

## Can science disprove the resurrection?

A journalist, Clifton Ross, formerly a Christian who believed in the resurrection, writes:

“It is as difficult as it is uncomfortable to enter into a previous state of mind from a later, more ‘evolved’ or developed state. I don’t like to admit that I once believed Jesus rose from the dead, but I did....The available scientific and statistical evidence (not to mention common sense) weighs strongly against belief in bodily resurrection from the dead.”<sup>1</sup>

Clifton Ross grew up a fundamentalist Christian in Southern Oklahoma. He went west to the University of California in Berkeley and there joined a “radical Christian” community. Eventually he moved through liberation theology to the secular left. Now, more “evolved” or “developed,” he’s left Christianity behind.

Perhaps Ross has not so much evolved as switched faiths – from fundamentalism to scientism. Scientism is the unscientific extension of science into fields where its categories don’t work. To claim that science disproves the resurrection is a category mistake.<sup>2</sup> As humanist Leon Wieselter says:

“Scientism is not the same thing as science. Science is a blessing, but scientism is a curse. Science, I mean what practicing scientists actually do, is acutely and admirably aware of its limits, and humbly admits to the provisional character of its conclusions; but scientism is dogmatic, and peddles certainties. It is always at the ready with the solution to every problem, because it believes that the solution to every problem is a scientific one, and so it gives scientific answers to non-scientific questions. Owing to its preference for totalistic explanation, scientism transforms science into an ideology, which is of course a betrayal of the experimental and empirical spirit.”<sup>3</sup>

Real science deals with matters that can be repeated in the lab, matters which can be tested and falsified. Science overreaches when it pronounces on matters which cannot be tested and falsified.

Science cannot deal with history because history cannot be repeated in a laboratory. Science cannot deal with questions of evil or origin. Science can say our universe originated in the Big Bang. But science cannot say why there is order rather than chaos. Nor can science say why there is something and not nothing.

In the same way Christian fundamentalists overreach when they regard the Bible as modern science. Consider Genesis 1:11: “And God said, “Let the earth put forth vegetation, plants yielding seed, and fruit trees bearing fruit in which is their seed, each according to its kind, upon the earth.” This is impossible botany by today’s standards, although it was accepted botany in the sixth century BC in Babylon, when Genesis 1 was written.

What about the cross and resurrection? Gerhard Forde writes:

---

<sup>1</sup>Clifton Ross, “The Bolivarian God that failed,” *Quillette*, Feb 1, 2019.

<sup>2</sup> In Aristotle, *metabasis eis allo genos* (a change into another genus)

<sup>3</sup> Leon Wieselter, “Perhaps culture is now the counterculture.” Graduation speech at Brandeis University 2013, available at [www.newrepublic.com](http://www.newrepublic.com).

“The cross is not to be understood by *another* system; the cross *is* its own system. The cross and resurrection in itself brings about something entirely new. That, to begin with, is what is meant by a theology *of* the cross, not merely *about* it.”<sup>4</sup>

To say “the cross *is* its own system” means there are no analogies, no existing systems of meaning, no categories in science, philosophy, psychology, etc., that can explain the cross and resurrection. It is beyond us.

Anglican professor and theologian Frederick W. Dillistone describes more than twenty Biblical metaphors for what happened on the cross; finally he throws up his hands and says there’s no adequate image or way to put all the images together. At best, he writes, one listens to Negro spirituals or Bach’s Mass in B Minor.<sup>5</sup>

The resurrection is not subject to scientific proof or falsification. Nor is it a super miracle; it is something totally other. It is beyond any categories or concepts that we have.

Paul writes: “So is it with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable....It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body” (1 Cor 15:42-44).

The word “body” here does not mean meat, bones, and molecules.<sup>6</sup> In Paul the word “body” means my historical relationships—to the external world, to myself, my neighbour, my God. My “body” is the sum of my history. This is my body which is raised up, forgiven, and given new life.

And make no mistake, **the resurrection is all important** and what we Christians joyously proclaim. As Gerhard Forde writes:

“It is significant that the resurrection by comparison is not really important for the various theologies **about** the cross. Even in the supposedly more ‘orthodox’ system of vicarious satisfaction, the resurrection is not really an operating part of the theology involved. For if you say that the logic of the matter demands that God be satisfied, then everything depends on Jesus’ punishment and death *but not on the resurrection*. There is no need for a resurrection really—one could just as well say that the Son of God suffered and was killed to pay the debt and that’s all there is to that....In a theology **of** the cross, however, **the resurrection is all important**. It is only the resurrection that **snatches victory from defeat**, brings about something

---

<sup>4</sup> Gerhard Forde, *Where God Meets Man* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1972) 36.

<sup>5</sup> F. W. Dillistone, *The Christian Understanding of Atonement* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1968).

<sup>6</sup> Acts 10:41 reports that Jesus appeared “not to all the people but to those chosen as witnesses” (cp. Paul’s list of Jesus’ appearances to other witnesses in 1 Cor 15:4-9). In Matthew 28:9 Jesus appears to Mary and Mary Magdalene and they touch his feet. In Luke 24:39 Jesus appears to the disciples and says “handle me” and then eats a piece of fish (24:43). Then in John 20:17 Jesus tells Mary not to touch him, but eight days later he appears to the disciples in a closed room and invites Thomas to touch him (20:27). The Greek verb in John 20:27 means first of all “touch” and any further attempt by the translator to use a word to help explain what is happening is an interpretation.

These resurrection appearance texts are not “proofs” in a modern scientific sense. At the same time they do not mean that he only rose or lived “in their hearts.” He was there in person as a new reality but not limited in the usual way our five senses perceive reality. See the discussion in this post.

really new, and, consequently, enables us to look on the cross as a real death....For in a theology of the cross, **the cross and resurrection is the way.**"<sup>7</sup>

We can be confident that the Lord who made heaven and earth, including reason and all that science and medicine are able to do, has on the cross defeated sin and death, and will create a new heaven and a new earth where evil and death shall be no more.

---

<sup>7</sup> Forde, *Where God Meets Man*, 37-38. Bolding added for emphasis.