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“In the long run we are all dead.” So wrote John Maynard Keynes. He did not thereby endorse a devil-may-care attitude. Rather he meant to remind economists that long-term projections cannot forever ignore pressing economic needs. Keynes, of course, did not write anything about Christ’s Resurrection from the dead, much less that we can share in his Resurrection. What that sharing means, however, is the question that Sarah Bachelard explores in the book under review.

Paul, to be sure, had much to say about Christ’s Resurrection and its import for us. “If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile,” indeed, “If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all men most to be pitied” (1 Cor. 15: 17, 19).

Bachelard takes the Resurrection to heart. As an “eschatological event” that reaches from the past and across the present into the future, it reshapes our moral imagination and revises our very experience of time (88). A personal impetus led to her welcome investigation. She writes that “Fifteen years ago . . . I was immersed in doctoral work in moral philosophy, focused on the writing of Iris Murdoch, Raimond Gaita and Cora Diamond. In these thinkers I had found what seemed to be the necessary and sufficient bridge between my lived moral experience and a Christian tradition that I no longer found credible or attractive” (1). Yet a few years later, at once “astonished, bewildered and slightly terrified,” she returned to Christian faith (1). She found herself trying to come to terms with the significance of the risen Christ and do so in a way that might engage the very mentors whom she continued to hold in the highest regard. The result of this engagement, at once a dialogue with doubt and a call to renewal, is this new monograph.

Sarah Bachelard’s contributions are many and notable. As a matter of context, her careful scholarship puts in play the varied strains of thought not only of her original mentors but also figures like Dietrich Bonhoeffer
and Simone Weil—as well as the contemporary writers James Alison, Brian Robinette, and Rowan Williams. As a matter of perspective, Bachelard writes as a theologian intent on letting theology be theology; she will not allow it to be a handmaid of the idols of the tribe. “All reflection,” she observes, “begins somewhere,” and “even secular liberalism presumes a background picture of reality” that is not open to proof (154).

Bachelard presents and develops several themes critical to Christian life. A first, linked with her contemplative background, is that wisdom comes from a union with God; it is a union that issues in a love stronger than death. A second is that the journey to this union brings us through the cross and into new life. A third is that in the Resurrection we find a peace that overshadows fear and brings “the lightness or hilaritas of the saint” (188). A fourth is that Christ’s victory over death shows us that we need not define ourselves in opposition to one another in the countless ways that we have supposed we must. A fifth is that in the Resurrection an “unselfing” becomes possible, since now we can see ourselves as existing in God’s love. A sixth is that a Resurrection ethics is “revelatory, vulnerable, and compassionate” and subverts the unredeemed structures which resist transformation (93). It presents a new horizon that “sets us free from preoccupation with our own goodness or innocence and invites us into the adventure of a future lived in and from God’s life” (191).

For Bachelard, a theologian of journey and transformation, Christian reflection is always an open inquiry. In this spirit, we might turn to a series of questions that her work poses. Quite rightly, she recognizes that in theological discourse “saying less” is not enough. Yes, Wittgenstein in his Lecture on Ethics says that “the experience of feeling absolutely safe” is a way that religious language might try “to go beyond the world”; Bachelard, however, suggests that a theology of “the resurrection encounters” can tell us more about the sort of “depth experience of the human condition” which he seems to have in mind (40–41n29). Nor would she accept Wittgenstein’s view that “The historical accounts in the Gospels might, historically speaking, be demonstrably false and yet belief would lose nothing by this” (Ludwig Wittgenstein, Culture and Value [University of Chicago Press, 1984], 32e).

The question arises, nonetheless, whether Bachelard is always alert to theological discourse that seems to be “saying more” but is very likely “saying less.” An example: she movingly recounts the martyrdom of Trappist monks in Algeria at the hands of radical Islamists. The monks, she thinks, faced death while already living in a time that shares in eternity. “There is not a separate, heavenly time,” she writes, “given to the monks as a ‘reward’ for being good” (92). Yet she approves a film’s portrayal of their last meal as “a foretaste of the heavenly banquet” (92). But how can there be a “foretaste” of heaven if it has no distinct time? And how are we to interpret Paul’s farewell to Timothy: “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge,
will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing” (2 Timothy 4: 7–8)?

A second example of “saying more” turning out to be “saying less” comes with Bachelard’s often perceptive analysis of oppositional identity formation: we habitually seek to define ourselves over and against “the others.” Christ’s Resurrection opens the way for us to share in God’s life, and we can say more about who we are. How? It does so by “making it possible for people to enter into the dynamic of the undoing of any form of ‘sacred’ belonging” (177). This is a puzzling dynamic. Where, then, do we belong? Is this newly realized eschatology at odds with Christ’s Kingdom? If so, for what are we to pray? From what temptation do we ask deliverance?

A third example of “saying more” that might become “saying less” develops in Bachelard’s analysis of the Enlightenment’s autonomous self, a self that mimics the Enlightenment deity. Feminists, she notes, have come to see the surrender of the autonomous self, even to God, as a jettisoning of the self. It is a kind of violence. Yet this autonomous self is the strange fruit of a mistaken anthropology. For Bachelard, the self is relational. Authentic “unselfing” is not destructive. Rather, it puts aside “that in us which maintains the illusion of separateness,” namely the struggle “to possess or secure the self over against others” (101). In contrast, if I yield myself “into God’s life,” then I am transformed, since now “I am not striving to enact love as a norm but becoming more transparent to [its] reality” (102). Now “my selfhood is constituted by its relation to God’s giving life” (102). Just as the Trinitarian life is relational, so too is mine.

But perhaps Bachelard is too quick. Note that if we speak of the relational, we must speak as well of that which is in relation. I can be brought into a new relation with God, but the relation does not constitute my life. Nor can we speak of a relation as an agent. Rather it is agents who act in relation to one another. Moreover, to be a free agent requires a certain mastery of oneself. This mastery is a mark of personhood. Or so it has seemed to the perennial philosophy. If we are to speak of the Trinity, and it is well to do so, Thomas Aquinas teaches that the distinction of persons therein is relational. In light of God’s simplicity, however, this relationality is subsisting; it is not other than God’s nature. Thus, Thomas contends that “in this sense it is true that ‘person’ signifies relation directly and nature indirectly, yet relation is signified, not as relation, but as hypostasis” (Summa Theologicae 1a 29, 4).

Here I would like to introduce a fresh pair of reflections, both in aid of further advancing a Thomist engagement with Bachelard’s Resurrection ethic. The first intervention addresses her account of a dualism between good and evil. Bachelard finds instructive Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s understanding of the Fall in terms of humankind’s taking on a supposed knowledge of good and evil that is fundamentally distorted. It is a knowledge “apart from God,” and, indeed, “any conception of ‘good’ that can be opposed to ‘evil’ is itself already outside of God, which means that it cannot be truly Good” (60). We
must, accordingly, reject any of the shop-worn dualisms of good and evil. If we do not, we make ourselves into judges who think themselves to be independent of God. To take such a stance is, in practice, to join the Pharisees.

Again, this conclusion seems too quick, even a rush to judgment. Christians, in any case, affirm that all that the Creator brought into existence, and sustains in existence, is itself good. Nonetheless, we daily encounter evil. Good, however, is not dependent on evil. It is evil, rather, that is a parasitic privation—a warping distortion—of that which is good. On this view, that of Augustine as well as Thomas, reflection on good and evil leads us to the very contrast of being and non-being. Metaphysics, if this be such, is not at odds with Creation so long as metaphysics is the study of the real and so long as the real is both finite and infinite. To be sure, religious language is analogical, but the Creator is the primary analogate.

A second Thomist intervention addresses Bachelard's account of moral ambiguity. She repeatedly rejects what she calls “systems of goodness” that pit in-groups (of various sorts) against outcasts. Nonetheless, she rejects “antinomianism” as well as “moralism” (66). Yet it is anything but clear what counts as doing good and doing harm in many of the complex situations that we face (for example, with regard to issues bearing on the beginning and end of human life, of political authority, of marriage and sexuality, and of immigration). In the order of grace, she insists, the dynamic of the moral life “prevents” its “becoming merely another system of goodness, a fixed measure according to which we can assess our moral performance” (88). We are to be present to each person as an “unrepeatable particularity” (95). Even failure can guide our way: “the truth is that sometimes it is only in the failure of sincerely undertaken commitments and endeavours that we . . . are able to name and repent of the deeper ‘sins’ that have brought us to this point” (172). Here a Thomist would readily agree that each person is unique. Yet each of us must, in applying the moral law, “grasp the universal in his own singular existence . . . face to face with God” (Jacques Maritain, *Existence and the Existent* [Doubleday, 1956], 67). Here, too, reason is a friend rather than a foe. Indeed, Thomas writes that reason is the root of all liberty (*De Veritate*, 24, 2). To each of us, and to us all, Christ says, “If you love me, you will keep my commandments” (John 14:15). No existential tension changes this.

For Bachelard, though, reason is a dodgy friend. Too close an embrace of it risks “rationalism” and blindness to God’s “radical otherness” (105). Thomas, to be sure, was no friend of intellectual posturing. But such posturing presupposes reason. Yes, sin undermines our capacity to act reasonably, as virtue requires—but not without limit. “[S]in cannot,” he observes, “entirely take away from man the fact that he is a rational being, for then he would no longer be capable of sin. Wherefore it is not possible for this good of nature to be destroyed entirely” (ST I-II, q. 85, a. 2). Pride, a deadly vice, can spring from reason gone wrong. But without a chastened reason, we cannot appreciate the intelligibility of Creation or, as we must, learn to speak to one another across our broken cultures.
Bachelard would agree that we must speak to one another, and speak especially to the least little ones among us. She would agree, too, that it is the mission of the Church to do so and that the philosophy of our academies cannot supplant that mission. There is not space enough to explore her ecclesiology. One might at least note, though, that her Church celebrates the sacraments, each of which celebrates life. A reason subservient to the idols of the tribe continues to find one such sacrament, a Sacrament of Resurrection, an insuperable scandal. How is it that Jesus dares to say, “unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you: he who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day” (John 6:53–54)?

A closing link? Keynes tells us that in the end we are all dead. With a Resurrection ethic and its imagination, we could counter that everything depends on “the end.” Might we not propose that “it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit—immortal horrors or everlasting splendors” (C. S. Lewis, Weight of Glory [Harper Collins, 2001], 47)?


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That Christ was a person with both a divine and a human nature is for Aquinas a fact that faith commands us to accept, but that a theologian also needs to understand as fully as possible. In his lucid, deep, and beautifully written book, Michael Gorman sets out to investigate Aquinas’s life-long attempt to understand the incarnation of God in Christ.

The book is composed of six chapters. The first and the second chapter introduce the reader to the key concepts of person and nature, and argue for the interpretation that “Aquinas is best read as thinking that the off-the-rack philosophical notion of nature is inadequate for Christological purposes. Something tailor-made—a modified notion of ‘nature’ is required” (9). Such Thomistic-type of nature will include, writes Gorman, what an Aristotelian-type of nature includes, and in addition “accidents, individuating principles, and so on”; in the case of a human nature, accidents such as that of speaking Aramaic, which is “connected to and rooted in Christ’s human nature, even if it does not belong to that nature” (45). The reason why Aquinas feels the need to introduce this expanded notion of nature is to be able to express all that Christology requires him to say about Christ, which a more restricted, Aristotelian understanding of nature would not cover. Naturally this move