

April 13, 2008

Last week a colleague showed me an article he'd cut from *The Age* on Good Friday by Melbourne philosopher John Armstrong; perhaps some of you saw it.<sup>1</sup> It was entitled "Beyond the sacred – reinventing a vision of the soul". As the title suggests, it sought to rehabilitate for secular consumption what is asserted to be the otherwise "religious" idea of the soul.

About the article in general a couple of things can be said. The first is that, as a piece of critical thinking, even given its brevity, it is disappointing. Granted that editors often misunderstand their writers and make a mishmash of a piece for the sake of saving valuable space on a page, pretty much every paragraph of the professor's article falls short of the glory it might have reflected. But, secondly, and more importantly, the article *was* published as it is, and doubtless because it was thought that it would *make sense* to a large number of people. Printed on Good Friday, it was an attempt to do something looking religious which was in fact *not* religious, and so might do something to bridge the religious-secular divide. What better way to do this than have a secular philosopher write appreciatively of the religious "idea" of the soul?

The tragedy of the whole thing is that the professor imagines that he has understood, and so can play with, another's magic, without the whole thing going off in his face. Or, perhaps, the tragedy is that he does not see that it *does* blow up in his face, or collapses in front of him, and that for all his appreciation of the "soul" he has nothing to show at the end but what he started with. I suspect that most of those who nodded in appreciation at what they read would not have realised that, in fact, they had not learned anything they did not already know.

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The presumption of the argument is that it is a very simple matter to transfer purportedly "religious" ideas into the "secular" sphere.<sup>2</sup> For *Christian faith* this *is*, in fact, very simple; faith has no problem seeing the secular significance of its beliefs and doctrines. But Professor Armstrong does not think as a Christian and, in fact, neither does he think as a true secularist. Despite his stated intention of distilling what is important from religion's "inherited wisdom", his thought has its own religiosity and so we end up not with an enrichment of secular life but

with simply another *religious* option (even if it *wants* to be secular).

We should hesitate to declare that *only* Christian faith can deliver truly secular or worldly realities, but we can at least affirm that Christian faith *is* truly secularising, and simply desire of other systems of thought that they be so also. As proof of Christian faith's secularity in terms of the professor's article, and *despite* the great religious heritage which seems to contradict me here, I would simply offer that Christian faith has very little interest in the "soul" in the sense that it has for the professor, and probably for most of us most of the time.

In our usual use – Christian or not – "soul" is almost always a reference to that which is quintessentially "I": the heart of "me". We speak casually, for example, of the soul leaving the body when it dies. By this we mean that we have a sense that we are more than simply bones and juices which break and leak. As these are lost or wither in accidents, illness or aging, we sense that something remains constant, something is free of what our body seems to be: "I" am still there, despite the change and decay in my body. One very influential line of thinking imagined our bodies as tombs for the soul, from which the soul is finally released at death. Death is, then, a liberation of the true me for whatever I was originally destined.

Now, when at Easter we come to speak of "resurrection", we quickly find ourselves thinking of the *immortality* of the soul – the notion death is simply a rite of passage of my soul, which continues on after me. What dies, rises – now in a "spiritual" sense – so that it seems that the existence of the soul is a requirement for the story of Easter. Precisely this link is made by John Armstrong in his Good Friday piece, and he interprets the death and resurrection of Jesus in just these terms. The Easter story serves as a representation of the idea that "the best in a person can survive humiliation and injury ... and that we are capable of renewing, or resurrecting our own lives". The tragedy of this conclusion, and this understanding of ourselves as "souls", is that it allows for *no* tragedy. No one *really* dies. Nothing is really lost – or only the bad stuff. Nobody is really bad, for deep down we are all good. The goodness is affirmed, and asserted to live on, and badness will ultimately lose its grip. (Just in passing, it's worth noting that the professor laments that the notion of the soul is merely speculative, but surely that must also be said of this optimistic reading of our potential.)

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<http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2008/03/20/1205602565204.html>

<sup>2</sup> Perhaps more basic is the presumption that these are actually two different spheres.

Over the last couple of weeks one of the questions we've been tossing around is what it *means* to declare that "Jesus is risen". In seeking the "meaning" of the resurrection we are seeking the *consequences* which flow from that event, or the difference it makes for us, here and now. Proclaiming "Jesus is risen" is intended to make a difference; but just what difference is that?

And so we come, finally, to our focus text this morning: the account of the response to Peter's preaching tells a different tale. It's only a few verses, so we'll hear it again:

[<sup>2.41</sup> *So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added.*] <sup>42</sup> *They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.* <sup>43</sup> *Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles.* <sup>44</sup> *All who believed were together and had all things in common;* <sup>45</sup> *they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need.* <sup>46</sup> *Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts,* <sup>47</sup> *praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.* [NRSV]

The consequence of the news that Jesus is risen results not in affirmations about life after death, the goodness at the heart (or in the soul) of all people, or our capacity for self-help. Rather, the outcome is an extraordinary re-ordering of social relationships. *Souls* do not enter into the matter, but *bodies* do. Different authority is established, different practices adopted, a different economy is observed. The professor, and perhaps many of us with him, declares that such things as wealth, poverty, illness, health and nationality are not directly related to the state of our souls, and so not really connected with what we really *are*, at heart. And yet with the return of *this* "soul" – the resurrection of the crucified Jesus of Nazareth – all of these things *are* effected. Wealth and poverty are relativised in the sharing of resources according to need. Illness is attended to in the "signs and wonders" done by the apostles. In the Pentecost event which provokes Peter's sermon national and racial divisions are shaken by the gift of the Spirit which caused all the people to hear the disciples in their own native language.

The issue is *not* whether these things actually happened as they did. Perhaps Luke's account of the life of the disciples after the gift of the Spirit is rather idealised, but that need not distract us either. The point *is* that what the resurrection of Jesus brings about – if indeed such a thing took place – has little to do with your or my little "soul", fearful for its own well-being or survival. But it does have, in fact, *everything* to do with such worldly matters as human relationships at micro and macro levels. Put differently, the resurrection of Jesus is an event

with a thoroughly worldly, or secular, significance.

None of this means we can't talk about souls! It's just that "soul" is actually one of those "most useless words" we've come across from time to time which seems to be filled with meaning but tends to lead us down blind alleys. The irony – and a tragic irony for those attempting it – is that precisely where the so-called secular mind imagines that it can distil a little religious essence for therapeutic application to tired, lonely and godless individuals, the gospel thrusts back not with isolated souls now filled with meaning but with inter-connected bodies filled with a joy for living. What a whimper the resurrection of the crucified Jesus would be if all it meant were something we might have hoped without him – that we have it within us to pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps. But the possibility of a new world of human relationships – previously unknown, made for us, through us, and yet not *by* us – this is a different matter altogether. For if we do not speculate about ourselves but consider the data, we might imagine that such a world is as likely to come into being as a dead body is likely to stop being dead.

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There's a danger in making a critique like this of a published piece like Professor Armstrong's article, in that it's easy to be cheap. It was not, after all, well-meaning philosophers who crucified Jesus but those we might think more concerned with the things of the "soul". It is the easiest thing for us to miss the point and muddy the waters with a focus on the soulful individual rather than the community, on the interior heart rather than the exterior neighbour. But if Jesus is risen, it must be otherwise – at least for us, and through us for those who don't yet get it.

Friends, we are the body of the risen Christ; his Spirit is with us. If the crucified Jesus is risen, then nothing can remain the same – not our souls nor our bodied societies. To attend, with those new converts of our reading, to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to break bread and to pray, to share as others have need, in such things *we* are, and become, the meaning of the resurrection of Jesus. Such a way of being doesn't know a secular and religious divide, for the two become one: souls have their wholeness in the society of bodies.

The risen Christ is no soul but a body; by the grace of God his glorious embodiment is offered to us. We are invited simply to try it on.

May he who has begun his healing work in us bring it to completion, that the glory may finally be his alone. Amen.