

A Very Brief Note on Plato

Britannica: “Plato (born 428/427 BCE, Athens, Greece—died 348/347, Athens) was an ancient Greek philosopher, student of Socrates (c. 470–399 BCE), teacher of Aristotle (384–322 BCE), and founder of the Academy. He is best known as the *author of philosophical works of unparalleled influence* and is one of the major figures of Classical antiquity.”¹

Several authors regularly presenting scientific articles at *Evolution News & Science Today*² on evolution, neo-Darwinism and intelligent design (as well as closely related factual subjects) have recently chosen to present a series of articles on the “immortality of the soul” – essentially following Plato’s philosophy on this topic.

However, the *enormous differences* between Plato’s ideas *versus* the teachings of early Hebrews and early Christians as found in the most widely distributed book of all times (the Bible: *Printing between 5 to 7 billion copies*³; *in 733 languages, and portions translated into over 3,700 languages*.⁴ “These translations *impact billions of people around the world*, with 5.9 billion people having access to the full Bible”⁵ and more billions of people through its translated portions) *seem to be unknown to many readers* believing so far that the teachings Plato and the Bible on the soul would be substantially congruent. They are definitely not.

To emphasize the *essential differences*, I am quoting some points from the Professor Anders Nygren’s⁶ Magnum Opus *AGAPE and EROS*⁷ – Part I: A Study of the Christian Idea of Love. Part II: The History of the Christian Idea of Love (1953, altogether 764 pp.).

Anders Nygren, p. 224 (for his footnotes, see the original volume):

“When Plato speaks of the soul, the thought of the immortality of the soul is always present, Immortality is a natural endowment of the soul, which bespeaks its Divine origin. All that is required is that the soul should purify itself and set itself free from its bondage to sense in order to return to its Divine origin. *The Divine life of immortality is its normal condition. This idea of the natural immortality of the soul is completely foreign to the Agape motif. Instead, we find a belief in the resurrection of the dead.* In the course of history these two—belief in the immortality of the soul and belief in the resurrection of the dead—have constantly been blended together; *yet in fact they belong to two opposite religious and ethical worlds.* Wherever the natural immortality of the soul becomes the fundamental religious dogma, we can be fairly certain that we are within the sphere of Eros. But where the Agape motif is dominant, it regularly expresses itself in belief in the resurrection of the dead. If

¹ All emphasis here and in the following quotations by W.-E. L. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Plato> (retrieved 25 June 2025). There many more details. See perhaps also Plato summary <https://www.britannica.com/summary/Plato> and “soul summary” <https://www.britannica.com/summary/soul-religion-and-philosophy>

² <https://evolutionnews.org/>

³ <https://www.guinnessworldrecords.com/world-records/best-selling-book-of-non-fiction> (Also retrieved 25 June 2025): “The best-selling book of all time is the Christian Bible. It is impossible to know exactly how many copies have been printed in the roughly 1,500 years since its contents were standardized, but research conducted by the British and Foreign Bible Society in 2021 suggests that the total number probably lies between 5 and 7 billion copies.”

⁴ “The Bible has been translated into a remarkable number of languages. As of recent reports, the full Bible is available in 733 languages, and portions of the Bible are available in thousands more. Specifically, at least *some portion of the Bible has been translated into over 3,776 languages.*” Übersicht mit AI (retrieved 25 June 2025), Cf. also https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bible_translations

⁵ AI? There is a range of similar statements when you google this topic.

⁶ As for Anders Nygren, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anders_Nygren (“Anders Theodor Samuel Nygren (15 November 1890 – 20 October 1978) was a Swedish Lutheran theologian. He was professor of systematic theology at Lund University...”)

⁷ The entire volume: <https://archive.org/details/agapeanderosbyandersnygren/mode/2up>

participation in the eternal life of God is possible for man, **the possibility is not based on any natural quality or endowment of man, but simply and solely on a mighty act of God.** Just as it is God who makes the sinner righteous, so it is God who makes the dead to live. Resurrection is the signmanual of the Divine Agape.”

Nygren, pp. 280 -282:

“**The ancient Church differs most of all from Hellenism in its belief in Resurrection.** Christian tradition affirmed the “Resurrection of the flesh,” which the Apologists opposed to the Hellenistic doctrine of the “Immortality of the soul.” The antithesis was conscious and intentional, for at no point so much as this was their opposition to the Hellenistic spirit felt by the early Christians. **The Platonic, Hellenistic doctrine of the Immortality of the soul seemed to the Apologists a godless and blasphemous doctrine, which above all they must attack and destroy.** 1 Their motto in this regard might well be Tatian’s word: “**Not immortal, O Greeks, is the soul in itself, but mortal.** Yet it is possible for it not to die.” 2 The difference between Christian and non-Christian in this matter was so great that belief in the “Resurrection of the flesh” could become a shibboleth. One who believes in the “Immortality of the soul” shows thereby that he is not a Christian. As Justin says: “**If you have fallen in with some who are called Christians . . . and who say that there is no resurrection of the dead, but that their souls, when they die, are taken to heaven; do not imagine that they are Christians.**”

The idea of the Immortality of the soul causes offence primarily because it is an expression of man’s hybris (insolence) towards God. For Christian faith, salvation from death is a mighty act of God; in the Platonic, Hellenistic view, immortality is a native possession of the human soul. But such a doctrine, from the Christian point of view, is in line with the Fall; **it is man’s attempt to make himself like God, to make himself God; it is an assault on God’s divinity.** Instead of taking eternal life from God’s hand as a gift of his unmerited Agape, man insists that *he possesses it in his own right in virtue of the divine nature of the soul.* That is why the idea is godless and blasphemous; *it implies the claim that the soul is akin to God, and itself a divine being.* Justin’s polemic from this point of view against the Platonic position is especially interesting (Dial. iv. ff.). He first attacks the view that the soul can attain the Vision of God on the ground of its kinship to Him and of the Eros that therefore dwells in it. No natural endowment and no Eros can deliver the soul from corruption. **If we consider merely its natural endowment, “it ought not to be called immortal.”** But Justin does not mean that the soul must necessarily perish; he is simply attacking the doctrine of its *natural immortality, the idea that its nature is such that it cannot perish.* This would mean the soul’s emancipation from God, so that it would not be in every respect dependent upon Him; and against this Justin’s theocentric conviction rebels. God alone is eternal and incorruptible. The human soul lives, not because it is life, as God, but because it has life, because God imparts life to it. **Life does not belong to the soul as it belongs to God.** 5 If man that dies does not remain in death, that *can only be due to an act of the Divine will.* Here, in characteristic fashion, Justin combines the ideas of Creation and Resurrection; both bear witness to God’s sovereign power. **As the soul did not exist from eternity, but was called into existence by the will of God, so its future destiny depends wholly on God’s will:** so long as God wills that it shall live, it lives, and when God wills that its existence shall cease, then “the soul is no more, but it returns to the place from whence it was taken.” To this sovereignty of God the Resurrection faith bears witness. When God through Christ awakens the dead to life on the Last Day, there can no longer be any doubt that eternal life is His gift. By setting the *Resurrection faith over against the Hellenistic doctrine of the Immortality of the soul,* the Apologists maintained a position of the utmost importance for Christianity.”

Nygren, p. 172

“In his magnificent myth of Eros in the Phaedrus, Plato starts from the *assumption common to the Oriental doctrines of salvation, that the human soul has a supernatural, divine origin and worth*. In a pre-existent state the soul has had a vision of the Ideas, or of that which is in itself true, beautiful and good; and this has made so deep an impression on it that even after it has fallen and become bound and fettered in the body “like an oyster in its shell”⁸, it still retains a memory (ἀνάμνησις) of the glory of the world above, and feels an upward attraction which it often cannot itself understand. Just as the stone in virtue of its nature is attracted downwards, so the soul in virtue of its divine nature is attracted upwards; for everything in existence strives to find its own natural place.”

W.-E. L. However, if the earth was designed for humans and humans for the earth – then this is our own natural place.

Nygren p. 210:

EROS

Eros is acquisitive desire and longing.
 Eros is an upward movement.
 Eros is man's way to God.
 Eros is man's effort: it assumes that man's salvation is his own work.
 Eros is egocentric love, a form of self-assertion of the highest, noblest, sublimest kind.
 Eros seeks to gain its life, a life divine, immortalised.
 Eros is the will to get and possess which depends on want and need.
 Eros is primarily man's love; God is the object of Eros. Even when it is attributed to God, Eros is patterned on human love.
 Eros is determined by the quality, the beauty and worth, of its object; it is not spontaneous, but evoked "motivated".
 Eros recognizes value in its object— and loves it

AGAPE

Agape is sacrificial giving.
 Agape comes down.
 Agape is God's way to man.
 Agape is God's grace: salvation is the work of Divine love.
 Agape is unselfish love, it “seeketh not its own”, it gives itself away.
 Agape lives the life of God, therefore dares to “lose it.”
 Agape is freedom in giving, which depends on wealth and plenty.
 Agape is primarily God's love; God is Agape.” Even when it is attributed to man, Agape is patterned on Divine love.
 Agape is sovereign in relation to its object, and is directed to both the evil and the good”; it is spontaneous, “overflowing”, “unmotivated”
 Agape loves—and creates value in its object.

Supplement

So – coming back to the notes above on the enormous distribution of the Bible in billions of copies and thousands of languages – *the question of what the Bible really teaches in detail* on the topic of the soul has been answered, for example here:

<https://www.jw.org/en/library/books/Insight-on-the-Scriptures/Soul/>

<https://www.jw.org/en/library/magazines/wp20150801/what-happens-after-death/>

⁸ W.-E. L.: In that case death could generally be viewed to be a liberation/relief/release from that situation of being ‘bound and fettered in the body “like an oyster in its shell”’ to gain a totally better life – so why do we normally like and want to live here on earth? Plato's idea of the immortal soul often appears to be **a very dangerous idea**: It has been used, for example, **to cheat/deceive/defraud millions of soldiers** in many (religious and non-religious) wars up to this very day. For example (2023): “**Fallen Russian soldiers would go directly to heaven**, said Moscow Patriarch Kirill” <https://www.mdr.de/nachrichten/welt/osteuroopa/politik/russland-orthodoxe-kirche-ukraine-krieg-102.html>

Encyclopedia Britannica: “Among ancient peoples, both the **Egyptians and the Chinese** conceived of a dual soul. The **Egyptian** ka (breath) survived death but remained near the body, while the spiritual ba proceeded to the region of the dead. The **Chinese** distinguished between a lower, sensitive soul, which disappears with death, and a rational principle, the hun, which survives the grave and is the object of ancestor worship. *The early Hebrews apparently had a concept of the soul but did not separate it from the body*, although later Jewish writers developed the idea of the soul further. **Biblical references to the soul are related to the concept of breath and establish no distinction between the ethereal soul and the corporeal body** [see link above in the Supplement]. Christian concepts of a body-soul **dichotomy originated with the ancient Greeks and were introduced into Christian theology at an early date by St. Gregory of Nyssa** [born ca. 335/350 CE] **and by St. Augustine** [born 13 November 354 CE]. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/soul-religion-and-philosophy> (Retrieved 26 June 2025). “**In Christianity, the conviction that God may offer physical immortality with the resurrection of the flesh at the end of time has traditionally been at the center of its beliefs.**”[5][6][7]” <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Immortality> (retrieved also 26 June 2025)

<https://www.jw.org/en/library/magazines/watchtower-no4-2017-july/what-does-the-bible-say-about-life-after-death/>

Among other points, there the *Jewish Encyclopedia* is cited that “The belief in the immortality of the soul came to the Jews from contact with Greek thought and *chiefly through the philosophy of Plato.*”

Interestingly the *Encyclopedia* continues as follows “...chiefly through the philosophy of Plato, *its principal exponent, who was led to it through Orphic and Eleusinian mysteries in which Babylonian and Egyptian views were strangely blended,* as the Semitic name "Minos" (comp. "Minotaurus"), and the Egyptian "Rhadamanthys" ("Ra of Ament," "Ruler of Hades"; Naville, "La Litane du Soleil," 1875, p. 13) with others, sufficiently prove.”⁹

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⁹Original quotation from <https://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/8092-immortality-of-the-soul>