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Review: Resurrection Reconsidered

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Resurrection Reconsidered. Edited by Gavin D'Costa. Oxford: Oneworld, 1996. 227 pages. \$18.99.

This volume is a somewhat odd assortment of essays on the resurrection of both Jesus and humankind, viewed from a very wide variety of perspectives. Even if one interprets the topic in general terms, the subject itself is perhaps the only common thread throughout. Themes vary extensively from exegesis and theology, to concerns regarding historicity, to existential interests, to a psychoanalytic feminist approach, to world religious implications!

Therefore, writing a single review is exceptionally difficult. Far too many critical facets would have to be addressed to do justice to each of the writer's conclusions. This reviewer will have to be satisfied to simply note the various directions of the individual chapters and offer a minimal number of reactions.

After an introduction by the editor that outlines the contents, John M.G. Barclay addresses the subject of the resurrection in current New Testament scholarship. Chapter 2, by Gareth Jones, discusses the subject from the angle of contemporary systematic theology.

The next three essays address the resurrection in generally historical terms. Atheist Michael Goulder attempts a psychological explanation for the appearances, as well as a critique of the empty tomb reports. Wolfhart Pannenberg concentrates on contemporary, a priori rejections of the resurrection and defends the empty tomb. Jürgen Moltmann, in a previously published essay, speaks roughly in historical terms, but pulls away from strong objective language.

Chapters 6 through 8 share the theme that historical concerns should be shunned in light of ecclesiastical interpretations. Viewing the resurrection in iconographic terms, Rowan Williams prefers existential issues to historical or dogmatic theological concerns. David McCarthy Matzko is interested in how the resurrection contributes to Christian sainthood. Gerard Loughlin rejects what he calls a scientific approach to the resurrection as too positivistic, preferring a narrative approach to the subject.

In a stand-alone sort of chapter, Tina Beattie writes about sexuality and the resurrection of the body. She moves widely through discussions of Freudian psychoanalysis, feminist theology, ancient goddess and fertility religions, in an effort to critique male-dominated theology.

The last four chapters are devoted to the place of the resurrection in inter-religious dialogue. Editor D'Costa argues that we will not finally understand the meaning of the resurrection until Christians have thoroughly encountered the other religions. David Marshall speculates on the relationship between Jesus' resurrection and the Qur'an. Dan Cohn-Sherbok contrasts the Christian and Jewish views of resurrection, while rejecting the historicity of the resurrection for scientific reasons, preferring a subjective psy-

chological explanation (hallucination?). Lastly, Rupert Gethin looks at Jesus' resurrection through the lense of Buddhism, concluding that Jesus would be viewed as a guru who probably avoided death, did not rise from the dead, and whose personal claims to deity would not make any sense.

To respond in a straightforward manner, most of the book was quite frustrating to read. The chief reason for this is that the volume does not appear to be very well organized, and for a variety of reasons. For example, the parameters for the entire enterprise are far from apparent. The project lacks a clear theme beyond the mere mention of the subject matter itself, taken in the widest sense. No conclusion unites the final effort.

Other editorial problems are also apparent. The wide variety of topics leaves one's head spinning. Some of them seem very much to have been forced for the sake of the breadth factor. What is the reason for an essay on feminist theology and why does one need the topic of the resurrection for an excuse to address this subject? Why not relate Jesus' resurrection to the concerns of other minorities? Or, since Jesus' resurrection is really absent in the Qur'an with the basis for the resurrection of the believer being obviously different in both traditions, then why spend half a chapter trying to discover common meanings in the Qur'an where they obviously don't exist?

This text seems like it is attempting to please everyone. Some of the authors are well known, others are not, while two are graduate students. Virtually none of the writers think that the resurrection should be approached in historical terms, giving one the impression that Pannenberg's almost token essay was included chiefly because of his influence on this subject. This reviewer fears that the fragmented sort of collection we see here may become a standard in the future, given a world where political correctness and anti-modernist tendencies of all sorts seem to be the order of the day in so many places.

Further, there is an apparent unevenness of scholarship throughout. Few of the essays present any standards for the assertions that are made, with authors seemingly talking "off the top of their heads," often without providing appropriate reasons. It seems that simply holding a position of authority allows one to go in almost any direction one pleases.

Examples are not difficult to locate, for they are far more common than we can mention in a brief review. Beattie boldly proclaims that, "The cross signifies the vengeance of the big, hard Phallus on the gentle and vulnerable God . . ." (142)! D'Costa opens his chapter by saying: "One might say that for St. John the Evangelist, the resurrection is Pentecost" (150), which then allows his entire theme that the Holy Spirit is present in the world religions. Gethin compares the plethora of Buddhist miracles to those in the Gospels without mentioning the extreme disparity in dates between the Buddhist documents and the time of their founder.

Strangely enough, all of these complaints does not preclude the presence of several noteworthy items. The return of naturalistic theories against the literal understanding of the resurrection is apparent not only from this text, but from several other recent volumes. Goulder's hallucination-delusion theory in Chapter 3 is the major example. But his assertions are greatly weakened by his reliance upon Humean-like comments that we are always to accept natural conclusions, and several unsubstantiated suppositions and factual assumptions. Especially problematic is his crucial lack of distinction between common delusions and the radicality of hallucinations, which he even admits. A move from the former to the latter appears increasingly common today, but is without any adequate bridge. In other words, just because people are sometimes deluded *when viewing existing objects*, it is a non sequitur to suppose that *groups* of people could just as easily witness appearances of a man *apart from any external stimuli*. But this move is crucial to Goulder's thesis.

Other, very brief naturalistic responses to the resurrection are also found in Cohn-Sherbok's hallucination-subjective experience position and Gethin's hint at a variety of possible Buddhist responses, with seeming preference for the swoon theory. Additionally, Gethin's comments about the more-or-less irrelevance of Christian historical claims is notable.

So we are left with a paradox here. A seemingly jumbled volume, seen from one perspective, still yields some significant material when referring to current trends in resurrection research.

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