Resurrection of the Dead

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This article explores the Christian notion of the resurrection of the dead under four headings: finality, individuality, communality and hope. For each, it takes its starting point in 1 Corinthians 15, and from there explores the debates and controversies associated with each basic affirmation, drawing from ancient and modern authors across the tradition, with reference to some of the key scriptural texts.

Under the heading of finality the article explores, first, the question of whether the resurrection restores an original perfection or rather brings about a new creation which exceeds the first; and second, whether death is a natural good or the consequence of sin. It argues for the finality of the resurrection as that which lends life on earth decisive and conclusive significance. Under the heading of individuality it explores patristic and medieval debates concerning the persistence of matter at the resurrection, and modern counterparts to these debates, whether in experiments in artificial intelligence or in contemporary gender discourse, arguing that the real significance of these discussions lies in the question of the nature of the good. Under the heading of communality it explores the question of whether all or only some are raised to salvation, and of whether the resurrection concerns only human beings or all living creatures, concluding that a focus on the extent of the resurrection’s inclusivity should give way to a focus on the communal character of resurrection life. Under the heading of hope it offers a liberationist response to the Nietzschean critique that belief in an afterlife entails a denial of this life.

**Keywords**: Resurrection, Finality, Individuality, Communality, Hope, Death, Bodily resurrection, Eschatology, Heaven, Hell, Cosmos, Liberation
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1 Introduction

We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. (The Nicene Creed, Common Worship)

In this credal declaration, Christians make a condensed affirmation concerning the goal towards which this world is directed, as it is affirmed, judged and transformed by God in Christ's life, death and resurrection. Even as it unites Christians in a common commitment, however, the declaration houses a set of questions and controversies. Among those are the following, each of which will be treated in the article. Are all the dead raised, or only some? Does the life to which they are raised have a shadow side in eternal death (or hell)? How is the world to come related to this world – as the restoration of what has been lost, or as something radically new? With what kind of bodies are the dead raised, and what kind of continuity will they have with the earthly bodies of this world? What kind of attitude to this world is inculcated by looking for the resurrection of the dead: one of submissive patience or one of activist commitment?

The biblical locus classicus (or go-to passage) for the resurrection of the dead is 1 Corinthians 15. All these questions find their germ, in one way or another, in this perplexing and exhilarating passage. The article is structured accordingly, each section taking off from a launchpad in 1 Corinthians 15, in order both to explore the associated controversies and to discover the basic affirmations of Christian teaching that emerge in and through them. These affirmations endure as ways of reading Paul in the context of the biblical witness more widely and as ways of parsing the credal declaration cited above. The article is divided into four sections, corresponding to four basic affirmations: the finality entailed by the resurrection; the individuality of what and who is affirmed in being raised; the communality of the resurrection; and the hope elicited by resurrection faith.

The article takes a thematic approach to the topic, in each section ranging across ancient and modern literature, allowing one to illuminate the other. It avoids an evolutionary approach, concerned with historical origins and precedents. For those interested in pre-New Testament belief in the resurrection of the dead, readers are referred in particular to the illuminating study by C. D. Elledge (2017). While the belief becomes non-negotiable in Christianity and rabbinic Judaism, Elledge argues that it is attested as a popular but still controversial, and diversely held, belief in early Jewish writings from the third century BCE, including 1 Enoch, the canonical book of Daniel (see 12:1–3), and 2 Maccabees. The way in which earlier scriptural traditions are drawn upon in these as well as later Christian and Jewish writings shows, however, that verses or passages such as Isa 26:19 and Ezek 37:1–14, which may not historically be understood to articulate belief in the resurrection, could be taken up in later contexts precisely to do so.
2 Finality

Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. (1 Cor 15:51–52)

Paul’s words evoke a sudden and decisive transformation. But what kind of change is envisaged? This section treats two areas of debate: first, the question of whether the resurrection restores an original perfection or rather brings about a new creation which exceeds the first; and second, whether death is a natural good or the consequence of sin. The article will suggest that what is emphasized across the range of positions within both debates is the finality of the resurrection: its possession of a definitive character that serves to lend this life on Earth decisive and conclusive significance.

2.1 Restoration or newness?

Does the resurrection involve a healing of sinful creation and a restoration to an original state that was lost as a result of the fall? Or does it involve the ushering in of something utterly new, beyond even the original paradise? In response to these questions it is possible to mark out two extremes between which Christian tradition has navigated.

On the side of newness, the extreme to be avoided is the claim that resurrection life is a replacement of or escape from this life, rather than a transformation of it. Instrumental in establishing this boundary of orthodoxy were Irenaeus of Lyon’s arguments against the complex system of the Valentinian Gnostics, and above all his affirmation of the resurrection of the body (Against Heresies 5; Irenaeus of Lyons 1996: 526–567). On the side of restoration, on the other hand, the danger to be averted is that the the resurrected are restored to a life that might again be lost by a further fall, imprisoning creatures in an unending cycle. Christians marked out their position on this side against pagan belief in the transmigration of souls. Origen of Alexandria’s account of apocatastasis (literally, ‘restoration’), in affirming that ‘the end is always like the beginning’ (On First Principles [Principles] 1.6.2; Origen of Alexandria 1994b: 260), comes dangerously close to a cyclical understanding of creation. However, he holds this in tension with a linear understanding, according to which the end – when God will be ‘all in all’ (1 Cor 15:28) – is an irreversible consummation (Principles 3.6.1–3; 1994b; cf. Ludlow 2000: 32–36). A safeguard can be found in Augustine of Hippo’s distinction between posse non peccare (the ability not to sin), the state that characterizes Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden, and non posse peccare (the inability to sin), the state that characterizes the communion of saints in heaven (City of God [City] 22.30; Augustine of Hippo 1998: 1179).
This way of marking out Christian orthodoxy, as a navigation between two heretical extremes, carves up the landscape differently from a dichotomous distinction between the resurrection of the dead and the immortality of the soul – a dichotomy made influentially by Oscar Cullmann (1958) and taken up by N. T. Wright (2003), but critiqued by George Nickelsburg (2006). In keeping with the mapping of the present article, Oliver O’Donovan, in his interpretation of Rev 21:1 – ‘Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more’ (ESV) – articulates the Christian orthodox position as a middle course between two extremes. Avoiding the first extreme of replacement, he parses ‘a new heaven and a new earth’ as ‘creation transformed’. Avoiding the second extreme of an unending cycle, he parses ‘the sea was no more’ as entailing that ‘the very possibility of disruption is altogether vanished’ (O’Donovan 1994: 56).

Gregory of Nyssa is among those who emphasize the restoration pole of the spectrum, developing an account of apocatastasis that takes up but goes beyond Origen’s, giving it clear directionality. Specifically, he holds God’s first creation to be an ideal which is only brought to reality over the course of time, and is actualized in (restored) perfection at the resurrection (On the Making of Man [Making] 22.3–6; Gregory of Nyssa 1994a: 411–412; cf. Ludlow 2000: 48–50). Approaching the question from the other end, and thus apparently nearer the newness pole, is Athanasius of Alexandria, who (interpreting Prov 8:22) understands the incarnation as being for the renovation of creation, in which all things are made new or (in his words) ‘deified’. However, Athanasius’ vision of the new creation is so comprehensive that the old creation becomes a mere abstraction, a shadow of the new. Indeed, the hypothesis of a creation that is not made new in Christ becomes unthinkable (Four Discourses Against the Arians II; Athanasius 1991: 348–393). This is a pattern taken up and radicalized by Karl Barth, for whom creation is merely the ‘external basis’ of God’s covenant with humanity in Christ (Church Dogmatics [CD] III/1; Barth 1936–1975: 42, 96), a covenant accomplished within history under the veil of suffering and sin, but to be manifested in glory at Christ’s parousia or return (CD III/2; Barth 1936–1975: 493–499). In this framework, any substantial distinction between the first and the new creation is in danger of collapsing – not because the new is a restoration of the original, but because there is no original creation independent of its redemption in Christ.

Barth’s vision might be considered an extreme logical outworking of a Protestantism that pairs grace with sin, in contrast with a Catholic pairing of grace with nature (for this typology, see Kilby 2020: ch. 8). This extreme is resisted in different ways within Protestantism by Katherine Sonderegger and David Kelsey. Underscoring the diversity of Christian teachings, Sonderegger affirms alongside the doctrine of creation a second element in a theology of the creature: a doctrine of resurrection, in which creation, perfectly complete in its own terms, is broken open to show its incompleteness. Self-sufficient and
self-enclosed creatures are laid bare both in their radical dependence on God and in their essential relatedness to one other. A good, original completeness is thus superseded by an eschatological incompleteness which outstrips the original (Sonderegger 2016b). Kelsey goes even further in emphasizing the diversity of doctrines by way of his ‘trinitarian’ affirmation of three irreducible sets of canonical stories – concerning creation, reconciliation and consummation respectively. Since God’s commitment to creation does not logically entail God’s commitment to consummating the creature, consummation is brought about as something new, ‘beyond anything implied in creaturely blessing’ (Kelsey 2009: 442). Kelsey characterizes God’s consummating relation to creatures in terms of ‘circumambience’, a state in which the epistemic distance of creatures from God is all but removed (Kelsey 2009: 526).

In effect, what both Sonderegger and Kelsey do is make room for an affirmation of nature as God’s good creation, in distinction from both fallen and redeemed creation. Roman Catholic thought has no need to make such room, given its traditional pairing of nature and grace. As a result, it has a ready way of distinguishing between original creation and its eschatological consummation without severing the latter from the former. The logic is articulated by Henri de Lubac in his *Surnaturel* (1945) in terms of a natural desire for the supernatural. This logic can be found in Thomas Aquinas, who, upholding Augustine’s distinction between *posse non peccare* and *non posse peccare* (*Summa Theologica* [ST] I–II.109.10 ad 3; Aquinas 1981: 1131), affirms that while all desire to be happy (*ST* I–II.5.8s c; Aquinas 1981: 615), no creature can attain final happiness by its natural powers (*ST* I–II.5.5 co; Aquinas 1981: 612). In this way, eschatological beatitude both exceeds creation and is its fitting end.

### 2.2 Death: natural or unnatural?

In the context of the question of the newness of resurrection life, a subsidiary point of controversy arises concerning the status of death. Is death ‘the wages for sin’, in Paul’s terms (Rom 6:23, cf. Rom 5:12)? Or is it the natural end of the creature (irrespective of sin), as might be implied by Ps 102:26–27, Isa 40:6–8, Job 1:21 and Eccl 3:20? Until the modern period, it was standard within the tradition to understand death as a penalty for sin, and thus as the enemy over which victory has been won in Christ (1 Cor 15:26, 54). To consider death unnatural in this way is to place emphasis on the restorative dimension of the resurrection, as that which undoes death. To make death natural, on the other hand, is to emphasize the newness of resurrection life as that which, by contrast with natural life, does not tend towards death. Complicating this picture, Augustine’s characterization of death as punishment for sin, consolidating the traditional reading, is nevertheless nuanced enough to allow for eschatological newness, as well as to create a chink through which the modern embrace of natural death could pass. For Augustine, Adam and Eve were protected from death by the tree of life, yet their animal bodies were not of themselves
immortal (see Mortality). The spiritual bodies in which they are raised, by contrast, will be gifted with immortality, capable neither of death, nor of corruption, nor of sin (City 13.23–24; Augustine of Hippo 1998: 570–580). Aquinas follows suit, distinguishing between the immortality of animal life enjoyed before sin and the immortality of glory (ST I.97.1; 1981: 489–490).

In keeping with their emphasis on the newness of resurrection life, both Kelsey and Sonderegger affirm the naturalness of death. Kelsey, drawing on biblical Wisdom literature, does so with unflinching attention to the ‘ambiguous’ character of creaturely existence in its vulnerability to damage and destruction, affirming that very existence as the good creation (Kelsey 2009: 202–203). Sonderegger, less radical, reads death as the creature’s good end, marking its completeness. At the same time, she recognizes death’s intractable two-sidedness: under the aegis of the fall it is also ‘the Last Enemy’ (Sonderegger 2016a). In this she converges with Karl Rahner, who articulates a Catholic understanding of eternal life as the fitting consummation of this life rather than something unanticipated within it, yet in more modern spirit affirms the simultaneous naturalness and unnaturalness of death (Rahner 1961).

Barth unequivocally affirms the naturalness of death (CD III/2; 1936: 632), citing verses such as Ps 90:12, 1 Kgs 2:2, Isa 14:10 and Luke 2:29 to contrast death in its natural aspect with the unnatural aspect that is introduced by sin – the ‘second death’ of which Rev 2:11 speaks. The conclusions Barth draws regarding eternal life are characteristically idiosyncratic. Rather than contrasting the finitude and mortality of temporal life with the immortality of eternal life, Barth understands eternal life as the ‘glorification’ by God of ‘[man’s] finite and mortal being’ (CD III/2; 1936: 633). He also describes it as the participation of that finite, mortal life, which is ‘our real but only life’, in ‘the eternal life of God’ (CD III/2; Barth 1936–1975: 624). Contrary to what one might expect, Barth’s unqualified emphasis on the goodness of mortality all but undermines any contrast between this life and the next, just as his exclusive emphasis on the reality of new creation in Christ all but undermined any distinction between the new creation and an original creation.

Alexander Schmemann resolutely rejects this modern accommodation of death, taking his cue from 1 Cor 15:26: ‘The last enemy to be destroyed is death’. For Schmemann, insofar as Christ conquers death, the Christian is called neither to console herself with the thought of another world as home of the immortal soul, nor to come to terms with the death-dealing structures of this world, but – in the company of Christ, who weeps at Lazarus’ grave (John 11:35) – to protest against those structures in the name of Life (Schmemann 2003). The life of the world to come is none other than this life, restored, redeemed and fulfilled in Christ (Schmemann 2003: 106).
Despite the surface disagreements regarding the newness entailed by the resurrection, and the status of death, it is possible to detect an underlying unanimity. Arguably, what each position is intended to safeguard is the conviction that the resurrection enjoys a finality which lends this life its definitive or conclusive significance. Rahner captures this insight particularly well. On the one hand, he characterizes death as that which brings this life of pilgrimage to its end, ‘imposing upon us an attitude of radical seriousness toward this life’. On the other hand and as the other side of the coin, temporal life finds its consummation in ‘an eternity [...] that is not to be destroyed in mere succession’ (Rahner 1961: 35–36). Contrasting human history as that which is ‘given once and for all’ with the ‘eternal return of all things’ (1961: 36), Rahner recapitulates a traditional argument against pagan affirmations of the transmigration of souls. For example, Gregory of Nyssa (On the Soul and the Resurrection [Soul]; 1994b: 453–455) critiques such a theory for its inability to give preference to life in heaven over life in a tree: ‘[a] circle, in fact, of the same sequences will be perpetually traversed, where the soul at whatever point it may be, has no resting-place’ (Gregory of Nyssa 1994b: 455). By contrast, heavenly life (in Gregory’s account) is such a resting place, and in its unambiguously blessed character it grounds the possibility of virtue in this life (cf. 1994b: 431).

In short, resurrection life is not continuation in time, but the consummation of a time that has been brought to an end. Its newness is not temporal newness. Its futurity is not temporal futurity. This truth is brought home concretely in Kelly Brown Douglas’ vision and characterization of ‘God’s just future’ (2021). The ‘resurrection hope’ she voices serves to expose the gap between the unjust present, in which Black lives in the United States are ‘worth a half-cent’, and God’s just future in which Black lives will matter (Douglas 2021: 189, echoing Frederick Douglass). It also serves to traverse that gap, by signalling and embodying God’s future in the midst of the unjust present (Douglas 2021: 190–198). The resurrection signifies not another life apart from this one, nor its continuation in the future, but its definitive redemption.

His idiosyncrasies notwithstanding, Barth is united with Gregory, Rahner, and Douglas in professing the definitive significance of this life, going so far as to declare it our ‘only life’ (CD III/1; 1936: 624). This indeed is his purpose in affirming the goodness of death. The resurrection of the dead is understood, conversely, as the revelation of this life in its full glory: redemption not from it but of it (CD III/1; 1936: 633). For Sonderegger, the incompleteness of eternal life throws into relief the completeness of this life, inviting renewed affirmation of its autonomy and density. The life to come, moreover, while new in its radiant transparency, is simply the hidden significance of this life brought finally to light.

In sum, whether as restoration, consummation, or renewal, the newness of resurrection life intensifies rather than detracts from the significance of this life. Those who affirm the naturalness of death do so precisely in order to affirm the finality it lends this life: without
death, so the reasoning goes, there would be no completion, and each moment would float in a sea of relativity (cf. Rahner 1961: 36). Those who deny death’s naturalness root that finality in the resting place of eternity, when the sea will be no more. As so often, Augustine captures the requisite dynamic with unrivalled clear-sightedness. While not to be attained amidst the evils of this life, our final happiness is, for him, the eternal rest that is sought and signified in each of this life’s restless moments (City 19.4; Augustine of Hippo 1998: 918–925).

Before commencing the next section, it is worth considering the ramifications of the finality of the resurrection for scientifically-engaged perspectives on the resurrection of the dead. The finality of the resurrection entails, as we have seen, that the life of the world to come is not a continuation of this life but a consummation of it. As Douglas has it, ‘God’s just future’ is not a remote temporal horizon but interrupts and calls us to account in the present. Treatments constructively informed by science, by contrast, are obliged to envisage resurrection life as in some sense a futural extension of the present cosmos, however much discontinuity with its present conditions is entertained (e.g. Russell 2008). Once the radical and total character of the transformation entailed is reckoned with – as bringing about something utterly new that is at once the redemption of this life – any foothold for scientific speculation is removed. As Nancey Murphy (speaking as a neuroscientifically-informed ‘nonreductive physicalist’) avows, ‘We can say nothing of what this [eschatological] transformation [of the cosmos] will be like in scientific terms because all science is based on the way things are in this aeon’ (Murphy 2011: 81). For a range of perspectives and interactions that bear out this analysis, see the collection edited by Peters, Russell, and Welker (2002).

3 Individuallity

But someone will ask, ‘How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?’ You foolish person! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. And what you sow is not the body that is to be, but a bare kernel, perhaps of wheat or of some other grain. But God gives it a body as he has chosen, and to each kind of seed its own body. (1 Cor 15:35–38)

The body has been, and remains, a contested site. Christians are unanimous that the resurrection of the dead entails the resurrection of the body. However, there is no unanimity about what this means. Paul’s question, ‘How are the dead raised?’, is as pressing now as it was then. And his ‘answer’, a few verses later, ‘[I]t is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body’ (1 Cor 15:44), serves only to intensify the attendant ambiguities.
On the side of unanimity, the affirmation of bodily resurrection goes together with an affirmation of this life. If the confession of resurrection to new life underscores the significance of this life, then the confession of bodily resurrection does so concretely and specifically. But what exactly is being affirmed? To talk about the body is to call for the specification of an affirmation that is presently vague, requiring a decision about what is good in this life. What is to be preserved, what is to be healed, and what is to be purged away? The question of newness in this context becomes a fraught one, giving rise to the more specific question of the continuity and discontinuity between this life and the next. While this can easily degenerate into technical discussion about identity – who is the ‘I’ that is raised? And how am I the ‘I’ that I was in this life? – it may be that the real significance of such discussion lies in the question of the good. What is the good that is raised and thus affirmed? This question will be returned to at the end of the section.

In a technological and ecological age such as our own, the contested character of the body is heightened, arguably to a point of contradiction. On the one hand, a schooling in evolutionary science and a heightened ecological awareness serve to confirm the inextricability of life from bodiliness, and thus the inseparability of the person from her body – arguably even the identity of the person with her body. This makes the idea of a soul in a disembodied state surviving the body’s transition to corpse unthinkable (see, e.g. McFague 1993 and Kelsey’s account of the human being as ‘personal body’; Kelsey 2009: chs 6 and 7). On the other hand, the increasing malleability of the body (to the point where, in some virtual contexts, it appears almost to evaporate completely) conjures a world in which body (or at least this body of flesh and blood) is no longer necessary. A similar fantasy is entertained in experiments in both replication and ‘body hopping’ (see also Caroline Walker Bynum’s discussion in Bynum 1995b).

In different ways the television series Doll House, Doctor Who, Battle Star Galactica, and the episode of Black Mirror, ‘San Junipero’, play with the idea of either replicable or extractable personal identities, raising the following kinds of question. Can the ‘same’ person be multiplied over many replica bodies? The series Battle Star Galactica features the ‘cylons’ – originally AI creations of humans – who exist in multiple identical copies of the ‘same’ person, each of whom is on the one hand differently individuated, but on the other hand intrinsically connected to all the others. Or can the ‘same’ personal identity be saved virtually, as in ‘San Junipero’, which envisages a ‘heaven’ that is in fact virtual but is experienced as real? And can personalities be virtually stored so as to be downloaded in other bodies, as in Doll House, in which humans can be wiped and then rewired with another personal identity, whether real or artificial? Or can the ‘same’ person’s life be lived in a series of different bodies such as in Doctor Who, which envisages the multiple lives of the Doctor, each lived in a different body? Despite the limits of these fantasies, they involve an attenuation of bodily rootedness which pulls against the bodily
dependence of which the ecological crisis has made us so vividly aware. Answering the question ‘with what kind of body are the dead raised?’ entails making a judgment about bodily dependence and bodily malleability, or – in others words – navigating this cultural contradiction. Historical debates concerning bodily resurrection within the Christian tradition are ready resources for guidance in this quest.

### 3.1 Persistence or transformation?

There was a wide spectrum of belief within the ancient church concerning the body to be raised (Lehtipuu 2015: ch. 3; Bynum 1995a: part 1). Will it be a body of flesh like our earthly bodies, or will it be transformed into a heavenly body no longer of the flesh? If fleshly, will it be of the same identical particles that conjoin to make the present body, or will the body (in flux even in this life) retain its identity in some other fashion, such as its form? Will it retain its gender, marital or ecclesial status, or will heavenly life transcend such earthly characteristics? Will it retain its deformities and scars, or will its perfection be incompatible with these?

Irenaeus and Tertullian stand near the beginning of a trend, which persists at least into the Middle Ages, of insisting that it is the same flesh and the same particles that are raised in the body’s resurrection. Only such an identity of matter ensures that it is really ‘my’ body that is raised, not another (e.g. *On the Resurrection of the Flesh* [Resurrection] 52; Tertullian 1885: 585; *Against Heresies* 5.12.3; Irenaus of Lyons 1996: 538). Commenting on 1 Enoch 61:5, Tertullian reasons:

> You will ask, Will then the fishes and other animals and carnivorous birds be raised again, in order that they may vomit up what they have consumed […]? Certainly not. But [they] are mentioned in relation to the restoration of flesh and blood, in order more emphatically to express the resurrection of such bodies as have even been devoured […] Now I apprehend that in the case of Jonah we have a fair proof of this divine power, when he comes forth from the fish’s belly uninjured. (Resurrection 32; Tertullian 1885: 568)

Tertullian elsewhere compares the resurrection of the ‘selfsame’ flesh to the reconstitution of a ship from its shattered pieces (*Resurrection* 60; Tertullian 1885: 592). Caroline Walker Bynum understands this insistence on material reassemblage to signify resurrection as a triumph over change, which is characterized negatively as decay. Paul’s seed metaphor in 1 Cor 15:36–38 is thus pressed so as to emphasize the persistence of a material core through the change from a decaying seed into an ear of corn, signifying not an inner transformation but the very same flesh being newly adorned with incorruption. The change thus paradoxically ensures changelessness (Bynum 1995a: 27–58; *Resurrection* 52; Tertullian 1885: 586). As in the above quotation, decay is frequently rendered in terms of
digestion, the metaphor becoming so well-established that by the twelfth century death was represented artistically as a devouring mouth which vomits up its victims at the resurrection (Bynum 1995a: see plates 12–16). In keeping with this, chain consumption and cannibalism became extreme test-case scenarios in arguments concerning the philosophical plausibility of the resurrection of the body (e.g. On the Resurrection of the Dead 4–5; Athenagoras 1994: 151; ST Supplement [Sup], 80.4 arg 3 and ad 3; Aquinas 1981: 2885–2887), the Eucharist in turn being understood as the guarantee of ultimate triumph over the destruction of digestion (Bynum 1995a: 39–42, discussing Irenaeus and Tertullian).

Alongside this trajectory in which the resurrection overcomes ‘change as decay’, there is a positive trajectory in which change is associated with fertility and growth. Paul’s seed metaphor is drawn upon to this end, and the resurrection is understood as the body’s full flowering (Bynum 1995a: ch. 2). Epitomising this position, Origen understands bodily identity not in terms of the continuity of matter but formally in terms of an internal power of change (Against Celsus 5.23; Origen of Alexandria 1994a: 553; Principles 2.10.3; Origen of Alexandria 1994b: 294). As Outi Lehtipuu narrates, however, Origen was later accused by Jerome of effectively denying the resurrection of the body (soma in Greek and corpus in Latin) in the fuller sense of the resurrection of the flesh (sarx in Greek and caro in Latin) (Lehtipuu 2015: 152). Jerome here recapitulates something like Tertullian’s critique of his own adversaries. What Lehtipuu shows is that what was at stake across the whole spectrum of ancient Christian belief, including Gnostic sects, was less whether the body was raised than what kind of body would be raised, and specifically what kind of resemblance, if any, it would have to the earthly body of flesh (Lehtipuu 2015: esp. 192).

The tension between identity as material continuity (following Tertullian) and identity as formal continuity (following Origen) is found not just between thinkers but within individual thinkers. For example, Gregory of Nyssa can be found arguing, on the one hand, that the very same particles of the body which are scattered after death are conjoined at the resurrection, recognized by the soul that has guarded over them in their dispersal (Soul; Gregory of Nyssa 1994b: 445–446). On the other hand, acknowledging that the body is in a constant state of flux throughout its life, Gregory argues that the resurrection means the reconstitution of the body’s original ‘form’, the consequences of the fall being left behind as naked grains spring into full and perfect cornfields (Soul; Gregory of Nyssa 1994b: 462–468).

The same tension recurs in Aquinas. First, addressing the question of the ashes to which the body has been reduced, he argues that by divine providence the soul will be reunited with the identical material elements it lost in death (Sup. 78.3 co; Aquinas 1981: 2876–2877), asking even whether they will be restored to the same parts of the body (Sup. 79.3; Aquinas 1981: 2881). Second, however, in keeping with an Aristotelian
understanding of the soul as the form of the body, Aquinas entertains the possibility that the matter of the body ebbs and flows while its form remains, just like a city in which the people come and go (Sup. 80.4 co; Aquinas 1981: 2885–2887). As Bynum narrates, however, formal solutions to the problem of identity such as Origen’s or Aquinas’ – despite their philosophical elegance and sporadic historical re-emergence – lost out to the ‘commonsense’ materialism of the more dominant trajectory (Bynum 1995a: ch. 6). A spectacular exception to this rule is Dante’s vision of heaven as a rose (Paradiso 31.1; Dante Alighieri 2006: 298–299), in striking contrast with the scholastic theologians’ characterization of heaven as crystalline stasis (Bynum 1995a: 304). Dante’s rose is in motion with desire, and it is instead the frozen depths of hell that are in stasis. If ever the triumph of ‘change as fertility’ over ‘change as decay’ is to be encountered, it is here.

3.2 Individuality versus particularity

Given the allure of a vision such as Dante’s, what accounts for the ultimate dominance of a static materialism? The problem that persists, even within the philosophical solution which otherwise seems so satisfying, is the problem of individuality. It is clear, on the one hand, that the individual cannot be identified with the particular matter of which the body consists at any one time, given the ebb and flow of that matter. On the other hand, a formal principle of identity either vanishes into sheer potential for change (Origen’s internal power), or carries a pattern that needs individuating (Aquinas’ soul as form of the body) – but in neither case itself provides a seat of individuality. Thought experiments concerning cannibalism are driven by precisely this problem of individuality: how is one person’s individuality preserved in distinction from another’s when one can incorporate the other’s flesh into her own? What does it mean to say that this is my flesh? The same problem is being explored today through thought experiments in artificial intelligence. If ‘my’ identity can be stored electronically and downloaded into another body, is the resulting individual still ‘me’ (cf. Doll House)? Or, if it turns out that my bodily experience is simulated, the real ‘me’ being electronically generated data stored in a microchip, does individuality turn out to be an illusion (cf. ‘San Junipero’)?

It is arguably the problem of individuality that gives rise to ancient and modern controversy concerning what is preserved in the resurrection. If I no longer bear this scar, am no longer musical, am no longer a mother or sister, am no longer autistic, am no longer female – will I still be me? What is essential to who someone is, and what is accidental? Against the Origenists, Jerome takes a view at one end of the spectrum, according to which not only gender is retained in heaven but also marital and social hierarchical status (Bynum 1995a: 90–91). Gregory of Nyssa, by contrast, associating not only mortality but also other facets of earthly life with the fall, understands heavenly life radically to transcend the conditions of this life. This includes not only procreation, feeding, old age, and disease, but also gender (Soul; Gregory of Nyssa 1994b: 465; and Making 16.7–17.5; Gregory of Nyssa 1994a:
Gregory cites both Gal 3:28 and Luke 20:35–36, Jesus’ saying that there will be no marriage in heaven. At the same time, and by contrast, he suggests that the scar on his sister Macrina’s breast which remained after the miraculous healing of a cancer will be preserved at the resurrection (Bynum 1995a: 86).

It might be suggested that Macrina’s scar is a clue both to the problem of individuality and to the solution. A scar, more than one’s gender, points beyond kind to the individual who is ‘one of a kind’. It tells a story. Gender may also be understood to tell a story, but because we are so accustomed to thinking in gender-types it is much harder to reach a storied account of gender. We have seen that Gregory holds in tension an account of resurrection as reassemblage of the pre-mortem bits of a body and an account of it as the full-flowering of form. His account of gender falls on the latter side. As Sarah Coakley argues, while the bodies that rise shed their genitals, the persons who are raised are precisely those persons whose lives are gendered stories – quintessentially, stories in which gender is subverted through lives of ascesis (Coakley 2002: 163–165). In keeping with this, Bynum argues that, throughout his wrestling with the nature of the resurrection body, Gregory has in mind the body of his sister Macrina, both in the life she lives towards death and in her eventual death (Bynum 1995a: 83–86). What this suggests is that the question of the resurrection of the body is no abstract question. It is not about kinds, or even particulars. It is about irreducible and irreplaceable individuals. Macrina’s scar signifies just this individuality.

The tension to be found in Gregory’s writings and in antique Christianity more broadly is arguably revived in contemporary gender discourse, and identity discourse more generally. Here, too, the aim (at least on one reading) is to do justice to individuality. Individual persons or individual groups of people have historically been overlooked, marginalized and oppressed, being made to conform to norms that cannot account for their difference, or being treated as inferior to those who do conform. The contemporary response has been to acknowledge and affirm ‘identities’ that do not fit the norm, and thereby bring the norm into question. The irony in this response is that the multiplication of identities serves merely to create further (if more specific) kinds of identity. It cannot get at individuals, who continue to elude the dynamics of classification involved. Within gender discourse specifically, the result is an oscillation between two positions. On the one hand, there are those who espouse ‘gender constructivism’ – whether in the form of Judith Butler’s ‘performativity’ or of performative accounts of transgender identity. On the other hand, there are those who rely on a ‘gender essentialism’ – whether in biologically rooted forms of feminism, accounts of transgender identity that affirm an inner gender identity at odds with the person’s original biology, or traditional complementarianism.

These poles map surprisingly well onto the antique tension between formal identity (with its emphasis on fluidity and transformation) and identity rooted in the persistence of matter
(with its common-sense materialism). Coakley explores the first of the two poles in her discussion of Butler and Gregory of Nyssa, detecting a latent eschatological yearning in Butler’s discourse of gender subversion (Coakley 2002). Susannah Cornwall, building on Coakley, argues that gender identity is rendered provisional in light of the eschaton and before the God who transcends all creaturely distinctions. She does so while affirming expressions of transgender identity that would seem to reinforce gender binaries, arguing that the onus to enact provisionality is on ‘those who do not have unusual configurations of sex and gender’ (Cornwall 2009: 31). At the other end of the spectrum is Barth’s theology of the human being as determined by the differential relationship between male and female, in correspondence with the eschatological relationship between Christ and his community (CD III/4, section 54.1; CD III/2, section 45.3; Barth 1936–1975). Beyond Gen 1:27, his argument is rooted in Gen 2:18–25 (among other passages), and the way it is taken up (for example) in Eph 5:25–33. Barth’s affirmation that the differentiation between male and female persists in the world to come recalls, in a different idiom, the medieval affirmation of the persistence and integrity of the matter to be resurrected.

One way of construing this abiding tension is to find an emphasis within the ‘formal’ pole on relations, with the danger that individual ‘things’ disappear, and an emphasis within the ‘material’ pole on ‘things’, with the danger that their relational significance is overlooked. In either case the individual is lost from view, beyond either the relations in which it is caught up or the kinds it instantiates. One might say that the problem of individuality, whether explored through cannibalism and chain consumption in debates about the bodily resurrection, through experiments in artificial intelligence, or contemporary gender discourse, has to do with the monopoly of the scientific method of classification on Western thought since its emergence in ancient Greek philosophy. To think in terms of genus and species, in terms of kinds, is to get a handle on particularity – but to bypass individuality. R. G. Collingwood, in his exploration of the difference between scientific and historical thinking, argues that while science classifies, turning individuals (as members of a class) into particulars, history successfully accounts for the individual as a unique part of a unique whole (Collingwood 2011: 154–221). Individuals are related to one another as mutually implicated parts of a larger whole, and are not merely isolated members of a class. Insofar as the whole of which the individual is part is ultimately the entire cosmos (and thus beyond the remit of any historian), Collingwood’s account implicitly calls for an eschatology (cf. Collingwood 2011: 231–246, where Collingwood indicates an alternative way out of the problem).

Several eschatological thinkers might be drawn upon to complete Collingwood’s account. If only indirectly, these thinkers arguably overcome the tension between persistent matter and malleable form. As we have already seen, Sonderegger understands the eschaton as that which transforms what was self-enclosed, autonomous, complete, and opaque into something open, dependent, incomplete and transparent. The mutual implicatedness
of all creatures, and their dependence on God – now known only indirectly – will be fully manifest. ‘Our spiritual bodies will manifest in their own constitution, their unique reality, their *haecceitas*, and their essential tie to all other creatures’ (Sonderegger 2016b: 125). In this context of mutually implicated parts and wholes, ‘thinghood’ and relationality are both affirmed as inseparably related.

Herbert McCabe complements Sonderegger by offering an account of bodiliness that can accommodate her radical vision. In the context of a discussion of the Eucharist (implicitly recalling Reformation eucharistic controversies concerning the character of Christ’s heavenly body), McCabe argues for a construal of the body as medium of communication—and thus of bodies as the way creatures inhabit and share worlds of meaning with one another (McCabe 2005: ch. 10). McCabe moves away from scientifically-informed accounts of bodiliness in terms of space and time, extension and movement, mass and gravity. This makes way for the affirmation that the resurrected Christ – available not only to some but to all, not only partially but fully – is more bodily than he was in the days of his flesh, when his bodily presence was also a form of absence. At the general resurrection, moreover, we too will become pure media of communication, no longer opaque to one another. A similar account can be found in Schmemann. Having acknowledged that bodily matter is in constant flux, he concludes that ‘[i]n essence, my body is my relationship to the world, to others’. The resurrection is ‘not about the eternity of matter, but about its final spiritualization; about the world that finally becomes truly a body […] fully communion with Life’ (Schmemann 2003: 42–44). McCabe and Schmemann find a way of articulating formal identity in which ‘thinghood’ does not dissolve into relationality but is consummated by it, as each thing becomes fully itself in its communicative presence to others.

Much earlier, this is how Augustine interpreted the ‘spiritual bodies’ envisaged by Paul:

> God will then be known to us and visible to us in such a way that we shall see Him by the spirit in ourselves, in one another, in Himself […] and in every created thing which shall then exist; and also by the body we shall see Him in every body to which the keen vision of the eye of the spiritual body shall extend. The thoughts of each of us will then also be made manifest to all. *(City 22.29; Augustine of Hippo 1998: 1177–1178)*

In the present, for Augustine, we are weighed down by corruptible bodies in which we deceive and can be deceived. When we know no longer by faith but by sight, deception will be obsolete. Our mutual implicatedness in corruption will be transformed into the mutual implicatedness of the *totus Christus* – the whole Christ – in which each of Christ’s members will be honoured as part of the harmonious and luminous whole. Drawing on the Pauline metaphor of the church as the body of Christ (in, e.g. 1 Cor 12), Augustine develops the *totus Christus* metaphor in his *Expositions of the Psalms* (2000).
It was suggested above that the real significance of discussion of the body to be raised lies in the question of the good. The discussion now comes full circle, as Augustine’s *totus Christus* can be said to be the whole cosmos liberated from its corrupting distortions, God filling all in all (Eph 1:23). The good, as common to all, is what unites rather than divides (cf. Eph 1:10). Just so, our transformed bodies as (in McCabe’s terms) pure media of communication will no longer divide us from one another, but rather enable us to be fully present to one another: each to the good of the other as all share in the radically indivisible goodness of God.

Macrina’s scar is a paradigmatic example of this goodness (it is noteworthy that scars, especially those of martyrs, feature significantly in traditional discussions of the resurrection body; see e.g. Bynum 1995a: 265). It is at once thoroughly individual, telling her particular story of illness and recovery, and at the same time replete in its relationality, signifying among other things her modesty, suffering, and miraculous healing by Christ (Bynum 1995a: 86). Moreover, it makes her transparent to Christ in a way that manifests her eschatological membership of the *totus Christus*. Her scar is, in this way, an irreducible and irreplaceable part of that eschatological whole.

Macrina’s scar, itself evocative of Christ’s wounds, might also be a good entrance to thinking about mental and physical disability in the context of the resurrection. As Amos Yong reflects, ‘Is it possible to conceive that the glory and power of the resurrection body will derive not from some able-bodied ideal of perfection but from its mediating the gracious activity of God?’ (Yong 2007: 18). Yong’s vision is a pneumatological one that takes up the emphasis on both individuality and healed relationality: ‘Salvation in this scheme of things is not so much the curing of biomedical afflictions, but the healing of human lives and relationships so that each redeemed vessel can now witness to the saving work of God uniquely in his or her language’ (Yong 2007: 15). The prioritization of nondivisive goodness invites discrimination between aspects of earthly disability which are irredeemably bound up with suffering and aspects which might – in an eschatological context free of present oppressive structures – be celebrated. However difficult this discrimination is in the present, one can be sure that nothing pertaining to the individual in her unsubstitutable goodness will be left unredeemed.

4 Communality

For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. (1 Cor 15:22)

The comprehensiveness of Paul’s vision is striking. But an urgent question that has dogged this verse, and other ones like it (e.g. Rom 11:32, Eph 1:9–10, 2:4–6, Titus 2:11, John 12:32) is ‘Who (or what) is included in this all?’ Are only the righteous dead raised,
or are the wicked dead raised to eternal damnation? Or, alternatively, is Christ’s ‘making
alive’ necessarily all-encompassing and saving (the position embraced by universal
salvationists)? Further, are only humans raised from the dead, or does the resurrection
include all living creatures? These questions have to do with both the inclusivity of the
resurrection of the dead and the goal of that resurrection. Such preoccupations have
had an indelible effect on the tradition in disputes over the doctrine of predestination and
literalized timetables concerning death, Christ’s return, the general resurrection, the Last
Judgment, and consignment to heaven or hell – often graphically portrayed.

It can be argued that these questions, despite their dominance in the Christian
imagination, are not the right ones, at least not in relation to 1 Cor 15:22. What if Paul’s
‘all’ concerns not the inclusive extent of resurrection life but its communal character?
The above questions presuppose an individualism (which humans? which creatures?)
that is not at home in the context of this alternative concern. After a brief rehearsal of the
disputes attending the traditional questions, this section culminates in a consideration of
the communality of resurrection life.

4.1 Resurrection to heaven and hell?

Universal salvation (the belief that all, not only some, are raised to eternal salvation)
was a viable option in the first few centuries CE (see e.g. Principles 3.6.3; Origen of
Alexandria 1994b: 345; and Soul; 1994b: 461). Augustine, however, consolidated the
grimier alternative. He articulated a doctrine of predestination according to which God’s
mercy is extended only to a small number of the massa damnata (‘condemned mass’),
the rest of whom receive God’s just judgment (see e.g. The Predestination of the Saints;
Augustine of Hippo 1999). He affirms that ‘all’ the dead are bodily raised at the last
judgment (City 20.14–15; 1998: 998–1001); the blessed are raised to salvation and the
wicked to damnation (City 20.21, 21.1; 1998: 1014). Augustine goes to considerable
lengths, moreover, to argue for the possibility of eternal bodily torment (City 21.2–4; 1998:
1045–1052). Thomas Aquinas (with a doctrine of single predestination, in which salvation
is a result of God’s active will and damnation merely of God’s permissive will) and John
Calvin (with his more austere doctrine of double predestination, in which God does not
merely permit but actively wills the damnation of some) follow in Augustine’s footsteps.
See Commentary on the Letter of Saint Paul to the Romans, ch. 9, lecture 3; Aquinas

In modern theology, the discomfort of a doctrine of hell has become more strongly felt,
but the weight of the tradition – and conflicting indications within the Bible – has made it
difficult for universal salvation to be affirmed as more than a hope. Hans Urs von Balthasar
sets two series of statements within the New Testament over against one another, one
that seems to affirm a dual outcome to God’s judgment (e.g. Mark 16:16; Matt 25:31–46;
Matt 5:29–30; Mark 9:43; Rev 21:8; Matt 22:13; Matt 25:46) and another affirming the salvation of ‘all’ (e.g. Rom 11:32; Eph 1:10; John 12:32; Rev 1:17–18). He concludes that no synthesis should be sought by us as those who are under God’s judgment, and that the only appropriate posture is one of hope in God’s will and ability to save all (Balthasar 2014). Karl Barth emphasizes the ‘in Christ’ of Paul’s formula in 1 Cor 15:22. Innovatively reworking Calvin’s doctrine of double predestination, he names Christ both the elect and the rejected one, and thus the one in whom all others find their destiny. Christ, however, is rejected precisely in order to be elected. Insofar as God’s ‘no’ is subordinated to God’s final ‘yes’, no room is left for ultimate rejection (CD II/2; Barth 1936–1975). Whether Barth’s position amounts to universal salvation is hotly disputed. What is clearer is his subordination of the question of individual salvation and damnation to God’s unitive and communal elective purpose in Christ. More recently, David Bentley Hart has offered a trenchant case for universal salvation, arguing against even a ‘hopeful universalism’ such as Balthasar’s (Hart 2019). Hart comes even closer than Barth to a focus on the communality of resurrection life in his account of persons as mutually implicated in one another (Hart 2019: 130–158).

The tradition’s tendency to consider individuals in isolation from one another has enabled over-literalized conceptions and graphic portrayals of the events involved in the general resurrection and Last Judgment, to which the souls of the dead are brought, reunited with their bodies after their bodiless interim sojourn in hell, purgatory or heaven (see plates 1–36 in Bynum 1995a). These go hand in hand with an over-literalized reading of Dante’s Divine Comedy, whose focus is the time between death and the general resurrection. In this period the souls of the dead, equipped only with aerial bodies, get their just deserts in hell, purgatory or heaven. Many aspects of the work complicate the view that these places, hell in particular, are to be understood as literal or final destinations. To get stuck on the question of each individual’s retributive fate is arguably to take a hellish perspective. The heavenly perspective, by contrast, is an intrinsically merciful, loving and communal one (see Montemaggi 2016).

4.2 Human beings only or all living creatures?

It will not go unnoticed that the whole discussion so far – concerning who is raised and for what – has been framed in thoroughly anthropocentric terms. The anthropocentrism that has been characteristic of the Christian tradition has meant that the fate of non-human creatures tends not to invite explicit discussion. Where it has been discussed, non-human creatures are typically excluded from those who are raised from the dead to the extent that they cannot rationally participate in God (e.g. Principles 3.6.2; Origen of Alexandria 1994b: 345). A focus on the human soul remains even alongside belief in cosmic recapitulation, with rare exceptions (e.g. Against Heresies 5.33.4; Irenaeus of Lyons 1996: 563, arguing for a literal rather than allegorical interpretation of Isa 11:6–9). St Francis of Assisi’s
preaching to the birds stands out against this background for its eccentricity. Even modern affirmations of the inextricable interconnectedness of the universe do not necessarily dislodge a human focus. Rahner, for example, argues that the soul, which is open to the world in life, will be brought into greater intimacy with the whole in death, becoming not a-cosmic but all-cosmic, the glorified body perfectly expressing its relatedness to all things (Rahner 1961: 26–34). But his focus is the human soul alone. This can perhaps be explained by a tradition of considering the human to be the microcosm of the whole creation, in whose destiny all other creatures are enfolded. Carmody Grey draws attention to this tradition, finding Pope Francis’s encyclical letter *Laudato Si’* to be in continuity with it, despite the document’s apparent break with a traditional anthropocentrism (Grey 2020). Thus the letter’s ‘radically inclusive eschatology’ and its affirmation of the ‘intrinsic dignity’ of nonhuman creation (Grey 2020: 872) are maintained in the context of the claim that other creatures find their good with and through human beings.

In light of rising concerns for the health of the planet, and the destruction and suffering at human hands of its many species, the dominance of the tradition’s anthropocentrism has begun to loosen (see *Ecotheology*). Jürgen Moltmann, writing with the ecological crisis in mind, is explicit in affirming the resurrection of non-human living creatures, taking seriously the ‘all flesh’ of texts like Joel 2:28 and Ps 145:21, without reliance on the traditional framework of the human being as microcosm (Moltmann 1996: 70). Deliberately narrowing his focus to animals in particular, David Clough argues for a full-throated affirmation of the independent life of non-human animals before God, referring to a host of biblical passages in support of his position, including Gen 1:22, Ps 104, Ps 148, Jonah 2:11, Joel 2:22, and Job 38–41 (Clough 2012: 40–43). He builds on but goes beyond the otherwise expansive redemptive vision of John Wesley, who affirms (on the basis of Rom 8:19–23, among other biblical passages) the eschatological inclusion of all animals – but only by way of human mediation (Clough 2012: ch. 6).

Sallie McFague combines the ecologically-motivated universal horizon of Moltmann’s eschatology with Clough’s affirmation of the independent worth of non-human creatures before God. As interdependent parts of an organically envisaged whole, all creatures – and first and foremost the vulnerable and outcast – are included in the resurrected Christ, who is the cosmic Christ. For McFague, this means not just the human outcast but also the many exploited creatures of the natural world. She thereby extends Matt 25:40 beyond the human family to include ‘the least of these’ among all earthly creatures (McFague 1993: 179–195). Unlike Clough, whose widening of the tradition’s scope to include animals is carried out within the terms of the long tradition, McFague departs in some significant ways from traditional doctrinal affirmations, drawing on *evolutionary science* to critique the Christian tradition for the dualisms she holds it to perpetuate. In particular, eschewing talk
of an afterlife, her eschatology comes to be about a new way of seeing and thus acting in the present (McFague 1993: 198–205).

Both the debate about universal salvation and the debate about whether the resurrection extends beyond the human are, on the face of it, debates about the scope of resurrection life: who (and what) is included? But might this be the wrong question? The move beyond anthropocentrism, with its emphasis (especially in McFague’s account) on cosmic interdependence, already points in an alternative direction. What if the ‘all’ of 1 Cor 15:22 were understood as an answer rather to the question: ‘What is the character of resurrection life?’ The ‘all’ would then signify not merely that no members of the class of all creatures are excluded, but that the resurrection life is radically communal: as participation in the good, it unites rather than divides. As John Milbank says, ‘[o]nly the bodies which we have in common arise’ (Milbank 1990: 411). Drawing on Augustine, he makes this claim in the context of an argument for the collective character of virtue, as that which cannot be privately possessed by one person at the expense of another but can be had only in the circulation of forgiveness, in which each bears the guilt of the other. Milbank’s claim evokes Augustine’s account of the good as that which is enjoyed in common by all (City 22.30; Augustine of Hippo 1998: 1179). God, the supreme Good, is not a good that one can have at the expense of others, and by the same token is not a good which requires the sacrifice of one’s good for the sake of the good of another (Milbank 2003: ch. 8). As radically shareable, it is radically non-competitive. It is ironic that this vision of commonality is to be found in the same theologian (Augustine) who sets the course for a divisive doctrine of predestination.

The communality of the resurrection was implicitly affirmed in the above account of individuals not as members of a class but as mutually implicated parts of a whole – made transparent in their relatedness to one another at the resurrection. Insofar as each part implies the whole, it is nonsensical to ask whether all parts are saved: on this logic, the salvation of one entails the salvation of all (cf. Hart 2019: 130–158). If this reframing of the question forecloses the debates regarding the scope of inclusion, it does so on the basis not of a quantitative but of a qualitative ‘all’. It is arguably just this kind of ‘all’ that Julian of Norwich has in mind when she reflects, in the following words, on God’s salvation:

For if I look at myself in particular, I am nothing at all; but in general I am, I hope, in oneness of love with all my fellow Christians. For in this oneness depends the life of all humanity who will be saved. […] [I]n those who will be saved all is comprehended: that is to say, all that is made, and the maker of all; for in man is God, and God is in everything. (Revelations of Divine Love, Long Text, ch. 9; Julian of Norwich 2015: 52)
It is a matter, for Julian, not of inclusion but of oneness: not of counting up the number of the saved, but of recognizing the mutual implicatedness of salvific life.

5 Hope

If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied. (1 Cor 15:19)

5.1 A Nietzschean critique and liberationist response

Hope in an afterlife is typically critiqued for the quietism or apathy to which it disposes one in this life. If happiness cannot be had in this life, as Augustine forcefully argues (City 19.4–10; 1998: 918–932), then why work to improve the conditions of the present? If justice is something only to be expected in the afterlife, why seek justice in the present? Friedrich Nietzsche is well-known for his searing rendition of this critique. In On the Genealogy of Morals, he expostulates:

– And what do they call the hope which serves to console them for all the suffering of life – their phantasmagoria of anticipated future salvation?

Nietzsche interprets Christian hope in terms of an impotent acquiescence, a self-flagellating submissiveness, passed off as virtue but harbouring a suppressed vengefulness. He captures this state in his term ressentiment, exposing it as fundamentally an attitude of life-denial.

It is in liberationist theologies (of various stripes) that the most effective and powerful response to this critique can be heard. Although Nietzsche speaks from outside the Christian faith, one might argue that such theologies find in him an ally, as one who puts his finger on a problem internal to the Christian tradition that cries out for Christian repair. Liberation theologians call Christians to account for failing to heed the cries of the poor and the oppressed while acquiescing in and perpetuating institutional and political structures that sustain systemic power inequalities and large-scale suffering. In doing so they remind Christians of their scripturally-derived preferential option for the poor: justice for the poor and the oppressed cannot be postponed but must be sought now.

Prominent in this sphere is James Cone, who in his A Black Theology of Liberation compellingly articulates the logic of ‘justice now’. As a foil for his argument, it is worth
summarizing an alternative logic according to which present injustices must be endured with submissive patience in the knowledge and hope that true justice will be meted out by God at the Last Judgment. Augustine is eloquent in his evocation of the sufferings of the present. He concludes:

We are in the midst of evils, and we must endure them with patience until we come to those good things [...] where there will no longer be anything which we must endure. Such is the salvation which, in the world to come, will also itself be our final happiness. (City 19.4; Augustine of Hippo 1998: 924)

In our fallen world where even peace time – always under the threat of further war – falls short of the peace that nothing can disturb, it is futile to seek the happiness of lasting peace. Likewise, there can be no true justice when human judges are compelled to operate in ignorance of the consciences of those they judge (City 19.5–6; Augustine of Hippo 1998: 925–928). Apparently in keeping with such a logic is Augustine’s distinction in Teaching Christianity between use and enjoyment. This world is to be used for the sake of the ultimate enjoyment of God. Mortal life is, as it were, a journey in which we seek to return home from exile, where alone we can find true enjoyment (Teaching Christianity 1.3.3–4.4; Augustine of Hippo 1996: 107–108). Such postponement of happiness or enjoyment seems troublingly close to the patient acquiescence Nietzsche and Cone critique. However, it is possible to read these Augustinian texts quite differently, and this possibility will be explored below after engagement with Cone and some other liberationist theologians.

By naming Jesus ‘the black Christ’, Cone, writing in the United States in the wake of the civil rights movement and during the Black Power movement, finds Jesus unequivocally on the side of the oppressed blacks. Rather than being a universalized ideal, Christ is to be found in the here and now fighting for justice (Cone 1990). Cone’s vision, contrary to what a Nietzschean logic would lead one to expect, is fuelled by hope in the resurrection. In the light of God’s promises it is no longer necessary, nor possible, ‘to accept the world as it is’ (Cone 1990: 130); the present is not fixed. Cone thus critiques an eschatological perspective that invites patient obedience in the hope of heavenly reward, rather than inciting a radical ‘challenge [of] the present order’ (Cone 1990: 137). For Cone this means, counterintuitively, being willing to die: ‘We know what the end is when we face it head-on by refusing, at the risk of death, to tolerate present injustice’ (Cone 1990: 137 [original emphasis]). Cone’s non-Nietzschean affirmation of this life in the light of the next means, paradoxically, not clinging onto life at all costs – which is likely to mean at the expense of oppressed kinsfolk. Instead it means confronting death in a way that the oppressor, who
does not know death because he does not know his own finiteness, cannot (Cone 1990: 136). Cone concludes:

To grasp for the future of God is to know that those who die for freedom have not died in vain; they will see the kingdom of God. [...] If we really believe that death is not the last word, then we can fight, risking death for human freedom. (Cone 1990: 141)

It is this stance towards death that Cone finds in Martin Luther King Jr, as he powerfully narrates in his *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Cone 2013). It can also be found in Paul’s testimony in 1 Cor 15:29–34.

Cone’s linking of hope in the resurrection to liberated life in the present captures the temporal dynamics of Rom 6:5–11. On the one hand, Christ’s resurrection is the pledge of the future resurrection of all those united with him in death (Rom 6:5, 8). On the other hand, Christ’s resurrection already spells his dominion over death, which liberates his followers for life to God in Christ in the present (Rom 6:9, 11). As Rom 6:4 puts it, ‘[w]e were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life’ (ESV). If the resurrection of the dead is a reality of the end times, it is also a reality that manifests itself in present newness of life (cf. Col 3:1–4). As seen above, this dynamic is abundantly evident in Douglas’ resurrection hope (2021). Building on Cone’s legacy, Douglas no longer has to make the case against the connection of hope in the resurrection with acquiescence to present injustice. That hope is self-evidently bound up with the struggle for God’s justice now. The challenge for Douglas is rather what can keep that hope alive in the face of the continued oppression of Black lives. Her answer is to invoke her great-great-grandmother, born into slavery, and those Black people who were both born into slavery and died in slavery, and who fought for a freedom they would never see but in which they believed (Douglas 2021: 201).

If Douglas is building on Cone, Cone in turn is building on Jürgen Moltmann (among others), as a ‘theologian of hope’. Moltmann exposes the death-denying attitude of modern society, describing how death is pushed out of view, away from the home and the centre of the village into hospital wards and cemeteries outside town. He sums up: ‘we no longer encounter [death] publicly at all’ (Moltmann 1996: 55). Moltmann extends the modern inability to face death into a sidelining of illness and disability, which cannot be accommodated in a meritocratic consumer society where the technical solution has replaced the human response. These suppressions result in a numbness towards life (Moltmann 1996: 56–57).
Resurrection hope, releasing a person from the fear of death, liberates her for the love of life. Moltmann concurs with those who read the resurrection as that which lends life its finality. Just as death is to be encountered within life, not only at the end, so the resurrection ‘must not be reduced to “a life after death”. [It] is also an event belonging to the whole of life’ (Moltmann 1996: 66). Moltmann refers to the life-affirming vision of Ezekiel 37, as well as to the jubilant ‘Little Apocalypse’ of Isaiah 24–26. Resurrection thus entails unreserved commitment to this life. More specifically, the raising of the dead, overcoming the separation of death, is what gathers all into one, healing and making whole each of our histories, and thus bringing this life to complete wholeness. As Moltmann concludes, ‘there is no “individual” resurrection, but always only a social resurrection into a new community’ (Moltmann 1996: 71). Moreover, he adds, there is no new community without ‘a cosmic new creation of all things and conditions. […] [E]very personal eschatology […] is constrained to press forward in ever-widening circles to cosmic eschatology’ (Moltmann 1996: 70).

Moltmann’s vision integrates the themes of the earlier sections: raised bodies no longer divide but unite, and individuals discover themselves to be implicated in a communal and cosmic whole which knows no bounds.

Catherine Keller is in sympathy with Moltmann insofar as he (like Cone and Douglas) articulates a hope that steers between ‘complacent optimism and self-defeating pessimism’ (Keller 1992: 186). Nevertheless, she issues an important challenge to the unitive, teleological vision of the kind Moltmann articulates: is its unity in danger of becoming a totality, repressing fleshly multiplicity in subjugation to a transcendent, male authoritarian God (Keller 1992: 193)? Is the finality of the resurrection it proclaims reducible to a single end which translates into earthly totalitarianism? Does it retain too much of the patriarchal violence of the apocalyptic imagination of the book of Revelation, eschewing the “wild patience” needed for non-final solutions”? Keller would perhaps endorse the contextual appropriateness of Cone’s ‘either/or’, but she argues that ‘when [apocalypse] moves beyond the context of those who “hunger and thirst for righteousness,” its vision of purity, religious or political, lends itself to a will to power’ (Keller 1992: 192). Speaking into a world saturated with apocalyptic fervour, Keller offers an apocalypticism of a different order, one which prophetically cuts through the fanatical and futureless apocalypticism of Western civilization. Her vision fosters a ‘spirituality of worldly attention’, in which ‘difference dis/closes itself in the flesh’ (Keller 1992: 195), disrupting the closed universe of global capitalism and making way for a celebration of the Earth in all its variety. It is an open question whether Keller’s vision of earthly difference is compatible with the account outlined in section 3 of the eschatological life as one of transparency to God and to one another in mutual implicatedness.
It is possible, either way, to return to Augustine to ask how his theology might read differently in the light of these liberationist theologies. Augustine charges his readers to be ‘happy in the hope of the world to come’ (City 19.4; 1998: 924). It was noted earlier that his insistence that we do not possess happiness in the present is easily read as resigned acquiescence. But, with Cone and Douglas, it is possible to read him as exhorting his readers not to accept the present as the way things must be, but rather to settle for nothing less than the true peace and justice of their final end in God – in light of which the injustices of the present are shown up for what they are. Augustine’s eschatological perspective lends him a shrewd eye for the evils of this age, of which he offers a poignant and lengthy description (City 19.4–9; 1998: 931). But Augustine is able to offer no less fulsome a description of the fragile goods of this age (City 22.24; 1998: 1159–1166). In this double-edged way, he exhibits Keller’s ‘worldly attention’, warding off the possibility of resignation. As Augustine himself says,

if any man uses this life in such a way that he directs it towards that end […] for which he so faithfully hopes, he may without absurdity be called happy even now, though rather by future hope than in present reality. (City 19.20; Augustine of Hippo 1998: 949–950)

In other words, happiness is a question of the use to which earthly goods are put. In the terms of Teaching Christianity (Augustine of Hippo 1996), if things are enjoyed for their own sake, their significance will be truncated insofar as they refer only to themselves. An Augustinian critique of misplaced enjoyment gains special resonance in a world of capitalist consumerism, in which commodities are detached from the wider context of their production and use, resulting in the flat world Keller describes as futureless (Keller 1992: 187). To use worldly goods for the sake of their final end in God, by contrast, is to acknowledge in them a depth which outstrips any finite significance the user might give them. This is the love of life instilled by resurrection hope, according to Moltmann. It is, as has been seen above, a love that is not afraid of death. Neither Cone, Douglas, Moltmann, nor Keller offer an unqualified affirmation of this life – far from it. The freedom for which one dies, in Cone’s account, is a freedom that is not yet manifest. Augustine’s exhortation to use rather than enjoy this life can be heard to echo Cone’s conviction that the death which pervades the present is not the last word, but one that points beyond itself to the world to come.

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