

Christianity's central tenet presents conundrum for other faiths

by Michael Miller

Non-Christian religions' reverence and appreciation of Jesus usually stops at the threshold of the empty tomb or takes an alternate route.

Yet the Resurrection, which will be celebrated by most Christians on Sunday, April 8, is still a topic that is addressed by most religions.

RELIGION AND THE RESURRECTION - How do faiths besides Christianity view Jesus' rising from the dead? CNS Illustration by Michael Anthony Noel. Islam says it didn't happen. Hinduism, the Baha'i Faith and many liberal Christians offer spiritual or metaphorical interpretations.

For instance, while Islam holds Jesus in high regard as a prophet, the Quran says neither the crucifixion nor resurrection happened, said Fayaz Malik, spokesman for the Peoria Islamic community.

He cited Sura 4:157-158 of the Quran:

"... they killed him not, nor crucified him. Only a likeness of that was shown to them. ... For of a surety they killed him not: - Nay, Allah raised him up unto himself; and Allah is exalted in power, wise."

Islamic traditions, called hadith, interpret the verses as meaning that Jesus was physically removed from Earth and that some other person, possibly Judas, actually died on the cross, Malik said. But Jesus will return as a sign of the end times, Muslim traditions say.

"He will come back, and he will die a natural death in the future," Malik said of the majority opinion of Muslim scholars.

He said Muslims accept the claim that Jesus didn't die because the Quran says it.

"For Muslims, the only authentic word of God existing in the world today is the Quran," Malik said.

Jacob Neusner, author of several books on Jewish-Christian relations and a senior fellow at Bard College in Annandale-on-Hudson, N.Y., said Judaism has no response to claims that Jesus was raised from the dead because "it's not relevant to Judaism."

"It (Judaism) doesn't engage the truth claims of other religions, so it's not an issue facing Judaism," Neusner said.

Rather, classical Judaism focuses on a general resurrection - and judgment - of the dead and not that of just one man, Neusner said, a belief that is shared by not only Christianity but also Islam and Zoroastrianism.

A Zen Buddhist leader was open to the idea of an historical Resurrection, though with that tradition's flavoring.

"When Jesus worked his miracles, spoke his words of wisdom and returned from the dead, he was utterly unconscious of being a separate, finite personality," said Cate Pfeifer, abbot of the Peoria Zen Center in Peoria, Ill. Citing John 10:38 ("You'll fully understand that the Father is in me and I am in the Father"), Pfeifer said that Jesus "was connected to life in the largest sense."

"If we find the Resurrection miraculous or unbelievable, it is only because we are caterpillars theorizing about a butterfly," she said. "We, who are caught in dualistic thinking, cannot mentally grasp the enormity of what he could and did do. His emergence from the chrysalis was so powerful that we are still talking about it over 2,000 years later."

Pfeifer, saying that "All great teachers will leave us with great mysteries," also said, "Jesus did not simply resurrect himself, he brought others back from the dead as well."

"Perhaps the anniversary of his death and return is an excellent time for us to reflect on the many ways we can help ourselves and others return to life."

Yet other religions also acknowledge claims that Jesus was raised in some sense, but put a purely spiritual spin on it.

Hindus, for instance, understand Jesus to be one of many incarnations of God but generally do not believe he was physically raised from the dead, said Prakash Babu of Peoria's Hindu Heritage Center.

"In Hindu philosophy, the atman, the spirit in all of us, is considered eternal and immortal, so in other words, even as we shed our bodies, the spirit of the atman is there eternally," Babu said. "In the case of Jesus's resurrection, Jesus coming back again is not a surprise. Obviously, he was a human person, having a human body, so he was shedding the human body, but the divine soul reappeared. That's not really a surprise in that sense.

"In the crucifixion process, his body was destroyed. That was just flesh and blood. In reality, nothing was

damaged because the divine spirit was eternal."

The Baha'i Faith gives the Resurrection a more metaphorical than physical emphasis.

Abdul Baha, son of the faith's founder, Baha'u'llah, wrote in "Some Answered Questions" that "His resurrection from the interior of the earth is also symbolical; it is a spiritual and divine fact, and not material; and likewise His ascension to heaven is a spiritual and not material ascension."

Baha also said that "The Cause of Christ was like a lifeless body" after his death.

"When after three days the disciples became assured and steadfast, and began to serve the Cause of Christ, and resolved to spread the divine teachings, putting His counsels into practice, and arising to serve Him, the Reality of Christ became resplendent and His bounty appeared; His religion found life; His teachings and His admonitions became evident and visible."

Even some Christian scholars take a more spiritual than historical approach to the Resurrection.

Gregory Riley, a professor at Claremont School of Theology in Claremont, Calif., and author of "Resurrection Reconsidered" (Fortress Press, \$20), said early Christians saw the Resurrection in a variety of ways, reflecting different views of the afterlife in the ancient world. Gospel accounts of the resurrected Jesus are "a huge mix of traditions," Riley said.

"I believe he is alive somehow in a spiritual way without his body," he said. "I don't put much store in the resurrection of the flesh."

In fact, Riley said, neither did Jesus or Paul, both of whom spoke at length of a spiritual afterlife.

"Whatever (Jesus's) resurrected being was, it wasn't identical to our earthly life," Riley said.

"He has changed, become somehow a spiritual or angelic type of being. Here's the big argument: Does flesh rise from the dead or are we transformed into spiritual beings?"

One way of explaining Resurrection accounts, Riley said, is that Jesus's followers probably had the experience that many people do of sensing the presence of a deceased loved one.

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Focus on physicality

Focusing on spiritual or metaphorical meanings of the Resurrection is legitimate, but incomplete, says a Christian scholar.

"I often use the metaphor that the Resurrection is like a many-faceted diamond and you can turn it many ways," said Gary Habermas of Liberty University, co-author of "The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus" (Kregel, \$19).

Only considering such spiritual and symbolic aspects of Jesus' resurrection, Habermas said, avoids the implications of a historical bodily resurrection - that Jesus and the Christian message are unique.

Those who want to say all religions, including Christianity, are the same "either have to round those corners off to make the teachings look the same or they're going to end up with a Christian message that makes more unique claims than all the other messages," he said.

William Lane Craig called the Resurrection "a stumbling block."

"The Resurrection was a real historical event, and that is why it can be meaningful," said Craig, who is a research professor at Talbot School of Theology in La Mirada, Calif., and a well-known Christian apologist.

He said the resurrection was "God's vindication of the radical claims for which Jesus was crucified," said Craig, "If the resurrection is historical, one would have to accept the truth of those claims," including Jesus's claim that he was God, Craig said.

The Rev. Stuart Swetland, who oversees campus ministries for the Catholic Diocese of Peoria, said belief in the physical fact of the Resurrection of Jesus is essential to Christianity.

He cited Paul's teaching in Corinthians 1:15 that "if Christ has not been raised, your faith is vain; you are still in your sins."

"That's the bottom line," Swetland said. "This is the central message, that Jesus of Nazareth, who lived, went through his Passion, died and was buried, was raised up. Christianity is foundationally built on the fact there was an empty tomb and a raised Lord."

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