

The Resurrection Effect: Transforming Christian Life and Thought

Anthony J. Kelly, C.Ss.R., Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press, 2008.

Reviewed by *Rev. Dr. Tom Ryan SM*, adjunct lecturer, Australian Catholic University, and visiting fellow, Griffith University, Brisbane.



As I read *The Resurrection Effect*, I was prompted to borrow a copy of F-X. Durrwell's *The Resurrection: A Biblical Study*. Durrwell's work, first published in 1960, was a watershed in theology. No longer, he argued, should the Resurrection be just an epilogue in the work of Redemption. Nor should it be the 'winner takes all' apologetic argument to prove the divinity of Christ. Looking at Durrwell, nearly fifty years later, is a reminder of how much development there has been in Scripture scholarship, systematic theology and the interdisciplinary mode of theological investigation. This latest book (and particularly its title) by Durrwell's fellow Redemptorist, Anthony Kelly, is testimony to that.

The foundation to Kelly's approach is that, before we can see the Resurrection as demanding, in N.T. Wright's words, 'a serious and well-grounded historical explanation' (4) especially for apologetic purposes, it needs to be appreciated on its own terms. It is a given (*datum*) that precisely *as* given (*donum*) is a remarkable phenomenon that 'saturates the whole life of faith.' Kelly argues that before the theoretical and practical tasks of theology are approached systematically, a 'phenomenological phase' is needed

(x). K wants to attempt such a 'phase'. His approach is to blend it with Lonergan's model of the basic structures of human knowing and loving that emerge in critical realism.

For Kelly, the optic that enables this process (and holds the study together) comes from French phenomenology, especially Jean-Luc Marion and the notion of the 'saturated phenomenon.' There are certain events (e.g., birth, death, falling in love, world war) that are so profound that they transform us and how we see the world. We return to them again and again, each time conscious of the 'over-brimming and prodigal' effect on us. They only disclose their richness and meaning gradually. The same can be said for works of art, our bodies and the other's 'face' as a commanding presence. All these phenomena have in common their revelatory quality – 'they are given from beyond the normal horizon of our perception' (x) but they also 'show themselves by giving themselves' (30, adapted)

K brings this interpretative framework to one particular instance of God's action. This unique 'event' is captured in the 'master-metaphor' of 'Resurrection.' It works, as K says, 'within the excess of primordial communication' (62). It needs 'the receptivity of faith and its creative expression in a disciplined intelligence and in all the arts' (62).

After outlining the context and his terms of reference in Chapter 1, K uses his lens and this controlling metaphor to engage with the tradition in various modulations. The chapters unfold in the direction of Lonergan's four precepts of 'self-transcendence.' In steps one and two (be attentive to data ('the given'), be intelligent (what does it mean?), K attempts a phenomenological analysis of the Resurrection as a 'phenomenon' - as event, revelation, aesthetic form, flesh, face (Chapter 2); in relation to the New Testament and Pauline witness (Chapters 3 and 5); as a visual reality (Chapter 6); and in relation to the economic Trinity and the divine action appropriate to each divine person especially as realized in the Church (Chapter 4).

Step three (be reasonable- is it true?) follows in Chapter 7. Here, K explores the subject / object question and its bearing on the Resurrection. Truth is seen not just in terms of scientific or historical data but of the dynamics within the polarities of subjectivity and objectivity. K's questioning of five assumptions about this are particularly insightful, especially his discussion of the objectivity of interpersonal communication. In more specific terms, Chapter 8 moves on to present the realism of the resurrection event in its 'salvific objectivity' –what it reveals about God, Jesus' humanity and forgiveness etc., and its 'salvific subjectivity' – the movement of self-transcendence in the disciples themselves in their understanding of truth and value.

By this stage, the book has segued into the fourth step both for the disciples and, in Chapter 9, for today's faithful followers of the Risen Jesus, namely responsibility to shape the world. The transforming 'effect' extends into today's world in a) initiating the action of the divine indwelling in our minds and hearts; prompting us b) to reclaim the Resurrection as an 'intrinsic factor in the style, mood and rationality of Christian morality' (16)) and c) to probe its role in interfaith and trans-cultural dialogue. K draws together the threads of the study in the final chapter 'Resurrection as Horizon.'

What is it in K's approach that brings a marked coherence and unity to this book? It is not simply that its concern is with a single aspect of the mystery of God's loving action in the world – the Resurrection-event and its effects. Perhaps it is that, in his investigations, K uses a hermeneutical lens to analyze experience that is broad enough to catch the light from a range of sources, e.g., scripture, philosophy and theology. He can engage in a phenomenological exercise with the data then shift the angle of the lens and adopt a philosophical stance to interpret the data further in terms of the subject/object relationship. More importantly, it is K's sustained focus ('disciplined attentiveness', x) in applying the phenomenological method that enables him move easily within the 'suite of techniques' for theological reflection – analogical correlations, the interconnection of themes and truths in God's self-revelation and their relationship to the future fulfillment of God's plan in an eschatological vision (63).

There are a few thoughts that arise in response to the book.

The layout of the book is clear and consistent. There is a helpful Select Bibliography and Subject and Name Index. In terms of its style, K is, as always, clear, probing, creative and imaginative. Again, he shows himself a master of his craft. While he consistently has control of his material, its malleability in his hands ensures a certain level of both freshness and originality.

In its context, K's is not a Cartesian optic of the self-made subject constructed from an internal dialogue. It is the self emerging in dialogue with the Risen 'Other' and reaching out to others and the world in love. However, in his multi-faceted and more global approach, K. moves beyond both Durrwell's biblical theology and Sebastian Moore's mainly psychological focus, namely of the Resurrection 'effect' on self-esteem as inter-subjective and other-fulfilling.

Again, K's study reminds us that at stake is not so much the abstract term 'Resurrection' but the *Risen Jesus*, a personal being embodied and embedded in our world. At the same time, the Risen One, as 'given', realizes in himself and reveals the kenotic and ecstatic nature of God. Persons, as in God or in God's image, possess themselves in life and joy by dispossessing themselves. Ultimately, the Resurrection is a disclosure of personhood as a gift.

Further, K rightly stresses that the Risen Jesus' 'effects' are not confined to 'peak' moments of undiluted peace and joy. Perhaps they are most at work, as in the post-resurrection incidents, when the remarkable changes in the disciples were experienced as loss, as dislocation, as a dismantling and reconstruction of the self. The divine presence comes within absence, as an irruption 'from beyond' (137) that breaks down frozen horizons to renew and expand them. If the Spirit of the Risen Jesus is at work beyond the Church, then one must consider that this pattern in consciousness when the human encounters God is also true of other communities and cultures.

In his comment on the back cover, Kevin Hart suggests that, in this study, Kelly 'has subtly but surely changed the course of studies in the resurrection.' It would be hard to disagree. But the work is also a blend of *scientia* and *sapientia* in that it both informs and transforms.

On that matter, and in conclusion, as I read this book, I was reminded of Steve Chase's comment on two writers in a recent issue of *Spiritus*. He suggests that they open 'hospitable space' for others to join the author in the author's own adventure. By stretching out their hands to the reader, 'they offer in kind the gift they have so transparently received.'

With *The Resurrection Effect*, Anthony Kelly takes his place with such authors.
