

Introduction

Milton's brief line in *Paradise Regained*, "Much of the soul they talk, but all awry",¹ conceals rather more than it reveals of that mortalist theology which by the middle of the seventeenth century had been circulating in England for 150 years or more and which Milton himself, among others, readily endorsed.² It suggests that the soul was a matter of serious discussion in Milton's England, but says nothing about the origin or nature of the soul itself, its relationship to the body, or its condition after death. It testifies to Milton's disagreement with the prevailing majority view, but does not tell us why he disagreed or what he believed instead about the soul, either concerning its status in this present life or beyond the grave.³ It says nothing about the protagonists on either side of the argument, those who were Milton's theological allies or those who took a different view, and nothing about the long history of mortalist thought reaching back, as it did, to the earliest days of the Reformation, both in England and on the Continent. And, of course, it has nothing to say whatsoever of that long line of mortalists who would succeed Milton, of the considerable body of literature they would generate, or the intensity of the arguments that would flow between those who would, often with some passion, share Milton's theology and those who would with equal passion oppose it. Those who proposed and debated these and related matters from Wycliffe onwards, their reasons and arguments, the questions about human being, the soul, life and death, mortality and immortality, Christ's resurrection and their own, which they raised and attempted to answer, are together the focus of this examination of Christian mortalism in

1. John Milton, *Paradise Regained* (1671), IV, 313. The words are spoken by Christ in Milton's schema, set against the background of Satanic temptations which extolled the "conjectures" and "fancies" of Greek culture, built on "nothing firm", "ignorant of themselves, of God much more", 236-284, 292, 310. It is mortalist thinking, if somewhat condensed.
2. Milton became a "staunch advocate" of mortalist doctrine in later life, even though some of his earlier poetry shows signs of a more orthodox position, *A Milton Encyclopedia* (William B. Hunter, ed.), 5 (1983), 155.
3. Milton's own mortalism, together with comment on the authorship of the *De Doctrina Christiana*, is discussed in ch. 4.

English thought from Wycliffe's time to that of Joseph Priestley at the end of the eighteenth century.

Two facts must be acknowledged at the outset. In the first place mortalism, in either of the two forms in which it was most commonly articulated, was always a minority view. The majority of English Christians from the very earliest days of the Reformation subscribed to the traditional and deeply cherished belief in the separate identity and inherent immortality of the soul, its release from the body at death to immediate heavenly felicity, and its ultimate re-unification with the body at the general resurrection of the dead at the last day.¹

This had been the essence of Christian hope for centuries, and most English believers during the Reformation and immediate post-Reformation eras, Protestant as well as Catholic, felt disinclined to depart in this particular from the received faith. The moderate Richard Baxter, if we may take him as representative, is at pains to affirm the immortality of the soul and to take issue with the "Somatists" who believed otherwise.² The lay scholar William Hodson, whose *Credo Resurrectionem Carnis* was as emphatic an argument for the resurrection of the body as any, and who declared that burial was "an act of hope", nevertheless began his apology by asserting the soul's immortality.³ This traditional doctrine, preached from pulpits of every persuasion up and down the land, alluded to frequently and with fervency at funerals and in biographies, and published in sermons, treatises and expositions of Scripture, had continued as the believers' chief source of comfort and hope for generations. It was unthinkable to the vast majority of English Christians that any alternative might even be suggested to take

1. The Westminster Confession of Faith (1643), although Presbyterian in character and intent, well represents the broadly accepted eschatology of the day. Article XXXII, 'Of the state of Men after Death, and of the Resurrection of the Dead', reads: 'The Bodies of Men, after Death, return to dust, and see corruption: but their Souls (which neither die nor sleep) having an immortal subsistence, immediately return to God who gave them. The Souls of the Righteous, being then made perfect in holiness, are received into the highest Heavens, where they behold the face of God in light and glory, waiting for the full redemption of their Bodies: and the Souls of the wicked are cast into Hell, where they remain in torments and utter darkness, reserved to the Judgement of the great day. Besides these two places for Souls separated from their Bodies, the Scripture acknowledgeth none.' *The Confession of Faith, Together with the Larger and Lesser Catechisms. Composed by the Reverend Assembly of Divines Sitting at Westminster* (1658), 105. It appears that this Article was intended to protect the faithful from the perceived errors of both mortalism and purgatory.
2. Richard Baxter, *The Reasons of the Christian Religion* (1667), 489ff; *The Life of Faith* (1670), 200ff; and, *contra* Clement Writter, in *The Unreasonableness of Infidelity* (1655). See also N.H. Keeble and G.F. Nuttall, *Calendar of the Correspondence of Richard Baxter* (2 vols., Oxford, 1991), I, 338.
3. W[illiam] H[odson], *Credo Resurrectionem Carnis* [1636], 20-1, 111.

its place. In the view of one well-known expositor of moderate seventeenth-century Puritan theology, they were heretics who asserted “the corruptibility and mortality of the soul as well as the body”.¹

Yet this is precisely what a diverse succession of convinced, energetic and, in the main, able apologists attempted to do for the best part of three centuries and more. Indeed, as the relevant literature testifies, for much of Christian history an alternative had existed to the traditional and deeply held beliefs concerning death and immortality. This study will remind us that, beyond the radicals and the sectaries, some of the most respected names in Reformation and post-Reformation English thought were ardent advocates of another position. Most of them came to believe that the Bible taught that the soul is not a separate entity inherently possessed of immortality, claiming instead that conscious existence ceases temporarily at death, pending the resurrection of the body, when the soul, i.e., the whole person, would live again according to the promises and power of God. Seeking to be true to what they considered to be the whole testimony of Scripture, they asserted with equal vitality that immortality was conditional upon Christ and His resurrection from the dead and upon the believer’s faith in Him, culminating in resurrection to eternal life at the last day, and not upon an inherently immortal soul. To them this view was a more cohesive and consistent interpretation of the relevant biblical texts and it provided an equally certain future for the true believer. In the words of one of their more notable eighteenth-century spokesmen, Edmund Law, Professor of moral philosophy at Cambridge, eternal life “is not an inherent property of our original nature”. Rather, the resurrection at the end of time “is the grand object of our faith, hope, and comfort”, even our “full hope of immortality”.²

Those who advocated such views have been known variously as mortalists, conditionalists, or more particularly in their own day, as soul sleepers. They were mortalists because, it was said, they believed in the death of the soul as well as the body, although some of them, particularly in the early years of the Reformation, did not quite go that far; conditionalists because they held that immortality derived from the work of Christ, personal faith in Him, and the resurrection at the last day; and soul sleepers because they considered that death was a sleep during which the soul was non-existent or, in the less extreme view, unconscious although still alive. This is, for the present, to leave undefined the nature of the soul, ultimately the most significant single consideration in mortalist dissatisfaction with the traditional doctrine. We

1. John Flavel, *Pneumatologia. A Treatise of the Soul of Man* (1685), Ep.Ded., sig. A3r.
2. Edmund Law, *Considerations on the Theory of Religion* (4th edn, 1759), 341, 355. This edition of the *Considerations* was essentially the same as Law’s earlier *Considerations on the State of the World with Regard to the Theory of Religion* (1st edn, 1745), but with an amended title and including, *ad cal*, *The Nature and End of Death under the Christian Covenant*, and an appendix ‘Concerning the Use of the Words *Soul* or *Spirit* in Holy Scripture, and the State of Death there described’.

should also observe that these definitions, even in their own day, were not always precise enough and that further clarification is necessary if the whole spectrum of mortalist conviction is to be understood. This is particularly true of the concept of soul sleeping. Provided we remember that soul sleepers were not always mortalists in the strict sense, the term Christian mortalist seems reasonable enough since all mortalists believed death to result in the cessation or suspension of personal existence, certainly of consciousness, and that it was not the continuation of life in another sphere.¹ That they were also Christian is evident from their insistence on the efficacy of the redemptive work of Christ which culminated in His resurrection from the dead, and on the fact that their own hope of eternal life was vested in Him rather than in themselves. We shall return shortly to the more precise and necessary definitions and distinctions which recent scholarship has proposed.

In the second place, something needs to be said in justification of another historical study of Christian mortalism. Without re-stating again the significance of Reformation and post-Reformation thought *per se*, in England or on the Continent, it may be argued that it is important to see the development of mortalist belief in the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries more as a legacy of Reformation theology than as an outcome of the influence of philosophy or rationalism on the theology of the day. Thus the veins of mortalist thought we shall seek to expose in this study were normally to be found in dogma, theological treatises, biblical commentaries and exegesis of the text, however limited at times that particular exercise may seem to later generations to have been. The status of the biblical text as divine revelation was a fundamental presupposition in the minds of all advocates of the mortalist position throughout the period covered by this study. The fact that mortalism could be found in Scripture, at least in the eyes of those who advocated it, and that it was found there by successive generations of English Christians, is one reason for the present study.

This is not to minimise the debt that the mature mortalism of the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries owed to philosophical reflection. With hindsight it may be predicated that the forays into neo-Aristotelian anthropology by a small but significant minority in sixteenth-century Italian academic circles foreshadowed in principle later philosophical enquiry in the English tradition. The conclusions reached by Thomas Hobbes and John

1. In addition to N.T. Burns, *Christian Mortalism from Tyndale to Milton* (Cambridge, Mass., 1972) and G. H. Williams, *The Radical Reformation* (3rd edn, Kirksville, MO, 1992), both of whom are cited in the following pages, other more recent uses of the term Christian mortalism include G.H. Tavad, *The Starting Point of Calvin's Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI and Cambridge, 2000), 36, 81 and V. Nuovo, *John Locke, Writings on Religion* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 2002), xxxiii, 289. Wainwright uses the term inclusively of both types of mortalist belief, A.W. Wainwright(ed.), *John Locke, A Paraphrase and Notes on the Epistles of St. Paul to the Galatians, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Romans, Ephesians* (2 vols., Oxford, 1987), I, 54.

Locke in particular were crucial to the development and ultimate establishment in England of thetropsychism and its continuance beyond their own day as a viable alternative Christian hope. The interdependence of philosophical deliberation and theological argument in the work of both these early advocates of the mortalist understanding of man is itself an important phenomenon, and may reasonably be argued as justification for an examination of this aspect of their thought. Beyond that, as we shall see more than once, many mortalists walked hand in hand with philosophers and with others who emphasised the necessity of reason to a credible faith. It may therefore be proposed that these earlier mortalists have something to say, both to those who currently find the mortalist position of interest in itself, and to those who wish, for whatever reason, to understand the thinking of earlier generations, particularly those, perhaps, who are persuaded of reason's necessary concurrence with belief.

From an historical perspective, the seeds of Christian mortalism had been sown in English religious thought at least as early as the fifteenth century. Mortalism itself first appeared in recognisable form during the sixteenth century, came more fully into the light in the first half of the seventeenth century, and found its fullest expression later in the seventeenth century and throughout the eighteenth century. It has continued as an alternative Christian hope ever since, although its later nineteenth- and twentieth-century advocates are beyond the scope of this present study.¹ Generally speaking, there are more fully-developed expositions of mortalism and more prominent advocates of the doctrine in the eighteenth century than in previous times given, of course, that Thomas Hobbes, John Milton and Locke, *inter alia*, belong to an earlier generation.²

There is, as we shall see, both continuity and development in English mortalism from John Wycliffe and his followers in the late fifteenth century to Francis Blackburne and Joseph Priestley in the latter half of the eighteenth century. Perhaps of greater significance is that this continuum of mortalist apologists included representatives from a broad cross section of the theological spectrum – Presbyterians, Independents, Baptists, Unitarians and ultimately Anglicans. While it is incorrect to designate all mortalists as being precisely of the same mind, or to denominate them as a separate sect,³ there is clearly

1. Prominent nineteenth-century English mortalists and their more notable works include Edward White, *Life in Christ* (1846) and William Gladstone, *Studies Subsidiary to the Works of Bishop Butler* (1896). Twentieth-century advocates include William Temple, *Nature, Man and God* (1934) and H. Wheeler Robinson, *The Christian Doctrine of Man* (1926). The Norwegian philosopher, Jostein Gaarder, claims that in the Judaeo-Christian tradition, "there is nothing in man – no 'soul', for example – that is in itself immortal". Any hope of eternal life that man may have is not through his "own merit nor through any natural, or innate, ability", *Sophie's World* (1996), 134.
2. Milton, as ever, is thorough and articulate, but the *De Doctrina Christiana*, in which his mortalism is set out at length was unknown in his own day. See further, p. 115.
3. E.g., D. Saurat, *Milton, Man and Thinker* (New York, 1925), 310-11; C. E. Whiting, *Studies in English Puritanism* (1931), 317.

significant common ground between those of otherwise divergent or even contentious opinion.

It must also be said that previous studies of mortalist thought which have included English advocates of the doctrine have not, for one reason or another, been entirely adequate. Beginning with my own *A Great Expectation*, the inclusion of a short appendix in the published edition of a limited Ph.D thesis, did little more than draw attention to the existence of the mortalist viewpoint,¹ which in any case was at that time already well known from other sources. However, no analysis of seventeenth- or eighteenth-century eschatological thought can be considered complete without adequate discussion of mortalism as a serious alternative to traditional views of death and the afterlife, and its relationship to other aspects of the prevailing eschatology. This present study may therefore be regarded from one standpoint as a late attempt to rectify a major earlier omission and to explore another important dimension of post-Reformation English thought concerning the last things and the *ordo salutis*.

L.E. Froom's comprehensive two-volume *The Conditionalist Faith of Our Fathers*² deserves mention as a starting-point and a rich source of information concerning mortalists and their beliefs throughout the Christian era. However, it fails to distinguish between the various strands of mortalism and is thus open to the charge of ambiguity. It also omits or mentions only in passing several important names from the seventeenth-century English scene, including Thomas Browne, Thomas Hobbes, Thomas Lushington, George Hammon and Clement Writer, and Samuel Bold, George Benson, George Clark and John Tottie from the eighteenth century, to mention only a few. More disturbing is Froom's inclusion of several names for whom the evidence of a mortalist stance is, at best, minimal or even refutable, notably Nathaniel Homes, John Tillotson and Peter Sterry in the seventeenth century and Isaac Watts, William Warburton and John Leland in the eighteenth century, none of whom can seriously be regarded as mortalists and most of whom were of another mind altogether.³

There is some evidence that in his discussion of the English mortalists, Froom relied on the earlier work of the English writer A.J. Mills, whose brief but helpful *Earlier Life-Truth Exponents* was published in 1925.⁴ While noting

1. B.W. Ball, *A Great Expectation: Eschatological Thought in English Protestantism to 1660* (Leiden, 1975), 243-6.
2. L.E. Froom, *The Conditionalist Faith of Our Fathers* (Washington, D.C., 1965), II, *passim*, but particularly pp. 49-243 for English mortalists of the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries.
3. For example, Isaac Watts, who wrote against both soul sleep and the death of the soul. His last word on the subject was, "The dead saints are not lost nor extinct . . . we may be assured that they neither die nor sleep", Isaac Watts, *Death and Heaven; or, The last Enemy Conquered, and Separate Spirits made perfect* (Edinburgh, 1749), 154-5.
4. A.J. Mills, *Earlier Life-Truth Exponents* (1925). Mills had participated in conferences of The Conditional Immortality Mission, formed in England in 1878, although he is scarcely acknowledged by Froom.

most of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century English mortalists, Mills fails sufficiently to analyse or contextualise their theology, or to denominate those whose works can be regarded as seminal to the continuity of the mortalist tradition, or to recognise the distinction between psychopannychism and thnetopsychism, concepts which are crucial to a correct understanding of mortalism as a whole, and to which we shall return shortly. Mills also omits Browne, Hobbes, Hammon and Writer, as does Froom, and while he is not guilty of claiming marginal or improbable names such as Homes, Watts or Warburton, his inclusion of Isaac Barrow, Henry Dodwell (the Elder), and Joseph Hallett III, as thorough-going or representative mortalists is not supported by the original source material.¹

D.P. Walker's *The Decline of Hell*² has justifiably made its mark in the literature concerned with seventeenth-century eschatological thought since its publication in 1964. Certainly the demise of traditional views of hell in many quarters is a significant development of more recent times³ and Walker's study remains an important contribution to our understanding of this phenomenon. In mortalist understanding, however, hell was contingent upon the soul's traditional immortality and could not exist as a place of torment if the wicked did not have an immortal soul. Strangely there are few references in Walker's text to mortalist doctrine and the index does not list mortalism, soul, soul sleep or related concepts. In fact, having stated that the simplest way to eliminate the idea of eternal torment is "to deny personal immortality", Walker inexplicably decides not to pursue the relationship at all.⁴

The more recent work by N.T. Burns, *Christian Mortalism from Tyndale to Milton*, is by far the best and most scholarly study of early seventeenth-century English mortalism currently available, although it too is rapidly becoming dated. It is thorough, reliable and readable as far as it goes, its chief weakness being that it does not go far enough. As the title indicates, Burns' study concludes with Milton, and therefore does not take into consideration the more developed and mature thought of later seventeenth- and eighteenth-century mortalist writers, and the omission of Locke is surely indefensible in

1. Froom includes Dodwell as a "fringe writer", and notes Hallett's work as a "recognised contribution" to the mortalist debate. The latter is inadmissible, although Hallett from a cursory reading appears at times ambiguous. In *A Collection of Notes on Some Texts of Scripture, and of Discourses* (1729), he states emphatically "The soul is a substance distinct from, and independent on [*sic*] the body. . . . This I firmly believe", 211-12, but allowing that those who deny the soul's immateriality "would not thereby overturn any Article in Religion", 214-15.
2. D.P. Walker, *The Decline of Hell* (Chicago, 1964), *passim*.
3. Confirmed as a major issue for re-consideration, perhaps, by William Temple's call for a radical re-evaluation of the traditional doctrine of everlasting punishment in 'The Idea of Immortality in Relation to Religion and Ethics', *The Congregational Quarterly*, X (Jan. 1932).
4. Walker, *Decline of Hell*, 67.

any serious study of seventeenth-century mortalism. One of Burns' important contributions is his recognition of the distinction between psychopannychists, thnetopsychists and annihilationists and the application of these distinctions to the English mortalist scene. Burns also recognises that English mortalism was "based on a wholehearted belief in the Word of God"¹, rather than deriving solely or even in part from philosophical rationalism, and that the more courageous mortalists saw their doctrine not only as emanating from Scripture, "but also as part of a coherent Christian creed".² The present study will attempt to demonstrate, as did Burns, that this mortalist creed was indeed a thoroughly Christian vision, however unorthodox or marginal it may have appeared to its contemporaries.³ Burns will help us considerably in our analysis of the earlier English mortalists.

One further consideration may be noted as justification for this study – the ease with which early and developing English mortalism continues to be overlooked, despite Burns' attempt more than thirty years ago to bring it to the attention of the scholarly world. Given mortalism's significance to the substance of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century philosophy and also to the study of early psychology and anthropology,⁴ as well as its indisputable place in the development of Reformation and post-Reformation Christian dogma, however deviant at times that dogma may have appeared to contemporaries, such disregard is quite remarkable. This phenomenon can be illustrated by three recent studies of major mortalist apologists of the period whose own thought will appear in due course in the following pages, Tyndale and Milton, and by reference to Peter Marshall's recent comprehensive study of death in the Reformation and post-Reformation period.

David Daniell's detailed, readable and justifiably acclaimed life of Tyndale, *William Tyndale, A Biography*, published in 1994 by Yale University Press, is virtually silent throughout four hundred pages concerning Tyndale's mortalism. Admittedly his mortalism is not the most frequently recognised feature of Tyndale's theology, but it is there, at times quite apparent, and it cannot simply be ignored. Yet we do not find it in Daniell's book, especially at the two points where we would most expect it – in his treatment of Tyndale's *Answer* to Sir Thomas More's *Dialogue*, and of the altercation with George Joye over the latter's pirated and substantially changed version of Tyndale's New Testament in 1534.⁵ Neither is it mentioned in Daniell's comments on one of Tyndale's last tracts, his

1. *CM*, 3, 4.

2. *Ibid.*, 9.

3. *Ibid.*, 22.

4. For example in the writings of Locke, Hartley and Priestley. Locke's *Essay concerning Humane Understanding* (1689) and Hartley's *Observations on Man* (1749) are two examples. The latter was later abridged by Priestley as the *Theory of the Human Mind* (1775).

5. D. Daniell, *William Tyndale, A Biography* (New Haven and London, 1994), 269-74; 322-26. See ch. 2, pp. 48ff for Tyndale's mortalism.

account of the Gloucestershire gentleman William Tracy's last will and testament,¹ which was mortalist in tone, as well as Lutheran in the wider sense, and which was condemned at the time on both accounts. There are no references to 'soul', 'resurrection', 'mortality' or 'immortality' and only one incidental reference to 'death' in the index. It is, in many respects, a strange silence.

The most recent omission of mortalism in a major study of Tyndale is in Ralph Werrell's *The Theology of William Tyndale* (Cambridge, 2006). It is, actually, not so much an omission as an outright denial. Contradicting Diarmaid MacCulloch's observation that Tyndale shared Luther's belief in soul sleep,² Werrell flatly says that this is a "false statement", arguing that Tyndale did not endorse a mortalist theology.³ A careful reading of Tyndale confirms, however, that MacCulloch is correct, as we might expect, and that Werrell is mistaken. Werrell's analysis of Tyndale's theology, in fact, has virtually nothing to say of Tyndale's eschatology from any perspective, let alone his mortalism. There is one reference to 'soul sleep' in the index to Werrell's book, that referred to above, and one reference to eternal life. There are no references to the soul, death, resurrection, immortality, heaven or hell.⁴ While Werrell's study is of interest in other respects, it is surely indefensible to say nothing about eschatology in a work that purports to analyse the theology of one of the great English Reformers, particularly since Tyndale lived and wrote at a time when belief in the life to come and the eternal salvation of the soul were of primary concern to scholars and laity alike.

There is an equally inexplicable silence about Milton's mortalism in the otherwise commendable collection of essays devoted to Milton's divergent theological views, *Milton and Heresy* (Cambridge University Press, 1998). Here, if anywhere, one might legitimately expect to find at least minimal discussion of a 'heresy' that in Milton's time was already well known and regarded with as much apprehension as any other unorthodoxy of the day and which appears in *Paradise Lost* as well as the *De Doctrina Christiana*. Despite the early promise inherent in the assertion that Milton "insists on the common materiality and mortality of body and soul" and passing recognition of his mortalism,⁵ the theme is never explored and rarely referred to again, even though Burns, Saurat and Masson had all previously seen it.⁶ The few references to monism as such

1. *Ibid.*, 222. See ch. 2, pp. 52-54 for Tracy's mortalism.

2. Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Reformation: Europe's House Divided 1490-1700* (2004), 580-81.

3. Ralph S. Werrell, *The Theology of William Tyndale* (Cambridge, 2006), 7.

4. Werrell's comments on William Tracy also ignore his mortalism.

5. S.B. Dobranski and J.P. Rumrich (eds.), *Milton and Heresy* (Cambridge, 1998), 1, 8.

6. *CM*, ch. 4, *passim*; Saurat, *Milton, Man and Thinker*, ch. 3; D. Masson, *The Life of John Milton*, VI (1880), 833-39, where Masson suggested that mortalism was a late addition to Milton's thinking.

appear to relate as much to the nature of God as to the nature of man,¹ and the phrase “animate materialism”, which is used almost entirely in the context of oral functions such as eating, speaking and kissing,² is never examined for its wider theological content or its broader implications. It is disappointing to find that one of Milton’s more notable ‘heresies’ is thus marginalised by inattention, if not trivialisation, the more so since clarification of Milton’s mortalism undoubtedly would have strengthened the book’s central proposition, Milton as heterodox rather than orthodox.³ Perhaps part of the problem is that the book was written by “bibliographers, feminists, literary historians, Marxists and psychoanalytic critics”⁴ without any input from theologians, biblical scholars or specialists in historical theology.

The writings of both Tyndale and Milton contributed materially to the shaping of the English language and, we may suppose thereby, to some extent at least, to the shaping of English thought. The omission of mortalism in very different and unrelated studies, either by accident or design, may be symptomatic of a general unawareness, even neglect, of the mortalist phenomenon and its presence throughout the Reformation and post-Reformation eras and the early modern period as a whole, and of its significance to the development of later and modern thought, particularly the current renewed interest in mortalist thought and doctrine. If that should be the case, it is surely no longer defensible.

The brief account of mortalism’s appearance during the English Reformation in Peter Marshall’s detailed and quite fascinating study of death, dying and the dead in the late medieval and early modern periods, *Beliefs and the Dead in Reformation England* (2002),⁵ is also an incentive for a more thorough analysis of mortalist theology. Marshall recounts the confrontation between Tyndale and George Joye over the issue, and also recognises the later mortalism of “major figures” such as Overton, Milton and Hobbes (but not Locke) in a footnote.⁶ Evidence for belief in the resurrection of the body in early English Protestantism, an undeniable fact of some significance that emerges frequently and strongly from the literature, is drawn almost exclusively from early seventeenth-century sources.⁷ Yet Tyndale, Frith, Tracy and Latimer, to mention only the mortalists of the early English Reformation who will appear in the following study, all had something to say about it. It must also be noted that the resurrection hope they entertained was certainly not the sole prerogative of these early mortalists, however much they preached and wrote in its favour. This is not intended to

1. Dobranski and Rumrich (eds.), *Milton and Heresy*, 83, 118.

2. *Ibid.*, 118, 129, 133. The title of the chapter which purports to examine Milton’s “heretical” monism is “Milton’s Kisses”.

3. *Ibid.*, 2, 3.

4. *Ibid.*, 16.

5. Peter Marshall, *Beliefs and the Dead in Reformation England* (Oxford, 2002), 223-25.

6. *Ibid.*, 225.

7. *Ibid.*, 226-28.

detract from what is a significant and enlightening investigation of thanatology in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, but merely to underline again the need for a more comprehensive account of mortalist thought as it emerged and developed in Reformation and post-Reformation England respectively.

We must now return to the question of definitions. The distinctions between various strands in European mortalist thought were recognised by G.H. Williams in his definitive *The Radical Reformation*, an indispensable guide to the development of divergent theological views on the Continent in the wake of the mainstream Reformation¹, particularly in its revised, and substantially enlarged, third edition (1992). The work is a rich mine of well-documented information, and we shall find it helpful in the chapter dealing with the Continental radicals. Williams maintains that psychopannychism “may be considered the Italian counterpart of Germanic solafideism and Swiss predestinarianism” in its contribution to the dismantling of the medieval church and its theological hold on the minds of ordinary men and women.² It was, indeed, a “recurrent feature of the Radical Reformation”,³ and although Williams does not find psychopannychism as prominent in Reformation and post-Reformation England as he does in Italy, Switzerland and Germany, it nonetheless found vigorous support there, as we shall see. To what extent English mortalism owed its existence to Continental radicalism is not entirely clear, but it is in the context of European radical theology that we can begin to understand the difference between the two major strands of mortalism which eventually also found expression in English mortalist thought.

Williams allows the term psychopannychism, “soul sleep”, to describe both the sleep and the death of the soul while awaiting the resurrection,⁴ conceding that although psychopannychism thus used is “etymologically ambiguous” it is permissible as “the generic term for the two variants” of soul sleep.⁵ These variants may be further defined as psychosomnolence, “the unconscious sleep of the soul” and thnetopsychism, “the death of the soul”, both pending the resurrection.⁶ Both psychopannychism, more narrowly defined, and psychosomnolence, however, presuppose the existence of a separate immaterial entity, the soul, which may live apart from the body, a position which thnetopsychism was not prepared to endorse. Sleep in the literal sense, indeed, requires existence and the capability of consciousness. Williams’ definition of thnetopsychism as “the death of the soul” is permissible and helpful, provided that the soul is

1. *RR*, particularly 64-70, 899-904.

2. *Ibid.*, 70.

3. *Ibid.*

4. *Ibid.*, 64.

5. *Ibid.*, 900. Cf. also Williams’ definition of psychopannychism as “the generic term for a complex of sectarian views about the death or sleep of the soul after the death of the body”, G.H. Williams, ‘Camillo Renato (c.1500 -?1575)’ in J.A. Tedeschi (ed.), *Italian Reformation Studies in Honor of Laelius Socinus* (Florence, 1965), 106.

6. *RR*, 902.

not defined in traditional terms, but only as authentic thnetopsychists would allow.

Burns is rather more precise. Psychopannychists believed in a separate, immaterial soul in common with those who held the traditional view of the soul's immortality, but maintained contrary to them that the soul 'slept' until the resurrection. Thnetopsychists did not believe in the soul so defined, maintaining instead that the soul was best understood as the mind, or more usually the person, which existed as the result of the union of breath and body. The soul, therefore, died or 'slept' between death and the resurrection, since the union of breath and body then no longer existed.¹ Burns explains,

The psychopannychists believed that the immortal substance called soul literally slept until the resurrection of the body; the thnetopsychists, denying that the soul was an immortal substance, believed that the soul slept after death only in a figurative sense. Both groups of soul sleepers believed in the personal immortality of the individual after the resurrection of the body, and so they should not be confused with the annihilationists.²

The terms psychopannychism and thnetopsychism will be used throughout this study, under the more general and inclusive term Christian mortalism, as thus defined.³ Both maintain a 'sleep' of the soul during death, the one literal, the other metaphorical, since psychopannychism's immortal soul could not die when the body died, and since thnetopsychism's 'soul', not being a soul in the accepted sense, could not actually sleep apart from the body. Moreover most, if not all, psychopannychists were mortalist in the sense that the soul, although a separate entity, was not inherently immortal, but derived its immortality from Christ. Annihilationism, which defines those who "denied personal immortality altogether because they believed that the personal soul was annihilated with the body and that neither soul nor body would be resurrected",⁴ does not readily fall within the scope of this study, since strictly speaking its advocates cannot be regarded as Christian mortalists, even though during the seventeenth century they were often regarded as one of a kind with others who denied the traditional view.

1. *CM*, 16-18.

2. *Ibid.*, 18.

3. *OED*, following the Greek *psuche* and *pannuchos*, defines psychopannychy or psychopannychism as the "all-night sleep of the soul", the state in which "the soul sleeps between death and the day of judgement", and thnetopsychism, after the Greek *thnetos* and *psuche*, as "the doctrine. . . that the soul dies with the body, and is recalled to life with it at the Day of Judgement". Tavad uses the term "anabaptist mortalism" inclusively for both the sleep and the death of the soul, *Calvin's Theology*, 36, 55. 'Mortalism' thus used more generically seems better on balance than risking further confusion by restricting it to being a synonym for thnetopsychism.

4. *CM*, 2.

There were, indeed, those in sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century England who held such annihilationist views, although it is fair to point out that compared to psychopannychists and thnetopsychists, they were relatively few in number, and that annihilationism had all but run its course by the middle of the seventeenth century. If we interpret the later mortalist writers correctly, psychopannychism continued with decreasing momentum to find expression throughout the seventeenth century, until by the latter decades of the century virtually all mortalists were thnetopsychist and thnetopsychism itself was the predominant expression of Christian mortalism. And by then, Burns would surely not have been able to conclude that “most of them were poor and ignorant”.¹ In fact, judged by the writings of those who openly and vigorously defended it, Christian mortalism had, certainly by the mid-eighteenth-century, attracted the attention of well-trained academics, philosophers and highly-placed ecclesiastics, whose careful and generally well-stated convictions became an indispensable part of that long tradition which continues to articulate an alternative Christian hope.

It thus becomes evident, on etymological grounds alone, that psychopannychism is not an authentic expression of Christian mortalism thoroughly understood, any more than a living person who is merely asleep can be said to be dead. The two concepts are mutually exclusive. Thnetopsychists, of course, argued that the biblical grounds for their position ratified, even generated, the inherent meaning of the terminology which came to describe their views and those of their psychopannychistic cousins. This study sets out to demonstrate, therefore, not only the extent and nature of the Christian mortalist impetus in post-Reformation English thought, but more precisely to argue, among other things, that psychopannychism cannot be regarded as a true expression of thorough-going mortalism. That distinction belongs alone to the thnetopsychist construction, and is perhaps the reason for its eventual ascendancy and the eclipse of psychopannychism's tentative disagreement with the traditional view.

Not that these distinctions were always clearly understood at the time. Quite the contrary, in fact. Either by ignorance or design psychopannychism and thnetopsychism were frequently confused, although in fairness it must be said that perhaps it was not always thought necessary to make the distinction. In 1655 Thomas Hall, a zealous Presbyterian defender of immortalist orthodoxy, denounced the author of the recent *Mans Mortalitie*, Richard Overton, as a “pamphleteering mortalist”, a “psychopannychist”,² when Overton, as we shall see, clearly held thnetopsychist views. When in 1659 the erudite Henry More set out to confute the “Psychopannychites”[sic] of his day, we are not quite sure who, besides Thomas Hobbes, also a thnetopsychist, he has in mind.³

1. *Ibid.*

2. Thomas Hall, *Vindiciae Literarum* (1655), 66.

3. Henry More, *The Immortality of the Soul* (1659), sigs. a7r, 8v, b1r.

In his *Explanation of The Grand Mystery of Godliness*, published the following year, More continued his attack on the “Psychopannychites”, arguing that the “souls of the deceased do not sleep, but. . . understand and perceive what condition they are in after death”.¹ Yet there were few, if any, thorough-going psychopannychists remaining in England by 1660, at least none we know by name or who have left documentary evidence of their beliefs.

The later seventeenth- and eighteenth-century mortalists themselves, by now almost entirely thnetopsychist, whose convictions we are about to examine in some detail in the following pages, were more concerned with substance than terminology. They would to a man have endorsed the conclusion of one of the more prominent later mortalists, William Temple. “Man is not by nature immortal”, Temple maintained, “but capable of immortality”. The “prevailing doctrine of the New Testament” is that “God alone is immortal . . . and that He offers immortality to man not universally but conditionally”. Hence the authentic Christian teaching about eternal life “is a doctrine not of immortality, but of Resurrection”.² By the time Temple arrived on the scene, the possibility of achieving immortality and the conditions upon which it could be attained had been the chief concerns of English mortalists for at least the preceding four centuries.

If any further justification is needed for rehearsing again the theological convictions of past generations, it may be found in the writings of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Christian mortalists themselves. They protested vigorously at the continuing inclusion of what they saw as an anti-Christian element in the Christian declaration, and the passive Protestant acceptance of a doctrine which in their eyes came palpably from pagan sources via Rome. It must be remembered that even by the mid-eighteenth century the gulf between Protestantism and Catholicism was still very wide, irreconcilable in fact, in the minds of most Englishmen. One suspects that the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century mortalists would have been astounded that after two or three hundred years of enlightenment and progress in virtually every realm of human intellectual endeavour, the greater part of Christendom at the beginning of the twenty-first century would still cling to elements of belief that to them were demonstrably incompatible with the essential Christian revelation. Of course, we do not see things from a seventeenth- or eighteenth-century perspective any longer, and justifiably find reasons for not doing so. Nonetheless, the theological and anthropological insights of these earlier students of human being and destiny may speak, in one way or another, to those who still struggle with the recurring questions of existence and the future,

1. Henry More, *An Explanation of The Grand Mystery of Godliness* (1660), 15, 30. More had in 1642 published *Antipsuchopannychia, or A Confutation of the Sleep of the Soul after Death*, in which similar sentiments had been expressed in verse.
2. William Temple, ‘The Idea of Immortality in Relation to Religion and Ethics’, in *The Congregational Quarterly*, X (1932), 17; *Nature, Man and God* (1934), xxx, 461-63.

particularly those who find the thought of previous generations a relevant context for the pursuit of similar questions in our own time.

It remains only to add a few words regarding procedure. Further biographical details on most of the English mortalists will be found in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* or the *Dictionary of National Biography* and in the *Biographical Dictionary of British Radicals*. The footnotes, therefore, normally make no reference to any source of such information. Much the same can be said of Continental mortalists, for whom biographical data can usually be found in G.H. Williams' *The Radical Reformation*. Spelling and punctuation have usually been modernised in quotations from original sources, except in titles cited in the text or in footnotes, where the original spelling and punctuation have normally been retained, and on other occasions when retention of the original adds emphasis or is of particular interest. Hebrew and Greek words have been transliterated and appear in italics, whether or not they so appeared in the original text. The works of Luther, Calvin and other Continental authors have been cited from selected English translations rather than from original language editions. New-style dates are used throughout unless otherwise noted, and all books cited were published in London unless otherwise indicated. Biblical quotations are from the Authorised Version. It was finally that version, held in such esteem by so many generations of English Christians, more than any other, which prompted English post-Reformation mortalists in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in particular to question the prevailing doctrine of the soul's immortality and which provided them with that alternative hope which is the subject of this study.¹

1. We are indebted to Alister McGrath for reminding us that the English Reformers themselves drew on Tyndale's New Testament and the Geneva Bible, among other sixteenth-century translations, and that these earlier versions, particularly Tyndale's New Testament, substantially shaped the Authorised version itself, Alister McGrath, *In The Beginning, The Story of the King James Bible* (2001), *passim*.