

Resurrection as a Symbol for Self-Identity and Boundary Drawing

It is the winners who write history. This is no less true with a view to the history of Christianity. The prevailing myth about the birth of Christianity tells that in the beginning, there was the one, true, primal Christian teaching, represented by “one holy catholic and apostolic church”. Only later did different heretical teachings emerge, distorting this original true faith and deviating from it. The diversity of beliefs in present-day Christianity (especially on the Protestant side) is seen as a late, unfortunate development and many still yearn for the alleged unity and harmony of the ‘primitive’ church.

This myth, however, is an illusion. There has never been a uniform faith or just one ‘primitive’ church. From the very beginning, there was diversity – diversity of experiences, beliefs and interpretations over such basic issues as who Jesus was, the meaning of his death, what it means to be a Christian, how the relationship to Jewish lifestyle should be defined, etc (Ehrman, 2003; Marjanen & Luomanen, 2005). In the first centuries

of Christianity, there was no New Testament canon, no creeds, and no ecclesiastical organisations that would have set boundaries for different interpretations. All these developed gradually and they were not undebated. Even after the Constantinian turn in the 4th century, when one form of Christianity gained the power to set the canon and to formulate the creeds, the views that lost and were condemned did not disappear overnight.

Building identity by drawing boundaries

In the first centuries of Christianity, the different Christian groups were small and always in a minority (Hopkins, 1998). Self-definition and identity building were crucial questions for them. One way a group defines itself is by boundary drawing, i.e. by distinguishing ‘us’ from ‘them’. This involves a construction of ‘the other’ against whom ‘we’ are then defined (Sanders, 2002). The early Christian sources attest to the fact that this kind of boundary drawing was done on different levels. First, Christians had to define their place in the pagan society around them. Sometimes pagan culture or pagan philosophy was accepted, sometimes rejected. Sometimes it was condemned even though many of its features were adopted. Second, Christians wanted to define themselves against their Jewish background. Jews often served as ‘the other’ in Christian rhetoric, especially after the 4th century when society at large gradually turned to Christianity. This juxtaposition between ‘we the Christians’ and ‘they the Jews’ was always in favor of the first, of course, and fostered brutal anti-



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Semitism over the centuries. Third, different Christian groups bolstered their positions by drawing boundaries between themselves and other Christians. In this intra-Christian struggle, one's own view was considered the only right one while all the others were wrong. After the Constantinian turn, one form of Christianity came to power, backed by the officials. It defined itself as 'orthodox' (literally: 'straight opinion' or 'right belief') and others 'heretics'. Present day scholarship avoids these terms since their use implies adopting the view of the winners (King, 2003). In reality, each Christian group considered itself 'orthodox'. No one used the term 'heretic' to describe themselves!

Controversy over belief in the resurrection

Belief in the resurrection is an example of a symbol that was used to define who belonged to the 'true church' and who did not. It involved two central tenets: the resurrection of Jesus, believed to have happened in the past, and the resurrection of believers, an incident yet to occur in an undefined future. The New Testament tradition was ambiguous concerning both. The Gospel writers emphasized a bodily resurrection. Jesus' resurrection meant that his body was not in the tomb anymore. Moreover, Jesus appeared to his disciples, urged them to touch him and ate in their sight (Luke 24:36–43). At the same time, however, he could suddenly appear and disappear – even moving through locked doors. When Paul reports his encounter with the resurrected Jesus, he reports seeing a light and hearing a voice – neither of which presumes any kind of a bodily resurrection. Similarly, there is ambiguity about the fate of the dead. Again, it is Paul who offers the fullest discussion on the matter. He speaks about the resurrection of the body – but of a 'spiritual' body (1 Corinthians 15). This kind of ambiguity yielded different interpretations that all could be claimed to have a biblical basis (Lehtipuu, 2007).

The fiercest battle was fought over the question of whether the resurrection involved the body or not (af Hällström 1988; Bynum 1995). In his treatise *On the resurrection of the flesh* (hence: *Res.*), the late 2nd century church father Tertullian gives several reasons why the salvation of the soul alone is not enough. Since the body is part of God's creation, it has intrinsic value of its own (*Res.* 5). It would be unworthy of God to save only a soul which is akin to God; a loving God saves the whole man, also the body (*Res.* 9 & 34). Since it is the body that is destroyed in persecutions or is affected by ascetic practices such as fasting or sexual abstinence, the body must be raised to receive its just reward. Similarly, it is the body that is responsible for the evil things it has done. God would be unjust if it were the soul that received either the reward or the punishment actually deserved by the body (*Res.* 8 & 15). For this same reason, resurrection must take place in the same body that has suffered or sinned (*Res.* 41).

Not everyone agreed. The very fact that several treatises entitled *On the resurrection* (or the like) were produced in the 2nd century shows that the question was prone to different interpretations. Moreover, we hear complaints that there are "...some who are called Christians, but who ... say there is no resurrection of the dead, and that their souls, when they die, are taken to heaven". These should not be considered Christians at all (Justin, *Dialogue with Trypho* 80, 4). However, we also have texts whose writers seem to promote this kind of understanding and they definitely call themselves Christians. In some of the Nag Hammadi texts, for

example, belief in the resurrection of the earthly flesh – promoted, for example, by Tertullian – is flatly denied. “Some are afraid lest they rise naked. Because of this they wish to rise in the flesh, and they do not know that it is those who wear the flesh who are naked,” writes the author of the *Gospel of Philip* (56, 26–30), for example. However, perhaps surprisingly, he also writes (57, 9–10): “I find fault with the others who say that it [= the flesh] will not rise.” Thus, he is arguing for a correct understanding of the resurrection of the body against two different positions which he finds erroneous: first, that the present, earthly flesh will rise; second, that only the spirit will rise. In his view, the spirit can not rise alone, i.e. ‘naked’. His ingenious solution is to intertwine resurrection with his teaching of the Eucharist. In the Eucharistic ritual, the believer receives the flesh and blood of Christ that provide him or her with proper ‘clothing’ for resurrection. Thus, even though actually representing a kind of spiritual resurrection, this belief is formulated using ‘carnal’ terminology.

How to distinguish ‘true’ faith from ‘false’ faith?

Little wonder, then, that those holding an opposing view complained that it was hard to distinguish ‘heretics’ from true believers since they “... speak like us but think otherwise” (Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses, Praefatio* 2). Moreover, they are at fault for “imitating our phraseology” and “transferring [expressions found in Scripture] out of their natural meaning to a meaning contrary to nature” (Irenaeus, *Adv. haer.* 1.9.4.). Tertullian speaks explicitly about the resurrection and claims that his opponents intentionally talk about the resurrection of the flesh, even though they mean something else by it, in order to deceive people (*Res.* 19).

Interestingly, the writer of the *Gospel of Philip* – who represents an opposing view – has a similar kind of complaint. According to him, names such as ‘God’, ‘the father’, ‘the son’, ‘the holy spirit’, ‘life’, ‘light’, ‘resurrection’, and ‘the church’ are deceptive, and those who have not learned their correct meaning perceive them incorrectly (53,23–44,13). In other words, those Christians who have not been taught the proper understanding of the term ‘resurrection,’ for example, are deceived by a wrong interpretation of it.

For outsiders, this must have sounded like incomprehensible nitpicking. Resurrection is a symbol which appears simple from the outside but is much more complex from the inside (Setzer, 2004). For insiders, mere talk about ‘resurrection’ was not enough. ‘Resurrection of the body’ was ambiguous as well. Even ‘resurrection of the flesh’ could be understood in different ways.

Strengthening boundaries strengthens identity

Bodily resurrection was not the only crucial belief in early Christianity, but it seems to have been an especially convenient shorthand for the Christian faith since many other focal tenets such as belief in the power of God, the Creator, and in ultimate justice were clustered around it (Setzer, 2004). But why was it so important to interpret the resurrection in the ‘right’ way? One reason might be offered by the insecurity of the small early Christian communities. Distinguishing those who belonged from those who did not helped enforce and maintain the boundaries of the communities struggling with questions relating to their own identity

and place in the society (Barclay, 1995). For the sake of internal coherence, then, deviant ideas were not easily tolerated. In addition, common beliefs created at least an illusion of unity among the scattered Christian groups who, in different cultural contexts, might have followed many different kinds of practices (Hopkins, 1998). For common self-definition, it was crucial to maintain that the interpretation of a given group was the only right one – and the one that had been taught ever since the time of the apostles. This was not only the claim of those who represented the view that later became the dominant Christian view but something every Christian group professed.

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