The poet T. S. Eliot was concerned we might have the experience, but miss the meaning. Tony Kelly’s work, *The Resurrection Effect*, places the emphasis differently. He thinks that the Resurrection is first and foremost an experience – for Jesus, the disciples, ourselves and the entire cosmos – which Christian theology so takes for granted, it takes too little
time to explore either the richness of the experience or the profundity of
its meaning. For AJK, the resurrection radically transforms the experience
and meaning of God, the world and ourselves (x). He is keen to make the
resurrection not only the centre-piece of Christian life and faith but, in so
doing, contribute to what he calls “the resurrection of theology as an
assured, distinctive mode of Christian rationality” (ix). Or, more poignantly:
“Christian theology cannot pretend that the resurrection has not happened”
(168).

While this book is rich in its exploration of Scripture and the classical
theological tradition – notably Aquinas – the freshness of its insight can be
found in the manner it subtly but surely takes the “phenomenological turn”
associated with postmodern philosophy. Among other things, this means
focusing on the singularity of the resurrection-event and recognizing the
primacy of experience over doctrine (23). In this, it favours a mystical
appraisal of reality in which the play of presence and absence provides
a richer tapestry in which to situate the present and absent Christ of
Christian faith. So, while AJK takes many pages of the book to insist on the
‘objectivity’ of the resurrection – something really happened to the
Crucified Jesus – his approach concentrates on the receptivity of the
receiver, whether this be the disciples (who saw the risen Christ but did not
see the resurrection) or ourselves (who are similarly caught between seeing
and unseeing, belief and unbelief or, if I may use a Panikkar phrase,
experiencing “faith in a mystery that transcends us”).

AJK’s postmodern-phenomenological turn allows him to draw from
Jean-Luc Marion’s notion of the “saturated phenomenon” which places
emphasis on the interactive event between subject and object. This
“disclosive theology” (28) sees the subject coming to “new consciousness
only through the self-giving otherness of the phenomenon” – in this case,
the resurrection of Jesus’ victimized corpse (29). In other words, the
subject is not a passive recipient but an active participant. AJK comments:
In this respect, it is not a matter of projecting new possibilities on an already established world, but of being involved in a new register of existence – within a world newly understood. Something has occurred from outside any previously understood horizon... The resurrection of the Crucified is pre-eminently such an event. By any showing, it is a world-changing occurrence. (33)

If this is true for us today, it was equally true for Jesus’ disciples for whom the datum of individual resurrection before the end of time was simply unimaginable for Jews, Greeks or Romans. The shattering otherness of the event, to which the disciples display initial scepticism, leads to a variety of reactions and expressions. “The excessive, all-transcending character of what took place” (76) is interpreted not with the light of cool reason, but with the heart of those overwhelmed by the experience of the totally unexpected, outpouring of divine love and forgiveness. The whole of the New Testament, including the Synoptics, attempts to articulate the meaning of the resurrection-event through a rhetoric of love and fulfillment, trinitarian and cosmic hymns of praise, formation of faith-communities, missionary outreach and apocalyptic reflections. This saturated phenomenon of the resurrection is an “originating event” which “dismantles previous horizons and categories, and introduces the radically new in which the past is interpreted and the possibilities of the future are re-defined” (134).

As a way of summarizing AJK’s own resurrection rhetoric that has particular import on our own experience of life and world, especially our new hermeneutic openness to the experience of violence and victimhood along with a new-found interest in matters cosmic, let me quote the following:

God has acted in history, not by communicating a new idea, but by doing a provocatively and properly divine thing. Through Jesus’ transformed physicality, the divine intention for the whole of creation is anticipated and manifested in this exemplary instance. As a result, the world is no longer a total system of entropy and decay, nor a theatre in which the scripts of self-justifying violence are enacted.
Even though death is still our common fate, its dominion has been disturbed. The risen Christ is the first and the last letter, the ‘alpha and the omega’ (Rev 22:12), of an alphabet by which the great poem of the Word comes to expression. A love stronger than death has been revealed. (145)

Clearly, for AJK, the “salvific realism” of the resurrection is not – or should not be – reflected upon purely in terms of Christian experience, at least narrowly understood. In this sense, the resurrection is an eminently practical doctrine that promotes solidarity with victims, reconciliation of enemies, practical justice for the poor and marginal, and subverts in a radical fashion ‘the way things are’ (159-168). The apocalyptic vision of “a new heaven and a new earth” (Rev 21:1), is a proleptic resurrectional category that “discloses a new world of relationships and a new way of being in the world” (156). In short, this is Mary’s Magnificat song of mercy and justice heard in Christian Churches on this very day when we celebrate yet another “resurrection effect” – Mary’s Assumption into heaven. The goal of creation – not only for Jesus and Mary, but for all of us including the entire cosmos – is less a source of information about the world’s end than a major source of challenge to the injustices and inhumanity that pervade our current world. The resurrection carries within it a highly political, even life-threatening, edge for those Jesus described as having ears to hear.

AJK provides a particularly interesting discussion on what he calls “extensions of the resurrection effect” (ch. 9). I will limit myself to his excursus on “transcultural openness”. Here he notes a new stage of human history, currently arising, which makes “imperative a new global integration of human relations – international, interreligious and intercultural” (168). This represents both crisis and opportunity. It also connects to the resurrection-event since “the risen Jesus is the space, as it were, of both fulfilment and reconciliation in a way which anticipates and provokes fresh forms of global solidarity” (168f.). Noting that “Christ’s rising from the tomb relativises all cultures” – including Israel and the Christian West – AJK focuses on the new energy being given to interfaith dialogue. While seeing
this as “one of the great signs of hope today” (170), he suggests we might do better to use the term “inter-hope dialogue” – a view he originally proposed in his other recent work, *Eschatology and Hope* (2006).

Is this a sensible proposal, I hear you ask? Well, it is catchy! And as AJK reminds us, “the future is what we have in common” (171). Now it so happens that another famous scholar, by the name of Raimon Panikkar, is not enamoured by the phrase “interfaith dialogue” either. But for different reasons. For Panikkar, ‘faith’ is what we all have in common and, moreover, what unites us; ‘belief’ on the other hand expresses our doctrinal thinking and leads to division. For this reason, he is happier with the term “interreligious dialogue” and what he calls “intra-religious dialogue” – that is, the dialogue we have with ourselves after the encounter with the religious other. Whatever about that, I actually think that what AJK means by “interhope dialogue (which) evokes the unimaginable ‘otherness’ of eschatological fulfilment” (171) and what Panikkar means by religious dialogue – “faith in a mystery that transcends us” – are much the same. There is the problem of course, that AJK himself alludes to, that eschatological understanding – future of the self, nature of God/Absolute, meaning of salvation, *moksa*, fulfillment, *nirvana*, liberation – are radically diverse. This is why religious dialogue, that necessarily deals with different conceptions of reality, different beliefs, must be first and foremost a dialogue of faith, hope and love. In other words, it must be a dialogue that arises from the authenticity of one’s religious experience. In this, I am pleased to say, AJK and Panikkar are at one.

“The Resurrection Effect” makes it clear that Christians need to enter the world of dialogue – with other peoples, cultures and religious traditions – with an openness to the future based on their own encounter with the risen Christ. While reading the book may not automatically achieve this goal, it will at least provoke a deeper awareness that the experience and meaning of the resurrection need to be central to Christian faith and – as the work powerfully asserts – central to the way in which all Christian
theology is done – including “our understanding of the scriptures, sacramental celebrations, and the whole life and conduct of ecclesial faith” (175). In particular, it should give renewed vigour to those theologians who are keen to engage with contemporary philosophical and phenomenological approaches to the understanding of life’s mysteries. –

It was Paul Ricoeur, a leading phenomenologist a philosopher of religion, who said that the symbol carries an excess of meaning. To AJK’s great credit, the resurrection as event and symbol is presented to us as carrier of meaning and action in a world that all too easily closes itself off to the possibilities of hope, grace and transcendence. Because it is the resurrection of the Crucified One, this mystery at the heart of Christian faith is able to embrace evil, suffering and death and see within them the seeds of victory.

I now declare Tony Kelly’s little but victorious seed, “The Resurrection Effect” launched!

Note: Although entitled a Book Review, this was actually delivered orally by Gerard Hall SM at the Brisbane launch of the book on the Feast of the Assumption, 15th August 2008, at Australian Catholic University McAuley Campus in the presence of its author, Professor Tony Kelly CSsR, with staff and students of the University as well as family and other guests.