

## IS THE RESURRECTION OF JESUS A HISTORICAL EVENT?

Convener: Aristotle Papanikolaou, Fordham University  
Moderator: Elizabeth Johnson, Fordham University  
Presenters: Kenan Osborne, Franciscan School of Theology, Berkeley, California  
Terrence Tilley, University of Dayton

In his paper, Terrence Tilley argued that the resurrection is best understood as a historical fact. He clarifies the ordinary language use of “fact,” “event,” and “action” in order to suggest that the resurrection is not an “event,” but an “act” of God on Jesus and that such an action is “factual.” Not speaking about the resurrection as a fact would be to deny that God has acted to save the particular historical person of Jesus of Nazareth.

Kenan Osborne reviewed the research on the resurrection in the twentieth century, indicating that, up to the mid-1970s, more scholarship was published on the resurrection than any other Christological theme. Most publications focused on the “historical question,” while ignoring the other methodological approaches, such as the soteriological, eschatological, kerygmatic/ecclesiological, and anthropological dimensions of the resurrection. Osborne argued that since the resurrection is an act of God that elicits faith, it is misleading to discuss such an act in historical or empirical terms.

The discussion began with a question to Tilley of what “historical” added to “fact”; specifically, should the resurrection be referred to as a historical fact? Could one call it a transcendent fact as witnessed by historical witnesses? Tilley responded by clarifying the distinction between “historical” and “historic,” indicating that one could speak about the resurrection as a “historic event,” much like Caesar crossing the Rubicon, but not as a “historical event.” Another question asked whether clarifying the distinction between temporality and historicity would be necessary for thinking about the resurrection as a historical fact. Osborne pointed to the danger of abstract conceptuality not respecting the divide between infinity and finitude in attempting to understand that which is ineffable (that is, the act of God on Jesus). Tilley challenged the relevancy of such abstract conceptuality for understanding the resurrection.

The question was then raised of what significance to the faithful is the discussion and affirmation that the resurrection is in some sense a fact. Would not such an understanding imply an observable, empirical reality, and, hence, make belief in the resurrection less credible? Questions were also raised about the implications of the bodily and physical dimensions of the resurrection, and about the limits of language when discussing the resurrection. Although the presenters could not respond to all the questions, they did offer concluding remarks. Osborne reiterated his point that the resurrection is an act of God that defies historical and empirical explanation and requires alternative language and discourse. Tilley returned to the theme of whether “historical” added anything to “fact,” warning that the question of the resurrection as a historical fact implies a modern understanding

of history that contains its own assumptions and prejudices toward the notion of a resurrection. He also amplified that fact need not suggest historical or empirical, since there are examples of facts that are not historical or empirical, such as being in love.

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