

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

## How to believe in immortality

Carol Zaleski 

Department of Religion, Smith College, Northampton, MA, USA  
Email: [czaleski@smith.edu](mailto:czaleski@smith.edu)

(Received 27 June 2022; revised 10 January 2023; accepted 11 January 2023; first published online 2 March 2023)

### Abstract

All the cards seem to be stacked against belief in immortality. Nonetheless, the resources of particular religious traditions may avail where generic philosophical solutions fall short. With attention to the boredom and narcissism critiques, intimations of deathlessness in Śāntideva's radical altruism, and recent Christian debates on the soul and the intermediate state, I propose two criteria for a coherent religion-specific belief in immortality: (1) the belief is supported by a fully realized religious tradition, (2) the belief satisfies the demand for self-transcendence as well as for self-preservation. Where self-transcendence and self-preservation are kept in balance, and where the whole idea rests upon the lattice-work of a fully realized religious tradition, immortality is a fitting object of belief. Moreover, such belief is compatible with considerable speculative freedom concerning matter and spirit, body and soul, and personal identity over time.

**Keywords:** Immortality; soul; intermediate state; Śāntideva

### Introduction

Many of us have intuitions about death and afterlife that are difficult to articulate, let alone prove, yet are deeply intertwined with our affections and imagination. Think of how inexplicable death seems when it claims a person we've known and loved. Or think back to early childhood, to our first impressions of wonder and amazement at the world. Could it be, as Wordsworth has it, that 'heaven lay about us in our infancy'?

Or consider the present moment of consciousness: it is fleeting almost to the point of vanishing, yet when we turn our attention inward, it feels boundless, endless, as big as the universe. Or consider how reason, having emerged from long epochs of evolutionary trial and error, turns around to address us with a voice of its own, pointing towards ideal realities which sail above this world of time and change. Consider further the persistent desire for immortality, the common belief in immortality, the moral demand for immortality to set right the injustices of this world. Long before we formulate arguments for belief, intuitions like these are already at work. Our very language predisposes us to imagine life beyond death. The person passes on, we say, the breath departs. It's almost irresistible to imagine that when the breath departs it must go somewhere, carrying vestiges of the personality it once sustained.

Yet a thought being irresistible doesn't make it true. We may justly be suspicious of beliefs that got here before we did, so to speak, and are waiting to seduce us. Now a

contrary intuition may present itself. We don't like to be seduced; we resolve not to be duped by our childish longings. We take a cold, hard look at the facts, and it seems that all the cards are stacked against immortality: the obvious facts of death and decomposition, the failure of paranormal research programmes, the moral reasons often adduced for considering immortality an unworthy object of desire, as well as a host of objections to common ways of thinking about matter and spirit, body and soul, and personal identity over time. If, having faced these objections, we still experience intimations of immortality, we're at an impasse. Philosophy delights in such dilemmas, but philosophy on its own may not have the power to settle this question for us.

Nonetheless, I suggest that – as with the problem of evil – the resources of concrete religious traditions may avail where generic philosophical solutions fall short. Two very different cases, one Buddhist and the other Christian, will serve to illustrate my point. With these two instances before us, I'll propose two criteria for a coherent religion-specific belief in immortality: (1) the belief is supported by a fully realized religious tradition, rather than by isolated arguments alone, and (2) the belief satisfies the demand for self-transcendence as well as for self-preservation, avoiding exaggeration on either side.

Exaggerated notions of self-preservation (preservation, that is, of one's ordinary egoistic self) end in tedium, for one is bound eventually to tire of one's attachments and self-projects. Exaggerated notions of self-transcendence, on the other hand, may give rise to various forms of alienation, whether by severing the connection between one's mundane life and one's ultimate transcendent state or by severing the bond between the living and the dead. The corrective for an exaggerated notion of self-transcendence may be found, in part, in practical and ritual observances that reinforce the symbiotic relationship between the living and the dead: care for the dead implies that they are in a position to be helped and promotes a relationship of kinship; appeal to the blessed dead implies that they are in a position to be helpful and promotes a relationship of patronage.

As I will suggest, immortality without relationship is sterile. If the opposite of relationship is confinement or estrangement, then there is a place for relationship in all great soteriological schemes, including śramaṇic teachings such as Jainism, which envisages liberated souls as independent monads. Though dwelling (according to Jaina belief) in self-sufficient solitude, each liberated soul is a plenitude of infinite knowledge, bliss, and power without trace of estrangement; and the path towards this inconceivable blessedness goes by way of veneration of spiritual exemplars and zealous care for all life forms.

Where self-transcendence and self-preservation are kept in balance, and where the whole idea rests upon the lattice-work of a fully realized religious tradition, immortality is a fitting object of belief. Moreover, as the examples discussed below will show, such belief can be compatible with considerable speculative freedom in our thinking about matter and spirit, body and soul, and personal identity over time.

Some working definitions are in order. By *fully realized religious tradition* I have in mind a religious tradition that exhibits staying power and aptitude for development. Following Paul Griffiths's (1999, 3, 7) characterization of a religion as 'principally an account' which exhibits 'comprehensiveness, unsurpassability, and centrality', I treat as 'fully realized' any religious tradition that has the resources to sustain and develop such an account. This would include resources such as sacred texts and foundational narratives (literate or non-literate); guidance from authorities, prophets, or paradigmatic figures (living or dead); practices like memorization, recitation, exegesis, and commentary; rules of life applicable to different walks of life; liturgical, spiritual, devotional, ascetic, penitential, and artistic disciplines. The precise weight given to particular resources

will vary, and the lack of one or more of these resources need not be disqualifying. Nor does it matter that individuals are rarely unflagging in their commitment or articulate in defending it; for the religious account is in the custody of the tradition as a whole, and as such remains recoverable for as long as the tradition survives.

To speak of *tradition* may also raise questions. As the word suggests, a tradition is something handed on. Better still, it is the activity of handing on and of receiving what is given. What a tradition is *not* is a static thing easily marked off from its cultural rivals. The religious traditions of the world are internally diverse, permeable, and subject to historical contingencies. Nonetheless, a sensitive interpretation of religion will avoid approaches that emphasize multivocality and the play of power interests to an extent that undermines the very idea of a coherent religious *Gestalt*. Fully realized religious traditions flourish by keeping faith with what is handed on, even as they grow, adapt, and change.

With this understanding of 'fully realized religious tradition' in mind, my aim is to defend the fittingness of one's given belief in immortality when nurtured by such a tradition. Here *fittingness* has a special sense which I take from the Latin *convenientia*. In the background is Cicero's use of *convenientia* to render the Platonic and Stoic *ὁμολογία* (agreement, harmony, fittingness, decorum, conformity to nature). In the foreground, for this article, is the *argumentum ex convenientia*, a form of reasoning that has proved indispensable for theology, famously within Christian scholasticism.

While Christian thinkers have proposed what they regard as necessary reasons to affirm the existence, uniqueness, and perfection of God, there are other core beliefs, such as those pertaining to motives for particular divine actions in history, which cannot be settled by rational demonstration or by appeal to authoritative texts. Such beliefs are typically defended by citing reasons of fittingness (*rationes convenientiae*), which are compelling even though not probative in force. By such means, Christian thinkers have sought to account for why God, who could have used other means, preferred the Incarnation as the means of human redemption.<sup>1</sup> Not just appropriateness but admirability and conformity to truths already in possession enter into what is meant by reasons of fittingness.

As such, the argument *ex convenientia* amounts to a vote of confidence in the rationality, coherence, and beauty of an entire religious scheme. Such practices of informal reasoning are broadly characteristic of religious thinking about questions regarded as neither definitively revealed nor capable of being settled in a strictly demonstrative fashion.

Is immortality such a question? I will suggest that in certain cases it can be.

I should clarify, first of all, that I am concerned with immortality in the transcendent sense – as a condition which rises above or passes beyond the circle of birth and death. Transcendent immortality is admittedly difficult to describe; to count as immortality it must involve some kind of personal continuity or persistence, but to count as transcendent immortality it must also involve a profound transformation (a self-transcendence which may, from our present vantage point, look like a self-death). There are many and various ways of picturing what it would be like to persist and yet be radically transformed. Images of the afterlife are famously riddled with inconsistencies. But this much can be said: the inescapable facts of birth and death, mutability, decay, and decomposition cannot rule out the possibility of a transcendent immortality, for they are confined to the hither side of the boundary between this life and the next. Nor can mediumistic communications, near-death experiences, or reincarnation memories establish its reality. Such phenomena also belong to the hither side, and are liable to being explained naturalistically. But if the case for a transcendent immortality neither stands nor falls on empirical evidence, it does remain vulnerable to other kinds of criticism, including the charge that immortality is an unworthy object of desire.

For example, a Buddhist may be expected to discourage the desire for immortality if immortality is construed as the craving for an eternal independent self, while a

Christian may be expected to discourage the desire for immortality if construed in a way that makes bodily resurrection superfluous. There are also general objections to the desirability of immortality: an endless life is bound to end in boredom, we are told; moreover, it is narcissistic to want such a life for oneself. I will begin by responding to these general objections – from boredom and from narcissism – before turning to specifically Buddhist and Christian considerations.

### Tedium and narcissism

In his famous essay, ‘The Makropulos Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality’, Bernard Williams (1973) argued that, while long life is a good thing, immortality is undesirable. Given endless time we would eventually exhaust the core projects and interests that made us wish for prolonged life in the first place, and so would sink into tedium.

Williams is not alone in this view, of course. Schopenhauer, Mark Twain, Paul Tillich, and Tolkien’s Elves all tell us that endless longevity is undesirable; and most twenty-first-century philosophers agree. Yet in recent years, John Martin Fischer (2019) has been arguing, against Williams and others he refers to as ‘immortality curmudgeons’, that an endless life spent pursuing a variety of interests, including the repetition of intrinsically worthwhile activities, is a reasonable and attractive picture of human immortality.

My own view, however, is that Bernard Williams has embedded in his argument the key for dismantling it. That key is his choice of the word *tedium*, instead of the more commonplace *boredom*, in his essay’s subtitle. Boredom is a word of modern coinage and shallow associations, while *tedium* (or its synonym *acedia*) has a long history in classical and post-classical moral psychology, and in the literature of late antique Christian monasticism, where it is classified among the eight temptations (*logismoi*) with which the demons assail contemplatives.<sup>2</sup>

For Williams, tedium occurs because there is a natural limit to our human capacity to take an interest, pay attention, lay plans, and fulfil them. For ascetic and monastic writers, however, tedium is not a natural limitation, but a vice. John Cassian (1900), writing in the fifth century, gives us a typical account of a Christian monk in the grip of tedium: ‘he looks about anxiously this way and that, and sighs that none of the brethren come to see him, and often goes in and out of his cell, and frequently gazes up at the sun, as if it was too slow in setting, and so a kind of unreasonable confusion of mind takes possession of him like some foul darkness, and makes him idle and useless for every spiritual work’.<sup>3</sup> An analogous syndrome – *thīna-middha* (‘sloth-and-torpor’) – appears in the Abhidhamma Piṭaka and in later Buddhist literature among the unwholesome mental factors that endanger spiritual practice. The Mahāyāna teacher Śāntideva (to be discussed below) warns monks against the idle habit of ‘breaking up clods of earth, ripping grass, and drawing lines in the earth without any purpose’ (Śāntideva (1996), 5.46, p. 38). One hears, in these small details, the voice of seasoned elders. Monastics and ascetics have a special intimacy with tedium; I take them to be experts on the subject.

The good news is that if tedium is a vice or, if you prefer, an impairment of attention and affections, it may admit of a cure. If tedium is a vice rather than a natural limitation, it follows that in principle human beings have the potential to be healed and transformed into a condition which would make immortality a worthy object of desire. We know from experience that we have it within us to be utterly absorbed in an object we find desirable or beautiful or otherwise worthy of attention. We also know how quickly we exhaust our powers of attention. But perhaps we were not meant to be so restless, so easily bored; perhaps we were meant to have inexhaustible reserves of attention, admiration, and love. As we are now, we aren’t fit for immortality, but perhaps we may be *made* fit, and in that remaking become more, rather than less, like ourselves.

That we aren't very good at imagining this transformed way of being doesn't mean that it is wholly alien to our nature. Monks and nuns, ascetics and mystics, and ordinary pious folks have already set their sights on this transformation and are preparing, here and now, by prayer, meditation, spiritual exercises, and works of love, to receive it.

So much for the boredom critique. But the narcissism critique should still give us pause. Picture a certain kind of seeker obsessively combing the annals of psychical research in search of evidence for personal survival of bodily death. The spectacle is unattractive, to say the least. Now contrast this with the selfless equanimity with which so many celebrated non-believers have faced the prospect of their own death. Think of David Hume dying (according to the testimony of his friends) with his patience, wisdom, kindness, and humour intact. Or think of Derek Parfit, making the cheerful discovery that as soon as he abandoned the idea of personal identity, the 'glass tunnel' he had been living in disappeared and he was cured of self-centeredness as well as fear of death (Parfit (1984), 281; cf. *Idem* (1971)). My colleague Jay Garfield has developed this theme of moral awakening through giving up the idea of a substantial self in many of his writings, including his recent book *Losing Ourselves* (2022). Such examples ought to make one wonder: isn't it nobler to face death squarely, not demanding the assurance of a persistent ego-self? It's a good question which, if not fatal to immortality belief, can perform the service of cleansing that belief of its narcissistic contaminants. For an exaggerated preoccupation with personal immortality is disqualifying for any immortality worthy of the name. In seeking ego-centred self-preservation at all costs, the narcissist paradoxically annihilates the self by refusing the gift of true blessedness. This is the point of the second criterion I propose: a fitting belief in immortality will hold fast to the middle path, satisfying the demand for self-transcendence as well as for self-preservation, avoiding extremes.

### Śāntideva and intimations of deathlessness

To explore the possibility that a sceptical challenge to immortality belief may purify rather than abrogate such belief, thus rendering it 'fitting' within a religious context, I turn to my first illustration, from the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* of the eighth-century Indian Buddhist scholar-poet Śāntideva. The *Bodhicaryāvatāra* is Śāntideva's summons and guide to the bodhisattva way of life, and to the *bodhicitta*, the altruistic resolve to attain awakening (*bodhi*) for the benefit of all beings, which is at its heart.

Admittedly, Śāntideva may seem an odd figure to recruit for an article on how to believe in immortality. Formed by the Mahāyāna sūtras and the Madhyamaka ('Middle Way') school, Śāntideva is adept at hammering down would-be absolutes wherever they pop up. If we are to think with Śāntideva, we have to imagine that everything and everyone, from gods to garden snails, is impermanent, dependently arising, empty of self, intrinsic nature, or 'own-being' (*svabhāva*) – and that we harm ourselves and others by grasping for a permanent hold where none is to be found. Clinging to unreal mental constructions, making ourselves and others miserable with ego-making thoughts, sowing deeds (*karma*) that for good or ill must bear fruit in future lives, we are captive to the cycle of birth and death. Reborn as a hell being, an animal, or a hungry ghost, I'll pay the consequences for my evil deeds – and will be hard pressed to amass the merit I need to improve future lives. Even in paradise there is no immortality to be found. Reborn as a god, after long eons of bliss I will exhaust my merit and fall into a lower birth. The situation is urgent, Śāntideva says: just now as I am enjoying the exceedingly rare privilege of a human birth, neither lulled by the pleasantness of paradise nor crushed by the miseries of lower births, I should resolve without a moment's delay to become awakened for the benefit of all sentient beings.

One point needs clarification at the outset. I take rebirth to be a background assumption for Śāntideva as for traditional Buddhists generally, though scholars and practitioners offer differing assessments of its centrality to the Dharma. For the purpose of this article it matters little if the standard arguments for rebirth – whether offered by Dharmakīrti in the late sixth century or by investigators of reincarnation memories in our own time – are persuasive or not. For it is not within the ordinary course of rebirth that one should look for immortality. On a traditional Buddhist account, every birth, however pleasant, is stalked by death, and fear of death only tightens death's grip upon us.<sup>4</sup> What intrigues me, rather, are the intimations of deathlessness to be found in accounts of Buddhist awakening – the suggestion that deathlessness is somehow a feature of awakening, whether beyond or (as in Mahāyāna traditions) transcendentally within cyclic existence. For Śāntideva, deathlessness is tasted by the bodhisattva who no longer pines for that storied 'other shore' beyond *saṃsāra*, but who resolves, rather, to awaken for the benefit of other beings.

How to generate this altruistic resolve? Whether because there is more than one hand in its composition, or because its author is a virtuoso of *upāya* (skill in means), the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* dispenses an assortment of instructions ranging from the folk-proverbial to the technically philosophical, suitable for every stage of the journey. If I am a beginner on the path, I should heed Śāntideva's warnings about the torments of hell. If assailed by carnal temptations, I should employ time-honoured ascetical techniques – neutralizing lust, for example, by meditating on the beloved's entrails. As a moral incentive, I should reflect on the equality of all sentient beings – for it is a truism that everyone wishes to be happy. Suffering is simply bad, and should therefore be removed wholesale without preferential treatment (*Bodhicaryāvatāra* 8.103). Finally I should realize that there is no other way for me to attain true happiness than to donate myself to others, dedicating to their well-being whatever merit I accumulate through spiritual practice. Echoing the Mahāyāna liturgy called the 'supreme worship' (*anuttara-pūja*), the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* abounds in performative utterances:

May the virtue that I have acquired by doing all this relieve every suffering of sentient beings. May I be the medicine and the physician for the sick. May I be their nurse until their illness never recurs . . . For the sake of accomplishing the welfare of all sentient beings, I freely give up my body, enjoyments, and all my virtues of the three times. (Śāntideva (1997), 3.6, 3.7, 3.10, p. 34)

Here is altruism to the nth power, enacted with language that is at once prayerful and heroically sacrificial.

In the ninth chapter on the Perfection of Wisdom, Śāntideva moves from ethics to metaphysics, drawing upon the Abhidharma analysis of existence as a causal stream of impersonal, ownerless dharmas while rejecting the view of dharmas as atom-like things, honouring Cittamātra teachings on equality of self and other while rejecting the view of consciousness as something independently real. He is free to be eclectic metaphysically because he holds fast to the Madhyamaka understanding of emptiness as his touchstone; with his core commitments in place, there is room for considerable speculative freedom.

Having acknowledged the difference between conventional and ultimate truth, Śāntideva uses conventional words about death and rebirth to set free those caught in language's nets. While he devotes himself to the flourishing of sentient beings, he harbours no doubts as to their ultimately illusory character.<sup>5</sup> One might expect, therefore, that he would be as eager as a Hume or a Parfit to wean us away from immortality language. Nonetheless, I cannot read the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* without noticing imagery evocative of immortality thinking.

Such intimations are present from the very beginning of Śāntideva's guide. The text begins with an extraordinary promise: the instant you set forth on the bodhisattva way of life, the base metal of your ordinary body will be transmuted into the precious gem that is the body of a Buddha. The *bodhicitta* is like an alchemical elixir, Śāntideva tells us: 'the elixir of life, produced to vanquish death in the world' (Śāntideva (1997), 3.28, p. 36).

The compound noun translated here as 'elixir of life' is an elaboration of *amṛta*, a remarkable word of ancient Indic ancestry which, like the Greek words *ambrosia* and *nectar*, means both deathlessness and the elixir that conquers death.<sup>6</sup> In Buddhist literature, we hear the Buddha praised as *amṛta*, his Dharma as *amṛta*, Nirvana as *amṛta*, mindfulness as *amṛta*. In the Perfection of Wisdom sūtras, emptiness is *amṛta*. Amitabha, portrayed as the Buddha of Infinite Life (Amitāyus), holds a vase of *amṛta*. The lay Buddhist master Vimalakīrti, in the sūtra that bears his name, treats his guests to a magical feast of *amṛta*. Among Mādhyamikas, both Bhāviveka and his critic Candrakīrti employ the expression *tattvāmṛta* to refer to the way things really are, undistorted by conceptualizations.<sup>7</sup> *Amṛta* may be taken to be metaphorical in these Buddhist cases, but if so it is a particularly strong metaphor, steeped in myth, ritual, alchemy, and medicine, and assimilated in meditative and visionary experience.

If only in this strong metaphorical sense, the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* conveys intimations of immortality. The bodhisattva's 'perfection of generosity' (*dānapāramitā*) imparts a gleam of deathlessness to this death-stalked world: 'As long as space abides and as long as the world abides, so long may I abide, destroying the sufferings of the world' is Śāntideva's prayerful resolve (Śāntideva (1996), 10.55, p. 143). He does not seek to escape from contingency into some absolute realm. Keeping to the Middle Way, he avoids the extremes of annihilationism and eternalism. He finds freedom from contingency *within* contingency, nirvana within this dreamlike show of a world. Call it deathlessness rather than immortality if that makes it less likely to be misunderstood. Call it deathlessness within life, rather than after life, if you prefer.

On the other hand, if we widen our view of the text to encompass its non-monastic as well as monastic audience, if we think of what it must be like to hear Śāntideva's words spoken by revered teachers, to hear them again during instructions for the dying and funeral rites for the dead, to have them echo in memory during private moments of grief, then the intimations of deathlessness acquire a powerful resonance. For ordinary folk hard-pressed by life, the bodhisattva path may be a far-off dream, but the good news is that there are magnanimous beings dispensing well-being out of their inexhaustible treasury of merit. Knowing this, Śāntideva dedicates his merit not only for the ultimate awakening of all sentient beings, but also for the fulfilment of their mundane desires: 'May all beings have immeasurable life. May they always live happily. May the very word "death" perish' (Śāntideva (1996), 10.33, p. 141).

Such intimations of deathlessness are muted, however, if we turn to secular analogues. Mark Johnston (2012), in his remarkable book *Surviving Death*, traces a movement from *anatta* to *agape*, that is, from no-self to self-sacrificing love. He suggests, in a humanistic vein, that immortality can be ours provided we deny the self and join the 'onward rush of humankind' (an expression Johnston takes from John Stuart Mill). For Johnston, the good are so thoroughly identified with others that they live on, as it were, in multiple embodiments. It's a beautiful thought, but it makes no provision for ongoing communion between the living and the dead. Similarly for Derek Parfit: when the glass tunnel of personal identity dissolves, other people come closer, but they are other people only of the sort that a naturalistic account could permit.

For Śāntideva, in contrast, the other people who come closer constitute a vast company of buddhas, bodhisattvas, gods, and other dazzling beings in addition to the ordinary folk

one meets every day. It's not only the living who have a moral claim upon one; as in most traditional cultures, the dead also have a moral claim. To think otherwise would be to make nonsense of pious practices regarding the deceased, and Śāntideva has no wish to make nonsense of pious practices. But here is the Buddhist distinctive: the bodhisattva's response to this moral claim is unconditional; it extends to countless multitudes; and it is heightened by the conviction that its beneficiaries are dependently originated, lacking a self, empty of own-being. To accept the moral claim of others on these terms is to taste the ambrosia of deathlessness, purified of narcissistic craving for personal survival. Such is Śāntideva's altruistic intimation of deathlessness.

For Śāntideva, this altruistic intimation of deathlessness goes hand in hand with the no-self teaching, set against a background of religious practices that link the living and the dead. But for other Indic philosophical and religious traditions (such as Hindu or Jain) which proclaim the reality of a transcendent, changeless, blissful *ātman*, there are analogous moral fruits. The glass tunnel must dissolve for the *ātmavādin*, too, for the only way to realize my true self is to disidentify from my ego-self. The spiritual disciplines that support self-realization, thus understood, aim at loosening the ego's grip by subduing the passions, retraining the attention, warming the heart with devotion, and balancing ecstatic states with prudence about the needs of the body and sensitivity to the needs of others.

So it is that the overt affirmations of immortality that figure so powerfully in many South Asian traditions, as well as the subtle intimations of deathlessness one finds in Śāntideva, rest upon the full length and breadth of their respective teachings and practices. Isolated arguments for immortality are vulnerable to being discredited; but where an intuition of immortality rests upon the lattice-work of a fully realized religious tradition, its claims become stronger and its moral fruits more wholesome.

So far I have suggested that immortality is a fitting object of belief provided it is supported by a fully realized religious tradition which, keeping to the Middle Way, balances self-preservation with self-transcendence and preserves the relationship between the living and the dead. For the remainder of this article, to pursue the same suggestion from a quite different angle, I turn to a question about the immortality of the soul as it pertains to the two-stage afterlife characteristic of classical Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

### Immortality of the soul and the intermediate state

For Jews, Christians, and Muslims, the traditional belief is that the dead will be raised at the end of time as complete embodied, perfected individuals.<sup>8</sup> But between death and resurrection there is a puzzling interregnum. Do the dead utterly blink out of existence, only to be reconstituted by resurrection? Are they unconscious, in suspended animation, or asleep? If the dead persist as separated souls without sense organs, what kind of experience, if any, are they capable of enjoying? If the blessed are admitted even now to the rewards of paradise, does that make the future resurrection superfluous? Which of the standard models of personal identity and selfhood is best suited to make sense of the two-stage afterlife traditionally professed by Jews, Christians, and Muslims?

One popular option is dualism. Soul-body dualism of a Platonic or Cartesian kind does a good job of securing the self's persistence even in a disembodied state, and has the virtue of simplicity, as Richard Swinburne likes to point out. Yet our biological evolution, our kinship to other animals, and the intricate entanglement of mind and brain make dualism – even if it should turn out to be the best candidate – difficult to theorize and defend.

More attractive to many theists today are hybrid models that stress the integrity of the human organism, regarding body and soul as naturally intertwined. On the view called hylomorphism, the human soul is the substantial form (*morphe*) which communicates



life and structure to the human body. Once separated by death, the body loses its human signature and becomes a mere corpse, while the soul is deprived of its normal body-constituting role. Hence, on a hylomorphic account, a complete and flourishing human life beyond death would require bodily resurrection.

Each of these models – dualistic and hylomorphic, with their many variations – faces a particular challenge. The dualist's challenge is to explain why resurrection of the body is necessary in addition to immortality of the soul; the hylomorphist's challenge is to account for the continuity of the human person during the interim period between death and resurrection. Yet with good will and skilful reasoning, these challenges can be met, though in different eras the climate of opinion will favour one model over the other for a time.

An interesting case in point is the current debate concerning 'survivalist' versus 'corruptionist' interpretations of Thomas Aquinas's teaching on the status of the separated soul.<sup>9</sup> The nomenclature is somewhat misleading: no one denies that, for Thomas, the separated soul (whose incorruptibility is knowable by reason) survives throughout the intermediate period from death until bodily resurrection. But the corruptionist reading is that the human *person* does not survive the loss of the body at death. Thomas's observation (2012), *anima mea non est ego* ('my soul is not I'), is frequently quoted in this regard. The survivalist reading, however, interprets Thomas as allowing for the idea that human personhood persists throughout the intermediate period.

For believers well grounded in their tradition, the existence of such rival views of the soul isn't in itself a great problem. Scholars may disagree about what Thomas Aquinas meant, but no one could imagine him endorsing a view of the soul which makes nonsense of such pious practices as praying to the saints or praying for the souls in purgatory. Aquinas remains a Catholic on any sound reading. The real worry arises when a disagreement over the metaphysics of the human person shakes the foundation of core religious practices and commitments. The remainder of this article will consider just such a practical case: a twentieth-century theological *contretemps* concerning immortality of the soul.

Here's how the issue was framed by the eminent Lutheran theologian Oscar Cullmann, in his 1955 Ingersoll Lecture on Human Immortality at Harvard:

If today one asks an average Christian, no matter whether Protestant or Catholic . . . what the New Testament teaches about the destiny of the individual human being after death, in almost every case one will receive the answer: 'The immortality of the soul'. In this form, this opinion is one of the greatest misunderstandings of Christianity there can be. (Cullmann (1965), 9)

Cullmann was not the first advocate of this view, nor was he alone in promoting it. Many exegetes and theologians were urging Christians to close their ears to the siren song of immortality of the soul, deeming it a Greek import unfaithful to the holism of biblical anthropology, unmindful of the centrality of Christ's redeeming work. Resurrection should be the exclusive focus of Christian hope. And in that case, the argument was, it is better to think of the intermediate period as unconscious sleep or temporary extinction, and thus conveniently set aside the church-dividing doctrine of purgatory.<sup>10</sup>

By the 1960s, a dehellenizing campaign, as Joseph Ratzinger called it (1988), was well advanced among Catholics as well as Protestants, with a number of biblical theologians arguing that one should think of life after death as entry into God's eternity, rather than as a temporal interlude in which separated souls hang around waiting to receive their bodies. A novel theory called 'resurrection in death' was proposed as a way to

overcome body–soul dualism and eliminate the redundancies of the traditional two-stage eschatology.

All this might have been a tempest in an exegetical teapot if it weren't for the fact that the dehellenizing campaign contributed to a general climate of embarrassment about soul language – an embarrassment that spread beyond the guild of professional theologians to affect the congregation. Some pastors began to wonder if it was improper to speak of going to heaven when you die, improper to comfort mourners with assurances about the souls of the departed, improper, even, to address prayers to the saints. Why pray for the dead, or to the dead, if there is no conscious life on the receiving end?

There were other practical consequences. Catholic liturgists seeking to implement the Vatican II mandate to reform the traditional (1962) Roman Missal trimmed back the use of the word *anima* (soul), deleting it even from Masses for the Dead.<sup>11</sup> This was part of a general movement to restrain what were deemed excessively individualistic and otherworldly tendencies in public worship. Moreover, in places where *anima* was retained in the 1970 Roman Missal, English-language translators favoured prosaic alternatives. The Communion Rite prayer, 'Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof, but only say the word and my soul shall be healed' (*Domine non sum dignus ut intres sub tectum meum; sed tantum dic verbo et sanabitur anima mea*), echoing the prayer of the centurion for his paralysed servant (Matthew 8:8), became by the translator's licence the abstract utterance 'Lord, I am not worthy to receive you, but only say the word and I shall be healed.' The assumption was that the pronoun *I* is more holistic than the noun *soul*. But the effect was paradoxically disembodied, for the word *soul* is far richer than the pronoun *I* in sensory and spiritual associations. It was entirely unnecessary, too: on a traditional Christian account the soul indwells the body not as a mere part like an appendix, but as a part that unifies the whole, is the deepest dimension of the whole, and represents the whole by synecdoche. That's about as holistic as any anthropological term could be. Moreover, as they await the general resurrection, the souls of the blessed already enjoy a corporate existence, so to speak, as part of the heavenly society in which they abide as members of Christ's body, in fellowship with all the saints, at once at rest and active in contemplation and charity.

Eventually the dehellenization campaign subsided. In 2011, the word *soul* was restored to English-language liturgical texts, reflecting principles set down earlier by a 'Letter on Certain Questions concerning Eschatology' published by the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (1979), and a subsequent intervention by the International Theological Commission (1992). Against the view that would oppose resurrection of the whole person to immortality of the soul, the Letter affirmed:

that a spiritual element survives and subsists after death, an element endowed with consciousness and will, so that the 'human self' subsists. To designate this element, the Church uses the word 'soul', the accepted term in the usage of Scripture and Tradition. Although not unaware that this term has various meanings in the Bible, the Church thinks that there is no valid reason for rejecting it; moreover, she considers that the use of some word as a vehicle is absolutely indispensable in order to support the faith of Christians.

And, most importantly: 'The Church excludes every way of thinking or speaking that would render meaningless or unintelligible her prayers, her funeral rites and the religious acts offered for the dead. All these are, in their substance, *loci theologici*.' The Letter sets forth a principle of restraint, not to make nonsense of pious practices that link the living and the dead; and it joins this principle of restraint to a principle of speculative freedom, not demanding uniformity in matters of metaphysics. One may be a Platonist or an

Aristotelian, a survivalist or a corruptionist, provided the non-negotiables are honoured. Śāntideva, as I've suggested, observed a comparable restraint and enjoyed a comparable speculative freedom.

For Jews, Christians, and Muslims alike, there is one word in the lexicon of theological anthropology which overshadows the words *soul* and *body* and renders disputes about them less worrisome: that word is *creature*. As a creature, the human being receives each moment of existence as a sheer gift. This is a key point that regulates metaphysical speculation: *the fact that we are made is more important than what we are made of*. We could be as immaterial as angels and God could destroy us if it were just for God to do so. We could be as material as mayflies and God could preserve us. Immortalism fails when it becomes forgetful of creaturehood. Mortalism fails when it severs the relationship between this life and the next, between the living and the dead, between the human person and God.

By the same token, personal identity in the afterlife becomes conceivable by dint of relation to one's maker. As the infant's development of a unified personal identity is fostered by the face-to-face vision of the mother and thwarted by its deprivation, so personal identity in the future life may be fostered by the face-to-face vision of God, the beatific vision.<sup>12</sup>

In principle, if I am Jewish, Christian, or Muslim, I believe in immortality because I believe in God, not because I have prior or independent proof of immortality. I need not be discouraged by the inconclusive character of isolated arguments for life after death. As long as I understand immortality in a way that harmonizes with the total pattern of creation, revelation, and redemption to which I subscribe, it is rational for me to believe in it. And from this it follows that I may judge models of body, soul, and self on their fittingness in relation to what I believe about God and in relation to what I do as a member of the spiritual community in which I am enfolded. Analogously, if I am Buddhist, I believe in *amṛta* – deathlessness – because I honour my interdependence with all sentient beings and entrust myself to the protection of fully awakened beings of invincible compassion. To satisfy mere curiosity about the afterlife is not conducive to my awakening, but deathlessness becomes intelligible as a Mahāyāna Buddhist theme when it is seen in light of the total *Gestalt* of the bodhisattva way of life.

There is admittedly a certain circularity to the claim that belief in immortality may be justified by internal considerations of harmony or fittingness. Yet I hope to have shown that belief in immortality is not always an automatic concomitant of a religious outlook. In the Buddhist and Christian cases examined here, there are tensions to resolve and work to be done in order to harmonize belief in immortality with the total pattern of religious belief.

How to believe in immortality? Immerse yourself in an immortality-bearing tradition which offers you something even greater than your own immortality to believe in and to love, and a thousand things besides your own immortality in which to take an interest. It should present a comprehensive vision of reality. It should appeal to your sense of what is good, beautiful, and true; engage your reason and your affections; integrate what you know while surpassing what you know; challenge as well as console; and direct you towards the fulfilment that is proper to your nature.

As the examples I've discussed illustrate, fully realized religious traditions have the resources to nurture as well as to restrain the impulse to believe in immortality. Coherent, religion-specific immortality beliefs balance self-transcendence and self-preservation, honour the connection between the living and the dead, and tolerate considerable speculative freedom provided the core beliefs of the tradition are in place. Narcissism is not an issue – for on any well-developed religious conception, the price of immortality is death to self; the promise of immortality is relationship unbroken by death; and the perfection of generosity is to draw others into this deathless relationship.

**Conflict of interest.** None.

## Notes

1. Thomas Aquinas made liberal use of this strategy. For a twentieth-century example, see Bernard Lonergan (2011).
2. *Boredom* is too recent for Samuel Johnson to have included it in his 1755 *Dictionary of the English Language*, while an entry for *tedious* defines the word as ‘wearisome by continuance’. See ‘tedious, adj.’. *A Dictionary of the English Language*, by Samuel Johnson. 1755. [https://johnsonsdictionaryonline.com/1755/tedious\\_adj](https://johnsonsdictionaryonline.com/1755/tedious_adj) (Accessed 8 June 2022).  
See also the following:  
‘acedia, n.’. (no date) *OED Online*. Oxford University Press. <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/1335#eid33133512> (Accessed 3 June 2022).  
‘accidie, n.’. (no date) *OED Online*. Oxford University Press. <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/1068?> (Accessed 3 June 2022).  
*A Latin Dictionary*, Lewis CT and Short C (eds), *taedium* (no date). <https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:text:1999.04.0059:entry=taedium> (Accessed 3 June 2022).
3. Cassian’s account is modelled on that of Evagrius of Pontos, *Praktikos* 12 ‘Acedia’; see Sinkewicz (2006), 99.
4. Śāntideva’s opinion on the harmful character of death is discussed by Garfield (2010/2011); also in ‘Seeing sentient beings: Śāntideva’s moral phenomenology’ in Gold and Duckworth (2019, 200). In other contexts, fear of death or of rebirth in lower realms is a salutary means to spur spiritual and moral exertion.
5. Scholars disagree about the precise relationship between his moral teaching of radical unselfishness and his metaphysical teaching of no-self, but there’s no doubt that both are non-negotiable commitments for Śāntideva. See Garfield et al. (2016), Harris (2011), Siderits (2000), Williams (1998).
6. The Sanskrit is *jagan-mṛtyu-vināśāya*, from *jagat* (the universe, all beings), *mṛtyu* (death), and *vināśāya* (annihilation). The Tibetan counterpart to this verse, as rendered by the Padmakara Translation Group, is more colourful: ‘This is the supreme draft of immortality | That slays the Lord of Death, the slaughterer of beings’ (3.29, 53). For *amṛta* in the Vedas see Olivelle (2011). For *amṛta* in the purāṇas and in South Asian iconography, see Narayanan (2014).
7. See Eckel (2008), on this expression in Bhāviveka’s *The Heart of the Middle Way (Madhyamakahrdaya)* verse 5.1, pp. 213–214, n. 2. Eckel cites an interesting discussion by Lamotte (1976) ‘Perfumed *amṛta* and the sacred meal’, 307–314, on differences between Buddhist and Hindu treatments of this theme. Candrakīrti (1979, para. 372, p. 182).
8. For resurrection in biblical and classical Judaism, see Levenson (2006); for Islamic traditions, see Lange (2015) and Smith and Haddad (1981).
9. For an influential survivalist interpretation of Aquinas, see Stump (2012). For an influential corruptionist interpretation, see Toner (2009 and 2010). See also the following for the ongoing debate: Oderberg (2012); Nevitt (2014), (2016); Spencer (2014); Brower (2017), 279–310; De Haan and Dahm (2019); Skrzypek (2020); Rooney (2021); .
10. Discussed in Zaleski Ingersoll Lecture (2004) and Yates (2017) (with a detailed defence of the traditional two-stage eschatology). For an ecumenical *rapprochement* between Lutheran and Catholic theologians on questions of the intermediate state, including purgatory, see The Hope of Eternal Life (2011).
11. For documentation of some of these changes, see Hazell (2021).
12. Christians haven’t always agreed about whether the souls of the blessed will see God immediately upon death. For Catholics, the question was settled in the affirmative by Pope Benedict XII in the 1336 Constitution *Benedictus Deus* and seconded by the bull *Laetentur coeli* at the 1439 Council of Florence.

## References

- Brower JE (2017) *Aquinas’s Ontology of the Material World: Change, Hylomorphism, and Material Objects*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Candrakīrti (1979) *Lucid Exposition of the Middle Way: The Essential Chapters from the Prasannapadā of Candrakīrti*. Sprung M with Murti TRV and Vyas US (trans.). London: Routledge.
- Cassian J (1900) *Institutes* 10, 2 in *The Twelve Books of John Cassian on the Institutes of the Coenobia, and the Remedies for the Eight Principal Faults*, A Select Library of Nicene and post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, second series, Schaff P and Wace H (eds), vol. 11. New York, NY: The Christian Literature Company, p. 267.
- Cullmann O (1965) Immortality of the soul or resurrection of the dead: the New Testament witness. In Stendahl K (ed.), *Immortality and Resurrection: Death in the Western World: Two Conflicting Currents of Thought*. New York, NY: Macmillan, pp. 9–53.

- De Haan DD and Dahm B (2019) Thomas Aquinas on separated souls as incomplete human persons. *The Thomist: A Speculative Quarterly Review* 83, 589–637.
- Eckel MD (2008) *Bhāviveka and his Buddhist Opponents*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Fischer JM (2019) *Death, Immortality, and Meaning in Life*. Oxford and New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Garfield JL (2010/2011) What is it like to be a Bodhisattva? Moral phenomenology in Śāntideva's Bodhicaryāvatāra. *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 33, 327–351.
- Garfield JL (2022) *Losing Ourselves: Learning to Live without a Self*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Garfield JL, Jenkins S and Priest G (2016) The Śāntideva passage: *Bodhicaryāvatāra* VIII.90–103. In The Cowherds (ed.), *Moonpaths: Ethics and Emptiness*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 55–76.
- Gold JC and Duckworth DS (eds) (2019) *Readings of Śāntideva's Guide to Bodhisattva Practice*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
- Griffiths PJ (1999) *Religious Reading*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Harris S (2011) Does *anātman* rationally entail altruism? *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 18, 93–23.
- Hazell M (2021) All the elements of the Roman Rite? *New Liturgical Movement*. Available at <https://www.newliturgicalmovement.org/2021/10/all-elements-of-roman-rite-mythbusting.html#.YpkXNuwpDrA> (Accessed 2 June 2022).
- International Theological Commission (1992) Some current questions in eschatology. *Irish Theological Quarterly* 58, 209–243.
- Johnston M (2012) *Surviving Death*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Lamotte É (1976) *The Teaching of Vimalakīrti: Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*. Boin S (trans.). London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Lange C (2015) *Paradise and Hell in Islamic Traditions*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Levenson JD (2006) *Resurrection and the Restoration of Israel: The Ultimate Victory of the God of Life*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Loneragan B (2011) The notion of fittingness: the application of theological method to the question of the purpose of the incarnation. In Doran RM and Monsour HD (eds), *Early Latin Theology*, vol. 19. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, pp. 482–490.
- Narayanan V (2014) Who is the strong-armed monkey who churns the ocean of milk? *Udaya* 11, 3–28.
- Nevitt TC (2014) Survivalism, corruptionism, and intermittent existence in Aquinas. *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 31, 1–19.
- Nevitt TC (2016) Aquinas on the death of Christ: a new argument for corruptionism. *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 90, 77–99.
- Oderberg DS (2012) Survivalism, corruptionism, and mereology. *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 4, 1–26.
- Oliveira P (2011) Amṛtā: women and Indian technologies of immortality. In *Language, Texts, and Society: Explorations in Ancient Indian Culture and Religion*. London: Anthem Press, pp. 101–120.
- Parfit D (1971) Personal identity. *The Philosophical Review* 80, 3–27.
- Parfit D (1984) *Reasons and Persons*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Ratzinger J (1988) *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life* [*Eschatologie – Tod und ewiges Leben*]. Waldstein M (trans.), Nichols A, O. P. (ed.). Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press.
- Rooney JDOP (2021) Survivalism, suitably modified. *The Thomist: A Speculative Quarterly Review* 85, 349–376.
- Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (1979) Letter on certain questions concerning eschatology. Available at [https://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_1979\\_0517\\_escatologia\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_1979_0517_escatologia_en.html) (Accessed 14 June 2022).
- Śāntideva (1996) *The Bodhicaryāvatāra*. Crosby K and Skilton A (trans.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Śāntideva (1997) *A Guide to the Bodhisattva Way of Life*. Wallace VA and Wallace B (trans.). Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion Publications.
- Siderits M (2000) The reality of altruism: reconstructing Śāntideva. *Philosophy East and West* 50, 412–424.
- Sinkewicz R (2006) *Evagrius of Pontus: The Greek Ascetic Corpus*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Skrzypek JW (ed.) (2020) *Hylomorphism: Ancient, Medieval, and Contemporary Approaches*, special issue of *Quaestiones Disputatae*, 10.2.
- Smith JI and Haddad YY (1981) *The Islamic Understanding of Death and Resurrection*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Spencer M (2014) The personhood of the separated soul. *Nova et Vetera* 12, 863–912.
- Stump E (2012) Resurrection and the separated soul. In Davies B (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Aquinas*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, pp. 458–466.
- The Hope of Eternal Life (2011) *Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue XI*. Almen LG and Sklba RJ (ed.). Minneapolis, MN: Lutheran University Press.
- Thomas Aquinas (2012) *Commentary on the Letters of Saint Paul to the Corinthians*. Larcher FR, O.P., Mortensen B, and Keating D (trans.). In *Latin/English works of St. Thomas Aquinas, Biblical Commentaries*, vol. 38. Lander, WY: The Aquinas Institute for the Study of Sacred Doctrine, 1 Cor. 15:12–19, lect. 2, para. 924, p. 349.

- Toner P (2009) Personhood and death in St. Thomas Aquinas. *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 26, 121–138.
- Toner P (2010) St. Thomas Aquinas on death and the separated soul. *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 91, 587–599.
- Williams B (1973) The Makropulos case: reflections on the tedium of immortality. In *Problems of the Self: Philosophical Papers 1956–1972*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 82–100.
- Williams P (1998) *Altruism and Reality: Studies in the Philosophy of the Bodhicaryāvatāra*. Richmond: Curzon Press.
- Yates S (2017) *Between Death and Resurrection: A Critical Response to Recent Catholic Debate Concerning the Intermediate State*. New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Zaleski C (2004) ‘In defense of immortality’ (Ingersoll lecture on human immortality, 2000, Harvard). In Post SG and Binstock RH (eds), *The Fountain of Youth: Cultural, Scientific, and Ethical Perspectives on a Biomedical Goal*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, pp. 109–129. Shorter version in *First Things* (2000) 105, 36–42.