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Three perspectives on Resurrection: Revelation, Experience, Recognition

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Summary: The claim about the resurrection of Jesus Christ is marked by relative semiotic indeterminacy. The lack of an experiential reference for this claim means that we have to see it as the result of an abductive interpretation. Against a backdrop founded on a pragmatist semiotic theory that includes the analytical differentiation between contexts of discovery and contexts of justification, the claim about the resurrection is analyzed with reference to the categories revelation, experience, and recognition. Abduction is at work with regard to all of these categories. Among the consequences emerging from this approach is that there is no way to prove the fact of the resurrection: it remains an interpretation of signs.

Keywords: Semiotics, Abduction, Revelation, Recognition, Experience

Zusammenfassung: Die Behauptung der Auferstehung Jesu Christi ist durch relative semiotische Unbestimmtheit gekennzeichnet. Der Mangel an einer auf Erfahrung beruhenden Referenz für diese Behauptung impliziert, dass wir sie als Resultat einer abduktiven Interpretation verstehen müssen. Vor dem Hintergrund einer pragmatisch-semiotischen Theorie, welche die analytische Differenz zwischen Kontexten der Entdeckung und Kontexten der Begründung beinhaltet, wird die Behauptung der Auferstehung in Hinblick auf die Kategorien Offenbarung, Erfahrung und Erkenntnis analysiert. In all diesen Kategorien ist Abduktion präsent. Eine der Konsequenzen dieses Vorgehens bildet die Unmöglichkeit die Auferstehung zu beweisen: sie bleibt eine Interpretation von Zeichen.

Schlüsselwörter: Semiotik, Abduktion, Offenbarung, Erkenntnis, Erfahrung

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Introduction – Setting up the stage

Let me first make a note about the position from which I develop the following considerations: If something like the resurrection of Jesus happened at all, it happened in the world we share, and it was related to conditions and circumstances that are, in principle, accessible to all. Hence, I do not consider it fruitful to declare the resurrection as an eschatological event from the outset, in order to say that is in no way possible to interpret from other points of view than those inherent in Christian faith. This does not mean that Christian faith does not offer considerable and significant interpretative resources for understanding the topic, but it would be misleading to deny that this faith is an interpretation of what happened in this world and in relation to circumstances that are common to all of humanity. The *theological* warrant for this approach is twofold: First, it builds on an interpretation of the incarnation as a historical event that materialized itself in this world, and second, it follows from the fact that Christian faith offer resources for a specific mode of being in this world. It is not based exclusively on an inaccessible realm that can be declared as „eschatological”.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ is, despite the claim that it is something happening in the realm of the universal human history, among the most complicated topics a theologian can approach. In the following, I will argue that the main reason for this difficulty is what we can call *the relative semiotic indeterminacy* of the topic. Accordingly, we have to start with some reflections about this indeterminacy – as all other theological endeavors seem, in some way or another, to need a reference back to it.

In order to determine what something is, the common hermeneutical approach is to place it in a context that provides an assumingly adequate context of interpretation. But in the cluster of possible topics that we face when we speak about resurrection, the hermeneutical decisions about which context to relate to are in no way obvious. For what is this „something” that we are to determine, and in which context is it relevant to place it in order to develop adequate interpretations of it?

In the literature that deals with the resurrection, we can distinguish between three different elements that are in need of interpretation. They are interrelated, but they should, I argue, be analyzed separately first, for the sake of clarity. Only based on a consideration about each of them can we move forward to an assessment of what the claim that Jesus was resurrected from the dead means.

The first element is the claim contained in the statement „He is risen!”.

The second element is the reported experiences of the empty tomb.

The third element is the appearances that disciples (and others) had of Jesus after his death.

As for the first of these elements, it is possible, with N.T. Wright, to say that this claim would not have been possible unless we take the two other elements into consideration.¹ He speaks, accordingly, about this as one of the necessary conditions for the claim about Jesus resurrection.² In other words, the claim that Jesus is risen is framed within the context of other experiences: experiences of the empty tomb, and of the appearances of Jesus. There is a certain circularity here: those experiences give rise to the claim, and the claim provides an interpretation of why these experiences were possible in the first place.

There is, however, one thing we need to note right away, here: the statement „He is risen!” does not have a precise *experiential* reference – in fact, it does not have any experiential reference at all. No one has experienced the resurrection. Thus, the notion ‘resurrection’ is not referring to an experience in the same manner as are the two other elements that constitute the warrants for this claim. Accordingly, we can say that ‘resurrection’ is an interpretative category – it does not refer directly to a state of affairs, but is the result of other, observed (or observable) states of affairs.³ It appears as a possible interpretation of these experiences, but not as something that some have themselves experienced in a similar way to how they could, at least in principle, experience the empty tomb. The lack of an experiential reference here, therefore, means that we have to see the claim that Jesus is risen as the result of *an abductive interpretation*. It results from an inference that is not necessary (deductive), but also not inductive, since there are no obvious experientially based parallels (although there are potential parallels in the literature⁴). No one has had a direct experience of someone else being resurrected from the dead. We need to accept this as a basic fact, and one of the conditions for the relative semiotic indeterminacy of the claims we make about the resurrection.

This being said, however, there is nothing inferior in abductive reasoning: it is something we do all the time based on previous experiences. The challenge with regard to the resurrection, though, is that there are no previous and no later

1 See N.T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, Christian Origins and the Question of God; V. 3 (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2003).

2 Cf. *Ibid.*, 531f.

3 This is the only possible way to interpret in any meaningful way Bultmann’s statement that Jesus is risen „in the faith of the believers”.

4 The question about literary parallels will nevertheless not occupy me here, and accordingly, I make a decision already here about which context of interpretation is more relevant than others.

experiences accessible that allow us to make similar inferences, presupposing that this is something we already know something about, and therefore can fit into already existing frames of interpretation.

I want to stress from the outset that when we talk about the resurrection of Jesus, we enter a context in which abductive reasoning is the only possible one. However, abductive reasoning operates on two levels: it is displayed in the ways in which the biblical authors engage their interpretative resources in order to deal with the experiences of the empty tomb and the appearances of Jesus, and it operates in the decisions that we, as contemporary interpreters of the reports (and their inherent abductive reasoning) make when we try to make sense of these. In both cases, decisions are made, and in both cases, they operate against the backdrop of the interpreter's background beliefs. To pretend otherwise is to ignore that we are here faced with a hermeneutical task that implies far more than just asking „what happened” – it opens to questions about *why* something happened, the *conditions* for the reported events, and finally, about what it can mean today – if it means something at all.

In the following, I will approach the challenges here indicated by addressing three different topics that are involved in the stories about the resurrection from a theological perspective: the resurrection can be addressed from the perspectives of revelation, experience, and recognition. These three perspectives have both past and present dimensions, which can be elaborated by means of contemporary semiotics. Let us see where they can lead us.

The semiotic approach: abduction at work

The three elements we encountered initially are all the result of semiotic processes, i.e., processes where something is interpreted as a sign of something for someone. All of life is characterized by semiotic processes, and these processes are internal to what characterizes life. Such processes constitute, connect, transform, and engage signs in order to exchange information within and between different living beings. Humans are referred to such processes to interpret the experiences they have and orient themselves. Andrew Robinson summarizes his interpretation of Peirce's semiotic in along the following lines:

Peirce suggested that signs consist of a relation between three elements: a sign-vehicle (sometimes referred to as the *representamen*, or simply the sign), which stands for an object, and to which a response may be made by an interpretant. The sign (or at least the interpreted sign) is thus a triadic relation. The sign-vehicle does not signify anything in itself, but is able to signify something (an object) to the extent that its relation to the object is such that an interpreting entity or agent may make a purposeful response to the sign,

where the fulfilment of that purpose depends on a certain relation between the sign-vehicle and the object.⁵

It follows from this that a sign's significance (what it signifies) is not given. Hence, I spoke above already about the relative semiotic indeterminacy of the events that constitute the claim for the resurrection. A word itself does not contain any definite meaning, and moreover, the meaning it has (as a sign) can be quite different depending on its actual use. This is not very controversial. The meanings of words are established by means of conventions.

Conventions are established by participation in common semiotic practices, in which we agree about the use of signs. Often, the fact that there are already some established contexts for use and interpretation of signs makes it easier for us to engage signs. E.g., we use the sign „university” in many different contexts, although what constitutes a university is continuously under discussion. There are nevertheless some parallels or elements of family-resemblance that can make this easier for us.⁶ Or important here is nevertheless the fact that this points to the dynamic character of religion: the dynamics that characterize semiotic processes in general also pertains to religious activity. This dynamic element is also among the features that contribute to the relative semiotic indeterminacy already mentioned.

Peirce's triadic semiotics operates with a threefold system of 'categories', which he calls Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness, and which he sees as both irreducible and fundamental to understanding the process of semiosis.

The First is that whose being is simply in itself, not referring to anything nor lying behind anything. The Second is that which is what it is by force of something to which it is second. The Third is that which is what it is owing to things between which it mediates and which it brings into relation to each other.⁷

Peirce holds that Firstness can never be adequately grasped or described. It is only present and immediate, so as not to be second to a representation. On the other hand, the category of Secondness is one that involves otherness or differ-

5 Andrew Robinson, *God and the World of Signs : Trinity, Evolution, and the Metaphysical Semiotics of C.S. Peirce*, Philosophical Studies in Science and Religion, (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2010), 17f.

6 On the notion of family-resemblance, including some of its historical background before Wittgenstein's more extensive introduction of it in modern philosophy, see Hans Sluga, „Family Resemblance“, *Grazer Philosophische Studien* 71, no. 1 (2006).

7 Charles S. Peirce et al., *The Essential Peirce: Selected Philosophical Writings*, 2 vols. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 248.

ence, as it „is precisely that which cannot be without the first.” Here we can see the relevance of this analysis for the present topic immediately. Secondness „meets us in such facts as Another, Relation, Compulsion, Effect, Dependence, Independence, Negation, Occurrence, Reality, Result. A thing cannot be other, negative, or independent, without a first to or of which it shall be other, negative, or independent.” However, understanding such facts as facts, and thereby relating to them as expressions of Secondness, requires what Peirce calls Thirdness. This is the mediator who engages in the world as a world of signs and thereby orients herself by means of signs that can denote what kinds of Secondness are at hand. For him, Thirdness „comprises everything whose being consists in active power to establish connections between different objects.” Robinson goes so far as to say, „As such, Thirdness is the source of meaning and intelligibility in the universe.”⁸

Now, this means that mediation of meaning is an activity dependent on the human being’s relation to a world that she understands to be something specific. This is only possible if that which is Firstness is mediated as Secondness for someone (Thirdness). In other words, what presents itself to us as humans in the world is a world that is already mediated as something – as signs of something – and we cannot get behind or beyond these mediations in order to relate directly to that which Peirce articulates by his category of Firstness.

The abstract character of the above description notwithstanding, Peirce insists that all these categories are related to human experience, be it experiences of immediacy or mere presence (Firstness) or the „hard facts of reality” (Secondness). Robinson summarizes this point as follows: „while feeling is a manifestation of Firstness, and brute reaction is a manifestation of Secondness, intelligibility is a manifestation of the phenomenon of Thirdness.”⁹ It furthermore follows from his analysis that „the presence of one of the categories always carries with it the latent involvement of the others.”¹⁰ In other words, to register what is present or going on is not simply a question of thinking but may involve the full range of human capacities for relating to the world. We do it by making abductive inferences.

If we now consider the three elements that constitute the cluster that is the warrant for the Christian belief in the resurrection, it becomes clear that both the appearances and the observation of the empty tomb are instances of Secondness that requires an abduction in order to form a statement like „He is risen!”. What is

⁸ Robinson, *God and the World of Signs: Trinity, Evolution, and the Metaphysical Semiotics of C.S. Peirce*, 23.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 26.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 28.

more, this statement cannot be made unless there is someone for whom these elements appear as a warrant for that statement (Thirdness). In other words: the semiotic process that leads to the claim about the resurrection is not only based on inferences from the Secondness of the empty tomb or the appearances of Jesus after his death.

Now, let us have a look at how to understand these abductive inferences. Abductive processes are active in two different ways: in C.S. Peirce's work, it belonged to what theory of science calls the *context of discovery*; i.e., at the stage where we try to generate theories which may then later be assessed with regard to their validity in a context of justification.¹¹ To understand the process thus fits well with how we can see the disciples reacting to the elements observed: they were not so much concerned with developing a scientific theory that could be assessed later as with the attempt to form a hypothesis which could make sense of their experiences. If we understand the claim „He is risen!“ in this way, we see that it is the result of an abduction which has led to the hypothesis that is intended to make sense of what happens. We can do this quite independent of how we later try to assess the warrants for this hypothesis – which then would be to relate it to a *context of justification*.¹² When it comes to the assessment of the biblical material, though, the distinction here made proves itself as having more analytic value than being something that can help us to distinguish between different materials.¹³

We can immediately apply the distinction between the contexts of discovery and justification when we consider the initial experiences that are the warrants for the resurrection: In order to see the appearances of Jesus as experiences of him, and thereby also recognize him in a way that allowed them to use the notion *revelation*, the first-hand witnesses had to employ the accessible context of discovery they had at hand. However, as soon as one moves from an assessment of the experiences to an assessment of their witnesses, and the content they convey, and thereby to a third-person perspective, one moves increasingly towards a context of justification.

11 „Abduction is the process of forming explanatory hypotheses. It is the only logical operation which introduces any new idea“ (CP 5.172). Furthermore, abduction encompasses „all the operations by which theories and conceptions are engendered“ (CP 5.590) (Peirce, *Collected Papers*, here quoted from *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, „Abduction“).

12 The latter procedure is what N. T. Wright does when he discusses the sufficient and necessary conditions for the claim that Jesus is risen in part V of his extensive treatment of the topic. See Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*.

13 As I suggest below, even the biblical material seems to have both contexts in mind in the reports of what happened after Easter.

At this point it is important to point to the fact that the process taking place is not resulting out of thin air: we need to assume that the instance that Peirce calls „Thirdness” – the instance for whom the Secondness is interpreted as the result of resurrection – in principle have access to interpretative resources that allow for the development of the claim. However, again we need to point to the fact that the context that makes the interpretation possible is uncertain and under discussion. This complicates the matter significantly. Let me try to show what is at stake here by suggesting the decisions to be made, and by whom:

The disciples who observed the empty tomb or the appearances of Jesus had to find something in their own tradition and their cultural context that could help them develop this hypothesis. They have to employ a context of discovery.

The biblical authors then had to decide not only which of the above interpretations to report, but they also had to address other possible explanations (that someone stole the body, Matt 27,64) and more deliberate theological elaborations about what took place. They still employ a context of discovery, but the New Testament also shows increasing signs that the claim about the resurrection must be addressed also within a context of justification.

The present reader who is interested in the historical question must decide which of the above historical contexts to select or emphasize and not with regard to relevance: E.g., the instances of other dead people rising, and the visions of angels at the grave may be considered as literary additions, whereas other elements not. Similarly, the context of interpretation may differ: some will point to Roman legends of risen gods, others to Ezekiel’s visions of the valley of the dead, some may consider the appearances of Jesus as a parallel to what is often reported about such visions of the dead¹⁴, whereas others may dismiss these as irrelevant, etc. All of this may be part of decisions about the *context of justification* for the claim, and is predominantly considered thus, although some of these approaches may also point to different contexts of discovery.

Finally, *the present critical reader* may also discuss the validity of the abductive inference in a contemporary context of justification. Much of the modern discussion of the resurrection is located in this area. This reader cannot ignore the fact that in a contemporary context, it is hard to justify the claim „He is risen!” with reference to the present stand of scientific knowledge.¹⁵ She is then presented with different options:

¹⁴ Most strongly, this last point is developed in Dale C. Allison, *Resurrecting Jesus : The Earliest Christian Tradition and Its Interpreters* (New York ; London: T&T Clark, 2005).

¹⁵ This is also noted by Alkier et al., when they write that „Theories of accommodation, rationalism, and demythologizing posit different strategies for explaining the miraculous element of miracle stories. Nevertheless, they come together at this point – they agree with the scientific

- a) She can accept this as a case. Then the present stand of scientific inquiry is taken to be a valid context of justification that makes the inference from the empty tomb and the appearances to the claim invalid. This can be done without rejecting validity of the witnessed experiences of the empty tomb or the appearances as such. The abduction made by the disciples and the biblical authors are then dismissed. The consequence of this is either that one concludes that Christianity is wrong altogether, or one has to make some hermeneutical moves in order to make sense of these stories without maintaining their content as historically adequate. The latter is the position that forms a basic part of Bultmann's approach to the resurrection.
- b) She can adopt a strategy that counters the way in which the present context of scientific justification is set up and argue along lines that suggest that there is no scientifically valid argument for saying that such things cannot in principle happen. Then, the possibility for the validity of the claim „He is risen!“ is still maintained, but not necessarily justified. It is possible to read Pannenberg's position to be along such lines.
- c) She can also argue that the resurrection, given the accessible evidence, is the best explanation of what is reported in the New Testament and that the statement „He is risen!“ is in accordance with the best scholarly procedures we have for making a claim like this.¹⁶ N.T. Wright can be read along these lines.

In all the three latter cases, the contemporary critical reader has to decide in what ways it may still be possible to interpret the stories about the resurrection as

perspective regarding the possibility, or better, impossibility, of miracles. They do not, however, want to exclude them from the canon. They try instead to understand the miracle stories as theological messages that have to be decoded. The question, therefore, shifts from a scientific discussion to one of hermeneutics. The real issue for these interpreters becomes how one can understand miracle accounts as stories. Their goal is to produce readings of these (embarrassing) biblical narratives that can justifiably and simultaneously be held as true within the modern scientific and philosophical worldview, and as true for the Christian faith, which is based upon biblical texts. This hermeneutical conundrum is solved by appealing to a particular philosophical theory of history – the theory of development.” Stefan Alkier, *Miracles Revisited New Testament Miracle Stories and Their Concepts of Reality*, Studies of the Bible and Its Reception (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013).

16 Gerhard Schurz' view of abduction seems to support this strategy. According to him, „the crucial function of a pattern of abduction ... consists in its function as a search strategy which leads us, for a given kind of scenario, in a reasonable time to a most promising explanatory conjecture which is then subject to further test.” See G. Schurz, „Patterns of Abduction“, *An International Journal for Epistemology, Methodology and Philosophy of Science* 164, no. 2 (2008), 205.

theologically significant. This is not a given but depends on the complicated relationship that the individual theologian has to the tradition, her own community, and to her own background and skills.

So far, we see that the abductive processes that lie behind a theological approach to the resurrection display what I have called the relative semiotic indeterminacy. This indeterminacy is strengthened by three different elements: a) the assumed lack of parallels to this event, which may also include the sudden and unexpected experience for the disciples in the midst of bereavement and shock that makes it difficult to establish – immediately – a clear interpretative context for the experiences b) the multitude of material that can be used as the interpretative context in order to determine the significance of the instances of Secondness that is interpreted as evidence for the resurrection, and c) the variety of decisions that has to be made among these about what their significance is for an actual someone who interprets them (Thirdness). This indeterminacy has consequences for all three aspects of the resurrection that I consider in the following.

On revelation

In his analysis of the concept of revelation, Christoph Schwöbel presents the following line of reasoning, which I will try to reconstruct in accordance with the semiotics presented above, and apply to the understanding of the resurrection as revelation:

A discloses in situation B the content C for the recipient D with the result E.¹⁷

A theologically explicit version of this formal statement would be something like: „God reveals through the historical appearance of Jesus for humanity that God is love, with faith and love and as its result.” A decisive theological point in this statement is that it allows for seeing revelation as originating out of God’s initiative and action, and not emerging primarily from the minds of humans. Thus, it underscores a specific position with regard to the Firstness of revelation.

If we reconstruct Schwöbel’s line above in accordance with Peirce’s distinction between Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness as three interrelated, but

17 Christoph Schwöbel, *God : Action and Revelation*, Studies in Philosophical Theology (Kampen: Kok, 1992), 87.

nevertheless distinguishable elements that constitute human experience, and apply it to the resurrection, we get the following result:

The appearance of Jesus (Secondness) is understood by the disciples (Thirdness) as a manifestation of God as love (Firstness), with the consequence that their life changes (expressed in faith and love). Thus, the interpretation of Jesus as a revelation of God (inaccessible) is dependent upon the abductive process that sees him thus – and the controversies over Jesus as reported in the New Testament points to the relative openness of his appearance with regard to different interpretations (again: relative indeterminacy). Moreover, the fact that Jesus is experienced in this way has a pragmatic consequence: it changes the mode in which the disciples live in the world. This pragmatic consequence is an important feature of every abduction that has significance because significance can only be determined with regard to pragmatic effects – if there are none, the experiences do not matter.

Let us now move one step further and see how this has an impact on how to think about resurrection as revelation.

God (Firstness) reveals to the disciples (Thirdness) in their observations of the empty tomb and the appearances of Jesus after his death (Secondness) that Jesus has risen from the dead. Here, the two elements of Secondness are engaged in a semiotic process that is theological and not historical: they point to a state of affairs that is theologically significant, and not only a question about what happened from a historical point of view. Hence the judgment (abduction) here is primarily theological, and not historical. However, had there not been any historically identifiable elements of Secondness, there would have been warrants for neither the theological claim about revelation nor the historical claim about the resurrection. In this respect, the instances of Secondness are conditioning both historical and theological inferences, both of which must be seen as abductive and not necessary. Nevertheless, their interpretation of these instances had, as many have pointed to, profound effects on how they decided to live the rest of their lives, and for the community that they established and the mission they engaged in. Thus, there are reasons to assume that the disciples remained strongly convinced that these instances of Secondness were the result of God's initiative and action. Thus, the relative indeterminacy that I have pointed to seems to have been overcome quite rapidly for them. There are reasons to think that their convictions were further enhanced by the experiences they had with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and their ability to heal, as well as their increasing number of followers. All these instances of Secondness contribute further to the conviction that God had revealed Godself in the instances that were interpreted as God's revelation of Godself in the resurrection of Jesus.

Let us now, after having established an argument that draws on pragmatism for the reconstruction of the resurrection, briefly look at another, more phenom-

enological approach which also allows for seeing the close relationship between revelation and the resurrection. Jean-Luc Marion sees revelation as *a saturated phenomenon*. In this context, this is helpful because it allows us to address the potential multitude of abductions from another angle. A saturated phenomenon is richer than what can be conceptually articulated. It allows for several different and explorative ways of understanding the revelatory event in question. We can illustrate this by looking at how Marion interprets the elusiveness of Jesus at the end of the Emmaus story:

Marion sees the disappearance of Jesus as an indication that the issue is not, from now on, to see Jesus, but to *show him*, „to make it so that all receive the significations that allow them to see that which the intuition offers, without rendering it manifest again.”¹⁸ Furthermore, he claims that such a saturated phenomenon cannot be touched, nor even contemplated in this world, which does not have the space to contain the significations that could have been written.¹⁹ He does not develop this point further, but it underscores the previous point I have made about these instances of Secondness as phenomena that allow for a multitude of interpretations, and the disappearance of Jesus as something in some way allow for him to be an ungraspable instance of Firstness, and this, himself the origin of a revelation of who he is. This makes it possible to formulate a distinctively theological point: revelation is not conditioned by the subject’s decision about which context of (its) interpretation makes sense, but must instead be seen as that saturated phenomenon that opens up to engaging different such contexts.²⁰

Marion’s concern here is clearly theological. It may be underscored further by Rowan Williams’ dictum that „A theology of the risen Jesus will always be, to a greater or lesser degree, a negative theology, obliged to confess its conceptual and imaginative poverty – as is any theology which takes seriously the truth that God is not a determinate object in the world.”²¹ My own suggestion would be, accordingly, that the elusiveness of Jesus after the resurrection not only underscores his presence in the world as an unconditional event of revelation (First-

18 Jean-Luc Marion, „They Recognized Him; and He Became Invisible to Them“, *Modern Theology* 18, no. 2 (2002), 151. A critical discussion of Marion’s position here can be found in Shane Mackinlay, „Eyes Wide Shut: A Response to Jean-Luc Marion’s Account of the Journey to Emmaus“, *ibid.*, 20, no. 3 (2004).

19 Jean-Luc Marion, *ibid.*, 152, with reference to John 21:25.

20 This last point is inspired by the critique against MacKinlay’s reading of Marion suggested by Brian V. Johnstone, „The Resurrection in Phenomenology: Jean-Luc Marion on the ‘Saturated Phenomenon Par Excellence’“, *Pacifica* 28, no. 1 (2015), 30.

21 Rowan Williams, *Resurrection : Interpreting the Easter Gospel* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1984), 84.

ness) but even more, it suggests that the resurrection of Jesus cannot be conceptually grasped in definite terms. Nevertheless, the experiences that lead to the claim about his resurrection allows believers to be directed towards something which they realize cannot be fully present, but which nevertheless can be represented in the world: the community of Jesus with others who believe in the reality he represented. The presence of Jesus is represented – in its absence – by the community of believers who by this belief not only keep the memory of him present but also, by keeping this memory present, keep the future that his life and resurrection promised open to faith and future experience.²² Thus, the resurrection reveals not only God but a new mode of being in and relating to the world.

On resurrection and experience

If there is in all semiotic activity an element of Firstness that is only graspable through its manifestations in Secondness, this means that there is also inherent in all experience an element of transcendence – something that goes beyond the manifestations that are interpreted as something by someone. It is important to note that this transcendent dimension is not necessarily qualified as religious, but it means that there are common reasons for arguing that transcendence is inherent in human experience – and not something that is presupposed only by religiously inclined persons.

In the following, I will suggest some lines that allow us to see revelation and religious experience as mutually dependent on each other: there can be no religious experience without revelation, and no revelation without the experiential context in which it is appropriated. This has profound consequences for the understanding of revelation.

From a phenomenological point of view, experience in a qualified sense must first of all be seen in relation to a *before* and an *after*, i.e., as something that takes place in *time*. Thus, experience comes in between, as an event that makes the subject aware of what was before but now has changed. In this sense, experience also makes us aware of the experienced in a way not recognized previously. Thus, experience is not only aware of what happens or is going on – but this awareness also implies an awareness of *oneself* as changed by what is going on, compared to what was the case previous to the experience in question. In this sense, experi-

²² This is not so only for present believers, but for the first ones as well. As R. Williams points to, „The preaching of Jesus crucified and raised occurs in a specific human context in which Jesus and his death are available in the public memory. This man and his way of living and dying, this man rather than any other, is exalted, approved and vindicated.” Ibid.. 20.

ence is also a negation of what was expected because taken for granted; it is the arrival of something new that transforms the consciousness of the one who experiences. Accordingly, experience implies the transformation of self-awareness and consciousness.²³

Gadamer²⁴ underscores how the *hermeneutical experience*, an, i.e., experience that makes us see something in a different light, and thereby is a manifestation of change, is always an experience that expands and adds to, the world as it hitherto has appeared. Experience is thus to be changed by this very meeting in such a way that nothing is quite like it was before. Such experience interrupts, destabilizes and changes the point of departure from which something was previously understood. To be an experienced person is accordingly not only to have had experiences, but also to be open to new experience that may continue to change and develop our expectations of the world.²⁵

In this manner, there are features in what Gadamer calls experience that has similarities with and may even be said to overlap with revelation partly: revelation is not information, but a specific mode in which God makes Godself known to us – in unexpected, surprising and uncontrolled ways. The event that we call resurrection is no exception in this regard: Resurrection as revelation disrupts already established modes of being in the world, ways of being self-conscious, as well as the ways things are experienced. Revelation can thus be seen as closely related to the empirical world, but not based on our anticipations about it as there is nothing in our minds that previously determines how we hitherto have understood and related to that which is experienced.²⁶ As should be clear from the above, this interpretation of revelatory experience makes it also possible to see it as an indication of God's transcendence (Firstness) in the midst of experience (Secondness).

Furthermore, hermeneutical experience thereby implies that we are confronted with the preliminary character of our concepts and our expectations. We

23 Cf. James Risser, *Hermeneutics and the Voice of the Other : Re-Reading Gadamer's Philosophical Hermeneutics*, Suny Series in Contemporary Continental Philosophy (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 89. According to this description, as well as what follows, it would be hard to say that God has experiences in the same way as humans do. Experience is a profoundly human mode of being, shaped and conditioned by finitude and time.

24 Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd, rev. ed., Stagbooks (London: Sheed & Ward, 1989). See esp. 340ff.

25 Gadamer, *ibid.* 355.

26 Cf. for further on the interruptive element with relation to experience L. Boeve, „Theology and the Interruption of Experience” in L. Boeve, Y. De Maeseneer, and S. Van den Bossche, *Religious Experience and Contemporary Theological Epistemology*, Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium (Leuven ; Dudley, MA: Peeters, 2005), esp. 33ff.

are faced with the finitude of our own mode of being in the world when we make experiences. Exactly in the experience of how the world represents an infinite array of possible options for experience, we also are confronted with our own finitude.²⁷ We become aware of this finitude, however, when we are pointed beyond the limitations it implies. This is highly relevant for how we understand the claim about the resurrection as rooted in experience:

There are two possible ways to deal with finitude: one way is to absolutize it and say that there is nothing more to our experience than what is already contained in what we have experienced so far. This is a way of relating to oneself and the world which closes oneself off from the genuine meeting with the other, from possibilities for developing oneself further, and from the opportunity to have new experiences.²⁸ It manifests a type of (scientific) dogmatism. It has severe consequences for how we understand both God and the human self because it does not provide us with a genuine notion of an open future. The alternative is more promising: We become open to the infinite that is „surrounding” and conditioning finite experience by adopting an open approach to the world and to possible experiences. This can be experienced in such a manner that genuine experience of the world in its richness and diversity can occur because of reckoning with the possibility of being corrected or changed by the meeting with the other – with that which we have not so far experienced. Risser summarizes this in a manner that I think may also be relevant for the revelatory component in genuine experience:

The openness to experience itself is an openness to what is alien and other. It is to face what refuses my framework. Thus, Gadamer concludes: „The hermeneu-

²⁷ As Risser says, with reference to Gadamer's *Truth and Method* (357): „What we learn is the uncertainty of all predictions and the folly of attempting to master the future Experience is the experience of human finitude, and ‘genuine [eigentliche] experience is that whereby the human becomes aware of its finitude.’” Risser, *Hermeneutics and the Voice of the Other : Re-Reading Gadamer's Philosophical Hermeneutics*, 91.

²⁸ Cf. Jan-Olav Henriksen, *Finitude and Theological Anthropology : An Interdisciplinary Exploration into Theological Dimensions of Finitude* (Leuven: Peeters, 2011), *passim*. Cf. also Pannenberg's more theological point here, regarding finitude: „Nor is the finitude of theological knowledge grounded only in the limitation of information about an object which the whole tradition information knows to be infinite, or in the limitation of what can be done with this information. It is grounded especially in the time-bound nature of the knowledge. According to the witness of the Bible the deity of God will be definitively and unquestionably manifested only at the end of all time and history. At every point in time it is a fact that what is lasting and reliable, and in this sense true, comes to light only in the future.” Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology* (Edinburgh: Clark, 1991), Vol. 1, 54.

tical consciousness culminates not in methodological sureness of itself, but in the same readiness for experience that distinguishes the experienced individual from the individual captivated by dogma. As we can now say more exactly in terms of the concept of experience, this readiness is what distinguishes historically effected consciousness.²⁹

Gadamer's understanding of hermeneutical experience (understanding) has, accordingly, consequences for how experiences are perceived as revelatory: they may not be seen as necessarily belonging to a specific mode of knowledge that is without connection to the ordinary features of human life and understanding. To the contrary; if theology says something about the new, about the event,³⁰ about that which was not anticipated or expected (cf. 1 Cor 2,9), it is describing something that not only relates to how God may appear or become manifest in the world but is about a feature of the human experience of the world.

Experience in this sense is then conditioned by a mode of relating to the world that is open to being corrected by and changed by the other. Hermeneutical experience (or revelatory experience, for that matter) does not consume that which is experienced but allows the one who experiences instead to have his or her world expanded and opened up to something new that was not there previously in the same manner, nor could be anticipated or fully controlled by the expectations in our already established relation to the world. That would mean only one more instance of experience of the *same* and exclude the possibility of revelation.

If we try to capture what has just been said in light of the previous theoretical considerations, we can say that it belongs to being open to new experiences that one can develop new abductions based on other contexts of interpretation than those which one had access to beforehand. Thus, to accept the relative indeterminacy of how one understands the features of the world is, simultaneously, to be open to experiencing the new, and it may also include (but need not, of course) the possibility that God can reveal Godself.

On recognition

There are several instances in the stories about visions of Jesus after the resurrection that suggests that there is an issue with regard to recognizing him. There are

²⁹ Risser, 94, with reference to *Truth and Method*, 362.

³⁰ I am here only alluding briefly to contemporary works on theologies of *event*, as in Caputo, Badiou and others.

different ways to understand this, among perhaps one of the most obvious is that there is simply no expectations of this to happen, or no framework accessible for those who had these experiences to interpret whom they saw as Jesus.

One way to approach this is Jean-Luc Marion's claim that the reason for the lack of recognition is due to their lack of *imagination*: in his interpretation of the disciples on their way to Emmaus, he says that they cannot even imagine that it is him.³¹ All their preconceptions and ways of understanding what has happened are saturated with the conception of the impossibility of the resurrection and imply that they „see” the resurrection as exactly that: as the impossible. Hence, the story is about *the lack of recognition*. Or, as Marion says aptly: the events „leave them petrified within a matrix of irrefutable prejudices,” placed in a situation in which they are given intuitions which their concepts are unable to catch.³²

Marion uses the notion of intuition here, and with good reasons: intuitions are *given us* and are, as he says, phenomena of excess or surplus, i.e., they contain more than can be contained in concepts, and they are also passively constituted, and not originating out of our minds active constitution of conceptually based understanding, which would then condition recognition. Marion consequently argues that the lack of recognition is due to lack of concepts by which they can make sense of the intuitions. There is no lack in *revelation*, but only in the travelers' ability to deal with the intuitions that the revelation gives rise to. In line with the reasoning already presented, we can say that they lack a definite interpretative context for what happens to them. In this way, Marion safeguards the reality of the revelation and the phenomenon of the resurrected, but he is at the same time offering an account of how the story that Luke tells finds a solution to the tension between concept and intuition: It is given with the teaching of Christ, which gradually – by means of the scriptures – allows for a different reading of the reality in which they find themselves – or, with my words – establishes a more definite context of interpretation and stabilizes the semiotic framework. Thus, Christ himself offers the interpretative framework that allows for an abduction that can provide them with the means for recognition. „By allowing themselves to be thought by Christ, they finally experience that the concept, at last, matches the intuition”, writes Marion.³³ By being open to receive this teaching, he continues,

31 Marion, „They Recognized Him; and He Became Invisible to Them“, 147.

32 Ibid.

33 Ibid. 150.

they ask to receive his *logos*, his interpretation of what has happened in the intuition and which they have nevertheless neither seen, nor caught, nor understood. They, at last, ask him *his* meaning, *his* concept, *his* interpretation of the public, yet unintelligible to spectators, intuition of Easter.³⁴

Marion is saying something here of great importance, not only for the interpretation of the story in Luke but even more so concerning the conditions of resurrection faith: This faith cannot be the result of any deduction based in present conceptions but must – as the event itself – be conceived as a gift. As Marion construes what takes place among the disciples on the way to Emmaus, all that happens in order to change their perspective is a gift: They are *given* the intuition with which they cannot cope, they are *given* by Christ the concept which finally makes them realize the significance of the events and recognize Jesus; he becomes visible to them by including them in a meal that manifests community, and where he (again) shares the gifts of God with them. Moreover, this gift allows them to see their place in the world differently, and to orient themselves anew. Thus, the gift is one of both orientation and transformation. This means that the capability to understand the resurrection as resurrection must be given and thus revealed in a hermeneutical experience which involved being transformed. And as said already, the semiotic indeterminacy is overcome simultaneously by the teachings of Jesus.

Marion points to how difficult it is to establish some kind of objective status that allows for the resurrection to appear – and even more to appear as an event in the history of God with God's people – which is the interpretative framework that makes sense of it all. The interpretation of the scriptures that Jesus reportedly offers in order to explain what has happened is only one among many possible approaches to the event. It is, however, the only one that has proved solid enough to persist through history – at least among those understandings of this event that did not render it impossible in the sense of *rejectable*. In this sense, the recognition that Jesus opens up to is also a recognition of what is at stake in this history.

Returning then to the initial point about what faith can contribute in terms of understanding the events of resurrection, from Marion's point of view it becomes clear that resurrection can *only* be understood from the point of view of faith. Abductive reasoning is the mode of faith. This does not mean that resurrection cannot take place outside of faith, but it means that resurrection as a phenomenon cannot appear as a phenomenon without faith. Faith is what makes us *see* what is at stake:

³⁴ Ibid.

What we lack in order to believe is quite simply one with what we lack in order to see. Faith does not compensate, either here or anywhere else, for a defect of visibility: on the contrary, it allows reception of the intelligence of the phenomenon and the strength to bear the glare of its brilliance. Faith does not manage the deficit of evidence — it alone renders the gaze apt to see the excess of the pre-eminent saturated phenomenon, the Revelation.³⁵

The problem that emerges from this way of understanding the phenomenological conditions for understanding the resurrection is linked to the fact that this can be read as if faith is requisite for the content of faith. However, at this point, I think we are well served by considering how the very language that we share also allows us to shape perspectives and points of orientation that indicate different possibilities of understanding. Despite the fact that you need a specific faith in order to understand the resurrection as resurrection, you can nevertheless contemplate that possibility already by listening to and being provided with, a particular understanding that someone else shares with you and offers you. By entertaining such a possibility, you either can come to the conclusion that you understand the resurrection as a resurrection, or you can conclude that there is something here that you are not able to see as significant, or that it is something that you do not see as a phenomenon altogether. But when you believe, you believe in something that is there, something that is not constituted by your concepts but *given to you in intuitions and concepts, as a gift, an event presenting itself*. Thus, recognition of the resurrected is a recognition of a gift.

Conclusion

The attentive reader will have noticed that I have not approached the topic here simply from the point of view of „can this happen or not?“. The reason for this is obvious: it is only experience that can tell us what can happen and not – and given the abductive character of all experience, to offer a „yes“ or a „no“ to the question about the resurrection is probably more about stating your background beliefs and their implications than it is about stating a final answer to that question. The jury is still out. Cases can be made for both, but under the circumstances, I have tried to lay out, a final decision on these matters remains to

³⁵ Ibid. 150. For a different, but still in many ways parallel account of the same, cf. Coakley, Sarah, „Not with the eye only‘: The Resurrection, epistemology and gender“, in Sarah Coakley, *Powers and Submissions : Spirituality, Philosophy and Gender*, Challenges in Contemporary Theology (Oxford, UK; Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 2002). 130–152. Coakley also points to how the language of the resurrection destabilizes and subverts common forms of understanding the world and opens up to a whole new way of ‘picturing’ the world.

be seen – as it should be, as long as the reality in which we live, continues to present us with a multitude of possible contexts of interpretation.

However, from a more distanced perspective, this reflection also points to a specific pragmatic implication of the conception of the resurrection of Jesus Christ: this story allows for us to consider history as still open, something still yet to come, something still to ponder and reflect on. Because this is done within a context where Christians believe that God is at work, the resurrection points to the open reality where God is continuously creating new things, building on the past (as contained in experience) but also opening up to things that liberate us from the bonds to the past (thereby making new experience possible).

The main challenge of the claims about the resurrection is linked to how this event is seen as something unparalleled.³⁶ To see it as parallel to other phenomena we may know, like grave robbery and visions of the dead, may contribute to providing us with parallels for the different experiential elements behind the claim that „He is risen!“. However, what such experiences cannot do, is to provide a satisfactory explanation as to why the events reported changed the lives of those who believed in Jesus. The pragmatic effect of these experiences is not similar to any other we know. In that respect, it still makes sense to say that the empty tomb and the visions, which were for those who had them instances where they could experience and recognize Jesus as risen, also are signs that reveals God by means of something that happens in this world in which we all share. The signs nevertheless remain signs, not proofs.

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36 I have deliberately used the notion „parallel“ throughout this article in order to avoid the whole discussion about analogies which has accompanied much of the discussion of the historicity of the resurrection. The intention is to suggest that we are not without any other reports of experiences that seem like those that the disciples may have – but is they are totally analogous is hard to determine, hence the (in my mind less burdened) concept of parallels.

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