ABSTRACT
The first rhythm of life begins at birth. The newborn child passes through various rites and stages of socialization to achieve maturity, and acceptance as a member of the social group. Of all rituals, none is disturbing like death. In many societies, death signifies a major set back to progress, disruption or termination of ambition. Psychologically, the impact of bereavement and mourning can culminate into acute depression - a state of mind characterized by feelings of gloom, hopelessness, anxiety and social withdrawal. As the greatest natural enemy facing humanity, death does not have any known solution. There is no known way for man to stop death. Despite the quantum of progress in medical sciences, man is still suffering helplessly from the pangs of death. Religion has only explained the spiritual essence of death, and then provides the platform for the consolation of survivors. Death is the source of sorrow, misfortune and failure. Man lives on earth with the endless fear of death. This paper examines the phenomenon of death from the perspective of individual eschatology in Christian theology and in African world-view. After death, the traditional concern of scholarship has been the fate of the soul. There is an attempt in this paper to answer the ancient question: Is there life after death?

KEYWORDS: Death, life, immortality, eschatology, resurrection, soul, spirit, body
INTRODUCTION

Eschatological questions are not only peculiar to Christianity. Any serious reflection on human existence, whether individually or collectively will not only terminate in the dynamic understanding of the cosmos and its historical development, but will also involve a comprehensive investigation into the fate of individuals after death. It is in the area of individual eschatology that Christian theology traverses and interpenetrates cosmology and cosmogony. Many people are interested to know the ultimate meaning and purpose of life. The puzzling questions are: who are we, and why are we here, and where are we going? J. Milton Yinger (1957:6) in his The Scientific Study of Religion has unraveled some of the fundamental questions of human existence: “Though there are important disagreements concerning the ultimate problems for man, a great many people would accept the following as among the fundamental concerns of human societies and individuals: how shall we respond to the fact of death? Does life have some central meaning despite the suffering and the succession of frustrations and tragedies it brings with it?”.

It does not matter whether one is a free-thinker, agnostic, skeptic or atheist, every human being is confronted with these fundamental questions of life. Even though religion has provided man with an intellectual mechanism to interpret, and cope with human predicament, man is still grappling with many unresolved questions. Louis Berkhof (1949:661) in his Systematic Theology has identified some of the enigmatic theological questions of human existence, which has preoccupied and dominated Christian individual eschatology for decades: “…What is the end or final destiny of the individual and what is the goal towards which the human race is moving? Does man perish at death, or does he enter upon another state of existence, either of bliss or of woe?”.

THE CONSTITUTION OF MAN

Theologians are divided on the constitution of man. While some people are of the opinion that man is made up of two distinct parts, body and soul, others, insist that man has three parts, body, soul and spirit. The body is a solid, physical object, which housed the soul and the spirit. The body (soma) is mortal, limited and circumscribed, located in space. The spirit (ruach) is the non-physical part of man. The soul (psuche), denotes the natural life of the body, seat of personality and the determinant of will and purpose. From the foregoing, it is glaring that man’s life is a complex integration of many parts. Man naturally is both a unit and a system. As a unit, man is auto-centric and the self-consciousness of his auto-centricity is his individuality which makes him a personality. Aubrey Vine (1948:323) avers that: “Each man realizes that he is an integration: he knows that he is made of ‘bits and pieces’; yet each man realizes that he is a unit, and though parts of that unit are in a continuous state of flux of minor integration, disintegration and reintegration”.

As a biotic unit, man maintains relationship with his environment by virtue of his cosmic superiority and the possession of a superlative intelligence of an empirical and pragmatic kind. The spirit, as the rational mind is the seat of the senses, affections and emotions of various kinds. The spirit cannot leave the body except in accordance with
natural law. Aubrey Vines has this to say on the relationship between the body and the spirit, “Man is not a spirit inhabiting a body. He is a spirit naturally integrated into a body, which is a very different matter. While a man lives he is not a spirit: he is a man and ‘man' includes body just as certainly as it includes spirit” (1948:322). Theologians have not been able to clearly distinguish between soul and spirit. Aubrey Vine has admitted the difficulty when he said: "what a human spirit in itself is it is useless to pretend to know” (1948:305). H. M. Relton in his speculation posits "We can of course form no conception of what the soul is in itself, i.e as an absolute substance... all we can say is .... It is an entity which is able to be linked for conscious and continuous experience both with this material universe and with the exoschema” (qtd. in Aubrey Vine 1948:305).

DEATH AS A NATURAL PHENOMENON

Man has a short time to complete his work on earth. Every human being is expected to assume his destiny and fulfill the purpose of creation within the time allotted to him. The end of life is death. Physical death is the termination of life and separation of body and soul. It is the disintegration of the human biotic unit. When the machinery of the body for one, or several reasons has worn out, broken down, or has developed a fatal fault which does not allow it to function efficiently, the end result is physical death. Berkhof has cautioned that physical death should not be mistaken to mean cessation of existence, but rather a severance of the natural relations of life, and that life and death are not direct opposites like existence and non-existence: “It is quite impossible to say exactly what death is. We speak of it as the cessation of physical life, but then the question immediately arises, just what is life? And we have no answer” (1949:668).

IMMORTALITY OF THE SOUL: A DEFINITION

Immortality is the belief in the continuous existence of the soul after the disintegration of the physical body. It is the survival of the soul after death. Aubrey Vines does not support the doctrine of natural immortality of man. Immortality according to him is the attribute of God, who alone is self-existent: “When we use the word immortality, therefore, of anything but God, we must always realize that none but God is immortal by qualification. Anything or anyone else is only immortal at his grace and pleasure” (1948:315). Vines described immortality as the ability to endure forever through the permission and will of God. John Macquarrie (1966:324) in his Principles of Christian Theology, preferred to speak of "eternal life" instead of "immortality", which to him is theologically defective. He identified two errors in the doctrine of immortality of the soul: “One of these is that it implies some kind of substantial soul, and that the substance of this soul is imperishable and so endures forever... the other defect... is that it suggests a soul that carries on apart from the body. When we try to think of it, the notion of a disembodied existence is very hard to conceive, and should probably not be called "existence" at all".
For the Jehovah's Witnesses man is a combination of two things that is the dust of the ground and breath of life. Man does not have an immortal soul that makes him different from the beast: “...it is clearly seen that even the man Christ Jesus was mortal. He did not have an immortal soul. Jesus, the human soul died. Thus it is seen that the serpent (the devil) is the one that originated the doctrine of the inherent immortality of human souls” (qtd. in Walter Martin 1996:56). Jehovah's Witnesses do not recognize any difference between the human spirit and soul—and that of the animals: “Precisely the same Hebrew phrase used of the animal creation, namely nephesh 'hhay-yah (living soul), is applied to Adam, when, after God formed man out of the dust from the ground and blew into his nostrils the breath of life, the man came to be a living soul” (Aid to Bible Understanding 1971:1533).

EARLY CHURCH ADOPTION OF PLATONISM

There is also a strong argument that the meanings popularly attached to the English word ‘soul' did not originate either from the Hebrew, or ‘Christian Greek Scriptures, but a legacy of ancient Greek philosophy. Plato in Phaedo quoted Socrates as saying: “The soul (at death)... departs to the invisible world - to the divine and immortal and rational: thither arriving, she lives in bliss and is released from the error and folly of men... and forever dwells... in company with the gods” (1977:73,103). Berkhof has insisted that the tripartite conception of man originated from ancient Greek philosophy, which interpreted the relation of the body and the spirit of man to the analogy of the relationship between God and the material universe: “The soul was regarded as, on the one hand, immaterial, and on the other adapted to the body. In so far as it appropriated the nous or pneuma, it was regarded as immortal...” (1949:191).

There is a consensus among majority of Christian theologians and philosophers that the belief in the immortality of the soul infiltrated Christianity from ancient Greek philosophy in the middle of the 2nd century A.D. This is corroborated by the authoritative Jewish Encyclopedia: “The belief that the soul continues its existence after the dissolution of the body is ...nowhere expressly taught in Holy Scripture... the belief in the immortality of the soul came to the Jews from contact with Greek thought and chiefly though the philosophy of Plato...” (qtd. in The Ambassador College 1983: 4).

The desire of the early ‘church fathers' to integrate Platonism into primitive Christian thought, aided the unanimous adoption of the doctrine of immortality of the soul into Christian theology. The New Encyclopedia Britannica has this to say: “From the middle of the 2nd century AD, Christians who had some training in Greek philosophy began to feel the need to express their faith in its terms, both for their own intellectual satisfaction and in order to convert educated pagans. The philosophy that suited them best was Platonism...” (1975:542,543).

The first teacher of Greek Christian Platonism was Justin Martyr, who passionately rejected Greek polytheism, but openly and positively endorsed the basic assumptions of Platonic religious philosophy as being in harmony with Christian teaching: “But our Jesus Christ, being crucified and dead, rose again and having ascended to heaven, reigned; and by those things which were published in his name among all nations by the apostles, there is joy afforded to those who expect the
The doctrine of immortality of the soul was popularized by the Christian humanist and by far the greatest of the Alexandrian Christian teachers, Origen, who though hostile and critical of Platonism, was able to produce a synthesis of Christianity and late Middle Platonism of outstanding originality and general acceptability.

Another influential teacher at the close of the second century was Quintus Septimius Florens Tertullianus who in his *A Treatise on the Soul*, posited: "For when we acknowledge that the soul originates in the breath of God, it follows that we attribute a beginning to it, for he will have the soul to be unborn and unmade ... if indeed the soul and spirit are two they may be divided; and thus, by the separation of the one which departs from the one which remains, there would accrue the union meeting together of life and death" (qtd. in Rand 1912: 116,120).

The originator of this distinctive kind of Platonism which was blended with Christian belief was Plotinus, the great philosopher and religious genius of the 3rd century AD, and pupil of the self-taught philosopher, Ammonius saccas. Plotinus as a meticulous critic and argumentator was engaged in the critical interpretation of social thought with a high degree of intellectual honesty. Philosophy to him was not just a matter of abstract speculation, but a way of life. In his *Enneades*, Plotinus wrote: "... but soul being one simple energy, and a nature characterized by life, cannot be corrupted as a composite. Will it, therefore, through being divided and distributed into minute parts, perish?... It is not possible for the soul to be corrupted according to any of these modes, it is necessarily incorruptible" (qtd. in Rand 1912:106,112-113).

The doctrine of immortality of the soul was enforced officially by the Catholic Church in the Lateran Council of 1513: "...we, with the approbation of the sacred council, do condemn and reprobate all those who assert that the intellectual soul is mortal, seeing, according to the canon of Pope Clement V, that the soul is ... Immortal... and we decree that all who adhere to like erroneous assertions shall be shunned and punished as heretics" (qtd. in Ambassador 1983:6). The enforcement of the doctrine and the threat of punishment to heretics by medieval Catholic Church show clearly that the doctrine was not an original dogma of the early church.

THEORIES OF DISEMBODIED STATE

It is an accepted speculation in Christian eschatology that after death, man's soul and spirit continues in a state of conscious existence between death and resurrection. Since it is impossible to have a unanimous opinion on any matter in Christian theology, we shall now proceed to examine different views on the disembodied state. The doctrine of the sleep of the soul (psychopannychy), denies conscious existence of the soul after death. Psychopannychians are of the opinion that after death, the soul continues to exist as a unique spiritual being, but in a state of unconscious repose. Psychopannychy is anchored from the statement of Jesus in John 11:11-13, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep;" (NIV:1628).

At death there is an apparent lose of consciousness and knowledge of time and intervening event between death and resurrection. At the resurrection, the souls of the righteous will be granted immortality and the souls of the wicked annihilated. Sleep of
the soul is the official doctrine of the Jehovah Witnesses and the Seventh Day Adventist Church. The Adventists position is stated as follows: “We as Adventists believe that, in general, the scriptures teach that the soul of man represents the whole man, and not a particular part independent of man's nature; and further, that the soul cannot exists apart from the body, for man is a unit” (qtd. in Martin 1996:447,448).

The second theory is the school of thought led by E. W. Bullinger, who posits that it is the breath of life from God that made man a living soul: “Man did not have a soul but he was a soul. The existence of the soul is therefore dependent upon the breath being in man's nostril. When man gives up the ghost and breathes his last the soul dissolves or goes out of existence” (qtd. in Baker 1971:571). The third view is the one held by Christian Science which was propounded by Mary Baker Eddy which sees death as: “Matter has no life, hence it has no real existence. Mind is immortal. The flesh, warring against the spirit... Any material evidence of death is false, for it contradicts the spiritual facts of being” (1971:584).

The fourth view is the doctrine of annihilationism, which holds the view that man was created immortal, but that any soul that lives in sin deliberately is by a positive act of God deprived of the gift of immortality and will be destroyed ultimately (Berkhof 1949:690). The fifth view is Swedenborgianism (The Church of the New Jerusalem), which teaches that man has two bodies, internal and external, one physical and the other psychical: “The internal of man is the spirit and the external is the body. The external or the body, is suited to the performance of uses in the natural world and is rejected or put off, at death, but the internal, which is called the spirit, and which is suited to the performance of uses in the spiritual world, never dies” (Emmanuel Swedenborg 1916:117). Swedenborgianism teaches that after the dissolution of the body, the spirit of man appears in the spiritual world in a human form as in a natural world.

CONCLUSION

Christian individual eschatology is theocentric. Man as a creation of God is bound to return to his Creator after the dissolution of the physical body. There is a dual destiny for each soul, either heaven (for the righteous), or hell (for the wicked). It is glaring that Christian eschatology is not monolithic. It is difficult, if not impossible to identify any element of unanimity in the doctrinal formulations of Christian denominations on personal immortality and the final destiny of the human soul. As Andrew Uduigwomen (1995:75) has rightly observed "... the veil demarcating the spatio-temporal world and the world that lies beyond is yet to be lifted”. It is humbly recommended that individual Christians should study the Bible privately and independently for a clearer self-understanding than to accept without critical reflection, the peculiar teachings of their denominations. Fanatical condemnation of other people's eschatology is a disservice to scholarship. Eventually perhaps, at the end of time, we shall realize as Bolaji Idowu did "...that there are many things about ourselves which we do not yet know" (1962:195).
REFERENCES

Concordia Self-Study Bible (NIV) (1973).
Eddy, Mary Baker (1932). Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures. Boston: The
First Church of Christ, Scientist.
Swedenborg, Emmanuel (1916). Miscellaneous Theological Works. New York:
Philosophical Library.
"Is there Life after Death", The Ambassador College Bible Correspondence Course
Lesson 5, Pasadena, California, (1983).
The New Encyclopaedia Britannica. Vol. 14, 1975, 539-545
and Ogbinaka.