

Christian apologists, on the mystery of resurrection

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Abstract: Man was concerned with the Mystery of death and resurrection way ahead of it, being unbound through the Death and Resurrection of our Saviour Jesus Christ. In all religions of the world, there was an attempt to solve this riddle and various conclusions and beliefs have been formulated, nevertheless, all pursuing the same goal – to offer man facing the imminent reality of death an answer concerning his existence and his hope in future life.

Having existed concepts about death and even some intuitions on resurrection in pagan religions, this being much more obvious with Jews, the Mystery of death and resurrection was discovered by our Saviour Jesus Christ Himself, Who, through His Incarnation, came to experience death, defending it forever through His Resurrection and making all the faithful in Him partakers to it.

Christian instruction on resurrection was a preoccupation of Christian apologists who had been trying to give an answer to pagans and hope to Christians facing martyrdom. The present study attempts to lay value on resurrection as investigated by Christian apologists, and as being looked at with curiosity, it answers multiple questions even nowadays, as well as worries that modern man has in relation with his existence and whatever there might be after death. I consider that in front of dilemmas that modern man comes across, an insight into the world of Christian apologetic writings on the resurrection of the dead may offer a clear and hopeful answer. This study points out that, even today as in the era of persecution against Christians, people are gripped by the fear of death especially in the face of multiple crises in the world. The Christian apologists gave conclusive answers to the persecuted Christians, which are still valid today for man afraid of death and its eternal consequences. The resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead has unravelled this riddle and given hope to mortal man.

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"For if the dead do not resurrect, then Christ is not Resurrected. And if Christ is not Resurrected, your faith is futile" (1 Cor 15:16-17)

In all religions, more vaguely or more profoundly, there has been preserved an idea of immortality. According to several religions, the souls of the dead continue to live in the kingdom of the dead, wishing to come, for a while, back to earth. This coming back may look like reincarnation into humans or animals, and afterwards, they may return to the kingdom of shadows.

One may also speak of a final judgment of souls which would be the result of life-time deeds. Good, wise, pure, brave and loving souls will live with gods in the kingdom of light and bad, coward, ignorant, impure or criminal souls will wonder eternally as shadows in wild places.

There will finally exist a purgatory of the world, a rebirth from its own ashes.

Drawing from these common features of religions, philosophers have built their philosophical system on the reality of the immortality of the soul. That is why, for them, the beauty and permanence of human wisdom lies in the beauty and permanence of the soul. Only through the soul does man reach the knowledge or at least the extra-sensory perception of the truth. If truth as the foundation of existence is eternal, then the soul is endowed with eternity.

Therefore, due to natural revelation, the pre-Christian world, through its own efforts came to glimpse the truth about the resurrection of the dead, but only in Christianity, through the supernatural revelation of Jesus Christ, did humanity reach the full truth about this reality and understand what the fundamental elements are:

1. Man will resurrect in the whole of his nature and personality, that is, with both body and soul;

2. The real, historical death and Resurrection of Christ are the proof of the complete death and resurrection of men. (Coman 1995: 75)

These realities, which were meant to dispel the fear of death and answer one of man's essential questions: what will happen after death? were received with reluctance and scepticism by the Greco-Roman world, and therefore, Christian apologists confronted on this subject not only with pagan philosophy and various

Christian heresies.

Given the addressee of their writings, Christian apologists used different methods to expose their teaching about the resurrection of the dead. Those who confronted with pagan philosophy approached the method of conferring a Christian meaning on philosophical elements, that is, the transition from *reason* to *faith*. Those who had to

face Christian heretics used scriptural arguments subject to rigorous exegesis, this time the path being from *faith to reason*. In both cases the goal was the same – salvation and the truthful demonstration on the resurrection of the dead.

Both directions of approach to the issue correspond to a group of apologists. In the following, there will be exposed the essential features of the eschatological theology of the most representative Christian apologists and references will be made to the works of other apologists where there is a similarity or identity of opinions.

For the first direction, the most representative is Athenagoras of Athens, and for the second direction, Tertullian.

Athenagoras, the "Christian philosopher of Athens", lived in the second century and inscribed his name in the gallery of the great Greek-speaking Christian apologists in an apology entitled *Message for Christians* and in the treatise *On the Resurrection of the Dead*.² (Stefănescu, 1906 and Bodogae, 1980)

Written in 180 A.D., the treatise *On the Resurrection of the Dead* is one of the most original works on this subject in the entire patristic literature. (Coman 1984: 348) With theological and anthropological arguments, Athenagoras debates the teaching on the resurrection of the dead on a rational basis, demonstrating an excellent knowledge in the field of biology, physiology and medicine.

In the first part (chs. 1-10), the author demonstrates *the possibility of the resurrection of the dead by the power and will of God*, and in the second part (chs. 11-25) he philosophically argues *the need for the resurrection of bodies as an inner request of human nature*.

For his part, **Tertullian** († 240), the author of an extensive treatise *On the Resurrection of the Body*, in 63 chapters, fights the Gnostic heretics by teaching about *the special authority or special prestige of the body, the power of God capable of the resurrection of the dead, and the cause and the purpose of resurrection*,³ (Tertullian 1906: 25-125) leaving to posterity one of the most developed and documented treatises on the resurrection of Christian antiquity.

Convinced that the teaching on the resurrection is an indisputable truth, Athenagoras considers it necessary to elucidate some general aspects in demonstrating a truth. Therefore, any error must first be rejected in order reach the truth. For him, the

² The title belongs to Athenagoras, *Supplicatio pro Christianis*. See: I. Geffcken, *Zwei griechische Apologeten*, Leipzig, 1907, p. 120-238, and W. Schoedel, *Athenagoras: Legatio und De Resurrectione*, Oxford, 1972. In Romanian see: I. Ștefănescu, *Despre învierea morților*, București, 1906, și T. Bodogae, „Athenagora, filosof creștin din Atena”, in: *Părinți și scriitori bisericesti* (PSB), vol. 2, București, 1980, p. 372-386.

³ Tertullian, *De carnis resurrectione*, ed. A. Kroymann, *Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum* (CSEL), 47, Leipzig, 1906, p. 25-125.

clarification of the truth removes unbelief, increases godliness, and opens the way to salvation.⁴

Tertullian, in turn, speaking of the reality of resurrecting, teaches that this truth is contained in the Holy Scriptures which contain the revealed truth. The truth about the resurrection of the dead stems from the reality of Christ's Resurrection, and thus the resurrection is the unravelling of the mystery of our redemption in Jesus Christ Resurrected.⁵

Starting from the pagan objections that God could not raise nor resurrect the dead, Athenagoras learns that God also has the science and power to do so. He knows the nature of the bodies that will resurrect both in terms of undamaged limbs and parts of the limbs. He knows where each of the disaggregated elements goes, which of them has received dissipation and has moved on to what is its own.⁶

If God the Creator, before the special composition of each body, had known the nature of the elements of which human bodies were to be composed, then, even after total dissolution, He knows where each element that was used in the composition of each body went. The power that created the bodies is able to bring together, at the resurrection, into a whole, disintegrated parts, to articulate what is broken, to give life to what is dead, to transform into holy what is corrupt.⁷

For Tertullian, the resurrection of the body is not only an act of will and power, but also an act of God's goodness. "I dare say, says Tertullian, that if all this were not to happen to the body, then the goodness, the grace, all the good-doing power of God, means nothing.⁸ God can raise or resurrect the body because He made everything out of nothing; therefore, if he built it that way from the beginning, it will be easier for him to rebuild it."⁹

Another objection that Athenagoras faces is that some human bodies, being devoured by fish, birds or other animals, which, in turn, become food for humans, would indirectly bring elements from other people's bodies. This would be even more obvious in the case of cannibalism. Hence the conclusion that the resurrection of bodies is not possible because the same parts cannot rise in several bodies, because either they cannot make up the bodies of the former, as their component parts have passed into the bodies of others, or, if they are given to the original bodies, sufficient elements remain for the bodies of the second echelon.¹⁰

⁴Athenagoras, *De resurrectione mortuorum*, 11, ed. C. Otto, *Corpus Apologetarum christianorum saeculi secundi*, vol. VII, Jena 1857, p. 224-226.

⁵Tertullian, *De carnis resurrectione*, 21, CSEL 47:53-54.

⁶Athenagoras, *De resurrectione mortuorum*, 2, p. 192-194.

⁷Athenagoras, *De resurrectione mortuorum*, 3, p. 198.

⁸Tertullian, *De carnis resurrectione*, 9, CSEL 47: 37-38.

⁹Tertullian, *De carnis resurrectione*, 11, CSEL 47: 39-40.

¹⁰Athenagoras, *De resurrectione mortuorum*, 4, p. 200-202.

Using biological and physiological arguments, Athenagoras rejects this claim by showing that food is not fully assimilated and assimilation does not mean total appropriation of assimilated elements, but each body takes over through natural digestion only what is specific to its genus. Thus, some elements are eliminated by the human body from the first contact of the stomach with them. Others undergo transformation through digestion, but do not immediately become an element with nutritional value, but undergo successive transformations and eliminations so that, in the end, what was consumed as food leaves almost nothing in the consumer's body.¹¹

Therefore, man remains, in somatic relation, almost identical with himself, regardless of the kind of death to which he has been subjected. The idea is also found in *Tatian the Assyrian* (second century) who states that whatever happens to the body, destruction by fire, disappearance in the waters of rivers or the sea, torn by wild beasts, he (the body) is in storage in the treasury of a rich master, God, Who, at the moment chosen by Him, will reconstitute matter in the initial state, which is visible only to Him.¹² (Tatian 1888: 6)

Another essential element brought as an argument by Athenagoras refers to the preservation of the integrity of the human body after death as a *sui generis datum*. To be even more convincing, he shows that the constituent elements of the human body to which the pagans refer and which he considers absolutely necessary for the resurrection of bodies were useful only in the first phase of human existence. At the resurrection, the human bodies will have the appearance of those who have died, but they will no longer have the same elements in their composition or the elements of the first body will be in such a tiny minority that they will no longer count. Not being part of the new body, these elements will not even resurrect.¹³

Another objection of pagan philosophy refers to God's lack of will and power to raise the dead and that the resurrection of the dead would be an act of injustice to angels and animals.

Athenagoras replies that the resurrection of men does not disturb the existence of angels who have a well-defined place and role from the beginning, nor that of animals because all that is inanimate will not resurrect. Thus, what no longer exists after the public resurrection cannot be wronged.¹⁴ Even if there were animals even after the resurrection, they cannot be wronged by the resurrection of men because they are no longer enslaved to man, he no longer having bodily needs.

The resurrection cannot be an offense to the soul either, says Athenagoras, for if the soul did not feel offended when it lived in a corruptible time, how could it be an

¹¹ Athenagoras, *De resurrectione mortuorum*, 5, p. 204-206.

¹² Tatianus Syriacus, *Oratio ad Graecos*, 6, ed. E. Schwart, Leipzig, 1888, p. 6.

¹³ Athenagoras, *De resurrectione mortuorum*, 7, p. 210-212.

¹⁴ Athenagoras, *De resurrectione mortuorum*, 10, p. 220.

offense to live in an incorruptible body.¹⁵ Since the idea of imprisoning the soul in the body during life and releasing it through the death of the body were elements of Gnostic doctrine, Tertullian, who confronted Gnostic heretics, had to respond to the argument that it would be unworthy for the body to return to the material state; while matter is subject and degraded, he learns of the divine origin of man, created in the image of God, endowed with great dignity, especially that Christ will one day also take on a material body.¹⁶ The body then receives value by union with the soul keeping itself close to God¹⁷ and will be rewarded together with the soul, with which it has earned its merits, through various renunciations, as a pleasing sacrifice to God. Thus, the body must be resurrected.¹⁸

Athenagoras places great emphasis on anthropology. For him, the purpose of human creation is not a necessity of the Creator, who needs nothing, nor a need of other creatures, because they are not created for the need of each other. "It is not allowed", he says, "for one, who commands and leads, to reach the humble position of serving angels, or for a rational being to submit to irrational beings who are incapable of leading".¹⁹

Man was created to live eternally in God, wholly, with his body and soul. Therefore, the resurrection of the dead is required as a fulfilment of this purpose: eternal existence as a meaning of man's creation, for man was made for his own life and for perpetuity.²⁰ God would not have created such a being and would not have adorned it with what is necessary for perpetuity, had He not wanted this being to live to eternity. Man is given the resurrection, for otherwise he could not live forever. The resurrection is therefore required as a conclusion of creation and the decision of the Creator.²¹

But man was created as an integral being: soul and body, as an indestructible unit. God has given this entity eternity. Hence the conclusion that the resurrection of the body is given to the human being by divine decision based on the inseparability of body and soul.

The argument is used by Athenagoras with a unique demonstrative force (Coman 1995:92), showing that in creation God did not set separate purposes for the two components of man, but gave the inseparable unity between body and soul the same meaning and the same sense of both existence on earth and after death. Therefore,

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, 10, p. 222.

¹⁶ Tertullian, *De carnis resurrectione*, 6, CSEL 47: 33.

¹⁷ Tertullian, *De carnis resurrectione*, 7, CSEL 47:34-35.

¹⁸ Tertullian, *De carnis resurrectione*, 8, CSEL 47:36-37. See also Tertullian's work *De anima*, 58, CSEL 20:394-396.

¹⁹ Athenagoras, *De resurrectione mortuorum*, 12, p. 230-232.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, 12, p. 230

²¹ *Ibidem*, 13, p. 238-240.

Athenagoras states that the human being will not exist in its entirety, unless only all its component parts exist. These parts will each exist after union unless, after they have been disintegrated, they will be reunited for the composition of the being; or another re-creation of the human being indisputably implies the resurrection of dead and disintegrated bodies. Without resurrection, the parties could not naturally reunite with each other, and the very nature of men would no longer exist.²²

To some extent we also find the idea in *St. Justin the Martyr and the Philosopher* († 165). "What is man, he wonders, other than a rational being made up of soul and body? Is the soul itself human? He is not! But he is the soul of man! Could the body be called human? No! But he is called the body of man! Therefore, if neither of these, separately, do not represent man, but what results from the union of both is called man, and God called man to life and resurrection, then he did not call man the part but the whole, that is, the soul and the body".²³ (Justin 1877:238)

Further on, Athenagoras teaches that God did not endow the soul in itself but man in his integrity as a psycho-physical unit, with mind and reason. Since these gifts are eternal, then man must endure eternally with body and soul. However, this is not possible without resurrection.²⁴

In order not to believe that death would harm in any way the duration of human existence, Athenagoras compares death with sleep²⁵, with the seed that contains in it the whole subsequent evolution of being²⁶, with nature chaining its phenomena.²⁷

Similar to Athenagoras, Tertullian uses analogies to demonstrate the reality of the resurrection of the body which must be a gift of faith and not of reason. "The day dies in the night," he says, "and is buried all over in darkness, the glory of the world is darkened, every substance is made dark, all things are unclean, they are silent, they freeze, everywhere they are all suspended". Thus, the sunset light is mourned, and yet it rises again with its adornment, with the sun, the same untouched and integral to the whole world, killing its own death, that is, the night, breaking its own grave, that is, the darkness, remaining a heir of himself until night revives in turn with its composition. For the rays of the stars, which the morning dawn had extinguished, light up again, and the stars, absent for some time ... return, and the images of the world which the lunar phases destroy, are adorned again. And they return again in summer

²² *Ibidem*, 15, p. 246-248.

²³ Justinus Martyr, *De resurrectione*, 8, ed. C. Otto, *Corpus apologetarum christianorum saeculi secundi*, tom. III., Jena, 1877, p. 238.

²⁴ Athenagoras, *De resurrectione mortuorum*, 15, p. 248.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, 16, p. 250-252.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, 17, p. 254-256. A similar analogy is encountered in *Theophilus Antiochenus, Ad Autolyicum*, I, 13 and II, 15, ed. Otto, *Corpus apologetarum*, tom. VIII, Jena, 1861, p. 38-40, 100-102.

²⁷ Athenagoras, *De resurrectione mortuorum*, 17, p. 258-260.

and winter, spring and autumn, with their strengths, behaviours and fruits. For also from heaven is the habit of the earth to clothe the trees after stripping, to colour the flowers again, to remove the grass again, to give again the thrown seeds ... wonderful reason which from a deceiver becomes guardian, who receives to return, destroys in order to preserve, spoils in order to complete, even to increase, first spends, gives back the destroyed more fruitfully and adorned, as death interest, as gain from damage indeed. I would say, in a word, that any state repeats itself. All that you will encounter has been before, all that you will have lost will be again; everything is again. They all return after they are gone, they all begin after they have ceased, they end just to be, nothing perishes except for the sake of salvation. Thus, all this circular order of things is a proof of the resurrection of the dead, God engraved it in His things before it was revealed in the books; he preached it by powers rather than by speech. He placed nature afore as a ruler, thinking to slip in the prophecy through which to believe, as a disciple of nature, easier to the prophecy, through which to admit as soon as you hear, what you will already had observed everywhere and nor doubt that God, whom you know as the restorer of all, is also the resurrector of the body. And again, if all come back to life for the man for whom they had been delivered, – of course not so much for man as for time – how can he perish, the body, altogether, when nothing of His and for Him does not perish?”²⁸

The resurrection is indisputably ordained by God as a requirement for the future judgment, rewarding the deeds of men. This judgment, says Athenagoras, is made to man as a whole, that is, to the human psycho-physical unity, because the facts belong to him. Thus, neither the soul had to pay alone for the deeds done with the body because the soul is indifferent in itself to the mistakes resulting from the pleasures, food and elegance of the body, nor the body alone, for it is incapable by itself to understand law and justice, but the man made up of these two is called to account for each of his deeds.²⁹

As if wanting to complete it, Tertullian teaches; “... since the purpose of the resurrection is the final judgment, necessity requires that man be made again as he had been, that he may receive from God the judgment of his deeds, good or bad. That is why the bodies will also appear, because even the soul cannot suffer something without matter, ... and what, in general, souls should suffer as a result of God's judgment and not deserving it alone, without the flesh within which they had done all.”³⁰

²⁸ Tertullian, *De carnis resurrectione*, 12, *CSEL* 47:40-41. See also Tertullian, *Apologeticus*, 48, 8, ed. Franz Oehler in *The Loeb Classical Library*, London 1977, p. 214-216.

²⁹ Athenagoras, *De resurrectione mortuorum*, 18, p. 260-262. See also Tertullian's work *De anima*, 58, *CSEL* 20:394-396.

³⁰ Tertullian, *Apologeticus*, 48, 4, p. 214.

Considering the resurrection of the dead necessary for the future judgment, *Tatian the Assyrian* shows that this will not happen periodically, without a specific purpose, as the Stoics learn, but at the end of the ages and then, only for people to gather at the final judgment.³¹

The coming judgment involves the resurrection, for man to appear as an integral entity, before the Judge, and for God's justice to be done. The body would be unjust if it participated in the virtues realized with the soul on earth, just as the soul would be unjust if it received punishments for its deeds inspired by the body.³² Therefore, judgment can take place only after the resurrection, when man will become the unity that lived and activated in earthly life.³³

The final judgment, as the supreme verification of the moral value of human life, categorically postulates the resurrection. The argument of the final judgment in support of the resurrection of the dead is supported by the reality of the indissoluble unity of human nature. (Coman 1995:98) In this sense Tertullian states: "That is why we say that the fullness of God's judgment is realized only when man in his integrity submits to it; consequently, man must appear as an integral unit, formed by the union of the two natures".³⁴

Finally, one last argument that supports the need for the resurrection of the body is, for Athenagoras, the purpose of human life; *living in happiness and contemplating God*. Only man was destined "to live in eternity with those things with which natural reason is in supreme harmony, that is, in the contemplation of the real and in the unceasing proclamation of his decisions."³⁵ For Athenagoras, the argument of eternal happiness and contemplation of God can be related only to man in his integrity, for only with the body united with the soul after the resurrection can man endure the warmth of divine love without him being sent to condemnation.

Tertullian adds, in this sense, that the resurrection of the body must take place integrally and perfectly, so that the body be called to be freed by diseases or infirmities³⁶.

In conclusion, one may say that Athenagoras conceives the resurrection of the dead more as a necessity than as a possibility. Similar to any believer, trusting in God's allpowerness, he demonstrates the need of resurrection as a gift of the human being through the power and will of the Creator. (Caraza 1968:365)

³¹ Tatianus Syriacus, *Oratio ad Graecos*, 6, p. 6.

³² Athenagoras, *De resurrectione mortuorum*, 21, p. 272-274. See also: Tertullian, *De carnis resurrectione*, 15, CSEL 47:44.

³³ Athenagoras, *De resurrectione mortuorum*, 19, p. 266.

³⁴ Tertullian, *De carnis resurrectione*, 14, CSEL 47:42-43.

³⁵ Athenagoras, *De resurrectione mortuorum*, 25, p. 286-288.

³⁶ Tertullian, *De carnis resurrectione*, 57, CSEL 47: 117-118.

As it could be observed, the two authors reach the same conclusion although they use different arguments. Athenagoras proves the reality of resurrecting the dead as philosophical argument because it addressed pagans, and Tertullian approaches the same problem from the perspective of biblical argumentation as he was addressing some Christian heretics. Rational evidence does not lack from his argumentation, especially in *Apologeticus*³⁷, *De testimonia animae*³⁸, and in the first part of the treaty *De carnis resurrectione*, due to the fact that the readers of these works, the gnostic heretics, would stand against the resurrection of the body by using arguments invoked by pagans. Consequently, Tertullian laid a great emphasis on logical reasoning; the resurrection of the body is a result of the reality of Jesus Christ's Incarnation and Resurrection, God being the Creator of the body and Christ, his Saviour³⁹, argument also encountered in Tatian the Assirian.⁴⁰ Tertullian insists on the proof of body resurrection because, as shown above, this truth constitutes a solution to the mystery of saving man and therefore, faith in the resurrection strengthens faith in God and in Christ.

Similarly, both bring evidence on God's judgment and payment of man's deeds as arguments of resurrection, only that, Tertullian, unlike Athenagoras, who emphasizes on the unity of the human being, founds resurrection on God's allpowerness and justice. Judgment, he says, is made as a result of man's deeds and the reforming of the human being through resurrection is necessary in order to have a plentiful judgment. "In order for the judgment to be plentiful and perfect, having value as the last, and, as a consequence, eternal, as much as this judgment can be safe, similarly safe can there be the resurrection of the body, without which judgment will not be complete"⁴¹. He looks at the deed as a result of common action of the psychophysical unit of man, and when it names man an integral indivisible unit, he has in mind this aspect⁴².

Still due to readers, Tertullian's argumentation is founded on texts in the Holy Scripture (Is 26:19; 38:16; 66:14; Mt 8, 11:12; 13:42; 22:13; Mk 10:28; Lk 13:10; 1Cor 1:15; 2Cor 4:16; Ephes 3:16; 4:22) which he submits to a severe exegesis, in order to show the heretics that resurrection is save due to the Logos, and this would not need rational arguments but must be received through faith.

In conclusion, it can be stated with certainty that the contribution that Christian apologists had for the defence of the truth about the resurrection of the body through

³⁷ Tertullian, *Apologeticus*, 50, p. 222-224.

³⁸ Tertullian, *De testimonia animae*, 4, CSEL 20:138-19.

³⁹ Tertullian, *De carnis resurrectione*, 2, CSEL 47:26-27.

⁴⁰ Tatianus Syriacus, *Oratio ad Graecos*, 7, p. 7.

⁴¹ Tertullian, *De carnis resurrectione*, 14, CSEL 47:42-43.

⁴² Tertullian, *De carnis resurrectione*, 15, CSEL 47:44.

the power, will and goodness of God – resurrection that does not mean a reincarnation in other beings but a rebuilding of the same psycho-physical entity of any man – is as important today as it was then. Based on their arguments, the teaching about the resurrection of the body was strengthened, testified by the Holy Fathers and postulated by the Church. At a time when the Church, the keeper of the truth of faith unaltered, is facing attacks on faith from either sectarian Christian movements or non-Christian or atheist religious groups, the rational and scriptural arguments used by apologists are the antidote, as effective today as then. The expository and demonstrative method used by them both in the face of philosophical rationalism and in the face of the unbelief of heretics is still a source of inspiration today and competent theology for the contemporary apologists of the Church.

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