

The Immortality of the Soul

By Sir Knight Greg Conner, PM

Do you believe in the immortality of the soul? Freemasonry believes in it.

The North Carolina Lodge Manual states in the introduction to the Master Mason's Degree that, "The important part of the degree (MM) is to symbolize the great doctrines of the resurrection of the body and the immortality of the soul."

In the York Rite Degrees – Knights Templar – Order of the Temple – the Commander says the following while holding a skull in his hand: "How striking, this emblem of mortality! Once animated like ourselves, but now, behold, it has cease to act or think; its vital energies are extinct, and all the powers of life have ceased their operations ... To such a state, Pilgrim, and Sir Knights, we are all hastening. Let us then so improve the remaining span of life, that when our frail bodies shall become, like this memento, cold and inanimate, our disembodied spirits may soar aloft, and dwell forever in the realms of life and light eternal."

Later, in the degree, the words of Jesus are used; "I am the resurrection and the life; He that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live; and whoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die."

Personally, I have always believed that my soul is a part of God living in me and that when I die my soul will continue to live (immortality). I had always assumed that this was a part of the Christian Religion. But this assumption came into question several years ago when I was preparing a Sunday School lesson. In the teacher's guide, it stated that when the body dies, the soul dies with it. ~~The author was saying that the soul is NOT immortal. I asked my Sunday School class how many of them believed that their souls would continue after their death and they unanimously agreed that their souls would continue after death, in other words that their souls were immortal. They were shocked when I told them what the lesson taught.~~

So I asked our Pastor, and he told me that the doctrine of the United Methodist Church states that the soul dies with the body. It is then resurrected with the body at the Second Coming of Jesus. I have since found out that most Christian churches have similar doctrines. While this doctrine may have been communicated to me over the years, I just assumed that the soul, was immortal and that the body would be resurrected at the Second Coming.

I have since learned that I am not alone, that many Christians have the same belief. So, I began to investigate and found that the immortality of the soul can be hotly interpreted in many different ways as often happens when discussing religious doctrine. A Google search on the internet for information about the Immortality of the Soul came up with 8,360,000 results.

One of the first results I read was an article by Kaufman Kohler with Jewish Encyclopedia.com which states: "The belief that the soul continues its existence after the dissolution of the body is a matter of philosophical and theological SPECULATION rather than of simple faith, and is NOWHERE expressly taught in the Holy Scriptures."

Whether it is speculation, interpretation or a matter of faith, a person's belief about the immortality of the soul has been argued and discussed for centuries. So first, let's start with defining the soul. According to the Old Testament we know that the soul exists as found in Genesis 2:7, "the lord God formed man of the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life and man became a living soul".

My interpretation of this scripture is that God breathed part of his soul into man and therefore the soul is immortal. Yet, I could not find any research of the Bible that expressly says man's soul is immortal. In the Old Testament, Ezekiel says, "The soul (nephesh) who sins shall die." (Ezekiel 18: 4, 20) The Hebrew word nephesh means "a breathing creature" or "body" and is often translated into "soul" or "being". King Solomon wrote in Ecclesiastes 9:5, "For the living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing". In Job 34:14, Job says, "If God were to withdraw his spirit, all life would disappear and mankind would return again to the dust".

In the New Testament, Paul tells the Romans to seek immortality (Romans 2:5-7) and the Corinthians that they must change and put on immortality (1 Corinthians 15:51-55). He also tells Timothy that only God and his son possess immortality (1 Timothy 6:12-16).

None of these scriptures expressly talk about the immortality of the soul, but tend to argue that the soul dies with the body. So again, why do so many Christians believe that the soul is immortal? Part of the problem is that mankind has a tendency to interpret to their own agenda, then cut and paste the Scriptures or other philosophies, often out of context, to explain their belief either for or against the immortality of the soul (this paper is a prime example).

Some Old Testament scriptures can be interpreted to defend the idea that man's soul is immortal. For instance, in Genesis 1:27, it is stated that "God created man in his own image". As a philosopher I would use the logic that if God is immortal; if God created man in his own image; and if God breathed a part of his soul into man ... then man's soul is immortal. Additional interpretations of the scriptures may be used, such as the Hebrew translation of 1 Samuel 25:29, which says, "May the soul... be bound in the bundle of life with the Lord thy God". The Kabbalists (Jewish mystics) used Proverbs to link the soul as a light from heaven. Proverbs 20:27, "The spirit of man is the lamp the lord, searching all his innermost parts".

Today there are some evangelists and theologians as well as a great many Christians followers who believe the soul is immortal. Yet many other Christians believe that the soul is not immortal and wait for the second coming of Jesus for the body and soul to be resurrected.

Reverend Billy Graham in his Louisville, Kentucky Crusade many years ago made the following remarks: “Your eternal soul is the most valuable living thing you possess. You have a body, but living inside you is your spirit or soul. When a person dies, what happens? The soul goes on.

First, it’s valuable because it is eternal. It’s going to live forever. A million years from now, our soul will be living. The body is the house, the soul is the tenant. But when the body dies, the soul lives on. The good news is that God offers eternal life to every soul”.

The Christian theologian – Georgia Harkness - in her book *Understanding the Christian Faith* wrote the following; “The wrecks of time are all around us. But for the Christian this means that for every Good Friday there can be an Easter morning; that beyond tragedy lies the possibility of triumph; that where God is, no defeat – not even death – is final.

We rightly emphasize the message of Easter as the hope of God’s gift of eternal life. Though the immortality of the soul did not begin with Christ’s resurrection, his conquest of the grave puts deep and abiding meaning into the faith that, whether in life or death, our souls are in God’s keeping.”

On the opposite side of this argument are those such as one author at myth-one.com who argues that “If you are born with an internal soul, which lives forever, why is it necessary for God to offer eternal life to every soul? It is redundant. Why would God offer eternal life to something that already has eternal life?” His approach is a reverse logic into the theology that we need Jesus as our Savior, because if the soul is immortal, we no longer need Jesus as a Savior and therefore Christianity itself becomes redundant and is no longer needed.

So, how did the immortality of the soul come into Christian theology? It actually goes back to early Christian church leaders who were heavily influenced by the Greek Philosophers. The Greek culture had some of the greatest philosophers in human history starting with Homer and Socrates who wrote about the soul and started defining it.

But it was Plato who declared that the soul is both immortal and aware. He went so far as to say that the soul was capable of intelligent thought and could go from life to death and back to life again. However, even Plato and his student Aristotle disagreed about whether the body and soul worked as one or were separate entities.

Early Christianity had differences of opinion in theology concerning the immortality of the soul. St. Augustine (354-430 AD) in his book, *The City of God*, wrote that the soul “is immortal, because in a sense, it does not cease to live and to feel; while the body is called mortal because it can be forsaken of all life, and cannot by itself live at all. The death, then, of the soul, takes place when God forsakes it, as the death of the body when the soul forsakes it”. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274 AD), another great Christian theologian in his treatise, *The Summa Theological*, taught that the soul is a separate conscious intellect and will that cannot be destroyed.

What about the Jewish faith? The dogma of traditional Judaism leans towards resurrection of the body and soul and therefore the soul is not immortal. But like Christianity there are many factions in the Jewish faith who have changed their philosophy and now believe in the immortality of the soul. Moses Mendelssohn (1729-1784), a German Jewish philosopher of the deistic school of thought, influenced the progressive or reformed Jews who moved towards the immortality of the soul both in theology and dogma.

Freemasonry's view on the immortality of the soul was heavily influenced by Albert Pike, who was one of Masonry's greatest philosophers. Pike in his *Morals and Dogma of the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite of Freemasonry*, delves into many religions and philosophies from the beginning of recorded time and from around the world to build his masonic philosophy.

In the 26th degree, the Prince of Mercy Degree or Scottish Trinitarian Degree, it was written that "The Soul of Man is Immortal; not the result of organization, nor an aggregate of modes of action of matter, nor a succession of phenomenon and perceptions; but an Existence, one and identical, a living spirit, a spark of the Great Central Light, that hath entered into and dwells in the body; to be separated therefrom at death, and returned to God who gave it: that doth not disperse or vanish at death, like a breath or a smoke, nor can be annihilated; but exists still and possesses activity and intelligence, even as it existed in God, before it was enveloped in the body."

Pike in describing the soul of a Mason says that "He believes that his spirituality will come in the next stage when he puts on the spiritual body; that his body will be dropped at death; ... Yet the Mason is not indifferent as to the fate of the soul, after its present life, as to its continued and eternal being...".

Pike also brings in the Hindu religion, which while it worships many gods and goddesses, most Hindu's believe that these gods are manifestations of the Supreme God, Brahman. The Hindu concept of Brahman is a belief in an unchanging, infinite, and transcendental Divine being. Hinduism believes in the immortality of the soul and the transmigration of the soul (reincarnation).

Pike quotes the *Bagvat Ghita*, one of the greatest of the Hindu writings which says: "The soul is not a thing of which a man may say, it hath been, or is about to be, or is to be hereafter; for it is a thing without birth; it is pre-existent, changeless, eternal, and is not to be destroyed with this mortal frame".

Pike wrote his own thoughts on the immortality of the soul when he said, "Like the belief in Deity, the belief in the soul's immortality is a rather natural feeling, an adjunct to self-consciousness, than a dogma belonging to any particular age or country."

Whether you are Christian, Jewish, or Hindu this brings us full circle back to Kaufman Kohler's statement that "The belief that the soul continues its existence after the dissolution of the body is a matter of philosophical and theological SPECULATION rather than of simple faith..."

And as we have seen, this type of classic circular logic can be argued either way.

So in the end, Freemasonry's belief in the immortality of the soul comes from many different sources, but each Mason must develop his own personal faith or philosophic belief - it is up to each individual to decide what he believes.