

4

The Problem of “Conditional Immortality”

BROADLY SPEAKING, THE FIELD of eschatology is the least distinguished in terms of movement of theological thought. Even in the West where, beginning with the era of the Reformation, theology got off the ground, and—for good or ill—new life arose in various theological spheres, this applied least of all to eschatology. We could instead speak here of a certain lack of eschatological feeling, which manifests either in the traditional repetition of what is unrepeatable *in that form* or in the easy acceptance of the painless solution of so-called “universalism.” Two types of eschatological thinking prevail: a penal codex of complete savagery or an appeasing amnesty that in practical terms shirks all the difficulties of the problem. The first approach is more and more becoming a practical impossibility in our day, for it has lost all interior persuasiveness; the second represents not the overcoming but the simple rejection of the first (not to mention the serious biblical and theological difficulties attending this type of thinking). Faced with these two options—medieval orthodoxy and a humanitarian universalism—there arises the question of another, third approach that, while uniting the advantages of both, would also be free from their weaknesses—a sort of *tertium*.

Thus, from the rejection of the two horns of this eschatological dilemma there arises in the second half of the nineteenth century the theological doctrine calling itself the theory of “conditional immortality” or “conditionalism.” At all events, it merits attention simply because it poses with radical acuity the question of immortality and eternal life: the preliminary question for any eschatological doctrine. Some believe that the

human being is essentially mortal, like animals, and therefore that death is a kind of annihilation; from this there clearly follows a negative eschatology of emptiness. Such is the currently widespread faith of atheistic unbelief (for, of course, unbelief too is only a species of *belief*, since the nature of the question does not allow a rationally demonstrable resolution). Or the human person is essentially immortal, eternity is proper to him, and eschatological doctrine attempts to define the content of this eternity. In the theory of conditionalism we have yet a third alternative: the human person does not possess natural immortality but can acquire it or *not* acquire it. Immortality is conditional: it is *given* or it is *not* given depending on certain conditions. Such is the formulation of the problem of eschatology that we find in “conditionalism.” Once this problem has been recognized, it cannot be evaded by quietly ignoring it.¹

The theory of conditionalism as a notable current of theological thought emerges in the second half of the nineteenth century in Europe and America, primarily, of course, and even almost exclusively among Protestant theologians not connected with the orthodox tradition. Several eminent theologians and philosophers (among the latter, for example, stands Renouvier)² are numbered among its proponents. The leading founders here are two Protestant pastors, the Englishman E. White³ and the Swiss Pétavel-Olliff,⁴ to whom numerous followers attached themselves. The writings of both, despite a certain theological primitiveness, nonetheless distinguish themselves by a more than typical force of conviction and therefore also of persuasiveness. They propose conditionalism not only as theological truth, which revelation indicates we should accept, but also as a salvific idea that alone is capable of liberating contemporary Christianity from a scandalizing lack of answers on the question eternal life, for it is from this lack of answers that both Christian life and especially Christian mission suffer. According to the theory of conditional immortality, the destiny of humanity in eternal life will be paradisaical bliss, and by this will be realized the

1. In Russian theological literature the sole presentation of the theory of conditionalism is given in passing by Prof. Nikolai Nikanorovich Glubokovsky. *The Preaching of St. Paul*, vol. 1, 571–91. [A theologian and scholar who specialized in the apostle Paul, Glubokovsky (1863–1937) served as Professor of New Testament at the St. Petersburg Theological Academy before the revolutions of 1917.—Trans].

2. Charles Bernard Renouvier (1815–1903), a French idealist philosopher. —Trans.

3. Edward White, *Life in Christ (A Study of the Scripture Doctrine of the Nature of Man, the Object of the Divine Incarnation, and the Conditions of Human Immortality)*, 1878. [Bulgakov notes that he is working with the French translation produced in 1880 —Trans.].

4. Emmanuel Pétavel-Olliff, *La fin du mal* [translated into English as *The Struggle for Eternal Life*], 1891; *Le problème de l'immortalité* [*The Problem of Immortality*], 1892.

prophetic word of the apostle that God will be all in all [1 Cor 15:28]. Yet in this beatitude only the just, those worthy of it, will participate. Sinners, on the other hand, resistant to the very end to the will of God, will die; having turned into nothing, they do not receive the destiny of immortality. Such is the basic idea. Let us turn to its theological grounding.

II

Man was created distinct from animals—which possess only *generic* (genus) life (“according to their kinds”: Gen 1:21, 24–25)—because he possesses the genus’ *personal* energy, which is realized in personal immortality. The human person was not created so as to be mortal by nature—on the contrary, he possesses, *by virtue of his creation*, the possibility of immortality, *posse non mori*.⁵ This immortality is proper to the human spirit, which is similar to the incorporeal spirits. Yet man is distinct from the spiritual world through the *complexity* of his composition, namely in that he is not created as an incorporeal spirit who, though existing in the created world, remains nonetheless *above* it. The human person is an *incarnate* spirit connected with the world. The possibility of death lurks in this complexity not from the side of the “immortal soul” but rather from the side of the *whole* human person, for whom death is not a return to non-being but instead a certain disincarnation, a rupture with the world, an ontological catastrophe. The body is by no means the cause of death; it is, on the contrary, the condition for the life of man, given to him by God at creation. By this complexity the human person is distinguished equally from the incorporeal world, which does not know enfleshment, and from the animal world, which does not possess a spirit but only a “living soul” [Gen 2:7], that animal soul which the human person too possesses alongside the animal world. It is this connection between soul and spirit, between supernatural and natural being, which was *given* by God at creation, that the human person ought to have secured by the power of his free and creative spirit through elevating his being to the highest level of positive immortality.

This was linked with his determinate relationship to God (symbolically expressed in the commandment not to partake of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil), as well as with his determinate positive

5. Catholic doctrine (see Matthias Joseph Scheeben, *Handbuch der Dogmatik* [*Handbook of Catholic Dogmatics*], Book II, section 165) considers *posse non mori* [*possibility of not dying*] to be not natural but supernatural, a gift of grace, for the body itself naturally contains the principle of death and dissolution—here we have the echoes of Manicheism and Platonism, as well as a harbinger of the future path of conditionalism.

relationship to the world (expressed in partaking of the fruit of the tree of life). The primordial arrangement did not alienate the human person from the world, and renunciation of the world was neither the goal nor the foundation of immortality. On the contrary, a proper connection with the world, included in the proper connection with God, was the necessary condition of the life of man on the path to the positive conquest of the *non posse mori*, although we do not know how it would have been realized. But the fall occurred. The human person lost the unstable ontological equilibrium of his complex being. Into the world entered death, *human* death, which is quite distinct from the death that reigns in the animal world, despite all external similarities. For human death is not death in the strict sense but is instead an ontological rupture of his one being into the two principles that constitute it. Through death the human person becomes, *outwardly*, the equal of the animal world to which he is not an equal, although the carnal side of his existence belongs to it; he becomes the equal of the incorporeal world as well, to which he also does not belong, although he is akin to it through the spiritual side of his existence. Death is not the cessation of human existence but rather the catastrophic “un-humanizing,” as it were, of the human person, the loss of his wholeness.

Conditionalism *denies* the root distinction existing between the human person and the animal world, both on biological grounds (here we have the direct influence of Darwinism and of biological evolutionism more generally) and on account of idiosyncratic exegesis. The human person is created, according to conditionalism, “as a living soul,” identical with the animals, and the distinction between them is not qualitative but quantitative: the human person has the same living soul as the animals, except this soul possesses certain distinct features. These are, specifically, language and the moral and religious sense that distinguish the human person from animals. Thus, *life* is identical for the human person and animals, as too is their death or mortality. “In the Old Testament the *soul* and *life* (*nephesh*) ascribed to the human person are often ascribed to animals as well.” “We must either share immortality with our neighbors in the animal kingdom or we must sacrifice our own hopes and recognize ourselves as mortals, just as they are.”⁶ “The image of God in man is not something ontological but rather a ‘shadow,’ *l’ombre n’est pas la réalité* [a shadow is not a reality]”;⁷ “*une ombre de ressemblance—l’ombre n’est pas l’identité*” [a shadow is a matter of resemblance, not identity].⁸ “The ‘image of God’ in Adam consists of the

6. White, *Life in Christ*, 19, 89.

7. Pétavel-Olliff, *Le problème de l’immortalité*, 399.

8. Pétavel-Olliff, *Le problème de l’immortalité*, 399.

capacity to understand and to emulate his Creator and thereby through this moral path to rise to immortality.”⁹ Man was not created immortal, but he is instead a “candidate for immortality.” Absolute immortality is natural only for God, and *conditional* immortality for man. The power of death is the same for the human person and for animals: it is the annihilation of life, the rupture of a vital unity, the complete and final dissolution of a whole natural complex, the simultaneous destruction of both body and soul, the “annihilation of substance,”¹⁰ the abolition of personhood. The influence of Platonism,¹¹ with its teaching on the immortality of the soul, namely *l’immortalité inconditionnelle et impie de religions panthéistes* [the unconditional and impious immortality stemming from pantheistic religions], corrupted this straightforward understanding of death as complete annihilation, despite the fact that of the six hundred instances where the soul is mentioned in the Bible, not once is it said that the soul is immortal¹² (though neither does it say in any instance that it is mortal). For this reason, the threat of death for the human person in paradise in the event of his disobedience signified not any sort of “spiritual death” but rather his immediate and complete annihilation. “Death could only mean for Adam too that reality which went by the same name in the animal kingdom.” “The original threat foretold unavoidable death.”¹³

And so the human person was given conditional immortality. Its condition was the fulfillment of the will of God. This continuation of existence depended on material food, on eating of the fruit of the “Tree of Life”¹⁴ of which man was deprived on account of disobedience. The human person fell, and the consequence of this ought to have been the onset of immediate death, which thereby would have made the existence of the human race impossible, for it would have been cut off with its first ancestor. But this did not occur: the execution of the death sentence was delayed. This delay occurred through the power of redemption: “at the moment of the fall the

9. White, *Life in Christ*, 87.

10. White, *Life in Christ*, 92–93, 100–101; Pétavel-Olliff, *La fin du mal*, 97: *La suppression totale de tel ou tel individu est une notion qui se laisse très bien concevoir* (!) [“The complete destruction of this or that person is an idea that can be easily imagined.” —Trans.]. “God does not tell Adam, ‘Your body will die,’ but rather, ‘you will die’” (103).

11. Pétavel-Olliff, *La fin du mal*, 158.

12. Pétavel-Olliff, *La fin du mal*, 163; *Le problème de l’immortalité*, 147.

13. White, *Life in Christ*, 96, 107.

14. White, *Life in Christ*, 87. The mythological image of the tree of life is here interpreted as the natural-magical means of immortality. Juxtaposed with it in this sense is the apocalyptic tree of life in the New Jerusalem (Rev 22:2, 27).

redemption began."¹⁵ "If the fatal sentence had taken immediate effect, we would have been dead in Adam, or, indeed, we would never have been born at all. Therefore, the very existence of our race is grace."¹⁶ God did not carry out his pedagogical threat, which turned out to be a kind of *pia fraus* [pious fraud]. Death was not only delayed but even turned out not to be the total death that had been threatened. Namely, instead of the dissolution of personhood, "upon the death of the individual, the spirit is preserved intact so that it may be united with the body on the day of judgment. This survival on the part of the soul we ascribe solely to the redemption,"¹⁷ whose effect, therefore, is anticipated in time. "Redemption is nothing other than the uniting of humanity with divinity, of the creature who broke the law with the supreme Lawgiver."¹⁸

III

The incarnation, the acceptance by the Son of God, the Logos, of human flesh, has as its goal the redemption and reconciliation of man with God, through the sacrifice of the Sinless One, by his sufferings and death on the cross. "The goal of redemption is to make man immortal."¹⁹ "*Le chemin de l'immortalité passe par Gethsémane et par Golgotha. On cherchait en vain autre route*" [The path to immortality passes through Gethsemane and Golgotha. In vain has any other route been sought].

According to the predominant dogmatic theology, if the body of man is mortal, then his soul which forms his personhood is, by nature, immortal or eternal. The redemption is not meant to change the nature or duration of this spiritual element. The "resurrection of the flesh" in glory is a circumstance both accidental and secondary in salvation. The grandeur of salvation consists in the deliverance of the soul from the "wrath to come" or eternal torments. A similar deliverance was implied by the divine redemption, the sacrifice of the Lamb of God. All these ideas appear to us to be contrary to Scripture. According to biblical teaching, the redemption has as its direct object the transformation of our nature, our translation not simply from sin to

15. White, *Life in Christ*, 107.

16. White, *Life in Christ*, 110.

17. White, *Life in Christ*, 111.

18. White, *Life in Christ*, 109.

19. White, *Life in Christ*, 193.

holiness but also from *mortality to immortality*, from death to life.²⁰

Redemption consists in the forgiveness of the *guilt* of sin, but the *punishment* is not abolished.

The redemption accomplished by Jesus is not total; Scripture does not speak this way. Each of us through suffering and through dying accomplishes, to a certain degree, his own redemption. But the difference between our act of redemption and that accomplished by Jesus Christ is that He, although innocent, died for the guilty. . . . Only His redemption has the character of representation. The hardened sinner drinks to its dregs the cup of redemption; the ingrained consequences of sin advance to the point of the complete annihilation of his being. Eternal death is the price of his obstinacy: *pour lui, par le fait, Jésus se trouvera n'avoir rien expié* [For such a one, therefore, Jesus' expiation will have accomplished nothing].²¹

Christ was raised from the dead by the Holy Spirit.

Though He was God, as a man he was undoubtedly "under the law" and died as a sacrifice of reconciliation; as God he was above the law imposed on the creature and was incapable of dying. That is why, when the death sentence was executed on his mortal nature, the Divine Guest who absorbed the human spirit into his own proper nature had the power to rebuild his own ruins, the "destroyed temple," to take possession of it and to "raise it up on the third day." . . . He conquered death, yet not as a "son of Adam" but instead as the "Son of the Most High," as the "Lord of Heaven."²²

The resurrection of Christ is not an immanent-transcendent but rather a wholly transcendent act of God's omnipotence. Our own resurrection from the dead rests on the solemn and infallible promise of the Son of God.

United with Christ in his sufferings and death, we will go to meet him on that day when our Savior, exercising his omnipotence, will transform our mortal body in accordance with his glorious body. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are united in accomplishing this glorious deed (Rom 8:11). The omnipotence

20. White, *Life in Christ*, 108.

21. Pétavel-Olliff, *La fin du mal*, 141–42.

22. White, *Life in Christ*, 233.

that was manifested in the creation in the world and in the resurrection of Christ will be manifested in the accomplishment of our own resurrection too. If the miracle of the *creation* of man has its own *raison d'être*, then we can count on an even greater *raison d'être* for this *promised* miracle that will grant to the elect the glorious bodies of new life.²³

The general resurrection, even before its consummation, is preceded by two distinct effects of the incarnation. The first of these we already know—the delay of the death of our ancestors after the fall, a delay that made possible the descendance of the human race from them. Clearly this delay covers all sinful humanity, which, while liable to die because of sin, nonetheless lives, albeit within the confines of a limited, mortal life. The second anticipation of the power of the incarnation, even more striking than the first, consists in that very *immortality* of the soul beyond the grave, against which conditionalists so persistently rebel. They are forced to acknowledge this life of the soul beyond the grave, both by virtue of the indisputable data of revelation and by the logic of their very own system.²⁴

If any element of our nature survives the first death, this should be ascribed solely to the redemption which acts in a supernatural manner to preserve our spiritual being from dissolution, either for judgment or for reward. . . . I am bound to believe the Bible that souls survive death. . . . Here is how one can imagine their state: some sleep, others are completely without consciousness; some think, they perceive, they improve; others find themselves in sorrow or even in torments, some wander the earth as *daimonia*, others are cast into the abyss, others still remain in Hades until the first coming of Christ.²⁵

The post-mortem life of the just already possesses the beginning of eternal life and immortality. The life of sinners after death has as its purpose: 1) the establishment of the personal identity of the one who sinned here and who will be awakened there for judgment; 2) torments in Hades (2 Pet 2:9); 3) the healing of their rebellion against God—when this rebellion has an excuse in ignorance—through the preaching to the “spirits in prison”; 4)

23. Pétavel-Olliff, *La fin du mal*, 195.

24. Some conditionalists have accordingly come to completely reject that a soul exists in man in any other sense than it exists in animals, and they claim that the soul disintegrates together with the body at death. Such are the views of Henry Constable, *Hades* [published 1878 —Trans]. The human spirit, according to Constable, is a particle of the divine spirit in the soul which is taken away at death. Man completely dies in death, and his consciousness is awakened only at the resurrection.

25. White, *Life in Christ*, 278–81.

the reception of the greatest, most solemn and terrible punishment: the first death kills the body alone—to *kill the soul* is left to the second death.²⁶ “The anticipatory suffering is in addition to the torments; in part it signifies punishment, in part persuasion. It leaves room for repentance.”²⁷ This is a kind of purgatory. Generally speaking the post-mortem state does not hold any particular interest for the conditionalists, and it is understood primarily as an intermediate state between death and resurrection.

The resurrection is universal, not only for the good who awaken to the resurrection of life, for eternal life, but also for the wicked who awaken to the resurrection of judgment, for the second and final death, for annihilation. The recognition of this *two-fold* outcome, immortality for some and complete annihilation for others—this is the basic message of conditionalism.

The condition for immortality is not any sort of “ontological or physical change of substance” but rather the moral state of the soul in which Christ has been formed and which thereby attracted to itself the indwelling of the Holy Spirit,²⁸ the gift of grace. For sinners, on the other hand, there begins the inescapable second death and the final annihilation after a certain indefinable time following the judgment. A general question arises: is this annihilation a death sentence or suicide? Oddly enough, there is no complete clarity on this fundamental question, and individual views vary between these two possibilities. Sometimes it is possible to think that the “second death” is a death sentence that is executed neither immediately nor in a short span of time but instead over the course of the sinner’s remaining life, a “mortal life” in the most literal sense.²⁹

26. White, *Life in Christ*, 281–82.

27. Pétavel-Olliff, *Le problème de l’immortalité*, 49.

28. White, *Life in Christ*, 254–56.

29. It is in this sense that White develops this idea, *Life in Christ*, 478–90: “The satisfaction or disclosure of the properties of God is the first and final goal of creation and providence. Such is the sound philosophy of liability which, while taking away hope for a universal salvation, establishes the solemn doctrine of retribution. All the unrepentant must answer to their Creator in their flesh and soul, and their fate will be determined by a deadly and definitive sentence. Common goodness will be taken into account. But the one who was obstinate in disobedience cannot hope for a remedy, he will be annihilated ‘body and soul in Gehenna.’ God will reject all his degenerate and hardened children, since He is faithful to his eternal justice.” “His Great Day of vengeance and the vengeance of the Lamb comes.” “It is a terrible thing to fall into the hands of the Living God” (Heb 10:31). “I will strike her (Israel’s) children with death, and all the Churches will know that I am the one who searches hearts and what is within” (Rev 2:23). “The Lord God is a consuming fire, God is jealous. I swear to you by heaven and earth, that soon you will lose the land, you will not abide long in her but will instead perish” (Deut 4:6). “The anger of God abides on the disobedient” (John 3:36), etc. (note the capriciousness in how conditionalists cite and interpret texts).