

Yet, significantly, the resurrection hope is concerned with this life, not a life to come:

Resurrection is not a consoling opium, soothing us with the promise of a better world in the hereafter. It is the energy for the rebirth of this life. The hope doesn't point to another world. It is focused on the redemption of this one. In the Spirit, resurrection is not merely expected. It is already experienced. Resurrection happens every day.²⁵

How does it happen every day? As God works in history, bringing liberation to the oppressed, showing the fruit of the new creation. And, it is our role as followers of the resurrected Christ that we should work to liberate those in the world that are oppressed, showing them the light that Jesus' life brings this world.

²³ Moltmann, 'Resurrection as Hope,' 146.

²⁴ Moltmann, 'Resurrection as Hope,' 146.

²⁵ Moltmann, 'Resurrection as Hope,' 81.

3. EVALUATION AND CRITIQUE

A person's interpretation of the resurrection of Christ is integrally related to one's view of what happened through the incarnation and the crucifixion. This is particularly evident in the theology of Barth and Moltmann.

For Barth, the resurrection serves only to reveal the finished work of the reconciliation of God and humanity. The resurrection was not part of the atonement. It only acted as the means of communicating this fact to the early church so that they might give him praise.

Thus, he does not consider the resurrection to involve any aspect of exultation of the humiliated Christ. For, his Christology does not understand Jesus to have experienced humiliation and exaltation, since his redemptive work was performed through his incarnation. By simply coming to Earth as a man and returning to heaven as the risen Lord, he achieves reconciliation between God and humanity. Indeed, as Klooster notes, for Barth the resurrection is merely a 'reciprocal action of the incarnation'.²⁶ The result is that '[if] Barth is correct, then Paul should have said that if Christ hath not been raised, then you do not yet know about what he has done.'²⁷

Moltmann's view of the resurrection likewise fails to come to terms with the objective work of personal justification achieved on the cross. The ramifications of his position are perhaps worse than Barth's. For, it would appear that by a denial of any factuality of the resurrection, Moltmann does not regard it as significant whether the bones of Jesus of Nazareth remain in the ground. The resurrection is simply the process of recreation after the negation of the negative achieved at the cross (Hegel). It has no aspect of personal redemption. Sin is not dealt with.

²⁶ Klooster, *Karl Barth's Doctrine of the Resurrection of,* 171.

²⁷ Klooster, *Karl Barth's Doctrine of the Resurrection of,* 171.



Barth and Moltmann have provided many profound insights into God's redeeming work through Jesus Christ. However, their refusal to regard the resurrection as true history results in a serious misunderstanding of the work of Jesus on the cross. He died for our sins... but was raised to life. Indeed, if Jesus has not been literally raised to life then it is true to say with the Apostle Paul that we are still in our sins (1 Cor 15:17).

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