

CHAPTER 1

General Resurrection of the Body

Our question about whether people might enjoy sex in heaven—that is, enjoy some sanctified experience of sexual desire and delight—presumes that risen life will be in a significant (though of course transformed) sense embodied. It presumes belief in what is technically known as the general resurrection of the body. To state the obvious, if you do not believe in bodily resurrection, then this query about sex in heaven makes no sense. Furthermore, if your resurrection hope is eviscerated—so “spiritualized,” as to be unrecognizable as hope in the bodily resurrection of the whole self—then the answer to the question of whether there might be sex in heaven would be “obviously not!”

To dive deeper into this conversation, I begin with a delineation of the notion of the general resurrection of the body and also briefly examine contemporary Christian views of death and the hereafter. In the second half of this chapter, I trace the roots of such dualistic ideas back to Christianity’s ambivalence about human embodiment. I argue that hope in the resurrection of the body is a faithful response to the truly ambiguous nature of our experience of embodiment. I detail the considerable theological support that such resurrection hope enjoys and

close the chapter with a brief word about the weak spots in speculations that deny sex in heaven.

THE NATURE OF BODILY RESURRECTION

Beliefs about bodily resurrection have been and are conceptualized in many and various ways. Nevertheless, there is a broad consensus among those that affirm the notion of bodily resurrection that it must express both continuity and discontinuity with embodiment as we know it here and now. Some accounts of bodily resurrection are distorted because they overemphasize the likelihood of discontinuity with life on earth as we know it. In such a framework new life cannot embody a gracious process of sanctification. From such a viewpoint, creation is annihilated. Other accounts of bodily resurrection are distorted because they stress too much of a continuity between this world and the next. At best, resurrection is merely a restoration of creation or a recapitulation of paradise, as the original blessing is imagined to have been. At worst, it is merely imagined to be the resuscitation of life as we know it. Neither of these perspectives adequately expresses Christian claims about glorification, if you believe in the resurrection of the body.

Like the body of the Risen Christ, the transfigured body must be recognizable in some sense as a personal, healed body. And yet, again like Christ's, this glorified body must be enhanced beyond recognition, even beyond our imagination! Such glorification differs dramatically from resuscitation. Though miraculously brought back to this life, Jesus's friend, Lazarus, was not resurrected to new life in this transfigured sense (John 11:1–43). Lazarus, like others who were resuscitated, would eventually die (again). Like the rest of the faithful departed, he too awaits the resurrection of the dead.

To believe in the general resurrection of the body is to believe that the embodied, historical identity of a faithful person is not destroyed by death. In some meaningful sense, recognizable individuals will be raised up and transformed into newly sanctified psychosomatic wholes. Why believe this? Why believe in the resurrection of the body? This will be discussed in

even greater detail in chapters 2 and 3, but here let me sketch some of the important theological and anthropological foundations for such a conviction.

Resurrection of the body makes sense once the body is recognized as central to who we are. People are embodied; we do not merely have or possess bodies. It is important to recognize that human beings are constituted by their bodies. Our embodiment differentiates and distinguishes us as individually unique, while it simultaneously unites us together in the human family and with the rest of creation. For these reasons, a truly personal notion of salvation must include the redemption and sanctification of our bodies in all their particularity. Because it is integral to personhood, the body must be integral to resurrection.

Additionally, it is embodiment—along with all the desires and feelings that spring from it—that makes possible all our social interactions, including our friendships and loves, only some of which are sexual. For this reason, though deeply personal, it follows that risen sanctified embodied persons will not have private, isolated experiences of God. Our corporeality connects us to the rest of creation. Hence, it follows that we enjoy the Presence of God in the company of all the angels and saints, indeed in the midst of all that is. Risen life is communal cosmic life.

For many Christians hope in the resurrection of the dead is joined with hope for the resurrection of the body, since we do not merely have bodies but rather are embodied people. If we are raised up, then we are raised as psychosomatic wholes. And because we are embodied, we are not only socially bound up with and raised in community with other people on earth, but we are so tied to all other creatures, to the earth, indeed to the cosmos in its entirety. As the Bible testifies, all that is—even the trees—will clap their hands in glory!

CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIAN VIEWS OF DEATH AND THE HEREAFTER

The vision of the general resurrection previously sketched indicates some of what it means to believe in the resurrection of

the body and the life of the world to come. Even among those who hold this to be true, there has never been unanimity about precisely how and/or when the faithful departed will experience this bodily resurrection. Today there are three primary conceptions of death and afterlife prevalent among Christians. Some believe people “sleep” between death and the Second Coming of Christ. Others believe that the souls of the dearly departed exist in an “intermediate state” between death and the fullness of risen life. Still others believe that at the very moment of death the faithful are brought—as if into another dimension—into the new creation. Let us consider each of these imaginative accounts of the hereafter in turn.

Peaceful Slumber in the Dust until Christ Comes Again

Some early Christians presumed that there would be only a brief interim between their individual deaths and the general resurrection that would accompany the Second Coming of Christ to earth. A number of scholars believe this was probably the shape resurrection hope took among the earliest Christians.¹ Because persons were understood to be psychosomatic wholes, what happened to the body was presumed to happen to the soul. So when the person died, both the body and soul died. The person disintegrated. When the faithful spoke of their beloved departed as simply “sleeping” or “resting” in the dust, this was just a polite, euphemistic way of saying that the person in his or her entirety had died. The dead simply “rest” in the dirt until the end of time, when with the return of Christ, the general resurrection will take place.

Even though they believed the Parousia to be imminent, we know from biblical testimony their faith wavered and doubts arose about the resurrection of the body. Consider the Christian community at Thessaloniki. Paul felt it necessary to encourage them not to grieve for their dearly departed, at least not like their neighbors who had no hope: “Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest of humankind, who have no hope” (1 Thessalonians 4:13). Paul assures them that at the

time of the Second Coming of Christ, “God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him” (1 Thessalonians 4:14b) and the faithful on earth will be swept up to meet them all. Like most among the first few generations of Christians, they expected the return of Christ—and with His return their own bodily resurrection into a world fully transformed into the Reign of God—to be imminent. Even so, Paul recognized that Christians must encourage one another in resurrection hope.

Contemporary Ash Wednesday liturgies still remind Christians: “Remember thou art dust and to dust thou shalt return.” And many today have experiences that resonate with the notion that the departed simply await bodily resurrection in the grave as Christ Himself did. Some who hold this view take solace in the fact that the dead await their awakening at the End Time to the glories of risen life peacefully unaware, even of their own death. Others find this to be a vision—however hopeful in the long run—that offers little immediate solace to those who mourn the bodily corruption of their loved ones.

Soul Abides in an Intermediate State

During the course of Christian history, considerable eschatological speculation turned on the question of whether something else—other than returning to dust while awaiting the Second Coming—might happen between the moment of death and the End Time at which the Reign of God would be fully realized. As the decades turned into centuries, the early hope for the imminent return of the Risen Christ began to wane. At first only the Christian hope for the imminent establishment of God’s Reign on earth faded. Eventually, however, especially as views of the nature of the person changed, some began to see the body and soul as divided by death.² Under Hellenistic influences, many came to believe that a person’s soul could “live on” after the body died. The notion that there could be such a division between body and spirit and the idea that the soul is immortal in this sense are Greek, not Jewish, in origin. Though the soul came to be viewed as immortal by some, the Christian hope in resurrection of the body remained important because

the body remained an essential component of the person. In her remarkable study of *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200–1336*, Caroline Walker Bynum concludes that the idea of bodily continuity after death showed remarkable persistence through the late Middle Ages.³

Eventually, the hope for the coming Reign of God became too distant to be of much comfort. As the centuries passed, for some Christians the hope for this new creation was forsaken altogether. Their hope shifted largely toward the vision of a purely spiritual home, where the souls of the faithful departed were thought at last to rest in peace eternally.

Not all Christians followed this path. Many rejected this trajectory away from hope in a general bodily resurrection of the body and a new creation. Because of a tendency of some versions of this perspective to supplant hope in a new heaven and new earth, accounts of this intermediate state are still contested. Why? As Wright so aptly puts the matter, salvation is not just about the future but concerns the present. It is about “what God does through as well as in and for us.”⁴ It is the “this world” focus of our future hope that enables us to be hopeful here and now. If risen life does not incorporate our bodies, does not include the transformation of all that is into a new heaven and new earth, then as St. Paul declared long ago ultimately our labor—what happens here and now on earth—doesn’t really matter much.

The idea that following death the soul could await with God the general resurrection of the body and final judgment associated with the Second Coming of Christ does not necessarily undercut the notion that ultimately a new heaven and new earth will be established. Much depends on how the idea that there is such an intermediate state is interpreted. Additionally, though some reject as unbiblical this notion of an interim or preliminary stage to resurrected life, others contend this idea has considerable biblical warrant.⁵ For example, the evangelist Luke depicts the Crucified Jesus as promising the so-called Good Thief, “Amen, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise” (Luke 23:43). Not surprisingly, this passage is frequently cited as evidence in debates among Christians about the existence of human souls in a heavenly realm prior to the

general resurrection. When coupled with the body/soul dualism that characterized some Greek philosophies, this viewpoint became popular among many Christians and acquired considerable weight in the tradition.⁶

Many Christians have lives of faith colored by a lively sense of the presence here and now not only of the Risen Christ but also of the Communion of Saints with whom as “through a glass darkly” they already pray and worship.⁷ For these believers (myself included) the promise of the resurrection of the body and the promise of our transfiguration in a new heaven and a new earth is not only that for which one personally hopes. It is a sense of communion of whose proleptic reality one may catch a glimpse through the grace of God.

Resurrection at the Moment of Death

More recently a third idea about death and the afterlife has emerged among some Christians. Many Protestants and Catholics alike have come to link resurrection of the body with the moment of individual death itself.⁸ In this view, death functions as a kind of passage into another dimension, into a radically transfigured, fully New Heaven and Earth. Clearly this conception of the Christian hope in resurrection aims to solve the problem of the utter coldness of the grave in which the faithful departed “rests.” But many object to this way of thinking. Opponents echo criticisms first raised by the deutero-Pauline author of Second Timothy: “Avoid profane, idle talk, for such people will become more and more godless, and their teaching will spread like gangrene. Among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus, who have deviated from the truth by saying that (the) resurrection has already taken place and are upsetting the faith of some” (2 Timothy 2:16–18). They argue that this notion threatens to eviscerate the concept of bodily resurrection.

Consider the reaction of then Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger—who later became Pope Benedict XVI—to this notion of resurrection. He argued that to suggest that “resurrection” happens immediately at the moment of our personal death actually “undermines the resurrection, because a resurrection which

concerns neither matter nor the concrete historical world is no resurrection at all.”⁹ This idea does not cohere with several other important theological considerations as well. For example, it conflicts with the contemporary understandings of the person operative at the Second Vatican Council: “The human person, though made of body and soul, is a unity.”¹⁰ Likewise, it is unclear how one’s personal relationship to the world could be fully integrated and healed prior to the completion of history and the transformation of the world.

In sum, the nature of risen life has been the subject of intense ongoing debate among Christians because what it means exactly to believe in the resurrection of the dead isn’t at all self-evident. But there is some agreement that belief in the resurrection of the body implies that the whole person, body and soul—albeit in a transformed, glorified state—is destined for new life. This vision of a new creation implies both discontinuity and continuity. It entails the belief both that life as we know it now will pass away and a belief in new life to come. Among contemporary Christians there are different views of when this will occur. As we have seen, some believe it happens: (1) when Christ comes again, (2) following an intermediate state, or (3) at the moment of death itself.

In the next five chapters I will examine in considerable detail the contours this debate took early in church history. What I want to underscore here is simply that there remain deep divisions among Christians today about exactly what it means to believe in the resurrection. As we shall see in the next section, some have come to deny altogether the bodily character of risen life.

SURVIVING DEATH AS A SPIRIT

Many Christians currently do not believe in a general bodily resurrection at all. In 2007 roughly 80 percent of the adult U.S. population self-identified as Christian, but only about 74 percent of those who identified as Christian believe in any sort of afterlife.¹¹ In her book *Heaven: Our Enduring Fascination with*

the Afterlife, Lisa Miller reported that a 1997 *Time/CNN* poll showed only 26 percent of the U.S. population believed they would have bodies in heaven.¹² It appears that many Christians believe that people do not really die. Instead they believe that in essence the person is a spirit and that in the afterlife the essence of the person exists independently of his or her body, not just for an interim or intermediate period but for eternity. From this perspective, people are just pilgrims on earth, “just passing through,” and the earth itself will be “left behind.” It follows that ultimately neither bodily life nor this material world matter much.

I contend in contrast that authentic Christian faith neither denies, nor does it bow before, the threat of personal obliteration posed by suffering and death. Christianity does not proclaim salvation from this world, from human community and relationships, or from embodiment. Instead Christian faith testifies to salvation from sin and death, promising healing and salvation in a new creation. Encounters with the Risen Christ invite believers to face their own deaths and the loss of their loved ones, with enduring hope for abundant life in a new heaven and new earth. Jesus himself names this hope as central to the work of redemption: “I came so that they might have life and have it more abundantly” (John 10:10b).

Neither scripture nor tradition can be easily interpreted as supportive of a purely spiritual notion of resurrection. Certainly, the scriptures are clear that only God should be considered immortal in this sense.

I charge (you) before God, who gives life to all things, and before Christ Jesus, who gave testimony under Pontius Pilate for the noble confession, to keep the commandment without stain or reproach until the appearance of our Lord Jesus Christ that the blessed and only ruler will make manifest at the proper time, the King of kings and Lord of lords, *who alone has immortality*, who dwells in unapproachable light, and whom no human being has seen or can see. To him be honor and eternal power. Amen. (1 Timothy 6:13–16; emphasis mine)

The very notion of a disembodied soul finds only minimal support in the New Testament. The few times the term “soul” is used in the scriptures, it connotes the whole person, not a disembodied spirit.

The same holds true for Christian tradition. It does not easily support the notion of a purely spiritual resurrection. Early Christian burial traditions were an important sign of belief in the resurrection of the body. Until relatively recently, cremation was not generally practiced by Christians. For example, cremation was expressly forbidden by the Roman Catholic Church until 1963 and remains officially discouraged in that denomination even now.¹³ Why? The reasons are largely symbolic and date back to ancient times. The church seeks to bear a public tangible witness to its convictions about the resurrection of the body through its teachings about burial practices.

In the ancient Mediterranean world, many first-century Greeks and Romans had no hope: “When you’re dead, you’re dead.” Period. End of story. One of their most common memorial inscriptions can be translated: “I was, I am not, I care not.” Even those among them who believed in some type of “afterlife” believed in the immortality only of the soul.¹⁴ So, they normally just cremated their dead. In contrast, early Christians insisted upon internment whenever possible. Indeed, the word “cemetery” comes from a Latin term that literally means “sleeping places,” because they wanted Christian gravesites to signify physically their resurrection faith. While Christians never questioned God’s power to raise bodily everyone, including those intentionally cremated, those burned as martyrs or burned by accident, they nevertheless found through burial a way “to practice” their distinctive Christian belief in the resurrection of the body. The church preferred the internment of intact corpses in part because inhumation was thought to bear a more effective witness to the Christian anticipation of the resurrection of the body.¹⁵

Any conception of afterlife that leaves the body behind is problematic.¹⁶ Christians must think carefully about the implications of their belief in the bodily resurrection of Christ. If the Reign of God was inaugurated in the Risen Christ, then salvation concerns whole human beings, not just souls. Indeed,

redemption is about the entire material cosmos. Along with many Christians I have concluded that resurrection faith is not compatible with the idea of the eternal “survival” of only the spiritual aspects (of only the soul or spirit) of a person, even if glorified. But while rejecting such a view of the hereafter, it is critical to grapple with why it appeals to people and to trace its deep roots in the mixed messages Christianity has sent across the ages about the body. To that task, let us now turn.

CHRISTIAN AMBIVALENCE ABOUT THE BODY

Let us examine the Christian ambivalence about the body and all its desires, sexual and otherwise, as well as its deep roots in the ambiguity of embodiment itself. An exploration of this ambiguity will prove foundational to the explication of the full meaning of the Christian hope in the resurrection of the body. I posit that hope in the resurrection of the body is the Christian “answer” to the questions posed by the ambiguities of the body. It is an alternative to the dualisms that suggest it is best to leave the body behind.

Christianity sends mixed, though not contradictory, messages to the world about the human body in general and human sexuality in particular, and not coincidentally, of course, about the entire material universe as well.¹⁷ Sometimes, Christians celebrate human embodiment, and even sexuality, as sacramental, that is, as a dimension of reality that enables God’s Presence and grace to be made tangibly manifest in the world. Such claims have deep roots in Christian understandings of creation and redemption. At other times, Christians denigrate the body, and sexuality, treating it with suspicion and loathing. Such claims have deep roots in Christian understandings of sin and “the Fall.” While it is important to highlight the tradition-specific theological roots of these beliefs, it is also important to illumine the way ambivalence about the body and sexuality coheres with the ordinary human experience of the ambiguity of sexuality and the body itself.

Despite this conflicted heritage, it can be said without question that Christianity celebrates the body as good.

Sanctification of the body, along with the sensual desires and the visceral emotions that stem from it, is expressed in a variety of ways. For example, Christians celebrate the goodness of beauty.¹⁸ Through the ages, especially in its Roman Catholic and Orthodox expressions, the church—while careful to avoid any idolatrous objectification of the Divine—has at the same time encouraged a vivid life of faith through religious icons, stained-glass windows, tapestries, paintings, vestments, and sculpture. One can find a celebration of the transcendent power of erotic love in icons of Mary’s parents, Joachim and Anna, and likewise in icons of St. Peter and St. Fevronia, a holy couple commonly regarded as the patrons of marriage and family life among Orthodox Christians. Many Christians facilitate the worship of God through the composition, performance, and appreciation of sacred music and dance as well. Through these arts the church invites everyone to savor creation in all its beauty.

In addition, the church sponsors a great many festivals in which the life of Jesus Christ and the feast days of Mary and the saints are joyfully celebrated with abundant food and drink, song and dance, as well as communal processions. Marriage is viewed as a sacrament—a means of grace wherein people may encounter God—by Orthodox and Roman Catholic Christians, and arguably at least as “sacramental” by many Protestant Christians.¹⁹

The Christian affirmation of the body also finds expression in various corporeal works of mercy. Traditionally seven in number, these practices recognize and address the bodily needs of persons. They include feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, clothing the naked, visiting the imprisoned, sheltering the homeless, caring for the sick, and burying the dead. Though these good works are commended to all the faithful, historically many Christian religious orders have devoted their apostolate to one or more, such as the care of the homeless, orphaned, and the sick. Many of these religious communities have built and staffed hospices for the dying. Even today the Catholic Worker Movement and the Salvation Army are renowned for the hospitality they offer to strangers, pilgrims, and drifters alike.

Despite grievous instances of abuse by church leaders across all the denominations, the church as an institution has long been committed to welcoming and nurturing children. Parents in desperate situations still choose to abandon their children near the entrances of cloisters, or on the steps of nearby churches, because Christians have been from the beginning, and still are, well known for the way they welcome and nurture girls and boys alike. Catholic and Protestant mission stations traditionally include medical, dental, and educational personnel, as well as evangelists. The New Testament makes it clear: from the very beginning of their ministry the apostles understood themselves to have been commissioned to preach, teach, and practice the corporeal works of mercy, especially healing the sick.²⁰

Christians are far from indifferent to bodily matters. From the earliest days of the church, faithfulness has included a call to offer one's body, as Paul proclaimed so well, "as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God, your spiritual worship" (Romans 12:1). The body alone can tangibly symbolize to the world this wholehearted response to God. Like Jesus who is reported to have proclaimed this before him (John 2: 21), Paul likened the body to a temple of God. He wrote to the Christians at Corinth: "The body, however, is . . . for the Lord, and the Lord is for the body; . . . Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? . . . Do you not know that your body is a temple of the holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own?" (1 Corinthians 6: 13, 15, 19). Reverence for the human body includes taking care of one's own physical needs, as well as being concerned about the bodily needs and sufferings of others.

Minimally, this entailed the prohibition of suicide, which was judged an offense against God, neighbor, and self. It also entails *prima facie* the obligation to care for one's physical health through proper exercise and diet, as well as through the pursuit of ordinary medical treatments like wellness check-ups.²¹ Such connections between faith and bodily self-care are part of Christian tradition and practice today. Though the casual observer might not notice the difference, for Christians,

honoring the body is part of how one honors God.²² Bodily self-care does not find a driving rationale only in the pursuit of exercised-induced release of endorphins or in concern for keeping up appearances. For many the bodily capacity to enjoy food, drink, sex, beauty, and exercise is celebrated as a gracious gift of God.²³

Perhaps no contemporary theologian gave clearer voice to the Christian view of the sacramental character of the world than the late Flemish Dominican Edward Schillebeeckx, O.P. His final message delivered in 2008 to his theological colleagues at Leuven is reported to have been: “Extra mundum nulla salus!” This translates: “There is no salvation outside the world.” Mary Catherine Hilkert, O.P., a master of his work, writes that Schillebeeckx “helped readers grasp the core sacramental insight disclosed by the Incarnation. The mystery of God is to be encountered in human life and creation.”²⁴

And yet, from the earliest days of the Jesus movement, disciples recognized the need to discipline the body and the affections that spring from it. The body and its emotions were recognized as a significant source of temptation, if not a primary locus of evil.²⁵ Paul noted in his letter to the church at Corinth that he struggled to train his body: “No, I drive my body and train it, for fear that, after having preached to others, I myself should be disqualified” (1 Corinthians 9:27). The point of such discipline is to restrain or strengthen one’s immediate, “spontaneous,” visceral responses (or lack thereof), so that the believer is inclined toward right action. Christians believe that the virtuous life is a consequence of gracious habits of the heart.

However pleasurable, gluttony, drunkenness, sloth, and lust are matters of serious sin for Christians because they incarnate vicious ways of “enjoying” bodily life. They are vices that hold the heart prisoner. They also deprive others of what they need. Vices take from and exploit others. The body and its desires are always about us, never just about me. Christians recognize that the reckless gratification of bodily desires can prove addictive to themselves and harmful to others. Thus, Christians have traditionally tried to develop virtuous responses to these bodily desires.

The Christian endorsement of bodily disciplines is not rooted in an idolatrous glorification of physical fitness, youth, or otherwise attractive “perfect” bodies. For Christians, fasting is not the same as going on a diet, at least not one undertaken for cosmetic purposes. The purpose of fasting is to (re)educate and properly nurture our bodily desires, so we might bear an incarnate witness to Christ. To fast is parallel to and has the same characteristics as prayer. Indeed, for Christians it is a non-verbal form of prayer.

Several biblical passages testify to the way our passions can lead us astray. And yet, when the entire Christian canon is taken seriously, faithful scriptural interpretation cannot support an overridingly negative view of the material world. Exhortations to bodily self-denial, even sacrifice, may be more frequent in Christian tradition than are declarations of the body’s gracious potential. But the latter are a vivid part of Christianity. The body is both celebrated as good and suspected as dangerous. So, where did this ambivalence about embodiment come from? Susan A. Ross in her fine book *Extravagant Affections: A Feminist Sacramental Theology*, argues convincingly that these mixed messages about the body can be traced back to the ambiguity of the body itself.²⁶

THE AMBIGUITY OF THE BODY AND RESURRECTION HOPE

Embodiment is the basis for all personal thought and action, as well as the foundation of our life together. The body facilitates our relationships with each other and energizes our individual connections with the world. Our interdependence with each other—for both survival and love—is the bodily basis of our vulnerability to each other. This same body that sustains us is also the gateway whereby we experience alienation, diminishment, disease, disintegration, death, and decay. This is why we may feel ambivalent about our bodily experiences.

One need not be Christian to recognize the truth in Jesus’s lament that quite often “the spirit is willing, but the flesh is

weak” (Matthew 26:41). Paul gives further voice to this experience of our divided state in his letter to the Romans: “But I see in my members another principle at war with the law of my mind, taking me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Miserable one that I am! Who will deliver me from this mortal body?” (Romans 7:23–24). Some exegetes speculate that Paul might have been referring here specifically to a personal difficulty he had either with an addiction, serious illness, impairment, or disability. We will never know exactly to what he was referring. Whatever it was, though, this experience typified for him the human condition. Our bodies can both empower and debilitate us. Sometimes we experience our bodies as noncompliant, to say the least!

The body can be more than a source of human vulnerability and risk. Our bodies can be a locus of human sin and of suffering. The point here is not to foster loathing for the body but rather to encourage our “facing into” the truth about its brokenness. The ambivalent language about the body within Christianity attests to the human experience of the body’s fundamental ambiguity. Earlier I noted that sometimes it seems like we simply *are* embodied. But it is important to add here that at other times it seems like we just *have* a body.

On the one hand, we often experience ourselves as a psychosomatic unity. It is a fact—and not one accidental to the heart of our existence—that we are corporeal creatures. This sense of wholeness, our psychosomatic unity, is evidenced in a variety of ways. It is evident in our language when we say, “I am hungry” instead of “my body is hungry.” The human capacity to make love through sexual activity expresses precisely this sort of personal, psychosomatic integrity. More negatively, we recognize in the threat death poses the risk that “I will die.” Our incarnate personal selves will dissolve. Or again, the fact that we recognize assault as a crime against persons, rather than merely their (bodily) property or possessions, reflects the profound degree to which we experience ourselves as embodied.²⁷

On the other hand, it sometimes seems more natural to say that we have a body rather than that we are embodied. Certain kinds of experiences—of illnesses, injuries, pain, and death—confirm our alienation from and discomfort with the

“otherness” of our body. Frequently, we do not identify with the syndromes that plague us. People resist (and perhaps rightly so) being reduced to the diseases they suffer. We say, “I have ocular histoplasmosis” or “I have a cold.”²⁸

We are connected to each other and to the world by our bodies.²⁹ Yet, the very embodiment that helps us to make these interpersonal connections is also, sometimes simultaneously, a source of our vulnerability to individual disintegration and interpersonal alienation. In other words, the body is the source of our capacity, power, and energy to negotiate the world, and it is frequently a source of our frailty, frustration, and fault. Visceral emotions—like rage, lust, and despair—can reverberate through the body, inclining us toward vicious choices. Other affections—like courage, hope, righteous anger, compassion, and joy—can reverberate through the body, inclining us toward virtuous choices. However limited, the human body is what enables us to connect with the world and people around us. Through the body we encounter not only goodness, beauty, and grace but also finitude and the mystery of evil. For this reason, when Christians testify to their resurrection hope—to the promise of personal, communal, and indeed cosmic salvation in Christ—I am arguing we must include a witness to the promised transformation of the body.

THEOLOGICAL SUPPORT FOR HOPE IN RESURRECTION OF THE BODY

Hope for human bodily resurrection not only offers a cogent response to the everyday experience of the ambiguity of bodily existence. It also coheres with many other, deeply traditional, theological tenets of Christian faith. An outline of the various convictions that frame the Christian hope in the resurrection of the body follows. Because there is a stark contrast between this well-supported theological anthropology and the view that the prospects for sex in heaven are dim, it is important to underscore the dramatic way this traditional speculation departs from its larger Christian framework.

The Christian hope for the sanctification of the body has roots not only in the admittedly ambiguous, anthropological realities of bodily existence but also in several convictions about God. Beliefs about the goodness of the Creator, the Incarnation of God, the bodily glorification of the Risen Christ, and the ongoing real Presence of Christ through the Spirit in the church constitute some of the theological foundations for Christian convictions about the sanctification of human embodiment.

Christian convictions about the goodness of the Creator ground Christian celebrations of the goodness of the created world. Christianity sees bodily life, like the universe and all therein, as a good and gracious gift. Delight in the life of the senses, along with the enjoyment of friendship, beauty, and good health, are all understood by Christians to be precious gifts from the Creator. It is important to understand that the “abundant life” already (but not yet fully) coming toward us from God is that risen life toward which God is drawing us. As Christopher Morse puts it, “heaven” is at hand but not in hand.³⁰

All are invited to enjoy life with gratitude and gladness.³¹ Many Christians see “nature” as being designed for perfection. Commenting on the “this-worldly” immanence of “heaven,” in her recent book *Heaven: Our Enduring Fascination with the Afterlife*, religion journalist Lisa Miller quotes J. D. Salinger’s comment from *Zooey* to Franny: “Jesus knew—*knew*—that we’re carrying the Kingdom of Heaven around with us, inside . . .”³²

Another important justification for celebrating the goodness of the physical world in general and human embodiment in particular is the Christian belief that in Jesus of Nazareth, God became incarnate and the Risen Christ through the Spirit continues to inhabit the world. Arguably the central tenet of the Christian faith, belief in the Incarnation of God is certainly among those convictions that distinguish Christianity from Judaism and Islam. As testified to in the New Testament: “And the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us, and we saw his glory, the glory as of the Father’s only Son, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). As Christians see it, when God

became human, the holiness of the universe, and all therein, was decisively revealed.

At some junctures the New Testament seems quite clear about this. Consider this passage from the letter to the Hebrews about Jesus.

Now since the children share in blood and flesh, he likewise shared in them, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and free those who through fear of death had been subject to slavery all their life. Surely he did not help angels but rather the descendants of Abraham; *therefore, he had to become like his brothers in every way*, that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest before God to expiate the sins of the people. Because he himself was tested through what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested. (Hebrews 2:14–18; emphasis mine)

However, the degree to which, and perhaps even whether, this promise incorporates the human body has been a matter of considerable controversy among Christians.³³ But as one early church father put it, “That which was not assumed is not healed; it is what is united to his divinity that is saved.”³⁴ Because of this unity of the divine and human natures in the incarnate person Jesus Christ, our world and our bodies will *not* be left behind. This doctrine conflicts with the idea that we are on a journey to a better “purely spiritual” place. On the contrary, God embraced all that is through the Incarnation and inaugurated a new creation in the Risen Christ.

Christians believe in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. We believe that the mortal, fully human historical person known as Jesus of Nazareth truly died. But He was not destroyed by death. Instead, in the Risen Christ, God established on earth a new creation. Though this ontologically new life in the Spirit will not be evidenced in its fullness until the end of time, it has been inaugurated already in the glorified body of the Risen Christ. The individual Christian’s hope for abundant life has

its foundation in their communion—here and now—with the Risen Christ, whose glorious resurrection is understood to be “the first fruit” of the life-giving Spirit of God. Hence the model for the general resurrection of all the saints is the Risen Christ.

It is the person’s relatedness to God through Christ that is the way into this new reality. But this connection to God is not understood to be private. Though deeply personal, our relationship to God is not solitary. As Christians we are baptized into Christ’s Body, the church, so salvation is basically communal in character. Resurrection is and will be both corporeal and corporate. The shared etiology of these terms is not accidental!

This is precisely the significance of belief in the *bodily* resurrection of Jesus Christ. Revealed in the bodily resurrection of Christ is our own transformed bodily future with one another in God. Indeed, Christians believe this cosmic ontological transformation was begun in the Risen Christ. Nothing in the doctrine of the Ascension of the Risen Christ negates or renders temporary the ongoing truth of this central confession. God is with us still; we have not been abandoned. Yet we await the establishment of this new creation in its fullness when Christ comes again.

Though ascended into heaven, the Risen Christ remains present to humanity and the world through the work of the Holy Spirit. It is difficult to identify a single Christian perspective on the nature of this gracious Presence. Indeed, it could well be argued that denominational divisions among Christians are rooted fundamentally in disagreements about the precise nature of Christ’s ongoing Presence in the world. However, most Christians believe that Christ is present as Word of God, whenever that Word is rightly preached. Many also believe Christ is really present in the church, indeed, wherever two or three gather to pray in Christ’s name. God continues to become human—to take on flesh—amid the People of God. Indeed, the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church is believed by many creedal Christians to be the Body of Christ. Some believe in the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist. Here God’s passionate and self-giving love is made tangible in the transformation into the Body and Blood of Christ of the bread, wine, and gathered community by and through the power of the Holy Spirit.