



## **Is Your Soul Immortal?**

### **A BIT OF HISTORY**

#### ***Greek Philosophers***

Long before Christ was born erroneous concepts of the human soul were cherished and taught in the pagan world. The writings of the famous Greek philosophers were widely circulated and read by the erudite.

The Catholic Encyclopedia says: "In Homer, while the distinction of soul and body is recognized, the soul is hardly conceived as possessing a substantial existence of its own. Severed from the body, it is a mere shadow, incapable of energetic life."<sup>3</sup> Homer, a pagan Greek poet, lived in the 10th or 9th century B.C.<sup>4</sup>

Orpheus, the mystic founder of Orphism in the 6th century B.C., taught "the doctrine of original sin, in the transmigration of souls, in the view that the soul is entombed in the body," etc.<sup>5</sup>

"The Orphic legends and poems related in great part to this [pagan god] Dionysus, who was combined, as an infernal deity, with Hades; and upon whom the Orphic theologers founded their hopes of the purification and ultimate immortality of the soul."<sup>6</sup>

Could this be a pagan antecedent of the doctrine of purgatory, cherished and taught by some professed Christians of our time?

Also in the 6th century B.C., Pythagoras (born c. 570 B.C.), a pagan Greek philosopher, taught the doctrine of the immortality of the soul. Plutarch, a Greek biographer (46-120 A.D.), wrote this about him:

"Pythagoras and Plato affirm the soul to be immortal.... Plato and Pythagoras hold, that part of the soul which is rational, is eternal, as being from God: but the irrational part dies."

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Pythagoras, a heathen, is said to be the first famous philosophic exponent of Metempsychosis, or the reincarnation and transmigration of the soul.

Plato

The man whose pen has done most to instill in the minds of churchmen belief in the immortality of the human soul was not one of the inspired writers of the Holy Scriptures, but the pagan philosopher Plato, born in Athens, Greece in 427 B.C. He was a disciple of Socrates (469-399 B.C.), whose teachings on the subject he reports in a treatise called Phaedo. Being a heathen and without divine revelation from God, Socrates walked in the sparks of his own kindling in his search for a solution to the problem of life and death. He said:

"This was the method which I adopted: I first assumed some principle which I judged to be the strongest, and then I affirmed as true whatever seemed to agree with this, whether relating to the cause or to anything else; and that which disagreed I regarded as untrue."<sup>8</sup>

According to his famous pupil Plato, Socrates "assumed" that man has a dual nature composed of a soul and a body and "that the soul is in the very likeness of the divine, and immortal, and intelligible, and uniform, and indissoluble, and unchangeable; and the body is in the very likeness of the human, and mortal, and unintelligible, and multiform, and dissoluble, and changeable."<sup>9</sup>

On this assumption Socrates reasoned that "when death attacks a man, the mortal portion of him maybe supposed to die, but the immortal goes out of the way of death and is preserved safe and sound."<sup>10</sup>

"Even when Plato employed mythology to describe creation, he considered the human soul an incorporeal substance, made from the same elements as the world soul, akin to the gods and yet part of the world of change and becoming (Tim. 41)."<sup>11</sup>

### ***Gnosticism***

Eusebius (b. c. 260 A.D.) was bishop of Caesarea in Palestine from 315 until his death in 340 A.D. A widely-used reference work of our time says this concerning him: "It is as an historian that he is best known, and to his History of the Christian Church he owes his fame and his familiar title 'The Father of Church History.' This work which was published in its final form in ten books in 324 or early in 325, is the most important ecclesiastical history produced in ancient times."<sup>12</sup> He says:

"As the churches throughout the world were now shining like the most brilliant stars, and faith in our Savior and Lord Jesus Christ was flourishing among the whole human race, the demon who hates everything that is good, and is always hostile to the truth, and

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most bitterly opposed to the salvation of man, turned all his arts against the Church. In the beginning he armed himself against it with external persecutions. But now, being shut off from the use of such means, he devised all sorts of plans, and employed other methods in his conflict with the Church, using base and deceitful men as instruments for the ruin of souls and as ministers of destruction. Instigated by him, impostors and deceivers, assuming the name of our religion, brought to the depths of ruin such of the believers as they could win over, and at the same time, by means of the deeds which they practiced, turned away from the path which leads to the word of salvation those who were ignorant of the faith."<sup>13</sup> Some leaders of Gnosticism named by Eusebius were:

Simon Magus. He is mentioned in Acts 8:9-24. Concerning him, John Lawrence von Mosheim says: "At the head of the heretics of this age, and particularly of the Gnostics, we find the ancient fathers of the church unanimous in placing a Simon Magus, whom they assert to have been one and the same with him whose depravity and perfidy was so severely reprobated by St. Peter at Samaria: Acts, viii.9,10."<sup>14</sup>

Writing in c. 208 A.D., Tertullian referred to the followers of Simon thus: "At this very time, even, the heretical dupes of this same Simon (Magus) are so much elated by the extravagant pretensions of their art, that they undertake to bring up from Hades the souls of the prophets themselves."<sup>15</sup>

Menander. Early in the second century Menander was a disciple and successor of Simon Magus. He taught that those worthy of baptism by him "would partake even in the present life of perpetual immortality, and would never die, but would remain here forever, and without growing old become immortal."<sup>16</sup>

Saturninus was a Gnostic and a disciple of Menander early in the second century, during the reign of Hadrian (117-138 A.D.).<sup>17</sup>

Basilides was an Alexandrian philosopher, also early in the second century.<sup>18</sup> Among other heresies, he taught that some souls "might expect, upon the dissolution of the body, to regain their original seats in the blissful mansions above; but those who neglected availing themselves of the proffered instruction, were destined to migrate into other bodies, either of men or brute animals, until their impurities should be wholly purged away."<sup>19</sup>

Gnosticism is "the name generally applied to the spiritual movement existing side by side with genuine Christianity, as it gradually crystallized into the old Catholic Church, which may roughly be defined as a distinct religious syncretism bearing the strong impress of Christian influences."<sup>20</sup>

"The great work of Irenaeus [120-202 A.D.] against heresies is the chief storehouse whence writers, both ancient and modern, have drawn their accounts of the Gnostic sects."<sup>21</sup>

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Carpocrates was another Gnostic heretic of the second century A.D. "He is said to have been the native of Alexandria and by birth a Jew. His family, however, seem to have been converted to Christianity. With Epiphanes, his son, he was the leader of a philosophic school basing its theories mainly upon Platonism....Carpocrates made especial use of the doctrines of reminiscence and preexistence of souls."<sup>22</sup>

Later in the same century Tertullian (c. 150-240 A.D.), an ecclesiastical writer, penned the following concerning Carpocrates:

"However, it is not for you alone, (Simon), that the 'F transmigration philosophy has fabricated this story. Carpocrates also makes equally good use of it, who was a magician and a fornicator like yourself,.... The transmigration of human soul, therefore, into any kind of heterogeneous bodies, he thought by all means indispensable, whenever any depravity whatever had not been fully perpetrated in the early stage of life's passage. Evil deeds (one may be sure) appertain to life. Moreover, as often as the soul has fallen short as a defaulter in sin, it has to be recalled to existence, until it `pays the utmost farthing,' thrust out from time to time into the prison of the body."<sup>2</sup>

### ***Justin Martyr***

Justin Martyr (c.100-165 A.D.), a Christian apologist, was born of pagan parents at Flavia Neapolis in Samaria. He was converted to Christianity in 130 A.D., and died a martyr. Justin had studied under a Stoic philosopher, a peripatetic, and also a Platonist. He became an Eclectic. He was a believer in the teachings of the Greek philosopher Plato.<sup>21</sup>

While Justin was in Ephesus he met Trypho, a Jew, with whom he discussed religion and philosophy. When Trypho inquired: "Will the mind of man see God at any time, if it is uninstructed by the Holy Spirit?" Justin replied: "Plato, indeed, says that the mind's eye is of such a nature, and has been given for this end, that we may see that very Being when the mind is pure itself ,.... coming suddenly into souls well-dispositioned, on account of their affinity to and desire of seeing Him."

Trypho asked: "Is the soul also divine and immortal, and a part of that very regal mind?" "Assuredly," Justin replied. "And do all the souls of all living beings comprehend Him," Trypho asked; "or are the souls of men of one kind and the souls of horses and of asses of another kind?" Justin answered: "No, but the souls which are in all are similar."<sup>25</sup>

Trypho asked: "Does the soul see [God] so long as it is in the body, or after it has been removed from it?" Justin replied: "So long as it is in the form of a man, it is possible for it to attain to this by means of the mind; but especially when it has been set free from the body, and being apart by itself, it gets possession of that which it was wont continually and wholly to love."<sup>26</sup>

The following statements by Justin reveal that he seemed to have been convinced by Trypho that the human soul is mortal and can die:

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"Nor ought it [the soul] to be called immortal; for if it is immortal, it is plainly unbegotten," and Trypho.

"It is both unbegotten and immortal, according to some who are styled Platonists," said Justin.

Trypho asked: "Do you say that the world is also unbegotten?"

Replied Justin: "Some say so. I do not, however, agree with them."<sup>27</sup>

Trypho asked: "They [souls] are not, then, immortal?"

Justin replied, "No"... "Souls both die and are punished."

The Catholic Encyclopedia, in comment on the Dialogue With Trypho, says Justin believed that "the soul is not immortal by its nature."<sup>29</sup>

Justin Martyr's First Apology, written in Rome c.150 A.D., was addressed to the Emperor and the Roman people. He affirmed concerning death that "if it issued in insensibility, it would be a godsend to all the wicked. But since sensation remains to all who have ever lived, and eternal punishment is laid up (i.e., for the wicked), see that ye neglect not to be convinced, and to hold as your belief, that these things are true. For let even necromancy, and the divinations you practice by immaculate children, and the evoking of departed human souls, and those who are called as among them magi, Dream-senders and Assistant-spirits (Familiars), and all that is done by those who are skilled in such matters--let these persuade you that even after death souls are in a state of sensation."<sup>30</sup>

Note that in making that broad, comprehensive statement concerning the state of a person's soul after death, Justin cites no statement of Holy Scripture to support his affirmation that "even after death souls are in a state of sensation."

In that same work Justin wrote concerning that Menandor who was a false teacher in Antioch and a disciple of Simon Magus: "He [Menandor] persuaded those who adhered to him that they should never die, and even now there are some living who hold this opinion of his."<sup>31</sup>

Concerning Justin Martyr, an extensively used Roman Catholic reference work makes the following significant statements:

"He found his chief inspiration in the Timaeus."<sup>32</sup> "His sympathies are above all with Platonism."<sup>33</sup> "St. Justin, supposing that the doctrine of natural immortality logically implies eternal existence, rejects it, making this attribute (like Plato in the 'Timaeus') dependent on the free will of God; at the same time he plainly asserts the de facto immortality of every human soul."<sup>34</sup>

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It is significant that the doctrine of the immortality of the human soul, according to Justin Martyr, is based on heathen philosophy instead of on the Holy Scriptures. The heathen philosopher Plato is cited by him many, many times in support of his concept of Christian doctrine.

"In their eagerness to point out the salvific significance of immortality, that it is a gratuitous gift and is intended to benefit man, some writers, such as Justin and Tatian, tended to favor the idea that the souls of the wicked died or were annihilated (thanatopsychism)."<sup>35</sup>

### ***Irenaeus***

Irenaeus, one of the so-called church Fathers, was a native of Asia Minor. Jerome says that he flourished in the reign of the Roman emperor Commodus (180-192 A.D.). He died a martyr c. 202 or 203 A.D.<sup>36</sup>

It is said that as a child he had seen and heard Polycarp at Smyrna, who had been acquainted with the apostle John. In 177 A.D. Irenaeus was a presbyter at Lyons, France. On his return from a visit to Rome he became bishop of Lyons in 178 A.D. He was a contemporary of Victor I, bishop of Rome (189-199 A.D.).<sup>37</sup> We are told concerning him:

"Man was not from the first, according to Irenaeus, made perfect and immortal, but designed, in God's purpose concerning him, to become so."<sup>38</sup>

Irenaeus wrote a treatise entitled *Against Heresies* in 180-185 A.D. Concerning certain heretics of his time, he wrote:

"These men are in all points inconsistent with themselves, when they decide that all souls do not enter into the intermediate place, but those of the righteous only .... They maintain that souls shall continue in the intermediate place, while bodies, because they possess material substance, when they have been resolved into matter, shall be consumed by that fire which exists in it; but their body being thus destroyed, and their soul remaining in the intermediate place, no part of man will any longer be left to enter in within the Pleroma. For the intellect of the man--his mind, thought, mental intention, and such like--is nothing else than his soul; but the emotions and operations of the soul itself have no substance apart from the soul. What part of them, then, will still remain to enter into the Pleroma? For they themselves, in as far as they are souls, remain in the intermediate place; while, in as far as they are body, they will be consumed with the rest of matter."<sup>39</sup>

Note that Irenaeus speaks of an "Intermediate place" between death and resurrection in which, he thought, the human soul would remain until the resurrection. Could this be the introduction of the doctrine of purgatory which has crept into some areas of ecclesiastical thought?

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One of the heretical doctrines that had become rampant among some Christians in the time of Irenaeus was metempsychosis, which taught the doctrine of reincarnation and transmigration of the soul from one body to another. In book II, chapter 33 of *Against Heresies* Irenaeus points out the absurdity of this heathen doctrine, which had been taught by the Greek philosophers Pythagoras and Plato.<sup>1</sup> This erroneous doctrine is widely taught today.

Irenaeus said concerning some professed Christians whom he deemed heretics: "How must these men not be put to confusion, who allege that 'the lower parts' refer to this world of ours, but that their inner man, leaving the body here, ascends into the super-celestial place? For as the Lord 'went away in the midst of the shadow of death' (Ps. XXIII<sup>4</sup>), where the souls of the dead were, yet afterwards arose in the body, and after the resurrection was taken up [into heaven], it is manifest that the souls of His disciples also, upon whose account the Lord underwent these things, shall go away into the invisible place allotted to them by God, and there remain until the resurrection, awaiting that event; then receiving their bodies, and rising in their entirety, that is bodily, just as the Lord arose, they shall come thus into the presence of God."<sup>41</sup>

Note that Irenaeus affirmed that at death souls "go away into the invisible place allotted to them by God, and there remain until the resurrection." In the quotation previously given, he refers to "the intermediate place," while here he calls it "the invisible place." he does not specifically say where that "invisible place" is between death and the resurrection.

It is no surprise, therefore, that "Against the Gnostics Irenaeus said that the soul is not immortal by nature, but it can become immortal if it lives according to God's law."<sup>42</sup>

### ***Tertullian***

It is said that Tertullian was "the earliest and after Augustine the greatest of the ancient church writers of the West."<sup>43</sup> Also, that he was "the earliest of the great Latin fathers, their chief in fire and daring, and the first to create a technical Christian Latinity."<sup>44</sup>

Tertullian, born c.150 A.D. into a heathen family in Carthage of North Africa, became a Christian c. 192. He was ordained a priest c. 200. Later he became a Montanist. His writings date from c. 197 to 218. He finally formed a church of his own. He died between 220 and 240 A.D.<sup>45</sup>

At this time there was some divergence of opinion among Christians concerning the human soul. Tertullian's book *de Anima* (A Treatise on the soul) was written in 208-209 A.D. Its 58 chapters fill 55 pages in volume 3 of the Ante-Nicene Fathers. Concerning this, a Catholic reference work says:

" A long book, 'De Anima', gives Tertullian's psychology. He well describes the unity of the soul; he teaches that it is spiritual, but immateriality in the fullest sense he admits for nothing that exists,--even God is corpus."<sup>46</sup>

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Tertullian's definition of the human soul is this: "The soul, then, we define to be sprung from the breath of God, immortal, possessing body, having form, simple in its substance, intelligent in its own nature, developing its power in various ways, free in its determinations, subject to the changes of accident, in its faculties mutable, rational, supreme, endued with an instinct of presentiment, evolved out of one (archetypal soul)."47 This agrees with his previous declaration that "the soul is immortal."48

Note that Tertullian emphatically declared: "The soul, then, we define to be sprung from the breath of God, immortal." Note, too, that he does not cite any scripture statement supporting that declaration. Why? Because the Holy Scriptures do not teach that at creation or at birth man is endowed with an immortal soul.

According to Tertullian, the word "soul" refers to the whole person: "All that we are is soul. Indeed, without the soul we are nothing; there is not even the name of a human being, only that of a carcase."49

Tertullian's concept of what happens to a person when he dies is set forth by him as follows: "Undoubtedly, when the soul, by the power of death, is released from its concretion with the flesh, it is by the very release cleansed and purified; it is, moreover, certain that it escapes from the veil of the flesh into open space, to its clear, and pure, and intrinsic light; and then finds itself enjoying its enfranchisement from matter, and by virtue of its liberty it recovers its divinity, as one who awakes out of sleep passes from images to verities."50

Also: "The operation of death is plain and obvious: it is the separation of body and soul .... The truth is, the soul is indivisible, because it is immortal; (and this fact) compels us to believe that death itself is an indivisible process, accruing indivisibly to the soul, not indeed because it is immortal, but because it is indivisible .... Death, if it once falls short of totality in operation, is not death. If any fraction of the soul remain, it makes a living state. Death will no more mix with life, than will night with day."51

"To the question, therefore, whether the soul is withdrawn, we now give an answer. Almost all the philosophers, who hold the soul's immortality, notwithstanding their special views on the subject, still claim for it this (eternal condition), as Pythagoras, and Empedocles, and Plato, and as they who indulge it with some delay from the time of its quitting the flesh to the conflagration of all things, and as the Stoics, who place only their own souls, that is, the souls of the wise, in the mansions above."52

One commentator has said: "As a preliminary to the consideration of the manner in which the soul encounters death, Tertullian considers the subject of sleep--the image of death(cc XLIL-end). He adopts by preference the Stoic definition of sleep as the temporary suspension of the activity of the senses ('resolutionem sensualisvigoris'), and limits the senses affected to those of the body; the soul, being immortal, neither requiring nor admitting a state of rest. While the body is asleep or dead, the soul is elsewhere."53

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The Stoic school of Greek philosophy was founded by Zeno of Citium at the end of the 4th century B.C. Stoicism did not "achieve its crowning triumph until it was brought to Rome, where ... for two centuries or more it was the creed, if not the philosophy, of all the best of the Romans."<sup>54</sup>

Concerning the heathen Stoic concept of the human soul, we read that "after death the disembodied soul can only maintain its separate existence even for a limited time, by mounting to that region of the universe which is akin to its nature. It was a moot point whether all souls so survive, as Cleanthes thought, or the souls of the wise and good alone, which was the opinion of Chrysippus; in any case, sooner or later individual souls are merged in the soul of the universe, from which they proceeded."<sup>55</sup>

Tertullian derived much of his information from the heathen Soranus, a Stoic Greek physician (98-138 A.D.)<sup>56</sup> Although professedly a Christian teacher, Tertullian cited heathen philosophy instead of the Holy Scriptures as the basis of his doctrine that the human soul is immortal.

### **Origen**

Origen (11.185-254 A.D.) was a pupil of Clement of Alexandria and succeeded him as head of the catechetical school there. "Epiphanius estimates the whole number of his writings at about six thousand."<sup>57</sup> Origen's concept of what happens to the soul at death is stated as follows:

"The apostolic teaching is that the soul, having a substance and life of its own, shall, after its departure from the world, be rewarded according to its deserts, being destined to obtain either an inheritance of eternal life and blessedness, if its actions have procured this for it, or to be delivered up to eternal fire and punishments, if the guilt of its crimes shall have brought it down to this."<sup>58</sup>

Note that Origen, in that statement, does not cite any biblical text telling when the rewards will be given.

Eusebius, bishop of Caesarea (315-340 A.D.), wrote that in the time of Origen some Arabian believers said that "the human soul dies and perishes with the body, but that at the time of the resurrection they will be renewed together." Origen was sent for and persuaded them to give up the biblical truth which they had held concerning the state of the dead.<sup>59</sup> Thus early church history reveals that the false doctrine that the human soul is immortal, as held by Origen, was being spread among Christians by the middle of the third century A.D.<sup>60</sup>

Origen taught "that the fury of God's vengeance is profitable for the purgation of souls. That the punishment, also, which is said to be applied by fire, is understood to be applied with the object of healing."<sup>61</sup> In this doctrine Origen paved the way for the introduction of the later ecclesiastical concept of a purgatory.

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In the same work Origen says: "The soul over which He [God] exercises this providential care is immortal; and, as being immortal and everlasting, it is not, although not immediately cared for, excluded from salvation, which is postponed to a more convenient time."<sup>62</sup>

He also says: "If human souls have partaken of the same light and wisdom, and thus are mutually of one nature and of one essence,--then, since the heavenly virtues are incorruptible and immortal, the essence of the human soul will also be immortal and incorruptible."<sup>63</sup>

Note that Origen cites no Scripture passage to support his affirmation that the human soul is immortal.

A long-used religious reference work says: "Origen taught the preexistence of the soul. Terrestrial life is a punishment and a remedy for prenatal sin."

In the revised edition of that reference work we find this statement: "Origen, who was much more susceptible to rational argument, was led to the opinion that souls did indeed preexist and were put into bodies as a punishment for sins committed in a previous life."<sup>65</sup>

In his commentary on the Gospel of John, book VI, chapter 7, Origen has "a remarkable discussion on the pre-existence of souls, and the entrance of the soul into the body." And in book XX he comments on the "preexistence and character of souls."<sup>66</sup>

Plato, the pagan Greek philosopher, is mentioned many times by Origen in his discussions of the human soul. He quotes Plato concerning the nature of the soul as follows: "For the essence, which is both colorless and formless, and which cannot be touched, which really exists, is the pilot of the soul, and is beheld by the understanding alone; and around it the genus of true knowledge holds this place," [Phaedro, p. 247]."<sup>67</sup>

### **Conclusion**

From the foregoing facts we can see that the widespread heathen concept of the immortality of the human soul as taught by the ancient pagan philosophers was still cherished and taught by many of the so-called church fathers after their conversion from paganism to Christianity.

We call your attention to the following excellent statements from the New Catholic Encyclopedia concerning the teaching of the Holy Scriptures on this subject:

"In the first Christian writers one does not find the arguments from reason concerning the immortality of the soul but rather the proclamation that God through Christ has called man to a life of happiness that will never end."

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"The notion of the soul surviving after death is not readily discernible in the Bible."69

"The Bible does not speak of the survival of an immaterial soul."70

Our only hope of enjoying immortality--eternal life --rests on the precious promises and assurances given in the Holy Scriptures. "For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord." Romans 6:23. "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life." John 3:16.