

Important Forgotten History

The Roots of Opposition to Conditionalism *

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Innate immortality and acquired immortality have been engaged in a protracted struggle for dominance throughout most of the Christian centuries. At virtually no time has this been so true as it is in the present hour. Even a quarter century ago, a prominent conditionalist could write, “Recent decades have been marked by a ground swell of revolt against the traditional position. So conditionalism has steadily shifted from the defensive position of an ostracized view to a recognized school of Christian teaching in a vital field.”¹

The 1980’s saw a remarkable rise in profile for the doctrine that immortality is bestowed. From *Eternity* magazine to *Christianity Today*, conditionalism has been given a hearing. Perhaps no factor has been as instrumental in this advance as the publication of *The Fire That Consumes* by Edward Fudge in 1982. Promoted by the Evangelical Book Club, this work has broadly influenced readers toward rethinking the subject of personal eschatology.

The upswing continued and the decade closed with the public declaration for life only in Christ by eminent thinkers John Stott (*Evangelical Essentials*) and Philip Hughes (*The True Image*). The cumulative impact has, in a phrase, stopped theological traffic!

As expected, traditionalism has reacted, a few examples of which are chronicled here. The limitation of our subject prohibits us from enlarging

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¹ Leroy Edwin Froom, *The Conditionalist Faith of Our Fathers*, Vol. 2, 1965, 1045.

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on the polemic specifics involved. Suffice it to say that when innatism is held, its presuppositions determine the interpretation one puts on such phrases as “unquenchable fire” and the “undying worm” and mitigate against biblical usage and ordinary exegesis.

The journal *Presbyterion* in its spring 1990 issue contained a response by Robert L. Reymond to John Stott which is civil in its tone. Not all such rejoinders have been so gracious.

Robert Morey’s 1985 book *Death and the Afterlife* begins its chapter on “Annihilationism” by credulously writing that conditional immortality was first advanced by Arnobius in about A.D. 300, a piece of historic revisionism few others would be academically willing to risk.² The author then proceeds to attempt to trash Arnobius in an *ad hominem* approach characteristic of the work in general. Similarly, Morey slights the ability as an historian of Leroy Edwin Froom, author of the *magnum opus*, *The Conditionalist Faith of Our Fathers*, because Froom doesn’t hold the same perspective of Arnobius as did Phillip Schaff. Contrast that method with the position of the late Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, who wrote of Froom’s work, “This magnificent *Conditionalist Faith* volume is characterized by your customary careful scholarship” (book jacket).

Virtually ignoring Fudge, Morey uniquely accuses conditionalist writers of “inadequate research” while exaggerating of himself that “our research has involved every conditionalist work, in or out of print, that is accessible today.”³ He further pompously declares, “We have consistently found that none of the annihilationists, Froom included, seem acquainted with the classic orthodox treatments of the subject.”⁴ That several conditionalists have closely critiqued Augustine and Calvin, among others, does not thus deter Morey from pronouncing the *argumentum ad ignorantium* censure on those differing from the traditional posture.

Still, Morey is mild in contrast with John Gerstner in his recent (1990) curiously titled *Repent or Perish*. This writer’s theme is “non-existence is non-punishment.” When referring to Philip Hughes’ answer to the criticism that annihilation is “no punishment at all,” he can only pen, “I won’t even condescend to quote it.”⁵

² Robert Morey, *Death and the Afterlife*, 1984, 199.

³ *Ibid.*, 205.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ John Gerstner, *Repent or Perish*, 1990, 57.

A few citations from Gerstner exhibit what he *is* willing to impart:

- Of the Christian, he declaims, “If he loves God, he must love hell, too” (31).
- “. . .when a conservative believer attacks hell, he has ceased to be a conservative believer, if a believer at all” (32).
- “. . . Hell does not exist, according to John Stott” (64).
- “the only thing worse than hell is to deny hell. . .” (66).
- The Bible “is out-Platoing Plato” (73-74).
- Conditionalists are “attempting to annihilate God” (185).
- “Probably ministers and other witnesses who do not believe [in Gerstner’s version of hell] . . . are going to hell daily by the tens if not hundreds. In comparison with such ministers, those who go to hell by the thousands will find hell ‘tolerable’” (216).

Surely this is not exactly what Jude had in mind when he spoke of the “defense of faith.”

It should be noted, however, that Gerstner does make concessions to conditionalist thought not often found in traditionalist writers:

1. He rejects the argument for inherent immortality based on man’s being created in the image of God (48).
2. He states that Christ did not literally “descend into hell” (161).
3. Likewise, he grants, “It is possible that Constable [a notable 19th-century conditionalist] and others are quite correct in saying Paul used common language others used for extinction and did not use language they used for a period of suffering” (164).

Additionally, R.C. Sproul’s July 1990 issue of *Table Talk* includes articles focusing on the nature of hell by five writers. Examples such as these plus John Ankerberg’s irresponsible labeling of conditional immortality as among the “doctrine of demons” at the “Evangelical Affirmations” gathering in 1989 point to one thing: A sore nerve has been pressed for those who would hold to Dante’s type of hell.

What shall we say of this reaction? Chiefly this: it comes too late in the day to withstand the progress made in 20th-century biblical exegesis and the overwhelming tide of increased understanding on the Bible’s teaching of man and his destiny.

From whence, then, do the problems of interpretation come posed by “orthodoxy” as it speaks of death? A good starting place is with Plato in the fourth century B.C. This pagan philosopher developed metaphysically and metaphorically the doctrine of the mystery religions in regard-

ing the soul as intrinsically immortal and capable of an incorporeal existence after its separation from the body.⁶ In contrast, the Apostle Paul made the resurrection of the dead the gateway to eternal life. Likewise, it may be said that the earliest Christian apologists “argued against a belief in the natural immortality of the soul”⁷ and saw that same doctrine as a “denial that any redemptive grace was necessary for man.”⁸

Soon, however, a megashift began to take place as Platonic thought came to exercise a direct and crucial influence upon Christian thought concerning death and beyond.

Various writers have captured this as follows:

The strongest force working in favor of a general acceptance of the belief in natural immortality has been the dominant influence of Platonism in the earlier stages of the development of Christian doctrine.⁹

The controversy concerning human immortality commenced as early as the latter part of the second century, and was, as might be expected, considerably influenced by the philosophical notions of the time concerning the constitution of man.¹⁰

The notion about the separate state of the soul was an importation into Christianity of the old Greek philosophy. The departed *souls* of the early Christians were the *shades* of Homer and the Greeks.¹¹

But early a majority of the Christians were Greeks or people more or less Hellenized in thought, so that Greek ideas were bound to assert themselves, especially the Platonic concept of the soul as an indestructible entity.¹²

The Hellenistic world had thoroughly assimilated the notions of a cosmic dualism which inevitably gave rise to the idea of a soul which is the immortal part of man and continues to exist in a disembodied state after it has been freed from the body. These ideas had come to be accepted almost without challenge in the Mediterranean basin.¹³

⁶ Clifford H. Moore, *Ancient Beliefs in the Immortality of the Soul*, 1963, 130.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 74.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, Vol. 1, 1913, 545.

¹⁰ Aaron Ellis, *Bible vs. Tradition*, 1853, 293.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 297-298.

¹² Moore, 71.

¹³ Milton McGatch, *Death: Meaning and Mortality in Christian Thought and Contemporary Culture*, 1969, 50.

Many Christian writers of the second and third centuries wanted to show their pagan neighbors the reasonableness of the Biblical faith. They wrapped their understanding of Scripture in the robes of philosophy, choosing from the vocabulary of worldly wisdom the words which sparkled and adorned it best.¹⁴

When the Apologists and early Fathers presented Christianity to the Greeks . . . they appealed to the poets and philosophers and general tradition of Greek thought in support of belief in immortality.¹⁵

The conclusion, then, of Plato's *Phaedo* became the accepted tenet of the Church and, given time, church creeds contained the formula of victorious Platonism. While valuing the religious function of philosophy, it nevertheless in this context must be asked as it was of old: "What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem?"¹⁶

The concept of the innate immortality of the soul as a Christian doctrine does not make a distinct appearance in patristic literature until toward the close of the second century A.D. in the writings of Athenagoras of Alexandria (c. 127-190).¹⁷ This Greek philosopher converted to Christianity and retained his neoplatonic concept of the nature of man.

His *Apology*, a philosophical defense of Christianity, spends much of its substance endeavoring to show to Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius that Platonism and the religion of Christ are in fundamental accord. Other works, such as his *Treatise on the Resurrection*, are unchecked in employing immortal soul terminology.

Tertullian of Carthage (c. 160-240) pushed innatism forward with a power surpassing Athenagoras. One of the influential Latin Fathers, a cadre of thinkers who gave Western Christianity its theological foundation, Tertullian altered the sense of Scripture so as to interpret "'death' as *eternal* misery, 'destruction' and 'consume' as *pain* and *anguish*."¹⁸ He goes beyond this devious treatment of the terminology of Scripture to give us such phrases as "perpetual life in hell" and "eternal killing." It should be noted that the considerable following the doctrine of ultimate reconciliation gained in the Ante-Nicene period is owed in no small part to a revolt against the eternal tormentism of Tertullian.

¹⁴ Edward Fudge, *The Fire That Consumes*, 1982, 66.

¹⁵ *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. 13, 1967, 465.

¹⁶ Found in Tertullian's *The Prescription Against Heretics*.

¹⁷ Froom, 928-929.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 951.

Still, as a late patristic voice, Lactantius of Nicomedia in Asia Minor (c. 250-330) addressed the Roman Emperor Constantine in the fourth century, vividly maintaining conditionalism.¹⁹ Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria (c. 297-373) and most prominent theologian of his generation, championed certain aspects of conditionalism. As such, he was virtually the last man of renown in his era to do so.²⁰ The consuming fire gave way to the tormenting fire.

Augustine (A.D. 354-430), bishop of Hippo, extended and augmented Tertullianism. For him, eternal loss of life was an eternal life of loss. Significantly, he had written a book giving 16 reasons for the immortality of the soul *before* he became a Christian.²¹ This neoplatonism was never abandoned.

His *City of God* is arguably the most elaborate philosophy of history ever attempted. In it, Book XXI contains 27 short chapters regarding eternal punishment. Therein he answers pagan critics who reject his view of personal eschatology. His chief concern is final punishment in the form of eternal torment. Largely, the subject is approached in a philosophical rather than scriptural discussion.

Augustine offered proofs of immortality which show him a debtor to the Platonic line. One involved borrowing "bodily from Plato's *Phaedo* and from Plotinus [the premier neoplatonist] when he maintains that life and the soul are identical, whereas the body is animated not by itself but by its soul. The body, therefore, can die—that is, be deprived of life; but the soul, whose essence is life, cannot lose that essence, cannot lose itself, and therefore cannot die."²²

Augustine's crucial role in the development of theology—his advocacy of eternal torment—tended to cause it to become the accepted doctrine of the Church for the centuries that followed. His Platonic presupposition of the natural immortality of the soul erected a barrier to a clear exegesis and consequently set a similar standard for most of Christendom.

To this effect, one writer has commented:

The evidence in the early Christian writers is clear that much confusion of thought prevailed until Augustine by his genius clari-

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 1052.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 1066.

²¹ *Ibid.* 1072-1073.

²² Moore, 122.

fied Christian doctrine through the modified form of Neoplatonism. His system in no slight degree determined the course of thinking within the church on the question of immortality down to the latter part of the 19th century.²³

Platonic influences and the growth of purgatorial doctrine tended to lead further away from conditionalist thought. The Middle Ages were therefore characterized by this emphasis at the expense of a significant resurrection. Foremost in influence among those of that time was Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), whose dogmatic corpus, Thomism, is officially recognized as the foundation of Roman Catholic theology. His argument, briefly recapitulated, is remarkable:

In theory it is possible that God should annihilate His creatures. . . . As He brought them into existence under no compulsion, but by the act of His will, so might He by a similar free act reduce them again to nothingness.²⁴

Though hence establishing Aristotelianism as the chief foundation of Christian philosophy, Thomas in his eschatological doctrine returned to neoplatonic mysticism.²⁵ His *Summa Contra Gentiles* leaves the impression of being primarily interested in the interim destiny of the soul, in its immediate individual judgment of which the general judgment is to him but a reaffirmation.²⁶

Of Aquinas, it has been observed, “With Plato he had little direct acquaintance; but from St. Augustine he learnt of later Platonism.”²⁷ The same writer continues, “It is sufficient to note that proof of the great influence of Thomas’s work soon after his death is given by Dante’s use of his philosophy and theology in his *Divine Comedy*.”²⁸

While rejecting the Roman Catholic distinctive of purgatory, Protestantism in the main took over this eschatology. Upon death, souls passed at once to heaven or hell. The resurrection remained an afterthought. Still, the Reformation had broken the fetters upon free speculation and conditional immortality once again was propounded and defended. Since those

²³ *Ibid.*, 72

²⁴ *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, op. cit., 547.

²⁵ Moore, 149

²⁶ McGatch, 120.

²⁷ Moore, 138.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 150.

eventful days, there has been an almost unbroken and well-documented chain of conditionalist thought.

Martin Luther, for example, held at one point in his theological development that the notion that the soul is immortal is a “monstrous opinion” from the “Roman dunghills of decretals.”²⁹ His views prompted no small dialogue with England’s Thomas More, whose *Utopia* made public denial of the immortality of the soul punishable by death.³⁰

It was, rather, John Calvin who “put the Protestant stamp of approval on the traditional understanding of souls and hell.”³¹ The power of his influence may be seen in the history of theology since.

The entry into France of certain Anabaptists hindered Calvin’s own Reformation. The term “Anabaptist” (“rebaptizer”) is a very general description which is applied to a wide diversity of Reformation Christians who rejected the state churches of Luther and Calvin.

Wrote Edward Fudge:

It is not surprising that these Anabaptists should be more open to new ideas—and to question the established doctrines of those around them. They stressed the authority of the Word of God apart from creeds and confessions of faith. They also championed the right of each individual to study the Scriptures himself, relying on the Holy Spirit alone for guidance and understanding.³²

Calvin maintained that “the Anabaptists in general say that souls, being departed from the body, cease to live until the day of resurrection.”³³ Against this Calvin wrote a treatise entitled *Psychopannychia* in 1534, which, apart from his work on the “De Clementia” of Seneca, was the first of his writings.

In *Psychopannychia*, Calvin explains that while he has not seen the tracts propounding the view in question, he did receive notes on them from a friend.³⁴ Explored are the variety of ways the word “soul” is used in Scripture in an endeavor to demonstrate that souls “have a proper substance” and are awake after death. To the thought that souls are

²⁹ Ellis, 303.

³⁰ *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, op. cit., 468.

³¹ *The Fire That Consumes*, 466.

³² *Ibid.*, 71.

³³ John Calvin, *Treatises Against the Anabaptists*, 1972, 119.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 124.

unconscious from death to the resurrection, he exclaims that “all Christendom viewed such a fantasy with horror.”³⁵

His blustering language against the Anabaptists is unrestrained; he calls them “ignorant babblers,” “evil,” “dregs,” a “nefarious herd” fraught with “insanity.” Weaknesses in the treatise are obvious, including a selective use of the church fathers, the synonymous use of the terms “soul” and “spirit” and, extraordinarily, deeming death the first resurrection of Revelation 20:6.

Of greater concern is Calvin’s contention that, contrary to Isaiah’s prophecy, Christ did not “pour out his soul unto death.”

To wit:

Now, O dreamy sleepers, commune with your own hearts, and consider how Christ died. Did He sleep when He was working for your salvation? Not thus does He say of Himself, “As the Father hath life in himself, so hath he given the Son to have life in himself.” (John V. 26.) How could He who has life in Himself lose it?³⁶

Along the same lines, he says of Christ, “If He can die, our death is certain.”³⁷ The implications for theology that arise from Calvin’s statement are grave.

The Reformer of Geneva does show humor, it might be added, stating that the “Anabaptists . . . , in the place of white robes, give souls pillows to sleep on.”³⁸

In the first book in its final form of Calvin’s monumental *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, there is a lengthy discussion of the immortality of the soul and the commendation of Plato as a good teacher in this area of learning: “not only enjoyable, but also profitable.”³⁹ So vehemently is he opposed to the “sleep of souls” that he holds Romanist John XXII’s embrace of the position as proof of the fallibility of the papacy.⁴⁰

Even reformed scholars such as Hoekema and Ridderbos have called into question Calvin’s biblicality in this area. No small wonder—do you hear the voice of Plato in this passage from Calvin?

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 141.

³⁶ John Calvin, *Tracts and Treatises in Defense of the Reformed Faith*, Vol. III, 436.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 439.

³⁸ *Treatises Against the Anabaptists*, 127.

³⁹ McGatch, 118.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 119.

The body which decays, weighs down the soul, and confining it within an earthly habitation, greatly limits its perceptions. If the body is the prison of the soul, if the earthly habitation is a kind of fetters, what is the state of the soul when set free from this prison, when loosed from these fetters? Is it not restored to itself, and as it were made complete, so that we may truly say, that all for which it gains is so much lost to the body? . . . For then the soul, having shaken off all kinds of pollution, is truly spiritual, so that it consents to the will of God, and is no longer subjected to the tyranny of the flesh; thus dwelling in tranquility, with all its thoughts fixed on God.⁴¹

Heinrich Quistorp is poignant in his analysis of Calvin. He charges Calvin with too hastily identifying the mortal body with sinful flesh, with using “spirit” and “soul” interchangeably, disesteeming the body altogether, literally making the soul into a substance independent of the body with a life and being of its own, and hence giving it immortal status, a conclusion Quistorp suggests is not biblical.⁴²

Quistorp observes Calvin’s dependence on the early Fathers for his principal views and regrets that in this case the Reformer did not subject them to as thorough a scrutiny as he did in other matters. Quistorp also comments on Calvin’s “horror of fanatical excesses” and thinks this horror made him too cautious in his eschatology.⁴³

Regardless, as Calvin’s passion on the issue of the soul outweighed such voices as Luther, William Tyndale and the Anabaptists, his Augustinian view gained the ascendancy in steering the Reformation.

To that effect, Edward Fudge has commented:

When the Lutheran reformers failed to give vigorous support to psychopannychism, soul sleeping lost what small chance it might have had to be considered a debatable doctrine, a thing indifferent. Once it was identified solely with the Anabaptists, there was no hope for a hearing before respectable Protestants.⁴⁴

For personal and historical reasons, then, Luther and Tyndale’s influence was not determinative. Expressly, Calvin more than any one man

⁴¹ Fudge, 453.

⁴² *Treatises Against the Anabaptists*, 33-34.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁴⁴ *The Fire That Consumes*, 72.

“put the Protestant stamp of approval on the traditional understanding of souls and hell.”⁴⁵

Opposition from outside the mainline in such groups as Anabaptists, Socinians, Adventists and Jehovah’s Witnesses “would only harden the established churches in the received interpretation and would effectively prevent any full-scale exegetical study of the subject in the same open-minded manner other important subjects might receive.”⁴⁶

That milieu has changed considerably, however, as we near the end of the century. Conditionalism’s hermeneutical strength and historical support are rapidly being perceived and this trend is nowhere near cresting. The day of *small* things has become much bigger.

Is a theological reformation at hand? Will the names of such worthies as Froom and Fudge someday be heralded as 20th-century reformers by a future evangelical consensus? We must wait and see. But, to be sure, “Nothing is more powerful than an idea whose time has come.”

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 466.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 383.