

Human Soul: A Religious Perspective

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Abstract

The main objective of this paper is to explore the understanding of human soul from the perspectives of different faiths and how neuro-scientific aspects are connected with the soul. The idea of soul, has been prevalent from ancient times. The discussion of human soul has become part of mainstream belief in nearly all world religions, despite “No Souls” being mentioned in the scriptures of Judaism and Buddhism. Although Buddhist doctrine. “*Anatta*” specifically emphasises on “No Souls, the objective of this paper is not to find the ultimate truth about the human soul, but rather to study the soul from various religious perspectives and to grasp a better understanding of the overall concept. The frequently asked question is whether living creatures are made up of two separate entities, a material body and a non-material soul or they are only physical beings. Semitic religions and so also people of other eastern faiths, believe (or at least assume) that human beings are dualistic in nature. However most scientists and philosophers may differ as they hold the monistic theology, person is merely one substance. This interaction of soul and body is a complex phenomenon. It is not simply an interaction between the two completely different and separate entities.

This paper perhaps, will explore a greater understanding on the concept of the human soul and potentially develop spiritual understanding of human soul in greater detail.

Keywords: Spirituality, human soul, religion, psychology, neuroscience.

Introduction

Most of the world religions believes in an immortal soul that lives in one or other form. The religious scriptures teach that after death, a soul within us leaves the body and lives on for eternity. This is a

common teaching in Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam and Baha'i, as well as tribal religions of Africa, America and elsewhere. Some say that soul will live for eternity in either heaven or hell. Others believe that after death the soul will reincarnate into other life forms in an endless cycle of reincarnation. Neuroscience uses the term soul, though they don't have complete belief in the existence of the soul¹.

However this idea of soul is rejected by most of the nonbelievers, as they are convinced that after death there is only nothingness. With this varied understanding, the study of human soul, has remained a complex subject for a long period of time. Even though it is impossible to prove whether or not the human soul actually exists, the concept of human soul has been accepted and has evolved all through the history of mankind. Generally the terms such as Ruh, Átma, Spirit, Nafs, etc discussed in the religious scriptures, all refer to the same general concept "Soul".

The above religious views of the eternity of soul afterlife, in heaven or hell, reflect the particular values and beliefs of the culture of that religion. This indicates that notions of immortality of soul is a purely human construct as man has gradually invented religion and religious beliefs on an as-needed basis to explain life's experiences and to cover up sorrow from life's troubles. During the early period, the idea of the human soul was impossible to be theoretically researched, and it was socially unacceptable. As the scientific research study is entirely different from the perspective of the religious thoughts, it was highly opposed by the society. After the 20th century, the contemporary world made it possible for humans to research about the soul more technologically and scientifically, which in turn provides more social acceptance. The traditional religious beliefs are beginning to fade about these changes in the modern world².

The objective here is to understand the soul from various differing viewpoints, preferably not to find the ultimate truth about it. We aim in understanding the concept of the soul from multiple perspectives, namely religious, neuro-scientific and other related perspectives on the human soul. Such inferred belief helps an individual to understand himself on a deeper level which in turn gives the more in-depth understanding of life.

Relation between Soul and body

Till today the factual relationship of body and soul is one of the crucial problems faced by various scholars. Most philosophers like almost all the theologians agree on common perception that “human beings are union of body and soul”, though they interpret its understanding quite differently³. The answer to the question ‘In what way is the soul and body related’, ends up with the theory of monism and dualism.

Religions, refer to soul as an immaterial entity conjoined with the body but separable from it. According to a dictionary meaning, the soul may be defined as, “the complete principle of feeling, life, thought, and humans action, that is regarded as a distinct entity separate from the body, and commonly held to be separable in existence from the body; the spiritual part of humans as distinct from the physical part⁴.

However, one such universal definition cannot answer the controversial question, because the nature of the human soul is still indefinite and many theories are striving to interpret what exactly the human soul is⁵. Hebrews, however did not consider soul to be different from body but latter Jewish perspective perceived that soul and body as separate entities. Following discussion will throw light on the different perceptions of soul and soul –body relationship from various outlooks, religious or otherwise.

Islamic perspective:

According to Islam human being is a composite entity embedded of two components; the animal and the spiritual components. The holy Quran explains that the animal being and the spiritual being, mysteriously joined together to form the human being or the human soul. In other words, man is the composite of a body and a spirit. In every human being there are animal characteristics and a divine spirit. This concept of animal nature is explicated in the holy Quran, in the verse, 15:28 as: “And mention (O Prophet) when your Lord said to the angels, ‘I will create a mortal (Bashar) out of dried clay, formed from dark mud.” This is the human body or the animal aspect of man. In the very next verse, 15:29 the Holy Quran reveals the other aspect, the divine spirit, “And when I have fashioned him and breathed into him of My spirit, fall down before him in prostration!” This aspect of human beings, according to Islamic belief is the spirit (ruh).

As mentioned above, both the human body and the human spirit make the human soul. The Quran identifies three types of souls: 1) The inciting soul; (Nafs ammarah) 2) The self-accusing soul; (Nafs al-lawwamah) and 3) The contented soul (Nafs al-mutma'innah).

According to the Holy Quran, Nafs ammarah is the lowest of these souls that influence human being to commit evil. This type of soul is directly related to the lower self of the human personality. The human "self" is not invincible against temptation. It certainly inclines to commit evil and demand instant fulfilment and satisfaction.

The second type of soul Nafs al-lawwamah is conscious of its imperfections. At this stage the conscience is awakened. The spirit within is stimulated and the self accuses the soul of its intended evil actions. The soul is treated and scolded when an evil act is committed. The soul evaluates its weaknesses and try to correct and attain perfection. At this stage there is an inner struggle between the Nafs ammarah, lowest soul and the Nafs al-lawwamah, self-accusing soul. It is that inner battle against all evil forces that prevent one from achieving the spiritual goal.

The third type of soul Nafs al-mutma'innah is the self-contented soul. This is the stage of perfection in faith. In this stage human beings are in total control of their animal instincts. They are beyond the world of lust and desires, and are absolutely satisfied with the command of God. During this process of elevation of soul from lowest soul to highest super soul there is always a tug of war between the body and the spirit, a constant struggle between fulfilling the demands of the body and the demands of the spirit. Nafs al-mutma'innah overwhelms the body and rises above the animalistic nature of man and attains the status of self-contented soul ⁶.

The Soul as Viewed by Various thinkers

One of the earliest Greek poets Homer contemplated Soul as one which human beings menaces in the battle. As stated by him, even though the Soul departed from the body, it remains in the underworld as a shadow of the lifeless ⁷. Subsequently, after Homer, The term has undergone expansion in its implication. Before the Christian era, in the early sixth and fifth century, the successive thinkers used the term to pronounce the ability to disclose one's emotions, thought, reasoning and virtues. As an illustration, during this period the Soul was accredited with all the pleasures gained from food, drink, sex and other things of

nature⁸. Based on the view proposed by Pythagoras, further the term advanced to include things not limited to animals alone, but also to plants. He regarded Soul as an entity which partakes of divinity, present before and after the physical body⁹. According to Socrates, the Soul is an immortal entity which is characterized by cognitive and intellectual features. The plurality doctrine of the Soul proposed by Plato explains that both the body and soul is different.

According to Aristotle, the soul is a principle which indicates the actuating cause of the living body, preferably not a distinctive occupant of the body. An ensouled living body only specifies particular kind of informed matter to him. According to the thoughts of Epicurus, both the body and soul ended at death, proclaiming that one's Soul becomes detached at his death. While Chrysippus thought that only Souls of the wise people survive, Stoics disproved the idea of Soul mortality, leading to the conflagration in the cosmic. He alleged that for other people, their Soul persists only to get detached after a short time. The soul is often pondered synonymous with the mind in modern philosophy, concerning it as the foundation of reasoning and thinking. Christian writers such as Augustine Hippo believed that both body and Soul come by natural generation. Later the soul is given to the regenerated Christian alone to sublimate him into a higher level. When one denotes the term Soul designated in the early Greek philosophy, he will realize that the term was mainly used to differentiate the living man from the corpse. The term was then used to indicate moral quality and intense emotions which is still retained by Soul after the demolition of the physical body. Excluding Epicurus, most of them believed that soul does not perish when the body decreases, and may undoubtedly be embodied in a different body. Subsequently, the Christian's writers embellished their ideas based on these Greek philosophers, precisely that of Plato's, which remain all the way to modern thinkers.

Soul in Hinduism

Bhagavad-Gita, a sacred scripture of Hinduism refers to soul as the 'Self'. It gives much insight to the nature of Atman (Soul) and how it can be liberated from the mortal world. The emphasis is given on good deeds and the means by which all living beings, including human souls (jiva) can overcome sufferings and attain ultimate liberation (mukti). Bhagavad-Gita clearly explains the characteristics of the Self (soul) by which liberation can be achieved from the mortal world. The scripture considers body and soul to be

different entities and living beings are the manifestation of the union of Body which is Prakriti (Nature) with the Soul, which is Purusha (God). The soul is bound to be affected by triple 'Gunas' [tamas (darkness), rajas (actions) and sattva (beingness)] and in order to achieve liberation, the soul will have to overcome the desire-ridden activities and fully get absorbed in the Self.

Besides Bhagavad-Gita other Hindu scriptures guide us not to develop attachment to material things as mind and body are subject to aging, sickness and death. Mind and body are subject to impurities of three gunas and requires constant efforts for purification. Hindus believe that, the body is the seat of the soul. It is a living temple of God and a vehicle of truth. Hence, we must keep them clean, healthy and remove the impurities of rajas and tamas from them. They also believe that body decays but soul is immortal and indestructible. The soul after death travels either to the world of Pitrllok or to the world of Brahman depending on the karma, the deeds in the life on earth. Those who are most sinful and indulge in evil actions fall down to the hell. After exhausting their karma and paying their dues to gods, they return and take another birth. However, those who go to the immortal world of Brahman have no rebirth and they get liberation.

Buddhist Views on Soul



Unlike Hinduism or Semitic religions, in Buddhism, there is no concept of eternal "soul." Instead, they believe that the soul, or "self" is only a short lasting composite of matter, thought and consciousness that dissipates and ceases to exist at death. Buddhist belief system consists of the Four Noble Truths: 1. Life means suffering. 2. The origin of suffering is attachment. 3. The cessation of suffering is attainable. 4. There is a path to the cessation of suffering.

While Buddhists believe in 'no-self' doctrine, one thing is common between Hinduism and Buddhism. In Hinduism, however, the atman is an eternal self that exists in a continuous cycle of rebirth. The type of life one is born is a direct result of the karma or deeds over previous lives. While Buddhists also believe in both karma and in reincarnation, though they do not share the notion of the transmigration of the soul.

Soul in Christianity

According to Christianity, the human soul is eternal that lives on after the body dies. Holy Bible states in Mathew 10: 28 that “we were not to fear men, who can only kill the body, but not the soul”. Bible is not very explicit on the relationship between Spirit and Soul, though the spirit is described more in terms of force ¹⁰, while the soul seems to be static, which imply that they are separate entities. Some of the important teachings of Holy Bible concerning human soul, its nature of immortality and its relationship with god can be summarised as follows:

Firstly souls are immortal. Christians believe in two realities in the universe: the physical, material world and, immaterial, spiritual realm .The soul does exist and we live, even when our bodies die. The spiritual world is the realm of God, and as living souls, we are spiritual beings. Therefore, the moment we are not living in the physical world, we will be living in the spiritual world with God ¹¹.

Secondly the souls animates the bodies. While the soul obviously lives without the body, the body cannot live without the soul. When a soul returns to a lifeless body, the body is said to “rise from the dead” or to be “revived”. We are living souls, and our souls are “seen” in this physical world when they are united with, and animating, our physical bodies. (1 Kings 17:19-23)

Thirdly souls are subject to God’s Judgement. Physical death does not end our life. God has complete control over our true life (as living souls), and our final death is not dependent on our body, but is instead dependent on our relationship with God through Jesus Christ. (John 8:51)

Agreeing on the New King James interpretation of the Bible, "he who keeps the decree keeps his soul. This statement proposes that the individuals who carry on their life as indicated by the Ten Commandments, the soul may live until the end of time. On the other hand, that an individual disregards the Ten Commandments without compromise before death, the soul will be given to Satan. Each sect of Christianity has an alternate perspective on the soul yet, common Christian perspectives concur that the soul lives after the physical body dies and it is immortal.

Baháísí' understanding of Soul

Baháísí' uses the metaphoric example of the sun to explain the relationship between the soul and the body: "The soul of man is the sun by which his body is illumined, and from which it extracts its sustenance, and should be so regarded." When death occurs in this world, the soul is separated from the body, and continues to progress in an eternal journey towards perfection. Explaining the immortality of soul which continues to live after the destruction of physical body Baha'u'llah, the founder of this religion said "know thou of a truth that the soul, after its separation from the body, will continue to progress until it attains the presence of God."

Neuro-Scientific aspects of Soul

As per American neuroscientists, Andrew B. Newberg and Eugene G. d' Aquili, the technique for investigating the mind in connection to religious experience and knowing God is called neuroethology. Neuroscientists see the physiology of the brain amid a spiritual experience and utilize that physical data to make inductions on life's non-physical world ¹².

There have been a few recommendations and speculations to attempt and clarify how the mind identifies with religion. Michael Persinger from the 1980's was one of the primary researchers to investigate the mind's association with religious experience. Persinger underlined the part of the limbic framework, particularly the hippocampus and the amygdala, in religious and spiritual encounters. He connected religious encounters with the areas of the brain due to similar experience associated with every occurrence, (for example, facial contortions, crying, talking in tongues, and amnesia). Along these lines, he contends that people can encounter God because of the temporal lobes. These regions of the brain are in charge of events, for example, attention, focus, and concentration amid meditation and prayers. Even though this doesn't include the entire action of the brain during a religious experience, it shows the exertion of neuroscience to get some data from the results of religious experience. This was the main endeavour to test the theories proposed by neuroscientists about the impact religion had on the brain ¹³.

As indicated by psychologists Justin Halper, Jesse Lee Preston, Ryan S. Ritter, the "area or location" of the human soul on brain functioning is still under research and investigation. Not all Neuroscientists universally accept the fact the one area of the brain is in charge of religious belief in the human soul. The

existence of the human soul is associated with brain activities during the experiences such as “emotion, moral judgments and personal agency”. According to neuroscientists Michael A. Arbib, Joseph E. LeDoux, and Marc Jeannerod (1999), people have a feeling of religion, and they do have a sense of the soul. Characteristics of the mind, for example, emotions, self-consciousness, feeling, and reason influence a person to seem, by all accounts, to be something other than a physical, which may support the faith in an immaterial soul. The neuroscience of the individual and the idea of God are still under scientific research and it there isn't yet any proof to entirely demonstrate or negate the presence of these ideas.

Conclusion

The understanding of the soul from view point of various religions depicted that to understand the concept of the human soul which may be influenced by several perspectives is merely based on personal beliefs. There is no right or wrong credence about an abstract metaphysical entity. That is why one depicts that the questions such as, whether living creatures are made up of two separate entities, a material body and a non-material soul or they are only physical beings remains the mysteries of life. The formation of a belief system develops over a period together with the development of the individual human being through his life experiences, life interests, and self-education. Such academic research on the human soul, may not reveal the divine truth but it remained completely unclear which of the perspective seems to be the best and most accurate. This has also been explained in the Holy Quran that “soul is the divine entity and little is the knowledge given to mankind” (17:85). By debating about one's belief system as superior to another without any tangible evidence, no other purpose is fulfilled other than satisfying the basic human instinct of curiosity. We can finally conclude that one can understand the human soul only based on personal feelings the understanding differs from one person to the other.

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