

CHAPTER NINE

CONCLUSION

9.1 Summary of results

The Patristic eschatological tradition is by no means a uniform and coherent body of teaching. It incorporates a diversity of incompatible and conflicting ideas, which are based on differing hermeneutical methods, leading to quite different results in the exegesis of Scripture. The variety of opinions and mass of detail on a wide range of topics means that it is impossible to produce a homogenised synthesis of Patristic eschatology: the most we can arrive at is a spectrum of views. Even a brief survey such as this study shows the complexity of the task. However, by making use of anthropological models as keys to interpretation, it has been possible to develop a typology which permits the correlation of diverse views around a common core. On that basis we can provide a broad outline of the typical features of each approach, which although developed with different emphases and nuances by various writers, followed something of a pattern.

Two models, the unitary and instrumentalist, proved to be sufficient for the purposes of this study to explain the basis on which Patristic writers understood the nature of the judgement. Those who stressed that the person was a unity of body and soul focussed on the resurrection, expecting that at that time everybody would be judged and then receive their appropriate deserts. The stage between death and resurrection was considered an interruption in normal, bodily life, and constituted a time of waiting. For some this was in a condition of “sleep,” in which the soul is inactive because it was deprived of its companion, the body. As it is only in and through the body that life can be expressed, the soul must wait until the body is restored before it can function properly again.

The Patristic writers who held to a unitary anthropology accepted the goodness of bodily life, and while often downplaying the relative value of marriage, sexuality and family life, they did not denigrate it as did many of those using an instrumentalist anthropology. They did stress the need for ethical standards to regulate human sexual behaviour, and as a result, they entered into conflict with Gnostic heresies, which denigrated sexuality on the one hand, or advocated a libertine approach on the other. The Patristic writers also defended the goodness of creaturely life and the unity of God as against the dual creators of the Gnostics and their defective view of the creation.

The millennialist views of many early Patristic writers continued these same themes. The concept of a banquet of celebration with the Lamb after the *Parousia* was accepted as a matter of course: eating and drinking were some of the pleasures of life which would be included in the triumph of the saints over the enemies of God in the millennial kingdom and in the renewed creation. The saints would be vindicated, their stand for righteousness upheld and those who had persecuted, tortured and killed them would be held to account for their actions. The saints would be recompensed in kind for that which had been denied them by the wicked: this was only just and right. The millennialist writers had no fears of a “materialist” view of eschatology, as many had

contended against the Gnostics for the very goodness of this material world. It was only when something of the Gnostic mentality infiltrated the church that a “materialist” eschatology was contrasted with a “spiritual” view, which was in no way consistent with the views of the early writers.

The resurrection body would be a restored, physical body, transformed and glorified, freed from corruption, disease and death. There was no sense of embarrassment over bodiliness among those who held to a unitary anthropological model: rather they keenly anticipated the resurrection as the demonstration of the power, justice and goodness of God. While they did sometimes become entangled in speculative debates about the precise details of the resurrection, this was partly because aspects of the doctrine, assailed by pagans and heretics of various kinds, as well as some “creation-negating” Patristic writers, needed to be clarified in order to present a coherent view consistent with the witness of Scripture.

The Patristic writers were able to resort to the Scriptures for material to assist them in developing a doctrine of the resurrection, although sometimes using dubious interpretations of passages only remotely, if at all, relevant to the matter in hand. Occasionally philosophical views came to their aid and provided arguments which permitted their understanding of the resurrection, even if these views did not actually support their doctrine, as did pagan myths such as the story of the phoenix.

However, it was predominantly philosophical arguments which provided the basis for their views on the immortality of the soul, and for that matter, the nature of the soul as such as a separable substantial entity, distinct from the body. Exegetical support for this doctrine was slender indeed, and relied on inferences drawn from passages which on the surface did not address the issue at all. The Patristic writers were predisposed to interpret passages of Scripture in such a way because of their prior acceptance, on external grounds, of the immortality of the soul. The philosophical arguments used to support (or refute) this doctrine were drawn from existing pagan discussions of the subject, and the Christian church inherited a debate which already had a long history in Greek thought.

While some who held to a unitary anthropology accepted such philosophical arguments in favour of the immortality and other characteristics of the soul, it was in the instrumentalist anthropological model that these came into their full flower in terms of Christian thought. Those who used this model were also in general more kindly disposed towards the heritage of pagan Greek philosophy. Various stratagems were employed to defend the use of pagan thought, and as a result, there was a failure to recognise the extent to which such thought was incompatible with Christian thought, not merely in detail, but in the deep underlying structure of that thought which provides the framework of meaning for the details.

As a consequence of adopting the structure of pagan thought on many issues, the content of Christian thought was reconfigured to fit into this new pattern. For instance, the contempt for death in the face of martyrdom, esteeming loyalty to Christ of greater worth than preserving bodily life, was transmuted into a contempt for bodily life itself, on the mistaken assumption that this creaturely existence, given to us by God, somehow in itself precluded close fellowship with God. Rather, it is

human sin and its consequences which cause alienation, guilt, sickness and death. But through the influence of pagan thought structures, asceticism, including the rejection of marriage and sexuality, became predominant in Christian faith and life.

The eschatological consequences include a loss of appreciation for the importance and centrality of the bodily resurrection, the expectation of an immediate entry to heaven (conceived on a pagan model as a spiritual, non-earthly realm) for the righteous soul and immediate punishment for the wicked, together with the eventual development of the concept of purgatory for those “in between” who did not fit into the other two categories. The concept of cosmic redemption and the renewal of the heavens and the earth were eclipsed as a result of the rejection of millennialism, on the grounds that this idea was “Gnostic” or “Jewish,” and was considered to be materialistic, naive and unworthy of the saints. That excessively sensuous conceptions of the millennium may have stimulated such rejection cannot be denied, but the fact remains that it was a philosophical, spiritualising concept of the eschaton which lay behind this rejection, coupled with a loss of appreciation for the goodness of earthly, bodily life. The consequences for Christian thought ever since have been unfortunate to say the least, as the promises of the OT, even when given a Christ-centred interpretation in the NT, were still abhorrent to their sensibilities.

9.2 Contributions from this study

The use of anthropological models, even a simple pair such as has been used in this study, provides a means whereby the mass of data on Patristic thought can be clarified as it relates to the answers to specific questions, as for instance: is the person the soul alone, making use of a body, or is the person a bodily being, a combination of soul and body? As a result of not recognising this distinction, the antithesis between “resurrection of the dead” and “immortality of the soul” as proposed by Cullmann,¹ appears to have been overstated.² Certainly these two concepts derive from incompatible sources: divine revelation and pagan speculation respectively; and are also quite different in character, the one rooted in our covenantal relationship with the Living God, and the other an ontological, metaphysical concept which can be readily separated from our relationship with God. However, in one respect this antithesis is misleading. As we have seen, there is no direct correlation between either concept and wider anthropological and eschatological views. It is the concept of the nature of the person which makes the difference. In order to make some headway in contemporary debate over this issue,³ it is necessary to address more complex issues of

¹ Oscar Cullmann. **Immortality of the Soul or Resurrection of the Dead?** London: Epworth Press, 1958. Cf. the comment by A Nygren. “Belief in the ‘Resurrection of the flesh’ is not the complement of the Immortality of the soul, but the contradiction of it.” **Agape and Eros**, p. 287.

² Simon Tugwell comments in this regard: “...I came to the conclusion that any tendency to insist heavily either on the immortality of the soul or the resurrection of the body is the product of an essentially false problematic.” **Human immortality and the redemption of death**, p. xi. Tugwell also comments: “Cullmann’s problematic seems to be quite absent from the early church.” *Ibid.*, p. 110.

³ As for example in the following works: R A Morey. **Death and the Afterlife**. Minneapolis: Bethany, 1984. John W Cooper. **Body, soul and life everlasting. Biblical anthropology and the monism-dualism debate**. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989. Murray J Harris. **Raised Immortal: Resurrection and immortality in the New Testament**. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans,

anthropology. The antithesis between “resurrection of the dead” and “immortality of the soul” cannot be treated in isolation as if that in itself provides the means to establish an authentically Christian eschatology.⁴

The most significant aspect of Biblical eschatology is the hope of the resurrection of the dead. The Patristic writers explored this hope in detail, and many of their insights remain fruitful and relevant, especially with respect to combatting current religious errors such as the fascination many people, both Christians and non-Christians, have for the idea of reincarnation. However, the doctrine of the judgement on the Last Day remains largely unexplored in contemporary theology,⁵ although it is an important and unavoidable theme within the Scriptures. To ignore, or worse to conceal the existence of such a belief at the very base of Christianity is to be untrue to its character, however much we may feel the idea to be unpleasant.⁶

An essential element of a Christian doctrine of the judgement on the Last Day is the issue of justice. Stöhr comments: “If I do not want to express the earthliness [of the Bible] by doing justice, then I have to spiritualize justice.”⁷ Unless we are to negate the Biblical call to do justice, and resort to an ethereal spirituality not earthed in everyday life with its struggles and hardships, the doctrine of the judgement cannot be discarded. It is often only the hope of vindication at the judgement that enables us to endure the profound injustices in the world around us, since it is then that all things will be put right and the innocent victims will be comforted and the guilty punished. Without belief in a judgement, we can only assume that those who die without being punished for their crimes have escaped justice, while those who die without vindication are denied justice.⁸ The Patristic writers insisted that justice is done only

1983. Idem., **From Grave to Glory. Resurrection in the New Testament**. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990. E W Fudge. **The Fire that Consumes. A Biblical and Historical Study of Final Punishment**. Houston: Providential Press, 1982.

⁴ However, it should be noted that the way in which emphasis on the immortality of the soul obscured the hope of the resurrection led to serious problems. As the philosophical doctrine of the immortality of the soul collapsed under the increasing weight of criticism from the humanist thought of the Enlightenment, Christian eschatology was left without any real content and became problematic. It is only in this century that eschatology has been recovered for theology.

⁵ A significant study of this theme is that by Stephen H Travis. **Christ and the judgement of God. Divine retribution in the New Testament**. Also important is James P Martin. **The Last Judgement in Protestant Theology from Orthodoxy to Ritschl**.

⁶ James Martin seeks to demonstrate that the decline in the popularity of this doctrine is rooted in the religious views of the Enlightenment, as a result of the conflict in Enlightenment thought between traditional Christian teaching and rationalism. **The Last Judgement in Protestant Theology from Orthodoxy to Ritschl**.

⁷ Martin Stöhr. “People and land.” *Immanuel* 22/23 (1989) 58.

⁸ This abdication of the Biblical call for justice is evident in the thought of Lloyd Geering, who sees the Judgement on the Last Day as a “myth” which was developed to give assurance that this was not a meaningless world, but one in which righteousness and justice are ultimately victorious, and resurrection was considered to be the means whereby justice would be meted out. However, Geering sees the judgement as our continuing influence on people, after our death, for better or for worse. “That is how the judgement of God manifests itself in the continuing life of the world.” The most we can hope for is that we have lived in terms of God’s covenanting love towards us, and have been of some value to God and not have failed to work for his purposes. This empty eschatology resulting from denial of the resurrection has

if those responsible for deeds in this life are appropriately rewarded or punished. Otherwise there is no incentive to do justly, love mercy and to walk humbly before God; nor will the saints be vindicated before those who deride them in this world for their faith and obedience.

The contrast between creation-affirming and creation-negating views and the consequences these have for eschatology have also been considered in this study. The other-worldly eschatology arising from a creation-negating approach is correlated with a neglect of the centrality of the hope of the resurrection, while only a creation-affirming approach is able to maintain the full flavour of the biblical hope. These two alternatives are compared by Galloway:

Once a community has accepted a redemptive faith, the impact of their environment upon them forces them either to narrow their concept of redemption by giving it an otherworldly interpretation, or to widen its reference so as to include the whole of their environment.⁹

As a result, it is apparent that the doctrine of the millennial reign of Christ on earth needs careful reassessment.¹⁰ It is not possible to continue to reject this doctrine if that rejection is ultimately rooted in the Patristic aversion to it, an aversion based on reasons which are unsupportable, namely, anti-Judaistic polemics, spiritualising and allegorizing hermeneutics, and embarrassment over a bodily eschaton arising from a creation-negating approach. The increasing awareness that the eschatological focus of Scripture is on the renewal of the earth and the resurrection hope, provides some important correctives for the traditional view, with the possibility of developing a more Biblically-nuanced millennialism, which would do much to undercut contemporary anti-creational dispensational pre-millennialism such as that popularised by Hal Lindsey, author of **The Late Great Planet Earth**.¹¹ However, eschatological traditions which do emphasise a cosmic renewal and the importance of this earth in God's purposes still tend to be paralysed by an a-millennialism rooted in the same problematics as Patristic anti-millennialism,¹² and as a result are unable to adequately critique dispensational pre-millennialism. There are many features of Patristic doctrine which have been lost through the abandonment of millennialism as a whole, namely the emphasis on the vindication of the saints before those who mistreated them, the anticipation of the marriage supper of the Lamb and its

no true place for justice since there are no rewards or punishments which personally affect us. Lloyd Geering. **Resurrection: A symbol of hope**, pp. 214-215.

⁹ Allan D Galloway. **The Cosmic Christ**, p. 9.

¹⁰ The recent work by J Webb Mealy, **After the thousand years: Resurrection and judgement in Revelation 20**, provides a good starting-point for a renewed consideration of millennialism.

¹¹ Note the important distinction between the **dispensational** pre-millennialism of Hal Lindsey and the **historic** pre-millennialism of authors such as George Eldon Ladd, which is closer to the Patristic millennialism (hence its label "historic." See for instance George Eldon Ladd. **The presence of the future: the eschatology of Biblical realism**. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985.

¹² See the otherwise excellent treatment of the renewal of the earth, mitigated by maintaining an a-millennialist view, in Gordon J Spykman. **Reformational theology**, pp. 531-543.

correlation with the Eucharist, and of course the focus on redemption as the renewal of human life and cultural endeavour, as well as the eventual renewal of this earth itself, in which all human history will reach its culmination. A recovery of these themes would do much to reinvigorate eschatological reflection in the church today.

Many of the problems in Patristic thought are rooted in the influence of allegorising hermeneutics, in which there are no controls on exegesis, since the meaning of the text is not found within the text but brought to the text from elsewhere. As Bietenhard says, the attempt to read Scripture allegorically “enables us to read into it the philosophy of the moment or anything that we desire.”¹³ This method thus laid itself open to the importation of pagan philosophical ideas into Christian thought, as can be seen in the rejection of an earthly-oriented exegesis which gave due credit to the Biblical promise of the millennial reign of Christ.¹⁴

The dichotomy between body and soul which is a structural factor in Patristic anthropology leads inevitably to numerous problems in the articulation of the Christian faith. These problems are not merely matters of detail that can be solved by modification or supplementation, but are intrinsic to any anthropology which presupposed a dichotomy between body and soul. Only a truly integral anthropology, that is, one which commences from the presupposition that the human person is a concrete whole, can adequately interpret the Biblical data and provide an alternative to the stultifying problematics of the approach based on a dichotomy of body and soul, and only on that basis can an adequate doctrine of the resurrection be articulated. The importance of the doctrine of the resurrection body is that it encapsulates many other doctrines. Bodiliness is essential to true Christian faith, both now and in the eschaton. Denial of that bodiliness leads inevitably to denigration of life in this world and all which that entails.

In his book on *Ethics*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer has reminded us that God willed that there should be human life on earth only in the form of bodily life. Therefore, bodiliness and human life belong together. This is confirmed by our everyday experience. We are born as a body, we express our personality and creativity through a body and so take our place in the ranks of society and the pages of history.¹⁵

Human life is always bodily life, whether now or in the resurrection, since the eschatological life is lived in the *new* earth in glorified, immortalised bodies.

9.3 Suggestions for further study

¹³ H Bietenhard. “The millennial hope in the early church.” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 6 (1953) 22.

¹⁴ Allegory is not to be confused with typology. While allegory is indifferent to the historical and literal sense of the text, typology regards historicity and the literal sense as the foundation on which the meaning of the text rests. Allegory sees the text as hiding a deeper meaning, while typology sees the text as true though merely provisional. It attempts to explain the meaning of the imagery than to find a hidden meaning behind the image. For a discussion of typology see J H Stek. “Biblical Typology yesterday and today.” *Calvin Theological Journal* 5 (1970) 133-162. E Earl Ellis. Foreword. L Goppelt. **Typos: The typological interpretation of the Old Testament in the New.** pp. 17-20. Goppelt, pp. 201-205.

¹⁵ John Wilkinson. “The Body in the Old Testament.” *Evangelical Quarterly* 63 (1991) 195.

During the course of this study various lacunae in our knowledge of Patristic thought became apparent.¹⁶ There seem to be no good comprehensive historical treatments of a number of central concepts in Patristic thought, although excellent studies exist dealing with individual writers. These concepts include anthropology in general,¹⁷ as well as specific anthropological concepts such as the “image of God” and its various interpretations, and the arguments for the immortality of the soul,¹⁸ which may have been analysed for their validity, but not it would seem in terms of their historical use.

The hope of renewal for the whole of creation needs to be further studied, as this Biblical theme is important for our environmental ethics, discussions concerning the land and resource rights of indigenous peoples, and animal rights, to mention but a few areas.

The issue of the formation of a synthesis between pagan Greek philosophical thought and divine revelation in Scripture is basic to the approach taken in this study. The problems caused (which are sometimes merely pseudo-problems, but which consume considerable energy amongst theologians) are as yet insufficiently analysed and further work needs to be done in this area. A theoretical basis on which this can be done is in some respects still lacking, as there is inadequate agreement on what “synthesis” properly refers to. It hardly seems adequate to characterise it as the use of any idea originating outside of the framework of Christian thought, since this is almost inevitable and hardly improper. However, the way in which such ideas are used in Christian thought is less frequently discussed, and yet this is an issue of vital importance to the integrity and coherence of Christian thought. Harnack’s view that Christianity has undergone a process of “Hellenization” seems justified; yet the way in which this idea has been developed has not always been sound. The debate occasioned by the book by Thorlief Boman, **Hebrew Thought compared with Greek**, failed to get to grips adequately with the issue because of flaws in Boman’s presentation that tended to render his whole approach suspect. The idea that the Hebrew mentality was different to the Greek shifted the focus from the nature and function of abstract reasoning and its place in everyday life, to the psychology of different ethnic groups, in an indefensible manner. Rather, the issue is the comparison between a covenantal document, addressed to every person in language they can understand on an everyday level, and abstract ideas which can only be grasped through education by those with sufficient intellectual ability. That the Hebrews were able to engage in such theorising is evidenced by Philo, to mention but one example. This flaw in the approach taken by Boman, together with inadequacies in Harnack’s analysis, has somewhat discredited the notion of “Hellenization” as a problem. But that it is a problem is undisputable. What is needed is more analysis of where and how

¹⁶ The limitations of local library resources available to me preclude certainty that no studies exist in these areas, but there would still appear to be room for further research in these areas.

¹⁷ Anna-Stina Ellverson comments that there is “a lack of general works or surveys on patristic teaching on man and creation or attempts to summarize what has so far been done in this theological field.” **The dual nature of man**, p. 9.

¹⁸ The **validity** of the arguments used have been well worked over by philosophers, but not it would seem the origins of such arguments, their significance for the Patristic writers in terms of their faith, and the different contexts in which the great variety of arguments were used.

“Hellenization” has occurred, and what our response should be to that.¹⁹ I trust that this study has been a small contribution to that on-going task in the life of the Church as it reflects critically on its intellectual heritage.

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¹⁹ See R D Crouse. “The Hellenization of Christianity. An historiographical study.” *Canadian Journal of Theology* 8 (1962) 22-33.