



Cosmological Christology: Arthur Peacocke, John Polkinghorne and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin in Dialogue

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Abstract

Arthur Peacocke, a biochemist turned theologian, accepted Christ's personal resurrection but not his bodily resurrection from the grave. He argued from Paul's silence about the discovery of the empty tomb, from Christ's sharing fully in our human condition, and from the irreversible processes of nature. John Polkinghorne, a physicist turned theologian, has maintained that Paul's view of resurrection implies an empty tomb, that Christ's resurrection from the grave has revealed the transformed destiny of matter, and that, for good reasons, God can suspend and change the laws of nature. In Pierre Teilhard de Chardin's vision of an evolving world, Christ's resurrection from the grave released a new force of love and revealed the spiritual destiny of matter. With Polkinghorne he shared a hope for the transformation of the universe, a process initiated by the glorious raising of Jesus' crucified body.

Keywords

Empty tomb; incarnation; laws of nature; love, matter; resurrection; science

Some very interesting thinking about the resurrection of Christ in the light of modern science has come from theologians and scientists in dialogue: for instance, from those who contributed to *Resurrection: Theological and Scientific Assessments*.¹ In that joint volume eighteen scientists and theologians from both sides of the Atlantic explored the Christian concept of resurrection in the light of the findings and views of modern science.

¹ Ted Peters, Robert J. Russell and Michael Welker, eds. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2002).

One of them, John Polkinghorne (born 1930), worked for many years as an elementary particle physicist, and from 1968 to 1979 was Professor of Mathematical Physics at the University of Cambridge. He then resigned to train for the ministry as an Anglican priest, returned to Cambridge, and served as President of Queens' College (1988–96). He has published many books about science and religion, and in 2002 was awarded the Templeton Prize for Progress toward Research or Discoveries about Spiritual Realities. In some aspects the career of Polkinghorne was paralleled by that of another scientist, Arthur Peacocke (1924–2006), a biochemist who was ordained an Anglican priest and became the Director of the Ian Ramsey Centre for the Study of Science and Religion at the University of Oxford. He also won the Templeton Prize (in 2001).

These two scientists, who became priests and theologians, have published extensively on issues that concern science and religion. While agreeing on the possibility and need for fruitful dialogue between scientists, theologians and philosophers, they differ on some points, one of which I want to take up in this article: the resurrection of Jesus from the tomb. This is an issue where the thought of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881–1955) and his 'Hymn to Matter' seem especially relevant and where it seems worthwhile putting him into conversation with the two priest scientists and, in particular with Peacocke. But before doing that, let us see how Peacocke and Polkinghorne differ.

Peacocke on the Resurrection

As regards the fate of Jesus after his death and burial, Peacocke held that he rose *personally* from the dead, but not that he rose *bodily* from the tomb. Let me explain. Peacocke maintained that the crucified Christ's new, personal life beyond the grave did not, or did not necessarily, entail an empty tomb. Three reasons underpinned this position.

- (1) Peacocke was impressed by the fact that in a key piece of testimony from the New Testament (1 Cor 15: 3–8), St Paul quotes early Christian proclamation about Christ's death, burial, resurrection, and post-resurrection appearances but never mentions an empty tomb or *resurrection from the grave*. Peacocke believed that the personal resurrection of Jesus from the dead did not need to involve some physical or material continuity between the earthly and the risen body of Jesus. He remained agnostic about the issue of the empty tomb, and could cheerfully envisage the crucified body of Jesus decaying like any other body.

- (2) Then Peacocke insisted on the fact that our bodies decompose and ‘lose their identity as their atomic and molecular constituents begin to disperse through the earth and its atmosphere’. If the resurrection of Jesus ‘consisted of a transformation of his physical body’, there would be an ‘insuperable’ gulf between what happened to Jesus and what could happen to us. The ‘nature of his resurrection would be unique and irrelevant to what might happen to us’.²
- (3) Biological science joins forces with common experience in emphasizing, so Peacocke recalled, the ‘irreversibility of death’. In the post-mortem situation any reversal of the chemical processes of decay is ‘highly improbable’, even to ‘the point of appearing to be impossible as breaking the Second Law of Thermodynamics which formalizes such irreversibility in general in natural processes’. (These laws describe the general direction of change in the universe. According to the Second Law, in a closed system the energy will inevitably tend to become distributed in the most disordered pattern.³) What he called ‘the general bearing of science’ seemed to control what Peacocke was ready to imagine about what happened to Jesus’ body after death and burial.⁴

Against the positions taken by his fellow priest and scientist, Polkinghorne has marshalled his arguments. As regards (1), he points out that an argument from Paul’s silence is flimsy (like most arguments from silence) and, in any case, unconvincing on historical grounds: ‘it is hard to believe that a first-century Jew like Paul, conceiving of human beings as psychosomatic unities, could have held the conviction, that he unquestionably did, that Jesus was alive and yet also believed that his body still lay mouldering in the grave.’⁵

Polkinghorne’s case is sound but can be strengthened. Paul’s ‘silence’ is a larger question that concerns many important and historically reliable details of the whole Jesus event: the parables preached by Jesus, his miraculous activity, Jerusalem as the scene of his arrest and crucifixion, and so forth. If silence about the discovery of the empty tomb prompted Peacocke into rejecting *that* tradition, he should have done the same with the parables, and so on. Polkinghorne’s remark about first-century Jewish beliefs and hopes

² Arthur Peacocke, *Theology for a Scientific Age* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), pp. 279–88, 332.

³ One can express the Second Law in terms of ‘entropy’, which represents the degree of disorder or randomness of the constituents of any closed system. The entropy of an isolated system can only increase but will never decrease.

⁴ Peacocke, *Theology for a Scientific Age*, p. 281.

⁵ John Polkinghorne, *The God of Hope and the End of the World* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2002), p. 74.

may also be put more strongly. In first-century Judaism those who hoped for resurrection, despite all their differences about the nature of the risen body, never imagined or expected a personal resurrection that did not involve the bodies of those who had been buried. For such first-century Jews, no empty tomb meant no resurrection. Wolfhart Pannenberg rightly states that 'for Paul the empty tomb was a self-evident implication of what was said about the resurrection of Jesus.'⁶

Apropos of Peacocke's second argument against an empty tomb and the bodily (as opposed to a merely personal) resurrection of Jesus (2), Polkinghorne disagrees with the claim that Jesus must share our lot with regards to bodily corruption in the grave. Is there in fact a perfect parallel, so that what happens to us corresponds precisely to what happened to Christ? Must he have shared our fate and suffered bodily corruption in the grave? In fact, the empty tomb of Jesus, which involved his body being transformed into a new and glorious risen body, is highly relevant to us and to what will happen to us. It dramatically illustrates the destiny of matter. The matter of our future environment comes from 'the transformed matter of this world'. The new creation initiated by the resurrection of Jesus is 'the divine redemption of the old', its 'transformation' and not its 'abolition'. Thus Polkinghorne can insist that the created order in which we presently live is profoundly significant for us; we should interpret it as the raw material from which the new creation will come.⁷

Polkinghorne's hope is that the faithful Creator, who is not bound to maintain unchanged the laws of nature, will bring about a transformed material universe and our future resurrection bodies. (3) Here comes his third disagreement with Peacocke. Polkinghorne is comfortable with the notion of God, for good reasons and in appropriate circumstances (e.g. the death of the incarnate Son of God), suspending some laws, which after all depend from moment to moment on God for their continuing existence and operation. *Vis-à-vis* God, the universe is not a closed system. In the process of transforming the material universe, God began by raising Jesus from the tomb. In this resurrection his body was fundamentally transformed, and an identity-in-transformation was preserved between the earthly and the risen state of Jesus.⁸

⁶ Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2, trans. G. W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1994), p. 159.

⁷ John Polkinghorne, *The Faith of a Physicist: Reflections of a Bottom-up Thinker* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), pp. 163–70; see also id., 'Eschatology: Some Questions and Some Insights from Science', in John Polkinghorne and Michael Welker, eds., *The End of the World and the End of God: Science and Theology on Eschatology* (Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 2000), pp. 29–30.

⁸ Polkinghorne, *The God of Hope and the End of the World*, 74–76, 113–16.

Thus Polkinghorne endorses a robust hope in the destiny of matter, which differs from the view of Peacocke that offered a one-sidedly spiritual version of our human existence and future. Peacocke expressed the hope that the purposes of God may ‘finally achieve their fulfillment *beyond space and time* within the very being of God himself’.⁹ This future existence ‘beyond space and time’ will involve the Creator in bringing our ‘created personalness *out of materiality* into the divine life’.¹⁰ Peacocke seemed to fall back into a radical and final dualism. The matter of Christ’s crucified body was left behind, just as our matter and our material world will be left behind when finally we will be brought ‘out of materiality’ and ‘beyond space and time’ into ‘the very being of God’. As it was for Jesus, so it will be for us: we face a transition from the created, material order into ‘a state of unity with God’ and an existence in ‘an *entirely* new mode’ of being.¹¹

Teilhard’s Contribution

Having died at Easter 1955, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin was long gone before any differences between Peacocke and Polkinghorne surfaced over the destiny of human beings and their material world. Beyond question, with his vision of ‘the progressive spiritualization of Matter’, Teilhard would line up against those who support any dualism either here or hereafter. ‘Matter’, he maintained, ‘is the matrix of Spirit. Spirit is the higher state of Matter’.¹² He could sing a ‘Hymn to Matter’,¹³ when he contemplated the story of the unfolding and evolving cosmos, as it moves towards the Omega Point—through (in Teilhard’s language) cosmogenesis, biogenesis, noogenesis, and Christogenesis. Teilhard called the resurrection “Christ’s effective assumption of his function as the universal centre”.¹⁴ So far from the resurrection leaving behind Christ’s crucified body, it made that mate-

⁹ Arthur Peacocke, *Creation and the World of Science* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), p. 353; italics mine.

¹⁰ Peacocke, *Theology for a Scientific Age*, p. 344; italics mine.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 384; italics mine. In the ‘Supplementary Notes’ to the paperback reprint of *Creation and the World of Science* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), Peacocke showed that he remained ‘sceptical’ about ‘the *transformation* of this actual world’ held by ‘those who believe that, in the resurrection of Jesus, his actual physical body was transformed to a new regime or mode of existence based on the assumption that the accounts of the empty tomb are historical and have this implication’. He still did not see this position about the transformation of Jesus’ body to be ‘essential to the primitive, historical, apostolic affirmation and experience “he is risen”’ (p. 383); italics original.

¹² Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *Science and Christ*, trans. René Hague (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), pp. 27, 35.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 75–76.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 63–64.

rial body the proper and perfect vehicle of Spirit, and mediated God's creative power in bringing the world towards the final unification of matter and spirit.

Teilhard saw love as 'the most universal, the most tremendous and the most mysterious of the cosmic forces'.¹⁵ With Christ's resurrection from the dead, the energy of love was released in a qualitatively new way to organize the noosphere and move it towards the Omega Point. After 1930, Teilhard worked out a view of love as *the* most enormous and universal force in a world that is dynamically converging towards Christ, the unifying goal of everything. He saw the resurrection as the cosmic event in which Christ overcame matter's resistance to spiritual ascent, effectively assumed his function as the centre and focus of the created universe, and guaranteed the upward and forward development of everything that exists. As the 'Personal Heart of the Cosmos', the risen Christ inspires and releases the basic energy of love which progressively carries both humanity and the material universe towards the final goal.¹⁶

Back to the Empty Tomb

As we have seen above, Peacocke did not integrate the empty tomb into his understanding of Jesus' resurrection from the dead. Here his view resembled that of an older, fellow Anglican, Geoffrey Lampe, who insisted that Jesus' resurrection 'cannot be of a different order' from our resurrection. Through the incarnation, Christ entered fully into the human condition, which involves physical corruption after death. Hence his body must have decayed in the grave.¹⁷ Somewhat like Lampe, Peacocke 'deduced' from the incarnation¹⁸ (and what it entails about Christ's sharing the human condition) the conclusion: there cannot be an 'insuperable' gulf between what happened to Jesus in death and what will happen to us. Hence, albeit in less vigorous tones than Lampe, Peacocke envisaged Christ's crucified body decomposing in the tomb.

Yet an incarnation-oriented theology, which also characterized the thinking of Teilhard de Chardin,¹⁹ need not and indeed should not

¹⁵ Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *Human Energy*, trans. J. M. Cohen (London: Collins, 1969), p. 32.

¹⁶ See Christopher F. Mooney, *Teilhard de Chardin and the Mystery of Christ* (London: Collins, 1966), pp. 120, 135; and Robert Faricy, *All Things in Christ: Teilhard de Chardin's Spirituality* (London: Collins, 1981), pp. 13–31.

¹⁷ Geoffrey W. H. Lampe, *The Resurrection* (London: Mowbrays, 1966), pp. 59, 97, 99.

¹⁸ Peacocke dedicated a whole chapter to the incarnation as 'Divine Being Becoming Human' (*Theology in a Scientific Age*, pp. 290–311).

¹⁹ See Gerald O'Collins, *Jesus Risen: An Historical, Fundamental and Systematic Examination of Christ's Resurrection* (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), p. 192.

lead us to reject the empty tomb. Lampe and, in his own way, Peacocke formulated the doctrine this way: the Son of God has become *man*. My own formulation would reverse the emphasis: *the Son of God* has become man. While Lampe and Peacocke felt it to be imperative that Christ should fully share our fate, I would argue that his primary role is to save us human beings and summon us to that which lies beyond our powers. In other words, as we heard from Polkinghorne above, the full and final redemptive goal of the incarnation needs to be respected. This goal can throw light on the particular importance of the empty tomb and prevent us from misinterpreting the *whole* meaning of the incarnation as that of sharing (more or less) fully in the human condition as such.

Moreover, the fact that our corpses and that of Jesus have different destinies hardly undercuts the ‘fundamental solidarity that the doctrine of the incarnation upholds’. There are many items in ‘ordinary’ human existence which ‘Jesus did not experience firsthand: for example, feminine gender, blood siblings, marriage, parenthood, old age, and so on’. As Paul Gwynne has rightly pointed out, ‘the particularity of each person allows for such differences without compromising the fact that we are all part of the human story’. Yet, I think, Gwynne recognizes that these differences are all ‘normal’ variations, which do not demand any exceptions from the common laws of nature. Hence the principle of solidarity on which Lampe and Peacocke insisted remains insufficient *by itself* either to rule out (their view) or allow for (Polkinghorne, Gwynne, and myself) the emptiness of Jesus’ tomb. One should bring into play ‘the principle of his unique identity and role’, as I did in the previous paragraph. The principle of solidarity must be supplemented by the full doctrine of the incarnation—that of Christ differing from all other human beings in that he is a divine person who assumed a human nature and had the unique role of being the Saviour of the world.²⁰

Unfortunately Peacocke’s version of the resurrection edged towards an over-spiritualizing, almost Platonizing interpretation that expounded the resurrection as an escape from the world of matter. By dispensing with the empty tomb, he ended up holding a position that hardly looks distinguishable from the immortality of the soul, a survival of Jesus’ inner self which involves a total break with his old bodily existence to enjoy an immortality beyond the grave in another world. Jesus was and we ourselves will be, so Peacocke hopes, ‘brought out of materiality’ into the very being and life of God. For Polkinghorne (and Teilhard before him), however, God intends to transform human beings and their world, and has begun this work

²⁰ Paul Gwynne, ‘Why Some Still Doubt that Christ’s Body Was Raised’, in Dan Kendall and Stephen T. Davis, eds., *The Convergence of Theology* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2001), pp. 355–65, at p. 360.

of re-creation in favour of the crucified body of Jesus. God does not simply discard or leave behind the old creation, so as to substitute a new (non-material) creation for the original creation. With Christ's resurrection from the dead, a qualitatively new way of organizing the noosphere has broken through and carries both humanity and the material universe towards the future and final transformation.

To some extent, Peacocke shared with Polkinghorne and Teilhard a sacramental view of the material cosmos. Not only the Eucharist and the other sacraments but also the whole physical universe 'expresses' God and provides the means by which God brings to fruition the purpose of the created order.²¹ Deeper reflection on the sacramental system, the sacramental face of the material cosmos, and the intrinsic value of matter might have helped Peacocke join Polkinghorne and Teilhard in accepting a resurrection from the grave and glimpsing something of what the empty tomb of Jesus signifies sacramentally. Both the transformed body of Jesus and the transformation of matter in the sacraments point to the glorious destiny that awaits the whole material world and humanity itself. But to reflect sacramentally on the empty tomb of Jesus would be another story and another article.

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²¹ See Arthur Peacocke, *God and the New Biology* (Gloucester, Mass. Peter Smith, 1994), pp. 116–27.