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Death, Immortality and Resurrection: A Response to John Yates, 'The Origin of the Soul'

Mr. Hannah, who is Academic Dean and Professor of Biblical Literature and Theology in the Canadian Nazarene College in Winnipeg, takes a further look at the question of the nature of the soul in relation to biblical teaching.

I should like to respond to the fascinating article by John C. Yates (*EQ* 61:1 (1989), 121–140), 'The Origin of the Soul: New Light on an Old Question'. The aim of this response is not to oppose his perspective but rather to draw out some of the ramifications of his views for a biblical view of immortality and resurrection.

The basic orientation of Mr. Yates is philosophical/theological. The basic orientation of the present response is biblical/theological. It is widely agreed among biblical theologians today that the traditional Christian understanding of a body/soul dualism is no longer a tenable position to hold. It is obvious from Mr. Yates' article that traditional philosophical and theological approaches to the issue are likewise resting on shaky ground. Specifically, the older views of Traducianism (the 'soul' is passed on from parent to child) and Creationism (each 'soul' is created *ex nihilo* by God and joined to the new organism) are shown by Yates to be seriously flawed. Neither view is tenable from a biblical or a philosophical perspective.

Yates argues for an 'emergentist view' of the soul's origin. Using certain modern materialist and evolutionary theories of the emergence of 'mind' as a point of reference, he suggests his own version of the emergence of the soul in the human organism. Citing specifically the Christian philosopher William Hasker's views as catalytic,[1] Yates argues for 'a new form of generationism'

[1] W. Hasker, 'The Souls of Beasts and Men', *Religious Studies*, 10, 1974, 256–277; 'Emergentism', *Religious Studies*, 18, 1982, 273–488. Hasker uses the example of a magnet producing its magnetic field as being analogous to the organism generating 'its conscious field'.

which sees the 'soul' as emerging from 'complex arrangements of organic molecules [which] generate mental fields over and above matter itself.'[2]

> . . . Only in man does the central nervous system possess a degree of complexity sufficiently developed to produce a 'soul-field' with the highest mental capacities of self-consciousness, abstract thought and linguistic ability . . . . The particular value of this position is that it affirms the existence of mental forces transcending material processes but does not claim that, in the ordinary course of events, these mental phenomena can exist apart from the brain mechanisms that generate them. I am proposing that the immensely complicated configuration . . . which compose the functioning cerebral cortex in man creates a new level of existence (the mind) which possesses genuinely novel properties compared with the levels below it.[3]

Yates goes on to point out that 'the "energy" responsible for the existence of mind comes from the central nervous sytem; but this "energy" is not to be identified with the mind itself whose composition is best described by the vague term "spiritual".'[4]

This is certainly an intriguing and attractive concept of the 'soul'. Yates refers to this view as 'minimal dualism' which is compatible with *development* in a context of human and divine interrelationships. Furthermore, the view is compatible with certain forms of evolution and 'it does not contradict the unitary anthropological emphasis of the Bible.'[5] Simply put, in Yates' view the soul *emerges* out of the human organism and is *not an addition* to the body from without.[6]

The crucial issue in this view of the soul is what happens upon the death of the human organism. Traditional Christianity has assumed the soul to be intrinsically immortal. The soul simply continues to exist after the body dies. Resurrection is the re-uniting of the 'never-dying soul' with a newly-created body. This kind of dualism is recognized by most biblical theologians today as being foreign to the biblical perspective. Oscar Cullmann has

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[2] Yates, 135.
[3] Yates, 136.
[4] Yates, 136.
[5] Yates, 137.
[6] A recent book related to Yates' concept of 'fields' is Eugene Fontinell, *Self, God and Immortality: A Jamesian Investigation* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986). Fontinell investigates the idea of immortality *vis-à-vis* William James' concept of the self in its evolving 'fields' of relationships.
[7] Oscar Cullmann, *Immortality and Resurrection*: Four Essays by O. Cullmann, H. Wolfson, *et al.*, K. Sendahl (ed.) (New York, Macmillan Co., 1965), 18.
[8] Karl Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline*, Harper Torchbooks edition (New York, Harper & Row, 1959), 154.

criticized this traditional view, holding that it is essentially a fundamental denial of death.[7] Similarly, Barth[8] and Thielicke[9] clearly reject a fundamental dualism of body/soul in the traditional sense and hold that resurrection of *the dead* is the Christian hope of immortality. It is obvious that more recent views seems to take death much more seriously and at the same time affirm the true significance of resurrection as the answer to the problem of death.[10]

One of the major concerns Yates has with Hasker's concept of the 'emerging soul' is that its merely physical base would mean the soul's dissolution upon the death of the body.[11] Yates' solution to this problem is to appeal to Karl Rahner's belief that 'all things whether material or immaterial owe their origin and continued existence to God . . .'[12] This view is certainly compatible with the scriptural teaching that ultimately God (through the Son) 'upholds all things by his word of power' (Heb. 1:3—cf. Col. 1:17). According to Yates, therefore, 'this property of self-transcendence cannot be ascribed to secondary causes considered in themselves, but is an ability given to them by God under the influx of his power as primary cause.'[13] In other words, God *enables* the human organism to generate its 'soul-field'.

But what happens at death? Yates' answer is

> that at the point of brain death, the point at which the soul faces non-existence, God exerts an effect identical to that normally produced by the nervous system. That is, one survives physical death because the ongoing generation of the 'soul-field' is now to be attributed to God rather than to the body.[14]

Yates does not speculate on any particulars regarding this transition of sustaining 'energy'.

This view at once raises difficulties and possibilities. The major difficulty would appear to be our understanding of death. Does death really occur for the 'soul'? Is there any hiatus between the

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[9] Helmut Thielicke, *Death and Life*. Trans. by E. H. Schroeder (Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1970), 198.

[10] A corollary to the issue before us is the idea of 'conditional immortality' and the meaning of hell. See on this John W. Wenham, *The Goodness of God* (London, Intervarsity Press, 1974), 27–41; Edward Wm. Fudge, *The Fire That Consumes: A Biblical and Historical Study of Final Punishment* (Fallbrook, California, Verdict Publications, 1982). See also *Themelios*, 11, #2 (Jan. 1986), for three articles which, while rejecting the immortality of the soul, stop short of endorsing conditional immortality.

[11] Yates, 135.

[12] Yates, 138.

[13] Yates, 138.

[14] Yates, 139.

transference of sustaining 'energies' from the body to God's sustaining power? It appears from Yates' description (i.e., that 'the soul faces non-existence') that no break occurs at all. Does the soul only 'face' non existence, or does it in fact momentarily (or longer) *become* non-existent? This is a crucial question for our understanding of three related areas: the meaning of death, the meaning of immortality, and the meaning of resurrection.

The Meaning of Death

The Bible is clear that death occurs because of sin (Gen. 2:17; 3:19; Ezk. 18:20; Rom. 5:12; 6:23; 8:6; 1 Cor. 15:17–22). But what does death mean? For the traditional body/soul dualist death occurs only for the *body*. The soul is immortal and continues (as the true self) to exist in independence of the body. But where is the biblical warrant for this view? And can death really be considered much of a *consequence* at all?

Advocates of the traditional dualistic understanding frequently describe death as a two-fold *separation*; first, separation of the soul from the body, with only the latter ceasing to live; second, the separation of the soul from God, known as 'the second death' (Rev. 2:11; 20:14; cf. Mt. 10:28), with the soul not ceasing to exist. It appears obvious from this traditional view that death, as it is normally understood, refers only to the *physical body*. Death, in any fundamental sense, is therefore redefined as *continued existence* in separation from God. Such a radical re-definition of death is in fact a denial of death—a definition, no doubt, which the 'subtle serpent' of Genesis three would find most appealing!

The Bible takes death much more seriously than traditional dualist exegesis would allow. The solemn sentence upon humankind, 'You are dust, and to dust you shall return' (Gen. 3:19), underlines this. The expulsion from the Garden and 'the tree of life' (Gen. 3), the generally pessimistic view of *sheol* throughout the OT, especially in the Wisdom writings, and the lack of any clear and consistent support in either Testament for an anthropological dualism of a Platonic sort ought, at least, serve as a caution against a ready acceptance of a view which assumes there is something naturally intrinsic in human nature which death cannot touch. Besides, the NT presents death as 'the last enemy' (1 Cor. 15:26) not the liberator of 'a never dying soul'. As Oscar Cullmann put it, 'death is the destruction of *all* life created by God. Therefore it is death and not the body which must be conquered by the resurrection.'[15]

[15] Cullmann, *Immortality*, 19.

It would seem, therefore, that the simple but profound meaning of death is *extinction of life*, a definition which takes terms like 'perish' (1 Cor. 15:18; Jn. 3:16) and 'destruction' (Mt. 10:28; 2 Thes. 1:9) most seriously. Death is loss of *being*, not merely a loss of well-being. As indicated earlier in this essay, Yates does not seem to allow for a serious view of death. In his view it appears merely as a transition. This matter will be considered again in the conclusion of this essay.

The Meaning and Ground of Immortality

The term immortality comes from the Greek, *athanasia*, meaning 'deathlessness', and hence, unending existence, or exemption from death. This term occurs three times in the NT and is usually rendered simply 'immortality' (1 Cor. 15:53, 54; 1 Tim. 6:16). A related word is *aphtharsia*, sometimes rendered 'immortality' or 'incorruption' (Rom. 2:7; 2 Tim. 2:10; 1 Cor. 15:53, 54). The adjective form, 'immortal' or 'incorruptible', occurs in Rom. 1:23 and 1 Tim. 1:17. There is no counterpart to these terms in the Hebrew OT canon.

Nowhere in either Testament is the idea of immortality attributed as a natural quality or right of humankind. Rather, we are told that 'God alone has immortality' (1 Tim. 6:16). The same idea may be inferred from John, chapter one, where the *logos* is the creator, source and bearer of life (*zoē*). The symbol of 'the tree of life' in Genesis surely indicates that immortality is only *potential* to humankind. Furthermore, immortality is to be *sought* (Rom. 2:7) and 'put on' (1 Cor. 15:53). It is, as 'eternal life', the *gift* of God (Rom. 6:23) to be *inherited* (Mt. 19:29) by *knowing* God (Jn. 17:3) *through Christ* (Jn. 14:19, 17:2; Rom. 6:23). In Paul's view immortality is tied solely to the resurrection of Jesus (1 Cor. 15) as the ground and pledge of the believer's hope.

It should be apparent then that the ground of immortality is soteriological and not anthropological. As P. T. Forsyth said, 'a sure belief in immortality does not rest where philosophy puts it, but where religion puts it. It is not founded on the nature of the psychic organism, but on its relation to Another.'[16] This is essentially what is meant in 2 Timothy 1:10: '. . . Christ Jesus [has] abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.' This of course is clearly a conditionalist

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[16] S. Mikolaski, ed. *The Creative Theology of P. T. Forsyth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1969), 249. Forsyth's full treatment of this appears in his *This Life and the Next* (London: Independent Press, 1918).

perspective. But it is not incompatible with Yates' view that the 'soul-field' can continue only as its sustaining energy is transferred from the human organism to God. As the hymnwriter put it:

> '. . . Other refuge have I none;
> Hangs my helpless soul on thee . . . .'

This, then, brings us to consider the meaning and significance of resurrection.

The Meaning and Significance of Resurrection

The idea of resurrection from the dead is predominantly a NT idea. While it is alluded to in the OT[17] and somewhat more clearly in the intertestamental period, it is presented as fundamental to Christian thought in the NT. The two principal terms for resurrection in the NT are *anastasis* and *egeirō*. The former means 'a standing or rising up', while the latter means 'to raise or rouse up'. Both terms are used of Jesus' resurrection and also that of believers. Since both terms occur numerous times (as any Greek lexicon will show) a listing of references here will not be necessary. Forms of both terms occur in an apparently synonymous manner in the fifteenth chapter of 1 Corinthians and elsewhere in the NT. They appear, therefore, to be almost identical in meaning.[18]

If either the resurrection of Jesus or the resurrection of his followers were removed from NT teaching the whole gospel message would be gutted. That the resurrection of Jesus carries incredible soteriological significance is obvious both from the earliest preaching (*kerygma*) in Acts, and from the writings of Paul and others. It is the conviction of the current writer that modern Christians do not begin to give the idea of resurrection the significance it deserves in our theological reflections. Modern Christians certainly do not emphasize it on anywhere near the scale that the NT itself does.

The *locus classicus* on resurrection in the NT is 1 Corinthians, chapter fifteen. It is obvious from Paul's teaching here that the human hope of resurrection is based clearly upon the resurrection of Christ which was instrumental in dealing effectively with the *consequences* of sin and death. The following emphases in 1 Cor. 15 bear this out:

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[17] The clearest reference to resurrection in the OT is Dn. 12:2. Other references which imply it are Is. 26:19; Job 19:25–27; Ps. 16:10 and 49:14–15.

[18] See C. F. Evans, *Resurrection and the New Testament*. Studies in Biblical Theology, 2nd series, #12 (London: SCM Press, 1970), 20ff.

1. Christ died for our sins and was raised (vv. 3–4). The 'gospel' is preached in these very terms (vv. 1–2) and is the basis of their being 'saved' (v. 2).
2. If Christ is not raised they are still in their sins (v. 17).
3. If Christ is not raised those who have died believing in him have 'perished' (v. 18).
4. Christ, being raised, is the 'firstfruits' of a greater harvest to come (vv. 20–23).
5. Death comes through Adam—resurrection comes through Christ (vv. 21–22; cf. v. 45).
6. Because of Christ's resurrection victory over death is assured (vv. 24–28; 54–57).

Paul clearly says here that the resurrection of Jesus from the dead is that which *brings* salvation and *that* not merely as a hope for this present life (v. 19), but salvation for the future which means release from death unto deathlessness (*athanasia*), vv. 53–54. Therefore the implication of this strong soteriological emphasis seems plain: immortality is not a quality intrinsic to man's nature, but rather, that which has been *won* for him by Christ. In other words, resurrection brings immortality,[19] and Christ has brought resurrection (cf. 1 Pet. 1:3–5; Rom. 4:25; 5:10; 6:23; 2 Tim. 1:10; Jn. 14:19). The soteriological and eschatological factors cannot be separated from Paul's treatment of resurrection.[20]

But what does resurrection mean? And when does it occur? The NT is not unequivocal on either question. What can be said with certainty respecting the meaning of resurrection is that it does *not* mean resuscitation as was probably the case of several recorded raisings in the Gospels by Jesus (Jn. 11; Mk. 5; Lk. 7; etc.). The resurrection of Jesus, and ultimately of all are 'in him', can only be described as *a transforming re-creation* to a new somatic existence over which death has no power. That this seems to be an apt description appears from the series of contrasts which Paul makes between the pre-resurrection and post-resurrection states in 1 Corinthians fifteen. In response to the question, 'How are the dead raised?' (v. 35) Paul first makes three fundamental points:

(1) What is sown does not come to life unless it dies (v. 36);

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[19] 'It is a case of resurrection to immortality or immortality through resurrection. To deny resurrection is to deny immortality . . .'—Murray J. Harris, *Raised Immortal: Resurrection and Immortality in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 233.

[20] D. E. Whiteley, *The Theology of St. Paul* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972), 248–249, states: 'Eschatology, anthropology, and soteriology are closely interwoven . . . . The eschatological hope of the Christian is founded upon a soteriological basis.'

(2) What is sown is not the body which is to be (v. 37);
(3) God gives it a body . . . (v. 38).

He then states several key contrasts in somatic existence as follows:

Pre-resurrection		*Post-resurrection*
perishable	(vv. 42; 50)	imperishable
dishonour	(v. 43)	glory
weakness	(v. 43)	power
psychical (soulish)	(v. 44)	spiritual
of dust	(vv. 47–48)	of heaven
mortal	(v. 53)	immortal

What seems to be the dominant note in all this is the *victory* over death (through Christ—v. 57) which God effects through the *change* (v. 51; cf. Phil. 3:21) of resurrection. In the context, then, this 'change' can very appropriately be called a transforming re-creation which 'swallows' (v. 54) up death 'at the last trumpet' (v. 52).[21]

Conclusion

The scope of this essay has allowed only summary treatment of the several facets of our topic chosen for discussion. However, some tentative conclusions may be drawn. First, Yates' description of the 'soul' *emerging* out of the human organism seems very credible indeed. It is a far more satisfactory anthropological perspective than the sharp dualism which is characteristic of historic Christianity. His view also denies that there is anything innate in man which can survive death on its own. In this he is at one with the biblical view as expounded by the majority of twentieth-century biblical scholars and theologians.

The problem arises over what I would call his *interventionist* perspective—i.e., that at the point where the person *faces* brain-death God intervenes and sustains the 'soul-field'. But this appears merely to be a *transition* of sustained life. How can it be called death in any fundamental sense? It is possible, of course, that this is precisely that is meant by John 11:26, 'whoever lives and believes in me shall never die', or John 3:36, 'He who believes in the Son *has* eternal life' (italics inserted) (cf. Jn. 5:24; 1 Jn. 3:14). However, if these verses are interpreted as a realized eschatology which exempts the believer from actual death they

[21] The question of resurrection—change for living believers at the time of the *parousia* cannot be discussed here.

would appear to contradict other Johannine teachings which point to life only at the 'last day' (Jn. 5:28–29; 6:39–40; 11:25). References such as Jn. 11:26 and 1 Jn. 3:14, etc., probably should be considered, therefore, as *non-permanent* death. They would then be compatible with Paul's concept of death as 'sleep' (1 Cor. 15:18, 20, 51; 1 Thes. 4:15–16) and with death as the 'last enemy' to be destroyed by resurrection power (1 Cor. 15:26).

It appears that in order to take resurrection seriously one must also take death very seriously. Karl Barth stated that the 'man who does not know wht death is does not know either what resurrection is.'[22] It seems obvious that the force of the NT teaching is on resurrection as that re-creative and transforming act of God which robs death of its *victims*. Resurrection, then, does not preclude death; it overturns death. It reverses the grip of this *last enemy* on the believer and *raises* him up to 'eternal life'.[23]

Both death and resurrection effect the total person. As Thielicke puts it:

> It follows that I dare not regard my death . . . as something that no longer strikes the real me, since I am immortal, but moves on bypassing my soul. No, all of me goes down into death. Nothing gives me the right to reject the totality of man, which the Scriptures proclaim in connection with the disaster of death, and suddenly split him into body and soul, into a perishable and an imperishable I-segment. But as a Christian I go down into this death with the complete confidence that I cannot remain therein, since I am one whom God has called by name and therefore I shall be called anew on God's day. I am under the protection of the Resurrected One. I am not immortal, but I await my own resurrection.[24]

Whether this resurrection occurs at some future *parousia* or immediately after the death of each believer is unclear from biblical data.[25] What appears quite certain from the overall thrust of NT teaching is that it is only 'the power of the resurrection' that enables and ensures the believers' passing 'out of death' into life. This is the great hope of the NT.

Postscript

The focus of this essay has deliberately been selective, with an emphasis only on the question of the resurrection of 'the just'.

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[22] Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline*, 154.

[23] The question of continuity between this life and the next cannot be discussed here. See Harris, *Raised Immortal*, 148–149.

[24] Thielicke, *Death and Life*, 198.

While Paul does not address the question of the resurrection of 'the unjust' this issue is quite clearly presented elsewhere in the NT and it has been part of the historic faith of the Church for centuries. It is therefore legitimate to touch upon the question of the general post-mortem resurrection of *all* mankind, especially since the position advocated in this essay has been that resurrection ot immortality is a soteriological and not an anthropological issue.

Certain NT references clearly state a resurrection unto condemnation. John's gospel (5:28–29) states that 'all who are in the tombs' will hear the voice of the Son of Man, and will 'come forth, those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of judgment.' Revelation, chapter twenty (vv. 11ff.) presents the picture of the 'great white throne' judgment where 'the dead, great and small' are judged according to the 'books', one of which is 'the book of life'. Those whose names are not in 'the book of life' are 'thrown into the lake of fire' which is 'the second death'.[26] It cannot be maintained, therefore, that the NT teaching on resurrection pertains *only* to the righteous however much the emphasis is onesided in favour of this aspect.

How, then, is the resurrection of the unjust to be understood? And how does Yates' view of God's intervention to sustain the 'soul-field' when the soul 'faces' death affect the unjust? The scope of this essay does not allow extensive treatment of this issue but nevertheless a suggestion may be made toward an answer.

If death is the cessation of life, the whole life Thielicke has argued,[27] then resurrection is the act of the sovereign God to re-create life and to overturn the power of death. This has to be true for the resurrection of *both* the just and the unjust. Resurrection for *anyone* is an act of God. The crucial difference, according to NT teaching, is that some are resurrected to eternal life (in Christ) and some are resurrected unto the crisis of judgment and condemnation. It appears from the teaching of the Revelator (Rev. 20:11ff.) that the unjust are resurrected unto the judgment of 'the second death'. What this means cannot be stated with certainty but it *could* mean annihilation. *When* this occurs, whether

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[25] See Harris, *Raised Immortal*, 98–101, 140–141.

[26] Other NT references implying a general resurrection include 1 Cor. 15:22; possibly Mt. 25:31–46 and several occurrences in the NT of the phrase 'resurrection of the dead'.

[27] Above, 13.

immediately after death, or after an indefinite period of time, is not clear.[28]

One of the problems associated with the idea of the resurrection unto judgment is that God will re-create and sustain the unjust in existence (for however long) *in order that* they may face judgment. In this sense is judgment meant to be endless punish*ing*? or some sort of *remedy*? or a tragic consequence in a moral order for those who finally refuse life in Christ? Surely not the first possibility!

[28] Whether this tragic reality means 'everlasting punish*ment*' in the sense of annihilation, or everlasting punish*ing* in the sense of eternal torment, or some sort of purgatorial cleansing resulting in renewal and life, has been debated in the church.