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INTRODUCTION

Prospective Theology and Immortality

William G. Vrasdonk

In July 1970 Gregory Baum introduced the readers of *The Ecumenist* to the understanding of an area of theological inquiry which he called Prospective Theology. In his effort to describe the significance of this prospective aspect he labeled traditional theology as normative theology, because it concentrates on God's revelation in Israel and Jesus Christ as understood by the Church, and thus finds in the past the normative elements of revelation. Prospective theology, on the other hand, focuses on the perspectives of evolution and history and the life of man in the cosmos. The purpose is to discern ultimate meaning and expressions of God's continuing self-communication. Baum states that normative theology deals with special salvation history that constitutes the Christian Church, and prospective theology deals with the universal salvation history that constitutes the human race, including, possibly, its cosmic destiny. In his illustrations the author relates that, if the research is "governed by a Christian vision of man, mediated by their culture," then the observations and analyses may well be called theology. (Vol. 8, No. 5, p. 75).

The above mentioned distinctions and insights are often at the foundation of the reflections on death and immortality presented here. Perhaps, the suggestions regarding the empirical aspects of the future of immortality are beyond the immediate perspectives of Baum's notion of prospective theology. However, if they are made within an expectation concerning the future of man, which is also the concern of Christian hope, then they may well be called theology.

It is in this spirit that the Department of Theological Studies of the University of Dayton in cooperation with the Foundation for Christian Renewal is sponsoring the Conference on Immortality on March 3 and 4, 1972. The general purpose of this conference is to concentrate the attention of different disciplines on their contemporary understanding of immortality, and to relate these insights to each other for further discussion.

Although great interest exists for the understanding of the concept "immortality" as understood by philosophy, psychology, religion, and anthropology, there is a final concern for immortality as an empirical phenomenon and its statistical probability.

More and more scientific disciplines are discussing topics which are related to the pursuit for immortality; e.g., Cryogenics and Robert C. W. Ettinger's book *The Prospect of Immortality*; Cybernetics and Bionics in their concern for the extension of man's life within humanoids and androids; Genetics and Physiology and their recent studies about the process of aging.

Because all these scientific endeavors touch upon one of the essential aspects of man's culture—the drive for immortality—it becomes extremely desirable that an interdisciplinary reflection on the concept of immortality be promoted.

A psychological or philosophical reflection on the scientific programs has perhaps some definite connections with a particular cultural understanding of man's immortality. This is said in reference to Robert Jay Lifton's psychological interpretation of great political events; e.g. Mao Tse-Tung and the Chinese revolution. ("The Politics of Immortality" is the title of a publication in *Psychology Today*; November 1970. It is a conversation of the editor T. George Harris with Robert Jay Lifton in the light of his recent book *Boundaries*).

The very core of being human is man's search for understanding his ultimate meaning. Immortality is a concept which symbolizes man's concern for the ultimate. It is urgent for contemporary man to take the different disciplines seriously in their efforts, and to communicate understanding for the sake of establishing a community of interest. The realization of this conference on immortality will contribute to already existing efforts, which bring specialists together and allow communication of their insights.

It is very important to note, that in sponsoring this interdisciplinary conference, theological studies explicitly recognize that the theme immortality is no longer the exclusive property of religions. Moreover, because other disciplines have become part of the discussion, it is understandable that this topic is studied in a language and perspectives which are not common to traditional religions. The scientific world-view is rather empirical, which means that immortality will be seen in connection with something that indicates immortality. This does not leave much room for ideological and poetical speculations and immortality becomes demythologized. Modern man is characterized by his willingness to accept the possibilities of nature according to immanent forces. In moderation of these empirical tendencies, recent studies emphasize that scientific man cannot refrain totally from mythological aspirations. The formulation of hypotheses and the thinking according to certain models indicate the mythological qualities in his scientific studies. (Cf. Langdon Gilkey)

In a paper "Beyond Thanatology: Immortality" (*The Journal of Value Inquiry*, Vol. 6) I argue that it is the vocation of modern man to find a contemporary understanding of immortality, otherwise his dignity is lost and stands for nothing. For that purpose we need contributions from all areas, may they come from parapsychology, chemistry, philosophy, languages, religion, engineering, etc. The point is that life-serving options should be considered in spite of the multitudinous number of oppositions. It is not enough to indicate signals of transcendence (e.g. death-refusing hope in man) which may lead to the induction that the finality of death is transcended and appears less absolute. (Cf. Peter Berger's *A Rumor of Angels*, p. 64). We cannot leave immortality as an induced inferential speculation. Our concern should include the possibility of the making of immortality, which expresses a modern concern about the basic need for immortality.

The making of immortality considers theologically the meaning of Christ's prom-

ise of the resurrection. Is it not possible that God's creative love, which has been expressed in a decisive manner by Jesus in his death refuting resurrection, is to be interpreted in modern times? Perhaps God's creative love is leading man to the daring adventure of overcoming death by making himself immortal. It is not a great sign of God's creative love if man accepts the fact of death in a fatalistic mentality. Because of Christ's resurrection man should be challenged in his fatalism and be more actively concerned in the search for all possible means of an everlasting survival.

This challenge and the guided attention for immortality should finally result in serious efforts in the direction of making man immortal. These efforts will be met by many opposing views, and it will become obvious in this conference that the suggestions stated here are not typical for the study of immortality according to the majority of the participants. However, the spirit within which the suggestions are made is called a beatitude. In a modern translation of the New Testament, *Good News for Modern Man* (The American Bible Society, New York, 1966) Matthew 5:6 reads; "Happy are they whose greatest desire is to do what God requires: God will satisfy them fully."

