

# The immortality of the soul: a relevant doctrine for contemporary Christianity?

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**THE IMMORTALITY OF THE SOUL:  
A RELEVANT DOCTRINE FOR CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIANITY?**

**A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfilment  
Of the Requirements for the S.T.L. Degree  
From the Boston College School of Theology and Ministry**

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## INTRODUCTION

Christian theology maintains a holistic-dualistic vision of the human person and destiny. It asserts that the human person is the unity of a spiritual soul and a physical body. The soul survives bodily death and, in the intermediate state, “waits” for a reunion with the resurrected body. Belief in the immortality of the soul has been expressed in many doctrinal documents and liturgical texts of the Church. It has also penetrated practices of many Christians, particularly in their relations to the deceased.

Developments in biblical studies and advances in natural sciences in the last century, however, have led theologians to raise questions about the immortality of the soul. In the twentieth century, several theologians such as C. Stange, A. Schaller, P. Althaus, G. Greshake, and G. Lohfink emphasized the indissoluble unity of the human person, in life and death. They also suggested that bodily resurrection is the authentic biblical hope. Soul-body dualism and the immortality of the soul were considered Platonic philosophy, not original biblical teachings. Challenge to the immortality of the soul on biblical ground reached a high point with O. Cullmann’s Ingersoll lecture in 1955 and a booklet published a couple of years later. Debate over dualism versus monism, the immortality of the soul versus resurrection of the body, attracted significant attention and reaction from both ordinary and learned Christians in the 1960s and 1970s, before it cooled down in continental Europe.

On the threshold of the twenty-first century, some nonreductive physicalist theologians in North America, such as Nancey Murphy or Joel Green, also raised questions about the Christian concepts of soul and the soul’s immortality. The charge this time is not limited to the Hellenistic origin of such concepts. Rather, in the light of advances in natural sciences, including physics,

evolution biology, and neuroscience, physicalist theologians reject the existence of a metaphysical element called “soul” in theological anthropology. For them, even the concept of soul, once considered necessary to account for distinctive human capacities, is no longer helpful. Indeed, the capacities once attributed to the soul, such as freedom, moral responsibility, and spirituality, can be allegedly explained by the functions of the brain, in interaction with socio-cultural and historical factors. From those arguments, physicalists like Murphy suggest an abandonment of the concept of soul and the doctrine of the immortality of the soul, to support the body and bodily resurrection as authentic biblical and Christian teachings about the human person and human destiny.

The physicalists’ suggestion, claimed to be biblically and scientifically sound, poses a significant challenge to traditional Christian anthropology and eschatology. It has caused not only a debate amongst theologians but also uncertainty and confusion amongst ordinary Christians, I myself included. But uncertainty and confusion can be starting points for a query into the doctrine, and a number of questions can be asked: What is precisely the “soul” in the teaching of the Christian Church? What is meant by the immortality of the soul? Is the Church’s teaching about the soul’s immortality firmly founded on the Scripture, or is it a Hellenistic philosophical belief? Is it true that the concepts of soul and the immortality of the soul are no longer helpful for a Christian understanding of the human person and destiny? To answer those questions systematically and coherently, it seems necessary to have a thorough investigation into the doctrine of the immortality of the soul, especially its biblical foundation and its theological unfolding in our contemporary context.

This thesis is an attempt to investigate the doctrine, and to answer the above questions in the context of uncertainty and confusion. In the first chapter, I will survey the Christian Church’s

magisterial documents, to see how the immortality of the soul has been understood along Christian tradition. I will also consider challenges that face the doctrine, particularly from nonreductive physicalism, endorsed by Nancey Murphy and others physicalist theologians. In the second chapter, I will delve into contemporary biblical criticism, especially the studies of scholars who have engaged in the discussions of the soul and immortality. Their researches and discoveries will help us see whether the doctrine in question is firmly founded on the Scripture, or that it is merely a Greek belief inserted into some biblical texts and mistakenly accepted as original biblical teaching. In the last chapter, I will turn to Joseph Ratzinger and Karl Rahner's thoughts of the doctrine. Their insights, hopefully, will shed further light on our discussion of the subject matter, and help us make some conclusions concerning the contemporary debate.

**CHAPTER I:**  
**THE IMMORTALITY OF THE SOUL:**  
**TRADITIONAL DOCTRINE AND CONTEMPORARY DEBATE**

This chapter focuses on the current state of our subject matter – the immortality of the human soul. On the one hand, the immortality of the soul had been part of the Catholic understanding of faith for centuries, before it was officially defined as a doctrine at the Fifth Lateran Council in 1513. The doctrine is supposedly supported by the Scripture and tradition, and its binding force is emphasized in certain documents of the Catholic Church. On the other hand, that doctrine has been challenged, not only by some Protestant and Catholic theologians more than half a century ago, but also by contemporary physicalist theologians, on the basis of biblical criticism, history of doctrine, and modern sciences. As arguments against the soul and the immortality of the soul spread, ordinary Christians may feel confused about the continued life of the departed. They may even doubt the authenticity and validity of the traditional teaching about the issue.

In this context, I want to look closely at the doctrine of the immortality of the soul as well as challenges facing it. Thus, I will first explore the Catholic teaching about the soul, how the immortality of the soul was affirmed as a doctrine in the Middle Ages, and how that doctrine has been maintained by the magisterium until the end of the twentieth century. Next, I will turn to contemporary challenges to that doctrine. I will analyze particularly the nonreductive physicalism put forth by Nancey Murphy – one of the most notable proponents of physicalism. Once those positions are examined, we can see with some clarity questions facing the Catholic doctrine of immortal soul in contemporary theology.

## I. Traditional Doctrine of the Immortality of the Soul

It is impossible to treat adequately the historical development of the idea of immortality of the soul within the limit of a thesis chapter. A treatment like that requires a thorough reading of two complicated concepts – soul and immortality – throughout history of Christian theology. It also requires careful assessments of different interpretations of biblical passages, the writings of Church Fathers and prominent theologians, as well as Church documents. Thus, I will limit my investigation to some instances in which the soul and immortality are explicitly mentioned and emphasized in the official teaching of the Catholic Church, particularly in doctrinal documents relating to anthropology and eschatology.

Regarding anthropology, many Church Councils underscore the complex human nature, which can be summarized as a unity of duality – soul and body. Indeed, the Church through Vatican II states that God from the beginning made human nature one (*Lumen Gentium* no.13, see Denzinger 4132).<sup>1</sup> That unity, that oneness of the human nature is constituted by a soul and a body. The soul-body composition of human nature was mentioned in the first centuries of Christianity, especially in context of conciliar discussions of Christ’s incarnation. For example, the body and soul in the human nature of Christ was set forth at the Council of Ephesus in 431, with the strong support of Cyril of Alexandria (DH 250) and the Bishops of the Church of Antioch (DH 272). Later, human nature in general, composed of body-soul, was affirmed at several ecumenical Councils, including Lateran IV in 1215 (DH 800), Vienna in 1314 (DH 900), Vatican I in 1870 (DH 3002), and Vatican II in 1965 (DH 4314). Through these Councils, the Church has constantly envisioned human as “whole and entire, body and soul, heart and

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<sup>1</sup> References and English translations of ancient Church documents are from Heinrich Denzinger, *Compendium of Creeds, Definitions, and Declarations on Matters of Faith and Morals*, ed. Peter Hünermann et al., 43rd ed. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2012). Hereafter, it will be abbreviated as DH.

conscience, mind and will” (DH 4303). The unity of duality [of body and soul] can be considered a truth of faith in Christian anthropology.

Several papal, synodal and conciliar documents in Church history have treated in details different aspects of the soul, including its origin, number, nature, and characteristics. Concerning the soul’s origin, the Church proclaims that it is the immediate work of God. It does not originate from human generation (DH 360) or develop from a purely sensitive principle (DH 3220) or derive merely from physical or social influences (DH 4314). While the soul is not “a segment of God” or “of the substance of God,” it is “a creature created by the divine will,” as the first Synod of Toledo in c. 400 put forth (DH 190, 201). As for the number of souls, Constantinople IV in 869-870 on authority of the Old and New Testaments, of Church Fathers and Doctors declared that “[each] man has one rational and intellectual soul,” and condemned as heresy the stance that each human has two souls (DH 657). Lateran V in 1513 condemned and reproved those who asserted or spread rumor about one common soul shared by all humanity (DH 1440). With regard to the soul’s nature, the Church states that it is spiritual or rational (Constantinople IV in 869, DH 657). Besides, that rational and intellectual soul is “of itself and essentially the *form* of the human body” (Council of Vienna in 1314, DH 902). The same doctrine of the soul as true and immediate form of the body was also confirmed at Lateran V in 1513 (DH 1440). Except for the concept of form, the rational soul was at times considered the “principle of life in man” (Pope Pius IX’s address to the Bishop of Breslau in 1860, DH 2833). As for its characteristics, the soul is thought of as “endowed with consciousness and will” (DH 4653). It is “much more precious than the body,” and thus doctors in their treatment of the bodies could not use any method harmful for the souls, as Lateran IV in 1215 instructed (DH 815).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> In a similar manner, Church documents also treat the concept of body: its materiality, goodness, honor, and value (D 4314); its possible origin from preexistent and living matter (D. 3896); the fundamental value of life (D 4552,

With respect to the soul's destiny after death, two initial magisterial documents in the Middle Ages are of greater importance. The first one is Pope Benedict XII's constitution *Benedictus Deus*, promulgated in 1336. That constitution stated that the souls of the saints and those purified, after their departure from this world and until the resurrection and general judgement, "have been, are, and will be with Christ in heaven, in the heavenly kingdom and paradise, joined to the company of holy angels" (DH 1000). The same Pope added that the souls of the righteous enjoy "the intuitive and even face-to-face vision of God" and "have eternal life and rest" forever (DH 1000-1001). Meanwhile, the souls of those who die in actual mortal sin "go down into hell immediately after death and there suffer the pain of hell," though they will also appear with their bodies in the Day of Judgement before the seat of Christ (DH 1002). The second document is the Lateran V's Bull *Apostolici regiminis* in 1513, which explicitly declared the immortality of the soul as a doctrine. That Council condemned those who asserted that the soul is mortal (DH 1440). It upheld that the soul is "individually infused" by God to each human person, and "it is immortal" (DH 1440). With those two documents, the Church provides a quite clear teaching about the immortality of the soul, that it survives bodily death and receives retribution right after death either in hell, purgatory, or paradise, until the general resurrection and judgement and the eternal life.

In the twentieth century, the Church continued to reaffirm traditional belief in the immortality of the soul. In 1979, in the context of wide publicity of theological controversies over the existence of the soul and life after death, the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith

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4791). It is easy to recognize that the body attracts less attention than the soul in the history of doctrine, and concern for the body only emerges quite recently.

(CDF) addressed all bishops with its “Letter on Certain Questions Regarding Eschatology.”<sup>3</sup>

That letter reminds bishops of being faithful to the doctrinal teaching of the Church, and being careful in pastoral explanations. The text of the letter also states clearly the Catholic belief in the existence of the soul and its survival of bodily death, when it writes:

The Church affirms that a spiritual element survives and subsists after death, an element endowed with consciousness and will, so that the ‘human self’ subsists. To designate this element, the Church uses the word ‘soul,’ the accepted term in the usage of Scripture and Tradition. Although not unaware that this term has various meanings in the Bible, the Church thinks that there is no valid reason for rejecting it; moreover, she considers that the use of some word as a vehicle is absolutely indispensable in order to support the faith of Christians.<sup>4</sup>

The same letter also notes that neither Scripture nor theology provides enough light for a proper picture of life after death. However, Christians must maintain two essential points in their speech about the afterlife: “on the one hand, they must believe in the fundamental continuity... between our present life in Christ and the future life; ... on the other hand, they must be clearly aware of the radical break between the present life and the future one.”<sup>5</sup> In other words, the Church emphasizes both continuity and discontinuity regarding human person in present life and in the life to come.

In 1992, the International Theological Commission (ITC) published a document titled “Some Current Questions in Eschatology,”<sup>6</sup> which continued to confirm the doctrine of the soul and its immortality. Though the document does not have the value of the magisterium, as one member of the Commission – Candido Pozo – said, it represents an agreement amongst

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<sup>3</sup> Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, “Letter on Certain Questions Regarding Eschatology” (May 17, 1979). [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_1979057\\_escatologia\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_1979057_escatologia_en.html). Accessed Feb 2, 2020.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> International Theological Commission, “Some Current Questions in Eschatology” (1992). [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti\\_documents/rc\\_cti\\_1990\\_problemi-attuali-escatologia\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_1990_problemi-attuali-escatologia_en.html). Accessed Feb 2, 2020.

prominent Catholic theologians on certain issues of eschatology. Three points in the text relevant to our subject should be made clear here. First, relying on the Old Testament, the text defends the soul's survival of death, claiming that "something of mortal human beings subsisted after death" (no. 3.1). Second, differentiating the Catholic teaching of the soul's survival of death from the Platonic idea of the soul's eternal emancipation from the body at death, the text underlines: "The state of the survival of the soul after death is neither definitive nor ontologically supreme, but 'intermediate' and transitory and ultimately ordered to the resurrection" (no. 5.1). Third, referring to St. Augustine and St. Thomas' conception of the soul as one part of the human whole, the text concludes that the soul separated from the body in intermediate state is not the "entire person," even though it still "performs personal acts of understanding and will" (no. 5.4). The soul in that state, as the ITC asserted, can safeguard the continuity of human identity in the midst of discontinuity. In a nutshell, the ITC's text relevant to our subject can be summed up in the following words:

Between the death of people and the consummation of the world, it [the whole Christian tradition] believes that a conscious element of people subsists which it calls by the name of 'soul' (psyche), a term used also by Holy Scripture (cf. Wis. 3:1; Matt. 10:28); this element is already in that phase the subject of retribution. At the Parousia of the Lord which will take place at the end of history, there is to be expected the blessed resurrection of those 'who are Christ's' (1 Cor 15:23). From that moment, the eternal glorification of the whole person who has now been raised begins. The survival of a conscious soul prior to the resurrection safeguards the continuity and identity of subsistence between the person who lived and the person who will rise, inasmuch as in virtue of such a survival the concrete individual never totally ceases to exist (no. 4.1).

Also, in 1992, Pope John Paul II promulgated the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC),<sup>7</sup> which presents "an organic synthesis of the essential and fundamental contents of Catholic doctrine...in the light of the Second Vatican Council and the whole of the Church's

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<sup>7</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. [https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/\\_P1B.HTM](https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_P1B.HTM). Accessed Feb 2, 2020.

Tradition.”<sup>8</sup> In the section regarding anthropology, the *CCC* stresses the fundamental unity of what is “corporeal and spiritual” in human (n. 362), that “body and soul” is “a unity” (no. 364), and “matter and spirit” forms “one single nature” (no. 365). As for the soul, while Scripture uses the word to point to “human life or the entire human person,” the *CCC* adds that it also refers to “the innermost aspect” and “the spiritual principle of man” (no. 363). However, the document does not go any further and define what are meant by those concepts. Then, following previous Church Councils, it states that soul is the “form” of the body (no. 365), created immediately by God and is immortal, that it does not perish when it separates from body at death and will be reunited with the body at the final resurrection (no. 366). The immortality of the soul is also affirmed in the *CCC*’s section concerning the everlasting life (nos. 1020-1065), particularly in nos. 1022 and 1051 when it is mentioned explicitly in connection with retribution in the intermediate state.

The binding force of the doctrine of the immortality of the soul is emphasized in 1998, in a CDF’s document titled “Doctrinal Commentary on the Concluding Formula of *Professio Fidei*.”<sup>9</sup> As the document points out, the concluding formula of profession of faith contains three “paragraphs intended to better distinguish the order of the truths to which the believer adheres” (no. 4). In the first paragraph, the object taught includes “all those doctrines of divine and catholic faith which the Church proposes as divinely and formally revealed and, as such, as irreformable” (no. 5). As these doctrines are “contained in the Word of God, written or handed down, and defined with a solemn judgement as divinely revealed truths either by the Roman Pontiff when he speaks ‘ex cathedra,’ or by the College of Bishops gathered in council, or

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<sup>8</sup> *CCC*, n. 11. [https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/\\_P1B.HTM](https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_P1B.HTM). Accessed Feb 2, 2020

<sup>9</sup> CDF, “Doctrinal Commentary on the Concluding Formula of the *Professio Fidei*” (1998). [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_1998\\_professio-fidei\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_1998_professio-fidei_en.html). Accessed Feb 3, 2020.

infallibly proposed for belief by the ordinary and universal Magisterium,” they require “the assent of theological faith” by all the faithful (no. 5). And amongst examples of the truths of this first paragraph, we find “the doctrine on the immortality of the spiritual soul and on the immediate recompense after death” (no. 11). That means the doctrine of the immortality of the soul belongs to the highest order of the truths of faith, equal to the doctrines contained in the Creedal formulas (cf. no. 11). And as the document states, “whoever obstinately places them in doubt or denies them falls under the censure of heresy” (no. 5).

From those documents, we can make a few remarks concerning the Church’s teaching regarding the soul and its immortality. First, the Catholic Church affirms the existence of an element called “soul” in each and every human being. That rational, intellectual, spiritual soul is created by God as the principle of life and the immediate form of the body. Second, the Catholic Church asserts the immortality of the soul. It survives bodily death, is subject to retribution in the intermediate state, and waits for the resurrection at the Parousia of Christ. Third, the Catholic Church emphasizes a unity of duality in both anthropological and eschatological teaching. Human nature consists in the unity of body and soul. The soul separated from the body is not the entire person; neither is the corpse. Also, eternal life does not consist in the immortality of the soul alone, even if that soul is with Christ, but the reunion of the immortal soul with the resurrected body in eternal glory of God.

Despite its clarity regarding anthropological and eschatological frameworks, Church magisterium does not define many concepts presented within them. The lack of definition renders many terms ambiguous, and many conceptions within some teachings, paradoxical. For example, in regard to anthropology, many Christians feel uncertain about the nature of human soul. Sometimes the soul is depicted as spiritual *aspect* or *principle* of human, while at other

times, it is depicted as a substantial *entity* capable of subsisting in itself independent of the body. So, what is precisely the soul? Likewise, many Christians are uncertain of the nature of human body, its relation to the soul, and vice versa. Is the soul-body relation like “a ghost in a machine,” or that the machine in interaction with its surrounding environment gives rise to that ghost?

Regarding eschatology, a problem arises. While the Church emphasizes the profound unity of body and soul because the latter is the *form* of the former, it at the same time adds that the soul can be separable from the body at death and remains alive, conscious, and willing, as if “having” the body or not makes no significant difference to the human soul. To many people, those assertions appear paradoxical. Besides, if the separated souls of the blessed have already enjoyed heavenly bliss as *Benedictus Deus* claimed (DH 1000), then why do such souls need the resurrected bodies? Are such bodies a kind of embellishment, like beautiful clothes added to wonderful “naked” souls?<sup>10</sup> In sum, obscurity in terminology and paradox in conceptions are problems that need to be considered in an adequate treatment of the doctrine of immortality of the soul.

Leaving aside those problems for the time being, let us now turn to an opposite vision, a nonreductive physicalist account of human nature and destiny, proposed by Nancey Murphy and several thinkers at the dawn of the third millennium.

## **II. Nancey Murphy’s Physicalism and its Challenge to the Doctrine**

Though the immortality of the soul is considered a truth of faith in the Catholic teaching, it is challenged in contemporary theology. Notable among critics of the doctrine is Nancey

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<sup>10</sup> Some theologians like St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas tried to advocate for the necessity of bodily resurrection. For example, St. Augustine claims that true immortality must be “a double immortality, an immortality affecting both the body and soul.” See John A. Mourant, *Augustine on Immortality* (Villanova University Press, 1969), 1. Meanwhile, St. Thomas focuses on the human person as constituted of soul and body. Because Thomas thinks that “my soul is not I,” a blissful soul separated from the body is not enough for the salvation of the human whole. The resurrected body is a necessity. Thus, according to Thomas, two-phase eschatology is the consequence of the twofold human nature.

Murphy, whose elaboration on and defense of nonreductive physicalism in anthropology are widely known. In her physicalist account, the human is composed of one physical element, the body. There is nothing like a Platonic soul, which has immortality as a “native” characteristic. The body and resurrection of the body are proper Christian accounts of human nature and eschatological hope.

Murphy’s physicalism poses a serious challenge to the doctrine in question. In fact, it rejects the immortality of the soul and asserts resurrection of the body, as if those two doctrines are mutually exclusive. Murphy’s thought makes many Catholics, who believe in both the immortality of the soul and the resurrection of the body, wonder: how can she come to the above assertions? On what grounds does she make her arguments? Are her grounds firm enough theologically? A detailed analysis of Murphy’s arguments is important, as they will help some Catholics understand not only Murphy’s stance, but also the challenge facing the doctrine of the immortality of the soul in today’s context.

Historically, Murphy is not the first and only one who has challenged the concept of the soul and immortality in theology. In 1955, Oscar Cullmann gave the Ingersoll lecture at Harvard Divinity School in which he discussed immortality of the soul and resurrection of the body. He later published that lecture in a booklet titled *Immortality of the Soul or Resurrection of the Dead? Witness of the New Testament*.<sup>11</sup> In his booklet, Cullmann sharply distinguishes the Greek doctrine of the immortality of the soul from the authentic New Testament teaching of the resurrection of the dead. For him, immortality of the soul and resurrection of the dead are mutually exclusive theses. We can only choose one of those two extremes, as it is impossible to integrate them in a harmonious eschatological synthesis. Fundamental to Cullmann’s argument is

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<sup>11</sup> Oscar Cullmann, *Immortality of the Soul or Resurrection of the Dead? The Witness of the New Testament*, Ingersoll Lecture 1955 (London: Epworth, 1958).

the presupposition of the unity/oneness of human nature in both life and death. His stance was a challenge to the traditional belief in immortal souls.<sup>12</sup>

Four decades after Cullmann's booklet, Nancey Murphy posed a similar question: "What happened to the soul?" With that questioning, she seriously attempts to re-examine the concept of soul in context of profound changes in modern sciences. Together with Warren Brown, Joel Green and other professionals in psychology, ethics, neurosciences, Murphy organized a conference in California in 1998 to discuss the question. Talks given at the conference were published in the same year under the title *What Happened to the Soul? Scientific and Theological Portraits of Human Nature*.<sup>13</sup> The intersection of those portraits is a non-reductive physicalist account of the human person. Turning to the twentieth century, Murphy wrote extensively to defend non-reductive physicalist anthropology and expand its eschatological implications. The most noteworthy among her books is probably *Bodies and Souls, or Spirited Bodies* (2006).<sup>14</sup> Murphy also co-authored or edited a number of books,<sup>15</sup> and published several articles<sup>16</sup> on different aspects of physicalism. Often starting with a query: "Are humans immortal souls temporarily housed in physical bodies, or are we our bodies?,"<sup>17</sup> she gradually rejects the concept

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<sup>12</sup> For a brief summary of Oscar Cullmann's critique of immortality and resurrection, see Cándido Pozo, *Theology of the Beyond* (Staten Island, N.Y.: St. Pauls, 2009), 131f..

<sup>13</sup> Warren S. Brown, Nancey C. Murphy, and H. Newton Malony, eds. *Whatever Happened to the Soul?: Scientific and Theological Portraits of Human Nature* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998).

<sup>14</sup> Nancey C. Murphy, *Bodies and Souls, or Spirited Bodies?* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

<sup>15</sup> Books Murphy co-authored or edited includes *Did My Neurons Make Me Do It?: Philosophical and Neurobiological Perspectives on Moral Responsibility and Free Will* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); *Evolution and Emergence: Systems, Organisms, Persons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); *Downward Causation and Neurobiology of Free Will* (Berlin Heidelberg: Springer, 2009), *Human Identity at the Intersection of Science, Technology and Religion* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010). Murphy's latest book is *A Philosophy of the Christian Religion: For the Twenty-First Century* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018). Chapter 9 of this book is dedicated to the question of Christian anthropology

<sup>16</sup> Nancey Murphy, "Whatever Happened to the Soul? Theological Perspectives on Neuroscience and the Self," *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* 1001, no. 1 (2003): 51–64; "Do Humans Have Souls? Perspectives from Philosophy, Science, and Religion," *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 67, no. 1 (2013): 30–41; "Immortality Versus Resurrection in the Christian Tradition," *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* 1234, no. 1 (2011): 76–82.

<sup>17</sup> Murphy, *Bodies and Souls, or Spirited Bodies?*, ix.

of immortal soul and dualism in favor of the body and bodily resurrection. Her position is best summed up in the preface of her book in 2006:

My central thesis is, first, that we are our bodies – there is no additional metaphysical element such as a mind or soul or spirit. But, second, this “physicalist” position need not deny that we are intelligent, moral, and spiritual. We are, at our best, complex physical organisms, imbued with the legacy of thousands of years of culture, and, most importantly, blown by the Breath of God’s Spirit; we are Spirited bodies.<sup>18</sup>

On what grounds does Murphy assert that we are our physical bodies and there is no soul and no immortality of the soul at all? In her books and articles, she often explains her vision on three different grounds: biblical criticism, history of doctrine, and contemporary sciences.

First, on biblical grounds, Murphy rejects trichotomism (the human as body-soul-spirit) and dualism (the human as body and soul), and asserts physicalism (the human as one substance, the body) as the proper biblical teaching. For her, trichotomism is a popular view among Christians,<sup>19</sup> but it “has no textual warrant.”<sup>20</sup> Meanwhile, body-soul dualism is “a Hellenistic addition to or distortion of biblical teaching.”<sup>21</sup> As she argues, the early Hebraic accounts of the person were “holistic and physicalist,”<sup>22</sup> and dualism only appeared later in the Old Testament “as a result of poor translations.”<sup>23</sup> In the New Testament (NT), Murphy agrees that conflicting accounts exist. Some of the NT texts appear dualistic, such as Matt. 10:28; Luke 16:19-31, 23:39-43; 2 Cor. 5:1-10. However, as she argues, “NT authors are not intending to teach *anything* about human metaphysical composition” in such passages.<sup>24</sup> Following James Dunn, she suggests that such texts should be viewed as Hebraic “aspective” accounts of the human, in

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<sup>18</sup> Murphy, *Bodies and Souls, or Spirited Bodies?*, ix.

<sup>19</sup> Murphy, “Whatever Happened to the Soul?”, 53.

<sup>20</sup> Murphy, “Whatever Happened to the Soul?”, 60. Of course, Murphy was aware of St. Paul’s 1 Thessalonians 5:23. But in Murphy’s interpretation, St. Paul considered body, soul, and spirit as three aspects of one human reality.

<sup>21</sup> Murphy, “Whatever Happened to the Soul?”, 52.

<sup>22</sup> Murphy, “Whatever Happened to the Soul?”, 53.

<sup>23</sup> Murphy, “Whatever Happened to the Soul?”, 60.

<sup>24</sup> Murphy, *Bodies and Souls, or Spirited Bodies?*, 21.

which “one aspect” stands for the whole person. They are quite different from Greek “partitive” accounts, in which parts can be separated from the whole.<sup>25</sup> Thus, she concludes: if one adheres to partitive approach, there will be nothing like *the* biblical view of human nature. But from the aspective approach, NT authors do attest that “humans are psychophysical unities;” consequently, “Christian hope is staked on bodily resurrection rather than an immortal soul.”<sup>26</sup>

To further support her argument, Murphy quotes several Christian exegetes to show that modern and contemporary biblical scholarship shares a physicalist vision of humans. She notes that H. Wheeler Robinson emphasizes the Hebrew idea of personality as “an animated body,” “not an incarnated soul.”<sup>27</sup> Later, Rudolf Bultmann considers the Pauline concept of *soma* (body) as the whole human person.<sup>28</sup> Recently, Joel Green puts forth that the dominant view of human person in the New Testament is that of “ontological monism,” and notions such as “the escape from the body” or “disembodied soul” fall outside parameters of New Testament thought.<sup>29</sup> On the authority of these scholars, to name but a few, Murphy concludes: “The issue was settled in favor of physicalism as original Christian teaching.”<sup>30</sup> She also adds that her conclusion is at least true to people in the academic world and not for conservative Protestants or Christian pews.

Second, with a detail analysis of doctrinal development, Murphy argues that body-soul dualism is a Hellenistic doctrine to which the Christian tradition accommodated itself; however, that accommodation appears problematic in the light of modern philosophy and neurosciences

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<sup>25</sup> James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of the Apostle Paul* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 54, cited in Murphy, *Bodies and Souls, or Spirited Bodies?*, 21.

<sup>26</sup> Murphy, *Bodies and Souls, or Spirited Bodies?*, 22.

<sup>27</sup> H. Wheeler Robinson, *The Christian Doctrine of Man* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1911), cited in Murphy, *Bodies and Souls, or Spirited Bodies?*, 8. Cf. Murphy, “Immortality Versus Resurrection,” 78.

<sup>28</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, vol. 1 (New York: Scribner, 1951), cited in Murphy, *Bodies and Souls, or Spirited Bodies?*, 10. Cf. “Immortality Versus Resurrection,” 78.

<sup>29</sup> Joel B. Green, “Bodies – That is, Human Life: A Re-examination of Human Nature in the Bible” cited in *Whatever Happened to the Soul?*, eds. Warren S. Brown et al., 28.

<sup>30</sup> Murphy, “Immortality Versus Resurrection,” 78.

and needs to be changed now. As Murphy observes, Tertullian followed the Stoic teaching of the soul as corporeal and generated with the body, while Origen adopted the Platonic idea of incorporeal and eternal soul.<sup>31</sup> Later, St. Augustine modified the Platonic view: a human being is an immortal (not eternal) soul using (and not imprisoned in) a mortal body. The soul is tripartite (nutritive, sensitive, and rational) and hierarchically ordered. The relation between soul and body is similar to an agent with a tool.<sup>32</sup> In the Middle Ages, St. Thomas Aquinas adopted Aristotelian hylomorphism,<sup>33</sup> when he considered the soul as substantial form of the body. Because Aristotle's soul or form is not a preexistent and transcendent entity, Murphy thinks that Thomas' anthropology is a kind of "moderated dualism," which has attracted many Christians until recently.<sup>34</sup> But two modern theories has challenged Aristotle/Thomas' hylomorphism. The first is Galileo's atomist conception of matter, which suggests that matter is formed by atoms through physical forces. The second is Descartes' identification of the soul with mind, cognition, and consciousness, which cognitive sciences consider as dependent on brain functions. These philosophical and scientific developments render the idea of soul as form of the body and source of cognition obsolete, while they highlight physicalism.<sup>35</sup> Therefore, Murphy implicitly suggests giving up the Hellenistic body-soul dualism and returning to the original Hebraic physicalist conception of humans, which is the authentic Christian teaching.<sup>36</sup>

Third, on the basis of contemporary scientific discoveries, Murphy argues against the concept of soul, and implicitly rejects the soul's immortality. As noted above, the atomist revolution in physics has replaced the idea of soul as form of the body. In addition, evolutionary

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<sup>31</sup> Murphy, "Whatever Happened to the Soul?", 53.

<sup>32</sup> Murphy, "Whatever Happened to the Soul?", 54.

<sup>33</sup> Hylomorphism is a philosophical theory, which holds that substance are constituted by two principles – form and matter.

<sup>34</sup> Murphy, "Whatever Happened to the Soul?", 55f.

<sup>35</sup> Murphy, "Whatever Happened to the Soul?", 56-58.

<sup>36</sup> Murphy, "Whatever Happened to the Soul?", 58.

biology has pushed many people away from the soul toward physicalism. The reason is simple: “if animals have no souls, then humans must not have them either... To claim that humans alone have the gift of a soul seems to force an arbitrary distinction [between hominid ancestors and modern humans] where there is much evidence for continuity.”<sup>37</sup> Last but not least, cognitive neurosciences have stated that “nearly all of the human capacities or faculties once attributed to the *soul* are now seen to be the functions of the brain.”<sup>38</sup> From those sciences, Murphy asserts that the person is “one substance, a physical body,” and “it is not necessary to postulate a second metaphysical entity, the soul or mind, to account for human capacities and distinctiveness.”<sup>39</sup>

In short, on account of biblical criticism, history of doctrine, and contemporary sciences, Murphy rejected trichotomistic/dualistic anthropology and highlighted physicalist anthropology as the original and authentic Christian teaching. To return to that authentic teaching, she contends, we only need “to give up or finesse of the doctrine of the intermediate state” in Christian tradition; meanwhile, it contributes greatly to theology, especially to that of salvation and history. Murphy believes that if physicalist anthropology predominated rather than dualism, there would be no deprivation of the body for the flourishing of the soul. The goal of life would not be a place in heaven for individual souls, but the working for God’s reign on earth. However, working for God’s kingdom, for the transformation of the world and history does not mean a total abandonment of the afterlife, because Christians still have hope in the eschatological resurrection of the body, understood as the human whole.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Murphy, “Whatever Happened to the Soul?”, 59.

<sup>38</sup> Murphy, “Human Nature: Historical, Scientific, and Religious Issues,” in *Whatever Happened to the Soul?*, eds. Warren Brown et al., 1.

<sup>39</sup> Murphy, “Human Nature: Historical, Scientific, and Religious Issues,” in *Whatever Happened to the Soul?*, eds. Warren Brown et al., 13. For a detail treatment of the influence of atomist revolution in physics, Darwinian evolution in biology, and neurosciences, see Murphy, *Bodies and Souls, or Spirited Bodies?*, chap. 2, pp. 40-70.

<sup>40</sup> Murphy, *Bodies and Souls, or Spirited Bodies?*, 23-28.

In rejecting the soul in favor of the body, Murphy is aware of three problems she has to face: the possibility of reductionism, human distinctiveness, and personal identity. With great effort, she addresses those problems. To the question: “is the human being a mere physical body, determined by atoms, genes, or brain function?”, Murphy gives a negative answer. For her, a reductive physicalism is wrong for several reasons. First, in highly complex organism like humans, it is not the behaviors of parts that determine the behaviors of the whole (bottom-up causation); instead, “holistic properties” of humans and their “interactions with environment” have causal influence on the behaviors of constitutive parts (top-down or downward causation).<sup>41</sup> Murphy admits that those principles of causation interact with each other, but she emphasizes the importance of downward causation to defend human freedom.<sup>42</sup> Second, Murphy thinks that humans have the ability of self-direction, as they can modify goals, and thus transcend mere survival and reproduction, toward moral responsibility.<sup>43</sup> Important factors for morality include a highly sophisticated language, a sense of self, abstract goals, and evaluation.<sup>44</sup> As for free will, Murphy argues that humans are not completely autonomous. Yet, they have a certain degree, a “*certain measure* of autonomy from biological drives and social forces.”<sup>45</sup> In short, Murphy asserts that the human being cannot be reduced to mere physicality or materiality; rather, the human being transcends it through morality and freedom thanks to the interactions with natural and social world.

The second problem facing Murphy’s nonreductive physicalism is human distinctiveness from animals. To this problem, Murphy argues that human distinctiveness consists in our

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<sup>41</sup> Murphy, *Bodies and Souls, or Spirited Bodies?*, 73.

<sup>42</sup> Murphy, *Bodies and Souls, or Spirited Bodies?*, 80.

<sup>43</sup> Murphy, *Bodies and Souls, or Spirited Bodies?*, 85.

<sup>44</sup> Murphy, *Bodies and Souls, or Spirited Bodies?*, 93f.

<sup>45</sup> Murphy, *Bodies and Souls, or Spirited Bodies?*, 109.

relationship with God. However, we do not need a soul to account for it as traditional theology used to claim, because “God relates to us through our *bodily* capacities.”<sup>46</sup> Part of Murphy’s logic is that God is immanent and acting in all physical realities,<sup>47</sup> and God acts “at quantum level.”<sup>48</sup> Therefore, God can “cause” religious experiences in people through *ideas* and *feelings*, which “are not beyond our ordinary neural equipment.”<sup>49</sup> To differentiate authentic religious experiences from fantasies, the circumstances, consequences, and confirmations of religious community are important. Murphy notes: “individual and communal discernment” can “distinguish one’s own fancies and the voice of God.”<sup>50</sup>

The third problem facing Murphy is human personal identity. Traditional theology often attributes this identity to the soul, while Murphy thinks that it is the body. But in the discussion of personal identity and the body, Murphy dramatically changes her concept of body, from physical body to the higher capacities enabled by the body. She says: “It is not the body *qua* material object that constitutes our identities, but rather the higher capacities that it enables: consciousness and memory, moral character, interpersonal relations, and, especially, relationship with God.”<sup>51</sup> For Murphy, those higher capacities are tied to “a spatio-temporally continuous material object;”<sup>52</sup> however, such an object is simply “contingent substrate,” and in the case where it is replaced while higher capacities are retained, then identity appears intact. She writes: “There is no reason *in principle* why a body that is numerically distinct but similar in all relevant

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<sup>46</sup> Murphy, *Bodies and Souls, or Spirited Bodies?*, 111.

<sup>47</sup> Murphy, *Bodies and Souls, or Spirited Bodies?*, 124.

<sup>48</sup> Murphy, *Bodies and Souls, or Spirited Bodies?*, 131. However, Murphy did not elaborate on how God’s action works at this level.

<sup>49</sup> Murphy, *Bodies and Souls, or Spirited Bodies?*, 122.

<sup>50</sup> Murphy, *Bodies and Souls, or Spirited Bodies?*, 123. cf. See Nancey Murphy, *Theology in the Age of Scientific Reasoning* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), chapter 5, for criteria from a number of Christian traditions for judging the authenticity of religious experience.

<sup>51</sup> Murphy, *Bodies and Souls, or Spirited Bodies?*, 132.

<sup>52</sup> Murphy, *Bodies and Souls, or Spirited Bodies?*, 141.

respects could not support the same personal characteristics.”<sup>53</sup> Murphy believes that her construal of the “same body” [as higher capacities] allows for the possible explanation of personal identity through life and in the intermediate state.<sup>54</sup> However, she does not articulate how that “same body” [as higher capacities] survives without the substrate in the intermediate state, and how new body would look like. After all, she just says we will be embodied, and new bodies will provide substrate for the ongoing and endless development of our mental life and moral character. However, we cannot know more about the nature of that “stuff.” In the end, she admits ignorance and suggests a point of silence when turning to certain matters of eschatology.<sup>55</sup>

With what has been said, Murphy’s nonreductive physicalism provides an interesting interpretation of Christian anthropology and eschatology. It offers an alternative to the somewhat Hellenistic, dualistic approach many Christians have been used to. To a certain degree, Murphy’s contribution is significant. First, by re-examining the concept of soul in the context of profound changes in sciences, she bursts Christian anthropology and eschatology out, engages them in a dialogue with other disciplines such as biblical studies, philosophy, physics, biology, neuroscience, etc. Second, in emphasizing physicalism, Murphy raises the importance of the human body after it has been deprived for centuries, especially in strict Christian asceticism. Third, as Murphy asserts that human nature is part of nature as a whole, then social, historical, and ecological realities have ultimate value and become indispensable even in the eschatological resurrection.<sup>56</sup> If physicalism is correct, we will have a coherent picture of humans in relation

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<sup>53</sup> Murphy, *Bodies and Souls, or Spirited Bodies?*, 141.

<sup>54</sup> Murphy, *Bodies and Souls, or Spirited Bodies?*, 142.

<sup>55</sup> Murphy, *Bodies and Souls, or Spirited Bodies?*, 145.

<sup>56</sup> Murphy argued: If humans are embedded in nature, physical beings are necessarily eco-physical beings. The resurrection of the eco-physical beings implies cosmic transformation. Ecological ethics or reconciliation is central to this transformation on earth, with the hope of eschatological transformation at the end of time. See Murphy, “Immortality Versus Resurrection in the Christian Tradition,” 79-82.

with the world and God. Such a coherent picture is very appealing in a fragmented, post-modern world today.

The above significance, however, cannot exempt Murphy from questions. One can ask what is exactly meant by the “non-reductive” aspect of Murphy’s physicalism? Is that nothing other than what Christian tradition has called “soul” or “spirit” for millennia? My impression is that Murphy only rejects the concept of soul understood as a spiritual substance, which possesses immortality by nature. Meanwhile she keeps all human abilities or capacities once attributed to the soul (memory, self-consciousness, morality, relationship with God, personal identity) and attributes them directly to the body. With that attribution, she appears to highlight the value of human body and the absolute unity of that body with the higher capacities it enables. However, in Murphy’s articulation of personal identity, the physical body seems degraded. It is considered contingent substrate on which the higher capacities rest. A replacement of that substrate does not affect personal identity. Furthermore, the replacement of substrates, e.g., the earthly body with the resurrected one, also suggests the separation of higher capacities from both the old and new substrates. The question is how such capacities are preserved during time of replacement. If they are preserved by the power of God, as Murphy said about the preservation of memories in order to be transposed to a new body,<sup>57</sup> then her reasoning is indeed a disguised return of body-soul separation and the immortality of the soul by God’s grace. In short, Murphy’s nonreductive physicalist theory of the humans seems coherent when she speaks about living humans. But when she comes to the issue of personal identity at death and beyond, she still has to face a serious challenge – the question of identity – with the nonreductive physicalist theory.

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<sup>57</sup> “If God can create a new (transformed) body and provide it with my memories, is that really I? If so, then I shall know that I am myself, just as I did this morning when I awoke.” See Murphy, *Bodies and Souls, or Spirited Bodies?*, 137.

### III. Summary and Question

I have presented two stances relating to the immortality of the soul. My aim is not to provide an exhaustive presentation of both the Church teaching and Murphy's seemingly "anti-Church" theory on the issue. Rather, I just provide a sketch of both viewpoints. On the one hand, we see the Church's assertion of the soul and its immortality as a dogma in a strict sense. On the other hand, we find a challenge to, and a rejection of, that dogma in the name of the body and bodily resurrection.

It is interesting enough that both stances claim to have biblical basis. As noted above, the CDF's document in 1998 ranks the immortality of the soul among the "divinely and formally revealed" doctrines, that it is "contained in the Word of God." Meanwhile, Murphy and nonreductive physicalists consider it part of the "Hellenistic addition to or distortion of biblical teaching." Those contradictory claims give rise to a variety of questions: what does the Scripture precisely teach on this matter? Does it support or reject the immortality of the soul? Is that support or rejection clear and consistent? Those questions need to be answered so as to establish a firm biblical foundation for the doctrine. In the case that such foundation cannot be secured, the doctrine in question can be charged as an arbitrary imposition of the magisterium on the faithful.

Another set of questions also need to be addressed: Is the immortality of the soul a Hellenistic philosophical doctrine, inserted into Christian tradition and falsely accepted as a proper Hebraic/Christian belief? Is that doctrine obsolete in our modern philosophical and theological understanding of human nature and destiny? Answers to those questions require a thorough investigation of the concepts of soul and immortality in Greek philosophy and in Christian tradition. That inquiry will uncover the nature of both the soul and its immortality in

Greek philosophy and Christian theology. It will reveal the similarity and difference between two traditions, so influential in the history of the western world.

I believe that these issues need to be addressed, if we want to have a clear understanding of the biblical foundation, doctrinal development, and contemporary vision of the doctrine of the immortality of the soul. Attempt to have such an understanding is fruitful, not only for a student in search of systematic explanation of the subject matter, but also for an ecclesial minister in a pastoral context, in which he must preach about the true Christian eschatological hope. And as that hope, viewed from the longstanding Christian tradition, is staked not only on the resurrection of the body at the end of time, but also on the immortality of the soul, we need to have a look at the latter's origin. The starting point, I think, should be biblical thought.

## CHAPTER II:

### THE IMMORTALITY OF THE SOUL AND ITS BIBLICAL FOUNDATION

One central point in the debate concerning the immortality of the soul is its biblical foundation. The CDF, in its 1998 document, affirmed the immortality of the soul as a divinely and formally revealed doctrine, contained in the Word of God.<sup>58</sup> Meanwhile, Nancey Murphy argues that body-soul dualism along with belief in the immortality of the soul are Hellenistic additions to or distortions of the biblical monistic and physicalist teaching.<sup>59</sup> For Murphy, only the spirited body and bodily resurrection are authentically biblical.<sup>60</sup> Hence, on biblical grounds, there are two contradictory claims about the doctrine in question.

On the surface, the contradiction seems to result from two different conceptions of biblical teaching, and a change in that conception may suffice to solve the contradiction. Murphy seems to identify authentic biblical teaching with the older Hebraic elements and rejects the Hellenistic elements. Meanwhile, Christian tradition accepts both the Hebraic and Hellenistic elements of the Scripture. With that acceptance, Greek texts using Hellenistic terminology are considered a part of biblical teaching, just like Hebrew texts using Semitic and Mesopotamian ideas and concepts. God reveals in many ways (Heb. 1:1), and one cannot limit God's revelation to the Hebrew texts alone. Thus, an inclusive notion of biblical teaching, and an acceptance of

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<sup>58</sup> CDF, "Doctrinal Commentary on the Concluding Formula of the *Professio Fidei*" (1998), no. 5. [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_1998\\_professio-fidei\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_1998_professio-fidei_en.html). Accessed Feb 3, 2020.

<sup>59</sup> Murphy, "Immortality versus Resurrection," 77; cf. "Whatever Happened to the Soul?," 52f.

<sup>60</sup> Murphy, *Bodies and Souls, or Spirited Bodies?*, 22. At the outset, Murphy seems more reasonable. In fact, the Bible does not explicitly state the immortality of the soul. Certain texts even consider the soul destructible (e.g., Matt. 10:28). Immortality belongs only to God and Christ (1 Tim. 1:17; 6:16). Meanwhile, the Bible explicitly states the resurrection of the dead (Matt. 22:30f.; Luke 14:14; 1 Cor. 15:22, etc.). The transformation or redemption of the bodies is probably understood as the whole persons (Phil. 3:21f.; Rom. 8:21-23; John 5:28f.). Arguments for the immortality of the soul, thus, can only be constructed from some textual hints, their relations, and background data.

pluralism in biblical anthropology and eschatology, provides a solution to the contradiction above.

However, that easy solution cannot give adequate answers to more fundamental questions: Is it evident that the Hebrew Bible supports monism and physicalism, and undermines dualism? Is it true that the Hebrew texts contain no idea about the soul and immortality in the dualistic sense? We can ask those questions in a search for biblical foundation of the doctrine in question, not only in Greek but also in the Hebrew texts of the Christian Bible. Answering them will also disclose whether or not the immortality of the soul is a later addition to or a distortion of the resurrection belief.

In this chapter, I will delve into those complicated issues. I will argue that the Hebrew Bible contains latent ideas about the soul and immortality of the soul in the dualistic sense of the traditional Catholic theology. Such ideas are more ancient than, but not contrary to, the belief in bodily resurrection. To support my argument, I will engage in contemporary biblical discussions, particularly the studies of Joel Green, James Barr, Robert Di Vito, John Cooper, Jon Levenson, Alan Segal, and Candido Pozo. Their diverse perspectives will contribute significantly to our comprehensive understanding of the subject matter. From their studies, we can get some clues for a vision of biblical anthropology and eschatology on which the doctrine of the immortality of the soul can be secured.

## **I. The Soul in Contemporary Old Testament Theological Anthropology**

### **1. Biblical Scholarship and the Problems of Pluralism in OT Anthropologies**

What does the Old Testament (OT), especially the Hebrew Bible, say about anthropology? Does it contain any idea about the soul in the dualistic sense? To those questions, contemporary biblical scholarship seems reluctant to provide definite answers. Instead, it

suggests a pluralism of perspectives. Such reluctance and suggestion can be found in *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* when it writes:

[T]he OT contains neither a systematic reflection on anthropology nor an abstract definition of terms dealing with the human person as such. Therefore, a number of formulations are possible... Even more, because the books of the Bible reflect the different historical circumstances of their writings, there will not be a single, standard conception of the human but multiple and sometimes even apparently conflicting conceptions that ultimately enrich the Bible's understanding.<sup>61</sup>

*The Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible* is even harsher when it notes:

...The Bible also resists any systematic or developmental picture of the human beings and opposes the imposition of overarching assumptions about human beings on texts, whether these assumptions are rooted in psychology, anthropology, philosophy, metaphysics, theology, Christology, or historical-critical method.<sup>62</sup>

With those remarks, general biblical scholarship refuses to single out a standard, consistent OT anthropological teaching. Diverse or even conflicting visions are welcome to enrich the discussion.

However, from another angle, diverse and conflicting visions may also make the discussion confusing and unfruitful. In the name of pluralism, anyone can argue for any vision of anthropology, provided it has some biblical witness. To avoid confusion and to contribute to a fruitful discussion, the specification of some prevailing vision, which can coherently connect ideas and conceptions from different texts and contexts, seems helpful. That specification is a difficult task, as it requires a project of reconstruction, given that the Hebrew authors were quite uninterested in presenting a fully painted picture of the human in their works.

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<sup>61</sup> Katharine Doob Sakenfeld et al., eds., *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, vol. 1 (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2006), 172.

<sup>62</sup> Denise D. Hopkins, "Humanity," *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*, eds. David Noel Freedman, Allen C. Myers, and Astrid B. Beck (Grand Rapids, Mich.: WB Eerdmans, 2000), 614-617 (614).

## 2. Joel Green: *Nephesh* as the Human Whole

Fortunately, several scholars have tried to figure out the prevailing account of the human, and many have touched upon the question of the soul. Among them, Joel Green is eminent for his physicalist, monistic approach. In Green's vision of biblical anthropology, the human is essentially embodied, and there is no evidence of a substantial, ontological entity called a "soul" to be identified either by Scripture or by the methods of modern sciences.<sup>63</sup> As Green explains, the term *nephesh* or *psyche* (soul), like *basar*, *soma*, or *sarx* (flesh, body), in the Scripture do "not necessarily refer to ontologically separate (or separable) parts of the human person," but to "the entire human being."<sup>64</sup> Green's explanation is similar to some contemporary interpretation of *nephesh* as the human whole, because the human does not have a "soul," but is a "living soul/*nephesh*" (Gen. 2:7).<sup>65</sup> With that holistic thinking in mind, Green sometimes portrays the soul/person as "a biopsychospiritual unity."<sup>66</sup> He believes that the unitary account of the person has been "almost unanimously supported" in biblical studies since the early twentieth century.<sup>67</sup> His remark is not incorrect, because many twentieth-century scholars, such as H.W. Robinson, J. Pederson, and O. Cullmann, have envisaged the human person as an indivisible, psychosomatic unity,<sup>68</sup> quite similar to what Green upholds.

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<sup>63</sup> Joel B. Green, *Body, Soul, and Human Life: The Nature of Humanity in the Bible* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2008), 31f.

<sup>64</sup> Green, *Body, Soul, and Human Life*, 57-58. Cf. Freedman et al., eds., *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*, 615

<sup>65</sup> Freedman et al., eds., *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*, 615. The concept of *nephesh* as the whole person can also be found in Gen. 46:18 (Leah bore to Jacob sixteen souls); 46:27 (70 souls in the house of Jacob came to Egypt). See the same dictionary, p. 1245.

<sup>66</sup> Green, "Soul," in *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, vol. 5, ed. Katharine Doob Sakenfeld et al. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2009), 358-359 (359). Though Green claims himself a monist (one substance), his understanding of the human person as a "biopsychospiritual unity" appears more holistic than he thought.

<sup>67</sup> Green, "Soul," 359.

<sup>68</sup> Robert A. Di Vito, "Old Testament Anthropology and the Construction of Personal Identity," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 61, no. 2 (1999): 217-238 (218).

### 3. James Barr: *Nephesh* as the Soul in Some Contexts

The virtually unanimous support for a unitary account of biblical anthropology, however, has been put into question by James Barr. Barr is aware of the popularity of the unitary account, especially when *nephesh* in Gen 2:7 and certain contexts refers to the total unity of the human person.<sup>69</sup> Nevertheless, he still raises several questions: is it the only meaning of *nephesh* throughout the Hebrew Bible? Is there any context in which *nephesh* means the soul in the dualistic sense? How did the ancient Hebrews have a consistent picture of humanity, which agreed so well with that of modernity, while the Greeks thoroughly misunderstood everything?<sup>70</sup> In raising the last question, Barr seems skeptical that the unitary account is not a reflection of ancient thought pattern, but “a product of modern sensibilities.”<sup>71</sup> The problem, as Robert Di Vito points out, is not merely “a projection of modern antipathy to dualistic thinking,” but the insertion of “modernity’s construction of personal identity as a whole” into the Bible’s anthropology.<sup>72</sup> In the end, Barr neither elaborates on his skepticism nor pushes his critique as far as Di Vito does. Instead, he is more concerned with analyzing the Hebrew texts to find possible meanings of the term *nephesh*.

Barr quickly realizes that *nephesh* is an ambiguous term. It has “a wide variety of meanings,” which often “overlap, but remain distinguishable.” “The choice between those meanings,” Barr argues, should be made after a careful analysis of “the verbal and syntactic contexts,”<sup>73</sup> not on a presumption from other texts. Barr then specifies three primary meanings of the term. First, *nephesh* sometimes means “a total, indivisible, unity of the person,” as in Gen.

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<sup>69</sup> James Barr, *The Garden of Eden and the Hope of Immortality* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 36.

<sup>70</sup> Barr, *The Garden of Eden*, 36-37.

<sup>71</sup> Di Vito, “Old Testament Anthropology,” 219.

<sup>72</sup> Di Vito, “Old Testament Anthropology,” 219.

<sup>73</sup> Barr, *The Garden of Eden*, 37.

2:7.<sup>74</sup> Second, in some contexts, “*nephesh* is much closer to what has traditionally been understood as ‘soul.’”<sup>75</sup> For example, in Pss. 42 and 103, it seems that the psalmist is addressing his *nephesh* as his soul and not his totality of being; in Isa. 10:18, *nephesh* is distanced from the flesh; in Gen. 35:18, *nephesh* went out of Rachel when she died; in 1 Kings 17:21f, *nephesh* returned to a child, and he was revived at the prayer of Elijah.<sup>76</sup> Third, in some other contexts, *nephesh* is closely associated with life (e.g., in Num. 23:10, Job 36:14), or with *ruach* (spirit) beyond bodily death (e.g., in Pss. 33:19, 56:14, 116:8).<sup>77</sup> From the analysis of those texts in contexts, Barr submits his probable conclusion:

[I]n certain contexts the *nephesh* is *not*, as much present opinion favors, a unity of body and soul, a totality of personality comprising all these elements: it is rather, in these contexts, a superior controlling center which accompanies, expresses and directs the existence of that totality, and one which, especially, provides life to the whole. Because it is the life-giving element, it is difficult to conceive that it itself will die. It may simply return to God, life to the source of life. Otherwise, it may still exist, and the thought of it being brought down to Sheol, or being killed, is intolerable... With the recognition of this fact the gate to immortality lies open. I do not say that the Hebrew, in the early times, ‘believed in the immortality of the soul.’ But they did have terms, distinctions and beliefs upon which such a position could be built and was in fact eventually built.<sup>78</sup>

In the above quotation, Barr moves beyond the merely monistic/holistic visions of the human. He does not dispute the unitary account, which he thinks belongs to “the Hebrew totality thinking.”<sup>79</sup> He just challenges the idea that *nephesh* only refers to the total unity of the human throughout the Hebrew Bible. With a careful analysis, he shows how *nephesh* should be understood as the soul in a dualistic sense in some contexts. Barr also argues that in specific texts where *nephesh* signifies a unity, there are “formulations... which point towards more dualistic

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<sup>74</sup> Barr, *The Garden of Eden*, 36.

<sup>75</sup> Barr, *The Garden of Eden*, 38.

<sup>76</sup> Barr, *The Garden of Eden*, 38-40

<sup>77</sup> Barr, *The Garden of Eden*, 40-42.

<sup>78</sup> Barr, *The Garden of Eden*, 42-43

<sup>79</sup> Barr, *The Garden of Eden*, 43.

conceptions.”<sup>80</sup> In other words, Barr suggests a kind of duality in unity. Gen. 2:7 is an example. In that text, God created Adam from dust and the breath of life (*neshama*/spirit). For Barr, “the passage is obviously dualistic,” with “two basic ingredients,” the latter of which “comes close to the ‘soul.’”<sup>81</sup> As the breath of life/spirit returns to God when dust returns to the earth (Eccl. 12:7), the idea of the immortality of the soul/spirit is possible. In sum, in Barr’s understanding, the soul and immortality of the soul are at least latent in the Hebrew Bible. A thorough reading of the texts with an unbiased interpretation of their contexts can uncover those latent thoughts.

#### **4. John Cooper: The Interplay of Holism and Dualism in OT Anthropology**

While Barr only suggests the possibility of the soul and immortality in the Hebrew Bible, John W. Cooper makes bolder assertions. He strongly endorses both dualism and holism in biblical anthropology and discredits monism. He also argues for the concept of soul and the immortality of the soul in the Scripture. In a relatively recent article, which summarizes his vision of biblical anthropology and eschatology, Cooper writes:

Biblical anthropology is demonstrably both holist and dualist. It is holist in teaching that God created, redeems, and will glorify humans as whole embodied persons. It is dualist in teaching that God created humans of two ingredients and that he sustains persons (souls, spirits) apart from their bodies between death and resurrection.<sup>82</sup>

Cooper has elaborated on and defended the above thesis for the last three decades, with the publication of his book – *Body, Soul, and Life Everlasting* (1989, 2000) – and many articles.<sup>83</sup> In his works, Cooper often rejects physicalist monism. He contends that “Green’s

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<sup>80</sup> Barr, *The Garden of Eden*, 43.

<sup>81</sup> Barr, *The Garden of Eden*, 36, 43.

<sup>82</sup> John W. Cooper, “Biblical Anthropology Is Holistic and Dualistic,” in *The Blackwell Companion to Substance Dualism*, ed. Jonathan Loose, Angus J. L. Menuge, and James Porter Moreland (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc, 2018), 413–426 (413).

<sup>83</sup> John W. Cooper, *Body, Soul, and Life Everlasting: Biblical Anthropology and the Monism-Dualism Debate* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2000 [1989]); “Biblical Anthropology and the Body-Soul Problem,” in *Soul, Body and Survival: Essays on the Metaphysics of Human Persons*, ed. Kevin Corcoran (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 218-228; “The Bible and Dualism Once Again: A Reply to Joel B. Green and Nancey Murphy,” in *Philosophia Christi*, vol. 9(2) (2007), 459-469; “The Current Body-Soul Debate: A Case for Dualistic Holism,” in

anthropology is less than fully biblical,” since it fails to “deal adequately with all the relevant texts, their relations, and background data.”<sup>84</sup> A comprehensive reading of the Scripture, Cooper says, discloses the dual characteristic of biblical anthropology: holism and dualism. One implies the other, to the extent that he names it “holistic dualism” or “dualistic holism.” Only a dual framework can explain both the wholeness of the human and the distinction of “parts, dimensions, and functions” within the human whole.<sup>85</sup> To support his argument, Cooper presents an in-depth study of various Hebrew terms in contexts.

As for the human wholeness (holism), Cooper analyzes the meanings of *nephesh*, *ruach*, *basar*, *quereb*, and *leb*.<sup>86</sup> The analysis leads Cooper to three conclusions. First, the souls or spirits in the Hebrew Bible are not immaterial substances independent of the bodies, while organic and bodily organs are not purely biological. Second, physical and spiritual organs have both physical and spiritual functions, and this suggests the integration or unity of the psychophysical totality. Third, synecdoche – a figure of speech in which a part signifies the whole – is used very frequently. All these statements point toward holism.<sup>87</sup> Nevertheless, Cooper warns against a generalization of synecdoche in biblical anthropology. Indeed, the Hebrew terms above do refer to one, total, indivisible human being, but sometimes they also

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*Southern Baptist Journal of Theology*, vol. 13(2) (2009), 32-50; “Scripture and Philosophy on the Unity of Body and Soul: An Integrative Method for Theological Anthropology,” in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Theological Anthropology*, ed. by Joshua Farris and Charles Taliaferro, (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 20015) 27-42.

<sup>84</sup> Cooper, “Biblical Anthropology Is Holistic and Dualistic,” 414.

<sup>85</sup> Cooper, “Biblical Anthropology Is Holistic and Dualistic,” 414.

<sup>86</sup> As Cooper maps out, *nephesh* means throat, neck, stomach; desire or appetite; vital principle or life-force; living creature; dead person; the seat of emotion and morality; soul, person, self. *Ruach* refers to wind or moving air, God’s breath; spirit; animating vitality, power, or energy; the seat of various conscious dispositions and activities, the source and locus of human’s higher capacities. *Basar* signifies flesh; the tissues different from bones, fat, tendons; the body with life, relationship, but also with vulnerability, frailty, contingency. *Qereb* points to inner parts or bowels, not so much for physiological functions but the locus of higher human capacities. Meanwhile, *leb* or *lebab* means heart, understood as the hidden control center of the whole human being. See Cooper, *Body, Soul, and Life Everlasting*, 38-43.

<sup>87</sup> Cooper, *Body, Soul, and Life Everlasting*, 43-44.

point to elements or parts of the whole.<sup>88</sup> They still retain their distinctive meanings in some contexts.

As for the distinction of parts, dimensions, and functions in the human whole, Cooper supports a sort of dualism with three connected arguments. First, he notes that biblical holism does not entail monism. As he explains, biblical holism “does not necessarily imply that the whole is at bottom a single homogenous substance,” whether that substance is matter, spirit, or some neutral, indefinable “stuff.” Also, biblical holism “does not necessarily imply that if the whole is broken up, all parts disintegrate into chaos and nothingness.”<sup>89</sup> Instead, when the whole is broken, a “secondary system” still exist and operate, though not with all properties and capacities of the whole.<sup>90</sup> Within that framework, Cooper argues, the “soul” or “spirit” may exist without the organism, though it will be deprived by the loss.<sup>91</sup>

Second, biblical dualism is evident in several texts regarding human composition, e.g., Gen. 2:7, Eccl. 12:7, Ezek. 37. Cooper says that in a non-philosophical way, “the OT picture repeatedly and consistently represents humankind as constituted from two different and mutually irreducible sources, elements, ingredients, ‘stuffs,’ or principles.”<sup>92</sup> The first ingredient is the dust of the ground, of which the human bodiliness is made. However, that body is lifeless, and a

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<sup>88</sup> Cooper, *Body, Soul, and Life Everlasting*, 44-45.

<sup>89</sup> Cooper, *Body, Soul, and Life Everlasting*, 44. Cooper names the biblical holism “functional holism,” which is, in his opinion, different from “ontological holism.” Functional holism affirms the functional unity of the person. It supports neither a compound system in which parts function independently of the whole nor a totality in which parts cease to function or exist when the whole dissolves (ontological holism).

<sup>90</sup> Cooper takes water molecules as an example. When they are broken, oxygen and hydrogen atoms can exist and function, but differently from that of water molecules. See Cooper, *Body, Soul, and Life Everlasting*, 46.

<sup>91</sup> Cooper, *Body, Soul, and Life Everlasting*, 44-45. Cooper names his approach “functional holism” over against what he calls “ontological holism” in which parts totally depend on the whole, and if the whole dissolves, then parts completely cease to function or exist.

<sup>92</sup> Cooper, *Body, Soul, and Life Everlasting*, 47.

second ingredient must be added: *ruach* or *neshama*, the life-force or power of the breath that comes from God.<sup>93</sup> On the second ingredient, Cooper comments:

This second element, *ruach*, is not a thing – an individual entity which exists apart from living creatures. And so it is not a Platonic soul or an individual spirit. It is more like a kind of created energy produced by God and continuously flowing from him to the individual creature .... Whatever technical label—substance, element, principle, constituent—is attached, we must recognize that two kinds of ingredients are put together by God in order to create one holistic living creature. Perhaps the dust is a kind of substance in the sense of ‘stuff’ and the life-force is an empowering principle or kind of energy. They do not both seem to be ‘substances’ in the same sense of the word... But whatever each is, they amount to a mutually irreducible duality which God puts together to get one person.<sup>94</sup>

Cooper is not ignorant of contemporary emergent theory. However, he contends that *ruach* is not a kind of power inherent in the dust so that when the dust was formed into a body, *ruach* or *nephesh* can automatically emerge and begin to function. As Cooper observes, the OT texts do not picture God making dust that way. Thus, materialistic monism is not adequate in conceptualizing the OT images of human nature, because *ruach* is not an expression of matter. Similarly, idealistic monism and even dual-aspect monism are not adequate, as the body is not an expression of *ruach*, and both body and *ruach* are not expressions of something else. Only a dualism “yet to be explicated”<sup>95</sup> can explain the human makeup in the creation story.<sup>96</sup>

Third, biblical dualism has a witness in the concept of *rephaim* (often translated into English as “the dead”) in Sheol. For Cooper, OT people believed that “the dead continue to exist in a ghostly form in an underworldly location called Sheol.”<sup>97</sup> Their condition in Sheol is generally “inactive and unconscious,” but “they could become conscious and active” on some occasions, as seen in Isa. 14:9-10 and especially in the historical narrative in 1 Sam. 28.<sup>98</sup> As for

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<sup>93</sup> Cooper, *Body, Soul, and Life Everlasting*, 47.

<sup>94</sup> Cooper, *Body, Soul, and Life Everlasting*, 48.

<sup>95</sup> Cooper, *Body, Soul, and Life Everlasting*, 37.

<sup>96</sup> Cooper, *Body, Soul, and Life Everlasting*, 48.

<sup>97</sup> Cooper, *Body, Soul, and Life Everlasting*, 59.

<sup>98</sup> Cooper, *Body, Soul, and Life Everlasting*, 56-59.

the nature of *rephaim*, Copper argues that they are not mere shadows of those who lived on earth, but identical with them, though some properties have changed.<sup>99</sup> By nature, *rephaim* can be either *nephesh/ruach* after the bodily death,<sup>100</sup> or “some third thing,” a remainder when human flesh and life-force are subtracted.<sup>101</sup> As Cooper says, the Israelites themselves had no clear view of this matter.<sup>102</sup> But whatever it is, the *rephaim* is different from the dead body, and this difference suggests some sort of dualism. However, this dualism is only temporary, as the dead will return to bodily life (holism) at the eschatological resurrection.<sup>103</sup>

In brief, through the analysis of terminology and contexts, Cooper affirms holism and dualism in the Hebraic anthropology and eschatology. Humans are created and redeemed ultimately as embodied beings (holism). They are created from two ingredients and retained disembodied temporarily in the intermediate state (dualism). This schema allows for the concept of soul/spirit and its survival of bodily death. The personal existence of *rephaim* in Sheol is a witness on the basis of which Cooper asserts the soul and its immortality in Hebrew biblical thinking.

## 5. Summary and Discussion

We have briefly surveyed contemporary scholarship on the concept of soul in the Hebrew Bible, with the three different viewpoints of Green, Barr, and Cooper being presented. Green rejects dualism and the soul in the traditional sense when he interprets *nephesh* as the human whole. Barr acknowledges the unitary meaning of *nephesh* but also suggests another reading in which *nephesh* points to the soul in the traditional sense in some contexts. Cooper moves further

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<sup>99</sup> Cooper, *Body, Soul, and Life Everlasting*, 67-68.

<sup>100</sup> Hans W. Wolff, *Anthropology of the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974), 20, cited in Cooper, *Body, Soul, and Life Everlasting*, 60-61.

<sup>101</sup> Otto Kaiser, *Death and Life* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1981), 40, cited in Cooper, *Body, Soul, and Life Everlasting*, 61.

<sup>102</sup> Cooper, *Body, Soul, and Life Everlasting*, 69.

<sup>103</sup> Cooper, *Body, Soul, and Life Everlasting*, 65-66.

than Barr's suggestion by holding both holism and dualism, from which he argues for the soul and its survival of bodily death with an in-depth analysis of *nephesh*, *ruach*, and *rephaim* in Sheol.

Which one of those viewpoints is plausible in a comprehensive reading of the Hebrew biblical anthropology? In my opinion, physicalist monism is unlikely, as it is problematic in methodology, and it cannot convincingly explain the two “ingredients” in human composition in Gen. 2:7 as well as in other OT texts.<sup>104</sup> Strictly speaking, not many biblical scholars are rigorous physicalists or monists. They often tend toward holism by insisting on human unity and wholeness, as Murphy and Green have done. However, their argument for a kind of ontological holism has one problem. It relies on a limited interpretation of *nephesh* as the human whole, plus a generalization of that interpretation throughout the Hebrew Bible, regardless of contexts. Hence, that sort of holism is challenged by Barr and Di Vito, who suspect that it might be a projection of anti-dualism sentiments or an insertion of modern expectation of integrity and wholeness into biblical anthropology.<sup>105</sup> Thus, in a comprehensive reading of *nephesh* and the Hebrew biblical anthropology, the holistic dualism or dualistic holism implicitly suggested by Barr and explicitly endorsed by Cooper is probably a better choice. It recognizes holism generally supported in biblical scholarship since the early twentieth century and, at the same time, explains quite convincingly the complexity of human nature in the creation story and especially beyond death.

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<sup>104</sup> Some arguments for physicalist monism are quite problematic, as witnessed in Green, *Body, Soul, and Human Life*, 61-65. For example, Green relies on a false presumption that Gen. 1 and 2 do not teach substantial dualism, and therefore they imply monism (pp. 61-65). At times, he interprets the dust of the ground in Gen 2:7 as substance, and God’s breath is a metaphor of God making that dust alive (p. 64).

<sup>105</sup> My impression is that Green seems to read the Scripture through the lens of sciences, which may filter some metaphysical element and project kind of physicalist holism into biblical anthropology.

Not all biblical scholars accept Barr and Cooper's vision. Green thinks that their approach relies too much on word-study. For Green, lexicography and semantics may be misleading. Even if not, they "are capable of only limited and primarily negative results," because they fail to present an "integrated anthropology."<sup>106</sup> This observation is not correct, given Barr and Cooper's acceptance of holism, as noted above. However, Green's remark raises the question of the role, guidance, and possible misguidance of linguistic tools, scientific lens, and metaphysical terminology in the contemporary discussion of the Hebrew biblical anthropology. Tools, lenses, and concepts from other disciplines, therefore, must be used with caution.

The misleading nature of linguistic tools, to some extent, was pointed out by Robert Di Vito. In his article on OT anthropology in 1999, he criticizes the classical debate between monism and holism, soul and body dualism, and the modern linguistic shift from "soul" to "self." He then proposes another reading of OT anthropology based on human social/relational nature. Instead of stressing individuality, personal unity, inner depth, and autonomy, as Charles Taylor did in his widely known philosophical anthropology,<sup>107</sup> Di Vito clarifies four characteristics of the OT's construction of personhood. First, the person in the OT is "deeply embedded, or engaged, in its social identity," mainly through familial relationship. Second, the person is "comparatively decentered, and undefined with personal boundaries." The soul or body as such is not in control; different organs or body parts such as eyes, ear, kidney, soul, jaw, bones, etc. operate as independent centers of activity. Third, the person is "relatively transparent, socialized, and embodied." The mysterious "inner depth" or "inwardness" [soul/self/heart] is occasionally

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<sup>106</sup> Green, *Body, Soul, and Human Life*, 54-60.

<sup>107</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 111, cited in Di Vito, "Old Testament Anthropology," 220.

mentioned (Ps. 51:8, Prov. 18:8), but it is barely emphasized in OT anthropology. Fourth, the person is dependent on others, especially the father and family members, despite a certain degree of autonomy.<sup>108</sup> For Di Vito, those characteristics constitute the unique cultural background of the Hebrew biblical anthropology, different from those of Greek metaphysical or modern individualistic anthropologies. An understanding of that cultural background is necessary, Di Vito says, because it helps biblical scholarship to avoid the metaphysical debate, and thus move beyond it in the discussion of OT theological anthropology.<sup>109</sup>

Di Vito's vision is impressive. It highlights the importance of relationality in the construction of personal identity in the OT. In some way, it reminds us of H.W. Robinson's suggestion of the "corporate personality" in ancient Israel.<sup>110</sup> However, Di Vito does not pay much attention to the theological aspect, the relationship with God, in his construction of identity. He also leaves open the issues of human identity after death. Thus, Di Vito's avoidance of the metaphysical question in OT anthropology has a price: he can say a lot about the identity of a living human, but not much about a dead human.<sup>111</sup> But as long as the question about a dead human is still a question about humans, then eschatology is necessarily a part of anthropology. A comprehensive account of OT anthropology must take into consideration the personal identity beyond death. Thus, Green, Barr, and Cooper's metaphysical discussion of the soul and immortality is appropriate, rather than misleading, as Di Vito might have thought.

In sum, it is difficult to identify *the* Hebrew biblical anthropology. Considerations from different texts, contexts, and perspectives (e.g., philosophy, theology, sociology, linguistics, etc.)

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<sup>108</sup> Di Vito, "Old Testament Anthropology," 221-327.

<sup>109</sup> Di Vito, "Old Testament Anthropology," 238.

<sup>110</sup> H. Wheeler Robinson, *Corporate Personality in Ancient Israel*, Rev. ed (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980). See also Freedman et al., eds., *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*, 615.

<sup>111</sup> Though the Hebrew Bible shows a general disinterest in the afterlife, it still includes terms, thoughts, and even narratives about it. We cannot simply keep those elements out in a comprehensive discussion of its anthropology.

disclose different aspects of the human. Taken as a whole, the Hebrew Bible contains not only holism but also dualism; not only ideas about human wholeness, but also the soul in the traditional sense, plus some hints of the survival of personal identity beyond bodily death. Though dualism, the soul, and the survival of personal identity are not frequently mentioned or emphasized, they are at least hidden in some texts, particularly when *nephesh*, *ruach*, and *rephaim* are used. A comprehensive reading of the Hebrew Bible, of its anthropology and eschatology, should not a priori rule out those conceptions. Instead, taking them into consideration not only respects the textual/contextual evidence in the Bible but also contributes to a fuller explanation of the Hebrew biblical anthropology and eschatology.

Keeping arguments for the concept of soul in mind, we can turn to the question of the immortality of the soul. While Barr only suggests this immortality, Cooper affirms it in his discussion of *rephaim* in Sheol, especially in Isaiah 14 and 1 Sam. 28. But does the existence of *rephaim* in Sheol really imply the immortality of the soul? If not, what is the nature of immortality? How does it fit in with the resurrection belief? In the next part of this chapter, I will discuss those questions, with the hope for a better understanding of the OT and especially Hebrew biblical eschatology.

## **II. Immortality of the Soul in Old Testament Eschatology**

Similar to the concept of the soul, immortality is subject to diverse viewpoints in OT eschatology discussions. Those viewpoints result from different anthropologies or different interpretations of *rephaim* and Sheol. In the following pages, I will present some studies on the immortality, particularly those of Green, Jon Levenson, Alan Segal, and Candido Pozo. Their constructions will help us understand how contemporary biblical scholarship conceives of the immortality of the soul in the Hebrew Bible, and its possible relation to resurrection belief.

## 1. Joel Green: No Immortality of the Soul and the Problem of Identity

As I mentioned in the previous part of this chapter, Green rejects the existence of a substantial, ontological entity called “soul” in the Scripture. He interprets *nephesh* as the total unity of the human person. Fundamental to his understanding of human identity is the “self-conscious relationality” and “embodied narrativity” in the form of personal histories.<sup>112</sup> As human relationality and narrativity are bound up with physicality in the cosmos, the death of the human entails not only the cessation of one’s body, but also “the conclusion of one’s embodied life, the severance of all relationships, and the fading of personal narratives.”<sup>113</sup> Hence, for Green, death means total death, and nothing in us can survive it. He writes: “[A]t death, the person *really dies*... there is no part of us, no aspect of our personhood, that survives death.”<sup>114</sup> In short, there is no soul or immortality of the soul in Green’s thought. Every hope for life-after-death requires embodiment, i.e., re-embodiment, which will provide the basis for relational and narrative continuity of the self.<sup>115</sup>

Like other physicalists, Green has to face the question of personal identity in the traverse from this life to the life-after-death. In this matter, he attributes everything to God’s doing, to what Paul called “a mystery.” But is it a pure mystery, and nothing about it has been revealed, particularly in the Pauline letters? In the end, Green admits that

... [H]e [Paul] hints at a relational ontology – that is, the preservation of our personhood, ‘you’ and ‘me,’ in relational terms: *with Christ, in Christ*. This suggests that the relationality and narrativity that constitute who I am are able to exist apart from neural correlates and embodiment only insofar as they are preserved in God’s own being, in anticipation of new creation.<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Green, *Body, Soul, and Human Life*, 179.

<sup>113</sup> Green, *Body, Soul, and Human Life*, 179.

<sup>114</sup> Green, *Body, Soul, and Human Life*, 179.

<sup>115</sup> Green, *Body, Soul, and Human Life*, 179.

<sup>116</sup> Green, *Body, Soul, and Human Life*, 180.

The question of how human identities are “preserved in God’s own being” matters here, and Green does not clarify what he means by those words. Two possibilities can be guessed. If Green thinks that the identities (i.e., relationality and narrativity) are preserved ontologically, in themselves by God’s power, then he is admitting the immortality of the souls without using the term. However, if he thinks that all human elements are reduced to nothingness, and their continuity is only preserved as pure thoughts in God’s mind from which they will be recreated, then his reading of some Pauline texts will be strange: God’s ideas about X is with Christ, and it is not the case that X itself is with Christ or in Christ. That reading seems at odds with Paul’s belief in heavens, the earth, and the underworld (Phil. 2:10) filled with spirits, angels, powers, dominions, demons, etc. (Rom. 8:38; 1 Cor. 15:24). That reading also contradicts other Gospel texts such as Luke 16:19-31, which depicts the dead with their identities, consciousness, and wills. Thus, if Green thinks in the second way, his eschatology is not fully biblical, because it fails to take into account all relevant texts, their relations, and background data. But anyway, this issue relates to NT eschatology. The question for us is whether the Hebrew Bible teaches anything about the survival/immortality of the soul. In this question, we can turn to the study of Jon D. Levenson, an expert on the interpretation of the Hebrew Bible and Second Temple Judaism at Harvard School of Divinity.

## **2. Jon D. Levenson: The Intimations of the Immortality**

Unlike Green, who focuses on biblical anthropology, Levenson studies OT eschatology and highlights the centrality of the resurrection belief in the Hebrew Bible and Second Temple Judaism.<sup>117</sup> However, he does not rule out the concept of immortality. Instead, he explains it in a

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<sup>117</sup> For a short bibliography of Levenson’s works on resurrection, see Jon D. Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son: The Transformation of Child Sacrifice in Judaism and Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993); *Resurrection and the Restoration of Israel: The Ultimate Victory of the God of Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006); *Resurrection: The Power of God for Christians and Jews* (with Kevin

way compatible with the resurrection belief, because both of them, in his opinion, belong to the biblical heritage. In *Resurrection and the Restoration of Israel: The Ultimate Victory of the God of Life* (2006), Levenson writes:

[R]esurrection and immortality are both to be found in classical rabbinic Judaism, have, to some degree, precedents in the foregoing biblical and late Second Temple heritages, and needs not be seen as exclusive of each other. Indeed, they can and did coexist without tension... Resurrection we must define as an eschatological event ... The expectation of an eschatological resurrection coexists easily with immortality so long as the latter is defined as the state of those who have died and await their restoration into embodiment, that is, into full human existence.<sup>118</sup>

Levenson's thesis is significant. He admits the concept of immortality as part of the Hebrew biblical belief. He also defines it as the state of those who have died and wait for bodily resurrection. However, Levenson does not think of individual immortality as the natural survival of "an indestructible core of the self."<sup>119</sup> Instead, he suggests the immortality of a person through his/her lineage in relationship with God.<sup>120</sup> The problem is: how can Levenson account for the existence of *rephaim* in Sheol?

Reflecting on Sheol, Levenson maintains that the concept refers to a state of lifeless and miserable existence. Comparing Sheol in Job 7:7-10 with the Akkadian account of "The Land of No Return," Levenson concludes that "the dead have existence without life – an existence of unqualified and interminable unhappiness, unqualified and interminable hopelessness."<sup>121</sup> He believes that the gloomy conception of Sheol is shared amongst biblical scholars, including J. Pedersen and J. Gray, who think that all the dead go to Sheol to continue an "altogether

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Madigan, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008); "The Resurrection of the Dead and the Construction of Personal Identity in Ancient Israel," *Vetus Testamentum Supplements*, no. 92 (2002): 305–322.

<sup>118</sup> Levenson, *Resurrection and the Restoration of Israel*, 20.

<sup>119</sup> Levenson, *Resurrection and the Restoration of Israel*, 21.

<sup>120</sup> By the end of the fifth chapter of his book, Levenson regards the above immortality only as "intimations of immortality," and saves the word immortality for the eternal life after the bodily resurrection, when the new embodied humans are "immune to death and bodily infirmities associated with it" (p. 107).

<sup>121</sup> Levenson, *Resurrection and the Restoration of Israel*, 37.

negative” and “wholly undesirable” existence.<sup>122</sup> That negative/undesirable existence, Levenson argues, is not limited to those who died physically, but expands to those endangered by death because of hostility, oppression, or illness, i.e., to the living-dead.<sup>123</sup> Thus, Sheol is not so much a place in time, but a metaphor, “a mode of existence” characterized by “weakness, defeat, depression, vulnerability, and the like,” especially when the cries of the inhabitants to God are not heard.<sup>124</sup> In sum, the concept of Sheol refers to the realm of death, physically or spiritually. It is less than life, let alone immortal life.

Does everyone who dies go to Sheol? On that matter, Levenson disagrees with Pedersen and Gray. He believes that Sheol is not the common “destination” for all people. Indeed, if the wicked and the righteous share the same fate in Sheol, then what is the ultimate justice of God? What is the meaning of the blessings God gives to righteous people like Abraham, Moses, and Job?<sup>125</sup> Moreover, biblical texts do not state that those righteous people went to Sheol when they died. Where would they have gone, if not to Sheol? As biblical authors are silent about their destination, Levenson tries to make his conjecture in this regard.

Levenson suggests that the life of the righteous like Abraham, Moses, and Job continues through the survival of their lineage. For example, Abraham died old and contented, seeing not only his favorite son Isaac being married but also Ishmael and six other sons, some of whom would beget great nations (Gen. 25:1-18). Similarly, Job lived to see “his children and children’s

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<sup>122</sup> Levenson, *Resurrection and the Restoration of Israel*, 35-36. James Barr shares a similar view about the negativity of Sheol: it does not constitute immortality; existence without bodily life is not life; Sheol seems to be the abode of the evildoers. See Barr, *The Garden of Eden*, 29-30.

<sup>123</sup> This vision Levenson shares with Nicolas J. Tromp, *Primitive Conceptions of Death and the Netherworld in the Old Testament* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1969), 36 and Philip Johnston, *Shades of Sheol: Death and Afterlife in the Old Testament* (Downers Grove, Ill.: Intervarsity, 2002), 93. For details, see Levenson, *Resurrection and the Restoration of Israel*, 37-39.

<sup>124</sup> Levenson, *Resurrection and the Restoration of Israel*, 46.

<sup>125</sup> Levenson, *Resurrection and the Restoration of Israel*, 71f. The Bible states that they died “old and contented.” But their old age and contention are meaningless, if they would go to Sheol to suffer a miserable existence again.

children, four generations” (Job 42:16 - NRSV), quite similar to Joseph, who “saw [his son] Ephraim’s children of the third generation” (Gen. 48:11- NRSV). For Levenson, instances of seeing future lineage are “hardly coincidental or irrelevant,” but they show how those people died fulfilled because the promises to them were realized even in their lineage.<sup>126</sup> As for Moses, there was no mention of his descendants, but God showed him the whole land that Israel was going to take possession of for generations (Deut. 34:1). For Levenson, that remarkable scene is reminiscent of the patriarchs’ viewing generations of descendants, because “all Israel has become, in a sense, the progeny of Moses.”<sup>127</sup> In short, obtaining a future lineage stands in opposition to Sheol. It is the continued existence of those who die fulfilled in the blessings of God. It is an intimation of immortality.

Another intimation of immortality is the relationship with God, expressed through the devotion to the Temple, the dwelling place of God. As Levenson observes, the devout Israelites yearned to go to the Temple to dwell, but not to die or to be buried there. Why? Because the Temple itself is a place full of life, and nothing deadly can enter it (Lev. 21:1-4, Num. 19). In the Temple, pious Israelites are under the protection of the God of life, like the trees planted there (Pss. 52:10; 92:13-16), free from all kinds of chaos, decay, and death.<sup>128</sup> Also, in the Temple, they claim to find the “fountain of life” (Ps. 36:6-11), from which springs the stream of living and healing water (Ez. 47:1-12). With those images in mind, Levenson concludes that “the Temple... was thought to be an antidote to death, giving a kind of immortality to those who

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<sup>126</sup> Levenson, *Resurrection and the Restoration of Israel*, 76.

<sup>127</sup> Levenson, *Resurrection and the Restoration of Israel*, 77.

<sup>128</sup> Levenson, *Resurrection and the Restoration of Israel*, 86f.

dwell there.”<sup>129</sup> That kind of immortality is not given to individual and disembodied souls, but a community of embodied persons, a community of brotherhood (Ps. 133:1-3).<sup>130</sup>

With those speculations in mind, Levenson upholds a duality of death and existence beyond death. For those who die “prematurely, violently, bereft of children, rejected by God, or brokenhearted” for whatever reason, they will face Sheol, “the prolongation of unfulfilled lives.”<sup>131</sup> For those who die fulfilled, the Hebrew Bible does not propose any destination. Instead, it suggests their prolongation “in the form of descendants” - an expression of the immortal dimension of their selves.<sup>132</sup> Through “familial or national continuity,” they remain in relationship with the God of life, who dwells in the Temple.<sup>133</sup> These two factors – descendants and the Temple – are antipodes to Sheol. They are intimations of immortality, until the eschatological resurrection of the body and entry into the eternal life.

Levenson’s construction provides a fascinating interpretation of the Hebrew concepts of death, Sheol, and antipodes to Sheol. In addition, the connection of those concepts presents a coherent picture of life, death, the [intimations of] immortality, the resurrection of the body, and eternal life in Second Temple Judaism. In that picture, immortality is not the survival of the self, but the family, because “the self of an individual in ancient Israel was entwined with the self of his or her family.”<sup>134</sup> A person, including his/her *nephesh*, therefore, may die completely, but the identity survives death through the survival of the family, ethnic group or nation, understood as the extended family.<sup>135</sup> In some way, Levenson’s vision of eschatology fits in well with Di Vito’s social/relational anthropology, and both echo H.W. Robinson’s notion of “corporate

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<sup>129</sup> Levenson, *Resurrection and the Restoration of Israel*, 90.

<sup>130</sup> Levenson, *Resurrection and the Restoration of Israel*, 91.

<sup>131</sup> Levenson, *Resurrection and the Restoration of Israel*, 77-78.

<sup>132</sup> Levenson, *Resurrection and the Restoration of Israel*, 78-79.

<sup>133</sup> Levenson, *Resurrection and the Restoration of Israel*, 81.

<sup>134</sup> Levenson, *Resurrection and the Restoration of Israel*, 109.

<sup>135</sup> Levenson, *Resurrection and the Restoration of Israel*, 113-118.

personality,” which is very different from the modern, more individualistic, conception of human personhood.

Levenson’s sort of “corporate eschatology” is supported by much textual evidence, but it still elicits some questions from a minority position. First, is Sheol an utterly negative term referring to the miserable existence of the dead? Can it be neutral in some contexts, where it points to a part of ancient Israel’s cosmology, with heaven, the earth, and Sheol under the earth (e.g., in Ps. 115:16-18, cf. Phil. 2:10)? Second, is it correct to say that only those who die unfulfilled go to Sheol, when some Hebrew texts consider it the universal destiny all people (Hab. 2:5; Ps. 49:10-12; Eccl. 9:2; and Dan. 12:2)? Third, are the identities of those who die fulfilled subsumed entirely into their familial, ethnic, or national identity, without remainder? Those questions are not treated adequately in Levenson’s construction and need to be taken into consideration.

Regarding our investigation, the question about personal identity beyond death seems essential, and Levenson is not clear about it. Sometimes, he rejects the idea of the survival of a disembodied soul or self beyond death.<sup>136</sup> Other times, he seems to accept it, as when he says: “One should not assume that... people simply do not exist between death and resurrection. ‘Many of those that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake,’ one reads in Dan. 12:2, in language that suggests inactivity (‘that sleep’) rather than nonexistence or the miserable fate of those dispatched to Sheol.”<sup>137</sup> But who are the subjects of the sleep and inactivity? Are they always sleeping and inactive? Isaiah 14 and 1 Sam. 28 provide a depiction different from that of Levenson. In some way, those texts can hardly be explained within Levenson’s framework of

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<sup>136</sup> Levenson, *Resurrection and the Restoration of Israel*, 113-118.

<sup>136</sup> Levenson, *Resurrection and the Restoration of Israel*, 21-22.

<sup>137</sup> Levenson, *Resurrection and the Restoration of Israel*, 106.

corporate eschatology. At most, they can be considered examples of a minor or conflicting view in comparison with the mainstream Hebraic eschatology that Levenson is trying to unearth.

### **3. Alan F. Segal: The Climate of Immortality in First Temple Judaism**

Alan F. Segal, in his detailed study of the afterlife in Western religions, proposes a theory capable of explaining the conflicting ideas above. In Segal's reconstruction, ancient Israel's neighbors – Egypt, Mesopotamia, Canaan – were obsessed with the afterlife, either optimistically (the soul of the dead going to the god of the stars) or pessimistically (the soul going down to the god/goddess of the underworld). Meanwhile, the Hebrew Bible, though borrowing myths, basic concepts, and even texts from those neighbors, is almost silent about life beyond the grave.<sup>138</sup> The reason, as Segal suggests, consists in the conflict between Israel's initial belief in the survival of the "soul" in the First Temple period, and the exclusive worship of YHWH strongly instated later in the Second Temple period. According to the belief in immortality in earlier period, the dead were often deified as ancestral gods. They were called the "divine/holy ones," "healers," "knowing ones," as found in the book of Isaiah. The cult of the dead and necromancy were probably popular practices.<sup>139</sup> Those beliefs and practices seriously violated monotheism, for they would open the door for idolatry. Therefore, when the Hebrew Bible was redacted in the Second Temple period, those beliefs and practices were described as pagan, forbidden and punished (Lev. 19:31, 20:27; Deut. 18:9-14). Accounts about them were carefully kept out of Israel's written tradition. However, some scandalous texts were still kept because of their importance to Israel's national history or literature (e.g., Saul's resort to necromancy in 1 Sam.

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<sup>138</sup> See Alan F. Segal, *Life After Death: A History of the Afterlife in the Religions of the West* (New York: Doubleday, 2004), 27-170. This section discusses the climate of immortality that overshadowed ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, Canaan, and Israel in the First Temple period. It also explains why the belief in the afterlife and immortality became almost absent in the Hebrew Bible since the Second Temple period.

<sup>139</sup> Segal, *Life After Death*, 123-124.

28).<sup>140</sup> Thus, according to Segal, the immortality of the soul/spirit was not an alien belief in First Temple Israel. It was kept out later on because of editorial biases. But that belief returned in late Second Temple Judaism,<sup>141</sup> together with the rise of belief in bodily resurrection.

If Segal is correct, then belief in the immortality of the soul/spirit was more ancient in Judaism, prior to belief in bodily resurrection. This would be counter evidence to the assertion that the immortality of the soul was a Hellenistic doctrine added to the Hebraic belief in the bodily resurrection. Segal's vision is quite compelling, and it is shared by several scholars, such as Stephen Cook and Mark Finney.<sup>142</sup> It also resembles that of Candido Pozo, a systematic theologian who provides a detailed treatment of the development of biblical anthropology and eschatology.

#### **4. Candido Pozo: Two Anthropological Schemas and the Evolution of Sheol**

Decades before Segal reconstructed belief in the afterlife in Judaism, Pozo had already asserted that “the idea of resurrection is, without doubt, biblical, yet very late.” Meanwhile, “the idea of survival is not only biblical but also...the most ancient notion found in Scripture concerning the beyond.”<sup>143</sup> Pozo argues for his assertion with two novel thoughts, one concerning the ancient Israel's anthropology and the other, its eschatology.

Analyzing various concepts in primitive Judaism, in “the patriarchal era,” Pozo realizes two schemas being utilized to speak about the human. About a living human, the schema is unitary. Within that schema, *basar* (flesh) and *nephesh/ruach* (soul/spirit) do not stand in

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<sup>140</sup> Segal, *Life After Death*, 124-131.

<sup>141</sup> This situation reminds me of the so called “Chinese rite controversy” in the Catholic Church in the 17<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> centuries. After some dispute, the rite was completely forbidden, before it was allowed once again by Pope Pius XII (1939) and the Second Vatican Council in 1963 (see. *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, no. 37).

<sup>142</sup> See Stephen Cook, “Eschatology of the OT,” in *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, vol. 2, eds. Katharine Doob Sakenfeld et al. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2006), 299-308 (306-307); Mark Finney, *Resurrection, Hell and the Afterlife: Body and Soul in Antiquity, Judaism and Early Christianity* (New York: Routledge, 2016).

<sup>143</sup> Cándido Pozo, *Theology of the Beyond* (Staten Island, N.Y: St. Pauls, 2009), 158.

opposition or separation, but they are strongly connected. The *nephesh/ruach*, then, is not a substantial soul/spirit capable of subsisting in itself, but it is the “life” of the flesh.<sup>144</sup> However, referring to a dead human, the schema is very different. It maintains a “real distinction” between the cadavers and *rephaim*, and thus paves the way for the doctrine of the immortality of the soul. As Pozo observes, “while the corpses are in the tomb, the *rephaim* survive with an existence that is as misty or shadowy as you like, but they nonetheless survive, in Sheol.”<sup>145</sup> Pozo argues that Sheol is not identical with or a metaphor for the tomb. He analyzes several texts such as Gen. 25:8ff.; 37:35; 49:33-50:3 to show the distinction between those concepts.<sup>146</sup> Pozo also uncovers different characteristics of the *rephaim*’s existence in Sheol: weakness, anonymity, dormition (but capable of awakening, as in 1 Sam. 28), lacking sensitivity, unable to praise of God, without differentiation between the just and the wicked, deprived of retribution, etc. He states that the *rephaim*’s existence in Sheol is diminished, but it is not an annihilation; rather, it is survival and perdurance. This primitive idea of survival, Pozo argues, is “not a highly developed concept of the soul,” but it is significant because it marks the ancient Israelites’ “initial effort of conception.”<sup>147</sup> And it lays the foundation for further efforts later on.

Another effort of conception that Pozo unearths is the evolution of Sheol. In the early times, Sheol referred to “a common and undifferentiated domicile for all the dead”; however, that concept underwent “a profound transformation” when retribution after death was introduced.<sup>148</sup> Some prophetic literature started speaking about differences in Sheol. For example, Isa. 14:15 and Ezek. 32:22-23 mention the depths of the Pit, while Proverbs 7:27 and

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<sup>144</sup> Pozo, *Theology of the Beyond*, 158-160.

<sup>145</sup> Pozo, *Theology of the Beyond*, 161.

<sup>146</sup> Pozo, *Theology of the Beyond*, 161-164.

<sup>147</sup> Pozo, *Theology of the Beyond*, 164-165.

<sup>148</sup> Pozo, *Theology of the Beyond*, 170.

9:18 speak of Sheol with chambers and strata.<sup>149</sup> Accordingly, Sheol is conceived as an underground reality with different levels, the lower for the wicked and, implicitly, the higher for the just. That notion continues until the inter-testamentary time (Enoch 22) and the NT period (Luke 16:19-31, with an abyss between levels in Sheol).<sup>150</sup> In parallel with that notion of Sheol, some Psalms suggest God's deliverance from Sheol (Ps. 16:10; 49:15). In this second notion, Sheol is like hell, the "place" only for the wicked, while the just are delivered to a celestial realm, paradise, or heaven (Ps. 73:25, Enoch 61:12, Luke 23:43).<sup>151</sup> As Pozo observes, those two conceptions of Sheol co-exist even in one work (e.g., Enoch and Luke), and they reveal the complexity of biblical cosmology and eschatological doctrine in late Second Temple period. The picture of Sheol and paradise becomes even more complicated when Hellenistic concepts (*psyche* in *Hades*) and the Ugaritic ideas (the Elysian Fields and banquet) were suggested respectively through the book of Wisdom (Wis. 3:1-3; 8:19-20; 9:15-17; 15:8) and the Psalms (Pss. 23; 43:3; 61:8).<sup>152</sup> Though such concepts are added to the original Hebraic thoughts about the *rephaim* in Sheol, they clarify rather than distort the original Hebraic thoughts about retribution in Sheol in later its development.

One last thing worthy to note is the belief in personal, bodily resurrection. It would be a mistake to think that such a belief is the most ancient and the only eschatological belief in the OT. Indeed, that belief emerged quite late, in Second Temple Judaism. Undisputed texts about bodily resurrection include Dan. 12:1-3 and 2 Mac. 7. Those who rise in Dan. 12:1-3, as Pozo says, "can be none other than the *rephaim*,"<sup>153</sup> those who have died and "sleep in the dust," both

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<sup>149</sup> Pozo, *Theology of the Beyond*, 170-172.

<sup>150</sup> Pozo, *Theology of the Beyond*, 173.

<sup>151</sup> Pozo, *Theology of the Beyond*, 174-180.

<sup>152</sup> Pozo, *Theology of the Beyond*, 182-186.

<sup>153</sup> Pozo, *Theology of the Beyond*, 199.

the just and the wicked. 2 Mac. 7 (vv. 9, 14) only suggests the bodily resurrection of the just, who suffered because of their obedience to God. Ezek. 37, which is probably earlier than 2 Mac. 7, also speaks of the resurrection, but it is undoubtedly a metaphor for the restoration of Israel after the exile (Ezek. 37:11). The last important text is Isa. 26:19, which states: “Your dead shall live, their corpses shall rise. Oh, dwellers in the dust, awake and sing for joy...” It is disputable whether the text is a metaphor for national resurrection or about individual resurrection. What is interesting in the text is its suggestion that the continuity of existence is guaranteed not only by the *rephaim* alone, but also by the corporeal element, the corpses themselves.<sup>154</sup>

In brief, Segal and Pozo’s reconstructions provide a broad, developmental picture of the belief in the immortality of the soul in the First and Second Temple Judaism. Within that picture, the immortality of the soul belonged to the primitive Hebraic belief. For Segal, that belief seemed to be suppressed for a time, but not completely wiped out from the Hebrew Scripture, until it emerged again in late Second Temple Judaism. Pozo does share the same vision with Segal when he argues for the development of the concept of *rephaim* in Sheol throughout the Hebrew Bible. For Pozo, the immortality of the soul is a constant Hebraic belief, from the ancient times until NT times.<sup>155</sup>

## **5. Summary, Discussion, and Conclusion**

Different biblical scholars uphold different viewpoints on the immortality of the soul. Green emphasizes human wholeness and rejects the survival of the soul. He therefore cannot fully explain the question of personal identity in some NT texts. Levenson meanwhile highlights the corporate identity and a kind of corporate “immortality.” His vision is very interesting, but

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<sup>154</sup> Pozo, *Theology of the Beyond*, 200. If Isa. 26:19 is about the personal resurrection, it can be counter evidence to the physicalist suggestion of God’s creation of new bodies and transfer of “old” memory, relationality, and narrative.

<sup>155</sup> For a detail treatment of the immortality of the soul in the NT, see Pozo, *Theology of the Beyond*, 204-272.

like Green, he fails to adequately explain the individual identity, consciousness, and activity of the *rephaim* in Sheol in some OT texts. Segal, with his construction of the afterlife in the ancient Near East, shows how belief in the survival of the soul was part of ancient Israel's religious heritage, and how it was kept out of the Hebrew Bible in Second Temple Judaism because of its conflict with monotheism. Pozo also thinks that belief in the immortality of the soul was part of the primitive Judaism, and that belief developed along the history of Judaism until NT times. Segal and Pozo's studies suggest that the immortality of the soul is not a merely Hellenistic doctrine added to the Hebraic belief in bodily resurrection; rather, the former is more ancient, but not contrary to the latter. Both of them belong to the Hebraic religious heritage.

The many visions regarding the soul and immortality in the Hebrew Bible raise the question of methodology in biblical reading and interpretation. At one end, we can choose one viewpoint (e.g., monist, physicalist, structuralist), from which other viewpoints are both welcome and criticized. At the other end, we can choose a more comprehensive reading and interpretation, which may result in "a systematic and developmental picture" of biblical anthropology and eschatology. Though that picture is resisted by scholars like Denise Dombkowski Hopkins,<sup>156</sup> it appears compelling to me because of its integration of greater textual, contextual, and extratextual evidence. In particular, I appreciate Green, Di Vito, and Levenson for their emphasis on relationality with others and with God. Yet, the personal, individual aspect emphasized by Barr and Cooper, Segal and Pozo is equally important. An integration of both aspects into a nuanced formulation will give us a better understanding of the Hebraic, and thus biblical, anthropology and eschatology.

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<sup>156</sup> Denise D. Hopkins, "Humanity," in *The Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*, 614f.

As for some specific questions posed at the beginning of this chapter, some conclusions can be made after our discussion of contemporary biblical scholarship.

First, the Hebrew Bible does not evidently present a physicalist, monistic anthropology. Instead, it presents a holism in which the human is created in unity and wholeness. Biblical holism does not rule out constitutive parts or functions within the human whole. Similarly, it neither rejects the relationality that constitutes personal identity, nor subsumes personal identity into that relationality, especially after a person's death. A fair balance between parts and unity, relationality and individuality characterizes Hebraic biblical anthropology, if it is taken as a whole.

Second, within the Hebrew Bible, there are certain hints at the concept of "soul" that survives bodily death. A careful analysis of the contexts in which *nephesh*, *ruach*, *neschama*, and *rephaim* in Sheol are used is necessary to uncover such hints. Because Scripture depicts without defining what *nephesh*, *ruach*, *neschama* or *rephaim* really mean, theological reasoning or speculation can be made regarding those concepts.

Third, belief in the survival of the soul is not a Hellenistic doctrine added to the Hebraic teaching of bodily resurrection. Rather, it belonged to Israel's most ancient religious heritage. It developed over time, prior to the emergence of the bodily resurrection. Though that belief was not emphasized in the early Second Temple Judaism, it emerged powerfully in late Second Temple Judaism, with the borrowing of some concepts from the Ugaritic and Hellenistic world. Together with belief in bodily resurrection, it forms a duality in late OT eschatology, which expands into the NT and lays the foundation for the two-phase eschatology of Christianity.

The use of Greek concepts and thoughts in the OT and NT, which expands to the Christian tradition, raises some questions: Is the biblical/Christian vision of the immortality of

the soul similar to that of Hellenistic/Platonic philosophy? If not, what is the difference between them? If they are different, is it possible that the Hellenistic/Platonic philosophy overshadows the biblical/Christian vision? Those are serious questions. I will deal with them in the next chapter, by making recourse to the thoughts of two Catholic theologians – Joseph Ratzinger and Karl Rahner.

**CHAPTER III:**  
**A CATHOLIC UNDERSTANDING OF THE IMMORTALITY OF THE SOUL:**  
**JOSEPH RATZINGER AND KARL RAHNER**

In this chapter, I will explore contemporary Catholic understanding of the doctrine of the immortality of the soul. I will focus on the thoughts of two prominent theologians – Joseph Ratzinger and Karl Rahner. The context of my exploration is the debate over the origin, coherence, and relevance of the doctrine. As noted previously, the Catholic Church considers the immortality of the soul a doctrine of faith, firmly founded on the Scripture. By contrast, Nancey Murphy believes that it originates from Platonic philosophy, inserted into the Bible, and mistakenly accepted as a Christian doctrine. Worse than that, the concept of a substantial soul appears obsolete in modern scientific thinking. For that reason, she suggests the rejection of that doctrine to support only the belief in bodily resurrection.

In the last chapter, I have argued that the doctrine of the immortality of the soul has roots in the ancient Hebraic tradition. It originates from the belief in the survival of *rephaim* in Sheol. The utilization of Greek terminology in the late OT period only makes that belief more intelligible in the Hellenized world. In this chapter, I will argue that the Christian concepts of soul and immortality are quite different from those in Hellenistic philosophy. Moreover, those concepts, if properly understood, are not obsolete or irrelevant, but necessary for an understanding of Christian anthropology and eschatology. They also serve as starting points for further thought on the mystery of the human person in earthly life and beyond the grave.

To begin, I will present Ratzinger's understanding of the immortality of the soul. His context and disputes, his retrieval of biblical data and theological development reveal the necessity and distinctiveness of the doctrine in comparison with Hellenistic philosophy.

However, some difficulties face Ratzinger's approach to our subject matter. Rahner, meanwhile, offers an alternative vision, which may illuminate the difficulties facing Ratzinger. However, a close look also reveals that Rahner's theory is not without questions. A comparison between Ratzinger and Rahner will disclose their points of convergence and divergence. It also leads us to some conclusions regarding contemporary Catholic understanding of the doctrine.

## **I. Ratzinger: "A New Concept of Soul" and "Dialogical Immortality"**

### **1. Ratzinger in Context**

Ratzinger developed his eschatology at a time of crisis when the theology of the last things moved into the center of theological landscape.<sup>157</sup> Two developments led to that critical change. In Christianity, there was a fresh understanding of the eschatological character of Jesus' message: the end of the world is imminent, and the Kingdom of God is breaking in. In world affairs, Marxism, with its realism, also proclaimed the coming of the end time, not by God's power or religion, but by scientific knowledge and socio-economic and political commitment. Both the ecclesial and secular "eschatological" movements emphasize corporate endeavors to create a new world. The older form of eschatology – the salvation of one's soul – was pushed aside for its lack of contribution to praxis.<sup>158</sup> In the context of fervent collective actions, Ratzinger makes a suggestion: "to integrate opposing elements" and "to strike a fair balance" between the care for one's well-being and the care for the common work.<sup>159</sup> With that suggestion, Ratzinger proceeds to discuss both the individual and corporate dimensions of eschatology.

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<sup>157</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1988), 1.

<sup>158</sup> Ratzinger, *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life*, 1-14.

<sup>159</sup> Ratzinger, *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life*, 15.

## 2. Challenging “Total Death” and “Resurrection in Death”

As for individual eschatology, Ratzinger maintains both the immortality of the soul and the resurrection of the body. It is indeed an attempt to integrate opposing elements because at the time he wrote the work on eschatology, the former was being discredited as an outdated Platonic doctrine, while the latter alone was being emphasized as biblically authentic.

To defend the doctrine of the immortality of the soul, Ratzinger criticizes two hypotheses that try to surpass it. The first one is “total death,” upheld by several Protestant theologians, including C. Stange, A. Schlatter, and to some extent P. Althaus. Appealing to Scripture and Luther, those theologians rejected the Platonic separation of soul and body at death. For them, death means total death. The proper Christian vision of the afterlife, for them, is nothing but the resurrection of the whole person.<sup>160</sup> That vision, as Ratzinger observes, stems from two sources: “an allegedly biblical idea of the absolute indivisibility of man,” and “a modern anthropology worked out on the basis of natural science,” which identifies “the human being with his or her body, without remainder.”<sup>161</sup> Ratzinger agrees that the elimination of the immortality of the soul may remove certain conflicts between faith and modern thought about the human; however, it does not bring faith much closer to science. Over against “total death and resurrection alone” hypothesis, Ratzinger asks several questions: supposing that the elimination of the concept of soul and immortality secures the unity of the human person, would the scientific world believe in the resurrection? What would happen between one’s death and the general resurrection at the end of time? What will secure the resurrection identity, if death is total death? Though those

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<sup>160</sup> Ratzinger, *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life*, 104-105.

<sup>161</sup> Ratzinger, *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life*, 106.

questions are quite philosophical, Ratzinger thinks that a refusal to answer them does not contribute to a fruitful discussion in eschatology.<sup>162</sup>

The second hypothesis Ratzinger criticizes is “resurrection in death.” That hypothesis emerged from K. Barth and R. Bultmann’s thoughts and attracted some Catholic theologians, such as G. Greshake and G. Lohfink. In that hypothesis, the dead person steps out of time into the timeless, and thus into the resurrection immediately after death. For Ratzinger, “resurrection in death” is problematic because it elicits several questions. First, how can the timeless be divided into parts – one before and one after the dead person’s entry into it? Second, if the resurrection in death is a timeless, non-historical event, what is the value of time and history?<sup>163</sup> Third, if the resurrection takes place in death, and the dead body is still lying on the deathbed, then what is really resurrected? Is that not merely “a camouflaged return of the doctrine of immortality on philosophically somewhat more adventurous presuppositions.”<sup>164</sup>

By raising those questions, Ratzinger points out that attempts to surpass the immortality of the soul are “quirky pathways, full of logical leaps and ruptures”<sup>165</sup> in eschatology. He thus maintains the necessity of the doctrine of the immortality of the soul within the traditional two-phase eschatology. He also tries to re-appropriate the doctrine by investigating biblical data concerning it.

### **3. Biblical Data: Immortality of the Soul as Communion with God through Christ**

Analyzing biblical data, Ratzinger discovers the theological and Christological character of the Christian understanding of the immortality. Two texts attracted his attention. The first is

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<sup>162</sup> Ratzinger, *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life*, 106f.

<sup>163</sup> Christian Tapp, “Joseph Ratzinger and Resurrection Identity,” in *Personal Identity and Resurrection: How Do We Survive Our Death?*, ed. Georg Gasser (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Pub, 2010), 207-224 (210-213).

<sup>164</sup> Ratzinger, *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life*, 108.

<sup>165</sup> Ratzinger, *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life*, 112.

God's revelation to Moses at the burning bush: "I am the God of Abraham..." (Ex. 3:6).

Reflecting on the texts in the light of Matt. 22:32, Ratzinger makes a remarkable assertion:

"Those who are called by God are part of the concept of God." Because God is Life, immortal, then communion with God is the root of life indestructible.<sup>166</sup> The second text is John 11:25f.: "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and anyone who lives and believes in me will never die" (NRSV). Observing that text, Ratzinger holds that the theological concept of immortality has taken on a Christological character. The communion with Christ is the source of resurrection and eternal life even here and now, while death is overcome.<sup>167</sup> From those insights, Ratzinger concludes that the Christian understanding of the immortality is placed "not on a particular anthropology, whether anti-Platonic or Platonic, but on a theology."<sup>168</sup> It begins with the concept of God and takes on a Christological focus.<sup>169</sup>

The above somewhat "existential" immortality in Johannine tradition, however, does not rule out the question of what we call "the intermediate state." In the Scripture, the life of the dead has been a concern since primitive Judaism until St. Paul's time. Retrieving biblical data, Ratzinger discovers several concepts relating to the afterlife: the dead's existence in Sheol, the punishment in Gehenna, the reward in the bosom of Abraham or paradise, etc.<sup>170</sup> Ratzinger's discovery resembles that of Pozo, mentioned in the previous chapter. What attracts Ratzinger most are the NT expressions of the dead's enduring relationship with Christ, found in Luke's Gospel, the Acts of the Apostles, and some Pauline letters: "You will be *with me* in paradise," "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit, "whether we wake or sleep, we might *live with him*," "the dead *in*

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<sup>166</sup> Ratzinger, *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life*, 114f.

<sup>167</sup> Ratzinger, *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life*, 117.

<sup>168</sup> Ratzinger, *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life*, 118f.

<sup>169</sup> Ratzinger, *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life*, 159f.

<sup>170</sup> Ratzinger, *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life*, 119-124.

*Christ.*”<sup>171</sup> Those expressions once again reveal the relational and Christological character in the biblical understanding of immortality.

For Ratzinger, the relationship with God through Christ becomes the lens through which later Church documents about the immortality of the soul are to be assessed. With that biblical lens, Ratzinger makes assessments of two Church documents. The first is Pope Benedict XII’s constitution *Benedictus Deus* (1336). As he observes, that document maintains the relational character in talking about the beatific vision granted to the souls of the blessed, while the Christological character can only be inferred by “christologizing.”<sup>172</sup> Meanwhile, Lateran V’s *Apostolici regiminis* (1513) is “an instructive text,” a warning against the Aristotelianism of Pietro Pomponazzi (1464-1525). The decree states that one cannot say the spiritual soul is a mortal, non-individual, impersonal, or that it is a collective reality all individuals participate.<sup>173</sup> In other words, the document warns against a misunderstanding of the Christian concept of soul with either the Aristotle’s *anima forma corporis* or the universal *nous*.

In short, biblical data reveals the theological-Christological character of the Christian understanding of the immortality. The relationship with God through Christ constitutes a person’s immortality, in this life and beyond death. This is a fundamental eschatological belief in early Christianity, and it requires a compatible anthropological expression. In the time-consuming construction of such a compatible theological anthropology, Hellenistic philosophy offers the most important conceptual tools.

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<sup>171</sup> Ratzinger, *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life*, 124-129.

<sup>172</sup> Ratzinger, *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life*, 136-138.

<sup>173</sup> Ratzinger, *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life*, 140.

#### 4. Christian Theology: “A New Concept of Soul” and “Dialogical Immortality”

It is not easy to assess the significant contribution of Hellenistic philosophy to the development of the Christian concept of soul. Because of that significant contribution, Christian anthropology and eschatology are sometimes misunderstood as Hellenistic or Platonic. However, a thorough investigation of both the ancient Greek philosophy and the development of Christian doctrine reveals a subtle distinction between them.

Delving into the ancient Greek philosophy, Ratzinger discovers diverse views on anthropology and no clear and consistent vision of eschatology. In Homer’s world, the body and person coincide. Then appeared the Orphic religion, which suggests the possible separation of the soul and the body, and the latter is the prison of the former. The soul in that religion is considered the locus of knowledge, judgment, and purification. Later, Plato used that concept of soul mostly to emphasize “the inner unity in man,” not a separation of elements.<sup>174</sup> But after all, Plato does not develop a unified philosophy of the soul’s nature or its relation to the body. He also takes the religious idea of the soul’s immortality as a philosophical starting point. With Aristotle, the soul is the form of the body, and it dies with the body; the truly spiritual element of a person is *nous* (mind/intellect) – an impersonal element connecting a person with the divine and transcendent principle. Thus, in Aristotle’s vision, there is both a soul-body unity and a dualism because of the *nous*. Later, Plotinus synthesized ancient Greek philosophy into a kind of trinity: the One, *nous*, and soul. If the soul goes down along cosmic processes, it multiplies in the mirrors of matter. If the soul goes up to the One through *nous*, it is united to the divine origin, in which individuality just disappears. In short, ancient Greek philosophy presents diverse anthropologies. A careful analysis of those views leads Ratzinger to the conclusion: “The

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<sup>174</sup> Ratzinger, *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life*, 141-142.

frequently encountered notion of Hellenistic-Platonic dualism of soul and body, with its corollary in the idea of the soul's immortality, is something of the theologians' fantasy."<sup>175</sup> Meanwhile, ancient Greek philosophy offers no consistent vision regarding eschatology. It suggests either no afterlife, some vague hint of immortality, or the mythopoetic shadowy existence in *Hades*.<sup>176</sup>

The early Christian Church, meanwhile, believed in the immortality of the soul on the basis of the Jewish tradition (the life of the dead in Sheol) and the NT's Christological focus (being with Christ, from this life unto the afterlife). That eschatological belief demanded an anthropological expression. However, a compatible anthropology was not worked out clearly and consistently due to the lack of a unified terminology. At first, the terms "soul" or "spirit," understood as "the being of the human person that survives death," and "the bearer of the existence with Christ," were used.<sup>177</sup> However, such terms were soon obscured by Gnosticism, which contrasted *psyche* (the lowest rung of human existence) with *pneuma* (the more elevated condition) and with the body. Hence, to keep using the terms, the Church needed to clarify and incorporate them into an anthropology compatible with all biblical data. An anthropology of that sort, according to Ratzinger, must recognize two things. First, the human is a creature with "unified totality," "conceived and willed by God." Second, it must distinguish in the human "an element that perishes and an element that abides."<sup>178</sup> Philosophically, it must merge Plato and Aristotle's visions at their points of contradiction: the soul must be "united to the body" and, at

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<sup>175</sup> Ratzinger, *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life*, 145.

<sup>176</sup> For a detailed analysis of Greek philosophy, see Ratzinger, *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life*, 140-146.

<sup>177</sup> Ratzinger, *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life*, 146f.

<sup>178</sup> Ratzinger, *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life*, 147f.

the same time, “must not be entirely dependent on the body for what it is.” That was an inherent difficulty, and it took the Church centuries to offer a synthesis.<sup>179</sup>

The Christian anthropology, Ratzinger claims, was finally found in the work of St. Thomas Aquinas. On the one hand, Thomas followed Aristotle’s doctrine of *anima forma corporis*; on the other hand, he broke away from Aristotle in maintaining the spiritual and personal nature of the soul.<sup>180</sup> As a *form*, the soul is one with the body; it belongs to the world of bodies marked by becoming and passing away. As a spirit, the soul abides and grows in maturity toward eternity, even in the corruption of the body. For Ratzinger, Thomas’ “dual character” of the soul is a powerful idea, a novelty in Christian philosophy and theology. He writes:

The soul belongs to the body as ‘form,’ but that which is the form of the body is still spirit. It makes man a person and opens him to immortality. Compared with all the conceptions of the soul available in antiquity [Hellenism], this notion of the soul is quite novel. It is a product of Christian faith, and of the exigencies of faith for human thought.<sup>181</sup>

The above concept of soul is unique compared with that of both Plato and Aristotle. However, that concept also gives rise to one question: Does the soul as spirit possess immortality as an essential characteristic? Ratzinger answers in the negative. For him, belief in substantialistic immortality is “theologically inappropriate” in Christianity. It may be “circulated in popular thinking,” but “not among great theological teachers.”<sup>182</sup> Gregory of Nyssa and Thomas are iconic examples. For Gregory, Christian tradition believes that immortality consists in knowing and seeing God, as the Beatitudes state. The problem is that humans, though they want to see God, do not have the strength to do so without dying. It is a dilemma, just like St. Peter, who wants to walk on the waters of mortality to taste immortality but quickly sinks. Only

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<sup>179</sup> Ratzinger, *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life*, 148.

<sup>180</sup> Ratzinger, *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life*, 148.

<sup>181</sup> Ratzinger, *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life*, 149.

<sup>182</sup> Ratzinger, *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life*, 151.

the Lord can save Peter from sinking and set him straight on the waves. That account illustrates the dialogical character of immortality: a desire on the human's part, and a gift granted by the divine, who alone possesses or, more precisely, is immortality. Centuries after Gregory of Nyssa, Thomas uses another way to express the dialogical character of immortality when he envisions all creation as coming from God and returning to God as its Source.<sup>183</sup> With those witnesses, Ratzinger shows how Christianity does not consider immortality part of the soul's nature, but a gift of God, given in the context of the divine-human dialogue.

A new question arising from the above concept of immortality is the fate of humanity at large. If immortality is given within the divine-human dialogue, which has taken on Christological character, will it be a special grace only for Christians or a small number of the devout? Ratzinger's answer is "no." Indeed, he identifies God with "truth in its most comprehensive meaning," the "Ground" of all beings, or "Another." Ratzinger also notes that opening to truth, relating to the Ground or Another, is not "some optional pleasurable diversion for the intellect," but something that lies in "the core of the human's very essence."<sup>184</sup> Such openness and relatedness in freedom make the human immortal. Following Thomas, Ratzinger notes that the capacity for openness or relatedness is not a merely human achievement. It is given to humans as their possession in creation, understood as God's self-communication to creatures.<sup>185</sup> In a sense, it can be seen as part of human nature, given that such a nature is already graced by God.

What would happen if someone goes against his/her nature? If he/she closes off rather than remains open to the rest of beings, and thus to God? For Ratzinger, that closing off would

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<sup>183</sup> Ratzinger, *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life*, 151-153.

<sup>184</sup> Ratzinger, *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life*, 154f.

<sup>185</sup> Ratzinger, *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life*, 155.

be like “Sheol-existence,” an existence without relation.<sup>186</sup> It is sin. Sin does not result in “sheer nothingness” or “the annulment of being”; instead, it creates a “self-contradiction, a self-negating possibility, namely ‘Sheol.’”<sup>187</sup> Fortunately, God’s gracious power overcomes that self-contradiction from within. In Christ’s incarnation and death, God “descends into the pit of Sheol” and creates in Sheol the possibility of a relationship, of a dialogue.<sup>188</sup> Christ’s incarnation and descent into Sheol once more show the gratuity of immortality: it is not a human achievement, but a gift from God.

## 5. Summary and Discussion

Ratzinger presents a thorough study of the doctrine of the immortality of the soul. Beginning with the dispute between immortality and resurrection, he returns to biblical data and history of doctrine, to discover what remains hidden or presupposed in the Scripture and tradition and has meaning for contemporary Christian life. The result is a fresh interpretation of the immortality of the soul, with three central conclusions. First, human beings do not possess substantialistic immortality but are given immortality in their dialogue with God through Christ. Second, early Christian belief in the human’s indestructible relationship with God through Christ demands “an anthropological constant,” which is found in Thomas’ concept soul as both the *form* of the body and spirit. Third, the dialogue with God through Christ is mediated by truth and love of others; consequently, opening to truth and fellowship with others are concrete expressions of the dialogical immortality.

Ratzinger’s discussion of the immortality of the soul is brilliant. It successfully synthesizes different elements of Christian faith and life, such as God-Christ-self-others, this life-the

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<sup>186</sup> Ratzinger, *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life*, 156.

<sup>187</sup> Ratzinger, *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life*, 156.

<sup>188</sup> Ratzinger, *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life*, 156f.

afterlife. On the pathway to that synthesis, Ratzinger also clarifies some controversial issues regarding the doctrine in question. With critical acuity, he maintains the necessity of the doctrine, as theologians can hardly explain the issue of identity and change without it. With clarity, he highlights the Hebraic origin of the doctrine, the uniqueness of Christian concepts of soul and immortality, without repudiating the significance of conceptual tools offered by Greek philosophy. An appreciation of distinctive contributions of different traditions within the doctrine is a hallmark in Ratzinger's work.

Despite the above contributions, Ratzinger has to deal with a twofold difficulty regarding the soul in the intermediate state: the *anima separata* and the state of the corpse. Strictly speaking, this is the difficulty facing Thomas, and those who adopt his concept of *anima forma corporis*. In Thomas' philosophy, matter without form is *materia prima*. Therefore, when the soul as the only form of the body departs, two things happen. First, the soul is no longer the form of the body, but an *anima separata*. Second, the body is no longer a human body, but a corpse, and "between a living body and a corpse lies the chasm of prime matter."<sup>189</sup> When the soul departs, new forms take the place the soul once held. Thus, Thomas cannot guarantee the self-identity of the body before and after death. A good point in Thomas' theory is that any matter can be taken up for the resurrected body. However, the same theory also raises question about the state of corpses, and hence questions about the veneration of dead bodies and relics in the Church.<sup>190</sup>

Ratzinger is aware of the difficulty facing Thomistic hylomorphism. He points it out and makes a suggestion. As he notes, there is an "abiding ordination of the soul to matter," and "the

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<sup>189</sup> Ratzinger, *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life*, 180.

<sup>190</sup> Fletcher, *Resurrection Realism*, 117.

soul cannot completely leave behind its relationship with matter.”<sup>191</sup> Those statements echo Thomas’ thought, that the soul’s departure from the body is “contrary to its nature and *per accidens*”; hence, the soul longs for its reunion with the body.<sup>192</sup> As John Gavin notes, Ratzinger does not think of this longing as a mere tendency, but “an intimate connection” between the soul and matter.<sup>193</sup> The question is: what is precisely the matter to which the soul is ordained or with which it has intimate connection? Is it the matter the soul used to draw into its corporeal expression, namely its dead body? Or is it matter in general, the cosmos? Can it be a third kind of matter, another body, and hence reincarnation? Ratzinger does not elaborate on those questions. Rather, he shifts to treat the issue of *anima separata* in another way. In his *Introduction to Christianity*, he believes that the issue of *anima separata* has become obsolete by the doctrine of the “communion of saints.”<sup>194</sup> Later, in the preface to the second edition of *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life* (2006), he makes recourse to the body of Christ, saying: “Beginning with our baptism, we belong to the body of the resurrected one... Never again are we totally disembodied.”<sup>195</sup> In a sense, being in the communion of saints and part of Christ’s body means not being disembodied. Nevertheless, the original problem of *anima separata* (the soul being separated from its body), the state of the dead body, and the possible relation of the soul to matter after death, etc., are still open for further thought and discussion.

Another issue concerning Ratzinger’s vision is “time” “after” death. Ratzinger rejects the idea of the dead stepping out of time right into eternity or timelessness, because “eternity with a

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<sup>191</sup> Ratzinger, *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life*, 179-181.

<sup>192</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, trans. Fabian Larcher, cited in John Haldane, “Is the Soul the Form of the Body?,” *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 87, no. 3 (2013): 481–493 (492).

<sup>193</sup> J. Gavin, “On the Intermediate State of the Soul,” *Nova et Vetera* 15, no. 3 (2017): 925–939 (933); cf. Joseph Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, trans. J. R. Foster (San Francisco: Communio Books, 2004), 358.

<sup>194</sup> Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, 351.

<sup>195</sup> Ratzinger, *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life*, xxi.

beginning is no eternity at all.”<sup>196</sup> He also disagrees with G. Lohfink’s retrieval of the concept of *aevum*, because *aevum* is the mode of time of angels, and a dead human does not become an angel.<sup>197</sup> Ratzinger then suggests *memoria*-time as the temporality of the dead.<sup>198</sup> For him, in *memoria*-time “lies the reason for the definitiveness of what we have done..., the possibility of a purification and fulfilment in a final destiny.”<sup>199</sup> This suggestion is very interesting, except for one little problem: *memoria*-time is internal and subject to the mind of each individual. How can it be shared by the departed, who are supposed to be in communion with others, both living and dead, and with Christ? This is a question still hard to answer, which calls for further reflections.

In short, Ratzinger provides a unique thought on the immortality of the soul, particularly through his discussion of the Thomistic concept of soul and dialogical immortality. The concept of soul as form and spirit preserves personal identity through change and death. Dialogical immortality emphasizes the significance of the relationship with God through Christ, the value of truth and love in human destiny. However, Ratzinger’s adoption of the Thomistic concept of soul also lead him to the questions facing Thomism – the *anima separata* and the temporality of the dead. Though Ratzinger offers his answers, namely the communion of saints in the body of Christ and *memoria*-time, such answers in their turns lead to further questions. Further thought and discussion are still needed for a breakthrough.

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<sup>196</sup> Ratzinger, *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life*, 182. Another reason for Ratzinger’s stance at this point is justice. How can a person “can be said to have reached his[her] fulfilment and destiny so long as others suffer on account of him[her], so long as the guilt whose source he is persists on earth and brings pain to other people” (Ratzinger, *Eschatology*, 187). Thus, there must be a “time” before eternity for a kind of purgatory.

<sup>197</sup> Ratzinger, *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life*, 182.

<sup>198</sup> Ratzinger accepts Augustine’s concept of *memoria*-time. For Ratzinger, the human, as long as he is a physical body, shares in physical time; however, as spirit, he/she also lives in *memoria*-time in which the past, present, and future can be gathered and measured according to the internal state of mind. In present life, physical time and *memoria*-time are tied together but not dissolved in each other. At the moment of death, “when a human being steps out of the world of *bios*, *memoria*-time separates itself from physical time, yet... does not... become eternity.” See Ratzinger, *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life*, 183f.

<sup>199</sup> Ratzinger, *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life*, 184.

Karl Rahner, a prominent Catholic theologian, also offers his thoughts about the *anima separata* and time of the dead. His thoughts are somewhat different from those of Ratzinger, though both of them accept the Thomistic concept of soul as form of the body and emphasize the Christological character of immortality. How can they be different from each other? The answer rests on Rahner's understanding of the unity of the human person. A grasp of Rahner's insights on those topics will help us better understand contemporary Catholic eschatology, at least in regard to the immortality of the soul.

## **II. Karl Rahner on the Immortality of the Soul**

While Ratzinger dedicates a large part of his "most thorough work"<sup>200</sup> to discuss the immortality of the soul biblically, historically, and systematically, Rahner surprisingly does not write any article on that doctrine. He only occasionally touches upon it in *Theological Investigations (II)*. Thus, we can only know what Rahner thinks about the immortality of the soul through a construction. The starting point is his anthropology, from which we can see what Rahner thinks about the soul, and what he means by the immortality of the soul. Other related themes, such as the life of the dead and the pancosmicity of the soul after death, will help us grasp more fully Rahner's breadth and depth in a part of his eschatology.

### **1. Rahner's Anthropology: Unity in Distinction**

Rahner strongly emphasizes the unity and wholeness of the human person. In several articles relating to anthropology, he stresses the unity in distinction in human composition, particularly between spirit and matter, soul and body.

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<sup>200</sup> John L. Allen, *Cardinal Ratzinger: The Vatican Enforcer of the Faith* (New York: Continuum, 2000), 93.

In “The Unity of Spirit and Matter in the Christian Understanding of Faith,” Rahner warns against “a world-wide materialism”<sup>201</sup> and “a spiritualizing Platonism”<sup>202</sup> that undermine the proper Christian understanding of human beings. With cautions, Rahner presents the ontological unity of spirit and matter. As he argues, the Christian faith recognizes the unity of spirit and matter by their origin, in their history, and their final end. First, both spirit and matter have one and the same origin – the infinite and absolute reality we call God. Second, spirit and matter are united in history. They mutually correlate, to the extent that one conditions the other and vice versa. The mutual correlation and conditioning are exhibited clearly in the process of evolution. In that process, matter, by God’s power, gives rise to human spirit through active self-transcendence.<sup>203</sup> In return, the human spirit draws matter into its process of becoming by entering into and by keeping matter as a factor of its own becoming. Thus, matter is not alien to but “a moment of the spirit.”<sup>204</sup> For that reason, the history of nature and history of spirit are *one* and the same history.<sup>205</sup> Third, spirit and matter are united in their achievement and goal. In the Christian faith, matter is not provisional, to be discarded at the end of time. Instead, both spirit and matter “remain eternally valid before God and form forever, now and in the state of perfection, the mutually correlative, non-separable constitutive elements of the one created reality.”<sup>206</sup>

Rahner favors speaking about the human as spirit;<sup>207</sup> however, he sometimes treats in detail the unity in distinction between the soul and body. In “Theology of the Symbol,” he

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<sup>201</sup> Karl Rahner, “The Unity of Spirit and Matter in the Christian Understanding of Faith,” *TI* 6:153-177 (153).

<sup>202</sup> Peter C. Phan, *Eternity in Time: A Study of Karl Rahner’s Eschatology* (London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1988) 46.

<sup>203</sup> Rahner, “The Unity of Spirit and Matter,” 168, 177.

<sup>204</sup> Rahner, “The Unity of Spirit and Matter,” 169.

<sup>205</sup> Rahner, “The Unity of Spirit and Matter,” 177.

<sup>206</sup> Rahner, “The Unity of Spirit and Matter,” 177.

<sup>207</sup> Karl Rahner, *Hearers of the Word*, rev. ed., trans. Michael Richards (New York: Herder and Herder, 1969), 37.

follows Thomas in holding that “the soul is the form of the body.”<sup>208</sup> Meanwhile, the body is nothing other than the “self-expression,” the “real symbol” of the soul. It is “the actuality of the soul itself through the ‘other’ of *materia prima*.” As Rahner explains, the soul “produces” the body with *prima materia*, while the body renders the soul present in space and time.<sup>209</sup> Soul and body for Rahner are just two sides of the same coin. From those conceptions, a strict soul and body unity can be guaranteed, while their distinction can be maintained.

Rahner also mentions the unity in distinction between soul and body in “The Body in the Order of Salvation.” In that article, he justifies the distinction made in the Church tradition. For Rahner, the reproach of Greek philosophy as a distortion of biblical anthropology and corruption of the original biblical message is “certainly an exaggeration.”<sup>210</sup> Though the OT never really distinguished between the body and soul in the philosophical sense, it does not mean there is no philosophical distinction. Thus, the distinction made or assumed in Church teachings (e.g., the Councils of Vienna and Lateran V) is “undoubtedly legitimate,” “theologically correct,” and “completely justifiable.”<sup>211</sup> However, Rahner also states that such a distinction is only “metaphysical and meta-existential.” In reality, we never encounter a mere body or a mere soul, but always a human person, “an incarnate spirit.” Because of the “indivisible unity” in the human person, “an existential cleavage between the body and the soul is actually impossible.”<sup>212</sup> Rahner believes that the unity in the human person is “designed by God,” and no one can break it. A

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<sup>208</sup> Rahner, “Theology of the Symbol,” *TI* 4:221-252 (246f.); cf. *Spirit in the World*, trans. William Dych (New York: Herder and Herder, 1968), 248-253.

<sup>209</sup> Rahner, “Theology of the Symbol,” 247. In a sense, the soul does not exist prior to the soul, and the soul does not make its “appearance” until the body comes to be.

<sup>210</sup> Rahner, “The Body in the Order of Salvation,” *TI* 17: 71-89 (80f.).

<sup>211</sup> Rahner, “The Body in the Order of Salvation,” 81f.

<sup>212</sup> Rahner, “The Body in the Order of Salvation,” 82.

person, for example, may be aware of the bodily and spiritual elements within him/herself, but he/she can never “get behind this unity, to take sides purely with the spirit or with the body.”<sup>213</sup>

In brief, Rahner emphasizes the ontological unity of the human person. In him/her, spirit and matter, soul and body cannot be separated. The distinction is justifiable philosophically or theologically. But existentially, a separation is impossible, even by the person him/herself.

The unity in distinction between spirit and matter, soul and body, is only one part of Rahner’s anthropology. Indeed, Rahner also portrays the human person with other characteristics: an individual and social being; living in solidarity with the cosmos and openness to the transcendent; having freedom for definitive self-determination and responsibility; being threatened by guilt and subject to God’s forgiving self-communication.<sup>214</sup> All those factors constitute what it means to be human. It is in the last characteristic – being subject to God’s forgiving self-communication – that the soul’s immortality can be understood.

## **2. A Rahnerian Vision of the Immortality of the Soul**

Though Rahner asserts that the immortality of the soul is “a truth of faith and not a philosophical tenet,”<sup>215</sup> he does not directly treat the doctrine. We can only know what he thinks about it with a construction. Following Mark Fischer,<sup>216</sup> I think three steps below are helpful for a construction of a Rahnerian vision of the immortality of the soul.

First, for Rahner, the soul is the *form* of the body. The soul “actualizes” the potency of matter, and “causes” it to take a particular form. This process of actualization presupposes time/history and purposefulness, toward the perfection of the matter informed by the soul.<sup>217</sup>

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<sup>213</sup> Rahner, “The Body in the Order of Salvation,” 83.

<sup>214</sup> For details, see Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity* (New York: Seabury Press, 1978), 24-137.

<sup>215</sup> Rahner, “The Life of the Dead,” *TI* 4:347-354 (352).

<sup>216</sup> Mark Fischer, “Karl Rahner and the Immortality of the Soul,” *The Saint Anselm Journal*, vol. 6.1 (2008):1-12.

<sup>217</sup> Rahner, “Natural Science and Reasonable Faith,” *TI* 21:16-55 (29), cited in Fischer, “Karl Rahner and the Immortality of the Soul,” 6.

Second, in the Christian tradition, the soul is the “immediate work” of God (cf. DH 360). Pope Pius XII in *Humanae generis* in 1950 reaffirmed the doctrine of God’s immediate creation of the soul. Rahner recognizes Pius XII’s reaffirmation and understands the doctrine metaphysically. As Rahner explains in “Natural Science and Reasonable Faith,” God creates the world not in a single act of creation, but in a constant process of “quasi-formal causality.”<sup>218</sup> The creation of human souls can be identified with this continuous creative process.<sup>219</sup>

Third, following St. Thomas, Rahner believes that Word of God assumed flesh through the soul, understood as the seat of human nature.<sup>220</sup> For Rahner, the Word’s assumption of flesh is not a mere disguise to set right things on earth, and then return to heaven.<sup>221</sup> Instead, the assumption is first of all an act of creation, because God “creates the human reality *by the very fact that* he assumes it as his own.”<sup>222</sup> Second, the assumption is an act of God’s self-gift to the human, when the Word “empties *himself*, gives away *himself*, poses the other as his own reality.”<sup>223</sup> Through the Word, God establishes human reality as God’s own reality. Human reality becomes immortal because of being assumed by the Word.

According to Mark Fischer, the Rahner believes that “the Word dwelt not just among us, but within us,” and that indwelling is “the more profound meaning” of the doctrine of the incarnation that Rahner proposed.<sup>224</sup> When the Word enters human nature, that nature, the very human soul, become immortal. For Rahner, the soul does not lack immortality prior to the

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<sup>218</sup> Rahner, “Natural Science and Reasonable Faith,” 35f. Rahner tries to maintain that God is not the formal cause of the cosmos, lest Christianity becomes pantheism. He does not think of God as the mere efficient cause so that God and the cosmos exist side by side. Rather, through “quasi-formal” causality, God is in the world as its transcendental Ground.

<sup>219</sup> Rahner, “Natural Science and Reasonable Faith,” 44f.;

<sup>220</sup> Fischer, “Karl Rahner and the Immortality of the Soul,” 9.

<sup>221</sup> Rahner, “On the Theology of the Incarnation,” *TI* 4:105-120 (111f.).

<sup>222</sup> Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 222. Rahner draws on Augustine, who thinks that God “creates by assuming” and “assumes by creating.”

<sup>223</sup> Rahner, “On the Theology of the Incarnation,” 114f.

<sup>224</sup> Fischer, “Karl Rahner and the Immortality of the Soul,” 10f.

incarnation of the Word in Jesus Christ, because the Word was present in God's creative acts, in the gift of Decalogues, in the prophetic teachings, and especially in the voice of conscience. The soul becomes immortal when it hears and obeys the Word in those ways.<sup>225</sup> He writes:

[T]he soul is immortal because God created it with the capacity to receive God's Word. Throughout history, that Word has addressed human beings via the conscience. Then, at a specific moment in history, the divine Word emptied itself, assumed a human soul, and made that soul its dwelling place. In that act, God revealed the divine intention for us. God intended an intimate relationship between divinity and humanity, a relationship by which God would freely offer us a share in the divine life. Our proper response is to discern the Word, to accept its message, and to act upon it. When we do, even when it costs us our lives, God validates that choice, recognizing its permanence, and incorporates it into God's own history. That was the testimony of Jesus Christ. Because God raised him from the dead, we, his brothers and sisters, can hope that God will raise us as well.<sup>226</sup>

In short, when the Word of God assumes the human soul, the soul becomes the abode of the living Word and is given a share of the Word's immortality. That is the vision of immortality proposed in Rahner's theology of the incarnation. In a sense, Rahner's vision is quite similar to that of Ratzinger, as they both emphasize the Christological character of immortality. Both visions are existential in the sense that the communion with God through Christ is a matter of here and now. Both visions call for faith as the acceptance of God's self-communication, and for a righteous and truthful life in fellowship and love of neighbors.

But immortality is not limited to present life. It expands beyond death. Then, what would happen to the soul? With this question, we have to get back to the unavoidable difficulties of *anima separata* and time of the dead, inherent in Thomistic metaphysics to which both Ratzinger and Rahner adhere. In response to those difficulties, Rahner proposes two hypotheses - the pancosmicity of the soul and eternity in and from time.

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<sup>225</sup> Fischer, "Karl Rahner and the Immortality of the Soul," 10.

<sup>226</sup> Fischer, "Karl Rahner and the Immortality of the Soul," 11f.

### 3. The Pancosmicity of the Soul

Rahner proposes the hypothesis of the pancosmicity of the soul in a booklet titled *On the Theology of Death* (1961). The basic idea of pancosmicity of the soul originates from Rahner's emphasis on the substantial unity of the human person. Because of that unity, death strikes the whole person, not merely the body.<sup>227</sup> In traditional theology, particularly in the Catechism of the Catholic Church (no. 997), death is described as the separation of soul and body. For Rahner, that description is both truthful and inadequate. It is truthful in pointing out that "the soul assumes in death... a new and different relation to that which is usually called the body." Because in death, the soul no longer holds the structure of the body, and the body lives no more, Rahner thinks that "we can and must say that the soul separates from the body."<sup>228</sup> However, in traditional description of death, the term "separation" seems obscure and can be subject to different interpretations. The problem, Rahner thinks, consists in the conception of the body. He explains: during a lifetime, the soul is one with the body, and the body is part of the material universe, so the soul must have a relation to the material universe. At death, if the soul is "separated" from the body, does it become a-cosmic? Or, because no longer be limited to an individual body, the soul has a more intimate relationship to the world, and becomes pancosmic?

Pondering on those questions, especially in the light of Christology, Rahner poses the hypothesis that death does not make the soul a-cosmic. Instead, as the soul in death is no longer bound to an individual bodily structure, it "enters into a much closer, more intimate relationship to the universe as a whole."<sup>229</sup> By the pancosmicity of the soul, Rahner does not mean that a particular soul becomes at death the form of the cosmos, or that the soul becomes omnipresent to

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<sup>227</sup> Karl Rahner, *On the Theology of Death*, trans. Charles H. Henkey, (New York: Herder and Herder, 1961), 21.

<sup>228</sup> Rahner, *On the Theology of Death*, 25.

<sup>229</sup> Rahner, *On the Theology of Death*, 27. Cf. Rahner, "Current Problems in Christology," *TI* 1:149-213 (195).

the whole world.<sup>230</sup> Rather, he tries to maintain his vision that an animated body is “an open system,” which does not stop “where our skin stops.”<sup>231</sup> Similarly, an embodied soul is not a closed monad, but exists in communication with the world. Such openness to and communication with the world may be maintained and even expanded at death, when the soul is not limited to a specific point in space and time.

How can we justify the soul’s connection to the material world after death? To this question, Rahner provides both philosophical and theological justifications. Philosophically, he makes three arguments. First, in Thomistic philosophy, informing the body is “the substantial act” of the soul, an act “not really distinct from the existence soul.”<sup>232</sup> Thus, if the soul “survives,” it cannot be what it is unless it somehow continues to inform the body; thus the soul after death must have some sort of connection to the material world. Second, on the basis of “life-entelechy” (vital force) theory, which suggests that sub-human organisms die but their “entelechal powers remain solidly implanted in the universe,”<sup>233</sup> Rahner thinks that the soul – the entelechy or vital force of human being – also persists in the world after death. Third, certain parapsychological phenomena might be more easily explained if the soul after death still has some connection with the world.<sup>234</sup> Though Rahner does not give any specific example, one can think of some “alleged communications with the dead” through mediums during seances.<sup>235</sup>

Theologically, Rahner also offers three arguments for the pancosmicity of the soul after death. First, angels are considered pure spirits, but they still have relationship to material world. Second, the teachings about the communion of saints and purgatory presuppose the relation

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<sup>230</sup> Rahner, *On the Theology of Death*, 30.

<sup>231</sup> Rahner, “The Body in the Order of Salvation,” 87. Rahner in the same article even writes, a bit exaggerating, that “in a sense, . . . we are living in one and the same body – the world” (p. 88).

<sup>232</sup> Rahner, *On the Theology of Death*, 28f.

<sup>233</sup> Rahner, *On the Theology of Death*, 29.

<sup>234</sup> Rahner, *On the Theology of Death*, 30.

<sup>235</sup> Phan, *Eternity in Time*, 86.

between the souls and material beings. Third, the resurrection of the body is more intelligible if the soul is connected to the world rather than cut off.<sup>236</sup> The resurrected body of Christ, corporeal and spiritual, inner-worldly and transcendent, is for Rahner “the perfect expression of the enduring relation of the glorified person to the world as a whole.”<sup>237</sup>

In brief, Rahner’s hypothesis of the pancosmicity of the soul aims at preserving the substantial unity of the human person. In a certain sense, it is a critique of the traditional understanding of death as the separation of body and soul, and an answer to the question of *anima separata* inherent in Thomistic metaphysics. Though Rahner in his later writings does not mention this hypothesis, Peter Phan thinks that “his basic ideas concerning the relationship of the soul to matter after death remains unchanged.”<sup>238</sup> Phan’s observation seems correct, as Rahner somehow maintains his idea about the relationship between the soul and matter after death in the an interview in the last years of his life.<sup>239</sup>

Rahner’s interpretation of death and the pancosmicity of the soul is not without questions. Phan in his *Eternity in Time* raised a series of them: has Rahner done justice to the notion of death as the separation of the soul from body? Has he missed the point that death is a real destruction of the substantial unity of the human being? Are philosophical and theological arguments for the pancosmicity of the soul truly persuasive? Are there other solutions to the problems of the relationship between matter and the soul after death?<sup>240</sup> To some extent, Rahner answered such questions in some interviews in the last years of his life. Indeed, he thought of

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<sup>236</sup> Rahner, *On the Theology of Death*, 31-34.

<sup>237</sup> Rahner, *On the Theology of Death*, 34.

<sup>238</sup> Phan, *Eternity in Time*, 114.

<sup>239</sup> Rahner, “Old Age and Death: Interview with Erika Ahlbrecht-Meditz (October 21<sup>st</sup>, 1980),” *Karl Rahner in Dialogue: Conversations and Interviews, 1965-1982*, Paul Imhof and Hubert Biallowons, eds., trans. Harvey D. Egan (New York: Crossroad, 1986), 244.

<sup>240</sup> Phan, *Eternity in Time*, 114f.

death not so much as the consequence of sin, but as “the eternal fulfillment.”<sup>241</sup> He also thinks that “a relation of matter to the soul after death would be quite conceivable.”<sup>242</sup> But Rahner also admits that “we do not have answers for everything,” especially about the beyond. He thus advises us to “entrust ourselves in hope and love to the incomprehensibility of God.”<sup>243</sup>

#### **4. Eternity in and from Time**

Regarding the temporality of the dead, Rahner suggests “eternity.” He makes this suggestion in two articles – “The Life of the Dead” (1959) and “Eternity from Time” (1979).

In the first article, Rahner suggests that care must be taken when speaking about “the life of the dead” in order *not* to leave the impression that “things go on” after death. For him, there is no afterlife in the sense of “rectilinear continuation of man’s empirical reality,” no change of horse to continue riding, no vagueness of temporal existence. He writes: “No, in this regard death puts an end to the *whole* man.”<sup>244</sup> For Rahner, the end of the whole person in terms of temporality is the dawn of “a new manner of existence” – eternity. The question is: what does Rahner mean by eternity?

Rahner’s concept of eternity is closely connected with time and human freedom. In his thought, time is finite; it has a “beginning,” it runs its irreversible course toward its end. Time is important, as it is “the condition of possibility for the exercise of human freedom.”<sup>245</sup> In time, a person makes choices and ultimately decides what he/she will become out of freedom. Thus, freedom is not the capacity to make an indefinite number of choices, but the capacity for finality and definitiveness of the whole person. And whenever a person achieves finality and

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<sup>241</sup> See “Death as Fulfillment: Interview with Gerhard Ruis (April 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1980),” in *Karl Rahner in Dialogue*, 238-240.

<sup>242</sup> See “Old Age and Death: Interview with Erika Ahlbrecht-Meditz (October 21<sup>st</sup>, 1980),” in *Karl Rahner in Dialogue*, 244.

<sup>243</sup> Paul Imhof and Hubert Biallowons, eds., *Karl Rahner in Dialogue*, 244.

<sup>244</sup> Rahner, “The Life of the Dead,” 347.

<sup>245</sup> Phan, *Eternity in Time*, 53f.

definitiveness in time, either by particular acts of freedom, or by the last act of freedom, namely death, then eternity comes to be.<sup>246</sup> Rahner writes:

It is *in* time, as its own mature fruit, that ‘eternity’ comes about. It does not come ‘after’ the time we experience, in order to prolong time: it eliminates time by being released from the time that was for a while, so that the definitive could come about in freedom. Eternity is not an immeasurably long-lasting mode of pure time, but a mode of the spirit and freedom which are fulfilled in time, and hence can only be comprehended in the light of a correct understanding of spirit and freedom.<sup>247</sup>

In brief, eternity is the fulfilled mode of human spirit/freedom. Eternity is not outside, above, after, beyond time, but “created” in time and from time. It is time having acquired final and definitive validity before God through the exercise of freedom.<sup>248</sup>

How do we know that eternity happens in time? To this question, Rahner makes recourse to human knowledge and revelation. As for human knowledge, he mentions great, “inexhaustible and indestructible” love, “incorruptible truth and honesty,” “true moral goodness,” “the absolute value of moral decision,” “the now and forever validity” of spiritual reality. All those realities transcend time, and mediate the presence of something eternal.<sup>249</sup> But if a person is still doubtful that time will dissolve all that is valid in life, then only God’s Word can tell and reveal to him/her the *actuality* of eternity in the middle of time. Rahner writes:

...[E]ternity as the fruit of time means to come before *God* either to reach pure immediacy and closeness to him face to face in the absolute decision of love for him, or to be enveloped in the burning darkness of eternal god-lessness in the definitive closing of one’s heart against him.... Since God knows each man[woman] by name, since *everyone* exists in time before the God who is judgement and salvation, everyone is a man[woman] of eternity, not just the enlightened spirits of human history. The theology of St. John makes it clear that the existence of eternity is seen as inserted in time, and that hence eternity grows out of time and is not just the afterthought of a reward appended to time.<sup>250</sup>

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<sup>246</sup> Phan, *Eternity in Time*, 55.

<sup>247</sup> Rahner, “The Life of the Dead,” 347.

<sup>248</sup> Phan, *Eternity in Time*, 56.

<sup>249</sup> Rahner, “The Life of the Dead,” 348-350.

<sup>250</sup> Rahner, “The Life of the Dead,” 351

In a sense, eternity can be experienced as the transcendental aspect of time, and eschatology, the transcendental aspect of our present. Classical theology suggests that only after death, the soul will come before God to be judged, to be punished or rewarded, and wait for the resurrection of the body, and then eternal life of the human whole begins. Rahner, in the light of Johannine Gospel, suggests the eschatological aspect of the here and now. For him, it is right in time that we humans are standing before God, to be judged by God, and to receive our eternal reward or damnation, both soul and body. This vision discloses the unfathomable depth and richness of our life, however trivial and banal it may appear.

Later, in “Eternity from Time,” Rahner continues to maintain this vision. He suggests three hints of eternity in and from time within our experience. First, we have experiences in which changing phenomena are manifestations of something permanent, which “persists as the same reality, sustaining the changing appearances, brings them together into a totality, into a history.”<sup>251</sup> The history of a flower or of our own lives can be examples. Second, eternity is experienced mentally, when we gather past, present, and future together, binding them into a unity and shape. Such experience, as Rahner notes, has “a peculiar superiority over time.” It is “an event intimating eternity.”<sup>252</sup> Third, eternity is experienced when we make a free decision that concerns the whole person. In that decision, when self-disposal is irrevocable, something definitive is achieved in time. “Here, time really creates eternity and eternity is experienced in time.”<sup>253</sup>

What about the eternity that we, Christians, hope to reach as our definitive life beyond death? To this question, Rahner admits his ignorance:

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<sup>251</sup> Rahner, “Eternity from Time,” *TI* 19: 169-177 (172).

<sup>252</sup> Rahner, “Eternity from Time,” 173f.

<sup>253</sup> Rahner, “Eternity from Time,” 174f.

[W]e cannot positively imagine here the concreteness of our eternal life. We know, it is true, that it will be an existence and life that has God himself in himself as its content, a life that implies love, limitless knowledge, supreme happiness, and so on. But how all this can be experienced in the concreteness of a state beyond time, what is the meaning of transfigured corporeality, eternal fellowship with the redeemed, and so on: this is something that we cannot concretely imagine or picture to ourselves here and now.<sup>254</sup>

In short, for Rahner, eternity is the definitive state of the moral and free act of our life taken as a whole. In a lifetime, we make ourselves the person we will be in eternity. This vision reveals the grandeur of our everyday actions, even though they seem mediocre. In the light of the Christian proclamation, Rahner makes two consoling conclusions. First, if our everyday life “is lived in faith, hope, and love,” then “eternity truly occurs...., since it has received God himself.” Second, though “timeless definitive perdition” is a possibility, it is not equal to salvation, because of “the victory of the love of God, who bestows himself in and through our freedom.” God’s love causes and guarantees that our brief, passing time creates “an eternity not made up out of time.” But that “eternity, born from time, is something other than what can readily be seen here and now.”<sup>255</sup>

A couple of remarks can be made here regarding Rahner’s thought of eternity in time. On the one hand, such thought is fascinating. It highlights the value of human freedom as well as the working of God’s grace within that freedom. It reveals the transcendental aspect of our everyday lives and connects our humble lives to our eternal destiny with God. In a sense, it encourages us to commit ourselves to a life of faith, hope, and love through which we taste in advance eternal life, which is still unfolding. On the other hand, Rahner’s connection of eternity in time with freedom also gives rise to some questions: How should we conceive of God’s eternity and its connection with time? How about those who die prematurely, before they can exercise freedom?

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<sup>254</sup> Rahner, “Eternity from Time,” 176.

<sup>255</sup> Rahner, “Eternity from Time,” 177.

How about lives not clearly “black or white,” but “gray” at death? Those questions are not easy to answer, and it may also call for our further thoughts.

### **5. Summary, Comparison, and Conclusion**

Rahner’s reflections on eschatology are rich, intensive, and well connected with other parts of his eschatology and theology.<sup>256</sup> A discussion of his thought on the immortality of the soul apart from other themes seems inadequate. However, given the limit of this chapter, it may be sufficient to have a summary of what Rahner thinks of the subject matter. A comparison between Rahner and Ratzinger’s thoughts will help us see their convergence and divergence and make some preliminary conclusions regarding contemporary Catholic understanding of the soul and its immortality.

Rahner’s thought on the immortality of the soul springs from his anthropology through Christology into eschatology. The human being is a unity of spirit and matter, soul and body. Metaphysical distinction between them can be made, but existential separation is impossible. Because of this indissoluble unity, both the soul and body refer to the whole person, viewed from different angles. The soul is immortal when it is assumed by the Word of God, when it freely “allows” the Word to dwell within it in the earthly life. The gift of immortality received through the union with the Word in life overflows definitively into eternal life through death. Beyond death, the soul in its eternity is not completely cut off from the cosmos; instead, it has a new manner of presence and a more comprehensive relation to the world at large.

Though Rahner’s vision is quite interesting and coherent, it also elicits several questions, particularly in regard to the hypotheses of the pancosmicity of the soul and eternity in time. Peter Phan and I have raised some questions above, and such questions call for further investigations.

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<sup>256</sup> As Peter Phan works out, Rahner wrote about seventy articles relevant for eschatology within his *Theological Investigations*. See Phan, *Eternity in Time*, 254-256.

But after all, we must agree with Rahner, that we do not have answers to every question regarding the beyond. Why? Because “we are actually going to the unknown, the unimaginable, and properly speaking, know only that it is filled with the incomprehensibility of God and his love.” Thus, “it is sufficient to accept for ourselves now the incomprehensibility of our eternal life and nevertheless go on hoping and trusting.”<sup>257</sup>

Rahner and Ratzinger share substantial similarities regarding the soul and its immortality. Both of them draw on Thomistic anthropology, in which the spiritual soul is the only form of the body. With that concept of soul, they both emphasize the unity of the human person as long as he/she lives on earth. In addition, both of them maintain the theological-Christological character in the Christian understanding of immortality. The soul does not possess a natural, substantialistic immortality but receives it as a gift in the community with God through the Word/Christ. Last but not least, both of them underline the existential character of the immortality through hearing and obedience to the Word, through faith in Jesus Christ, through a truthful and honest life in fellowship with others.

To some extent, Rahner and Ratzinger diverge in regard to death and the afterlife. Ratzinger seems to accept the separation of the soul from the body, though he leaves a couple of hints of their possible relationship beyond death. As for time of the dead, Ratzinger does not accept the soul’s immediate entry into eternity and suggests *memoria*-time as proper for the soul in the intermediate state. Meanwhile, Rahner tries to maintain the unity of the human person by proposing the pancosmicity of the soul. He also suggests a person’s entry into eternity, created in and from time. In a way, Rahner seems to go further than Ratzinger in defining the state of the soul beyond death, though such “going further” also elicits questions.

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<sup>257</sup> Rahner, “Eternity from Time,” 176.

Methodologically, both Ratzinger and Rahner's explanations are helpful for a better understanding of the doctrine of the immortality of the soul. Ratzinger's account appears more "traditional" and can be thought of as a typical attempt of *ressourcement*. As we have seen, Ratzinger approaches the subject matter biblically and historically. He leads us back to the biblical sources of the doctrine, from which we can formulate for ourselves a correct understanding of the tradition. With Ratzinger's approach, we can defend the doctrine as part of the ancient Jewish and early Christian faith, which still has significance for a renewed Christian life here and gives hope for the future. Meanwhile, Rahner's thought on the same topic seems more "up-to-date." It represents an attempt of *aggiornamento* – making Christian faith intelligible to modern Christians and people at large. As E. Vacek observes, Rahner often starts with a "somewhat narrow view" about a Christian teaching and ends up with "a more expansive, inclusivistic perspective."<sup>258</sup> Vacek's observation is correct, because Rahner often takes Christian teachings as well as past interpretations of such teachings as starting points. Then, in the light of developments in science and philosophy, in dialogue with cultures and religions, Rahner offers, out of his original thinking, some fresh interpretations of doctrines. The new interpretations either provide answers to certain questions facing the teachings or render such teachings intelligible to contemporary people. Rahner does not consider his interpretations definitive, but a kind of "experiment." But in such experiments, he contributes significantly to the development of dogmatic theology in a new, changing context.

Through Rahner and Ratzinger's discussions, we can make three conclusions regarding the contemporary Catholic understanding of the immortality of the soul. First, the Christian concept of soul is quite distinctive compared with that of Platonism or Aristotelianism. The soul

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<sup>258</sup> Edward Vacek, "Development Within Rahner's Theology," *The Irish Theological Quarterly* 42 (1975): 36-49 (36).

as form is united to the body, and as spirit abides the changes or corruptions of the body. Similarly, the Christian concept of immortality is not so much Hellenistic, but theological and Christological. That immortality is not a native characteristic of the soul, but a gift given by God through Christ to humanity. Second, the doctrine of the immortality of the soul cannot be easily rejected as obsolete or irrelevant. Instead, it must be kept as an expression of a truth of faith in God's abiding self-communication to humanity through the Word/Christ. That truth of faith needs to be purified from misunderstanding spread in popular thinking, with the help of great Christian teachers as well as prominent theologians. Third, the immortality of the soul is, first and foremost, about the present life. It springs from the community with God, with the Word/Christ, with truth and love of neighbors, here and now. If it is properly understood, the doctrine will bring new light and motive for a renewed Christian life, spiritually and ethically. That renewed Christian life guarantees the afterlife, still hidden in the incomprehensible mystery of God.

## CONCLUSION

As I mention in the introduction, this thesis is a personal attempt to re-appropriate the doctrine of the immortality of the soul amid confusion and uncertainty. In the first chapter, I present two contradictory positions concerning the doctrine – one maintained by Christian tradition, and the other, proposed by some nonreductive physicalist theologians. As demonstrated, Christian tradition has maintained the existence of the soul and its survival or immortality in several dogmatic documents. Catholic magisterium even emphasizes the doctrine in question as a truth of faith in the highest order. Meanwhile, physicalist theologians, such as N. Murphy and J. Green, have seriously challenged the doctrine. On the basis of biblical studies, theological unfolding, and scientific advancement, they suggest an abandonment of the concept of soul as well as the immortality of the soul, to support only the body and bodily resurrection. As both the Catholic and physicalist positions claim to be truly biblical, biblical criticism plays a crucial role in the examination of the doctrine.

A thorough investigation into the Scripture reveals the solid foundation of the traditional doctrine, particularly in the Hebrew Scripture. Physicalist theologians often consider the dualistic concept of soul and the immortality of the soul Hellenistic philosophy, an addition to and distortion of the original Hebraic teaching of the body and bodily resurrection. That consideration is not correct. As J. Barr and J. Cooper contend, while the Hebrew Bible generally supports a holistic (but not monistic or physicalist) vision of the human person, it also contains certain texts in which *nephesh*, *neshama* or *ruach* only make sense if they are understood as soul or spirit in the dualistic sense. As A. Segal and mostly C. Pozo argue, the Hebrew Bible also contains texts in which the survival of the soul beyond death is implied. The existence of *rephaim* in Sheol, different from corpses in the tombs, bears witness to ancient Israel's initial

effort of conception of immortality. The development of the concept of Sheol with levels and retributions and the differentiation of Sheol from heaven partly laid the foundation for early Christian belief in the afterlife, which blossomed into the doctrine on the immortality of the soul and the immediate recompense after death in High Middle Ages.

The last chapter provides a Catholic understanding of the immortality of the soul by making recourse to the thoughts of J. Ratzinger and K. Rahner. Both theologians accept the Thomistic *anima forma corporis* as legitimate for an understanding of the human person. Both recognize the immortality of the soul, not as a natural survival of bodily death, but as a gift that springs from the dialogue, the relationship with God through Christ. The dialogical or relational, theological or Christological immortality begins in the present life. Faith in God and Christ, openness to truth, obedience to the voice of conscience, fellowship and love of neighbors, all constitute the soul's immortality here and now. But the immortality of the soul is not limited to the present life. It springs from this life into the afterlife through death. How would the soul be in the afterlife? Ratzinger and Rahner provide seemingly different answers. Ratzinger suggests the soul's abiding ordination to matter, its communion with the saints in the body of Christ, and *memoria*-time as solutions, while Rahner suggests the pancosmicity of the soul and eternity in/from time. If we look closely, Ratzinger and Rahner's suggestions have certain points in common. However, both suggestions lead to new questions and call for further thoughts.

From the discussions above, we can conclude that the traditional doctrine of the immortality of the soul can be defended biblically and theologically, despite the challenges raised by contemporary non-reductive physicalism. This is the answer I want to find out for myself in this project. Yet, the process leading to this conclusion also reveals to me one issue in

theological anthropology that needs further attention, and another issue in eschatology that seems very exciting for further study.

First, regarding anthropology, Christianity has maintained the unity of the body and soul since its early times. It has also defined the soul as *form* of the body and asserted the immortality of the soul since High Middle Ages. In a sense, Christianity has a “quite developed” theology of the soul. But what is the body? What is its nature? How is the relationship between the soul and the body? It seems that Catholic magisterium does not provide enough definitive teaching regarding those issues. This lack of definitive teaching creates an imbalance. The challenge raised by nonreductive physicalism is a good chance for Catholic theologians and Church magisterium to think more about the body and strike a fair balance in theological anthropology.

Second, regarding eschatology, Christianity has been facing two difficulties for centuries: the separated soul and time beyond death. Prominent theologians such as Ratzinger and Rahner have offered their solutions, which in turn give rise to further interesting questions. One of them is the relationship between the soul and matter or the cosmos after death. As Ratzinger observes, “the soul can never completely leave behind its relationship with matter.”<sup>259</sup> As Rahner suggests, the soul after death “enters into a much closer, more intimate relationship to the universe as a whole.”<sup>260</sup> Then, what is meant by this relationship? How can it be realized? What is the matter with which the soul has relationship, according to Ratzinger? Does this relationship have anything to do with “the communion of saints” and “the body of Christ?” Questions of this sort usually fall outside the line of inquiry taken by mainstream theology. Part of the reason is the presupposition that the soul after death is cut off from matter and becomes a-cosmic. But if it is not the case, then there will be an exciting realm for us to do research.

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<sup>259</sup> Ratzinger, *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life*, 179.

<sup>260</sup> Rahner, *On the Theology of Death*, 27. Cf. Rahner, “Current Problems in Christology,” *TI* 1:149-213 (195).

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