

Immortality and the Soul

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Many people have thought you could have the immortality of the soul without the resurrection through not seeing that the body and soul belong to one another by nature. Now, however, we are getting the opposite view: the resurrection without the immortality of the soul. Although it may be vain to hope for immortality without the resurrection, it is not apparent that the same person is raised up without something of us continuing in existence after death. But there is no immortality of the soul anyway unless we have souls.

To More, however, writing in 1515, and perhaps giving his own answer to those who, like Pomponazzo, denied the immortality of the soul, as well as showing an awareness of the view of those who, like Cajetan, did not think it could be demonstrated by reason, it seemed that a people practising a natural religion would hold that the soul is immortal. In the Second Book of *Utopia*, he tells us that whenever the Utopians discuss felicity or blessedness they add to the reasons of philosophy certain principles taken from religion, for the inquiry of which they think reason of itself weak and imperfect, and one of these principles is: That the soul is immortal. The Utopians themselves seem to have regarded not believing in the immortality of the soul as something inimical to society, for further on we read that, though their founder, king Utopus, wanted there to be liberty of religion among them, on this one point he laid it down that 'no one should conceive so vile and base an opinion of the dignity of man's nature as to think that the souls do die and perish with the body'¹. We find a similar connection between human dignity and the soul being made a little later, in 1512, by the Dominican, Fr Antonio de Montesinos, who, in his famous sermon pointing out to the Spanish conquerors of the New World that the native Indians possessed human dignity, appealed to the argument that they too had souls. 'Are they not men?', he asked, 'Do they not have rational souls?'

Today, however, we have become reluctant to speak about the soul. This may in part be an understandable reaction to Descartes' dualism about man, making us into two separate things without any essential union. Thus, in order to avoid his division of man, many prefer to speak of the mind instead of the soul. One can find this way of speaking in Aquinas too, though he makes it plain that when we do so it is as if we call the soul after its primary power. Replacing the soul with the mind,

however, is not without its own difficulties, which are not always recognized or admitted.

Kenny, for example, gives us a good rendering into modern idiom of the medieval conception of the intellect as a *potentia* by calling the mind 'a capacity for capacities'. It is a capacity for acquiring and exercising intellectual abilities, he says. At one level is the basic capacity which belongs to human nature for learning language. At another level, the particular languages which someone may know are capacities of this capacity for thinking and speaking in those languages. A capacity, however, must be the capacity of something. Kenny would say that the mind is a capacity of the body; 'it is a capacity of the living human being, of the body you would see if you were here in the room where I write'². However, since thinking as such is not predicable of the body because it is not the exercise of a bodily organ, he has not explained how it is the capacity of a human being. Kenny himself admits that thinking is not predicable of the body since he says that 'in the present life there are intellectual and volitional activities which do not involve any bodily activity, such as silent thought'³. If the mind were a capacity of the body, it would not transcend the body in the way it knows things generally but only know them as the senses do, which is individually as particulars. If the mind were a capacity of the body, we would differ from other animals by having a different sort of body rather than by having a different kind of soul. Aquinas, however, was able to say that it is a human being, not just a mind, who thinks, being quite in accord in this with the way we speak today, though thinking is not the power or function of a bodily organ, because he said that the mind is a power of that which is the form of the whole human being, namely the soul. 'It is possible to say that the soul thinks, as the eye sees, but it is more correct to say that a man thinks by means of the soul'⁴.

But we have largely given up thinking about form today. This seems to go back, in modern times, to Descartes who tells us in a letter that he had little time for the notion of substantial form⁵. This may well have been a source of his dichotomy of man and why he could regard the body as a machine which would go on working without mind in it, as though our vital activities, one of which is thinking, do not stem from a single principle which gives us our unity. But if our vital activities do have a single principle in us, and the mind is not merely a capacity of the body, then the source of our vital activities is an intellectual soul. Another reason for thinking about form is that the identity of living things is not material identity, since their material constituents, the cells, are continually changing and being renewed; so their identity is of something else, their form. A living thing is matter flowing through one

and the same form (Aristotle compares this with water flowing through the same river).

Forms are of two kinds, Aquinas says: they are either having existence or that by which something composite exists. A form having existence is a subsistent form; for anything to subsist it must have an activity of its own. Aquinas argues that the human soul is a subsistent form, which could in theory exist on its own, since it has an activity which is not the activity of a bodily part, namely thinking of things. This point has been well stated by Herbert McCabe: 'The conclusion that George performs by his soul activities which are not bodily activities will be taken to show that the soul of George is subsistent'⁶. When Aquinas calls the human soul a subsistent form, he means that it exists in matter but not as though its existence depended on the body; indeed he thought they share the same existence. The souls of brute animals, on the other hand, are not subsistent because they do depend on the body for all their activities and so perish with it.

Aristotle thought that it would only be possible for the soul to exist separately from the body if it has an activity which affects the soul alone but that if thinking were merely a form of imagination or only occurred with imagination, not even thinking could exist apart from the body⁷. However, the mind is not just the imagination since it can judge its images, whether they be true or false of things, which is by another faculty than the imagination itself. If the mind were just the imagination, it would not be able to reflect on itself. Only something immaterial can reflect on itself; the eye does not see itself, nor a mirror reflect itself, except by reflecting another mirror opposite to it with a reflection of itself in it, but this is not reflecting *on* itself, which is what the mind can do. Aquinas remarks that only knowing powers which are subsistent in themselves can know themselves but that the knowing powers which are actualities of bodily organs do not know themselves⁸. This is because to reflect on one's own knowing is an action which only a knowing power which exists in itself and is not the power of a material organ has. It is significant that people who deny that the intellectual soul is anything subsistent often resort to saying that the mind is identical with its contents. The first thing to be said about contents is that they are contained by something. If the mind were merely a bundle of perceptions or its mental contents, it would not be able to reflect on itself since there has to be something which is able to turn onto itself, as occurs in self-reflection, but this cannot just be the mind's contents since they are what it is reflecting on.

One might say that we have no need to suppose that the soul is anything subsistent or that it survives after death since all that is

required for post-mortem existence is that we are 'alive' to God, since 'He is not God of the dead but of the living, for all live for him'. However, most people agree that for something to be alive it must have some activity (there is no life in a thing without activity), and for something to be active and act it must be subsistent. Otherwise, we are not using 'being alive' or 'to live' in a proper sense. Unless something of us survives when we die, we do not live even for God, properly speaking. We rightly say that the saints in heaven await the resurrection, but one can ask what are they who await the resurrection, for it must be something which awaits its body. In the language of Benedict XII, in '*Benedictus Deus*', something *resumes* its body at the resurrection. If we are to omit mention of the soul, one has not said *how* the saints are in heaven. But whatever we are after death and before the resurrection, we must be something which can be cleansed, if in purgatory, or which enjoys eternal happiness, seeing God as he really is, if in heaven, and in either case is the subject which has the virtue of charity.

Survival of the soul is not just a conventional way of saying that the dead person is somewhere else, such as is in heaven, besides being in their grave. The soul is not just a way of speaking because one also wants to know what it is a way of speaking of. Perhaps the reason why we say that we have buried Jack or that Jack is in his grave is because we also think that something of Jack still exists. A corpse is not a human being but the remains of one. This is the view which Kenny takes; 'When I die, my body ceases to be me and I cease to exist'¹⁰. When a human being dies, nothing of the person *sensibly* remains; so for those who think that all that exists is matter, the person is reduced to nothing. If I am just a body, when the body dies I cease to exist and, as it says, our fate is the same as that of the beasts. Unless something of us continues in existence, when we die we are extinct, just as a dead tree is extinct. For when a body dies it is resolved into its material elements, which remain in existence, as dust; but when the soul ceases to exist it does not become anything else but is simply annihilated. But presumably, when I pray to Peter and my prayer seems to be answered by him, this is not something which God brings about without the knowledge of the saint whom I invoke, but what I call 'Peter' is something subsistent, if we are to talk properly of the saints being instrumental in bringing about what we have prayed to them. If we are not to speak about the soul, we leave God without any direct part in the coming of each individual human being into existence. We are made in the image of God because he has a creative part in the formation of each human being. His creation of a human soul shows us that each one of us comes into being through the special love of God and that he has made

us for himself, which is not so with other animals. Although one may question whether the Church has ever defined the immortality of the soul, it seems that what the Fifth Lateran Council did was not so much impose a 'philosophical option' about the matter as say that one may not use philosophy to come to conclusions which are contradictory to faith. What seems more certain, however, is that the Church has defined that there is a spiritual as well as corporeal creation, as indeed is implied in the Creed, 'Creator of all things visible and invisible', specified as the world and angels and 'the human creature constituted as though with a common nature, of spirit and of body'¹¹. Once one admits that there is a spiritual creation, it is reasonable to think that God can make the human soul of such a nature that it survives and is something subsistent, as it is not generated with the body but comes in, as though from outside, to it. If, however, human souls are not created singly by God, then they are traduced.

If we do not have a soul, does Christ then not have a soul either? This would require us to rewrite a central passage in the dogma of Chalcedon which, in proclaiming that Jesus Christ has a complete human nature, states that he is 'truly God and truly man, the same of a rational soul and a body', in his humanity like us in all things apart from sin¹². Chalcedon was only taking up a point which had been gained in rejecting the error of Apollinaris in the preceding century, which left Christ without a real human nature by making the Word take the place of a human mind and rational soul in Christ. Although we may not think of Apollinaris much today, Aquinas noticeably makes rather a point of dispelling his view of the Incarnation at some length. Christ's descent into Hades when his body lay in the tomb implies that he had a soul which survives.

Not speaking about the soul renders pointless Christ's saying: 'Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who is able to kill soul and body in hell'¹³. This seems to be a saying which he meant quite seriously but it rests on his contrast of body and soul. It does not do here to translate 'soul' by 'life', as one can in other places, since doing so would mean that one would kill the soul in killing the body but Christ is saying that it is possible to kill the body without killing the soul. If, as he says, it is possible to kill the body but not the soul, the soul, in his words, can survive. This is also implied when he adds that the soul can be killed in hell, which is not in this but in the next life.

Resurrection without the immortality of the soul requires that God create a new soul for the body, but this would not be raising up an identical person. For, as Aquinas notes, the resurrection is not like

melting down a bronze statue and making an exact replica of the statue out of the same lump of matter, which he says would not be the same statue but another one with another individual form. In the resurrection, however, the body will be raised up with the same form because this persists in its existence¹⁴. If the soul does not continue in existence but is made afresh at the resurrection we do not get the identical person, not least because it has not been through that set of experiences and circumstances which have shaped and made me the person that I am in this life.

- 1 *Utopia* (Everyman edition) pp.84 and 120.
- 2 *The Metaphysics of Mind* p.17.
- 3 *Ibid.* p.31.
- 4 *Summa theologiae* I 75, 2 ad 2.
- 5 *Philosophical Writings*, edd. P.T.Geach, G.E.M.Anscombe p.274.
- 6 The Immortality of the Soul, in *Aquinas: a collection of critical essays*, ed.A.Kenny p.300.
- 7 *De Anima* I c 4 403a 10.
- 8 *ST* I 14,2 ad 1.
- 9 *Luke* 20,38.
- 10 *Op.cit.* p.31.
- 11 Lateran IV, Denzinger-Schönmetzer 800.
- 12 *DS* 301.
- 13 *Matthew* 10,28.
- 14 *Quodlibet.* XI 6,6 ad 3.

Reviews

CHURCH: THE HUMAN STORY OF GOD by Edward Schillebeeckx.
SCM, London, 1990. Pp. xvi + 268. £22.50.

This volume concludes the trilogy which began with *Jesus* (Dutch 1974, English 1979) and *Christ* (1977, 1980): fifteen years of hard work. The first two volumes run to 760 and 925 pages respectively. The first offers a digest of recent exegesis of the first three gospels, together with an essay on Jesus as parable of God and paradigm of humanity. *Christ* surveys recent literature on the rest of the New Testament, together with a long essay on salvation as justice. Much of this material, particularly the chapters on Ephesians, Hebrews and the Johannine writings, monographs in themselves, is of great value simply as surveying the field. It is rare for a systematic theologian to take the trouble to study so much biblical scholarship and, beyond that, to try to place it in a single unified theological perspective.