THE ASSURANCE OF IMMORTALITY

HARRY EMERSON FOSDICK

THE ASSURANCE OF IMMORTALITY

BY

HARRY EMERSON FOSDICK

ASSOCIATION PRESS
NEW YORK: 347 MADISON AVENUE

Printed in the United States of America.

PREFACE

In publishing this essay upon immortality, it is useless, and in most cases impossible, for me to indicate in detail my indebtedness for the lines of thought which here are interwoven. The general considerations which support faith in everlasting life have been canvassed so often that extensive originality in arguing for immortality is out of the question. Whatever freshness of thought this essay may possess will be found in the fact that the problem of life after death is viewed from the standpoint of the twentieth century and is discussed in terms of the special difficulties and the prevailing attitudes which exist to-day. Old arguments must take new direction from the banks of the generation's thought between which they flow. In particular I have had in mind the man, conscientious about his daily work, with whom the words honor and friendship, fidelity and courage, weigh heavily, but who, occasionally lifting his thought to the problem of life everlasting, speedily turns away, saying: "What difference does it make? At least I can do my present task well,

and if there be any world beyond the grave, I will face it, when it comes." This prevalent attitude is often maintained in admirable spirit and is accompanied by an honorable and useful life. But there are considerations which such an attitude leaves out of account, and to these the attention of this essay is specially directed.

The reader will find the understanding of the argument easier if he keeps in mind the general outline of the thought. In the first chapter, I try simply to point out the real and present importance of the problem which we are considering; in the second chapter, I try to show the inconclusive nature of the arguments commonly urged against a future life; and in the third chapter, I try to present the positive reasons for a modern man's assurance that death does not end all.

HARRY EMERSON FOSDICK.

August 6, 1913.

CONTENTS

CHAPTER I

The Significance of Immortality

I

One of the most noticeable contrasts between this generation and those immediately preceding it, is the relative unimportance of the future life in the thought of the present age. When our forefathers were at all religious, and often when they were not, they not only took for granted the fact of continued existence beyond the grave, but they regarded it as a matter of supreme concern. When in the eighteenth century Butler constructed his impressive argument for revealed religion, he used the soul's deathlessness, not as a conclusion to be established, but as a premise to be assumed. Even with radical thinkers outside the churches, faith in the future life could then be presupposed as a common point of agreement, while within the churches men's hopes and fears of immortality dominated their religious thought, and made this present life significant largely because it was

preparatory to the glories or the terrors of the life to come.

Our fathers, therefore, hardly could have understood the present generation's scepticism about the truth of immortality; much less could they have comprehended that *modern nonchalance* which speaks and acts as though it made but little difference whether or not men live beyond the grave. A recent writer tells us that in our unwillingness to die and have that the end of us, "We have not passed far beyond the attitude of peevish children who refuse to come in at nightfall after they have played outdoors all day." This cavalier belittling of the significance of life to come is prevalent to-day even among religious men. They do not so much disbelieve in immortality; their scepticism lies deeper; they do not care. With some such phrase as "One world at a time," they commonly dismiss consideration of the future life, regarding immortality as indeed a possibility, but a possibility whose import is postponed until they die. To insist, therefore, that the persistence of personality beyond the grave involves tremendous issues for our present life, is to-day not by any means superfluous.

The reasons for this decline of emphasis upon the importance of the world to come are easily discernible. For one thing, the impact of new

scientific information concerning the evolutionary origin of man and the intricate relationship between the mind and brain has shattered confidence in the certainty of life to come. The manifold causes which in our day have unsettled old religious beliefs, and have cast doubt upon or utterly discredited supposed bases of faith that had gone unquestioned for two thousand years, have made unstable the hopes of immortality. With that admirable power of adaptation, therefore, which is one of the noblest elements in human character, men, finding their confidence in a future life vanishing, have set themselves to make the best of the new situation, and have stoutly asserted that the change makes little difference. Even a Robinson Crusoe looks for compensations in his condition, when he finds himself upon a solitary island, and men, at their best, believing that this life is all they have, will resolutely make the most of that, and as an armor against the malice of their fate, will courageously affirm that they do not care, that one life is enough, and that the difference is inconsiderable after all.

In addition to this initial cause for the decline of emphasis upon the importance of immortality, is an even nobler reason. Men have gathered new hopes of racial progress in our day, and, at their best, are increasingly inclined to sink their indi-

vidual prospects in their expectations for humanity. The social passion finds voice in pulpits as well as on secular platforms, and proclaims there what our fathers would not have thought of saying, that our mission is not to get men into heaven, but somehow to bring heaven to earth. What Narodny said of Russia, "I am nothing; personal success, happiness, they are nothing; exile, Siberia, the Czar's bullet, they are nothing; there is just one thing, that Russia must be free," men in a larger sense are saying of the human race. Hope of a future life, with its rewards and possibilities, has a mean look in the light of such self-forgetful passion, and as new discoveries open new hopes of progress for mankind, one hears scores of men wish that they could see America a hundred years from now, for one man who, after the old fashion, longs for heaven. What difference does it make whether another life awaits us after death, so long as here we play our part like men, and hand down the heritage of the past, so purified and furthered by our thought and sacrifice that our children will rise up to call us blessed?

Another reason for the decline of emphasis upon the importance of the life to come is not so creditable as the other two. In the present age, this life has been made vivid and interesting in an unexampled way. Old isolations have been overcome,

so that the whole world is now the province of any mind that chooses to be cosmopolitan, and rapidity of communication has made possible world-wide enterprises on such a scale as no previous age has ever known. New knowledge has consumed the thoughts of men, and new avenues of wealth have engaged their ambitions, until the contemplation of eternal destiny has paled before the immediate brilliance of this present world. For men are like auditoriums; they can hold so many occupants and no more; and when the seats are filled and even the "Standing Room Only" sign has been removed, the next comer, though he be a prince, must cool his heels upon the curb. The minds of men have been preempted by the immediate and fascinating interests of this vigorous, exciting age. The fact is not so much that they through reasoned disbelief have discarded faith in immortality, as that through preoccupation they have lost interest in anything beyond the grave.

Even a deeper reason, in the realm of serious thought, helps to explain the modern depreciation of immortality. Eternal life is a matter of quality and not of time, men say. Justice and goodness, beauty and truth exist eternally in God and may be incarnate in our transient human lives. Let the individual die; the value of his spiritual quality, which alone is worth preserving, is perpetuated in

the life of God. From God came all the worth of our characters, to him it shall return and in him it shall never die. Not in our small individualities, but in his persistent Being,

"All we have willed or hoped or dreamed of good shall exist."

The only Eternal is God; of him we are but broken lights; and our flickering lives, luminous with his quality, may be eternal in this sense only, that we can mean what he means, we can incarnate in time the spiritual values that in him are absolute and timeless. Must every little candle burn forever, that so light may persist? Must each separate breeze be perpetual in order that the air may still enswathe the earth? Shall the special waves insist on perpetuity when they but represent the ocean that abides behind them, and in them and millions like them is expressed?

These are four outstanding reasons for the modern doubt, not only of the fact, but of the importance of personal immortality. There are other reasons, operative in all generations—the pessimistic mood that does not want to live again, the worldling's hatred of the hopes and fears that would deprive him of comfort in self-indulgence—but these four causes, not by any means dishonorable, lead even the best of men to-day to wonder

how much difference it makes whether belief in immortality be accepted or denied.

To be sure, one value for our present life which faith in immortality possesses is evident to all. It comforts men in the hour when bereavement comes, when human hearts discover that by as much as love is great, by so much must grief be deep. But men are not assured that they have any right to expect comfort from the universe. They do not propose to find solace in a lie. They do not want the opium of a dream to ease them of their heart's distress. If the only value for life which faith in immortality possesses is the value of comfort, folk for that very reason will mistrust their right to it, will fear lest their desire for consolation may drive them to seek it in a hope that is not true. Even though a man has cried with Tennyson:

> "Ah, Christ that it were possible
> For one short hour to see
> The souls we loved, that they might tell us
> What and where they be,"

he has not drawn appreciably nearer to confidence about the future, nor has he even dimly seen the deepest issues which are implied in the acceptance or denial of immortality.

ASSURANCE OF IMMORTALITY

II

The directest way by which we may perceive what difference to life is made when we believe or disbelieve in the continuance of personality beyond the grave, is to give free range to all our doubts and let them carry us into a frank and full denial of everlasting life. The affirmation that death ends all is a creed as clearly as is the assertion of immortality. Let that creed be asserted, and let all the implications of annihilation be followed to their logical results. In what sort of world do we then find ourselves? What difference to life does that assertion make?

However superficial his first impression may prove to be, the ordinary man who, after believing in immortality, now turns to consider a world from which the hope of a future life has been obliterated, feels an unavoidable sense of injustice to the race. What Professor Palmer of Harvard wrote, with fine restraint, when he recorded his wife's decease, we instinctively feel about the whole prospect of personality's annihilation: "Though no regrets are proper for the manner of her death, who can contemplate the fact of it and not call the world irrational, if out of deference to a few particles of disordered matter it excludes so fair a spirit?" If death ends personality, the universe seems to be

throwing away with utter heedlessness its most precious possessions. Whatever evaluations of the world may be questioned, no one doubts that personality, with its capacities for thought, for character, for love and for creative work is the crown of all existence. Out of what travail, age-long and full of agony, has personality been born! By what vast struggles, admirable in their sacrificial heroism, has the moral life of man been attained and preserved! A reasonable person does not build a violin, with infinite labor gathering the materials and shaping the body of it, until upon it he can play the compositions of the masters, and then in a whim of chance caprice smash it into bits. Yet just this the universe seems to be doing if immortality is false. Longer ages than our minds can conceive she has been at work upon those forces which underlie our personalities, and now when Jesus and Augustine and Luther and Lincoln are possible, when at last a spiritual man can be the residence of poets' dreams and martyrs' consecrations, when the mind can think truth and the heart can love righteousness, are these supreme triumphs of the age-long, universal toil thrown utterly to ruin?

Before a man, however, surrenders himself to this instinctive revolt against the unreasonableness and injustice of a world that creates person-

ality only to destroy it, he must face the mitigating considerations which have been suggested, the alternatives to personal immortality which have displaced in many minds the hope of individual continuance. Many take refuge from the malice of an obliterated life in the hope, already mentioned, that the worth of personality, in terms of its goodness, its justice and its love, is made perpetual in the life of God. What we lay down, he gathers up and makes eternal, and so the spiritual gains of our human struggle are perpetuated even though human individuals do not persist. But just what does this mean? It is easy to speak of justice as a quality in God, of which we may be the temporary representatives and the value of which we, dying, may know to be perpetual in him, but does not this in the face of searching thought turn out to be merely a form of words? Justice cannot exist in a solitary being whether he be God or man; justice is a quality impossible except in social relationships; and God himself cannot be just without being just to some one. So, all the moral values that we know, truth, goodness, love, are forms of personal activity that never would have existed without social life, and that have no meaning whatsoever apart from relationships between persons. To imagine God, therefore, in some sublime and timeless solitude after

the race is gone, hoarding within himself the values of the justice, truth and goodness, which have been wrought out in the experience of the race, is to conceive an absurdity. When this earth has come to its inevitable dissolution and the persons who lived upon it have vanished utterly, will God indeed preserve within himself the spiritual gains of our human struggles, just without being just to any one, true yet true to no one, perpetuating all our love, yet loving no person save himself? Then the justice, truth and love which are eternal in God have no imaginable likeness to the qualities which we mean by the words. The moral gains of the race are all social in their genesis and in their expression. What can altruism mean in a universe without separate personalities; or honor, or sincerity, or loyalty, or faithfulness? These are all terms applicable only to individuals sustaining a mutual relationship. The obvious fact is that the only hope of preserving the moral gains of humanity lies in the persistence of a community of human persons. Love, righteousness, fidelity, in an absolute and unrelated Being, are inconceivable.

Moreover, spiritual quality in the very nature of the case cannot be detached from a man to be appropriated and preserved by God. All spiritual quality is simply personality in action, and when