

**GARY
HABERMAS
AND
ANTONY
FLEW**

**DID
JESUS
RISE
FROM
THE
DEAD**

**THE
RESURRECTION
DEBATE**



THOMAS L. MIETHE, Editor

DID JESUS RISE FROM THE DEAD?

The Resurrection Debate

Gary R. Habermas and Antony G. N. Flew

Edited by Terry L. Miethe



1817

Harper & Row, Publishers, San Francisco

New York, Cambridge, Philadelphia, St. Louis
London, Singapore, Sydney, Tokyo

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FIRST HARPER & ROW PAPERBACK EDITION PUBLISHED IN 1989.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Habermas, Gary R.

Did Jesus rise from the dead?

Bibliography: p.

1. Jesus Christ—Resurrection. I. Flew, Antony,
1923– . II. Miethe, Terry L., 1948–
III. Title.

BT481.H27 1987 232.9'7 85-45355

ISBN 0-06-063549-5

ISBN 0-06-063552-5

89 90 91 92 93 MCN 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

To John-Hayden, Robert, Michelle, Holly, and Kevin
with much love,
in the hope that they will become tough-minded and love the truth

Preface

The Resurrection of Jesus Christ is the most significant topic of our day. Of course Christians since Paul have made that claim, because they have been convinced that it proved Jesus' deity and the efficacy of his death for our sins. The development of the post-Kantian view of religion, however, which now dominates the twentieth century, makes the Resurrection critical in an entirely new way.

In the current view, religion is not an issue of knowledge, of what the facts are, but of faith, of what is believed. This notion of the Resurrection as "existential meaning-making" makes its actual occurrence irrelevant. Further, given the apparently negative results of the great quest for historical proof, the Resurrection is lost to demythologizing. Thus the factuality of the Resurrection is deserted, even by explicitly Christian theologians. Consequently, the very mention of evidence for Jesus' Resurrection is a startling thought. It challenges not only the received evaluation of history but the very nature of religion.

In this context, the debate between Antony G. N. Flew and Gary R. Habermas at Liberty University was perfect staging. Habermas is an expert on the historical evidence, Flew on the impossibility of miracles. They agree that the current view of religion is nonsense—that there is no meaning if there is no event. They agree that the question of the Resurrection must be settled in terms of the sufficiency of the evidence. Finally, they agree that if the Resurrection did occur, then materialism is doomed; there must be a supernatural reality. Thus a true debate was possible, and the reader will discover that it rarely strayed from the central issue: does the evidence demand assent to the historical event? For these reasons I regard this as a crucial and timely book. I hope that it will be a catalyst for further thought that will bring Christian conceptualizing as well as concepts of Christianity back to their factual and historical roots.

I am especially grateful to Professor Terry L. Miethe for initiating

and organizing the original debate and also for editing the material into this volume. I am grateful to the staff at Harper & Row, who saw the importance of this project and sent two of their senior staff members to the actual debate. Many others contributed time and energy in making the debate a reality and we in the Department of Philosophy are grateful. Finally, I, with the Department of Philosophy of Liberty University, wish to thank our friend and chancellor for underwriting the expenses of this debate and thus making this book possible.

—W. David Beck
Chairman, Department of Philosophy
Liberty University

Introduction

“Did Jesus rise from the dead? is **the most important** question regarding the claims of the Christian faith. Certainly no question in modern religious history demands more attention or interest, as witnessed by the vast body of literature dealing with the Resurrection.¹ James I. Packer says it well in his response to this debate:

When Christians are asked to make good their claim that this scheme is truth, they point to Jesus’ Resurrection. The Easter event, so they affirm, demonstrated Jesus’ deity; validated his teaching; attested the completion of his work of atonement for sin; confirms his present cosmic dominion and his coming reappearance as Judge; assures us that his personal pardon, presence, and power in people’s lives today is fact; and guarantees each believer’s own reembodiment by Resurrection in the world to come.

The Apostle Paul considered the Resurrection to be the cornerstone of the Christian faith. If Jesus did not rise from the dead, the whole structure, Christianity, collapses. Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 15:14–17,

And if Christ has not been raised, *our preaching is useless and so is your faith*. More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses about God. . . . And if Christ has not been raised, *your faith is futile* [emphasis added].

The Christian faith—and its claim to be Truth—exists only if Jesus rose from the dead. The heart of Christianity is a living Christ. “It is in the Risen One that the whole life of mankind ultimately comes to a decision. The ultimate decision, however, is that between life and death. The word of the resurrection of Jesus is the assault of life upon a dying world.”²

Our debaters echo the importance of the question. Antony G. N. Flew says in his opening remarks in the debate:

We [Habermas and I] both construe *resurrection*, or rising from the dead, in a thoroughly literal and physical way. . . . We are again agreed that the

question whether, in that literal understanding, Jesus did rise from the dead is of supreme theoretical and practical importance. For the knowable fact that he did, if indeed it is a knowable fact, is the best, if not the only, reason for accepting that Jesus is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel. . . . We are agreed both that that identification is the defining and distinguishing characteristic of the true Christian, and that it is scarcely possible to make it without also accepting that the Resurrection did literally happen.

Having thus established the importance of the question and that the debaters agree on its importance, perhaps a word about how the debate came to be would be appropriate. I have been familiar with Flew's work, especially *God and Philosophy*, since my early days in seminary when a professor of mine required as a term assignment in his Analytic Philosophy class that every student present a critique of Flew's book. It had been my hope, then, for more than fifteen years to see Flew debate the subject of the possibility of miracles, specifically the evidence for the historicity of the Resurrection.

Then in February 1985, Gary R. Habermas and I were invited to participate in a series of debates entitled "Christianity Challenges the University: An International Conference of Theists and Atheists," to be held in Dallas, Texas. The objective of the conference was to present the Christian understanding of reality in the international intellectual community in such a way as to be "forceful and effective as well as intellectually impeccable."³ This was to be accomplished by inviting renowned scholars in philosophy, the natural sciences, the social sciences, the historical foundations of Christianity, culture, morality, and education to participate in debate via a panel discussion format.

Antony G. N. Flew was one of the panel participants in philosophy to represent the atheist position. After the philosophy panel discussion, Gary R. Habermas and I had dinner with Flew and discussed at length his position regarding the possibility of miracles and the Resurrection of Jesus in particular. It was agreed by Habermas, Flew, and myself that the Resurrection of Jesus presented the most important evidence for the historical reality of miracles. Flew said that he had never adequately addressed this issue in his writings and indicated interest in doing so

formally in debate with Habermas and the philosophy faculty of Liberty University.

An invitation to debate "The Historicity of the Resurrection: Did Jesus Rise From the Dead?" was then issued to Flew by the philosophy faculty of Liberty University. Habermas and Flew were to be the primary debaters, with W. David Beck and myself also participating in the discussion. Thus the events that produced the material for this book were a debate of the aforementioned subject by Habermas and Flew held on May 2, 1985, at Liberty University and attended by 3000 people, and a continuation of the debate on May 3, 1985, involving the four of us.

All parties agreed, because of the limitations of time, the demands of the subject, and a belief that the debaters in Dallas had talked past each other to limit the debate to a single issue, that of the historicity of the Resurrection of Jesus. The debate was not to be concerned with issues such as God's existence, revelation (such as the Bible), or miracles in general. These issues could, however, be addressed in the question and answer session following the formal debate.

Because audiences are perennially interested in who the experts choose as the winner of a public debate, we organized two panels of experts in their respective areas of specialty to render a verdict on the present subject matter. One panel consisted of five philosophers, who were instructed to judge the content of the debate and render a winner. The second panel consisted of five professional debate judges, who were asked to judge the argumentation technique of the debaters. All ten participants serve on the faculties of American universities and colleges such as the University of Pittsburgh, the University of Virginia, Western Kentucky University, James Madison University, George Mason University, Randolph-Macon College (Ashland, Virginia), Sweet Briar College, and Liberty University. We attempted to choose persons of a wide spectrum of views and persuasions.

The decisions of our judges were as follows. The panel of philosophers, judging content, cast four votes for Habermas, none for Flew, and one draw. One philosophy judge commented:

I was surprised (shocked might be a more accurate word) to see how weak Flew's own approach was. I expected—if not a new and powerful argument—at least a distinctly new twist to some old arguments. Given the conditions under which public debates are often conducted, many of the finer details of Flew's position do not become evident until the pages of the book that record the dialogue following the public debate [Part Two: The Continuing Debate]. By this time, it becomes clear that even Flew has not rid himself of some of the older, outdated, and discredited objections to the resurrection. When I completed my reading of the debate and the following dialogues, I was left with this conclusion: Since the case against the resurrection was no stronger than that presented by Antony Flew, I would think it was time I began to take the resurrection seriously. My conclusion is that Flew lost the debate and the case for the resurrection won.

Another philosopher commented:

Flew [is defending a point] which he acknowledges to come ultimately from Hume's First Enquiry, that a miracle can never be proved in such a way that it can serve as the foundation for any system of religion. . . . Flew's success in the debate should be measured by how well he came out of it with this claim intact, Habermas's by how well he undermined it. . . . Habermas at first seemed wrongly to interpret Flew to be maintaining a naturalistic bias against the ontological possibility of a miracle. . . . So, Habermas missed the point . . . only if an inconsistency in Flew's position is overlooked. Otherwise, he correctly unearthed the fact that Flew can hold his ground on this point only by maintaining a naturalistic bias against the occurrence of a miracle in spite of his [Flew's] claim not to hold one.

The panel of professional debate judges voted three to two, also in favor of Habermas, this time regarding the method of argumentation technique. One judge noted:

I am of the position that the affirmative speaker [Habermas] has a very significant burden of proof in order to establish his claims. The various historical sources convinced me to adopt the arguments of the affirmative speaker. Dr. Flew, on the other hand, failed, particularly in the rebuttal period and the head-to-head session, to introduce significant supporters of his position. Dr. Habermas placed a heavy burden on Dr. Flew to refute very specific issues. As the rebuttals progressed, I felt that Dr. Flew tried to skirt the charges given him.

Another professional debate judge said:

I conclude that the historical evidence, though flawed, is strong enough to lead reasonable minds to conclude that Christ did indeed rise from the dead. Habermas has already won the debate. . . . By defeating the Hume-inspired skeptical critique on miracles in general offered by Flew and by demonstrating the strength of some of the historical evidence, Habermas does end up providing "highly probable evidence" for the historicity of the resurrection "with no plausible naturalistic evidence against it." Habermas, therefore, in my opinion, wins the debate.

One of the two professional debate judges who voted for Flew gave the following reason: "Since most debates are decided based upon clash of argument and that characteristic was weak in this debate I hesitate to name a winner. However, given that the request was to name a winner I . . . voted for Professor Flew." And the other debate judge who voted for Flew said: "Flew's strategy is to restrict his argumentative burden to demonstrating the scientific/historical inadequacy of theological explanations of the resurrection stories, rather than proving a contrary explanation. Winner of debate: Flew." This second judge found that Habermas's citations of so many scholars kept him from spending more time on the content of his argument.

The overall decision of the two panels, judging both content and argumentation technique, was a seven to two decision (with one draw) in favor of the historicity of the Resurrection as argued by Habermas. Because of this panel decision, Habermas has been asked to write the reply essay directed to the three internationally known respondents whose perspectives follow the debate sessions.

I am pleased indeed to have three such renowned respondents to the debate. Wolfhart Pannenberg, a German scholar, is one of the world's best-known theologians. Charles Hartshorne, an American philosopher, is the foremost living advocate of process philosophy. James I. Packer, a British scholar, is one of the best-known evangelical theologians of our time. Although we made every possible attempt to find the best-known representative for every scholarly position toward the Resurrection, from evangelical to Catholic to Bultmannian, several scholars were not able to respond because of other commitments.

The decisions regarding the debate should not take the place of a decision from you, the reader. Each person should study the arguments, sift the evidence, and decide which case best fits the facts. This is an area in which the importance of the issue almost invariably involves the emotions, but the question of truth is the initial query. Did Jesus rise from the dead? is what this volume is all about. Of course the issue of the Resurrection of Jesus, which is the subject of the debate, is more important than the personalities involved here. The ideas that constitute this confrontation, and the evidence for them, are the crucial factors before us. The decision is yours. On with the debate!

—Terry L. Miethe
Oxford, England
17 August, 1986

NOTES

1. See the Select Bibliography at the end of this book for examples.
2. Walter Kunneth, *The Theology of the Resurrection* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1965), 295.
3. This is the stated purpose in the bulletin *Christianity Challenges the University: An International Conference of Theists and Atheists* under number 1 of "Objectives."

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I. THE FORMAL DEBATE

Negative Statement: Antony G. N. Flew

I will begin by spelling out three fundamentals upon which Dr. Habermas and I are agreed, notwithstanding that many of those still claiming the Christian name will, nowadays, make so bold as to deny one, or two, or all three of these fundamentals.

First, we both construe *resurrection*, or rising from the dead, in a thoroughly literal and physical way. It is to this understanding that the story of doubting Thomas is so crucially relevant.

Second, we are again agreed that the question whether, in that literal understanding, Jesus did rise from the dead is of supreme theoretical and practical importance. For the knowable fact that he did, if indeed it is a knowable fact, is the best, if not the only, reason for accepting that Jesus is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel.

Third, we are agreed both that that identification is the defining and distinguishing characteristic of the true Christian, and that it is scarcely possible to make it without also accepting that the Resurrection did literally happen. Together these two doctrines constitute what used to be called the scandal of particularity, which would make the discovery of other worlds inhabited by rational moral agents embarrassing to Christianity but not, I think, to any of the other great world religions, and which requires Christians to insist that adherents of all those other religions, and of mine, are, on matters of supreme importance, ruinously wrong.

In these days such fundamentals do need to be reiterated, for sometimes they are denied outright or ignored. Last year, for instance, David Jenkins, a man who has repudiated, and still repudiates, the doctrine of the Resurrection, and that in words too offensive for me to repeat in the presence of genuine believers, was elevated to the senior bishopric of the Church of England. He has since devoted most of his energies