

# How to speak with intellectual and theological decency on the resurrection of Christ?: A comparison of Swinburne and Wright

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## Abstract

In recent scholarship the spiritual reading of the New Testament resurrection stories has come under pressure from new studies of the relevant data. In this article, two of the most conspicuous of these studies are compared and evaluated. First, Richard Swinburne's monograph opens our eyes to the fact that, in interpreting the resurrection stories, much more is at stake than is usually recognised in so-called 'undogmatic' exegesis. However, the rather crude way in which Swinburne deals with these stories, suggesting that they represent Jesus' resurrection as a bare fact not qualitatively different from other historical facts, neglects their peculiarity and displays insufficient hermeneutical sensitivity for their unique theological meaning. Second, Tom Wright's monumental volume is sometimes criticised for a similar single-minded focus on historical questions and a concomitant lack of attention to the eschatological character of Jesus' resurrection. As a result, George Hunsinger has argued, it becomes unclear why the resurrection reports embody life-transforming good news *now*. Close scrutiny of Wright's book, however, does not vindicate this criticism. Wright neither isolates the question of the resurrection's historicity from its theological meanings nor overlooks the fact that a plausible historical case for the resurrection does not in itself elicit faith. Still, he rightly argues that what people believe about what actually has happened often plays a vital role in their personal transformation. Moreover, the eschatological nature of the resurrection does not rule out the fact that it can be seen and discussed with integrity as a historical issue.

## Introduction

Make no mistake: if He rose at all  
it was as His body;  
if the cells' dissolution did not reverse, the molecules  
reknit, the amino acids rekindle,  
the Church will fall.

Let us not mock God with metaphor,  
 analogy, sidestepping transcendence;  
 making of the event a parable, a sign painted in the  
     faded credulity of earlier ages:  
 let us walk through the door.<sup>1</sup>

These are two of John Updike's seven 'stanzas at Easter', famous for their rigorously material way of representing the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Of course the poem is just that – a poem, not a theological treatise in disguise. That being conceded, it is nevertheless interesting to see what it aims at theologically. Clearly, the poem voices a resuscitation view of the resurrection which may strike us as crude, highly disturbing and even offensive. Where in the New Testament do we find the resurrection depicted in such a vividly realistic way as in the first of these stanzas? Clearly, the New Testament reports are consistent in not portraying the resurrection as a kind of *reversal* of natural biochemical processes, but as a transformation into a new kind of existence, characterised by a physicality which displays both continuity and discontinuity with our present physicality. At the same time, however, we intuitively feel that Updike has a point. If we are to think about the resurrection with integrity, we cannot escape thinking about it in its concrete materiality. For clearly, sheer analogy and parable can hardly bear the weight of real hope which springs from the resurrection stories.

But can we still subscribe to such a 'realist' view of the resurrection, given the host of old and new objections that have been and are being put forward against it? Or to put this question in a more open way: can we speak with intellectual and theological integrity on the resurrection of Christ today, and if so how? In this article I will explore this question by comparing the different answers given to it in two recent thought-provoking monographs, namely Richard Swinburne's original *The Resurrection of God Incarnate* and Tom Wright's monumental *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (both dating from 2003).<sup>2</sup> These books are only two specimens of a host of present-day studies reappropriating this fairly traditional theme. Leaving aside all sorts of other publications, I counted on average one volume with collected academic papers on the resurrection-theme each year during the past decade – most

<sup>1</sup> John Updike, 'Seven Stanzas at Easter', first published in *The Christian Century* 78 (1961), p. 236; later included in e.g. *Telephone Poles and Other Poems* (New York: Knopf, 1963).

<sup>2</sup> Richard Swinburne, *The Resurrection of God Incarnate* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God (Christian Origins and the Question of God, vol. 3)* (London: SPCK, 2003).

of them (also) focusing on the resurrection of Christ.<sup>3</sup> Whether or not a common denominator or general tendency can be distinguished in current resurrection research is hard to say. It seems, however, that the view which for a long time counted as the 'standard view' (at least among academics, although not among ordinary believers) is coming under increasing pressure.

The standard view on resurrection comprises at least the following four theses:

- (1) In the opaque context of Jewish Hellenism at the beginning of the first century 'resurrection' could mean many different things.
- (2) One of the earliest and most influential Christian writers, Paul, did not believe in physical resurrection, but had a more 'spiritual' view.
- (3) Early Christian resurrection language was originally used to express the view that Jesus after his death was exalted into heaven in some special way; only subsequently it became conflated with more literalist views, as appearing e.g. in the empty tomb stories.
- (4) Given the current scientific worldview, it is undeniable that whatever happened to Jesus' body, it was not 'raised from the dead' as the gospels suggest (at least when read at face value).<sup>4</sup>

Whether or not this view is indeed losing its sway, it is in any case severely criticised by such mutually different accounts as those of Swinburne and Wright (as well as a couple of others). In discussing these accounts, I will not go into detail, but concentrate exclusively on the structure of their respective arguments. I will first have a closer look at Swinburne's approach to the matter.

<sup>3</sup> Paul Avis (ed.), *The Resurrection of Jesus Christ* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1993); Stephen Barton and Graham Stanton (eds), *Resurrection: Essays in Honour of Leslie Houlden* (London: SPCK, 1994); A. Bommarius (ed.), *Fand die Auferstehung wirklich statt? Eine Diskussion mit Gerd Lüdemann* (Düsseldorf: Parerga, 1995); Gavin D'Costa (ed.), *Resurrection Reconsidered* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1996); Stephen Davis, Daniel Kendall and Gerald O'Collins (eds), *The Resurrection: An Interdisciplinary Symposium on the Resurrection of Jesus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); R. N. Longenecker (ed.), *Life in the Face of Death: The Resurrection Message of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998); Stanley E. Porter, Michael A. Hayes and David Tombs, *Resurrection* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999); R. Tacelli and P. Copan (eds), *Jesus' Resurrection: Fact or Figment?* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000); Friedrich Avemarie and Hermann Lichtenberger (eds), *Auferstehung – Resurrection: The Fourth Durham–Tübingen Research Symposium* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001); R. Bieringer, V. Koperski and B. Lataire (eds), *Resurrection in the New Testament* (Leuven: Peeters, 2002); Ted Peters, Robert J. Russell and Michael Welker (eds), *Resurrection: Theological and Scientific Assessments* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002).

<sup>4</sup> See, for a slightly more elaborated description of this 'dominant paradigm', Wright, *Resurrection*, p. 7.

## Richard Swinburne: intellectual and theological decency?

Richard Swinburne is of course well-known for his inductive 'strictly scientific' approach to numerous problems in philosophical theology. Thus, he can hardly be suspected of being a biblicist or fundamentalist; he does not even assign some a priori kind of special authority to the biblical scriptures at all. Surprisingly or not, however, quite often his conclusions come very close to the conclusions of those who do believe all kinds of things 'because the Bible says so'. For example, already in 1979 Swinburne argued that when we evaluate all relevant data and considerations as fairly as possible, it is more probable than not that God exists.<sup>5</sup> Now in his 2003 book Swinburne applies his inductive method to the questions and problems which beset traditional Christian resurrection belief. From the very first sentence Swinburne makes clear that his special interest concerns an inquiry into the 'core physical element' of the resurrection of Jesus. He defends this focus by arguing that any universal (cosmic or theological) significance the resurrection might have, although going infinitely far beyond its physical element, does nevertheless depend upon it. 'To initiate the redemption of humanity and of the natural order, [God] needs to bring to life a previously damaged body, not only a soul.'<sup>6</sup> That is why Swinburne specifies this physical aspect as the *core* element of resurrection belief.

Given this central emphasis, it is remarkable that Swinburne devotes only a third part of his book to the ordinary questions relating to the exegesis of the Easter stories in the New Testament. His argument for giving only scant attention to these fountainheads of Christian resurrection belief is as follows. According to Swinburne there are some important other issues which influence our evaluations in exegesis and biblical theology, but which are rarely if ever made explicit. It is these issues that Swinburne wants to sort out first, because the relative weight we have to attach to the resurrection reports depends upon how we deal with these preliminary issues. These preliminary issues concern first of all the general background evidence for the resurrection. For example, when it is improbable that there is a God who can miraculously intervene in the course of things, it is all the more improbable that this God raised Jesus from the dead. When, on the other hand, the general evidence suggests that such a God does exist, then it is important to assess whether this God might have a good reason to bring about the resurrection of Jesus. Such a reason can only be found by looking

<sup>5</sup> Swinburne, *The Existence of God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979; rev. edn 1991); cf. its popularised version *Is there a God?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

<sup>6</sup> Swinburne, *Resurrection*, p. 1 (numbers in parentheses in the text in this section refer to pages in this book).

carefully at the sort of life Jesus led and at what he taught. Therefore, second, Swinburne takes into account what he calls the prior historical evidence for the resurrection. Of course New Testament scholars also study this material, but usually they do not consider it relevant to the issue whether or not the resurrection occurred (p. 3). This is a serious mistake, Swinburne argues. For when we have reason to suppose that the life of Jesus is the sort of life which God might resurrect, we will need less detailed *posterior* historical evidence, i.e. evidence from texts about what happened after the death of Jesus.

Therefore, only after having discussed the general background evidence and the prior historical evidence, Swinburne turns to the traditional material: the exegesis of the New Testament reports on Jesus' resurrection. By making this detour, Swinburne prevents hidden theological commitments from playing an unacknowledged role in the formation of our judgement. It seems to me that Swinburne rightly castigates those New Testament scholars who contend that they examine their subject matter without any prior theological claims. For whether we decide in the end that the resurrection reports are trustworthy or not depends to a large extent on whether we think that such an extraordinary event as the resurrection could have occurred at all and, if so, whether in the case of Jesus there were good reasons for such a 'super-miracle' (p. 4). Therefore, we need to put our views concerning these preliminary issues on the table in advance (p. 3).

In this context Swinburne spells out a couple of reasons (connected with human sin and suffering) which God might have for becoming incarnate, and sketches the sort of perfect earthly life an incarnate God would live. He then goes on to argue that in all human history there was no (religious) figure except Jesus whose life satisfied these requirements.<sup>7</sup> Swinburne also thinks that God, in order to make us believe that some particular person is God Incarnate (so that we can associate with this person), must provide a kind of divine signature on this person's life by means of some super-miracle. Such a miracle must be understood by the contemporaries as God's authenticating approval of that person's life (p. 62). A resurrection would of course be a superb instantiation of the required sort of super-miracle. All in all, therefore, there is a significant prior probability that God would raise Jesus from the dead. Now I will short-circuit the exact course of Swinburne's argument and jump to his conclusion, which is as follows. Given that it is not improbable that God exists – Swinburne modestly estimates this probability

<sup>7</sup> It is possible for Swinburne to do this in a more or less fair and unbiased way, since no comparable claims concerning sin and suffering as motives for an incarnation are being made in connection with any of the more serious alternative candidates (e.g. Muhammad, the Buddha, etc.).

at 50 per cent – and given what we know about the concrete biography of Jesus compared to that of other religious leaders, the probability that Jesus, being God Incarnate, was raised from the dead, calculated by means of Bayes' theorem, is approximately 97 per cent (p. 214). Or to put this in more domestic terms: if you don't judge the existence of God highly improbable, you have every reason to believe that this God raised Jesus from the dead. Even if we would estimate the relevant probabilities somewhat lower, it still remains true that it is more probable than not that God became incarnate in Jesus and that Jesus was resurrected. In short, therefore, we can speak with perfect intellectual integrity about the bodily resurrection of Christ today.

But is this true? In a review of Swinburne's book, the atheist philosopher Michael Martin raises quite a number of objections against Swinburne's argument.<sup>8</sup> First, he questions the reasons Swinburne ascribes to God for becoming incarnate. If, for example, it was appropriate that God came to share our human sufferings by becoming incarnate, why did it take so long before the incarnation occurred? Second, Martin disputes the claim that Jesus is the only proper candidate for being an incarnation of God. For did Jesus really lead such a morally perfect life? What about his tacit approval of slavery, or the harsh punishments he inflicted on the wicked in the afterlife?<sup>9</sup> Third, Martin's interpretation of the posterior historical material differs from Swinburne's. For example, when it comes to the empty tomb, what historical accuracy do the traditional stories have? 'Given Roman crucifixion customs, the prior probability that Jesus was buried is low.'<sup>10</sup> It is much more plausible that Jesus was buried anonymously in a common grave.

At this point I interrupt my rendering of this discussion, and make a general observation. It seems that with this sort of discussion between Swinburne and Martin we are back in the times of Celsus and Origen. But is it really the case that we have not made any advance, e.g. in hermeneutics, since those times? The arguments adduced by both Swinburne and Martin undeniably display a certain coarseness and vulgarity. It is suggested that in the Christian faith the resurrection of Jesus counts as a bare historical fact not qualitatively different from other historical facts. This raises the question as to whether Swinburne and Martin speak with sufficient *theological* decency about the resurrection of Christ. It seems that both neglect the peculiar strangeness of the New Testament resurrection stories, as well as the specific theological

<sup>8</sup> Michael Martin, review of Swinburne's *Resurrection of God Incarnate*, *Religious Studies* 40 (2004), pp. 367–70.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 369.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 370.

meanings attached to the resurrection in the scriptures.<sup>11</sup> Neither Swinburne nor Martin seems to have noticed that ordinary human language is in a sense warped and distorted by the inconceivability of the new reality which came to light at Easter – an eschatological reality that cannot easily be grasped, but only hinted at in a groping way. It seems that we must be more sensitive to the fact that in the New Testament the glory of the resurrected Christ subverts our familiar metaphysics, ‘upsets our worldviews of what is possible, shatters the “glamour of violence” that blinds us, and sets in its place the splendour of the truth of God’s reconciliation and peace realized in Jesus Christ’.<sup>12</sup>

In brief, as a theologian I accept from Swinburne that in interpreting the resurrection stories much more is at stake than is usually recognised in so-called ‘undogmatic’ exegesis and/or biblical theology. However, Swinburne might in turn learn from biblical theologians and others to listen carefully to the scriptures in the first place, rather than simply to consider these as suppliers of answers to our own preconceived questions. Let us now examine whether Wright proceeds more cautiously in this respect.

### Tom Wright: intellectual and theological decency?

Wright’s answer to his leading question (‘What happened at Easter morning?’) is embedded in what is probably the most comprehensive historical study of all relevant textual material thus far.<sup>13</sup> Wright not only examines virtually all early Jewish and Christian texts that somehow relate to the notion of resurrection, but also surveys views on death and afterlife in the pagan ancient world. His book has already been hailed as ‘a magnificent contribution to an enterprise of singular excellence and significance for modern biblical study, theology and the church’.<sup>14</sup> Coming to the New Testament, Wright attempts to establish, by means of detailed analyses and in discussion with many biblical scholars, that the standard interpretation of the resurrection reports is misguided. According to Wright, careful scrutiny shows that Paul understood Jesus’ comeback at Easter in terms of a bodily resurrection, that the empty tomb tradition goes back

<sup>11</sup> A fine example of a study uncovering the theological meanings of the resurrection stories (without denying their referential intentions) is Peter Selby, *Look for the Living: The Corporate Nature of Resurrection Faith* (London: SCM Press, 1976), esp. pp. 82–125.

<sup>12</sup> Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, 2nd edn (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), p. 193; Migliore is inspired here by David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), pp. 349, 389.

<sup>13</sup> See also, however, Alan F. Segal, *Life After Death: A History of the Afterlife in Western Religions* (New York: Doubleday, 2004); both volumes exceed 800 pp.

<sup>14</sup> Stephen N. Williams, ‘The Resurrection of the Son of God’, *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 6 (2004), p. 421.

to the earliest post paschal times rather than being a later invention, that the gospel writers considered Jesus' resurrection as a real historical event (although a unique one), etc. As in Swinburne, the significance of the mutual discrepancies between the gospel reports on the resurrection is minimised; these discrepancies are largely what might be expected given such an extraordinary event and reflect only minimal adjustments and theological elaboration. 'The very strong historical probability is that, when Matthew, Luke and John describe the risen Jesus, they are writing down very early oral tradition, representing three different ways in which the original astonished participants told the stories.'<sup>15</sup>

Next, Wright wonders how it was possible that the earliest Christians were so confident that Jesus was raised from the dead. He suggests that all details point in one direction here: they must have considered the traditions concerning the empty tomb and the appearances of the risen Lord as historically credible. These traditions, in turn, can only be reasonably explained by the actual bodily resurrection of Jesus. Alternative explanations are less convincing, because they have less puzzle-solving capacity (to use the Kuhnian phrase), e.g. when it comes to clarifying the rise of Christianity. Along such historical and hermeneutical lines, Wright ultimately arrives at conclusions which are largely similar to those of Swinburne. His concluding formulations reflect in a sense Swinburne's approximation of 97 per cent. So the two studies under review form complementary (and only to some extent overlapping) challenges to the standard view and affirm the notion of bodily resurrection.

The crucial question, however, is whether Wright, with his strong historiographic interest, does not succumb to the same temptation Swinburne yielded to, namely a lack of attention to the anomalous and inconceivable (or in theological terms, the eschatological) character of Jesus' resurrection. Indeed, this is what George Hunsinger has recently put forward against Wright's position.<sup>16</sup> Hunsinger distinguishes three main approaches that have been taken towards Christ's resurrection in contemporary theology: a spiritual approach, taking the resurrection primarily as a symbol of spiritual regeneration (as in Schleiermacher and Bultmann), an eschatological one, which emphasises that the unique, transcendent character of the resurrection makes it elude historical grasp (endorsed by Moltmann, Frei and Hunsinger himself), and a

<sup>15</sup> Wright, *Resurrection of the Son of God*, p. 611 (Mark is left out here because his eight-verse ending does not bring the risen Jesus on stage, p. 608).

<sup>16</sup> George Hunsinger, 'The Daybreak of the New Creation: Christ's Resurrection in Recent Theology', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 57 (2004), pp. 163–80. Similar suspicions can be found in Williams, 'Resurrection', p. 430, and in Larry W. Hurtado, 'Book of the Month', *Expository Times* (2003), p. 84.

historical approach, which bases the Christian faith on Christ's bodily resurrection as an actual historical occurrence. It is the latter view that Hunsinger ascribes to Pannenberg and Tom Wright. In this connection he charges Wright with focusing 'so single-mindedly on historicity' as to relegate 'questions of transcendence to the margins, or at least to another day'.<sup>17</sup> As a result, despite his 'enormously learned and significant body of work', Wright leaves obscure how his historical conclusions are actually related to faith.<sup>18</sup>

It seems to me, however, that a close reading of Wright's book reveals this criticism to be overstated, to say the least. For, unlike Swinburne's approach, Wright's position is free of naive evidentialism.<sup>19</sup> Wright is fully aware that the resurrection is about more than an empty tomb, and not just 'a conjuring trick with bones' (as one of the few resurrection writers conspicuously absent in Wright's book, David Jenkins, caricatured the orthodox view<sup>20</sup>). He is not so preoccupied with the many historical and literary questions surrounding the Easter reports that 'the question of why the resurrection should be good news now almost disappears' – a risk that is not always avoided, as Rowan Williams has indicated.<sup>21</sup> Wright, however, does not isolate the question of the resurrection's historicity from its theological meanings, and explicitly discusses the relation between faith and history in this connection. The only thing is that he comes to conclusions which are slightly different from Hunsinger's in this respect.

Wright elucidates his view of the relation between history and theology, or in philosophical terms, immanence and transcendence, by opening his book with a suggestive little parable, to which he returns at the final pages. It is about a king who commanded his archers to shoot the sun. Understandably, their zealous efforts to obey this command were in vain. Their arrows fell short, and the sun remained unaffected. Then, however, the youngest of them came to where the king sat before a pond in his garden. With a single shot he pierced the place in the pond where the image of the sun was reflected. The sun splintered into a thousand glittering fragments. In the same way, all arrows of history cannot reach the transcendent God. Deep inside the Christian tradition, however, lies a rumour that an image of the one true God has appeared within the gravitational field of history. The parable makes clear what, according to Wright, history can and cannot say

<sup>17</sup> Hunsinger, 'Daybreak of the New Creation', p. 173.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 172.

<sup>19</sup> So rightly Williams, 'Resurrection', p. 429.

<sup>20</sup> It is not easy to find Jenkins's oft misquoted phrase in its original context; for a somewhat later presentation of his views on the matter, see David E. Jenkins, *God, Miracle and the Church of England* (London: SCM Press, 1987), pp. 3–39.

<sup>21</sup> Rowan Williams, *Resurrection: Interpreting the Easter Gospel*, 2nd edn (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim, 2003), p. 110.

about what happened at Easter. We cannot, by offering historical ‘proofs’ of the Easter event, demonstrate the existence of God or the validity of the Christian message.<sup>22</sup> But if Jesus (as the rumour has it) is God’s image on earth, then history can touch what happened to him. Even his resurrection, however earth-shattering, was an earthly event, and needed to be exactly that because in it the Creator starts to reclaim his creation. As a result, it had earthly consequences, including an empty tomb. So if the sun is truly reflected in the pool, then to shoot the sun’s reflection in the water is to say something about the ‘real world’ and the way God is present in it. It is this real world that historians are committed to study. When in doing that they run up against rumours about the resurrection, the water may become so splashed and stirred that we can hardly see the image anymore. But this is just what might be expected, given that the resurrection has to be understood ‘not as a bizarre miracle, but as the beginning of the new creation’.<sup>23</sup>

Strikingly, in this quotation Wright uses almost exactly the same phrase which figures in Hunsinger’s title and which so neatly points to the unique, eschatological character of the resurrection. So, clearly, Wright does not deny this. His emphasis, however, is on the fact that the disanalogous, eschatological character does not make historical inquiry into the resurrection either impossible (as Bultmann and Troeltsch held) or inappropriate (as Hunsinger, and beyond him Hans Frei and Karl Barth suggest). When arguing for its appropriateness, Wright grants that to present a plausible historical case for the resurrection (as he is attempting to do) does not in itself elicit faith or transform our lives.<sup>24</sup> Faith does not rest upon a historical probability of approximately 97 per cent, but upon the self-authenticating encounter with the living Christ in Word and Spirit. However, Wright insists that this does not make historical investigation into the resurrection event superfluous or inappropriate. Here he has a quarrel with Hans Frei. Admittedly, in his all too brief discussion of Frei, Wright misses the point that Frei does allow for the role of historical inquiry when it comes to showing that the claim that Jesus rose from the dead has not been disconfirmed. As Frei rightly saw, if this claim had been falsified, then there would be nothing unique or eschatological about the resurrection at all.<sup>25</sup>

Unfortunately, however, Frei did not allow for a more positive role of historical investigation in connection with the resurrection, because the

<sup>22</sup> Wright, *Resurrection*, pp. 11–12.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 737.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26. This point can be illustrated by the example of Jewish theologian Pinchas Lapide, whose recognition of Jesus’ bodily resurrection as a historical fact did not turn him into a Christian; see his *Auferstehung. Ein jüdisches Glaubenserlebnis* (Stuttgart: Calwer Verlag, 1977).

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Hunsinger, ‘Daybreak’, pp. 176–7.

transcendence of the object would elude historical grasp, and because according to him the 'fact claim' about the risen Christ is inseparable from our affirmation of his living presence.<sup>26</sup> Now let us briefly examine both these arguments in turn. First, the idea that the resurrection cannot be confirmed historically because it eludes historical grasp seems to betray a more or less positivist understanding of science. For surely nothing can be proved or definitely confirmed here by establishing some causally closed chain of events. That is not to say, however, that it is impossible to affirm Jesus' resurrection by means of inference to the best explanation. In fact, that is what Wright is trying to do, and it is not clear what is wrong (or inappropriate) with his approach.<sup>27</sup>

Second, according to the Barth–Frei–Hunsinger school, acknowledging that Christ rose from the dead is inseparable from the affirmation of Christ's living presence. This suggests that one can only believe in the resurrection when one is already a Christian, so that the resurrection cannot figure, for example, as a subject worth raising in missionary encounters. It seems to me, however, that we should not concede this point too easily. For surely the connection between acknowledging Christ's resurrection and affirming his living presence may also work the other way round. That is, affirming Christ as the living one cannot be separated from the 'fact claim', nor isolated from historical considerations. 'What people believe about what actually has happened is often an extremely powerful element in human transformation.'<sup>28</sup> To put this in scholastic terms: although the *fides historica* is not to be identified with the *fides salvifica*, that does not make the *fides historica* meaningless from the perspective of faith.<sup>29</sup> After all, already at Easter evening Jesus' disciple Thomas came to faith only after having been convinced that Jesus really was raised from the dead (or so it is depicted in St John's gospel). And we are summoned to believe even if we have not personally encountered ('seen') the living Christ.<sup>30</sup>

Wright further illustrates this point by indicating what happens when people have become convinced that, as a matter of history, the resurrection

<sup>26</sup> Hans Frei, *The Identity of Jesus Christ: The Hermeneutical Bases of Dogmatic Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), p. 147; cf. Hunsinger, 'Daybreak', p. 176. For an instructive full-scale introduction to Frei's theology, see Mike Higton, *Christ, Providence and History: Hans W. Frei's Public Theology* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2003).

<sup>27</sup> Wright, *Resurrection*, p. 716; on the use of 'inference to the best explanation' in science as well as in (philosophy of) religion: see Wilko van Holten, *Explanation within the Bounds of Religion* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2003), pp. 133–42, 171–6.

<sup>28</sup> Wright, *Resurrection*, p. 26

<sup>29</sup> Pace Williams, 'Resurrection', pp. 430–1.

<sup>30</sup> John 20:29.

did not happen after all. Clearly, this new factual belief of theirs about what historically is the case does not fail to influence and transform their way of life in a variety of ways.<sup>31</sup> We can imagine them, for example, developing other emotions and moral attitudes, adapting their expectations of the future, stopping going to church, etc. (of course, these things can also be cause rather than effect, but it is not clear why there should be one-way traffic here). Conversely, the transformational capacity of the resurrection stories and the spiritual experience of Christ's presence should not be disconnected from the propositional statement (or factual belief, or referential claim, or whatever) by means of which the resurrection is affirmed as a historical event. In this sense, it seems to me that Wright is correct in arguing that, despite the unique, eschatological character of the resurrection event, the possibility and the relevance of 'historical knowledge about the resurrection, of a sort that can be discussed without presupposing Christian faith, cannot be ruled out a priori'.<sup>32</sup>

### Conclusion

I come to a twofold conclusion. First, in speaking about the resurrection of Christ we should always keep in mind the strangeness surrounding the New Testament resurrection reports, as well as the specific theological meanings attached to it in the scriptures. As a result, the resurrection cannot be treated with theological integrity as a historical fact not qualitatively different from all others. In this sense, Swinburne's approach to the matter is questionable, to say the least.

Second, although the resurrection of Christ, as the inauguration of an inconceivable new reality, is an extremely odd and anomalous occurrence from a historical point of view, we can speak about it with intellectual and theological decency as a historical event. Arguably, Christians even *should* speak about it in this way, for reasons which have been excellently summarised by Wright's famous predecessor as a New Testament scholar, C. D. F. Moule: 'A gospel which cares only for the apostolic proclamation and denies that it either can or should be tested for its historical antecedents, is really only a thinly veiled gnosticism or docetism and . . . will prove ultimately to be no Gospel.'<sup>33</sup> In this sense, we have reason to take with theological seriousness the tenor of John Updike's 'Seven Stanzas at Easter'.

<sup>31</sup> Wright, *Resurrection*, p. 26.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22.

<sup>33</sup> C. D. F. Moule, *The Phenomenon of the New Testament* (London: SCM Press, 1967), pp. 80–1 (as quoted in Wright, *Resurrection*, p. 23).