

Survival Of The Soul A Historical Glimpse Of The Belief In The Survival Of The Soul

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Samuele Bacchiocchi, Ph. D.
Professor of Theology, Andrews University

Dear Members of the Endtime Issues Forum:

The previous three essays focused on the deception of conscious life after death that is spreading today like wildfire, due to such factors as the traditional dualistic view of human nature, the polished image of mediums and psychics, the sophisticated "scientific" research into near-death experiences, and the popular New Age channeling craze with the alleged spirits of the past. We noted that we are witnessing today the unprecedented fulfillment of the warning penned by Ellen White over a century ago: **"Through the two great errors, the immortality of the soul and Sunday sacredness, Satan will bring the people under his deceptions"** (Great Controversy, p. 588).

In the previous essay (Endtime Issues No. 3) we have seen that the Biblical view of human nature is wholistic, consisting of an indivisible person where the soul is the animating principle of the body. We have found that creation tells us that originally the whole human nature was conditionally immortal. The Fall informs us that the whole human nature became unconditionally mortal. Redemption reassures us that God has made provision for the whole human nature to be morally renewed in this present life and physically restored in the world to come. This is God's glorious plan for our human nature and destiny; a plan that embraces the creation, redemption and final restoration of the whole human nature as well as the whole planet.

This essay is divided into two parts. The first part (Endtime Issues No. 4) briefly reviews the history of the belief in the survival of the soul, focusing especially on recent developments that have revived the notion of conscious existence after death. We shall see that spiritualism, the study of near-death experiences, and the channeling (promoted by the New Age Movement, especially through the influence of actress Shirley Maclaine) have all contributed to promoting the view that death is not the cessation of life, but a transition to a different form of existence.

The second part (Endtime Issues No. 5) to be posted next week, examines the Biblical understanding of the nature of death. Does the Bible teach that death is the separation of the immortal soul from the mortal body? Or, does the Bible teach that death is the termination of life for the whole person, body and soul? In other words, is death according to the Bible the cessation of life for the whole person or the transition to a new form of life for the immortal component of our being? These are some of the questions we plan to address in the next essay.

A HISTORICAL GLIMPSE OF THE BELIEF IN THE SURVIVAL OF THE SOUL

This essay is excerpted from chapter 4 of my book *Immortality or Resurrection? A Biblical Study of Human Nature and Destiny*. The book has been favorably reviewed by over 50 scholars of all denominations. If you do not have a copy of this timely book, feel free to contact me. We will be glad to mail you a copy immediately.

Throughout human history, people have refused to accept the finality that death brings to life. Death brings an unacceptable, sudden interruption to one's work, plans, and relationships. Though the inscription on many tomb stones often reads "Rest in Peace," the truth of the matter is that most people do not welcome the peaceful rest of the

grave. They would rather be alive and productive. Thus, it is not surprising that the subject of death and afterlife always has been a matter of intense concern and speculation. After all, the death rate is still one per person. Each of us at the appointed time will face the grim reality of death.

Today we live in a death-denying culture. People live as if death did not exist. Doctors and hospital personnel generally think that death is something that should not happen. Regardless of how miserable people may feel, they usually respond to "How are you?" with an artificial smile, saying: "Just fine." When we can no longer maintain the facade, we begin to wonder, "What is going to happen to me now?"

Even at the end of life, we tend to deny the reality of death by embalming the dead and using cosmetics to restore the corpse to a natural, healthy look. We dress the dead in suits and gowns as if they were going to a party instead of returning to dust. A special mourning color that has been prevalent in most countries, such as white or black, is gradually disappearing, because people do not want to believe that death is an intrusion that terminates their life.

In recent years, courses on death and dying have been introduced in many colleges and high schools. Some colleges and universities also offer courses on the occult and other phenomena such as near-death experiences which allegedly offer scientific evidence for life beyond death. All of these trends suggest there is a renewed interest today to unravel the mystery of death and to gain reassurance about some form of life after death.

"You Will Not Die." To set the stage for the study of the Biblical view of death and of the state of the dead in the following essays, it may be helpful to look briefly at the history of the belief in the survival of the soul after death. The serpent's lie, "You will not die" (Gen 3:4) has lived on throughout human history to our time. The belief in some form of life after death has been held in practically every society. The need for reassurance and certainty in the light of the challenge that death poses to human life has led people in every culture to formulate beliefs in some form of afterlife.

In the history of Christianity, death has been defined generally as the separation of the immortal soul from the mortal body. This belief in the survival of the soul at the death of the body has been expressed in various ways and given rise to such corollary doctrines as prayer for the dead, indulgences, purgatory, intercession of the saints, the eternal torment of hell, etc. Since the time of Augustine (A. D. 354-430), Christians have been taught that between death and resurrection—a period known as "the intermediate state"—the souls of the dead either enjoy the beatitude of Paradise or suffer the affliction of Purgatory or Hell. The disembodied condition of the soul is supposed to continue until the resurrection of the body which will bring completion to the salvation of the saints and to the damnation of the wicked.

During the Middle Ages, the fear of death and speculation about what happens to the soul after death gripped the imagination of people and inspired literary and theological works. Dante's *Divina Commedia* is only a small fragment of the immense literary and artistic works which graphically depict the torments of the sinners' soul in Purgatory or Hell, and the blessedness of the saints' soul in Paradise.

The belief in the survival of the soul contributed to the development of the doctrine of Purgatory, a place where the souls of the dead are purified by suffering the temporal punishment of their sins before ascending to Paradise. This widely believed doctrine burdened the living with emotional and financial stress. As Ray Anderson puts it, "Not only did one have to earn enough to live, but also to pay off the 'spiritual mortgage' for the dead as well."¹

Reformers' Rejection of Purgatory. The Protestant Reformation started largely as a reaction against the medieval superstitious beliefs about the afterlife in Purgatory. The Reformers rejected as unbiblical and unreasonable the practice of buying

and selling indulgences to reduce the stay of the souls of departed relatives in Purgatory. However, they continued to believe in the conscious existence of souls either in Paradise or Hell during the intermediate state. Calvin expressed this belief far more aggressively than Luther.² In his treatise *Psychopannychia*,³ which he wrote against the Anabaptists who taught that souls simply sleep between death and resurrection, Calvin argues that during the intermediate state the souls of the believers enjoy the bliss of heaven; those of the unbelievers suffer the torments of hell. At the resurrection, the body is reunited with the soul, thus intensifying the pleasure of paradise or the pain of hell. Since that time, this doctrine of the intermediate state has been accepted by most Protestant churches and is reflected in various Confessions.⁴

The Westminster Confession (1646), regarded as the definitive statement of Presbyterian beliefs in the English-speaking world, states: "The body of men after death return to dust, and see corruption; but their souls (which neither die nor sleep) having an immortal subsistence, immediately return to God who gave them. The souls of the righteous, being then made perfect in holiness, are received unto the highest heavens, where they behold the face of God in light and glory, waiting for the full redemption of their bodies: and the souls of the wicked are cast into hell, where they remain in torment and utter darkness, reserved to the judgment of the great day."⁵ The confession continues declaring as unbiblical the belief in purgatory.

By rejecting as unbiblical the popular superstitions regarding the suffering of souls in purgatory, the Reformers paved the way for a reexamination of human nature by the rationalistic philosophers of the Enlightenment. These philosophers did not immediately abandon the notion of the immortality of the soul. The first significant attack on the belief in the survival of life after death came from David Hume (A. D. 1711-1776), an English philosopher and historian. He questioned the immortality of the soul, because he believed that all knowledge comes from the sensory perceptions of the body.⁶ Since the death of the body marks the end of all sensory perception, it is impossible for the soul to have conscious existence after the death of the body.

The decline in the belief in an afterlife reached its climax by the mid-eighteenth century as atheism, skepticism, and rationalism spread in France, England, and America. The publication of Darwin's *Origin of Species* (1859) inflicted another blow on supernaturalism and especially on the immortality of the soul. If human life is the product of spontaneous generation, then human beings have no divine spirit or immortal soul in them. Darwin's theories challenged people to seek "scientific" evidence for supernatural phenomena, such as the survival of the soul.

Spiritualism and the Revival of Interest in the Soul. Public interest in the life of the soul after death was soon revived with the publication of *The Coming Race* (1860) by Bulmer-Lytton. This book influenced a host of writers who contributed to making occult practices fashionable in British society. In America, the public interest in communicating with the souls of the dead was ignited by the sEances held by the Fox sisters who lived in Hydesdale, New York. On March 31, 1848, they conducted a sEance in which the alleged spirit of a murdered man, who called himself William Duesler, informed them that if they dug in the basement, they would find his corpse. This proved to be true; a body was found.

Since the spirits of the dead at the Fox house communicated by a rapping sound on the table, "table rapping" sEances became fashionable all across America and England as a way of communicating with the spirit of the dead. This phenomenon attracted the attention of numerous learned persons, who in 1882 organized the Society for Psychical Research (SPR). Henry Sedgwich, a noted philosopher at Cambridge, became instrumental in gathering into the society some of the most influential people of the day, including William Gladstone (former British prime minister) and Arthur Balfour (future prime minister).

An important outcome of the SPR movement is represented by the work of Joseph Banks Rhine, who in 1930 began researching conscious life after death. Rhine

was trained as a biologist at the University of Chicago and later became involved with the SPR while teaching at Harvard University. He redefined and relabeled the subjects that the SPR had researched for years by coining such terms as "extrasensory perception" (ESP), "para-normal psychology," or "parapsychology." This was designed to give scientific credibility to the study of the afterlife. Later Rhine, together with William McDougal who served as president for both the British and American SPR groups, set up a Department for Psychic Studies at Duke University. The Russians conducted their own psychic experiments. Their findings were published in a popularized form in *Psychic Discoveries Behind the Iron Curtain* by Sheila Ostrander and Lynn Schroeder (1970).

In the late 1960s, the late Episcopal bishop James A. Pike gave new and widespread attention to the idea of communicating with the spirits of the dead by communicating on a regular basis with his deceased son. Today our society is flooded with mediums and psychics who advertise their services nationwide through TV, magazines, radio, and newspapers. In their book *At the Hour of Death*, K. Osis and E. Haraldson write: "Spontaneous experiences of contact with the dead are surprisingly widespread. In a national opinion poll . . . 27 per cent of the American population said they had encounters with dead relatives, . . . widows and widowers . . . reported encounters with their dead spouses twice as often-51 per cent."⁷ Communication with the spirits of the dead is not just an American phenomenon. Surveys conducted in other countries reveal a similar high percentage of people who engage the services of mediums to communicate with the spirit of their deceased loved ones.⁸

In their book *Immortality or Extinction?* Paul and Linda Badham, both professors at St. David University in Wales, devote a chapter to "The Evidence from Psychical Research" to support their belief in conscious life after death. They wrote: "Some people believe that direct contact with the dead can be achieved through mediums who allegedly have the ability, while in a state of trance, to transmit messages between the dead and the living. Belief in the reality of such communications is the lifeblood of the Spiritualist Churches, and mourners who consult mediums are often impressed by the convincing descriptions of departed loved-ones which the mediums give. On occasion a medium may also show knowledge of the deceased's former life."⁹

The Badhams acknowledge that in many cases mediums are charlatans who base their communications on "acute observation and intelligent guesswork."¹⁰ Yet, they believe that there is "genuine evidence for the human personality's survival of bodily death."¹¹ They support their belief by reporting the cases of several members of the Society for Psychical Research (SPR), who after their death began sending messages to living members of the SPR to prove that they had survived death.¹²

It is not our intent to dispute the ability of some mediums to receive and transmit messages from spirits. The question is whether such messages are from the spirits of the dead or from the spirits of Satan. We address this question later in the next essay, in conjunction with our study of King Saul's consultation of the medium of Endor (1 Sam 28:7-25). At this juncture, it suffices to note that spiritualism still plays a major role today in fostering the belief in the survival of the soul after death. People who through mediums have been able to communicate with the alleged spirits of their deceased loved ones have reason to believe in the immortality of the soul.

Near-Death Experiences. Another significant development of our time, which has contributed to promote belief in the survival of the soul, is the study of "near-death experiences." Such studies are based on reports from people who have been resuscitated from a close encounter with death, and from doctors and nurses who have recorded the deathbed experiences of some of their patients.

The experiences reported by persons who have had a close encounter with death often parallel what many believe to be the life of the soul in Paradise. Though no two reports are the same, some of the common characteristics are: the impression of peacefulness, the sensation of being pulled very rapidly through a dark space of some kind, floating in a weightless, spiritual body, the awareness of being in the presence of a

spiritual being, an encounter with a bright light, often identified with Jesus Christ or an angel, and a vision of a city of light.¹³ Such experiences are interpreted as proof that at death the soul leaves the body and lives in a disembodied condition.

Reports of near-death experiences are not new. They can be found in Classical literature, such as the *History of the English Church and People* by the Venerable Bede, the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, *Primitive Culture* by Sir Edward Burnett Tylor, and the *Republic* by Plato.¹⁴ In the *Republic*, Plato gives a remarkable account of a near-death experience, which he uses to substantiate the belief in the immortality of the soul.

He wrote: "Er, the son of Armenius, by race a Pamphylian. He once upon a time was slain in battle, and when the corpses were taken up on the tenth day already decayed, was found intact, and having been brought home, at the moment of his funeral, on the twelfth day as he lay upon the pyre, revived, and after coming to life related what, he said, he had seen in the world beyond. He said that when his soul went forth from his body he journeyed with a great company and that they came to a mysterious region where there were two openings side by side in the earth, and above and over against them in the heaven two others, and that judges were sitting between these, and that after every judgment they bade the righteous journey to the right and upward through the heaven with tokens attached to them in front of the judgment passed upon them, and the unjust to take the road to the left and downward, they too wearing behind signs of all that had befouled them, and that when he himself drew near they told him that he must be the messenger to mankind to tell them of that other world, and they charged him to give ear and to observe everything in the place. . . . Yet how and in what way he returned to the body he said he did not know, but suddenly recovering his sight he saw himself at dawn lying on the funeral pyre."¹⁵

Plato concludes his story with this revealing comment: "So the tale was saved. . . . And it will save us if we believe it . . . that the soul is immortal and capable of enduring all the extremes of good and evil."¹⁶ One wonders what kind of salvation the belief in the immortality of the soul can offer to a person. Survival as a disembodied soul or spirit in an ethereal world hardly compares with the Biblical hope of the resurrection of the whole person to a real life on this planet earth renewed to its original perfection. To this question we return in a later essay which examines the Biblical vision of the world to come.

Studies of Near-Death Experiences. In our time, the study of near-death experiences was largely pioneered by American psychiatrist Raymond A. Moody. His two seminal books, *Life after Life* (1975) and *Reflections on Life after Life* (1977) have generated a multitude of books, articles, and debates that address out-of-body experiences.¹⁷ "More recently, a bibliography of books and articles relevant to near-death experiences has been published, listing two and a half thousand titles."¹⁸

Moody studied 150 persons who had near-death experiences and, in some cases, who clinically were dead. The question is how the data should be interpreted. Moody's publisher asserts that the reports are "actual case histories that reveal there is life after death."¹⁹ Moody himself, however, is far more cautious. He explicitly denies that he tried "to construct a proof of survival of bodily death," even though he regards the data as "highly significant" for such a belief.²⁰ He leaves open the possibility of conceiving of near-death experiences as intimations of immortality or merely as the result of terminal physiological events.

It is not our intent to examine the alleged probative value of near-death experiences for the belief in the survival of the soul. Our normative authority for defining human nature is not the subjective near-death experiences of people, but the objective revelation God has provided us in His Word (2 Pet 1:19). Thus, only three basic observations about near-death experiences are considered here.

First, there is the problem of defining death. The Editor of *Lancet*, a journal dedicated to medical research, points out that "only a deliberate use of obsolete definitions of death can enable one to claim that anybody has, under clinical conditions, returned to

tell us what lies beyond death, for by working definition, periodically updated, death is just beyond the point from which anybody can return to tell us anything."²¹ Similarly, Professor Paul Kurts comments, "We have no hard evidence that the subjects had in fact died. Such a proof is not impossible to obtain: *rigor mortis* is one sign and brain death is another. What the accounts actually describe is 'dying process or near-death experience, not death itself.'"²²

Second, we need to remember, as Paul and Linda Badham observe, that "any person hovering between life and death must be suffering profound physical and psychological stress. A brain starved of oxygen, drugged by hallucinatory painkillers, or excited by fever is hardly likely to function properly and who knows what visions could be accounted for by its disturbed conditions?"²³ Some research has shown the similarity that exists between near-death experiences and the effects caused by psychedelic drugs. "Modern consciousness-research has shown that these similarities can be reproduced by drugs in psychedelic sessions. These experiences, thus, tend to belong to the continuum of psychic experiences, which have proved, not life after death, but that the relation between the conscious self and the embodied self is more complex than previously thought."²⁴

Lastly, how can it be established that near-death experiences are "real experiences," rather than the product of the patients' own mind? And why is it that nearly all the reports of near-death experiences concern happiness and heavenly fulfillment, but no glimpses of the fiery torments of hell? It is evident that when people are dying they prefer to dream about the bliss of heaven rather than the suffering of hell. But even the vision of heaven depends largely upon one's religious background.

Karlis Osis and Erlendur Haraldsson evaluated the reports of more than 1,000 deathbed experiences in the USA and India. They found that the vision of the Hindu patients was typically Indian, while that of the American was Western and Christian. For example, one college-educated Hindu woman had the experience of being brought to heaven on a cow, while an American patient who had prayed to St. Joseph encountered her patron saint in the experience.²⁵ Such reports about afterlife experiences reflect the personal beliefs of the patients. What they experienced in the process of dying was most likely conditioned by their personal beliefs.

We should always remember that deathbed or near-death experiences are experiences of people who are still alive or whose mind have regained consciousness. Whatever they experience under such circumstances is still part of their present life and not of life after death. The Bible does report the cases of seven of people who were raised from the dead (1 Kings 17:17-24; 2 Kings 4:25-37; Luke 7:11-15; 8:41-56; Acts 9:36-41; 20:9-11), but none of them had an afterlife experience to share.

Lazarus was brought back to life after being clinically dead for four days did not report any exciting out-of-the-body experiences. The reason is simple. Death according to the Bible is the cessation of life of the whole person, body and soul. There is no form of conscious existence between death and resurrection. The dead rest unconsciously in their tombs until Christ will call them forth on the glorious day of His coming.

New Age Movement. The belief in conscious life after death is popularized today especially by the New Age Movement.²⁶ Defining this popular movement is not easy, because it represents a network of organizations and individuals who share common values and a common vision. These values are derived from Eastern/occult mysticism and a pantheistic world view according to which all share in the One who is God. They envision a coming "new age" of peace and mass enlightenment, known as the "Age of Aquarius."

New Agers may differ on when and how the New Age begins, but they all agree that they can hasten the new order by becoming involved in the political, economic, social, and spiritual life. According to some social analysts, the New Age Movement has become

a major cultural trend of our time. Elliot Miller defines it as "a third major social force vying with traditional Judeo-Christian religion and secular humanism for cultural dominance."²⁷

For the New Agers, the ultimate reality is a pantheistic God manifested as an impersonal, infinite consciousness, and force. Human beings are part of the divine consciousness and are separated from God only in their own consciousness. By means of specific techniques, like meditation, chanting, ecstatic dancing, and sensory deprivations, New Agers seek to experience oneness with God. Thus, salvation for the New Ager is equated with self-realization through special spiritual techniques.

The Channeling Craze. An important aspect of the New Age Movement is the alleged communication with departed human and extra-human intelligences. This phenomenon is known as "channeling," but it has been rightly called "Spiritism New Age Style."²⁸ Miller rightly notes that "spiritism has played a part historically in virtually all forms of paganism. Those who have allowed spirits to use their bodies in this way have been called a variety of names, including 'shaman,' 'witch doctor,' 'medicine man,' 'oracle,' 'fortune-teller,' and 'seer.' In our culture, the common term has been 'medium,' but in recent years it has been largely abandoned in favor of 'channel' or 'channeler,' reflecting, in part, a desire to break free from negative stereotypes that have come to be associated with mediums over the years."²⁹

A "channeler" is essentially a person who claims to be the recipient of teachings and wisdom from the great spirits of the past. The channeling business is booming in all the major American cities. According to the Los Angeles *Times*, in a decade the number of known professional channelers in Los Angeles has increased from two to over one thousand in a decade.³⁰ This is compelling channelers to employ Madison Avenue psychology to sell their services.

An advertisement by Taryn Krive, a popular channeler, gives a good idea of the services they provide: "Through Taryn, a number of Spirit Guides bring forth their teachings and messages. They will answer your questions regarding this life and other lives. They will help you identify your life lessons and unblock your highest potential for living and loving. . . . Meet your Spirit Guides. Learn to recall your past lives and release their influences from the present. Develop your channeling abilities (conscious channeling, automatic writing, trance channeling)."³¹

The person who has played a leading role in promoting the New Age Movement, especially channeling, is the famous actress Shirley Maclaine. Her books have sold over five million copies. The *Out on a Limb* mini-series sparked an unprecedented interest in channeling. Maclaine takes seriously her role as the chief evangelist of the New Age. Following her TV mini-series, she held two-day, nationwide seminars called "Connecting with the Higher Self." Later she used the proceeds from the seminars to establish a 300 acre spiritual center near Pueblo, Colorado. The purpose of the center is to provide a trusted place where people can communicate with higher spirits.³²

An important factor which has contributed to the success of the New Age is its claim to connect people not only with their deceased loved ones, but also with the Great Spirits of the past. As parapsychologist and channeler Alan Vaughan points out: "The thrill, the immediacy of that contact with another consciousness, may be the driving force behind the phenomenal growth of the practice of channeling."³³

Death as Transition to Higher Existence. Communicating with the spirits of the dead is based on the belief that death is not the end of life, but merely a transition to a higher plane of existence which makes it possible in time to reincarnate either on earth or elsewhere. Virginia Essene, who claims to be speaking as a channel for "Jesus," states: "Death is an automatic and nearly immediate entrance into a greater sphere of learning, growth, and service to which you are well-accustomed already. You simply live at that higher level of purpose, joy and understanding."³⁴

In many ways, the New Age's view of death as the immediate entrance into a higher sphere of living reflects the traditional Christian belief in the conscious survival of the soul at death. Both beliefs can be traced back to the first lie uttered by the serpent in the Garden of Eden: "You will not die" (Gen 3:4). This lie has lived on through the centuries with devastating effects on both Christian and non-Christian religions.

In his penetrating analysis of the New Age Movement, Elliot Miller keenly observes: "It has been rightly noted by many Christian observers that the core New Age/channeling doctrines, 'You can be as God,' and 'You shall not die,' were first uttered by the serpent in the Garden of Eden (Gen 3:4-5). Embraced then, this 'gospel' produced all of the world's misery. Embraced now, it will make all that God has done in Christ to remedy the situation of no avail to the individual in question."³⁵

Miller is right in noting that the belief in innate immortality promoted by the New Age today makes of no avail Christ's provision of salvation, since people think they already have the resources to enter into a higher level of existence after death. Unfortunately, Miller fails to realize that the success of the New Age in promoting such a belief is largely due to the traditional Christian dualistic view of human nature. Christians who believe that the body is mortal and the soul immortal have no major difficulty in accepting the New Age view of death as the transition into a higher sphere of living. After all, the latter largely corresponds to the belief in the conscious existence of the saints' souls in the bliss of Paradise.

Conclusion. The preceding survey shows how Satan's lie, "You shall not die" (Gen 3:4) has lived on in different forms throughout human history until our time. While during the Middle Ages, belief in the afterlife was promoted through literary and artistic, superstitious representations of the bliss of the saints and the torments of the sinners, today such a belief is propagated in a more sophisticated way through mediums, psychics, "scientific" research into near-death experiences, and New Age channeling with the spirits of the past. Satan's methods have changed, but his objective is still the same: make people believe the lie that no matter what they do they will not die but become like gods by living for ever. Our only protection against such a deception is through a clear understanding of what the Bible teaches about the nature of death and the state of the dead. To these questions we shall turn our attention in the next essay (Endtime issues No. 5).

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Contact Information

Samuele Bacchiocchi, Ph. D.
Professor of Theology and Church History
Andrews University
4990 Appian Way, Berrien Springs, MI 49103

Phone (616) 471-2915 Fax (616) 471-4013
E-mail: sbacchiocchi@qtm.net or sbacchiocchi@csi.com
Web site: <http://www.biblicalperspectives.com>