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Alexander Nairne  
Excerpt  
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## IMMORTALITY: THE CHRISTIAN VIEW

A great theme is here proposed. Hope, desire, the age-long common sense of mankind, the dignity as well as the imbecility of our mortality and vocation, are to be considered. But there is no place for fancy. It is the Christian view that we are to elucidate, and the Christian view includes the life on earth, the heroic death, and the resurrection of Him whom the Christian calls Lord and Saviour.

The Christian view of immortality is first of all the moral view. And that does not imply reward and punishment in a future life beyond the grave, except so far as reasonable assurance of such reward and punishment induces Christ-likeness here and now. And Christian immortality is quality not extension, the immediate

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enjoyment of the eternal “while it is called to-day”. That is possible for others besides those who name Jesus Christ as Lord. But it is easier for such as do, for the Christian trusts the Father with the trust wherewith the Lord Jesus trusted. “God is the God of the living : all live unto him” begins and consummates the Christian view.

Let me begin by quoting a notable confession of faith in immortality :—

No coward soul is mine,  
No trembler in the world’s storm-troubled sphere:  
I see heaven’s glories shine,  
And faith shines equal, arming me from fear.

O God within my breast,  
Almighty, ever present Deity !  
Life—that in me has rest,  
As I—undying Life—have power in Thee !

Vain are the thousand creeds  
That move men’s hearts; unalterably vain;  
Worthless as withered weeds,  
Or idlest froth amid the boundless main,

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To waken doubt in one  
Holding so fast by thine infinity;  
So surely anchor'd on  
The steadfast rock of immortality.

With wide-embracing love  
Thy Spirit animates eternal years,  
Pervades and broods above,  
Changes, sustains, dissolves, creates and rears.

Though earth and man were gone  
And suns and universes cease to be,  
And Thou wert left alone,  
Every existence would exist in Thee.

There is not room for Death,  
Nor atom that his might could render void:  
Thou—Thou art Being and Breath,  
And what Thou art may never be destroyed.

Those are Emily Brontë's "Last Lines". They have been called Stoic, but are Christian. Christians may add, some this some that, but may not abstract from this full flood of faith, and what they add of detail must be reverent and restrained,

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self-mortifying: If any would save his soul...he must lose it, for the Saviour's sake and his good-tidings.

Benjamin Jowett, the famous Master of Balliol, is honest faithful and assuring in his Introduction to Plato's *Phaedo*:

Most persons when the last hour comes are resigned to the order of nature and the will of God.... Another life must be described, if at all, in forms of thought and not of sense.... We cannot reason from the natural to the spiritual, or from the outward to the inward.... Most people have been content to rest their belief in immortality on the agreement of the more enlightened part of mankind, and on the inseparable connexion of such a doctrine with the existence of a God...also on the impossibility of doubting about the continued existence of those whom we love and reverence in this world. And after all has been said, the figure, the analogy, the argument, are felt to be only approximations in different forms of the common sentiment of the human heart.

One silence there is in Emily Brontë's poem

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which Christian faith would fill. Hear Donne,  
*A Hymn to God the Father:*

Wilt thou forgive that sin where I begun,  
 Which was my sin...through which I still  
 Do run...though still I do deplore?  
 When thou hast done thou hast not done,  
 For I have more.

Wilt thou forgive that sin which I have won  
 Others to sin...?  
 When thou hast done thou hast not done, etc.

I have a sin of fear, that when I have spun  
 My last thread, I shall perish on the shore:  
 But swear by thyself, that at my death thy Son  
 Shall shine as he shines now and heretofore:  
 And having done this thou hast done,  
 I fear no more.

You catch the pious wit of the seventeenth century, the pun on his own name and on Sun and Son. But you catch the deep meaning too. Since the Son of God was born and died and dying lives, man in God, all life is different. Trust is now

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assured, and affects even where it is not confessed. Emily Brontë would not have been so firm and free and deep but for him whom she names not, but who has redeemed her and us and all mankind.

And her almost rejection of creeds should not offend a churchman; for in comparison with that boundless main of hers creeds are but froth: and there are some good churchmen to whom creeds are less help than hindrance, as to her.

Yet not so, taken rightly. The earliest creeds were hymns, like that fragment in the Epistle to Timothy “Who was manifested in the flesh... received up in glory”, or the *Te Deum*. And the early name for creed was *symbolum*. A creed was poetry, symbolic, not plain statement of plain fact. Repeat the Apostles’ Creed thoughtfully and consider the extraordinary character of every sentence. It is thought, affection, mystery, sketched and abruptly sketched, in picture: yet hardly picture; you think of that surprising definition Plato gives of “form”—“form always

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follows colour". The Apostles' Creed in its original is Latin. The Latin "eternal" is better than our English translation "everlasting", but our "body" is truer to the sense than its "flesh". But take the whole without too scrupulous a nicety over details. What free glad simplicity; the faith of the people and the catacombs, whereas the Nicene Creed is theology of doctors and councils, yet that too so grand and satisfying and still so poetic. And then there is "The Hymn *Quicumque vult*" which we call the Athanasian Creed, wherein immortality enforces salutary discipline, a bond of hope for every day:

One Christ... God and Man... One, not by conversion of the Godhead into flesh: but by taking of the Manhood into God... Who suffered for our salvation: descended into hell, rose again the third day from the dead... He ascended into heaven, he sitteth on the right hand of the Father, God Almighty: from whence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead. At whose coming all men shall rise again with their bodies: and shall give account for their own works. And they that have done good shall go

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into life everlasting: and they that have done evil into everlasting fire. This is the Catholic Faith.

How broad and deep, wonderful and homely. Good deeds and evil are the ultimate matter: He died to make us good.

Wonderful the mystery of his life and fate and person: but the same wonder throughout the life of men: "For as the reasonable soul and flesh is one man, so God and man is one Christ". The Word became flesh, the Incarnation: what is it like? what is it all a piece with? Answer: The soul and body making every man a person, a spirit. And so the Resurrection:

How say some among you that there is no resurrection of the dead? But if there is no resurrection of the dead, neither hath Christ been raised: and if Christ hath not been raised, then is our preaching vain and your faith is also vain... for if the dead are not raised neither hath Christ been raised; and if Christ hath not been raised your faith is vain, ye are yet in your sins.

S. Paul is quick to believe that Christ has



risen because he recognises in the rising of Christ the proper sequel of “Christian” history: his faith as Pharisee commends his faith as Apostle; his faith as Apostle assures the faith of the Pharisee: “But now hath Christ been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of them that are asleep”.

So Paul to the Corinthians. And the quotation reminds us that creeds are bound to holy Scripture. They are not independent authority: they are but symbols summaries interpretations of Scripture.

Thus the Fire in the Athanasian Creed is not penal but that fire at the end of the Apocalypse of S. John which consumes and abolishes evil finally utterly eternally, leaving the whole world free pure and glad for the coming of Jesus the Lord: “And there shall be no curse any more... and the Spirit and the bride say, Come. And he that is athirst, let him come....Yea: I come quickly. Amen: come, Lord Jesus”.

And so each and every sentence in the creeds

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about the Advent and the Judgement must be interpreted in the light of S. Paul's

Then cometh the end, when he shall deliver up the kingdom to God, even the Father; when he shall have abolished all rule and all authority and power. For he must reign till he hath put all his enemies under his feet...and when all things have been subjected...then shall the Son also himself be subjected to him that did subject all things unto him, that God may be all in all.

Deep and dark with excess of light. Beyond Judgement the End, beyond time the eternal, beyond evolution the absolute: abstract credal sentences, God the concrete unity. Compare the noble envoi of Dampier Whetham's *History of Science and its relations with Philosophy and Religion*:

But, now or later, intelligible mechanism will fail, and we shall be left face to face with the awful mystery which is reality.

And S. Paul to Corinthians passes into S. Paul to Ephesians with that far-reaching vista of pro-