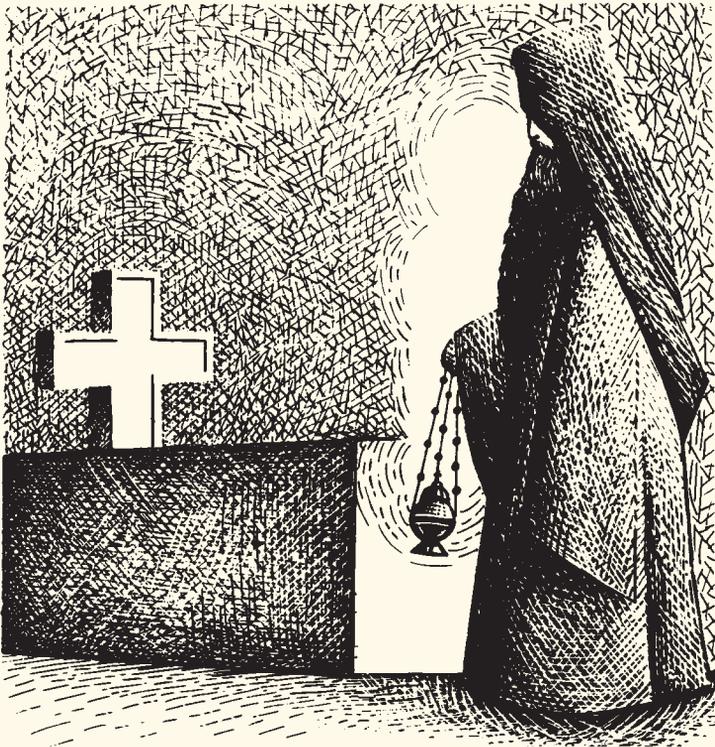


THE FUTURE LIFE ACCORDING TO ORTHODOX TEACHING

CONSTANTINE CAVARNOS



Translated by

Hieromonk Auxentios and Archimandrite Chrysostomos

Foreword by Archimandrite Chrysostomos

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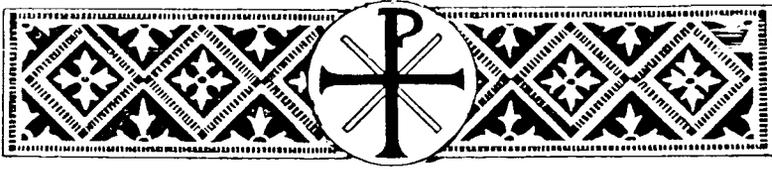
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|--|----|
| FOREWORD | 7 |
| PREFACE | 13 |
| I The Future Life According to Orthodox Teaching | 14 |
| II Jesus Christ on the Soul | 53 |
| III The Soul According to the Fathers of the Church | 55 |
| IV The Survival of the Soul After Death According to Holy Scripture | 59 |
| V The Fathers of the Church on the Immortality of the Soul | 65 |
| VI The Immortality of the Soul in Orthodox Hymnography | 73 |
| VII Holy Scripture on the Resurrection of the Dead and the Second Coming | 74 |
| BIBLIOGRAPHY | 80 |
| INDEX | 83 |
| ABOUT THE AUTHOR | 84 |



Foreword

...Ther is Joye in heven and peyne
in helle; And I accorde wel that hit
is so; But natheles, yit wot I wel al-
so, That ther nis noon dwelling in
this contree, That either hath in he-
ven or helle y-be, Ne may of hit
non other weyes witen, But as he
hath herd seyde, or founde hit writ-
en.

Chaucer

There are few subjects in religious thought so compelling as that of the future life, or life after death. Indeed, there are those who would argue, with a somewhat privative view of the subject, that religion itself rises out of human desperation at the thought of death and the compensatory need to seek the afterlife. Just such a notion well may be the dominant one in a society such as ours, which admits theoretically and with a certain nostalgia to the existence of Eternity, but really does not predicate life on its existence.

To the Orthodox Christian, the afterlife is an essential part of this life. In our Liturgical life, we attain true communion with our fellow Christians *only* when that which is Heavenly is joined with the earthly and the living join chorus with those gone forth before us. Indeed, the culmination of our Christian life is realized in the eating and drinking of the flesh and blood of one Who died, yet still lives, Who brings to death life, and

Who joins the living and dead in the Eternal life of the Resurrection.

In the mystical life of the Church, there is a constant interaction between the Eternal and the time-bound. *Theosis*, in which man reaches his highest state of perfection on earth, being bound in the body yet cleansed of the passions, rests on the constant interplay and interaction of the Eternal world and the world that is subject to death. Participating in the divine, imperfectly communing with the perfect, our Holy Fathers and Saints, who by Grace shine forth even in our day—though in ever fewer numbers—, reveal in their lives a spiritual reality that links every true-believing Orthodox believer to the Eternal. And it is from the sayings, reports, witness, and written words of these holy men and women that we know, too, as much as it is possible to know in darkness what is a pure property of light, something of the nature of the life after death.

In modern times, theology—and, alas, to some extent in the Orthodox Church, too—has become the domain of speculation and creative presumption. We have separated the description of true spiritual experience, which was once real theology, from the modern practice of theology—the modern “doing” of theology that gives forth to spiritual dilettantism, if not blasphemy, if not, finally, disbelief. So it is that many have written of late that Scripture and the Fathers of the Church are silent about the afterlife and reticent in their approach to this topic. Reticent they are, indeed, to speak of the mystical realm of Eternity in words that might make of Heaven the middle-class Protestant songfest so feared by Samuel Clemens, or cast Hell in images, not of metaphysical anguish, but of epic barbecues; but quiet about the afterlife Holy Scripture and the Fathers most certainly are not. Only our departure from Patristic study and from theology which derives from the Patristic mind can account for this great error among our contemporary theologians.

To return to a Patristic view of any religious subject is difficult. If dilettantism (not to mention mediocrity) and disbelief have become a hallmark of much of today's vogue and official theology, it is as much an optic as a scholarly disease: it distorts the vision of all those afflicted, such that they see, read, and perceive all that about them as accordingly superficial. Thus it is that in an evaluation in response to a request for funding, I recently found a polemical writer reacting to a collection of scholarly papers, based on years of meticulous study and Patristic exegesis, as mere "sermonettes." Many scholars have come to lack even the basic experience in research by which they might identify the authentic. Thus it is that I wish to preface the present little book with a warning to the dilettante and to the amateur scholar. There are here no inadequacies. There is here no modern scholar. In this little work by Professor Cavarnos, we find a study as studies should be: work drawn from the Fathers, scholarship shaped by the Patristic mind, and commentaries richly adorned with Patristic references.

Dr. Cavarnos exhibits in his writing the tell-tale sign of a good Patristic scholar: it is abundantly evident in his rich use of citations from primary sources that he *reads* the Fathers and reads them thoroughly. Trained in philosophy, he organizes, explains, and juxtaposes his primary citations in such a way as to present the Patristic witness with great clarity. He derives from the Fathers that catholicity in thought which makes them speak as from one mouth and as with one voice. To the proud dilettantes, who can but expound on what they do not adequately know, Cavarnos is a formidable challenger. His writing does not contain the pride which is necessary to their kind of theology; nor, to be sure, do their writings admit of the humility of a scholar who uses his talents to *present* and *offer* the words of the Fathers, rather than juggle them in a game of philosophical and theological prestidigitation.

If we have been heavy-handed and a bit harsh in dealing with much modern theological thought, it has been for the purpose of focusing the reader's attention on the unique scholarship which we find in this little book on the afterlife. After all, such scholarship really is threatened —it really is increasingly rare. Increasingly rare, too, as we have said, are those who can even recognize, today, an authentic piece of Patristic scholarship. In such circumstances, we are obliged to be blunt, to be strong in our statements, and perhaps to be at times hyperbolic in our expression —not in the interest of polemics, but as a device for commanding the attention of a Christian world which is being lulled into a harmful spiritual stupor.

There is a special quality in Professor Cavarnos' writings, beyond that of authenticity, which in turn challenges the modern believer, or demi-believer, as we have suggested. Our recognition of this quality is no personal laudation of the author as such, for it issues forth from the power of his sources themselves. From the Patristic and Scriptural references which Cavarnos has collected with such assiduity, there flows forth that "theology of facts" that so vibrantly enlivened the writings of the early Christian Fathers. If one rises above the merely scholarly and its aforementioned limitations, he senses —as if with some hidden intuitive faculty— that what he is reading of the afterlife is not the result of frivolous speculation or personal presumption, but just what it is: a description rendered by those who saw, and then wrote about, the life after death. This quality permeates Professor Cavarnos' writings. It is a quality bestowed upon any writings that authentically reflect the Patristic experience. And it is a quality which deeply affects the modern doubter or demi-believer.

It is a particular personal privilege to publish this book under the aegis of our monastery's publication program, which, though only several years old, has produced some six titles (four independently and two in

conjunction with the Holy Cross Orthodox Press in Brookline, Massachusetts) of some popularity. In my own scholarly career, there have been several people who deeply affected me with the breadth of their scholarship and intellects. In the area of history and religious thought, two among those still living stand out particularly in my mind: Professor Cavarnos and the renowned Church historian and medievalist, Professor Jeffrey Russell of the University of California. The latter was a mentor; the former was not. But both have given me a vision of honest scholarship which has been sustained in contemporary times. At a time when belief in God is waning, Professor Russell has produced an exhaustive study of the devil that has received attention even in the popular press. His study of the devil has led many back to an understanding of God; for, what more quickly leads one to God than a belief in the existence of the devil? Dr. Cavarnos has likewise kept alive an understanding of the Byzantine mind and Orthodox spirituality that is almost gone in our dark days. In both of these men one finds that light which shines in darkness and a vision of true scholarship anchored in the enlightenment of the Christian Fathers and an inner knowledge of Jesus Christ.

Dr. Cavarnos has supplied us with much Patristic and Scriptural material not found in his original Greek edition of this book. We are very happy to add this material, which eloquently expands on the various themes put forth in the work. For any inadequacies in our publication, we take full responsibility, assuring the reader again that these are not the fault of the author, as his fine work will immediately make apparent to the reader. To the extent, then, that our own shortcomings will be readily visible, we apologize to the reader and ask for the author's forbearance.

Archimandrite Chrysostomos

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“As for this clearly written work, touching upon such a great problem as life after death, we can only write words of praise, for it is grounded on the steadfast teaching of the Orthodox Church and not on human presumptions. We ardently recommend this little book, congratulating the author.... The subject is profoundly important and helpful in the acquisition of the ‘remembrance of death,’ which, in turn, is a salutary mode of conduct for us all.”

P. Soterchos

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The author, Dr. Constantine Cavarnos, is a Harvard-educated philosopher, Byzantinist, and Orthodox theological writer of international renown. The translators, Hieromonk Auxentios and Archimandrite Dr. Chrysostomos, are both Princeton graduates and have published widely in Orthodox theological studies.

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