THE SOUL IN OLD AND NEW INTERPRETATION

George A. Wells

In his immensely popular *L'Irréligion de L'Avenir* (The Non-Religion of the Future) J.M. Guyau showed that the soul has been invoked to account (among other things) for the difference between the living and the dead and for dreams. The breath, he said, was the most tangible thing, other than the blood, with which life could be definitely associated. It could even be heard leaving the body at the last gasp. It seems to be immaterial and invisible, so that it is not surprising that in many languages words for soul or spirit are derived from words meaning the breath or the wind. As for dreams, Guyau pointed out that the dreamer experiences adventures, yet is assured by his companions that he did not leave the room or the tent at all during the night, and that this could be explained by supposing that there is a soul that can leave the body, roam the country, and then return to its normal corporeal abode. In dreams one not only goes on adventures, but also meets friends and talks with them, yet thereafter they know nothing of the meeting. Some semblance of them had therefore been separated from their bodies without their knowledge. Sometimes these simulacra belong to the dead and must therefore represent some portion of those persons that survived death.

Guyau added that this idea of an insubstantial soul which bears some resemblance to what the body in which it is housed looks like is strengthened by experience of shadows. 'Does it not seem', he said, 'that one sees the soul walking at the side of bodies in this form of the shadow, and changing its position even when the bodies are motionless?'

The materials for the construction of the soul as an explanatory model include not only the breath and the

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shadow, but also the reflection, the echo, and all kinds of vaporous configurations that arise and vanish, assuming strange and inconstant forms. Birds and flying insects, which appear to support themselves inexplicably in space, have also been regarded as a kind of incarnation of the spirit that had left its human abode.

In time, the soul came to be accepted not just as an explanatory hypothesis, but as a real thing, something as real as the heart or liver, and which needed to be accounted for as they did. In this way it was subtly insinuated that the argument is not about whether the soul exists at all, but only about how to account for its undoubted existence. This process of degradation of ideas easily happens, given the interchange of notions, by means of a common language, between individuals of different mental capacity. The superior mind invents the hypothesis and gives it a name. The inferior mind accepts the name, but interprets it as standing for some independent entity, a supposed reality that can be investigated.

The development of theories of the soul (as of other things) is but the continual revision of rational inferences in the light of accumulating experience – a revision prompted by such emotions as the desire for reunion, the sense of justice that requires the unfair balance of happiness here to be redressed hereafter, and the dread of annihilation. Under the perpetual urge of such desires and fears, reason works out its provisional theories, revises and replaces them as new phenomena attract attention or new explanatory models become available. The anthropologist E.B. Tyler gave an excellent account of this development in his *Primitive Culture*. The difficulty in tracing it lies partly in the continual alternation of the idea of the soul as a hypothesis, to explain observed phenomena, with the idea that it is an actual existing entity, well enough understood to serve in itself as an explanation of other things.

Today, since we now know the great extent to which psychological processes are bound up with bodily

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physiology, it is no longer so easy to think of the soul in the manner of Plato or Descartes as a separate spiritual entity which, at the death of the body, can float off to an independent existence. John Polkinghorne, who resigned his Cambridge chair of theoretical physics in order to become an ordained minister of the Church of England, takes cognisance of this development in his musings on the soul (in the 2002 symposium on *Resurrection* edited by T. Peters, et al.). Each of us, he says, should regard it as 'the real me', 'the complex, dynamic information-bearing pattern in which the matter of our bodies at any one time is organized'. This pattern will be dissolved at our death as our bodies decay. Nevertheless, if I am to achieve immortality, the immortal me must bear some resemblance to, and have some continuity with, the me that exists now, and not be an entirely different entity having the same name. Hence we may tentatively suppose that, at my death, the everlastingly faithful God will hold the pattern that is me 'perfectly preserved in the divine memory, and then re-embody it in the ultimate divine eschatological act of resurrection at the last day'. In the interval between death and resurrection, the soul will, then, exist disembodied in God's mind, and may even experience some 'redemptive transformation' in that intermediate state because of its 'closer contact and interaction with the reality of God'.

Polkinghorne allows that there is 'an element of speculation' in all this, but denies that it is 'an exercise in fantasy'. Rather is it a combination of 'scientific insight and theological understanding' that enables us 'to embrace a credible hope' founded on 'the faithfulness of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob', who is faithful in the sense that he will not abandon the creatures he loves to final annihilation or worse.

Polkinghorne's views have heavily influenced the 1995 Church of England report *The Mystery of Salvation*, for he was one of the clergy who authored it. Another was N.T. Wright, the former bishop of Durham, whose views are

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similar to Polkinghorne's. He offers, as not 'too much of a caricature' of the latter, the following paraphrase: 'God will download our software onto his hardware until the time when he gives us new hardware to run the software again'. In advocating something similar to this, Wright likes to speak not of 'life after death' but rather of 'life *after* life after death', on the ground that 'all the Christian departed' are in a state of 'restful happiness', in that, although their bodies are dead, the real person – however we want to describe him or her – 'continues', in a state 'held firmly within the conscious love of God and the conscious presence of Jesus Christ', while awaiting its final destiny, which is 'the newly embodied life *after* life after death', an embodiment that will be 'no longer subject to sickness, injury, decay and death'. Wright's whole book is essentially a protest against the 'sneering scepticism' that has cast doubt on Christian ideas of resurrection – doubt encouraged by the liberal theology he deplores.

Both Polkinghorne and Wright suppose that our renewed resurrection bodies will live on an Earth that will be similarly renewed at the eschaton: not a totally new creation, but 'the redeemed transformation of the old creation', just as our resurrection selves will have some continuity with our present selves. If we are to regard what is taken for the immortal element in a human being as in any sense a body, it is indeed easier to envisage it as existing on Earth rather than in a less material heaven. The notion that bodies survive the grave belongs historically to the *collective* hope of an *earthly* kingdom for the righteous, while the survival of disembodied souls reflects the expectation of a transfer of *individuals* to *heaven.* These souls, if not completely immaterial, were certainly regarded as less material than earthly bodies. In the Graeco-Roman period even philosophers could speak of the soul as composed of some kind of thin matter.

St Paul is among those who have tried to reconcile the idea of bodily resurrection with the more refined concept of

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the survival of a soul; for he held (1 Corinthians 15: 35–50) that the resurrected faithful will have bodies, but spiritual ones. At the sound of the trumpet they will rise, caught up in the clouds 'to meet the Lord in the air' as he descends (1 Thessalonians 4: 15–17). Whether they will accompany him to Earth or go with him to heaven remains unclear. In either case, they will 'always be with the Lord' (verse 17). That, says Heikki Räisänen in his masterly 2010 study *The Rise of Christian Beliefs*, is all that matters for Paul. 'Believers will *always* be *in the presence of Christ*. Everything else fades.'

As for the gospels, Räisänen lists and discusses passages in them which indicate that the everlasting life of the faithful will be sited on Earth, and other passages which suggest, or are at any rate compatible with, the expectation of a transcendent fulfilment. He thinks that quite possibly 'Jesus himself may have been less than clear' on this matter, just as the thought world of many Jewish authors of that time included elements of both earthly and transcendent eschatology.

It was for bodily survival on Earth that such early Christian authorities as Justin Martyr, Tertullian and Irenaeus pleaded: they were millenarians, awaiting blessedness for the resurrected flesh. Although mainstream churches now treat millenarianism with considerable reserve, 'resurrection of the body' is specifically affirmed in the so-called Apostles Creed recited at Anglican services of morning and evening prayer; and the Athenasian creed likewise states that, when Christ comes to judge the quick and the dead, 'all men shall rise with their bodies'.

As we study these old and new contributions to the long debate about the nature of the soul, we may share the perplexity of the late Hugh Trevor-Roper (recorded by the editor of the posthumous (2010) collection of his essays on *History and the Enlightenment*). How, he asked, can there still be people who apparently take 'those quaint, superannuated doctrines' which 'in the Creed we solemnly

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say we believe . . . not (as is surely permissible) as an agreeable allegory, or harmless poetic myth, . . . but *literally*?'

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