

## **Christian Belief In Life After Death (4/13/1973)**

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Some readers may be aware of recent criticisms of the traditional doctrine of the immortality of the soul. ("So what else is new?" you may ask.)

The controversy is instructive, because it shows how ineptly many Catholics, of both left and right, fashion their response to theological problems.

The Catholic of progressive-to-radical leanings shrugs his shoulders and says, "So what! I'm not really interested in life after death. Our responsibility is for the present moment and for the building of a truly human future for our children and theirs."

The Catholic of conservative-to-traditionalist leanings arches his back and says, "You see! One by one the precious elements of our faith are being whittled away. Before much longer there will be nothing at all left to believe."

In this debate, as in so many other instances, both sides have misread the issue. They have concluded that the recent discussion on immortality means that the traditional and historic Christian belief in life after death is now on the way out. Both sides are wrong.

It is true that theologians have become much more critical about the doctrine of the immortality of the soul. An entire issue of *Concilium*, an international journal of theology, was devoted to the topic in December, 1970. One of the articles begins with the sentence: "It is no longer so easy to speak theologically and honestly about life after death."

And yet there remains in the human being a streak of stubborn resistance to the idea that death is absolutely final, or that life is destined for defeat in every case.

Are theologians setting themselves against this innate human conviction about the durability of life? Are they challenging the abiding faith of the Church expressed in the preface of the funeral Mass; namely, that in death "life is changed, not taken away?"

There may, in fact, be theologians of various Christian and non-Christian traditions who would, for reasons of their own, reject any and every idea of life after death. But most of the criticism of the traditional doctrine of the soul's immortality does not lead inevitably to that kind of conclusion.

What theologians are rejecting is not the reality of eternal life but rather certain assumptions about the human person which underlie the immortality doctrine.

The traditional doctrine of immortality holds that, while the human body dies and decays, the soul continues in existence. The body dies because it is fleshly and material; the soul perdures because it is spiritual and without parts.

There is a dualism here which is difficult, if not impossible, to reconcile with other elements of the Christian tradition; namely, its consistent affirmation of the goodness of the flesh, created by the Father, elevated by the Son, and vivified by the Spirit.

In condemning Docetism, which held that the human body of Christ was nothing more than an unreal, outward form, the Church at the Council of Chalcedon (A.D. 451) implicitly affirmed the body-soul unity of every human being.

We are not souls imprisoned in bodily form, nor are our bodies simply the instruments of the soul. In Christian teaching, the soul is not a separate entity existing for its own sake, but rather a principle of being.

Man is not man without a soul, or spiritual principle, to be sure. But man is not man without a body, or material principle, either.

The doctrine of immortality -- at least in its popular expositions -- reflects a dualistic, rather than integral, understanding of the human person, and it implies that there is something less noble, less holy, less worthy about the body.

Even the adjunct doctrine of the "resurrection of the body" was often presented almost as an afterthought. We were reminded that the reunion of the body and soul will add nothing really essential to our enjoyment of the vision of God.

Nevertheless, theologians today seem to prefer the concept of "resurrection" rather than "immortality." Resurrection involves the whole person, body and soul; immortality refers directly to the soul alone.

Accordingly, the recent questioning of the traditional doctrine of the immortality of the soul does not imply a rejection of the historic Christian belief and hope in personal resurrection. Indeed, if there is no personal survival, then the universe for the person is absurd, and the "Good News" of Jesus Christ can be called "Good" only by mercilessly contorting the meaning of the adjective.

See <http://theology.nd.edu/people/all/mcbrien-richard-p/index.shtml> .