

Sr. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Lake Worth, Florida



UNDERSTANDING CHRISTIANITY

A monthly forum on the third *Saturday* of each month from 6:30 to 7:30 or 8 P.M. following Evening Prayer at 6
Forums usually with Canon Richard T. Nolan
retired philosophy & religion professor, editor of www.philosophy-religion.org

Saturday, February 16, 2008

TOPIC:

***"Reincarnation, Immortality, Resurrection, or Oblivion? –
What They Are and Which is Credible?"***

Note: These topics/issues are reported - and are to be discussed - here with scholarly, university-based resources, not in popularized versions, however sincere.

A Prayer To Be Said In Unison

**Almighty God, who has committed to your holy Church
the care and nurture of all the faithful;
Enlighten with your wisdom those who teach and those who learn,
that, rejoicing in the knowledge of your truth,
they may worship and serve you from generation to generation;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.**

***[On the third Saturday of March we shall replace the usual Service/Forum with an Eve of Palm Sunday Eucharist -
including music, homily, and the blessing and distribution of palms.]***

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Ia. SOUL/BODY (from *A New Handbook to Christian Theology*)

The very juxtaposition of "soul" with "body" indicates the problems involved in defining either word. Christian thought, standing as the inheritor of both Greek and Hebraic traditions, has lived from earliest times with an ambiguity resulting from the fact that, broadly speaking, in Greek thought "soul" is defined in dualistic opposition to "body," while in Hebraic thought no such dualism is present and the ideas that the two words convey cannot be clearly distinguished from one another.

In Greek thought, particularly as it comes from Orphism and is expressed in the earlier Platonic dialogues, there is a marked dualism between the soul and the body. The soul belongs to a divine, eternal realm, and is the undying, indestructible part of a human being, which is unfortunately confined to the body during life on earth. The body is thus nothing but a hindrance to the soul. Consequently, salvation involves the extrication of the soul from the body, the immortal part of the human being finding release from the confines of the mortal body. An old Greek proverb sums up the belief: "The body is the prison-house of the soul."

This way of thinking is so deeply imbedded in Western culture that it is often difficult to see how sharply differentiated from it is the biblical understanding. The word "soul," in particular, has a very different meaning for the biblical writers from the understanding that modern Christians usually assign to it. The Hebrew scripture's word *nephesh* basically means "breath," and the term is often used simply to designate "a living being" (not always a human, sometimes an animal); the word, along with the New Testament equivalent, *psyche*, can mean "life," and even "person" or "self." The term is much broader in biblical usage than is commonly supposed, and it can be taken to stand for the unity of personality, since Hebraic thought conceives of the human being as a unity, rather than as a duality of body and soul.

This meaning can be further clarified by noting its relationship to the word "body." In Pauline thought, for example, body (*soma*) is an inclusive word for the psycho-physical unity of the flesh (*sarx*) and soul (*psyche*). No hard and fast distinction between the two can be established. The body is the whole person, not a detachable part of that person to be distinguished in dualistic fashion from the soul. J. A. T. Robinson in *The Body* concludes that we do not have bodies, but we are bodies—that we are "flesh-animated-by-soul, the whole conceived as a psychophysical unity."

This is not just a Pauline idiosyncrasy; it concurs with the results of scholarship on the Hebrew Bible also. H. Wheeler Robinson, in *Religious Ideas of the Old Testament*, notes that the same idea of unity pervades the Hebrew scriptures: "The idea of human nature [in the Hebrew scriptures] implies a unity, not a dualism. There is no contrast between the body and the soul, such as the terms instinctively suggest to us." Again, "The Hebrew idea of personality is an animated body and not an incarnated soul." J. Pederson, in *Israel*, goes so far as to say, "The body is the soul in its outward form." There is, in fact, no distinctive word for "body" in Hebrew; such a word is not needed because there is no separate part of a human being, distinct from that person's "soul," that needs to be so distinguished.

This ancient sense of the interrelatedness and unity of the human personality is being substantiated by modern research in psychosomatic medicine, the very name of which (*psyche-soma*, or "soul-body") shows the impossibility of a cleavage between the body and the soul. Relating and reflecting on his own experience of illness and recovery, Norman Cousins, in *The Anatomy of an Illness*, has shown how much the attitude of the patient correlates with the ravages of disease.

The issue of "soul (body)" is very much alive in theology today, particularly as represented by "liberation" movements in Third World churches. There has been firm resistance to perpetuating a dualism by dividing life into "political" activity, on the one hand, and "spiritual" nurture on the other, as though either "outer" or "inner" life could be understood in isolation from the other. Gustavo Gutiérrez, Jon Sobrino, and others write about and live what they call a "spirituality of liberation," insisting that the two realities are inseparable in Christian living. All dualisms are disavowed, from a perspective that clearly exemplifies the recovery of the biblical understanding.

ROBERT McAFEE BROWN

Ib. THE HUMAN SOUL

(excerpt from "Human Nature" (Nolan, <http://www.philosophy-religion.org/thought/humannature-biblical-religion.htm>)

It is important to distinguish between the classical mysticism and biblical religion's contrasting value of human activity. A key premise is that mystical religion encourages an escape from (or downplay of) this world, while the biblical recognizes a vibrant involvement with it. A significant factor that supports this motif relates to the concept of the human soul.

The image of the soul projected by perennial philosophy is of a "divine spark" trapped within the human body. In this sense, everyone carries within himself a share of ultimate reality, of the Wholly Other. Thus, one can refer to the "God within," or in the extreme, "I am God." An implication, however, is that there is no real human claim on the soul; it is strictly a trace of the Absolute, which at death automatically escapes the body and eventually returns to its point of origin. In human nature, there is a "higher self," the soul or spirit, which aspires to the perfection of Pure Spirituality; there is also the "lower" state that is associated with all physical needs and desires. Perennialism, therefore, is consistent in its approach to human nature, because ultimately it divides individuals into two realms, one part that is a trace of the "wholly other" and another part that is finite. The primary motivation is to pull these two realms even further apart, to minimize, deny or renounce the body and the finite, so that the One can retrieve that small "portion" of itself which is trapped in the natural world.

The biblical image of the human soul is distinctly different: it is God's gift. God has made man as inherently good, in God's own image, *i.e.*, with the ability to act, to make decisions, and enter into relation. The logical extension of this interpretation is that the human soul, through an act of God's grace, remains uniquely human, though not necessarily mortal. According to biblical religion, "The soul is not an entity with a separate nature from the flesh and possessing or capable of a life of its own. Rather it is the life animating the flesh."⁽⁴⁾ By way of elaboration, others have noted:

Nephesh means primarily "breath." ... (It) is often used also with the meaning "living being," human or otherwise. In Gen. 2:7 the first man became a living *nephesh* when Yahweh's breath (a different word) was breathed into his nostrils. ... Frequently the best translation of the ... word is "person." ... Clearly the word "soul" in the Bible has a much broader meaning than in current use now.⁽⁵⁾

One might also say that a human being is a "breather."

Man is a living soul. This sentence, which corresponds easily to Gen. 2:7, says three things: It says first of all that man became a living soul and now is a living soul. It does not say that man *has* a living soul. Soul is the nature of man, not his possession. ... The second thing that the sentence says is that man is a soul. Were man only flesh made from the dust he would be only body. Were man only spirit without body, he would be formless.⁽⁶⁾

(4) James Hastings, ed., *Dictionary of the Bible* (New York: Scribner's, 1963), p. 932.

(5) Millar Burrows, *An Outline of Biblical Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1956), pp. 135ff.

(6) L. Kohler, *Old Testament Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1957), p. 142.

The third implication, according to Kohler, is that man has a body, for "Form is essential to the soul."⁽⁷⁾

The famous verse in Genesis (2:7) does not say, as is often supposed, that man consists of body and soul; it says that Yahweh shaped man, earth from the ground, and then proceeded to animate the inert figure with living breath blown into his nostrils, so that man became a living *being*, which is all that *nephesh* here means. ... the important thing here is the conception of man as body, not as soul or spirit. The Hebrew idea of human personality is an animated body, not an incarnated soul.⁽⁸⁾

The soul, therefore, is a functioning, integrated aspect of human nature and of behavior. It represents that part of human consciousness which moves toward fellowship with God. This is not, however, a union of like parts, of the fragment returning to the whole, but rather two individual identities joining together in positive relation, in communion. The soul can then be spoken of as being active, not as the prisoner of the body, but as its animating conscience. It enters into human activity, directing that action by offering up possibilities which correspond to the will of God.

Another scholar has written:

... for many theological anthropologists, it is axiomatic that the original Christian vision of humanity followed the Jewish tradition in affirming human life as a 'psychosomatic unity', distinguishing, but never separating the soul and the body as different dimensions of human existence. What is distinctive about the Christian vision of humanity, therefore, is not that it posits the existence of an additional entity, the soul, not recognized by other anthropologies, but that it posits the existence of an additional relation - a relation to God, as creator and redeemer - which encompasses all other relations which define us as individuals. The insistence that the human being is an 'embodied soul' or an 'ensouled body', and not a soul somehow occupying a body, is now not just the conclusion of arguments in theological anthropology but also the premiss of arguments in some other theological disciplines, and this is one measure of success of the campaign against dualism in the second half of the 20th century.⁽⁹⁾

(7) *Ibid.*

(8) H. W. Robinson, "The Psychology and Metaphysics of 'Thus Saith Yahweh'," *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* XLI (1923), p. 2 of a mimeographed edition provided in a 1957 class by Theodor M. Mauch, Th.D.

(9) Colin Crowder, "Humanity," *The Oxford Companion to Christian Thought*, ed. Adrian Hastings, et al (New York: Oxford, 2000), p. 313.

Human Destiny

In contrast to the perennial, the (later) biblical view of human destiny (of personal survival after death) makes the eventual fellowship between God and human beings a possibility, but only a possibility. It is not automatic and cannot be brought about through the exercise of mystical disciplines or practices; there is no formula or method that can *make* it happen. A person's relationship with God is grounded in the individual's choice of a course of life. It can be in direct opposition to God or toward harmony with him; the nature of a person's decision determines his destiny. If a human soul or spirit enters into fuller communion with God, it does so with two important qualifications: first, it does so not according to necessity, but by the quality of human nature - individuals are able to decide their own courses of action; second, the soul retains the personal essence of the person - it is not an unconscious element in human nature, but is a vital, active part of the human character. The spiritual reunion between God and mortals is not the vision of the piece returning to the whole, but of "persons" coming into a relationship. Biblical philosophy, therefore, allows human beings to be mortal, to have a range of action, alternatives and options. Among these choices is the ability to come into an everlasting, mutual relation with God, a concept that is logically impossible for mystical religion. One commentary on this topic follows:

Beliefs about life after death as it relates to human nature are found in two forms in the Hebraic traditions. First, the ancient Hebrew view as a community rather than as achieving an individual, personal life beyond the grave. Because there is not detachable soul, death brings about the individual's demise. The ongoing people of God, including a person's legacy of children and deeds, continues. In a rather undeveloped form, some Hebrew people held to a vague notion that the dead lingered on in a region outside or under the earth, not in God's presence. Not particularly attractive terms designate this spot: "Ditch," "Pit," "Realm of Death," and "Sheol." Preventing a future of total extinction and giving sharp focus to *this* life, such a secondary religious tenet does suggest the continuance of a component, however minor, of human nature. The precise nature of this element was simply not of concern. Just before the New Testament period, Hebrew civilization pictured a different life after death, which included a restored communion with God. As was the case in earlier times, philosophical speculations about the nature of existence in the life hereafter were secondary.⁽¹⁸⁾

The second general form of Hebraic views of life after death posits that by acts of God, deserving⁽¹⁹⁾ persons may be resurrected or transfigured to everlasting life. The "physics" of such a change is not a biblical concern. Transformed, resurrected persons may continue their self-aware life in the greater presence of God. Notions of purgatory, hell, and hell-as-annihilation along with ideas of continued life at the moment of death or at a final judgment are among the speculations dotting the biblical literature and communities.

(18) *Ibid.*, p. 400.

(19) Over the centuries many adherents of biblical religion have proposed many contrasting and conflicting standards for qualifying as a person "deserving" life after death in the presence of God.

II. REINCARNATION

Some Resources:

Brandon, *DICTIONARY OF COMPARATIVE RELIGION* (Abingdon, 1970)
Crim, *ABINGDON DICTIONARY OF LIVING RELIGIONS* (Abingdon, 1981)
Ferguson, *ENCYCLOPEDIA OF MYSTICISM AND MYSTERY RELIGIONS* (Crossroad, 1982)
Gentz, *THE DICTIONARY OF BIBLE AND RELIGION* (Abingdon, 1986)
Kurtz, (ed.) *FREE INQUIRY* (1986, Vol. 6, #4 and 1987, Vol. 7, #1 & #2)
Liptak, "Reincarnation: A Heretical Theory" in *THE CATHOLIC TRANSCRIPT* (4/4/75)
"The Perennial Philosophy" - <http://www.philosophy-religion.org/perennial/index.htm>
Parrinder, *A DICTIONARY OF NON-CHRISTIAN RELIGIONS* (Westminster, 1971)

A. What Is Reincarnation?

"Metempsychosis is ... the idea of life as a cyclical process, *i.e.* of passage of soul through successive bodies..." [Brandon]

"The process by which, in certain belief systems, the soul of a dead person enters another body in order to continue its existence. depends upon a belief in a soul which is ontologically distinct from the body and which can therefore exist independently from the body, or at least from any particular body" (Crim)

"..... sometimes include passage into an animal or even vegetable life." (Ferguson)

"Random reincarnation. There seems to be a belief among some people in the West, apparently without any systemic religious foundation, in what may be called random reincarnation. This is part of the widespread emphasis on the occult and the uncanny. There is talk about persons having memories which cannot be explained without recourse to the notion that they are remembering some previous existence. This prior life may have taken place in fairly recent history, or it may go back to antiquity or even to prehistory. But there does not seem to be any organized philosophy behind this belief." (Crim)

Many classical Asian and Greek philosophical interpretations: the reincarnated soul retains no memories or other personality characteristics, all of which are shed at death.

B. What Purposes Does Reincarnation Serve?

1. Opportunities for the soul to become purer
2. Justice: reward or punishment after death
3. A sense of some type of spiritual immortality
4. An explanation for being "low class" or better now
5. A sense of being cosmic
6. An explanation for some private, personal experiences

C. Where Is The Belief To Be Found?

In systems of belief conceiving of time as cyclical:

Hinduism; Buddhism; Jainism; Sikhism; Plato's philosophy, mystery religions such as Orphism; small "cults" within Judaism, Christianity, and Islam who were influenced by Plato's and other Greek thought; Theosophy; modified forms in Chinese religions

D. What Religions Have Rejected Reincarnation?

Systems of belief conceiving of time as linear, not cyclical:

Judaism; minor inclusion in mystical cabalistic tradition;

Christianity; appeared among Gnostics who were found outside mainstream Christianity;

"Orthodox Christianity has never espoused it" (Ferguson);

" ..dismissed as heretical.." as early as 6th Century (Liptak);

Biblical Christianity proposes linear everlasting life, not a recycling, immortal soul;

**"The belief was unknown to the Bible, attacked by Augustine, though perhaps favored by Origen, and condemned at the Council of Lyons in 1274." (Parrinder);
Zoroastrianism**

E. Evidence For Reincarnation:

Testimony by individual believers who are convinced that they have some memories or spiritual experiences related to previous lives.

F. Opposition To Reincarnation

"(Hypnotic) regressions are fascinating examples of cryptomnesia.

"To understand cryptomnesia we must think of the subconscious mind as a vast, muddled storehouse of information. This information comes from books, newspapers, and magazines; from lectures, television, and radio; from direct observation and even from overheard scraps of conversation. Under normal circumstances most of this knowledge is not subject to recall, but sometimes these deeply buried memories are spontaneously revived. They may reemerge in a baffling form, since their origins are completely forgotten. This is cryptomnesia proper.

"Because its origin is forgotten, the information can seem to have no ancestry and can be mistaken for something newly created

"Yet in the end they turned out (after investigations) to be nothing but fantasies, pure and simple"

[Harris, "Are 'Past-Life' Regressions Evidence of Reincarnation?" in *FREE INQUIRY*]

[See also, Edwards, "The Case Against Reincarnation" also in *FREE INQUIRY*.]

G. Does Christianity Have Alternatives To The Purposes Of Reincarnation?

Yes. (Compare to above list.)

1. The individual will have the opportunity to "grow in God's love and service" in the next phase of living.

2. Justice is ultimately in the hands of God; some receive justice in this phase of living, some in the next; we trust God in this regard.

3. A hope for personal continuity after this phase of life.

4. Being unfortunate (low class) is the result of complex human decisions of societies and individuals, not the quality of a prior life.

5. A sense of being a unique, loved child of the Creator.

6. Private, personal experiences are far less significant than an individual's experiences in fellowship with others: explanations of unusual, private experiences can be offered scientifically or left unexplained without major impact.

III. RESURRECTION

I Corinthians 15:14 "and if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain."

We may wonder whether the Resurrection was an historical event. While it is incorrect to affirm every detail of the New Testament post-Resurrection accounts of Jesus as if they could have been photographed, it is equally mistaken to declare them all as subjective products of spirited fantasy or inner conviction.

The post-Resurrection passages include actual persons, places, and incidents that could have been videotaped, among them Thomas, other disciples mentioned by name, a place of burial, and the Risen Christ himself. These passages also contain or imply wonder-filled meanings beyond the range of any human or camera lens.

Within and beneath the Easter texts, whether statements referring to photographable incidents or metaphors based on a unique event, is this central Christian *discernment*: that at an actual time and place

of the Creator's own choosing, God's intention for humanity (God's "Word" for everyone - Jew and Gentile alike), embodied in Jesus the Christ, was born, ministered to many, was wrongly executed for treason by the Roman government, and was raised from death in a transfigured, exalted form unknown to us.

Jesus "entered a new order of life: one which does not and cannot occur as part of the present order of things."¹ "...the resurrection of Christ was an objective event but of an unusual kind. Although it was not simply an event in the minds of the disciples, yet it was not publicly observable. Christ appeared only to chosen witnesses."² In the New Testament the Resurrected Christ is depicted with "a body identical yet changed, without the usual limitations of the flesh yet capable of manifesting itself within the order of the flesh."³ Thus, the Resurrection was an historical happening - even though the physics of this "divine surprise" is beyond our knowledge. The *meanings* of the Resurrection are preached virtually every Sunday.

(1) Norris, *Understanding the Faith of the Church*, p. 137.

(2) Thomas, *Introduction to Theology*, p. 226.

(3) quoted by Thomas, *ibid*.

from <http://www.philosophy-religion.org/catechism/unit4.htm>

MEANINGS OF THE RESURRECTION FOR VARIOUS CHRISTIANS INCLUDE:

- a. The Resurrection is a point of transition for human history: a new order of life based on love (not rules, procedures, or ceremonies) and based on being part of a joyous, loving fellowship, the Church, (not being alone or part of a lesser fellowship) has been established.
- b. God has placed his seal of approval on Jesus' life and ministry; death did not silence Jesus' life or teachings.
- c. The Resurrection is God's confirmation of Jesus as his Messiah. With a new meaning, Jesus is viewed as the awaited Messiah, one who brings to humanity deliverance from hardness of heart, one whose focus on love can liberate all of life, including the political.
- d. Everlasting life, begun as individuals enter the New Easter Covenant focusing on Love, continues beyond death. One's transfigured personality survives death, which like birth is an entrance to another realm of existence.
- e. Without Easter, the story of Jesus would be a dismal failure; as a mere footnote at most, history would mention an unbelieved and unbelievable executed rabbi living and teaching love!

IV. OBLIVION

Freedom from worry, care, or unpleasantness; non-conscious; nonexistent; lifeless

V. PERSONAL SURVIVAL AFTER DEATH

[from *Living Issues In Philosophy* (9th ed. Oxford), pp. 399f.]

See <http://www.philosophy-religion.org/living/philosophy/18.pdf> .

Since the time of Job, people have asked whether there is a life after death. Belief in immortality, resurrection, or some form of future life was widespread in primitive times and is present in most theistic religions today. The belief is closely related to the belief in God, although the two are not inseparable. If we accept the existence of God, it is comparatively easy to believe in some future life. If we do not believe in God or some other nonmaterial "ground of existence," the belief in an afterlife is harder to support.

Personal survival after death cannot be definitely proved one way or the other. Science presents no indisputable data. Most clergy believe in some kind of afterlife. But a few people say that the belief in survival after death is a delusion and the result of wishful thinking. The difficulties arise as a result of certain scientific interpretations of the universe that describe the world as material and universally lawful. Some biological, physiological, and psychological interpretations leave little or no place for mind or consciousness; when the body dies, the person, it is said, simply ceases to exist.

Scientists have begun to gather data from persons resuscitated after being “near death” or being pronounced dead because their hearts had stopped beating. One study by a philosopher–psychiatrist discusses some of the methodological difficulties of his work, but cautions against trivializing the frontiers of controversial inquiry.²⁴

Personal survival after death may mean quite different things to those who believe in it. There is biological survival, or the continuance of the germ plasm generation after generation. In this sense, there is no question about “survival” in an afterlife. There is instead social survival, or the inheritance of influence or of some social contribution; this too is generally unquestioned. Although few people become famous in history, almost everyone’s influence or contribution does continue even after he or she is forgotten.

There is also impersonal immortality, which means that the person or the self is merged with its origin, a “world soul,” or with an Absolute. In some Asian religions, the self may enter lower forms than that of humans, as determined by the law of *karma*. It may, however, finally escape the wheel of rebirths and gain unity with a nonpersonal Sacred Ultimate. Doctrines of *karma*, reincarnation, and the transmigration of souls are found in various forms of religions originating in India—notably, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism. These views, however, are not what most people in the West mean by life after death. They believe in the persistence of personal identity in some sphere or plane other than the present earthly one. Does a person persist as a conscious self after what we call death?

The beliefs about life after death in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are understandably entwined with their beliefs about human nature. In the earliest biblical and Qur’anic passages, a person is conceived as a “living soul,” flesh-animated-by-soul, a psychophysical unity. A person is not perceived as having an immaterial soul encased in a separable body. A noted scholar of Islam has pointed out, “the Qur’anic doctrine of the soul is that man’s soul is a corporeal, material substance, thin and tenuous as air, fine and light as vapor, permeating the body as sap in trees.”²⁵

Beliefs about life after death as it relates to human nature are found in two forms in the Hebraic traditions. First, the ancient Hebrew view stressed survival of the Hebrew people as a community rather than as achieving an individual, personal life beyond the grave. Because there is no detachable soul, death brings about the individual’s demise. The ongoing people of God, including a person’s legacy of children and deeds, continues. In a rather undeveloped form, some Hebrew people held to a vague notion that the dead lingered on in a region outside or under the earth, not in God’s presence. Not particularly attractive terms designate this spot: “Ditch,” “Pit,” “Realm of Death,” and “Sheol.” Preventing a future of total extinction and giving sharp focus to *this* life, such a secondary religious tenet does suggest the continuance of a component, however minor, of human nature. The precise nature of this element was simply not of concern. Just before the New Testament period, Hebrew civilization pictured a different life after death, which included a restored communion with God. As was the case in earlier times, philosophical speculations about the nature of existence in the life hereafter were secondary.

Second, central to Christian and Muslim theologies is the view that by acts of God persons may be resurrected for everlasting life. Forms of continued self-awareness also found their ways into Jewish thinking. Although convictions about the features of the next life vary, the mode of understanding of the three Hebraic traditions is quite different from an automatic immortality of an eternal soul. Grounded in the psychosomatic unity position, the Hebraic traditions affirm a special divine act of re-creation of an embodied, recognizable human personality. Our main point here is that Western religious thought in its most ancient forms stresses human nature as an organic unity; a transfiguration of some sort is necessary (rather than the soul’s automatic discarding of the body) for everlasting life. Notions of “immortality of the soul” enter the Hebraic traditions not in their scriptural roots but in later medieval thought. But at no point have they proposed an “immortal” soul that continues beyond this life unchanged.

²⁴ R.A. Moody, Jr., *Reflections On Life After Life* (New York: Bantam, 1977), pp. 123ff. See also, K. Ring, *Life at Death: A Scientific Investigation of the Near-Death Experience* (New York: Coward, McCann and Geoghegan, 1980).

²⁵ E. E. Calverley, *Islam: An Introduction* (Cairo, The American University at Cairo, 1958), p. 92.