

# THE RESURRECTION OF THE DEAD: A RELIGIONLESS INTERPRETATION

ADAMKOTSKO

The resurrection of the dead has often occupied an ambiguous place in Christian theology. On the one hand, the resurrection of Christ is regarded as the ultimate proof of his divinity and belief in the resurrection is one of the most frequent litmus tests for what counts as true Christianity. On the other hand, the resurrection of the dead can sometimes seem like an awkward footnote to Christian doctrine. It is a spectacular event associated with the end of time, but for all practical purposes, the tradition has been much more preoccupied with the fate of the individual's immortal soul.

Attempts to reconcile belief in the resurrection with belief in the immortality of the soul have generated considerable intellectual gymnastics. This perhaps indicates that the two doctrines are not a natural fit, and indeed many contemporary theologians of a more traditional bent have significantly de-emphasized the immortality of the soul in favor of the resurrection. Such approaches are often presented as a long-overdue return to the more originary truth of the gospel, but it cannot be denied that they also represent attempts to make Christian theology more relevant in an academic culture that is increasingly fascinated with the question of "the body."

Outside of academic circles, stances toward the resurrection have largely fallen into a familiar conservative-versus-liberal pattern. Conservatives emphasize "literal" belief in the resurrection, even though this is surely one of the most inapt possible designators for such a singular event. Meanwhile, liberals have tended to explain it in ways that are in danger of explaining it away—for instance, by claiming that the resurrection accounts are a later development and that the early communities simply had a firmly-held belief that Christ was somehow still with them. The goal of such liberal approaches to the resurrection is to return the focus where they believe it belongs: the moral edification to be derived from Christ's teachings.

In this essay, I would like to propose an alternative approach to the resurrection of the dead, using the methodology I have developed in my book *Politics of Redemption: The Social Logic of Redemption*.<sup>1</sup> I have called that methodology a social-relational one and—drawing on Bonhoeffer's prison

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<sup>1</sup> Adam Kotsko, *Politics of Redemption: The Social Logic of Salvation* (New York: T&T Clark, 2010), esp. chaps. 1 and 8.

writings as well as the work of Dorothee Soelle—a religionless one. It is religionless insofar as it does not start with the framework of a transcendent God and an immortal soul and does not assume that biblical or theological texts require such a framework in order to be meaningful. It is social-relational insofar as it pushes beyond the irreducible individualism of that traditional paradigm and focuses on ways that biblical or theological texts speak to the *social* structure of human existence. In order to uncover a social-relational logic in the text, however, it is necessary to take it as a whole. Dismissing certain elements as mythological accretions to be explained away imposes an outside framework onto the text that proves just as counterproductive as presupposing the metaphysical framework of the soul and its God.

My test-case for this methodology was the vexed question of atonement theory—that is, of the various theological attempts to make sense of the nature and meaning of Christ’s saving work. An investigation of the classical articulations of atonement theory showed that they all rely on a fundamental connectedness among human beings. This fundamentally social structure of humanity allows Adam to create a problem that propagates itself to all human beings and similarly allows Christ to solve that problem in a way that is (at least potentially or in principle) equally universal in scope.

The earliest extended discussion of the resurrection of the dead in the New Testament holds out the promise that this theme will be similarly productive when approached from a social-relational or religionless perspective. I am speaking here of 1 Corinthians 15, where Paul insists on a radical inseparability between Christ’s resurrection and ours. This inseparability is visible in the very phrase “resurrection *from the dead*” (ἐκ νεκρῶν).<sup>2</sup> It is easy to treat this phrase as a quasi-jargonistic term, such that “from the dead” is a King James-style way of saying something like “from the grave,” but it is important to emphasize that the Greek term for “the dead” is plural here. A more expressive translation might say that Christ was raised “from among dead people” or “out of dead people.” The “resurrection of the dead” is not a general power that God possesses and has used in the particular case of Christ, but rather a universal event that Christ’s resurrection kicks off. He is the “first fruits of those who have died” (15:20), and his action will have as universal an effect as Adam’s propagation of

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<sup>2</sup> 1 Cor. 5:12 (New Revised Standard Version). All biblical citations hereafter come from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) unless otherwise noted.

death (15:21-22). If Paul envisions any from among the dead being excluded from the resurrection, he does not mention such a possibility here—and that is fitting, given that such a possibility would conflict with Paul’s repeated assertions that death will be utterly defeated (15:26, 54-57).

Paul equally ignores the possibility of an immortal soul surviving the body; instead, he puts forth a more complex account of continuity-in-discontinuity. Responding to a hypothetical question about the kind of body in which the dead will be raised (15:35), he first turns to the analogy of a seed, which is not yet what it will become (15:37-38). Paul emphasizes the diversity among the types of bodies that God has created, including the various types of flesh (15:39), and the contrast between earthly and heavenly bodies (15:40-41). The contrast between the “seed” of the mortal human body and the “plant” of the resurrected body is just as stark: “It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. It is sown an ensouled body [σῶμα ψυχικόν], it is raised a spiritual body [σῶμα πνευματικόν]” (15:42-44, translation altered). Paul repeats this contrast in terms of his first Adam/second Adam schema: “Thus it is written, ‘The first man, Adam, became a living soul [ψυχὴν ζῶσαν]’; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit [πνεῦμα ζωοποιόν]” (15:45, translation altered). It is not clear exactly what Paul means by “soul” here, but he cannot possibly be putting forth the traditional “religious” view of the soul if the soul is aligned with the mortal body that is overcome through the resurrection.<sup>3</sup>

While Paul’s account of the resurrection of Christ begins with an attempt to shore up the authority of the gospel message and those appointed to preach it (15:3-11), it almost immediately opens out onto broader reflections on the death-defeating, life-giving consequences of Christ’s resurrection for *all* the dead. It emphasizes themes of human solidarity with no explicit attention to the metaphysical question of the immortal soul as a survival of individuality beyond bodily existence. While the end times play a significant role, the real payoff of the passage comes in the consequences of faith or trust in the resurrection for the community. This trust issues in a practice that anticipates the “life-giving spirit” that Christ as “first fruits of those who have died” has become (15:20).

The Gospel accounts are at first glance significantly different from Paul’s theological meditation. All four trace a similar narrative with

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<sup>3</sup> In fact, the translators of the NRSV, undoubtedly in deference to that view, misleadingly render “πνευματικόν” as “physical.”

relatively limited explicit theological elaboration. First, a group of women come to the tomb in order to attend to the body, but they are informed by some type of messenger or messengers that Jesus is risen. Jesus then appears personally to a gradually larger number of people, but soon ascends into heaven, having promised some form of future presence or empowerment to his disciples. This presence or empowerment is sometimes but not always identified with the Holy Spirit.

The four narratives differ significantly in details—such as the precise identities of the women who first come to the tomb, the number and nature of the messengers, the events associated with each appearance—and explicating all those differences is beyond the scope of this essay. Instead, looking at each Gospel account in turn according to the general scholarly consensus of their order of composition, I would like to focus on what one could call the structural differences among these narratives, the unique elements that make them more than trivial variations on a theme. As I will try to show, these structural differences, far from representing serious contradictions, actually allow each account to enrich in its own way the basic scheme found in Paul.

According to scholarly consensus, the oldest of the Gospel accounts of the resurrection is Mark.<sup>4</sup> Like the rest of Mark's narrative, his resurrection account moves very quickly, and the common thread throughout this account is disbelief in the absence of miraculous signs. The women arrive to find the stone rolled away (16:3), and see a young man sitting in the tomb (16:4). The young man tells them Jesus has been raised and orders them to tell the disciples, but they are afraid and do not do so. Jesus then appears directly to one of the women, Mary Magdalene, who finally obeys and tells the others, but they do not believe her (16:9-11). He subsequently appears to two others, and they tell the others, who do not believe *them* (16:12-13). Finally, he appears to the disciples altogether, berates them for their lack of faith, and orders them to tell the whole world (16:14-16). Jesus promises them that signs will accompany their message: “[B]y using my name they will cast out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up snakes in their hands, and if they drink any deadly thing, it will not hurt them; they will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover” (16:15-18). He is then immediately taken up to heaven (16:19), at which point the disciples obey and begin preaching, “while the Lord worked with

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<sup>4</sup> Given the uncertain state of the text, it seems the only practical way to proceed here is to follow the tradition and treat the “longer ending” (16:9-20) as a unit together with 16:1-8.

them and confirmed the message by the signs that accompanied it” (16:20).

The message here is clear: those who expect others to trust that something extraordinary has happened should also have something extraordinary about them. At the same time, it is noteworthy that Jesus appears to be trying to keep his direct appearances to an absolute minimum, at first appearing only to one person, then to two, and finally—visibly annoyed—to his disciples as a group. Taken together with the famous theme of the “messianic secret,” this presents us with a savior who very much wants to take people’s mind off of *him* as an individual. As soon as he jump-starts the movement by appearing to as small an inner circle as possible, he immediately ascends to heaven and begins helping them invisibly.

The signs that Jesus “worked with them” follow in this pattern of taking the focus off Jesus as a person—there is no sign of the cross, for instance, and no particular emphasis on baptism or other distinctively “Christian” rituals. Instead, the disciples put forth the content of his message. Casting out demons has been a priority all along, in keeping with Mark’s emphasis on the defeat of Satan. In addition, when one takes into account the ways that the demon-possessed (most notably the Garasene demoniac of Mark 5) were cut off from human society, the ability to cast out demons and the ability to “speak new tongues” fit together as ways of expanding the circle of human fellowship. Similarly, certain types of highly symbolic invulnerabilities (to snakes and poison) highlight the disciples’ fearlessness before death, while their healing abilities reflect the life-giving nature of the resurrection.

Matthew’s account is significantly different, both in narrative details and in overall tone. Perhaps the most significant difference is that Jesus’ resurrection is not the first resurrection mentioned—instead, immediately upon his death, the evangelist claims that “the tombs were also opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised” (27:52). What’s more, these resurrected saints “came out of the tombs and entered the holy city and appeared to many” (27:53). Thus the first consequence of Jesus’s death was the resurrection *of other people*, an occurrence that contradicts Paul’s claim that Jesus was the first fruits from among the dead, yet neatly captures the logic of his overall argument.

When we turn to the resurrection account proper, it is clear that Matthew’s version of the story has considerably more bombast than Mark’s, with the earthquake and the dramatic appearance of the angel who rolls the stone away (28:2-3). Notably, however, the core reality is the same: the

women arrive to find Christ's body already gone. The moment of the resurrection itself is never depicted in either account—Matthew provides a more dramatic “reveal” than Mark, but the main event happened at some unknown time between his burial and the women's arrival without the guards or anyone else noticing it. The women and disciples all worship him, providing a clearer indication of his divine status than in Mark, but in contrast to the terrifying angel, Jesus's appearance goes unremarked. Furthermore, Matthew does not depict any post-resurrection miracles, not even the ascension into heaven. Nor does he promise that the disciples will be able to perform miraculous signs: he merely promises that he will be with them.

This notion of Jesus's presence is a theme common to Mark and Matthew. Notably absent here, however, is any explicit mention of the sending of the Holy Spirit in the sense familiar from the liturgical observation of Pentecost. Matthew associates the Holy Spirit with the commandment to baptize, yet in neither Matthew nor Mark (nor indeed Paul) is any particular connection drawn between Jesus's resurrection and the working or availability of the Holy Spirit. Instead, Jesus's presence—for which no specific mechanism is described—appears to play the empowering and emboldening role one normally associates with the Holy Spirit. Together with the fact that Paul depicts the resurrection body as a “life-giving spirit” (1 Cor. 15:45), this perhaps indicates that there was not initially a strong contrast between the resurrected Christ and a separate entity known as the Holy Spirit.

Luke's most significant structural innovation is to add a two-level frame within which Jesus' post-resurrection appearances occur. The first level of the frame is the explication of scripture, which includes within it a frame centered on the sharing of food. In the appearance to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, he first explicates scripture and then shares a meal (or at least begins to), while in his subsequent appearance to the main body of his disciples, he first shares a meal and then explicates scripture. In both cases, Jesus follows with the theme of moving the emphasis away from himself.

I will begin with the frame of sharing a meal. With the Emmaus road disciples, his identity remains unknown until he breaks bread with them (24:30-31), an act that traditional interpreters have associated with the Eucharist. With the other disciples, by contrast, he eats a piece of fish in order to demonstrate that he is not a ghost (24:34-42). The tradition has

tended to emphasize that the latter meal indicates that Jesus has been “literally” resurrected. If we take the two meals together, however, the “menu” is not that of the Eucharist, but rather of Jesus’s most famous miracle: the feeding of the five thousand. If I am correct that this miracle is Luke’s point of reference, then this account enacts a transition from Jesus as detached miracle worker (breaking the bread and promptly disappearing) to a *participant* in the miraculous feast (eating the piece of broken fish). From this perspective, the important thing about Jesus’s “literal” resurrection is not the way it demonstrates God’s transcendent power, but rather its portrayal of Jesus as *one of us*—indeed he is paradoxically even more “one of us,” in the sense of being less super-human, than before he died. Like Mark and Matthew, Luke is sparing in attributing miraculous signs to the resurrected Jesus (aside from ascending to heaven), so that he is strangely less impressive after rising from the dead than before. In fact, Jesus frequently appears to be just “some guy,” as in the encounter on the road to Emmaus.

The frame of scriptural interpretation works similarly. The explication of prophecy on the road to Emmaus serves to demonstrate that Jesus really was the Messiah, while his second hermeneutical exercise opens outwards to include the disciples’ mission: declaring “repentance and forgiveness of sins... to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem” (24:47). In contrast to the accounts of Mark and Matthew, the disciples will be empowered not by Jesus’ own presence, but by another entity known as the Holy Spirit—a distinction that is emphasized by the waiting period the disciples have to undergo after the ascension (24:49).

While the exact nature and status of the Holy Spirit is not explained in this account, it is clear that the shift in emphasis toward the Holy Spirit thus corresponds with a shift in agency toward the disciples rather than Jesus. The resurrection account at the beginning of Acts deepens this insight when the narrator claims that before being taken up to heaven, Jesus taught the apostles “through the Holy Spirit” (1:2). After a waiting period, the disciples then receive the Holy Spirit in a remarkable vision, which gave them the ability to speak foreign languages (2:1-4); later in Acts, the disciples perform all the signs promised in Mark and more. Acts thus presents Jesus as *also* empowered by the Holy Spirit in his post-resurrection teachings—the same Holy Spirit that will empower his disciples to carry on his mission and to do signs that, in Acts, are arguably even more impressive than Jesus’s own. The shift from Jesus’ earthly ministry to the ministry of the Holy Spirit has the effect of turning Jesus into a kind of “first among equals.”

The Gospel of John enacts the theme of displacing the interest from Jesus as a person in a unique way through its use of Jesus' intimate relationships. John has Mary Magdalene come to the tomb alone to find the stone rolled away (20:1), then stages an enigmatic race between Peter and the beloved disciple to be the first to see the empty tomb (20:2-10). The beloved disciple becomes the first to believe (20:8), while Mary is the first to see the resurrected Jesus. The presentation of this encounter is particularly intimate, as Jesus goes unrecognized until he calls Mary by name (20:16). Yet Jesus tells her "do not hold on to me" or "do not touch me" (Μή μου ἅπτου) and instructs her to tell the other disciples (20:17). What is important is not her personal attachment to Jesus, but furthering his mission.

The same theme recurs in the discussion of the beloved disciple after Jesus' reconciliation with Peter in chapter 21, when Peter asks whether the beloved disciple will remain alive until the end (21:20-21). What is noteworthy here is that Jesus does not indulge Peter's curiosity, basically declaring it none of his business (21:22). This leads to rumor-mongering among the disciples (21:23), but when the Evangelist seems to declare in conclusion that he is the beloved disciple, he too does not respond directly to the rumor. Instead, the Evangelist simply points to his own trustworthiness in witnessing the events related (21:24). Yet again, we can see that an excessive focus on Jesus as an individual—in this case, on the very special personal relationship that only the Gospel of John portrays—is inappropriate. Neither Jesus nor the beloved disciple dignifies Peter's curiosity or the disciples' rumor with a clear answer: the important thing is to follow Jesus—that is, to trust in the events related in the Gospel and act accordingly.

John also introduces a new perspective on the Holy Spirit. Later on the same day, Jesus appears to his disciples (20:19). After wishing them peace, he "showed them his hands and his side" (20:20), and the disciples "rejoiced when they saw the Lord" (20:21). Breaking with Luke's narrative, Jesus "breathed on them," telling them, "Receive the Holy Spirit" (20:22) and entrusting them with the power to forgive sins (or not). This incident is interesting for several reasons. First, it posits an extremely close bond between Jesus and the Holy Spirit, playing on the fact that the Greek πνεῦμα means both "spirit" and "breath." Secondly, it is worth noting that in the Gospel of John, the forgiveness of sins is not a significant part of Jesus' ministry. Even in the case of the woman caught in adultery, he merely refrains from condemning her (8:11), and the narrator is at pains to clarify that only Jesus' disciples baptized repentant sinners, not Jesus himself (4:2).

As in Luke, this is something of a “hand-off”: Jesus has fulfilled one part of a larger mission that the disciples must now continue in their own way.

Another interesting addition in John’s Gospel is the story of “doubting Thomas,” which like Jesus’ meal of fish in Luke is often put forward as proof of the importance of a “literal” resurrection. The agenda of Thomas, however, is not to verify that Jesus really has a body, but that he is really the one who was crucified: “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe” (20:25). When Jesus appears to him and invites him to perform his investigation (20:27), Thomas does not do so. Instead he immediately declares Jesus to be Lord and God (20:28), just as the other apostles believed upon seeing Jesus’s wounds. Jesus then declares, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe” (20:29), and the narrator declares that this sign—that is, Jesus’s appearance with his wounds from crucifixion—was chosen out of many others in order that the reader “may come to believe” (20:31). The most important sign of Jesus, then, is the demonstration that he really was the same Jesus who was crucified, a theme that dovetails nicely with Paul’s insistence on the solidarity of Christ with all those who have died.

After this brief investigation of the most important New Testament accounts, what can we say about the significance of the resurrection of the dead? It seems clear that it bears some relationship with eternal life, but the emphasis in Paul and even more so in the Gospels is on the availability of at least some anticipatory participation on that eternal life *here and now*. This participation is not premised on membership in a self-enclosed elite, but instead issues in a service that continually crosses boundaries—beyond the initial setting of Judaism, beyond the kinds of social divisions caused by differing languages and demon possession, and at the margins, even beyond the line between the living and the dead. Indeed, the resurrection even appears to actively confound this last boundary, as the resurrected Jesus still bears the marks of his death.

If we still must await the definitive defeat of death, trust in the resurrection allows us to live as those who no longer fear death. The tradition has tended to associate this boldness specifically with the Trinitarian person known as the Holy Spirit, but none of these New Testament accounts make such a clear distinction between Jesus and the Spirit. Paul seems to identify the resurrected Christ as a “life-giving spirit” (1 Cor. 15:45) but the logic of his argument dictates that that is what we will also become. The Gospel

accounts, in turn, express different aspects of this basic logic. Mark and Matthew emphasize Jesus's presence and his continuing role in empowering his disciples. Drawing on the resources of the Greek language, John presents the "Spirit" as the "breath" of the same Jesus who has just proven that he is the crucified one who is now risen. Luke-Acts, meanwhile, puts forth the Holy Spirit as a broader reality in which Jesus and his disciples equally, though differently, participate. The Holy Spirit cannot be separated from Jesus because the Holy Spirit names the immediate consequence of trust in the resurrection, a general resurrection that Jesus has inaugurated. Thus, some of these accounts can claim that the Holy Spirit somehow "is" Jesus, or even directly identify the function of the Holy Spirit with Jesus, without naming any separate entity. Yet what is the Holy Spirit if it is not *simply* Jesus?

In a religionless approach, we cannot presuppose either the metaphysical framework of the transcendent God and the immortal soul or the Trinitarian orthodoxy that attempted to square the gospel message with that framework, and so we cannot say much about what the Holy Spirit is in itself, at least not with much confidence. All we can definitively say is that the Holy Spirit is *us*. I do not mean this in the Hegelian sense whereby Christ is resurrected as the *Geist* of the Church as an institution, but in the sense that the Holy Spirit's only concrete existence, as portrayed in the Gospels, is in the work of those who trust in the resurrection. This *us* is defined by its relationship to Jesus, but not limited by it. Indeed, it is just the opposite: insofar as our relationship to Jesus empowers us to overcome the fear of death, it emboldens us to reach out to all we meet.

The *us* that the Holy Spirit is allows us to anticipate the day when we will be able to say *us* in the broadest and most all-inclusive way. Jesus remains an indispensable point of reference, yet the Gospel accounts leave us with the impression that, to paraphrase John the Baptist's statement from John 3:30, "Jesus must become lesser, we must become greater." From a religionless perspective, we can see that Jesus did not come so that we could become Christians, but so that we could become *us*, in the most powerful sense of the word—an *us* that is constitutively open, continually transgressing every boundary, even and especially the boundary that sets *us* off from others.

This is the account of the resurrection that a religionless approach gives us access to. Yet some readers may be wondering whether this scheme really requires us to *reject* the traditional framework of the transcendent God

and the immortal soul.<sup>5</sup> Might it not be safer to harvest the insights of a religionless approach and incorporate them into a more traditional view? For instance, one might say that while the emphasis is clearly on the resurrection of the *body*, nothing in these passages explicitly excludes the notion of an immortal soul that survives death. Yet how is the notion of a soul that can never die compatible with the crossing of the boundaries between life and death that we see in resurrection? Resurrection is certainly an overcoming of death, but it is far from an exclusion of it—after all, Jesus still carries the marks of his death on his resurrected body. And what sense can Jesus’—and, by extension, our—solidarity with the dead make if the dead are not really dead? Indeed, I would argue that the traditional concept of the soul—that hard core of individuality that is in the last analysis impervious to any influence aside from its own free will—is incompatible with anything but the most superficial kind of solidarity.

A potentially more serious question arises in connection with the necessity to reject the transcendent God: who but a transcendent, all-powerful God could perform a miracle as profound as the resurrection? These accounts may emphasize the consequences of the resurrection for human agency, but don’t they logically presuppose an act of God? To this I would reply that it does require an act of God, but not necessarily a *transcendent* God, nor indeed a purely *miraculous* act of God. The notion of a miracle implies that God is somehow violating the laws of nature, yet Paul is able to present the resurrection through the naturalistic metaphor of planting seeds—and more generally, to portray the resurrection as God’s ultimate goal for all of creation. The resurrection is certainly amazing and unanticipated from a human perspective, but to view it as the miraculous act of a transcendent God implies an inviolable boundary between God and creation, one that can only be crossed in one direction. Why should this one boundary remain pristine and unaffected amid the proliferation of transgressions the resurrection inaugurates?

One can also come at this question from another direction: how could one say all we have said about the resurrection and then maintain that the power of resurrection must be something God and God alone possesses? The resurrection is not the kind of power that can be “possessed,” and in fact, one of its defining signs is breaking people free from “possession” by

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<sup>5</sup> In the discussion that follows, I am deeply indebted to Daniel Colucciello Barber’s remarks on an earlier draft of this essay.

demons. The first fruits of the resurrection was Jesus, “who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited [ἄρπαγμὸν]” (Phil. 2:6)—and what is a possession if not something seized in order to be exploited? Further, the agent of Jesus’ resurrection is very often identified precisely as the Holy Spirit whose movement the resurrection inaugurates (e.g., Rom. 1:4), reflecting a strange time-warp logic that challenges any straightforward notion of agency.

The resurrection is undoubtedly divine, but it is an out-going of the divine with the goal of making us divine in just that out-going way. We must never imagine that we possess the power of resurrection, lest we become something completely contrary to the *us* the resurrection seeks to make us. The way to prevent that is not, however, to keep the possession of the resurrection safely in the hands of a transcendent God, which would paradoxically enshrine possession as what is holiest and best. To become the *us* the resurrection that calls us to be, we must give up on possessing the resurrection, on possessing faith, on possessing the Holy Spirit, and above all, on possessing *us*—not because God actually possesses all those things in a way that excludes us, but because being *us* excludes any possession whatsoever.

*Adam Kotsko (PhD, Chicago Theological Seminary) is Assistant Professor of Humanities at Shimer College, Chicago, IL.*