

Recent Catholic Writing

on the Resurrection

(II) The Appearance Stories

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Having described the new approach to the empty tomb narratives (NEW BLACKFRIARS, July 1977), we must next investigate what some Catholic theologians now believe about the gospel narratives about appearances to the disciples of the resurrected Jesus. As before, we limit our enquiry to *The Common Catechism*, and to the recent books by Walter Kasper and Hans Küng.

Hans Küng in fact says almost nothing about the appearance narratives themselves. He behaves here like the most traditional scholastic theologian. He develops his view in opposition to that of the distinguished young Catholic exegete Rudolf Pesch, and indulges in a good deal of speculation about the metaphysics of the risen body. He leaves aside all detailed reference to the gospel texts.

As far as the speculation goes, Küng starts from the assumption that the Resurrection is “essentially a work of God on Jesus” (p. 349): that is to say, he is in no doubt that the Resurrection is something that happened to the crucified Jesus—it was not something that happened in the minds and hearts of the disciples. Küng cannot be accused of subjectivising Easter or of reducing it to any kind of human discovery or projection. Since the Resurrection is “an act of God within God’s dimensions”, Küng believes that it cannot be described as a historical event, as he says, “in the strict sense”:

“For the raising of Jesus is not a miracle violating the laws of nature, verifiable within the present world, nor a supernatural intervention which can be located in space and time. There was nothing to photograph or to record. What can be historically verified are the death of Jesus and after this the Easter faith and the Easter message of the disciples. But neither the raising itself nor the person raised can be apprehended, by historical methods” (p. 349).

Nobody supposes that the raising might have been photographed, but wouldn’t many Catholics disagree with Küng here and argue that the person raised might indeed have been photographed, had cameras existed then, on such occasions as the gospel accounts of the appearances of the risen Christ apparently describe?

The best test of visibility is being photographable. One who

could be seen (in the ordinary sense), who could be touched by the hand, and who could eat and drink, could surely have been photographed. Kūng is very insistent that the Easter appearances are manifestations of the already exalted Jesus (p. 353), and that what is meant by the raising of Jesus from the dead is not just the revival of a corpse (p. 358). The language is, as he says, metaphorical: to raise from the dead is represented on analogy with rousing from sleep. But the model can very easily distort our understanding of the uniqueness of the Resurrection:

“It is the very opposite of returning as from sleep to the previous state of things, to the former, earthly, mortal life. It is a radical transformation into a wholly different state, into another, new, unparalleled, definitive, immortal life: *totaliter aliter*, utterly different” (p. 350).

Again, there is no problem in Kūng’s saying that the reality of the Resurrection itself is “completely intangible and unimaginable”, since it is “something which is itself intangible and unimaginable and of which—as of God himself—we have no sort of direct knowledge”. If, or rather when, we find we must speak of it, “there is nothing left for it but to speak in paradoxes”. We are “at the extreme limit of the imaginable”. And he goes on to say that “that is what happens *in a way* in the gospel accounts of the appearances” (my italics). The gospel appearance narratives refer to the risen Christ in such paradoxes:

“not a phantom and yet not palpable, perceptible—imperceptible, visible—invisible, comprehensible—incomprehensible, material—immaterial, within and beyond space and time” (p. 351).

Or as Paul says: a spiritual body (I Cor 15:44).

This does not mean, Kūng hastens to add, that the person raised is “body” in the sense of the New Testament *soma*, “which corresponds much more closely to the modern integral conception of man and to the fundamental importance of his corporality”. Here Kūng recalls a personal conversation with Rudolf Bultmann: asked if the resurrection were *bodily*, he replied as follows:

“No, if ‘body’ simply means the physiologically identical body. Yes, if ‘body’ means in the sense of the New Testament *soma* the identical personal reality, the *same self* with its whole history” (p. 351).

There is no continuity of the *body*, in the sense that questions of natural science, such as that of the persistence of the molecules, do not arise; but there is an identity of the *person*. He nowhere refers to J.A.T. Robinson’s famous monograph on the New Testament concept of the body as *soma* (upon which certain anti-dualistic, “Christian-materialist” theological proposals have relied), but Bultmann as well as Robinson has received harsh treatment lately at the hands of the conservative-evangelical scholar R.H. Gundry, who goes back to the texts and insists that the word *soma* stands

always and only for the individual man in his purely physical aspect and thus that there is *no* non-dualistic anthropology in the New Testament.

As for Rudolf Pesch, he has argued that, against the background of Jewish traditions about the suffering of the just (Maccabees, Psalm 22) and about the translation into heaven of eschatological figures (Enoch, Elijah, Moses), the disciples might have interpreted the death of Jesus as martyrdom and concluded that he too had been “taken up”. Mark’s gospel, with its emphasis on the Passion (Psalm 22 is placed upon the dying Jesus’ lips), and its concluding with the disappearance of the body (assuming that *is* the conclusion), is adduced as evidence that suggests the existence of one such version of the multi-faceted Easter faith of the earliest communities. To be fair to Pesch, it should be said that even if the Easter faith was thus the product of theological reflection on the part of the disciples he ascribes a decisive role to the instruction of Jesus himself before his arrest, and regards the present status of the crucified Jesus, which the disciples would have worked out on their own, as a reality in God and not merely their story. This is clearly reminiscent of Don Cupitt’s line in his debate with C.F.D. Moule: faith in the Resurrection is the product of theological meditation, not of extraordinary experiences. Hans Küng has no objection to the idea that the disciples reflected on the death of Jesus in the light of the Jewish faith, but he completely rejects the view that they worked out for themselves that he had been raised. It is pure conjecture, even if the Markan Passion narrative shows traces of belonging to the category of the acts of the martyrs, as the Catholic exegete Detlev Dormeyer has argued. It neglects the emphasis in the New Testament on something absolutely new and unexpected. As Küng says, “there can be no doubt about the unanimous agreement of the New Testament writings that the disciples did not conclude from Jesus’ fate to his resurrection but in fact *experienced* after his death the living person himself” (p. 373).

He observes that the New Testament texts never suggest that the resurrection appearances “were in any way spectacular miracles which could have been watched with amazement by the general public” (p. 375). On the other hand, he has no hesitation in referring to “quite definite experiences”, “true encounters”, “occurrences”, and the like, completely ruling out any theological, psychological or subjectivist explanation. The disciples came to believe because the crucified Jesus manifested himself to them as Lord, and for no other reason. The Easter message is not the product of their faith.

How are we to think of these manifestations to the disciples of the crucified Jesus as their exalted Lord? Küng makes two points. In the first place these occurrences were clearly, and inevitably, understood in the light of Jewish traditions about how the Lord

had manifested himself to previous generations. While he was still a Pharisee, Paul of course knew about the resurrection faith as a claim although he did not accept it. His conversion occurred when the crucified Jesus made himself manifest to him as Lord (Gal 1:16, I Cor 9:1 and 15:8). Relying on the language of Old Testament appearances of the Lord, or of angels of the Lord, as he surely did, Paul was able to ascribe his own vocation to that kind of experience—and, furthermore, had apparently no hesitation in supposing that the appearances of the resurrected Jesus to the other apostles were of the same kind (I Cor 15:5-8). This is a crossroads in understanding the Resurrection. Küng's second point is that the appearances though they certainly made the resurrected Jesus manifest, were also vocation scenes.

To put it in a nutshell: what many Catholic theologians now do is to start from Paul's allusions to his own conversion as bound up with his "having seen Jesus our Lord" (I Cor 9:1), label this experience a "vocation vision" with Old Testament and other Jewish analogies and models, adduce Paul's confidence that what he underwent was the same as what happened to the other apostles (I Cor 15:8), and conclude from this that the descriptions in Matthew, Luke-Acts, and John, of resurrection appearances may, and even ought, to be read as (at most) palimpsests of the original Easter experiences. The crux here is, of course, the supposition that we have no better evidence than Paul's for what the first appearances were like. Writing from Ephesus to the church in Corinth about AD 54–55, the converted Pharisee Paul regarded what happened to him as similar to what happened to Simon Peter and to the Twelve, among others. It has always been difficult to understand how he could have done so if he had any knowledge of the appearance narratives with which Matthew, Luke and John conclude. To put it at its starkest: if Peter ever told Paul the kind of thing with which, on the face of it, these three gospels conclude, how could Paul have thought that he had had the same experience? Paul evidently met Peter in Jerusalem about the year 40 (Gal 1:18), and, as somebody once said, they must have talked of more important things than the weather. If they compared notes on how their faith in the Resurrection arose, it is hard to believe that Peter can have described his experiences in such terms as Luke and John present them. Paul may have misunderstood Peter, or he may, for some reason, have been left in ignorance of the massively physical, realistic appearances of the risen Christ such as Luke and John recount. The generally accepted view is that the accounts in Luke-Acts and John were handed down in oral tradition for however long it took until the gospels were composed—as soon as AD 70-90 on the more usual theory. It is more difficult than many think, though not impossible, to account for Paul's ignorance of the kind of occurrences which Luke and John re-

count. But that is a problem for those who regard them as reporting eye-witness accounts of events that took place in AD 33-35. The line adopted by many Catholic theologians now is that the resurrection narratives in Luke and John deal with the theological and ecclesiological problems current in AD 70-90 and provide no *direct* evidence of what happened to bring Peter and the others to faith in the Resurrection.

On the assumption that what happened to Peter and the others was a revelation of the resurrected Jesus as Lord together with a mandate to preach, a Christophany inseparable from a vocation scene, comparable with Paul's conversion though, what ever he thought, clearly not exactly the same (for he already knew of the Resurrection), the gospel resurrection narratives begin to allow interpretations somewhat different from those generally accepted until recently among Catholics.

Hans Kung, as we noted, offers little in the way of detailed reading of these texts. The experiences of the apostles were unique vocations (p. 379), granted to men of little or no faith who became believers as a result of what happened to them (p. 378), and we are always thrown back on their testimony, which "declares with the utmost clarity that the Crucified is not dead, but lives on and rules forever through and with God" (p. 379). But their testimony, upon which subsequent believers rely, is proclaimed, variously, in the New Testament as a whole. The Easter message is proclaimed in Mark's gospel *as a whole*, without any mention of resurrection appearances. The appearance narrative with which Matthew's gospel concludes, far from being a record of what happened in AD 33-35, may be taken rather as a way of ascribing the practice of the church in AD 75-90 to the continuing action and mandate of the risen Christ (p. 362). In Luke and John, on the other hand, in the closing decades of the century, there is apparently need—"probably for apologetic reasons"—to stress "the true corporality of the risen Jesus" and "the motif of overcoming doubt" (p. 362). But the most sympathetic reader must surely feel that, in a book that runs to over seven hundred pages, the page and a half which Hans Küng finally devotes to the gospel appearance stories is meagre, to say the least.

Walter Kasper covers much of the same ground. He holds that the resurrection accounts cannot be harmonised—there are too many "joins and supplementary glosses" for that (p. 129). Despite the irreconcilable discrepancies, however, all the traditions agree on one thing: Jesus appeared after his death to certain disciples:

"All the traditions circle round this core and this centre. But it is obviously a shifting centre, a core that is not identifiable simply and that cannot be held still" (p. 129).

That last phrase Kasper quotes from Hans Urs von Balthasar, the most impeccable of all the theologians who have moved in a dist-

inctly conservative direction since Vatican II. He proceeds to discuss fundamental hermeneutical decisions which are-- and have to be-- taken prior to our reading the resurrection narratives, or indeed any other texts. People will consider something historically true and real, he says, only if it is verifiable as a *fact*. The problem of the Resurrection has been treated as a problem of fact, by those who want to accept it as well as those who seek to discredit it. Kasper thinks that this places the problem in a false perspective:

“Easter is not a fact that one can adduce as evidence for faith; Easter is itself an object of faith. The Resurrection itself is not historically verifiable, but only the resurrection faith of the first witnesses and possibly the empty tomb” (p. 131).

The appearances of the risen Christ are described on the model of Old Testament theophanies (p. 137). Thus they are understood as revelatory occurrences in which those involved are faced with God himself. This is why the emphasis in the New Testament is overwhelmingly not on Christ’s rising from the dead but on his being raised and his being made manifest by God. For Kasper, that is to say, the appearances of the risen Christ are very much encounters with the living God. An appearance in this sense is of its nature “not immediate” (p. 137, though the German text says *unverfügbar*), and thus is determined by the “dialectic of representation”, i.e. the divine is always mediated. God reveals himself always precisely as the hidden God (Isaiah 45:15).

Thus Paul’s experience again becomes the paradigm. After analyzing the relevant texts briefly Walter Kasper sums up as follows:

“The crucified one is ‘seen’ in the glory of God, the glory of God is ‘seen’ as glorification of the crucified one. What dawns on the witness is God’s glory, his divinity, which shows itself precisely in that God identifies himself with the crucified one and wakens him from death to life” (p. 138).

An analysis of the appearances reported in the gospels leads to a similar result, Kasper says (p. 139).

“About what actually happened, that is to say, we can be no more specific than to say that the risen Lord was encountered (blessed word!) in greeting and blessing, in call, address and instruction, in consolation, mandate and mission, in founding new fellowship, and that the disciples reacted at first with shock, fear, non-recognition, doubt and disbelief (p. 139).

They had to be “overwhelmed” by the risen Lord, and this overwhelming into faith was followed by mission and mandate. The most magnificent description of this event Kasper finds in Matthew’s conclusion: “He is experienced only in the act of faith and worship” (p. 139).

As Kasper says, the difficulties for his kind of interpretation come home most notably in the texts in Luke and John where the risen Jesus is represented as eating with his disciples and as capable

of being touched by them physically. These texts “seem at first glance intolerably drastic statements which transgress what is theologically possible and are in danger of providing grounds for a crudely materialistic Easter faith” (p. 139—here, as elsewhere, I have modified the English translation). Here, however, according to Kasper, we have to ask what such statements meant when they were set down in the period AD 70-90. They were intended to stress the identity of the exalted Lord with the crucified Jesus, and to ward off a “biased spiritualism”. In the case of Luke-Acts, the assumption is thus that, in turning to the wider Roman world (“Most excellent Theophilus”, Luke 1:3), Luke has to deal with people who find a divine being easy enough to worship, but have difficulty in identifying him with a crucified man. It is, of course, simply a matter of opinion, finally undecidable, whether this was a greater problem in AD 70 than in AD 33-35. The choice of the later date for the composition of these narratives might be confirmed, perhaps, by Luke’s clear concern to get his audience to look less towards heaven and more towards the here and now (Acts 1:11). The freedom that Luke seems to show in composing the Ascension scene, and giving it a different slant each time that he describes it (Luke 24:50-53, Acts 1:9-11). may be cited as evidence that he might have exercised the same liberty in shaping his resurrection narratives to answer questions current at the time of writing.

The Fourth Gospel, of course, provides equally realistic appearances. The only comment that Walter Kasper makes on them is to say that “John noticed the misleading nature of his stylistic device” (p. 139)—*Stilmittel* in the German). That is why he concluded his chapter of resurrection appearance narratives with the saying: “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe” (John 20:29), which Kasper takes to be a hint to the reader not to take these appearances too literally. He goes on, in quite vigorous language, to insist that the first believers were not brought to faith by a miraculous event, as if they had been ‘knocked over’ and forced to their knees by extravagant miracles, *exorbitante Mirakel*. That would have led grotesquely to the conclusion that those who were the first to proclaim the Easter faith did not themselves have faith since they had been dispensed from faith by having seen. Our point of departure, so Kasper insists, must be that the resurrection appearances involved “a believing seeing”, *ein gläubiges Sehen* (thus not just “ordinary seeing”). They were experiences in faith—which does not mean that they were not “encounters with Christ present in the Spirit” (p. 139). As he says, “it was not faith that established the reality of the Resurrection, but on the contrary faith was grounded upon the reality of the risen One imposing itself upon the disciples in the Spirit”. The note on which Walter Kasper concludes is further insistence that, in the New Testament,

the encounter with the risen Lord is characterised as encounter with *God* and as experience of *God*. This is an emphasis which even those who would take a very different line from Kasper's on all these questions might readily accept: faith in the Resurrection is always, after all, faith in "Him who raised Jesus from the dead" (Romans 8:11, etc.).

This is a point stressed also by the authors of *The Common Catechism* (pp. 182-185). In addition to this, however, they offer a good deal more guidance on how the appearance narratives may be read than either Küng or Kasper, though always along the lines which we have described. The Easter appearance which "forms the impressive conclusion of Matthew's gospel" is admitted to be, as they say (p. 171), "in its present form", thus cautiously allowing that it may contain an element of tradition, "the composition of the evangelist Matthew, who uses this section to indicate once more the main purpose of his gospel". The bias of their reading is clearly towards the assumption that the scene was composed by Matthew, and that it is a depiction of the risen Christ as the exalted Son of man (cf. Daniel 7:14). They go on to say that it is "well known" (in German-speaking countries perhaps, certainly not among Catholics here) that Matthew's narrative presupposes the established practice of the early church with regard to baptism and the mission to the Gentiles. It is thus not necessary to treat the story as being an exact report of something that occurred in the period AD 33-35; it is much more likely that Matthew is presenting what had become common ecclesial practice by 85 or whenever as always the command and indeed the action of the risen Christ. As they say, "The ending of Matthew shows how the evangelist wanted us to see his whole purpose in writing his gospel, as the fulfilment of the last command of the risen Christ" (p. 173). But it is evident from the context that the *Catechism* theologians think that Matthew himself composed the kind of apocalyptic scene in which he imagined the command of the risen Christ being issued.

What about the last chapter of Luke's gospel? The *Catechism* theologians say first that "the reports of appearances presumably come from special traditions" (*scil.* which were unknown to Mark), but then go on to add that "the author of Luke has, however, so skilfully developed these special traditions that the whole section must be described as the working out of Luke's own theology of Easter" (p. 173). It is no surprise, then, to find references to Luke's tendency to "reification" (p. 175) and to his "materialistic" account (p. 185). The heavy emphasis on the material quality of the risen figure, so we are told, is meant to remove all doubt about his reality—for Luke's original readers: "The scene is not particularly convincing for modern readers, but people in the ancient world reacted differently, we must assume, or there would have

been no point in Luke's adding the detail", i.e. about how Jesus ate a piece of "roast fish" (*sic*). Thus *The Common Catechism* goes much further than either Küng or Kasper in suggesting that Catholic readers need not take the scenes described in the last chapter of Luke's gospel literally.

The discussion of the last chapter of the Fourth Gospel (John 20) is again much superior to anything in either Küng or Kasper, and follows the latter's line to even more radical conclusions. The famous *Noli me tangere*, "Do not hold me" (John 20:17), it is suggested here, may be directed against the tendency to reify the risen Christ which was detected in Luke (p. 177). That is to say, somewhat paradoxically, the purpose of the Mary Magdalene story would not be that the risen Jesus could be touched and handled but on the contrary that that kind of contact with him is inappropriate for the believer to desire. Similarly with the doubting Thomas story; wanting to touch the risen Christ before he will believe, Thomas actually makes his confession, "My Lord and my God", at the word alone of Jesus (John 20:27). These narratives could thus be read as meditations on the relationship to the risen Lord which the believer has, by faith and not by sight, composed to meet problems current about the year 90 or whenever. It is worth noting that the *Catechism* theologians refer with great respect to John's "theological and literary technique", which "moves with extreme delicacy and sureness along the edge of the unimaginable and inexpressible" (p. 178).

That just about sums it up. It is an essential presupposition of the kind of approach which we have outlined that the evangelists were more than simply chroniclers or even editors of traditional material, and far more than simple men from Galilee. Whoever they were, and their texts leave the question of their identity so mysterious that they obviously didn't care if anybody ever knew, they were quite as creative as Paul. That is surely becoming an acceptable opinion, even if it is far from unchallenged. But, as we have seen, Mark's gospel may be read as, in its way, a complete statement of the Easter faith of at least one line or generation in the early church—apparently without any appearance narratives at all. It evidently stirred Matthew to undertake a fairly drastic revision, incorporating a concluding affirmation of the church's mission as being the risen Christ's own mandate and action. The angel's Easter message at the sign of the empty tomb required supplementation by Matthew's church-legitimizing Christophany. For Luke, in different theological and ecclesial circumstances again, Mark, and perhaps Matthew too, required revision to bring out the continuity between the risen Lord and the crucified Jesus. For John, however, whose Easter message surely reaches its culmination in the word from the cross—"It is completed"—because that is where Jesus is at once "lifted up" on the cross and into the hands

of his Father (cf. John 3:14; 8:28; 12:32-34), the appearance narratives may be regarded as an appendix, emphasising that faith, not sight, is the only access any man has ever had to communion with Jesus, "the Christ, the Son of God" (John 20:31).

Pure conjecture? Yes, because the dating and the mutual relations (if any) of the New Testament writings are all matters of conjecture, and because we often cannot be certain how far Luke and John were handing on traditions intact and how far they were composing their material. It is pure conjecture that their resurrection narratives were composed in AD 70-90 to meet problems current then. The new approach that has become so widespread and so respectable among Catholics cannot be regarded as self-evident or incontestable. There is too much hypothesis in it for that. But then adherents of the hitherto generally accepted interpretation must admit that it is pure conjecture that the resurrection narratives were handed down in oral tradition.

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