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The Resurrection of Jesus: Explanation or Interpretation?

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Introduction

Licona's book, *The Resurrection of Jesus*, is, in effect, one very long elaborate argument. The argument has clearly defined stages. The first is that, given available documents that mention Jesus' resurrection, it is possible to infer what he calls "bedrock" facts:

- (1) Jesus died by crucifixion.
- (2) Very shortly after Jesus' death, the disciples had experiences that led them to believe and proclaim that Jesus had been resurrected and had appeared to them.
- (3) Within a few years after Jesus' death, Paul converted after experiencing what he interpreted as a post-resurrection appearance of Jesus to him.¹

In addition Licona draws attention to what he calls "second-order facts" namely that Jesus appeared to his brother James (as reported in 1 Cor. 15:7), and that on Easter Day the tomb in which Jesus had been interred was empty.² These are second-order facts because they are not accepted by all scholars, only by a majority.

The second stage of Licona's argument is that the best explanation of the experiences of the risen Jesus by the disciples, Paul and perhaps James and others is that Jesus himself had appeared to them. He is sometimes reluctant to say that Jesus appeared in physical form, though he allows this as a possibility. The other possibility is that he appeared to them in "an objective vision," i.e. not as a product of their own minds. Licona states his theory thus:

Following a supernatural event of an indeterminate nature and cause, Jesus appeared to a number of people, in individual and group settings and to friends and foes, in no less than an objective vision and perhaps within ordinary vision in his bodily raised corpse.³

¹ Michael R. Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus: A New Historiographical Approach* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2010), 463.

² Licona, *The Resurrection*, 463.

³ Licona, *The Resurrection*, 583.

Eventually, however, he comes down in favour of a physical resurrection as “in accord with the plain sense of the resurrection narratives in the canonical Gospels and with Paul’s concept of the resurrection body,” and because the vision hypothesis cannot explain why the tomb was empty.⁴

The third and final stage of Licona’s argument is that the best explanation of Jesus’ resurrection is that it was an act of God. He admits that this claim “is incapable of verification,” which is why he writes instead of “a supernatural event of an indeterminate nature and cause.”⁵ But the claim that God raised Jesus from the dead plays a much more important part in Licona’s argument than he is sometimes ready to admit. To put it briefly, if we do not say that God raised Jesus, Licona says, then we must claim that his resurrection was a natural event. But in nature such events never happen, so the claim that Jesus rose unassisted is wildly implausible. For the hypothesis that Jesus rose from the dead to be plausible, therefore, we must assume that God raised him.⁶ If one believes in God, or even if one is agnostic and merely allows the possibility that God exists, there is no reason for denying that this is possible. And if one accepts that Jesus really did rise from the dead, what other explanation is there?

In this paper I intend to do three things. First, I will point out some difficulties with Licona’s argument. In particular, it is not clear that the Jesus whom the disciples experienced had a physical body; and to explain Jesus’ resurrection as an act of God is quite *ad hoc* and so unconvincing. Second, I will suggest that a theological account of the disciples’ experiences of the risen Jesus is better understood as an interpretation, not an explanation, of those experiences. And finally I will point out that although faith in God’s having raised Jesus from the dead is not entirely justified on epistemic grounds, as a persuasive explanation of the evidence, such faith is supported for pragmatic reasons, by the benefits that flow from it.

Some Problems with Licona’s Argument

The first problem is with Licona’s final conclusion that the risen Jesus probably had a physical body. He considers two alternative theories: first, that people’s experiences of the risen Jesus were some kind of hallucination with a psychological and cultural origin (proposed by Michael Goulder, Gerd Lüdemann, John Dominic Crossan and Pieter Craffert); and second, that they were “an objective vision” of Jesus who appeared as some sort of disembodied ghost or angel (Geza Vermes’ hypothesis).⁷ The thesis he prefers is a third, that they were normal perceptions of a physical person. Licona is not happy

⁴ Licona, *The Resurrection*, 601.

⁵ Licona, *The Resurrection*, 583.

⁶ Licona, *The Resurrection*, 145.

⁷ Licona, *The Resurrection*, 470-9; 479-580.

with the first two theories for several reasons. Most reports of the risen Jesus suggest that he had a physical body, one that doubting Thomas could touch, one that could break bread in Emmaus, and one that could eat fish with his disciples. Also the first two theories cannot account for the empty tomb, so their explanatory scope is more limited than that of the hypothesis that the risen Jesus indeed had a physical body. And finally, Licona says that although individuals may have had hallucinations and visions, these have never been experienced by a group of people at the same time.

There are other possible reasons for thinking that the risen Jesus had a physical body. Some Jews believed that one day the dead would be raised for judgement (Dan. 12:2), with some to inhabit the New Jerusalem (Isaiah 52). Apparently some of the Jews in Jesus' day believed the souls of the dead would be reunited with their bodies on Judgement Day. Licona points out that Jews did not expect the Last Judgement to occur before the end of history, and they would not have expected Jesus to return so soon. Even so, when he did return I think they expected him to have a physical body to establish his kingdom on earth.

If Jesus was going to return to judge people on earth, he was expected to do so in a physical body. Saint Paul told the Thessalonians to expect Jesus to "come down from heaven" to raise the dead for judgement (1 Thes.4:13-17). Accounts of Jesus' ascension are in simple physical terms: e.g. Acts 1:9, which states that "he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight." If he ascended into heaven in a physical body, he could be expected to return in a physical body.

Precisely what kind of physical body does Licona think the risen Jesus had? Licona is clearly impressed by Saint Paul's account of how believers will be raised on the Last Day. According to Paul, he says, "[T]here is a continuity between the believer's present body [...] and the resurrection body. What dies and goes down in burial comes up in resurrection, having been made alive and transformed."⁸ He adds that the corpse "will be clothed with immortality and imperishability," that it will have "spiritual appetites and qualities," and that it will be "composed of a heavenly substance that is given life by Christ."⁹ He insists that Paul imagines that people's natural bodies will be altered, and not exchanged for a spiritual body.¹⁰ I think that Licona imagines that Jesus' resurrection body was as Paul described it, physical but transformed, so not simply physical. N.T. Wright suggests we call Jesus' resurrection body "transphysical," meaning physical but incapable of dying or decay-

⁸ Licona, *The Resurrection*, 404-5.

⁹ Licona, *The Resurrection*, 406, 410, 416.

¹⁰ Licona, *The Resurrection*, 422.

ing. He admits that “As historians we may have difficulty imagining such a thing.”¹¹

One objection to the idea that the risen Jesus had a physical body is that the Gospels report him passing through locked doors (John 20:26), and mysteriously disappearing from sight (Luke 24:31). But more worrying, I think, is the suggestion that the risen Jesus ascended bodily into heaven, that is, rose up into the sky and became hidden behind a cloud. Do we really think he is still hovering up there waiting to return to earth to judge the quick and the dead? William P. Alston has drawn attention to this problem and comments: “I think we have to say that there is no satisfactory answer to this question in the New Testament.”¹² He adds in a footnote:

To be sure, this problem disappears if we take the embodiment to be an illusion perpetrated by Jesus for the sake of a more personal encounter with the disciples. He really existed in some way, but he made it appear, for the moment, that he was in a quasi-humanly embodied form.¹³

The trouble is that the New Testament reports repeatedly emphasise the physical reality of the risen Jesus.¹⁴

N.T. Wright simply dismisses the suggestion that Jesus rose physically into the sky by saying, “the language of ‘heaven’ and ‘earth’, though it could be used to denote sky on the one hand and terra firma on the other, was regularly employed in a sophisticated theological manner, to denote the parallel and interlocking universes inhabited by the creator god on the one hand and humans on the other.”¹⁵ However, there is no mention of “parallel and interlocking universes” in any biblical descriptions of Jesus’ ascension. And if Wright wants to avoid the suggestion that Jesus is “physically situated a few thousand feet above the surface of the earth,”¹⁶ he must introduce a second transformation of the risen Jesus, from “transphysical” to immaterial (unless his other universe is physical too)!

I cannot solve the problem of the nature of the risen Jesus. Neither the ghost theory nor the physical theory is entirely satisfactory, given the available evidence. I think most Christians think of the risen Jesus as they do of his heavenly father. Jesus talked about God as a Spirit with personal properties,

¹¹ N.T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (London: SPCK, 2003), 477-8.

¹² William P. Alston, “Biblical Criticism and the Resurrection,” in *The Resurrection: An Interdisciplinary Symposium on the Resurrection of Jesus* (eds. Stephen T. Davis, Daniel Kendall, and Gerald O’Collins; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 148-83 (169).

¹³ Alston, “Biblical Criticism,” 169-70.

¹⁴ Stephen T. Davis rejects the “objective vision” hypothesis chiefly because of “the massive physical detail of the appearance stories” in his article “‘Seeing’ the Risen Jesus,” in *The Resurrection: An Interdisciplinary Symposium on the Resurrection of Jesus* (eds. Stephen T. Davis, Daniel Kendall, and Gerald O’Collins; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 126-147 (141).

¹⁵ Wright, *The Resurrection*, 655.

¹⁶ Wright, *The Resurrection*, 655.

as one who has knowledge, will and creative power. He addressed him as a person, “my father,” and Christians pray to him as “our father” too. It is natural to think of the risen Jesus in the same way, as a Spirit with personal properties, who is with us whether we can see him or not. The disciples evidently saw him, or in the case of Saint Paul, heard him, as evidence of his continuing reality. And some of his followers hear his voice today. If we cannot tell how Jesus appeared to his disciples, it seems wisest to leave the method unexplained. It is enough to say just that he did appear to them, in order to convince them of his continuing existence. Several had difficulty deciding who he was, but he was able to convince them that he was the Jesus they had known.¹⁷

The second problem with Licona’s argument has to do with his claim that the best explanation of Jesus’ resurrection is that it was an act of God. Licona is reluctant to say much about God’s role in the resurrection, because we know so little about it. But he is forced to say that God raised Jesus in order to counter the argument that in the natural course of events, dead men do not rise. Once a person has died, their bodies start to decay and after three days they could not possibly live again. So if one is going to say that the risen Jesus had a physical body, one has to explain how such a thing was possible. Otherwise the claim is utterly implausible. However, if God intervened in a natural process and reconstituted Jesus’ body, then the laws of nature are not effective and so the objection that the resurrection could not have occurred can be set aside.

Licona makes the same point in these words:

What if a god exists who wanted to raise Jesus from the dead? That would be a game changer. In that case, a miracle such as Jesus’ resurrection may actually be the most probable explanation [of his appearances]. The challenge for historians, of course, is that they cannot know ahead of time whether such a god exists.¹⁸

He adds in a footnote: “Even if one is persuaded by any number of arguments for God’s existence, they do nothing to indicate that such a god would desire to raise up Jesus.”¹⁹ Licona makes it quite clear that the two hypotheses under consideration are, first, “that Jesus was raised *naturally* from the dead,” and second, “that Jesus was raised *supernaturally* (i.e. by God) from the dead.”

¹⁷ Sarah Coakley has considered several occasions on which people failed to recognize the risen Jesus, and suggests “a crucial role for deepened and *transformed* epistemic function.” See her response to William P. Alston in Sarah Coakley, “Response,” in *The Resurrection: An Interdisciplinary Symposium on the Resurrection of Jesus* (eds. Stephen T. Davis, Daniel Kendall, and Gerald O’Collins; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 184-90 (188-9).

¹⁸ Licona, *The Resurrection*, 175.

¹⁹ Licona, *The Resurrection*, 175, note 133.

He adds, "If God desired to raise Jesus, then his resurrection may be regarded as very probable."²⁰

Licona, William Lane Craig and others defend the hypothesis that God wanted both to raise Jesus from the dead and to enable him to appear to various individuals, and that God could by definition do so. I agree with them that that hypothesis, if it were true, would make probable the resurrection of Jesus in some form, and also make probable the empty tomb and the appearances of the risen Jesus recorded in the Bible. The problem that remains is whether this hypothesis is rationally credible. It would be if, in addition to making the data probable, the hypothesis was plausible and not *ad hoc*. A hypothesis is plausible if it is implied by some accepted truths and contradicted by very few. And it is *ad hoc* if there are no reasons for thinking it true besides the fact that it would explain the available data.²¹ The hypothesis that God exists and cared about Jesus is of questionable plausibility; the hypothesis that he wanted to raise Jesus from the dead and reveal him to the disciples and others is almost entirely *ad hoc*.

To appreciate the importance of these conditions, consider the evidence that Santa Claus provides children's presents at Christmas time. Children awake on Christmas morning to find presents for them arranged beside the fireplace in their sitting room. Their parents say that the presents have been made by Santa and his elves at the North Pole during the year, to give as a reward to children who have been good. Since the children have been quite good, Santa put them in a sleigh pulled by reindeer, alighted on their roof, climbed down the chimney and left the presents for the children. If this story were true, it would provide an excellent explanation of the arrival of the presents. It certainly implies their probable existence. But no-one has ever seen Santa, his elves, his sleigh or his flying reindeer. The Santa explanation is implausible because there are no other facts that imply its truth, and it is entirely *ad hoc* for the same reason. When kids grow up they suspect their parents left their presents.

Richard Swinburne is aware that to explain the empty tomb and the various appearances of the risen Jesus satisfactorily, one needs to justify belief in God and have evidence of his desire to raise Jesus. He refers to this as "background evidence" for the resurrection.²² He writes: "we need that sort of background theory well supported by evidence if our evidence overall is to give a significant overall probability to the resurrection."²³ Elsewhere, Swinburne uses this "background theory" to help provide a Bayesian justification

²⁰ Licona, *The Resurrection*, 176; c.f. 602.

²¹ Licona, *The Resurrection*, 110.

²² Richard Swinburne, "Evidence for the Resurrection", in *The Resurrection: An Interdisciplinary Symposium on the Resurrection of Jesus* (eds. Stephen T. Davis, Daniel Kendall, and Gerald O'Collins; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 191-212 (202).

²³ Swinburne, "Evidence," 206.

of faith in the resurrection.²⁴ And in his essay, Swinburne offers a list of facts that point to the existence of an intelligent, powerful creator whom we name as God, though he does not say that God is benevolent.²⁵ Perhaps that is so that he does not have to confront the problem of evil, which is a strong reason for doubting that God, if he exists, is benevolent. If God is just and loving, how could he let so many of his faithful disciples suffer such dreadful deaths? If God's benevolence forms part of Licona's hypothesis, then its plausibility is questionable.

The fact that God cannot be seen is not in itself a reason for doubting his influence. As William Lane Craig argued in his discussion of the resurrection, scientists posit invisible entities to explain observable events.²⁶ Think of the force of gravity to explain why things fall to the ground, or magnetic force to explain the movement of a compass needle. What distinguishes these from God, however, is that they are said to have regular functions: things almost always fall to the ground, and compass needles nearly always point north. The acts of God, on the other hand, are by no means predictable. That is why an appeal to God as the cause of the resurrection of Jesus is implausible. It is not simply that he is invisible and so difficult to investigate, it is that we know too little about him to predict what he will do.

Swinburne goes on to suggest reasons why God might want to intervene in human history. One is "to make available an atonement for human sin."²⁷ In raising Jesus from the dead he shows that he has accepted his sacrifice, says Swinburne.²⁸ Another reason is "to vindicate the life and teaching of a human whose outer life was holy, and forward the teaching of a church which teaches that the incarnate one was God."²⁹

The hypothesis that a benevolent God exists is scarcely plausible. The hypothesis that he wanted to raise Jesus from the dead is almost entirely *ad hoc*. I say "almost," because if you believe that God is benevolent, then you might infer that he would want to raise Jesus who obeyed him even unto death. But that is a very speculative idea, for which there is no direct evidence.

Licona is aware of the need to find reasons for thinking that God raised Jesus from the dead. Like Swinburne and Licona,³⁰ Craig thinks that God might have wanted to raise Jesus to "vindicate" his claim to have been the promised Messiah. In support of this theory, Craig quotes Acts 2:36, where

²⁴ Richard Swinburne, *The Resurrection of God Incarnate* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 2003).

²⁵ Swinburne, "Evidence," 202.

²⁶ William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics* (third edition; Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2008), p.352.

²⁷ Swinburne, "Evidence," 203.

²⁸ Swinburne, "Evidence," 204.

²⁹ Swinburne, "Evidence," 205.

³⁰ Licona, *The Resurrection*, 284.

Peter, having said that God raised Jesus to life, went on to say, "Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ".³¹ I am also impressed by the frequency with which Jesus is said to have referred to himself as "the Son of Man," who is described in Dan. 7:13-14 as being "given authority, glory and sovereign power" and the promise that "his dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away" (NIV). The Son of Man could not remain dead if this description of him were true.³²

A second, related, reason for God wanting to raise Jesus from the dead is that he wanted Jesus to fulfil his mission of establishing God's kingdom on earth. Licona notes that "Jesus thought of himself as having a special relationship with God, who had chosen him to bring about his eschatological kingdom." This, he went on, is "a context in which we might expect a god to act."³³

But there is no evidence that God acted for these reasons. They are entirely speculative. Saint Paul viewed the resurrection as evidence that the power of sin and death has been overcome for those who are "in Christ" (1 Cor. 15:12-20, 54-57). He took it to be a source of hope for Christians who suffered for their faith, as he did, that they too might be raised to be with Christ (e.g., Phil. 3:7-14). Each of these suggestions of why God might have wanted to raise Jesus from the dead is really an interpretation of the significance of the resurrection. What God had in mind in raising Jesus, if he did, we can only guess.

Without good evidence of God's intentions, we have no good reason for thinking that he might have raised Jesus from the dead. If we assume that Jesus physical body was raised, against the laws of nature, we might ask who or what could have brought this about except God? But this begs the question against the alternative possibility, that the experiences of the disciples were not of the risen body of Jesus but were of a spiritual being or were a hallucination of some kind.

At one point Licona is aware of the weakness of his assumption that God raised Jesus, and says instead that some supernatural power must have done it. He writes:

Since the claim that it was *God* who raised Jesus is incapable of verification, we will not make any claims pertaining to the cause of the event other than it must have been supernatural. Accordingly I herein define the resurrection hypothesis as follows: *Following a supernatural event of an indeterminate nature and cause, Jesus appeared...*³⁴

³¹ Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 388.

³² See Licona, *The Resurrection*, 606.

³³ Licona, *The Resurrection*, 301.

³⁴ Licona, *The Resurrection*, 583.

What does he mean by “supernatural?” He does not mean that the resurrection was just unnatural, because then we would have excellent reason to doubt its occurrence. He must mean that Jesus was raised by a supernatural agent, and the only one on hand is God. You will recall that elsewhere Licona writes, “the hypothesis is that Jesus was raised *supernaturally* (i.e. by God) from the dead. If God desired to raise Jesus, then his resurrection may be regarded as very probable.”³⁵ The appeal to a supernatural agent does not rescue Licona’s argument. We may believe that God raised Jesus from the dead, but we have no good evidence that he did so.

So while the hypothesis that God raised Jesus from the dead would imply that he was able to appear to his disciples, that hypothesis is weakened by the fact that it is entirely *ad hoc*.

The Resurrection as an Interpretation of History

When there are more than one equally valid descriptions of a subject, each one can be called an interpretation of that subject. For instance, when an English cricket team beats an Australian team one can say that it was a victory for the English, and one can say that it was a defeat for the Australians. They are equally true, though one seems to praise the English and the other to blame the Australians. Each is an equally valid interpretation of the same event. The same can be said of buying flowers for one’s wife. It can be called a generous expression of love, or an extravagant indulgence.

The same is true of explanations. The war in Afghanistan can be seen as a fight against international terrorists or as the foreign occupation of a sovereign state. Usually the alternative descriptions are equally valid. But sometimes they are incompatible, and are expressions of prior assumptions. When your friend gives you a gift, you might think his chief motive is kindly, or that he has done so chiefly in order to elicit a favour. If you have suspected the latter, you might be pleasantly surprised when no favour is requested.

Some people view the design and regularities of nature as evidence of an intelligent and benevolent creator, but others think they are a matter of chance, given the great number of planets in the universe. One cannot prove the matter one way or another, so both are equally valid though incompatible interpretations of the origin of the laws of nature. If one could prove that one explanation was true and the other false, then rather than have two interpretations we would have two possible explanations, one true and the other false. When there are two or more explanations of certain events and one cannot prove any of them true or false, then one may call them interpretations of why those events occurred. Those who say that people who saw the risen

³⁵ Licona, *The Resurrection*, 176.

Jesus saw his physical body, or had a subjective or objective vision of him are all offering an interpretation of why Jesus appeared as he did.

There are constraints on the acceptability of interpretations. They must not be internally inconsistent, for then they would be unintelligible, and they must not be clearly inconsistent with accepted facts about the world. That is why people find it difficult to believe that there is a God who is both forgiving and just, as these seem to be inconsistent; and why people who believe that God created the universe doubt that he created the earth with its animals and humans in seven days, as the Bible states, given the evidence of the evolution of species over millennia.

We can view the Bible as providing a theological interpretation of natural and historical events from beginning to end. The gospels not only describe what Jesus said and did on earth, they declare him to have been the divine Son of God. The story of his virgin birth expresses the conviction of his divine sonship, and the miracles he performed are said to display his divine power and benevolence. His post-mortem appearances to his followers are presented as evidence of God having raised him from the dead. One cannot prove any of these theological assertions true. They are interpretations of what happened that we may or may not believe.

I think we should regard the biblical statements that God raised Jesus from the dead as part of the theological interpretation of worldly events that we find in the Bible. This interpretation cannot be proved true, but it may be worthy of belief. When James D.G. Dunn considered the resurrection, he noted that the so-called facts of the empty tomb and Jesus' appearances to the disciples are interpretations of the available texts, and he said that the explanation that God had raised Jesus from the dead was a further interpretation, of those facts. "The resurrection of Jesus, in other words, is [...] an interpretation of an interpretation."³⁶

Pragmatic Justification for Religious Belief

Licona explains that his great effort to prove the truth of the resurrection is motivated by a desire to justify his belief that Jesus is risen indeed.³⁷ Given the difficulty of providing such a proof, he might like to consider pragmatic grounds for faith.

Scientists insist upon adequate evidence for the truth of their observations and theories. But in everyday life we often accept as true statements for which we have very little evidence, so long as we have no reason for thinking them false. Indeed, strictly speaking we cannot prove any description of the world necessarily true, true beyond the possibility of error. Our faith in many descriptions of the world far exceeds our capacity to prove them true.

³⁶ Licona, *The Resurrection*, 184.

³⁷ Licona, *The Resurrection*, 130-31.

Does that mean we are generally irrational? Well it would if the only reasons that could justify belief in descriptions of the world were evidential, what philosophers call epistemic. Thanks to our reverence for the accuracy and achievements of science, most people think that their beliefs about the world should be confined to those for which they have good evidence. But in everyday contexts we often have to accept descriptions of the world for which we have little evidence, and for practical reasons we do so. If doctors tell us that a medicine will cure us, then, because we want to be cured, we believe them and take it. We know them to be qualified, so we have some epistemic reason for believing them, but we have a practical reason as well. We want to enjoy the consequences that are likely to follow if the belief is indeed true.

The pragmatic justification of religious beliefs has been discussed at length elsewhere.³⁸ Because the idea suggests foolish wishful thinking, let me draw attention to some important constraints to avoid that. Then, to demonstrate the power of a pragmatic justification I would like to present examples of traditional Christian beliefs and show how they can be justified pragmatically, before turning to the case of Jesus' resurrection.

First, it is not rational to hold religious beliefs that are clearly inconsistent with what we already know to be true. For then we have a strong epistemic reason for denying their truth. For instance, William James argued that the claim that God is just and loving is contradicted by "the moral complexion of the world."³⁹ So that was a description of God he could not accept.

Second, there must be some evidence for the truth of a belief which is not outweighed by evidence that it is false. In a religious context I suggest that the following beliefs in the Christian tradition are worth considering:

- (1) that a powerful, intelligent being has created and sustained the universe so that humankind could evolve and live within it; (2) that this God revealed his will for humankind to and through Moses and the prophets, and above all in Jesus, each revelation being appropriate to the people to whom it was given; (3) that God provides a spirit of truth and love, the spirit that characterised Jesus, to those who are willing to submit to it.⁴⁰

These propositions are not necessarily true.

For instance, the extraordinary appropriateness of the fundamental constants of the cosmos might be a matter of chance; the Mosaic law and the commands of Jesus might be said to be good because Moses and Jesus were wise and good men, not because they were divinely inspired; and the

³⁸ See C. Behan McCullagh, "Can Religious Beliefs be Justified Pragmatically?" *Sophia* 46(2007): 21-34.

³⁹ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (London: Fontana Books / Collins, 1960), 427.

⁴⁰ McCullagh, "Can Religious," 28.

changes in character found among believers could come simply from their determination to imitate Jesus, not from any mysterious spirit at all.⁴¹

Third, it would be wrong to hold beliefs for which there is only slight evidence in order to justify bad behaviour. Some believe other individuals to be wicked on very little evidence to justify attacking them.

Fourth, there must be clear good consequences from holding these beliefs. The value of holding the three beliefs just mentioned is well known. I have summarized them as follows:

(1) If the cosmos and the world were made for people to live in, that gives their lives an extraordinary value [...] (2) If the commands given by Moses and Jesus were the word of God, then they deserve unqualified respect [...] (3) Finally, if God's Holy Spirit of wisdom and love is available to those intent on obeying God's commands, it would enable people to overcome their wayward and wicked natures and live as they ought and as they desire [...] Those who are convinced of the truth of these propositions will treat all people, including themselves, as of ultimate value; they will act as justly and lovingly as they can; and they will seek the support of God's Holy Spirit to enable them to lead a holy life.⁴²

People's faith in the three traditional Christian beliefs is strengthened if they know and endorse the value of the way of life they both cause and justify.

Now can faith in the resurrection of Jesus be justified on pragmatic grounds? Let's assume that the explanatory scope and power of this thesis compensates for its implausibility and ad hoc character. After all, if God did indeed raise Jesus from the dead in physical form, then he could have appeared to his disciples as reported in the Bible. Although the hypothesis that God raised Jesus is quite *ad hoc*, there are some facts that support its credibility. But the evidence is far from overwhelming, so why do so many people affirm Jesus' resurrection so confidently? I suggest it is because they want to enjoy the comfort of its implications. It is good to see that God has power over death and will raise all those who love and obey him to a new eternal life. And it is a comfort for faithful Christians to think that they might be raised sometime after they die as well.

I have always been impressed by the faith of African American slaves whose passionate spirituals express a longing for heaven as a merciful alternative to the suffering they experienced on plantations. If ever faith in life after death had a practical justification it was here, providing a hope that sustained them.

But faith in the risen Jesus is not simply grounds for hope in life hereafter. It is also the condition of one's daily walk with a personal God, whose Spirit is willing to guide and encourage one in the service of his heavenly fa-

⁴¹ McCullagh, "Can Religious," 29.

⁴² McCullagh, "Can Religious," 29-30.

ther. It is thus absolutely essential to a Christian way life. And if that is of absolute value, as I believe it is, then faith in the risen Jesus is essential.

So although the hypothesis that God raised Jesus from the dead cannot be proved true, as an interpretation of the experience of the disciples and others it is worth believing, both as a reason for hoping in life after death, but even more importantly, as an essential condition of a Christian way of life.