

RESURRECTION AND ETERNAL LIFE

The Canonic Memory of the Resurrected Christ, His Reality, and His Glory

There is perhaps no topic that seems less suited for the dialogue between theology and the so-called exact sciences than the topic of the resurrection. At least in the contemporary cultural, intellectual, epistemological and theological climate of Western societies, the reality of the resurrection strikes most people as located, at best, at the farthest edge of any reality that correspond to the standards of rationality, experience and technical reproduction set by the sciences. It seems that this particular "reality" can only be introduced in contrast to, or in negation of, all scientifically trustworthy forms of reality. It seems to be a counter- or hyperreality which science, when confronted with it, cannot but trace back to the realms of fantasy, dreams, or even pathological individual or psycho-social phenomena.

This chapter wants to challenge this opinion. It will confront the exact sciences and the forms of common sense (that claim to derive their standards of knowledge, experience, certainty and truth from the sciences, particularly from the natural sciences) with the reality of the risen Christ, as it can be grasped through the biblical witnesses.¹ It will attempt to describe this reality and the participation in it. Finally, it will try to grasp the nature of "eternal life", a life that is embedded in finite natural and cultural life processes, but which transcends this embeddedness, because it is not bound by, or subjected to, their forms of transmission and reproduction.

Doing this we want to test the duality, on the one hand, of scientific certainties and truth, and,

1 On the whole, it is amazing how resistant the belief in resurrection, or at least the tolerance of the church's insistence on that belief, has been despite the severe doubts and attacks on it since the Enlightenment. Cf. only for Germany the scandal-causing publications of David Friedrich Strauß, *Das Leben Jesu, Osiander*: Tübingen, 2. Aufl. 1837, 657ff; Rudolf Bultmann, *Neues Testament und Mythologie. Das Problem der Entmythologisierung der neutestamentlichen Verkündigung, Kerygma und Mythos*, Bd. 1, 1948, re-edited with an introduction by Eberhard Jüngel, Gütersloher Verlagshaus: Gütersloh, 3. Aufl. 1988; and Gerd Lüdemann, *Die Auferstehung Jesu. Historie, Erfahrung, Theologie*, Vandenhoeck: Göttingen 1994; Hansjürgen Verweyen (ed.), *Zwischen Karfreitag und Ostern*, in: *Osterglaube ohne Auferstehung? Diskussion mit Gerd Lüdemann*, Herder: Freiburg/Basel/Wien 1995, 13ff.

on the other, of religious certainties and truth. In order to face the reality of the resurrected Christ and of "eternal life" (which is offered to creation by the reality of the resurrected), we do not start with the presupposition of any specific form of a metaphysical duality, or an axiomatic split between two realities, no matter what terms might be applied (e.g., natural/supernatural).

On the whole, this chapter wants to show that in dealing with the reality of the resurrection, it is possible--on the basis of the biblical witnesses to the resurrection--to go a long way with the conditions of certainty and rationality set by the exact sciences. It is possible to describe the reality of the resurrection in such a way that the recognition and knowledge of this reality can turn into a meaningful challenge to the non-theological sciences, even if they have difficulties in rising to this challenge within the boundaries of their epistemological and experimental procedures.

I. The Reality of the Resurrection

There are three groups of New Testament texts which promise more specific information on the resurrection: 1. the traditions of the empty tomb, 2. the texts that connect the witnesses of the resurrection to appearances of light, and 3. the traditions that connect the witnesses of the resurrection with direct personal encounters in the manner of appearances. What do these traditions tell us about the resurrection?

- Since the traditions of the empty tomb were supported by both the Christian and the Jewish sides, although for different reasons, most researchers grant them an "historical basis". It is, however, clearly seen that in themselves they offer no basis for bearing witness to the resurrection of Jesus. The witnesses that maintain that the tomb was empty in principle admit of four different interpretations:

a) The tomb was empty because the pre-Easter Jesus was in fact physically reanimated and had gone to a place initially unknown. This is the interpretation on which those sceptical of the resurrection mostly concentrate.

b) The tomb was empty because the corpse had been stolen and decayed at an unknown place. This is very important to Gerd Lüdemann, a New Testament scholar who raised a public

scandal by his writings: "The factual statement of Jesus' decomposition is to me the starting point of all further work on the questions in the context of his 'resurrection'."²

c) The tomb was empty because a removal, a withdrawal of an unimaginable kind had taken place.

d) The tomb was empty because an empty tomb had been mistaken for the real tomb. This is a possibility only occasionally considered by a few interpreters.

All these interpretations have in common that they emphasize the fact that **the empirically perceptible body of the pre-Easter Jesus was, at least for some time, withdrawn**. All the imaginable interpretations of the empty tomb--from the dry empirical ones (theft of the corpse or the confusion of the tombs) to the magical and supranaturalistic ones--have in common that they do not offer any material for judicial autopsies.

The experience of the withdrawal of the pre-Easter body is not a sufficient condition for the belief in the resurrection. The empty tomb **in itself**--and here not only almost the whole history of interpretation, but also the biblical traditions themselves agree--the empty tomb in itself does not create a well-founded belief in the resurrection. Even the appearances of the angel or the young man or men at the empty tomb with the message, "The Lord has risen!" do not yet lead to the spreading of the knowledge of the resurrection.

The first biblical reactions to the empty tomb and the appearances of messengers/a messenger or an angel in or at the tomb are fear and silence (Mark 16), the worry or the public rumour that a theft of the corpse has taken place (Matth. 28, John 20), or the belief that the claim of the resurrection was mere talk of women (Luke 24).

- The second group of witnesses to the resurrection (particularly of Paul) speaks of light appearances and thus completely excludes the idea of a merely physical reanimation of the pre-Easter Jesus. Important academic theologians such as Wolfhart Pannenberg wanted to trace back **all** the witnesses to the resurrection to such appearances of light and thus tried to evade the difficult problem of the confusion of resurrection and physical reanimation.³ For at least three reasons they voted for the historicity of the appearances of the resurrected: a) because of the wide time-span in which they took place; b) because of the fact that in a

2 Lüdemann, *Zwischen Karfreitag und Ostern*, 27 (see note 1); translation M.W.

3 W. Pannenberg, *Grundzüge der Christologie*, Gütersloher Verlag: Gütersloh, 6. Aufl. 1982, 96, cf. 85ff.

disciplined way, so to speak, the appearances remain centered on Jesus' resurrection and do not proceed to an enthusiastic expectation of general resurrection as would, according to Pannenberg, have corresponded to the eschatological moods of the time; c) because of the mutual support of the experiences of Jesus Christ's appearance and the traditions of the empty tomb which probably originated independently.

However, the seemingly elegant limitation of the appearances of the resurrected to light appearances is problematic since these appearances alone do not explain in any way why and how the relation to the person Jesus became evident and clear. More modestly, one should start from the fact that **among** the resurrection appearances were **also** appearances which in no case referred directly to a mortal real person, but to a phenomenon of light from the heights, from heaven. It should be noted that among the various appearances of the resurrection were ones which **at any rate** excluded any confusion with ideas of a physical reanimation. This, however, is not the case in the third and most complicated group of appearances of the resurrected.

- The third group of texts is not only offensive to modern thought and feeling. At first glance these texts seem indeed to start from a notion of the reanimation of Jesus. But at closer inspection they all contradict the impression that the resurrection was a mere reanimation. They bring before us a strange embodiment and real presence.

On the one hand, it is said: The resurrected meets the witnesses palpably. He is **palpably perceived** by them with eyes, ears and hands. Matthew 28:9 says that the women who meet the resurrected touch his feet. Luke 24:30 tells us that Jesus breaks the bread for the disciples who lie at table with him. According to Luke 24:39 Jesus asks the disciples to touch his wounds. In John 20:27 this is said to the skeptical Thomas. Particularly pointedly, Luke 24:41ff emphasizes, "And while they still disbelieved for joy, and wondered, he said to them, 'Have you anything here to eat?' They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate before them."

On the other hand these texts make it very clear that the resurrected is and remains **an appearance**. In direct connection with the emphasis on the palpable presence of the resurrected they acknowledge: **The resurrected is an appearance**. Mark 16:12 reads, "... he appeared in another form ...". Mark 16:14 and other texts refer to the surprising and

unmediated appearance among the disciples who lie at table. Repeatedly, several texts say expressly that the first witnesses to the presence of the resurrected find faith as well as **no faith**. It is said that even some of those who are directly confronted with the appearance of the resurrected **doubt** it. Matthew 28:17 for instance tells us that the disciples see the resurrected and worship him. But it is also explicitly stated, "... but some doubted". Correspondingly Luke 24:36 reads, "As they were saying this, Jesus himself stood among them. But they were startled and frightened, and supposed that they saw a spirit."

As I have shown elsewhere,⁴ many biblical texts try to express this complicated identity of the resurrected Christ with the pre-Easter Jesus by, on the one hand, highlighting the **palpability** of the presence of the resurrected Christ and by, on the other hand, emphasizing that this presence is the presence of an **appearance**. Among a number of accounts, the Emmaus story (according to Luke 24) is the most graphic example. It states that the eyes of the disciples who encounter the resurrected Christ were kept from recognizing him (Luke 24:16). It says that when they sat down, the resurrected Christ took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him. But already in the next sentence the text explicitly states: And he vanished from their sight! (Luke 24:31).

After the opening of their eyes to the presence of the resurrected Christ, he vanishes from sensual visibility. But instead of bemoaning this and complaining about a 'spooky' event, the disciples now recognize retrospectively that they had a feeling for the presence of the resurrected even before their eyes were opened by the ritual act in table fellowship. They say to each other: Were not our hearts burning within us, while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us? (Luke 24:32). And then they bear witness to the resurrection before others.⁵

In a variety of ways, the accounts of the resurrection that deal with the personal encounters contradict an impression that the resurrection only restores the old pre-Easter liveliness and embodiment of Jesus of Nazareth. "Resurrection"--this does not mean: The dead Jesus stands up again and leaves his tomb as if nothing had happened. The resurrection of Jesus does not

4 "Resurrection and the Reign of God," in Daniel Migliore, ed., The 1993 Frederick Neumann Symposium on the Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Hope for the Kingdom and Responsibility for the World, The Princeton Seminary Bulletin, supplementary issue, no. 3 (Princeton: 1994), 3-16.

5 The gospel of John also follows this "logic of the resurrection". John 20:19 and 20:26 emphasize that Jesus comes and stands among the disciples when the doors were shut.

simply lead to a continuation of an earthly life that was only interrupted. It is no re-entrance into the life lived before his death. The resurrected does not live on with his disciples and his fellow persons in the same way that they live together and deal with each other. Nowhere does the Bible have a person say, "Good that you are back again, Jesus!" The touch of the resurrected is rather experienced as a revelation of God, as a theophany. The disciples and the women fall down before him. "My Lord and my God", exclaims the disbelieving Thomas. And again and again it is said: But some doubted. So what kind of reality is this new life and this new embodiment?

By maintaining the disturbing connection between palpability and appearance of the resurrected, the witnesses to the resurrection emphasize: The reality of the resurrection is **more than a simply natural event**. This reality concerns the human species more deeply, it is more powerful than merely natural events. Here we deal not only with the earthly person who could be crucified and killed. Here we encounter the resurrected Christ who has overcome death. Here we have before us not simply an earthly person who can only be present in one place and time. Here we meet with the resurrected and elevated Christ who can and does reveal himself in diverse forms and in surprising ways at many places. This reality of the resurrection is no illusion, no product of the fantasy. It is borne witness to by many men and women, and in many different contexts of experience. All the witnesses refer back to the historical Jesus and the fullness of his life. They all refer to his past and to his future.

The knowledge of Jesus' resurrection is just as little an illusion as the discovery of justice or of mathematics. This event, however, is not only the discovery of a new order and a new truth, but here the person and life of Jesus bring their influence to bear. The pre-Easter person and the pre-Easter life here continue in a new way. From the outside perspective one could speak of a cultural-historical event. The pre-Easter Jesus is transcended and yet remains true to himself. The biological body is not restored. The biblical texts speak of a "glorified" body or of a "spiritual" body. The person and the life that the pre-easterly body bore now look for, and find in the witnesses to the resurrection, a new body as bearer of Jesus' earthly-historical existence. But how can we make it clear that this is not the result of a sudden psychotic and faked change of opinion, of a counter-propaganda or a contagious fantasy?

The resurrection of Christ is not a mere reanimation of the pre-Easter Jesus. In no case do the biblical witnesses give the impression that the post-Easter Christ lived together with his

disciples or with other persons in the same way that the pre-Easter Jesus did. Although they claim that there is both identity and continuity between the pre-Easter and the post-Easter Jesus Christ, they point to **a complex identity and continuity that needs to be unfolded**. This continuity is not just the continuity of an earthly physical existence, realized at several space-time points of intersection.

It is important to see that the encounters with the resurrected Christ as witnessed by the scriptures take different forms, from visions of light to the appearance of a person with all the impressions of palpability. It is important to see that the biblical texts do not try to smooth over the problems connected with this presence. They describe the fear, the doubt, the derision and the disbelief connected with this reality. They state that the resurrected Christ revealed himself "in another form" (Mark 16:12). They stress the improbability of these encounters by underscoring the surprise of the witnesses and the "unnatural" way in which Christ enters the scene: for instance, by coming through closed doors or through walls. Although the scriptures explicitly underscore all this, they do not allow for the duality of illusion versus empirical reality with respect to the reality of the resurrected Christ. Occasionally, however, they note this problem: for instance, when the text says that Jesus' followers were frightened because they thought they saw a ghost (Luke 24:37). On the whole, the resurrection witnesses very calmly acknowledge that this presence is not a simple empirical reality, although it bears several characteristics of such a reality.

On the one hand, the experiences of the resurrected Christ and of his reality are as various and unique as our own individual experiences of love, joy, trust and sorrow are various, highly unique, never fully communicable, and certainly not experimentally reproducible. On the other hand, according to the witnesses of the scriptures, the experiences of the resurrected Christ are quite the opposite of any existential experiences that either are beyond words or can only be narrated individually. All the witnesses to the resurrected Christ refer to the new presence, the presence in a different mode, of the pre-Easter Jesus Christ. Despite their witness-character they are communal experiences and they generate communal experiences. In intelligible ways they are directed toward a new reality. And this is the reality we have to understand.

II. Cultural and Canonic Memory and the Living Christ

In his book *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis*⁶ the Heidelberg Egyptologist Jan Assmann gives a brilliant examination of the cultural shaping power of cultural memory. He takes up ideas from Maurice Halbwachs⁷, Claude Lévi-Strauss⁸ and other theorists of the culture of memory and shows that memory is not only an individual or a common mental phenomenon. It is the power to construct a common world. Cultural memory does not only shape a common past, but also a shared presence and, to a high degree, an expected future. It shapes cultural and moral spaces⁹ which condition human life and communal life no less than natural spaces. The power of cultural memory becomes obvious as soon as we observe in what ways it transcends the fluid communicative memory. The "communicative memory" of a community is a memory that is constantly reconstructed. It is constantly enriched, and constantly parts of it fade away. The communal memory shifts, rearranges and regroups itself all the time. But beside this communal memory human beings develop a cultural memory that as a rule lasts much longer. Cultural memory imposes meaning, control and forms on memories, actual experiences and expectations in ways that are difficult to change.¹⁰

Cultural memory can help to stabilize communities and societies against change, for instance against change by the flux of the communicative memory. Lévi-Strauss used the term "cold societies" for societies which resist the change of those structures which normally history would shape and reshape.¹¹ Assmann speaks of "cold options" of the memory. However, cultural memory can also turn into a "hot memory" which enables societies to make the historical dynamics a motor of their own development. This happens when historical events or clusters of historical events are lifted up to the level of myth. Thereby cultural memory starts, a process that Assmann calls *Mythomotorik*.¹²

"Hot" dynamizing and "cold" stabilizing memories are not abstract alternatives. Highly developed human societies, it seems, strive to attain a cultural memory that allows them to

6 Jan Assmann, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis*. Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen, Beck: München 1992, 2nd ed. 1997.

7 Maurice Halbwachs, *Das Gedächtnis und seine sozialen Bedingungen*, Frankfurt 1985 (Paris 1925); ders., *Das kollektive Gedächtnis*, Frankfurt 1985 (Paris 1950).

8 Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Das wilde Denken*, Frankfurt 1973 (Paris 1962).

9 Cf. William Schweiker's paper in this volume.

10 Cf. Assmann, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis*, 48ff; Siegfried J. Schmidt, *Gedächtnis - Erzählen - Identität*, in: Aleida Assmann / Dietrich Harth (ed.), *Mnemosyne. Formen und Funktionen der kulturellen Erinnerung*, Fischer: Frankfurt a.M. 1991, 378ff.

11 Lévi-Strauss, *Das wilde Denken*, 270.

12 Assmann, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis*, 75.

stabilize their identity and, at the same time, provides a dynamic development. Assmann shows that the canon, for instance the canon of the biblical traditions, is such an achievement that allows cultural memory to operate in dynamizing and stabilizing modes simultaneously.¹³ The canon stabilizes the common identity and at the same time requires a living development in a multitude of individual and communal perspectives and interpretations. The canon conditions the interplay of hot and cold memory and thus stimulates a cultural memory which I would like to term "living cultural memory" or "canonic memory".¹⁴

Living cultural memory, the canonic memory, is an amazing power. On the one hand, the living cultural memory is bound by a certain stock of texts (e.g., the biblical traditions which grew for about one and a half thousand years). As a fixed stock of texts, the possibilities for change are limited. On the other hand, a pluralistic multitude of perspectives in the canonic traditions stimulates a liveliness, a liveliness of permanent exegesis and interpretation which functions like hot cultural memory, but does not swallow up the historical basic stock of texts and does not devour the common identity. A canon and a canonic memory cannot be planned, launched or constructed. They arise out of complex historical and cultural lives and patterns. It is historical and cultural reality that gives shape to the canonic remembrance.

The memory of Christ, the memory which is established and instituted by the resurrection and which is renewed in proclamation and in the celebration of the sacraments, is a key example of such a living cultural and canonic memory. It is conditioned by the synoptic gospels, with their in part highly similar, in part subtly divergent, ways of presenting Jesus' life, proclamation, death and resurrection. It is stimulated by the perspectives of the gospel of John and the different perspectives of the New Testament letters, by the images of Christ in Acts and by the complex Christology of the Apocalypse. It is stimulated by the different roles of the earthly Jesus and the different christological titles (Son of God, Kyrios, Our Lord, Son of Man, the Messiah etc.) with their different realms of memory and expectation. These perspectives, these roles and titles are modes of an approach to the reality of the resurrected Christ in its liveliness and fullness. They are--substantially--generated by the life of Christ, his proclamation, his death and his resurrection.

13 Assmann, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis*, 103ff, esp. 126ff; J. Assmann, *Fünf Stufen auf dem Wege zum Kanon. Tradition und Schriftkultur im frühen Judentum und in seiner Umwelt*, MTV 1, Lit: Münster 1999.

14 M. Welker, *What Happens in Holy Communion?*, Eerdmans and SPCK: Grand Rapids and London 2000, Chapter 8.

The living cultural or canonic memory connects together a multitude of perspectives on the presence of Christ which are all interdependently related in a continual interplay. In this canonic memory, which is only one dimension of faith and of the working of the Spirit--although a most important one--the resurrected Christ, in the fullness of his person and in the fullness of his pre-Easter history, brings his presence to bear. From a multitude of witnesses to the presence of the resurrected Christ, the unfolding of the full life of the pre-Easter Christ, his sayings and his deeds and intentions, arises and in all this a rich and living memory and doxology with respect to his person and his continuous effectiveness.

Narratives about the encounter with the resurrected Christ are wonderful examples of the **ignition and the inflammability of the canonic memory**. The breaking of the bread, the perception of his wounds, the modes of address, his opening up of the scriptures, all these canonic elements bring the presence of Christ to bear and release the knowledge of the presence of the resurrected Christ. From his turning to the children, to the sick, the suffering and the obsessed to his acceptance of outcast people and collaborators in the table-fellowship, there is a multitude of events that can ignite the canonic remembrance with respect to Christ's life.¹⁵ Furthermore, the symbol-political arguments with the cult of the temple and with the Roman Empire¹⁶, and analogous arguments in historically analogous constellations, can provide such stimulation of the canonic memory. Complex normative fields become operative through Jesus' new interpretation of the law and by his proclamation of the coming reign of God. This, and Jesus' claim to the intimate relation with the Creator, as well as his laying claim to the power to forgive sins, explicitly bring religious dimensions into the canonic memory, which in itself has a religious quality. In these and other references to the historical Jesus canonic memory can become active and can become a witness to the presence of the resurrected in the interplay of highly stabile and highly fluid forms.

The memory that Jesus established in the celebration of the Lord's Supper allows the canonic memory--on the basis of the Biblical traditions--to become highly concentrated, concrete and existential. It involves those who celebrate Holy Communion in the memory of Christ in a much more basic and elementary mode than proclamation or exegesis could do. In the action of the breaking of the bread, the Emmaus disciples recognize the resurrected, and only then

15 Cf. John Dominick Crossan, *The Historical Jesus. The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant*, Harper: San Francisco 1992; ders., *Jesus. A Revolutionary Biography*, Harper: San Francisco 1995.

16 Cf. the excellent article of Gerd Theißen, *Jesus und die symbolpolitischen Konflikte seiner Zeit. Sozialgeschichtliche Aspekte der Jesusforschung*, *EvTh* 57, 5-1997, 378ff.

do they see that "their hearts burned within them while he opened to them the scriptures". The living cultural memory in which the crucified and resurrected Christ again and again brings his influence to bear is a result of the resurrection and the working of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the power that again and again brings human beings together to strengthen, to renew, to enliven and to enrich the memory of Christ. The Holy Spirit is on the one hand the spirit of Jesus Christ by which the resurrected Christ makes himself present among his witnesses. The Holy Spirit is on the other hand the power by which the human beings become witnesses to the presence of Christ and gain participation in Christ's life and in the creative life of God. It is through the working of the Spirit and through the working of God's creativity that the memory of Christ does not sink to a merely historical remembrance, or even to a multitude of remembrances.

This cannot be grasped at all if we think only along the lines of a remembered individual or of an objectified and attuned communal memory. For living memory, it is crucial that there is a connection between the multifariousness of the witnesses, the establishment of a common medium **and** the reference to the historico-empirical past person or event. All these factors have to come together. In the case of the resurrected Christ they do all come together in an exemplary way, through the establishment of what the Bible calls faith, namely the objective faith which has come with Christ (Gal. 3,25).

III. The Life of the Resurrected and Eternal Life

In the canonic memory, and in faith, the incarnated life of Christ is present in a way that allows the witnesses to gain a share in this life. The presence of the resurrected is--as Luther and Barth in his late writings would put it--"nicht ohne die Seinen". He is not without his witnesses. They shape the realms of common remembrance, common expectations and common experiences in proclamation, in the celebration of the sacraments "in remembrance of Christ", and in a life lived in accordance with his guidance. In that they live in the remembrance of Christ, their lives are shaped to diverse degrees, and they shape other people's lives to diverse degrees by living as witnesses. But this process of bearing witness is finite. It is limited by individual lives, and it is limited by the finitude of the existence of the

human species on this planet.¹⁷ Impressive and important as the chain of cultural remembrance and the loving activity of faith are--they do not fully explain the power of eternal life. Amazing as the vitality and power of common remembrance are, amazing as the cultural and ethical consequences of this remembrance may seem, the resonance to Christ's life and proclamation alone is at best a mirror that permits only a dim view of the power of eternal life.¹⁸

The power of eternal life becomes visible as soon as we make it clear that it is not the activity of the memory which is the power of the resurrection, but the substance and the glory of the life of Christ incarnate. It is the fullness of the life of Christ that can rightly be called "eternal life." This life in its worth and in its glory does not depend on memory. It is no less fulfilled under the cross than in Christ's parousia. In this life the witnesses gain a share and give a share. By this life they are ennobled and made holy. Participation in this life is the ground of Christian hope.¹⁹

Participation in this eternal life is not a question of the quantity of that remembrance and of the spreading of that remembrance through the activities of faith. It is its quality that brings the fulfillment. But it is also its quality that directs us to intensify the remembrance of Christ and to give our fellow human beings a share in it. And it is its quality that challenges us to shape and reshape our lives to become more similar to Christ and to make the Gestalt of this life already on this earth as clear as possible.

This gaining of Gestalt, of participation in Christ's life, is not simply a source of comfort, but a very dramatic event. It gives us participation in a reality that elevates us along with our finite lives into a life that is indestructible. At the same time, this process works in our lives in judging and redeeming ways. The biblical traditions speak of the judging and redeeming workings of God in the "coming of God's kingdom,"²⁰ in the dynamic presence of the resurrected, in faith and in other spiritual forms and symbols. The divine judgment is grasped as the opening up of truth and righteousness and as their preservation. Eschatological judgment is presented through metaphors of purification, or surrender to the negative

17 Cf. the contributions of William Stoeger and John Polkinghorne in this volume.

18 Cf. Hans Küng, *Eternal Life? Life after death as a medical, philosophical, and theological problem, ...*

19 Cf. the contributions of Kathryn Tanner and Gerhard Sauter in this volume.

20 Cf. Michael Welker, *The "Reign" of God*. *Theology Today* 49, 1992, 500-515; Michael Welker and Michael Wolter, *Die Unscheinbarkeit des Reiches Gottes*, *Marburger Jahrbuch Theologie* XI, hg. W. Härle u. R. Preul, Elwert Verlag: Marburg 1999, 103-116.

consequences of one's life-behaviour²¹, and thus it is happening already during one's earthly life.

The fulfilment of the law--that is, the exercise of righteousness, mercy and the striving for the knowledge of God and for truth--is the Old-Testament criterion for measuring in judgment. The christological *Aufhebung* of this orientation in the New Testament goes along with an altogether utterly heightened sensitivity to the fact that even the good law can be perverted and its normative dynamics distorted. Concentration on God's justice and God's truth again and again is made concrete in acts of mercy. "... as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me" (Matth. 25:40)--thus runs one of the most important formulae for the orientation of life, whose observation grants acceptance at the eschatological judgment.

In this perspective--relative to individuals, times and epochs--on the judgment of the world in its historical process, we encounter the purifying and preserving, judging and redeeming, workings of God, the search for righteousness and truth which in our lives grasps, elevates and preserves eternal life. Yet also, we find another idea of judgment and another mode of transition into eternal life in the New Testament. This idea of judgment appears in a perspective on the judgment of the world in its totality, eschatologically transcending all definite conditions of the world and all particular processes of history. The coming of the Son of Man with his angels, the fleeing of heaven and earth before God's face--these are images that the New Testament traditions use to describe this state of affairs.

The image of the Son of Man who comes with the angels does not simply want to portray a final epoch or episode of human life on this earth in a manner rich in fantasy. The images of the New Testament are intended as provocations which make it necessary to problematize all the conceptions of world, reality and future which are only generalizations of certain well practised ideas of world, reality and temporalities.²² The eschatological texts say that the Son of Man comes with the elect and with the angels and that they come together not only from **one** certain time and place, but from all the times and places of the world. Mark 13 puts it thus, that the Son of Man will gather **all** the elect--not only from one end of the earth to the other, but "from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven" (Mark 13:27).

21 Cf. the Contributions of Jürgen Moltmann and Miroslav Volf in this volume.

22 Cf. Klaus Berger, *Wie kommt das Ende der Welt?*, Quell: Stuttgart 1999, esp. 148ff.

The more or less dramatic descriptions of the perishing or the fleeing of heaven and earth correspond to this, since the eschatological gathering of the fullness of times and the fullness of realities must dissolve and transform the present creaturely and historical texture of the world. This form of the judgment does not speak of purification and the merciful transformation of the world in Christ. It pointedly aims at decision, separation, the abstract preservation for eternal life and the similarly abstract condemnation. Judgment is reduced to sentence and decision, to abstract condemnation or redemption.

One could talk of an "eschatological Complementarity" which on the one hand makes it necessary for us to grasp and to think the transformation of earthly life into eternal life, and on the other the difference between earthly and eternal life.²³ Contrary to the idea of judgment we meet with a reality in the life of the resurrected, and in faith in him, that in a thoroughly "evangelical" way includes and leads us into the eternal life.

Eternal life which finds its form in Christ's life presses for its anticipation already here on this earth. It presses for the New Creation to become present already under the conditions of the old vanishing creation. It wakes a delight and joy in this life which although it wants to be carried on to others also rests in itself. The existential dimension, the dimension of historical memory, and the dimension of practical and ethical formation are entwined into each other. Existential access to, and the participation in eternal life have a clear and rich form.²⁴ Their content is accessible to us. The perception of eternal life in the life of the resurrected is the foundation of a meaningful and genuine hope which understands and ennobles this world in the light of the incarnated and the coming Christ.

23 This religious eschatology of Jewish-Christian origin combines two achievements. a) It can offer a connection of norms which concentrates individual and cultural processes of development and education on the interdependencies of a striving for righteousness, the inculturation of the protection of the weak and the search for truth, and which at the same time cultivates sensitivity for the corruptibility of even highly developed morals and the corresponding readiness for self-criticism. b) It withdraws this connection of norms from any attempt by peoples, cultures and powerful interest groups to fix it for their respective ethos, no matter how tentative and searching these attempts may be.

24 The experiences of the resurrected Christ are individual and unique and can not be reproduced in experiments. This certainly does not mean that they are all "existential" experiences in the sense of Neo-Protestantism, in which the standardized modern individual comes to his or her abstract encounter with an "ultimate point of reference" or a "ground of being." Nor does this mean that they are all "existential" experiences in the sense in which the unique postmodern individual simultaneously encounters God and her or his radical *Eigentlichkeit* à la Bultmann. Or rather, since Bultmann oscillates between modern individuality and the search for radical uniqueness, it would be more appropriate to say that the biblically attested experiences of the resurrected Christ are not "existential" experiences that strive for what is sensorially erratic and bizarre, in the hope of reaching the realm of religion.