



The **immortality** of the soul: Could Christianity survive without it?¹ (Part 1 of 2)

More than half a century has passed since Oscar Cullmann delivered the Ingersoll lecture at Harvard and it was published under the title *Immortality of the Soul or Resurrection of the Dead?*² Cullmann was, at the time, a professor of theology at the University of Basel and at the Sorbonne in Paris and had already published *Christ and Time*, described by one reviewer as “one of the most significant theological works” of the decade.³

Given the almost universal adherence to the immortality of the soul within contemporary Christendom, it may be legitimate to raise Cullmann’s question once more, even to press it further. Could Christianity survive without the soul’s immortality? Or is resurrection at the last day a more credible and biblical alternative? We shall attempt to answer these questions from theological and historical perspectives; the theological from within the context of the historical, bearing in mind that Cullmann was in the mid-twentieth century, the latest in a very long line of distinguished thinkers and writers who had raised similar questions.

We shall perhaps be surprised to discover that some of Europe’s keenest minds were engaged in this discussion, challenging the assumption that the immortality of the soul was central to the Christian proclamation and propounding an

alternative eschatology, which to each of them was always more biblical, more thoroughly Christological, and, therefore, nearer to the heart of the authentic Christian message.

Some preliminary considerations

Although it hardly seems necessary to explain the traditional view of the immortality of the soul, yet for the sake of clarity, it may be helpful to restate the doctrine briefly. Human beings consist of two components: a material, mortal body and an immaterial, immortal soul. At death, the immortal soul leaves the body and, in the case of the righteous believer, ascends immediately to heaven and into the presence of God to enjoy eternal bliss. The souls of the unsaved go somewhere else. This belief has defined and undergirded Christianity for at least 1,000 years. It is almost impossible to overstate how crucial it has been in the faith structure of countless millions of believers in every country where Christianity has taken root, who have died believing that they were about to go to heaven and enter eternal glory.⁴

By the time the Westminster Assembly finally articulated this doctrine in its influential Confession in 1646,⁵ English Protestantism was over 100 years old, continental Protestantism a generation older than that, and belief in the soul’s immortality several hundred years

older still. It was unthinkable that belief in the soul and its immortality could ever seriously be challenged or that a credible alternative should even be considered. Yet that is precisely what has taken place over the past four centuries, beginning, as we have said, in the very earliest years of the Protestant Reformation and continuing in an unbroken succession of biblical scholars ever since.⁶

Those who have challenged the traditional doctrine and proposed an alternative eschatology have generally been known as mortalists, Christian mortalists, or conditionalists-mortalists because they believed that human beings are essentially mortal rather than inherently immortal creatures. Or they were known as conditionalists because they argued that immortality belonged only to God and was attainable by humans through Christ and that its acquisition was dependent on the believer’s faith in Him and the resurrection at the last day, rather than on themselves.

It is important for a correct understanding of the mortalist position to recognize that there were, from the early days, two forms of Christian mortalism: psychopannychism and thnetopsychism. Psychopannychists believed that the soul was a separate immortal entity, which left the body at death, did not ascend immediately to heaven, but slept in rest and peace until the last day when it would be

reunited with the body and then received into glory. Thnetopsychists did not believe in the existence of a separate soul, holding instead that the word *soul* referred to the whole person and that at death the whole person died, to await the resurrection at the last day.

N. T. Burns explains, “The psychopannychists believed that the immortal substance called soul literally slept until the resurrection of the body; the thnetopsychists, denying that the soul was an immortal substance, believed that the soul slept after the death only in a figurative sense. Both groups of soul sleepers believed in the personal immortality of the individual after the resurrection of the body.”⁷

Both forms of the mortalist understanding appeared throughout Europe within only a few years of the onset of the Reformation.

We will briefly trace mortalism’s development in the early Reformation years in Europe and England and then turn our attention to some of the more influential mortalist spokesmen, specifically to note their concerns and the arguments they used to challenge the traditional view and sustain their own position.

Early continental mortalism

In 1439, the Council of Florence declared canonical a belief that had already existed for some time, the doctrine of purgatory, with its essential presupposition that the souls of the dead are conscious and “capable of pain or joy even prior to the resurrection of their bodies.”⁸ Few doctrines of the medieval church provoked such widespread opposition from the early Reformers and those who followed them than this doctrine of an intermediate state between death and a future life in which those who had died would undergo purification and punishment prior to the resurrection and the last judgment. Eamon Duffy more recently described purgatory as an “out-patient department of Hell.”⁹ The abuses deriving from the belief

in purgatory were to become one of the major concerns of Luther’s Ninety-Five Theses, along with his attack on the sale of indulgences and the “audacious” claim that souls could be released from purgatory thereby. Luther would soon conclude that the underlying doctrines of the soul’s reality and immortality were “monstrous” opinions concocted by the medieval church.

A careful analysis of Luther’s writings reveals more than 300 instances where he rebuts the medieval view of the soul, substituting in its place an undeniable psychopannychism. Indeed, all the essentials of the psychopannychistic view of man are found in Luther’s writings; most of them stated repeatedly: the separate existence of the soul, its unconscious sleep in death, its exclusion from heavenly bliss until the resurrection, and the ultimate reunification of body and soul at the last day as the true way to immortality and eternal life. In his lectures on Ecclesiastes (1526), Luther asserted that the dead are “completely asleep” and do not “feel anything at all . . . they lie there not counting days or years; but when they are raised it will seem to them that they have only slept a moment.”¹⁰ Luther actually says of the resurrection at the last day, that it is “the chief article of Christian doctrine.”¹¹

Already, by the mid-1520s, psychopannychism was being advocated in Austria, Switzerland, France, and the Netherlands as well as in Germany. In 1527, the Swiss Anabaptist leader Michael Sattler was burned at the stake, convicted on numerous counts of heresy, including denying the efficacy of the intercession of the virgin Mary and the departed saints (since, like all the faithful, they were asleep, awaiting the resurrection and the last judgment). In the Netherlands, Anthony Pocquet, a former priest and doctor in canon law, proclaimed that the redemptive work of Christ would culminate in the resurrection of the righteous. Believers who had died in anticipation of the resurrection were asleep in the grave.

G. H. Williams of Princeton, in his monumental analysis of the Radical Reformation, maintains that mortalism, in either of its forms, was a central article in the theology of many continental radicals. He argues that the evangelical rationalists of the Radical Reformation, Italian in origin, spread widely across eastern Europe by the latter half of the sixteenth century, took mortalism convincingly to what he calls its “extreme” position of thnetopsychism.¹² The evangelical rationalists themselves, with their insistence that reason must prevail in the interpretation of Scripture, might have called it the more logical and consistent formulation of mortalist theology.

Thus, by the mid-sixteenth century, psychopannychism and thnetopsychism were established in various parts of Europe and had already given Calvin the motivation for his *Psychopannychia*, which first appeared in print in 1542 but possibly had been written as early as 1536. This was a fierce attack on mortalists and mortalist theology, which had enormous and lasting implications for the future of Protestantism.¹³

English mortalism

We now turn our attention to the English scene for it is English Reformation theology that has most influenced Protestantism, particularly in its Anglican and non-conformist forms, throughout the English-speaking world.

In 1526, eight years before the English Reformation, William Tyndale’s historic translation of the New Testament in English was published in Germany and smuggled into England.¹⁴ Not only was Tyndale’s New Testament influential in the development of the English language and English Protestantism, it also contributed to the early mortalist-immortalist debate. A second edition of Tyndale’s New Testament appeared in 1534 under unusual circumstances. George Joye, a fellow Reformer had, without Tyndale’s knowledge or permission, published a revision of the 1526 New Testament. One of the main issues

in the ensuing exchange between Tyndale and Joye concerned the soul and its state after death and Joye's intense desire that the New Testament should not be construed to support the mortalist idea of soul sleep.

Joye had, "with breathtaking folly" (to use David Daniell's phrase), made several significant changes in Tyndale's original English text, some 20 in all, changing the word *resurrection* to read "life after this life" or "the next life" or an equivalent alternative phrase, to avoid the word *resurrection* with its obvious

then the preaching of the resurrection of the flesh were in vain."¹⁶

For Tyndale, the believer's hope of immortality is grounded in the resurrection of the dead as the culmination of a thoroughly biblical eschatology. "And we shall all both good and bad rise both flesh and body and appear together before the judgement seat of Christ, to receive every man according to his deeds. And that the bodies of all that believe and continue in the true faith of Christ, shall be endued with like immortality and glory as is the body of Christ."¹⁷

doe sleepe, being without al sence, fealing, or perceiving, until the daie of judgement, or affirme that the souldes die with the bodies, and at the laste daie shal be raised up with the same, do utterlie dissent from the right beliefe declared to us in holie Scripture."¹⁸

Hardwick correctly noted that the Forty-Two Articles were drawn up with "an eye . . . to the existing necessities of the times,"¹⁹ one of which clearly was mortalism, in both forms.²⁰ While no figure can be put on the number of mortalists throughout England at

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implications.¹⁵ Tyndale feared that, as a result of Joye's unauthorized manipulation of the 1526 translation, many might misunderstand the emphasis in the original text on the resurrection of the body. This has become an important, but frequently overlooked, episode in the history of religious thought as well as in the mortalist debate itself.

Tyndale, therefore, reaffirmed his position and what he considered the biblical teaching concerning man's future arising from his own careful study of the text in the original and his translation of it into English. In his introduction to the 1534 edition, he says, concerning the souls of the departed: "I am not persuaded that they be already in the full glory that Christ is in, or the elect angels of God are in. Neither is it any article of my faith; for if it were so, I see not but

The early Anglican articles of religion are also enlightening in terms of the growing appeal of mortalism across the country. The first formal doctrinal statement of the Church of England, the Forty-Two Articles of Religion formulated in 1552, were largely the work of Thomas Cranmer. They were intended to preserve peace and unity within Anglicanism and some of the articles were specifically directed against the swelling ranks of Anabaptists and others disaffected with the newly established national church and those whose teachings were already threatening the unity of the English church. The heading to Article 40 reads, "The souldes of them that departe this life doe neither die with the bodies, nor slepe idlie," with the following text: "Thei which saie that the souldes of suche as departe hens

the time, it had to be a considerable amount. A Baptist Confession of Faith, published in 1660 with two prominent mortalists as signatories, claimed to represent 20,000 followers in Kent, Sussex, and London alone, and a pamphlet published in 1701 accused one of those signatories of spreading heresy throughout the region. An old document, only discovered in 2007, provides evidence that mortalism was still strong among General Baptists in Kent and Sussex in 1745.²¹ It seems beyond doubt that mortalist belief had prevailed among Baptists in southeast England for at least 200 years.

During this period, a succession of able and prominent writers advocated the mortalist view as the preferred interpretation of biblical eschatology. They included the following:

- Richard Overton, author of the first published exposition of the mortalist viewpoint titled *Mans Mortalitie*.²²
- Thomas Hobbes, the mid-seventeenth-century philosopher, regarded by some as the father of modern social science.²³
- John Milton, poet, author of *Paradise Lost*, still regarded today by many as the finest poem written in the English language. It contains many allusions to mortalism.²⁴
- Jeremy Taylor, Anglican bishop and author and chaplain to Charles I.²⁵
- John Locke, the empiricist philosopher whose ideas influenced English thought for the next two centuries. His writings are still required reading for students of philosophy.²⁶

These seventeenth-century writers were followed by a succession of equally illustrious names in the eighteenth century:

- Henry Layton, lawyer, mortalism's most prolific apologist, who produced 1,500 pages in all, most in response to advocates of the traditional view.²⁷
- William Coward, physician and member of the College of Surgeons, who argued that the idea that immaterial substance has existence is self-contradictory and contrary to reason, saying, "I can as soon conceive a black whiteness as frame such a concept in my mind."²⁸
- Edmund Law, bishop of Carlisle and professor of moral philosophy at Cambridge, where he had defended his doctoral dissertation on thetropsychism in 1749.²⁹
- Peter Peckard, vice-chancellor of Cambridge University and dean of Peterborough, one of mortalism's most articulate apologists.³⁰
- Francis Blackburne, another Cambridge graduate, a disciple of Locke, a friend of Law, and the first English historian of mortalist

thought, tracing the then-known origins of mortalism back to the fifteenth century.³¹

- Joseph Priestley, the scientist known for his "discovery" of oxygen but undeservedly not as well known as a competent biblical scholar who had reached mortalist conclusions through his own study of the text.³²

All these, and many others throughout the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries were persuaded of the essential correctness of the mortalist viewpoint and felt strongly enough about it to publish their convictions for their contemporaries and for posterity. What, then, did they believe? We shall consider this in part 2 of this article. ■

1. Much of the material in this two-part paper is condensed from my book, *The Soul Sleepers: Christian Mortalism From Wycliffe to Priestley* (Cambridge: James Clarke, 2008).
2. O. Cullmann, *Immortality of the Soul or Resurrection of the Dead?* (London: Epworth Press, 1958).
3. F. V. Filson, translator's preface to *Christ and Time*, by O. Cullmann (London: Westminster Press, 1951), 7.
4. The entry under "soul" in the 3rd edition of *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* notes that, in recent times, philosophical difficulties over the traditional dichotomy between soul and body "and the recovery of the biblical insight into the unity of man have meant that the doctrine of the soul, if considered at all, is thought of in relation to the whole biblical doctrine of man."
5. Article 32 of the Westminster Confession, "Of the State of Men After Death, and of the Resurrection of the Dead," reads, "The bodies of men, after death, return to dust, and see corruption: but their souls, which neither die nor sleep, having an immortal subsistence, immediately return to God who gave them: the souls of the righteous, being then made perfect in holiness, are received into the highest heavens, where they behold the face of God, in light and glory, waiting for the full redemption of their bodies. And the souls of the wicked are cast into hell, where they remain in torments and utter darkness, reserved to the judgement of the great day. Besides these two places, for souls separated from their bodies, the Scripture acknowledgeth none." But G. S. Hendry noted "several reasons" that have led many people to question whether the immortality of the soul ("an ingenious theory") should be considered an integral part of the Christian hope. G. S. Hendry, *The Westminster Confession for Today: A Contemporary Interpretation* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1960), 245, 246.
6. See *The Soul Sleepers* for a historical survey and analysis of continental and English mortalist writers to 1800.
7. N. T. Burns, *Christian Mortalism From Tyndale to Milton* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972), 18.
8. *The New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 2nd ed. (Farmington Hills, MI: Gale, 2003), vol. 5, 770.
9. E. Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England 1400–1580* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992), 344.
10. M. Luther, "Notes on Ecclesiastes," in *Luther's Works*, trans. and ed. J. Pelikan and ed. H. T. Lehmann (St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1972), 15:150.
11. Luther, "Commentary on 1 Corinthians 15," in *Luther's*

Works, trans. and ed. J. Pelikan and ed. H. T. Lehmann (St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1973), 28:94.

12. G. H. Williams, *The Radical Reformation*, 3rd ed. (Kirkville, MO: Truman State University Press, 1992), 836, 1149.
13. On Calvin's *Psychopannychia* and its implications for Protestant eschatology then and in the future, see Ball, *The Soul Sleepers*, 38–42.
14. On Tyndale's English New Testament, see David Daniell, *William Tyndale: A Biography* (New Haven, CT: Yale University, 2001); Alister McGrath, *In the Beginning: The Story of the King James Bible and How It Changed a Nation, a Language, and a Culture* (New York: Anchor Books, 2002), 67–88.
15. Daniell, *Tyndale*, 324.
16. William Tyndale, *Tyndale's New Testament: Translated From the Greek by William Tyndale in 1534*, trans. David Daniell (New Haven, CT: Yale University, 1989), 15.
17. *Ibid.*
18. E. Cardwell, ed., "Article 40 of the Forty-Two Articles of Religion," in *Synodalia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1842). The articles were published in 1553.
19. C. Hardwick, *A History of the Articles of Religion* (Philadelphia, 1851), 93.
20. This article, together with Articles 39, 41, and 42, was omitted from the revised Thirty-Nine Articles of 1563, which remain the classic formulation of Anglican belief. The Anglican scholar Francis Blackburne argued that the omission of this article was a "certain sign" that mortalism was no longer thought to "differ from the right faith and orthodox belief delivered in the Scriptures." F. Blackburne, *No Proof in the Scriptures of an Intermediate State of Happiness or Misery Between Death and the Resurrection* (n.p., 1756), 37.
21. See Ball, "Appendix III: The Eighteenth-Century Sussex Baptists," in *The Soul Sleepers*. The eighteenth-century Sussex Baptists were widely known in their day as "Soul Sleepers" on account of their mortalist eschatology.
22. *Mans Mortalitie* was well known and controversial. A second edition appeared in 1655 with the title *Man Wholly Mortal*.
23. "The greatest political philosopher to have written in the English language," Tim S. Gray, "Hobbes, Thomas," in *The Oxford Companion to British History*, ed. J. Cannon (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 482. Hobbes's mortalism can still be seen in his most influential work, *Leviathan*, first published in 1651, with many subsequent reprints, editions, and translations into various European languages.
24. Milton's mortalism was set out in detail in his most comprehensive theological work, *A Treatise on Christian Doctrine*, which was unknown in his own day and only discovered in 1825.
25. Taylor is one of the two most frequently quoted authors to represent Anglican belief and practice in the extensive anthology edited by P. E. More and F. L. Cross, *Anglicanism* (London: SPCK, 1962).
26. Locke's theology is now being recognized after being virtually ignored for three centuries.
27. Only a few copies of Layton's *Search for Souls* (1706) have survived since the work was suppressed by the authorities as being heterodox.
28. Coward's works were also unacceptable to those in authority. A committee appointed by the House of Commons decided that they contained "offensive" doctrine and ordered them to be burnt.
29. Later editions of Law's chief work, *Considerations on the State of the World*, included a thorough study of all biblical words and passages relevant to the question of the soul and immortality, particularly the use and meaning of the Hebrew and Greek words for *soul* and *spirit*. It remains as one of the most comprehensive of such studies undertaken.
30. In addition to opposing enforced subscription and the immortality of the soul, Peckard was also one of the early opponents of the slave trade.
31. Blackburne's mortalism was advocated in the context of strenuous opposition to required subscription to articles of belief, creeds, and confessions of faith.
32. Priestley's *An History of the Corruptions of Christianity* was read widely in his day, caused much debate, and was also burned in public in 1785.

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