

## Who Cares?

I sometimes wonder if anyone cares about God. The Bible says that “God cares about us” (1 Pet. 5:7), but do we care about God, about the teachings of His inspired prophets and his last “word” to the world, through the Lord Jesus Messiah? Do we care passionately about the teaching given by Jesus? Or have we been systematically told that Jesus preached to and taught **only Jews!** No lie is greater than that! Jesus is the founder of the Christian faith we claim, and if we do not believe in what he taught (in addition of course to what he later taught us through Paul) we are floundering in chaos. Jesus is the first preacher of the saving Gospel (Heb. 2:3), and he preached the Gospel *first* to his colleague Jews (Matt. 15:24). This same Gospel is now equally for us all. “This one and only Gospel of the Kingdom must be preached in the whole world,” Jesus said (Matt. 24:14). He promised to be with all who faithfully teach everything he taught, until the “end of the age,” which is of course the Second Coming, the single future arrival of Jesus (Matt. 28:19-20). If this is not lucidly clear to you, kind reader, nothing is clear!

Millions of churchgoers across the world go weekly to church ostensibly to learn about Jesus and the faith he taught. Millions of churchgoers emerge reinforced in a conviction drawn not from Jesus at all but from Platonic philosophy. Does anyone care?

Woven into what we call our Western Christian outlook is the belief that when we die our conscious, separable soul leaves the body and ascends to heaven. “When we all get to heaven...” So runs the title of a popular hymn, and its message is repeated and reinforced in an unending succession of sermons at funerals and other occasions — and in ordinary daily language.

Does anyone care that this endemic teaching is false to the Bible we claim as our Christian guide? If the evidence of simple texts in Scripture (“Lazarus is sleeping.

Lazarus is dead. I am going to wake him up,” John 11:11, 14) will not persuade the would-be disciple of Christ, who can do it? Do you and your children really find Ecclesiastes 9:5, 10 difficult? People who are dead know nothing at all. There is no activity at all in Sheol, “gravedom,” the world of all the dead. The dead are dead, not alive! There is no point at all in praying to dead persons.

Jürgen Moltmann, “the foremost Protestant theologian in the world” (*Church Times*), tells us that our Christianity has been infected by paganism. It happened in the second century. But does anyone care?

“In the degree to which Christianity [in the second century] cut itself off from its Hebrew roots and acquired Hellenistic [Greek] and Roman form, it lost its eschatological [future] hope...It merged into late antiquity’s gnostic [pagan] religion of redemption [salvation]. From Justin onwards [150 AD], most of the Fathers revered Plato as a ‘Christian before Christ’...God’s eternity now took the place of God’s future, **heaven replaced the coming kingdom**...the immortality of the soul displaced the resurrection of the body...People ceased to hope for ‘the redemption of the body’ (Rom. 8:23)...They now hoped for the soul’s final deliverance *from* the body...”

“In the world of late antiquity, Christianity encountered the Platonic dualism of soul and body in the form of the gnostic contempt for the body...The soul, condemned to life-long incarceration in the body, yearns to be freed from this prison. It does not long for the prison to be changed into a home in which it likes to live. In this gnostic [pagan] form, the Christian hope no longer gazes forward to a future when everything will be created anew. It looks upwards, to the soul’s escape from the body and from this earth, into the heaven of blessed spirits [‘When we all get to heaven...’].

“All the Greek and Latin Fathers had to fight against this contemporary gnostic [pagan] religiosity, and *most of them succumbed to it*, developing a Christian

spirituality which went half-way to meet these religious requirements...*And this is so even today...* A gnostic spirituality in fact replaces the original Jewish and Christian vitality of life reborn out of the creative God” (*The Spirit of Life*, p. 88-89, emphasis added.).

Ponder those words. “In this *gnostic* [*paganized*] form, the *Christian* hope...” Do you see what has happened? Gnostic paganism reappeared in the guise of “Christian” faith. But the switch of labels ought not to conceal the true nature of such religiosity. It is still Platonism — dressed up as the teaching of Christ. Lots of scholars and historians know this well!

In the Bible and the mind of Jesus, no one emerges from death except by resurrection of the whole person from the grave. And the great event of resurrection belongs to the *future* at the last trumpet, only when Jesus returns (1 Cor. 15:23, 50-52; Rev. 11:15-18). **No human beings go to a bodiless immortality in heaven at death, and in the Bible no human person is currently being tormented in a subterranean hell.** Such popular beliefs could never have caught the imagination of churchgoers if the biblical view of our destiny had been retained.

“Heaven in the Bible is never in fact the destination of the dying,” said a leading NT scholar at Cambridge.<sup>1</sup> Do churchgoers care enough to raise a protest? Many see gnosticism in the rise of the contemporary New Age movement. But gnosticism is a little closer to home. It is embedded in the “evangelical” faith of millions. Every sermon which preaches the “soul” off to heaven at death reveals that early intrusion of gnosticism via mystically-minded “church fathers.” There is a hidden paganism in the belief system of many who claim to believe the Bible only!

The faithful are not in heaven. They are waiting to be resurrected. There is only one way to be “with the Lord.” It is described with precision by Paul in 1 Thessalonians

4:13-18. “*In this way* we shall come to be with the Lord” — through resurrection, not before! And only on the occasion of the one return, Second Coming of Jesus. Paul in verse 15 was discussing the one future Second Coming of Jesus.

Perhaps it is that churchgoers find no comfort in the future return of Jesus to raise the faithful dead from death. It appears that Plato’s view is more comforting. This should be openly admitted, and the gnosticism/paganism recognized for what it really is. It should be repented of and the truth embraced, with enthusiasm, in its place (2 Thess. 2:10).

It makes no sense in this amazing information age that we should cling to the “Christian” hope in a *gnostic* form. Those who care about Jesus and the truth will surely wish to distance themselves from the corrupting influence of pagan philosophy and its falsehood about the “immortality of the soul.” If the church “loves the truth” — a condition for salvation itself (2 Thess. 2:10) — it ought to abandon wholesale a tradition which is no more than a thinly disguised gnostic Platonism. Christians presumably believe in Jesus and his teachings. At least that is what they claim! And Jesus the Jew cared nothing for the speculative and mystical outlook of Plato. He said nothing about the natural immortality of the soul. As a Hebrew he believed in the *acquisition* of immortality only via resurrection of the whole person *in the future* when he returns at his one Second Coming to inaugurate his worldwide Kingdom on earth (Rev. 5:10; 20:1-6, 9; Dan. 7:18, 22, 27).

But does anyone care? We really cannot risk not caring. Loving Jesus means loving what he taught. A major part of loving the truth is “loving his appearing” (2 Tim. 4:8). ✧

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<sup>1</sup> J.A.T. Robinson, *In the End God*, p. 104.