

A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF IMMORTALITY OF THE SOUL IN CHRISTIANITY AND AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION

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Abstract

Mankind has been searching for a way to live forever. If he cannot live forever, the next best thing would be to become alive again after death. Some scholars argue that there is no immortality of the soul. They believe that death is a period of absolute annihilation. Contrarily, others regard this as erroneous teachings. This paper adopted a comparative approach to examine the views of the select religions: Christianity and African Traditional Religion on the immortality of the soul. The paper discovers that the soul of man continues to live after death. The belief in reincarnation, the ancestral world, the living-dead, continued existence of the soul in hell or heaven depicts this.

Introduction

“What becomes of the soul after death? Does physical death bring its life to a close, or does it continue to exist and live on after death? Strauss (1947) is of the opinion that the word immortal means exemption from liability to death. He continues: “that which is immortal is not liable to death” (p.13). Three Greek terms denote immortality in the New Testament: *athanasia*, 'deathlessness'; *aphtharsia*, 'incorruptibility'; *aphthartos*, 'incorruptible'. According to Ferguson (1998) immortality denotes “immunity from any kind of decay and death (the negative aspect) that comes from having or sharing the eternal divine life (the positive aspect)” (p.332). The doctrine of immortality of the soul has attracted a lot of arguments.

Some scholars argue that there is no immortality of the soul. This assertion is in line with the Jehovah's witnesses teaching propounded by two of their leaders, Charles Taze Russel and Judge J. F. Rutherford. They believe that no man has a soul and that death is a period of absolute annihilation. Zoghbiates (1977) opines,

“nowhere does the Bible state that the soul is immortal or possesses immortality” (p.63). He goes on to say that this does not mean that we are to conclude that the soul dies, for the soul never ceases to exist. Whenever we use the term, “immortality of the soul”, we actually mean just what the Bible teaches, that it is eternal. However, Zodhiates is of the opinion that the eternal quality of the soul is never designed as immortality in the scriptures. We need to ask, does the word of God assume the eternal existence of every soul regardless of its destiny? Is every man's soul immortal which can never be annihilated? The doctrine of the immortality of the soul calls for consideration at this point in the light of Christianity in view of the Old and New Testaments and in African Traditional Religion.

Arguments from the Old Testament

The Old Testament implies the continued existence of man either in the sense of a bare immortality or survival of the soul (Berkhof, 1958). The Old Testament represents man as created in the image of God, created for life and not for mortality. He is made for communion with God, is but a little lower than the angels, and God has set eternity in his heart (Eccl. 3:11). Landis (1973) opines that the ancient Jews, and the Patriarchs, had knowledge of the doctrine of immortality. The Jews believed in the existence of the spirit after death, which is evident from the credit they give to the art of 'necromancy'. Necromancy according to Hornsby (563) is “the art or practice of communicating by magic with the dead in order to learn about the future.” In Leviticus 19: 31, God warns: “Do not turn to mediums or seek out spiritists, for you will be defiled by them. I am the Lord your God.” This warning is also repeated in Leviticus 20:6 “I will set my face against the person who turns to mediums and spiritists to prostitute himself by following them, and I will cut him off from his people. Moses fully enacted laws directly against the art of necromancy. It was fully entertained in Saul's time. In the days of King Saul, he expelled the mediums and spiritists from the land of Israel but he was later forced to look for them when he could not hear from God owing to his disobedience. He went to Endor to inquire of a medium what will be the outcome of the war between Israel and Philistine (1sam. 28: 3-10). This implies that immortality of the soul is not absent in the Old Testament for the fact that the

Jews believed that the spirit of the dead can be summoned back to the present sphere of existence. Landis (1973) believes this as he quotes Jahn's remarks: "To suppose that persons who did not believe that departed spirits continued to exist, should invoke them, and give full credit to the ability of non-existing spirits to reveal the mysteries of the future would be sheer absurdity" (p.128). The word "spirit" is frequently employed in the Old Testament in such a sense as necessarily to convey the idea of separate existence of the vital principle in man. In Psalm 31:5, David says: "into thine hand I commit my spirit." This is uttered in view of the separation of the soul and body. At death, the body is separated from the soul or spirit; where upon the body, which contains all that was taken from dust, is given back to dust. However, the soul does not return to the earth: and therefore it is distinct from the mortal and perishable part of man.

The doctrine of the immortality of the soul in the Old Testament is implied in its doctrine of Sheol (Berkhof, 675). We are taught in the Old Testament that the dead descend into Sheol. The belief of the ancient Hebrews on this subject, therefore, was that the spirit at death is received into Sheol, which is represented as a large subterranean abode. This spacious dwelling place for the departed is sometimes described as dark, sorrowful, and inactive. In Job 10:21, we read "before I go to the place of no return, to the land of gloom and deep shadow." Psalm 6:6 reads, "No one remembers you when he is dead. Who praises you from the grave?" Again, the place for the departed is described as full of activity (Isaiah 14:9)

Landis (1973) opines that the truth of immortality of the soul in the Old Testament is apparent from the often occurring phrase translated "being gathered to his fathers," or "to his people" or more correctly, entering into their habitation. "Then Abraham gave up the ghost, and was gathered to his people" (p.18). What then is this gathering? It cannot refer to the body, for while his body was buried in the cave of Macpelah, in Canaan, his fathers were buried afar off; Terah in Haran, in Mesopotamia, and the rest of his ancestors far off in Chaldea. This gathering therefore relates not to the body but to the soul.

Gen. 25:8; Then Abraham breathed his last and died at a good old age; an old man full of years and he was gathered to his people,

Gen. 35:28 - 29; Isaac lived a hundred and eighty years. Then he breathed his last and died and was gathered to his people, old and full of years. And his sons Esau and Jacob buried him.

Numbers 20:24a; Aaron will be gathered to his people.

Arguments from the New Testament

The word immortality is found five times in the New Testament. Purkiser (1977) sees man as being mortal as to his physical constitution, but immortal in personal spirit identity. Furthermore, that the ability of the self to exist in a disembodied state is everywhere assumed in the New Testament. In Bonnell's (1959) opinion, the Christian's idea of immortality is somehow related to Plato's idea in his *Phaedo*. Plato based his argument for immortality on such considerations as the uniqueness of man, and finds in his moral endowments and constitution the demand for immortality. He stresses the fact that man is a mortal being. He is subject to the constraint of moral law. The roots of man's life reach out into the unseen and the eternal. He is impelled by duty. Therefore, his true being belongs more to the laws and life of eternity than to time. Bonnell more so opines that Christian thinkers are fully in agreement with this aspect of Plato's argument about man.

Landis (1973) presupposes that all the passages in the New Testament which speak of the present existence of a hell for the wicked man imply the doctrine of the soul's uninterrupted immortality, for it is not to be supposed that hell should be created, and exist for thousands and myriads of the years without an object. The present existence of hell is affirmed in every way by which such an idea can be conveyed as in Mark 9:43: "where the worm dieth not and the fire is not quenched." Jude 13: "To whom is reserved the blackness of darkness forever". The same idea of a present hell is conveyed also by metaphorical language, for example: "set on fire of hell" (James 3:6).

In view of these texts, one is tempted to ask: "is hell now in existence? If yes, what is its use?" There is no much difficulty in admitting that wicked men should, before the day of Judgment suffer it's torments. Chukwuedo (2015) is of the opinion that every text, therefore, which announces the present existence of hell, is a proof

that annihilation theory is false and immortality of the soul true. All the texts which speak of the present existence of heaven, (the region of the blessed), in like manner prove the annihilation theory false.

Landis (1973) in this argument of immortality of the soul discusses Matthew 10:28; “And fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul; rather fear him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.” These words of our lord he repeated on another occasion, as follows: “And I say unto you, my friends, be not afraid of them that kill the body, and after that have no more than they can do. But I forewarn you whom ye shall fear, fear him, which after he hath killeth, hath power to cast into hell; yea, i say unto you, fear him.”(Luke 12:4, 5). To Landis, this is clear announcement of the separability of the soul from the body, and of the fact that the death of the body does not involve the extinction of the soul.

Berkhof (1958) classified the passages that contain the doctrine of the immortality of the soul into the following: -

- a. To the survival of the soul a continued existence of both the righteous and the wicked is clearly taught. That the souls of believers survive, appears from such passages as Matt. 10:28; Luke 23:43; John 11:25f; 14:3; II Cor. 5:1; and several other passages make it quite clear that the same can be said of the souls of the wicked; Matt. 11:21-24; Rom. 2: 5-11; II Cor. 5:10.
- b. To the resurrection by which the body is also made to share in the future existence: For believers, the resurrection means the redemption of the body and entrance into the perfect life in communion with God, the full blessedness of immortality. This resurrection is taught in Luke 20:35, 36; John 5:25-29; I Cor. 15; I Thess. 4:16; Phil. 3:21, and other passages. For the wicked, the resurrection will also mean a renewed and continued existence of the body, but this can hardly be called life. Scripture calls it eternal death.
- c. To the blessed life of believers in communion with God: there are numerous passages in the New Testament which stress the fact that the immortality of believers is not a bare

endless existence, but a rapturous life of bliss in communion with God and with Jesus Christ, the full fruition of the life that is implanted in the soul while still on earth. This is clearly emphasized in such passages as Matt. 13: 43; 25: 34; Rom. 2:7, 10, 1Cor. 15:49; Phil. 3: 21; 11 Tim. 4:8; Rev. 21:4; 22: 34 (p.676).

We can conclude on this point that the Bible teaches that the soul does not go into extinction at death. If the soul is not annihilated as argued by some scholars like Landis (1973) it then means it is immortal.

Immortality of the Soul and African Traditional Religion

In the Africans' mind, the soul or spirit is quite active and exercises a great influence in the affairs of the living. Imasogie (1985) asserts that there is an afterlife and each deceased spirit is judged on the basis of his earthly character. There is also the strong belief that the deceased may become an ancestral spirit provided he lived a good earthly existence and proper funeral rites have been performed by his children and next of kin. Imasogie further reveals that when a man dies, his body is immediately left by his spirit, which hovers around the house in anticipation of the funeral rites, which will enable it to proceed to the spirit world.

The belief in “spirits”, “ancestral spirits”, or “the living dead” is a proof that there is belief in immortality of the soul in African Traditional religion. The majority of spirits are thought by most people to be the spirits of departed human beings. According to Mbiti (1989), the ghosts of people who die recently and whose names are remembered are called “the living dead”. This term refers to the living relationship between the living and their dead ancestors. Though the person is “dead” physically, they are “living” in their continued communication with the living. On the other hand, Mbiti further opines, “those ghosts whose names are no longer remembered by the living because they died more than five generations ago are called “spirits”. According to Gehman (1989) those spirits who are no longer remembered by the living have lost their “personal immortality” because the living no longer remembers them by name.

Berkhof (1958) gives the substitutes for the doctrine of personal immortality, one of which is “immortality of commemoration”. According to positivism, Berkhof more so reveals, this is the only immortality we should desire for. Everyone should aim at doing something to establish a name for himself, which will go down in the annals of history. If he does this, he will continue to live in the hearts and minds of a grateful posterity. What we have to bring out here from this doctrine of “immortality of commemoration” is its relationship with the concept of the “living-dead” in African Tradition Religion. The living dead according to Ifesieh (1989) is supposed to be a person who has undergone a physical death, but, because of kinship relationship with the surviving relatives, remains alive in their memory as they knew him as being alive in the world of spirits. The living relations therefore, have recourse to the dead through cults, which they are convinced is the way of alleviating their fears and maintaining the natural and blood link. While the surviving relatives remember the departed, the spirit more or less leads a personal continuation of life. The idea of immortality of the soul is more so depicted in the belief in reincarnation, which is the idea of partial rebirth. It is partial rebirth because only some aspects of the living dead are reborn (Mbiti, 1975).

African Traditional Religious believers offer sacrifices to the ancestors. According to Ngewa (1998) these sacrifices can be performed at the gravesides, it can be marital sacrifice, for agriculture or one performed by hunters in order to secure proficiency required for hunting. This act shows that the Ibos believe in the immortality of the soul. If the ancestors were dead, there would be no need for such sacrifices. In African Traditional Religion, the concept of immortality of the soul leaves little or no room for arguments. The concept of resurrection of the body as discussed in this chapter is one of the issues that formed the bedrock of Christianity. In African Traditional Religion, the concept of resurrection of the body is not apparent.

Comparative Analysis of Immortality of the Soul in Christianity and African Traditional Religion

Our discovery based on the various arguments put forward in this paper shows that the Bible teaches that the soul does not die and is

not annihilated at death. The story of creation in Genesis Chapter 2 points to the duality of man. God breathed into man the breath of life and he became a living soul. We believe that God cannot die and as to this, His spirit breathed into man at creation cannot die which makes the soul or spirit immortal. African Tradition Religion does not dispute this fact.

The belief in reincarnation and ancestral spirits support the immortality of the soul. The dead does not stop to exist in the ancestral world and it is not unconscious and oblivious of what goes on in his earthly family. That is why he is called 'the living dead'. The consciousness of the soul in Christianity is inferred in the story of Lazarus and the Rich man in Luke 16: 10-31. In African Traditional Religion, it is believed that the dead can continue to reincarnate up to four or five generations. Shorter (1997) posits that "if we have no moral worth, we shall not be remembered by our posterity and there will be no offerings" (p.122). How far the remembrance of the dead is bound up with their immortality is a question that receives different answers from one group to another.

Conclusion

The soul of man continues to live on after death. This belief is held by both Christianity and African Traditional religion. The soul is not annihilated at death. African Traditional Religion holds that the soul of the dead person enters into the ancestral world from where he stages a come back to the physical world. The belief in immortality of the soul is depicted in the belief in reincarnation, which is the idea of partial rebirth. This disproves the belief of the Jehovah's witnesses that the soul is annihilated at death. Strauss (1947) asserts that every man's soul is immortal and cannot be annihilated.

Another question that has puzzled the minds of scholars is, "Is the spirit conscious after death?" (Humbard, 1963). The Bible answer is yes! We must consider the argument put up against this teaching, by those who believe the dead are unconscious and out of existence between death and resurrection. This teaching that physical death is cessation of all consciousness until the resurrection of the body is usually called the theory of "soul-sleep". Those who adhere to this theory tell us that 'no man has a soul' and that at death man passes entirely out of existence. If it were true that no man has a soul, there would be no soul that could sleep, therefore neither the

word, 'soul' nor the word 'sleep' is truly descriptive of this teaching. It is true that at death, the soul is separated from the body. It is not considered with the teaching of the Bible to say that at death the soul lapses into a state of complete unconsciousness or even into a deep sleep. Strauss (1947) says that the few texts scholars have dislodged from their context in order to prove that physical death is the cessation of all consciousness can be easily and understandably explained when interpreted in the light of the other passages on this subject. In Ecclesiastes we read: "the dead know not anything" (Ecclesiastes 9:5). Certainly we all agree that a dead and deteriorating body has absolutely no consciousness of anything. But those who teach "soul - sleep" will find it quite difficult to harmonize their views with other statements that are made by the same writer of Ecclesiastes. "Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was: and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it" (Ecclesiastes 12: 7). Now we know that this verse is speaking of the body. Never once does the Bible refer to the soul as sleeping. The danger some fall into is identifying man merely with his body and ignoring the fact that he has a spiritual nature. Now the body is not the whole man. Therefore it cannot be concluded that the death of the body is the death of the whole man.

In African Traditional Religion, it is believed that the soul is quite active and exercises a great influence in the affairs of the living. African Traditional Religion does not believe that the soul is senseless and inactive. In fact, the dead who become ancestors are regarded as the living dead because they are believed to oversee the affairs of their children. They guide and protect their children.

The Bible assumes eternal existence and consciousness of every soul regardless of its destiny. Jesus said, "fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell" (Matthew 10:28). The soul is conscious after death, either in hell, heaven or in the ancestral world as upheld in the African Traditional Religion.

The consciousness of the soul in death can be inferred in the story told by Jesus in Luke 16: 19-31 about Lazarus and the rich man. Those who oppose the teaching of consciousness after death say that this was only a parable that Christ was relating and therefore it cannot be submitted as evidence to show conscious life after death. We can say that the experience was a statement of fact. "There was a

certain rich man” and “there was a certain beggar Lazarus.” Further evidence that this is not a parable is seen in the fact that parables of our lord begin with words like “And he spoke unto them a parable saying”. Furthermore, Parables do not give Proper names such as Abraham and Lazarus. But let us suppose for a moment that it is a parable. We know that a parable is an illustration that is purposed to make clear an obscure truth. Then to be true to its purpose, every detail of a parable must distinctly and accurately portray the obscure truth. Therefore, even if this is a parable, the same doctrine is taught. In either case, as Humbard (1963) rightly asserts, “whether we regard the account as a parable or as a verifiable history, the souls of the dead are presented as living- talking, remembering, being 'comforted' or 'tormented' after death”. Indeed this teaches that the soul is alive and conscious after the body dies, and is happy or miserable in the spirit world.

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