

THE CONCEPT OF al-RUH (SOUL) IN ISLAM

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Abstract

This paper presents to readers the teachings of Islam concerning the concept of al-Ruh (Soul), basing the proofs from the Quran and prophetic traditions. It focuses on explaining what the term implies in both Islam and Arabic language. Divergent of opinions between Scholars concerning the difference between al-Nafs and al-Ruh have been also highlighted in which the correct opinion with proofs has been identified. The paper stated the view proponed by some sects within the Islamic religion on pre-existence of the Soul only to nullify it, affirming al-Ruh to be a created extremely light ethereal-sort body, which perishes not with the perishing of the physical body. The convincing information given by the Quran and the prophetic traditions will reiterate the importance, relevance as well as the reliability of religious teachings, as the only source of knowing reliable information on metaphysical issues.

KEY WORDS: Islam, Soul, Body, Greek philosophy, al-Ruh, al-Nafs

1. INTRODUCTION

The objective of this paper is to contribute with explanations on the concept of al-Ruh (Soul) in Islam, using the Quran and Sunnah as the main reference and source of knowledge. Scholars over the Islamic history have indeed contributed on the topic with their excellent writings, yet there is need to continue writing on the topic, to bring into lime light what the real Islamic teachings on the matter is, discarding any view built on conjecture and illusion which might constitute saying things about Allah or His religion without sure knowledge. Readers of this article may find reference to the early views of the Greek philosophers on the concept of al-Ruh (Soul), but the main focus of the paper is discussing the concept in Islamic point of view. Greek philosophers record more success in dealing with the physical sciences, of which evidence of knowledge can be collected from sense of perception using the

five senses. But facts of al-Ruh (Soul) are beyond the conjecture or skepticisms; it needs an answer beyond the scope of the physical sciences. Diving into such matters requires consultation of Divine Scripture to gather reliable information, leaving a decisive knowledge of what is not clear to Allah the Exalted. This is because the concept is not a philosophical matter in which any scholar can claim any authority for it. One needs to study the Qur'an to get the internal evidences, testimonies and proofs of its Divine authority, providing him with a convincing information and answer to every question concerning the metaphysical issues. This helps him realize that life is a trust as well as a gift of grace from Allah, of which man is under obligation to use it as a capital to do righteousness, by submitting to the will of Allah alone. It also helps him manage his life with virtue and justice between him and the rest of mankind. Only then can his life become useful to him, only then can he save his soul as well as his physical body from eternal curse.

2. PHILOSOPHICAL VIEWS ON THE CONCEPT OF al-RUH (SOUL)

Homer, one of the earliest Greek poets, considered Soul to be that which human beings risks in the battle. According to him, if the Soul departed from the body, it still remains in the underworld as a shadow of the deceased. After Homer, the term experienced expansion in its connotation. In the early sixth and fifth century before the Christian era, the subsequent thinkers used the term to designate the faculty of making known one's emotions, thought, reasoning and his virtues. For instance, pleasures gained from food, drink sex and other things of that nature are all attributed in this period to Soul (Stanford, Encyclopedia). The term again developed to include things not limited to animals only, but to plants also, the view proponed by Pythagoras. He conceived Soul as an entity which partakes of divinity, existing before and after the physical body (Encyclopedia, Britannica). To Socrate, Soul is an immortal entity which is characterized by cognitive and intellectual features (Stanford, Encyclopedia). The doctrine of plurality of the Soul taught by Plato teaches that Soul and body differ, classifying the former to be consisting of rational Soul located in the head, the passionate or spirited Soul with breast as its seat and the appetitive Soul in the abdomen (Catholic Encyclopedia).

Soul according to Aristotle is not a distinctive occupant of the body; rather, it is a principle which implies the actuating cause of the living body. An ensouled living body to him only indicates particular kind of informed matter (Stanford Encyclopedia). To Epicurus, both Soul and the body ended at death, asserting that one's Soul becomes dispersed at his death. Stoics refuted the idea of Soul mortality, while Chrysipus held that only Souls of the wise people survive, all the way to conflagration in the cosmic cycle (Catholic Encyclopedia). As for other people, he said their Soul lasts only to get dispersed after a short time. In modern philosophy, Soul is often considered synonymous with mind, regarding it to be the source of reasoning and thinking. Later, Plato's doctrine of plurality of the Soul passed on to

Christian writers such as Augustine Hippo, upon which their doctrine of trichotomy is built, where both body and Soul come by natural generation. The spirit is then given to the regenerated Christian alone to sublimate him into higher level (Ibid).

If one refers to what the term Soul designated in the early Greek philosophy, he will discover that the term was used primarily to distinguish the living man from the corpse. The term was then used to imply moral quality and intense emotions which is still retained by Soul after the destruction of the physical body. Most of them with the exception of Epicurus, were of the opinion that it does not perish with the perishing of the body, and may indeed incarnate in different body. Later Christian's writers built their ideas on these Greek philosophers, especially that of Plato's, which persist all the way to modern thinkers. There is no need to conduct penetrating criticisms of these views, as our aim is to cover only the concept of al-Ruh in Islam. But due to the impact of the views on some sects within the Islamic religion, we may selectively comment on some aspects, setting aside the irrelevant or absurd ones which have no revelation to confirm its intellectual value.

3. THE TERM al-RUH IN THE QURAN AND SUNNAH

In Islam, al-Ruh primarily implies the animated breath of life blown into a living, which departs his physical body at the point of the death. Allah the Exalted said:

“Then He fashioned him (man) in due proportion and breathed into him His Ruh (Soul created by Allah for that person); and He gave you hearings (ear) sights (eyes) and hearts. Little is the thanks you give” (32: 9)

Al-Ruh which departs the physical body is of two types, the first is called the lesser death (*al-Wafat al-Sugra*), happening during sleeping, and then the actual death (*al-Wafat al-Kubra*). In both occasions, the Ruh departs the body, although the nature of this departing is not of equal degree. For instance when one fall asleep, his Ruh does not completely separate his physical body, rather, it wanders about, remaining in one way or the other as he breathes such that when he is about to wake up, it returns to him in as soon as the blinking of an eye. This is substantiated in the Quran and Sunnah, Allah the Exated says:

“It is Allah who takes away the Souls at the time of their death, and those that die not during their sleep. He keeps those (souls) for which he ordained death and sends the rest for a term appointed. Verily, in this are signs for people who think deeply” (39: 42)

Abdullah b. Abbas (May Allah be pleased with him) in commentating the above verse, stated that Allah takes Souls of his slaves in two occasions. The first being the time they are asleep and then the actual death, ceasing that Soul for which He ordained death and sending the rest without any mistake (Ibn Kathir, 1999). In the same vein, the Prophet (May the blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) is reported to have said, according to what Bukhari narrated on the authority of Abu Qatadah that, when they slept and missed a prayer one day, the Prophet said: *“Verily*

Allah took your souls (Arwahakam) when he willed and returned them when he willed’.

This is a clear testimony that sleeping is similar to death in which the action of Ruh is restricted and taken, but still remains connected to the body. The nature of this connection may not be fully known by us. This rule however applies only to the Ruh (Soul) designated to refer the breath of life blown into a person. But besides this meaning, the term is used to designate other connotations in the Quran, as highlighted below:

1. **Quran:** al-Ruh may be used in the Quran to mean the Book itself, due to what it breathes in believers of conviction as well as guiding them to earn the Grace and Mercy of their Lord. Allah May He be Glorified said:
“And thus we have sent to you (O Muhammad) Ruh (a revelation) of Our command. You knew not what is the Book, nor what is faith? But we made it (this Ruh (Quran)) a light wherewith we guide whosoever of Our slaves we will. And verily, you (O Muhammad) are indeed guiding (mankind) to a straight path” (42: 52)
2. **Angel Jibril:** the term may be used to imply Angel Jibril, as in the verse below:
“(Quran) which the Ruh al-Amin (trustworthy Ruh (Jibril)) has brought down” (26: 193)
3. **Isa son of Maryam:** al-Ruh is used in the Quran in reference to Prophet Isa (May the blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) as in the verse below:
“O people of the Scripture! Do not exceed the limits in your religion, nor say of Allah aught but the truth, the Messiah Isa son of Maryam was no more than a Messenger of Allah and His Words (Be-- and he was) which He bestowed on Maryam and a Ruh created by Him. So believe in Allah and His Messenger, say not: Three (Trinity), cease! (It is) better for you. For Allah is (the only) one Ilah (God), Glorified is He (Far Exalted is He) above having a son. To him belong all that is in the heavens and all that is in the earth. And Allah is All-Sufficient as Disposer of affairs” (4: 171)
4. **Allah’s Assistance and Strengthening:** al-Ruh is used to imply Allah’s support, assistance and strengthening of believers as in the verse below:
“You (O Muhammad) will not find any people who believe in Allah and the Last Day, making friendship with those who oppose Allah and His Messenger even though they were their fathers or their sons or their sons of their brothers or their kindred (people). For such He has written faith in their hearts and strengthened them with the Ruh from him” (58: 22)

Any of the connotations above are distinguishable but related in one way or the other to the actual meaning of al-Ruh. Where various usage of al-Ruh are stated from the Quran, only the primary meaning signifying the soul departing the body at the point of death, represent the real meaning of al-Ruh.

4. DIFFERENCE BETWEEN al-RUH AND al-NAFS

The difference between al-Ruh and al-Nafs has been a matter of discussion between Scholars of both Islam and Arabic language. Ibn Mandhur (n.d) cited al-Anbari to have asserted al-Ruh and al-Nafs to be the same, except that the former is masculine while the former is feminine. Ibn Qayyim (2004) in his famous book “*al-Ruh*” stated in detail, the views suggesting the two to be different. Some of the views he stated include that which was held by Muqatil b.Sulayman, who said every person has his own Hayat (life), Ruh (Soul) and Nafs (Self), explaining that when one sleeps, Allah the Exalted takes his Nafs not his Ruh with which he still breathes. But if Allah wills that he dies in that sleep, He the Most High took his Nafs therein. Another opinion is that which is held by those who differentiate the two in terms of its bliss and foul character, considering Nafs to be that aspect of man filled with vain desires which desires nothing other than this world. But his Ruh only longs to meet its Lord, it therefore prepares him to do righteousness.

There are other views besides the above two, all of which lack support from the Quran and the Sunnah. As for the first opinion, the Hadith of Abu Qatadah cited earlier proved it to be wrong, while the difference stated by the second opinion inclined more to convenience. The correct opinion concerning this matter as affirmed by Scholars such as al-Qurtubi (1967), Ibn Taymiyyah (1988) and his student Ibn Qayyim (2004) is that the difference between the two is that of attributes rather than the substance. Allah the Exalted in the Quran used the term Nafs to imply the departing Soul, as in the verse below:

“---And If you could but see when Zalimun (wrong-doers) are in the agonies of death while the Angels are stretching forth their hands (saying): “Deliver your Nafs (soul)! This day you shall be recompensed with the torment of degradation because of what you used to utter against other than the truth. And you used His Ayat (proofs and lessons) with disrespect” (6: 93)

Indeed, this was the same Nafs the Prophet (May peace of Allah and His blessings be upon him) spoke of, when he entered into the house of Abu Salmah upon the latter death, whose eyes were still fixed intently, the Prophet after closing the eyes said: *“Verily when al-Ruh (Soul) is taken, the eyesight follows it”*. This Hadith was narrated by Umm Salmah (May Allah be pleased with her) as contained in *Sahih Muslim*. But Abu Hurayrah (May Allah be pleased with him) narrated this same Hadith in which “*Nafs*” was used instead, reporting the Prophet to have said: *“Do you not see when one dies, his gaze becomes firmly fixed? That was due to the fact his eyesight follows his Nafs”* (Muslim related). Furthermore, the Prophet (May the blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) in another Hadith made a general declaration, referring to both good and evil Soul, in which the term “*al-Arwah*” (plural of Ruh) was used, he said: *“al-Arwah (Souls) are troops collected together, those who familiarized with one another would have affinity with one another, and those amongst them who opposed one another would be divergent”* (Agreed upon).

This is a clear proof that al-Ruh and al-Nafs during the time of the Prophet (May the blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) and the period after him, are the same in terms of what they denote, and may in fact be used interchangeably. The only difference is in their attributes in the sense that, Soul is called al-Nafs in view that it occupies the physical body. But it is called al-Ruh due to its nature of being ethereal-sort substance, tenuous, translucent and luminous. It was in this sense the wind is also called *al-Rih* in Arabic (Ibn Mandhur, n.d).

Similarly, in the Quran, Sunnah as well as the Arabic language, both the terms al-Ruh and al-Nafs have other connotations other than what we mentioned. Al-Ruh may also imply the process of inhaling and exhaling (Ibn Taymiyyah, 1988), which is not the meaning designated for the departing Soul. In the same sense, al-Nafs is used to imply one's own self (Dhat), as in the verse below:

“...Your Lord has written (prescribed) Mercy for Himself (Nafsihi)...” (6: 54)

Allah the Exalted said also:

“(Remember) the Day when every Nafs (person) will come up leading for Himself” (16: 111)

The term may be also used to mean blood in Arabic language as indicated in this context: ما له نفس سائلة (meaning: what has the flowing blood). It can also signify in view of its predominant character, the blamed-worthy Nafs (Madhmumah), as indicated in this context: فلان ترك نفسه (meaning: so-so person ignored his own vain desires) (Ibid). But none of these meanings imply the actual Soul departing the physical body at the point of death.

5. ORIGIN OF al-RUH

Greek philosophers as already stated believed in the pre-existence of the Soul. Such beliefs are normal if one brings into mind that their belief in life after death is weak, simply because their views are not based on the teachings of the Scripture. Their opinions therefore are all built on their traditional ideas and beliefs. Unfortunately their philosophical views including that of metaphysics found their way to subsequent generations of people, especially the Christians who modified the Plato's doctrine of plurality of the Soul. It was also these same views that passed on to the so-called Muslims philosophers, in person of al-Kindi and Ibn Sina, who also proposed the idea of Soul pre-existence, but destroyed according to them after the spoil of the physical body (Muslim Philosophy). Some individuals from Sufi groups also fell in this illusion, the notion strongly refuted by al-Qushayri (n.d) in his book “*al-Risalah al-Qushayriyyah*”. If it is now established that these absurd views were built on mere Greek traditional beliefs, then now we shall bring in to lime light the teachings of Islam regarding the matter.

It is of great importance to know that the early religious Scholars from among the Companions of the Prophet (May the blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) and their disciples never cast any doubt on the fact that Soul is a created entity. The idea

of its pre-existence is a fabrication introduced by heretics and the people of Innovations, borrowing the ideas foreign to Islam. The proof of it being a created entity is substantiated in verse 42, chapter 39 quoted earlier, in which Soul was indicated as something which is taken, ceased and sent back to the physical body, and these features apply only to the enslaved thing. In the same vein, Allah the Exalted in the verse below:

“Has there not been over man in a period of time, when he was not a thing worth mentioning” (76: 1)

It is plainly here not say, the speech is thrown to physical body not the Soul, simply because man consists of both Soul and body. Allah the Exalted said also:

“There is none in the heavens and earth but comes to the Most High, Gracious (Allah) as slave” (19: 93)

It is beyond any doubt that Soul is one of those in the heavens and earth being an entity inhabiting the physical body. Finally, several verses and prophetic traditions confirmed that both Soul and the physical body are subjected to either bliss or punishment depending on the degree to which one attains spiritual virtue or condemns himself, and that only applies to the enslaved thing. Allah the Most Gracious declares this:

“Then as for him whose balance (of good deeds) will be heavy. He will live a pleasant life. But as for him whose balance (of good deeds) will be light, he will have his home Hawiyah (Hell)” (102: 6-9)

Basically, according to Scholars of Islam, there is rule to distinguish between two nouns in genitive constructions (*Idafah*). For instance, if a noun is attached to Allah’s Name, and it is a distinctive entity, thus being a substance which exists independently, then it is a genitive construction by ownership and possession. For example *ناقة الله* (*Naqatallah, meaning the she-camel of Allah*) as in 92: 13, *روح الله* (*Ruhullah, meaning the soul created by Allah*) and so on, all these imply ownership and possession. But when one of the nouns is Allah, and the second is neither a person nor a thing, thus being a quality, then it implies Allah’s Attribute and Quality. For example *علم الله* (*Ilm al-Lah, meaning the knowledge of Allah*), *كلام الله* (*Kalam al-Lah, meaning Allah’s speech*) and so on, all these indicate Allah’s Qualities. It is therefore a great err to relate al-Ruh to the second form of construction (Ibn Taymiyyah, 1988).

6. NATURE OF al-RUH AND ITS CONNECTION TO THE PHYSICAL BODY

Abu al-Hasn al-Ash’ari in his book (1990) *“Maqalat al-Islamiyyin”* explained in detail the hosts of conflicting opinions between sects regarding the nature of al-Ruh, its real essence and its connection to the body. The sects tried to get evidence alluding to its actual nature by attempting to find philosophical answers to some vital questions, like what is the difference between al-Ruh (Soul), al-Nafs (Self) and al-

Hayat (life)? Is al-Ruh a form or abstract? Their findings were hover philosophical observations, the results of which raise more question than the proofs of fact. This is because facts of al-Ruh are beyond the argument of any philosophical conjecture or skepticisms. Delving into this matter requires consultation of the Divine Scripture.

The legal injunctions from the Quran and Sunnah indicated al-Ruh to be *extremely light ethereal-sort body, of tenuous, translucent, luminous qualities, moving and penetrating into depth organs of the body and circulating through them, which perishes not with the perishing of the physical body*. This fact is affirmable using several proofs from the Quran and prophetic traditions, indicating al-Ruh to be an extremely light body incorporated with the body, each lives in its own spheres as counterparts to each other. This union is extrapolated from the verse quoted earlier (32: 9), in which breath of life is blown into man. It is tenuous, luminous and translucent in view of its intrinsic nature such that it is not distinguishable by us, nor it is visible by except in some special occasions.

That is why it is a vogue question to ask whether it is a form or abstract. This is because, if it is meant with form what is known of its qualities, role and nature, then that are conceivable. But as for its type, sort or anything of that nature as seen in substantial matters, then that cannot be conceived by us, for nothing from this world of what we see, resembles it. This is not however, to say it is not a real entity which can be seen in sleeping or by the deceased as it is detached from the body. As a matter of fact, proofs from the Quran and Sunnah indicate it to be substance which is separated from the body, taken, carried up through the skies as well as experiencing either Allah's pleasure or punishment, and that rule applies only to the real entity. It was in view of this Imam al-Qurtubi affirmed that it is a form which is right and correct.

Some Muslim Scholars divided human soul into Mutma'innah (resting Soul), Ammarah (the Soul inclined to the evil) and the Lawwamah (rebuking Soul), borrowing the idea from the Greek philosophy, who in their end, divide Soul into vegetarian, situated in the liver, the animal found in the heart and the articulating one placed in the brain. But Ibn Taymiyyah (1988) and Ibn Qayyim (2004) all refuted the claim that it exists as a separate entities by themselves; for what they mentioned of Ammarah, Lawwamah and Mutma'innah are only designated to imply the features of human Souls.

Ibn Qayyim (2004) in discussing the connection between Soul and body mentioned five different ways to which different rules apply. The first connection happens during the conception of the fetus as confirmed by the prophetic tradition, according to what Abdullah b. Mas'ud narrated, that Angel is sent to blow the breath of life unto him (Bukhari & Muslim). Another stage is that which happens after he was born, followed by the next when he sleeps. His Soul leaves his body at this stage but not completely as it does at the point of death. The next stage is when he dies, in which the Soul leaves the body, only to be connected in a highly special state which is

called the life of *Barzakh* (Isthmus). The next stage is the most complete connection, happening in the day of resurrection in which both Soul and the body will be subjected to account for one's actions. Discussing these in detail requires a separate paper, but what has been discussed so far is fairly enough for one to gain an insight into the concept al-Ruh in Islam. If he refers to the information given, he will find that believers are only provided what may motivate them to earn the pleasure and grace of their Lord, showing them what is right from that which is not, for them to save their body and Soul from the eternal doom. But the information is direct and more conceivable, unlike the erroneous views mentioned earlier, which only indicate its proponents' failure to elucidate the nature of the concept. Allah the Exalted said:

“And they ask you (O Muhammad) concerning the Ruh, say: the Ruh is one of the things, the knowledge of which is only with my Lord. And of knowledge, you mankind have been given a little” (17: 85)

7. CONCLUSION

This paper has been presenting to readers the teachings of Islam concerning the concept of al-Ruh. The paper stated hosts of conflicting views held by Greek philosophers on the concept, all built on personal conjecture and skepticism, diving without guidance from Allah the Exalted. Meanings and differences between al-Ruh and al-Nafs have been examined in the light of the Quran, Sunnah and Arabic language. The idea of pre-existence of the Soul held by some sects within the Islamic religion has been refuted, indicating it to be a created entity with extremely light body which perishes not with the perishing of the physical body. The paper also highlighted the connection of al-Ruh with the physical body, in which five different connections have been identified. Discussion about the concept of Al-Ruh is a vogue topic, and despite the fact that we treated some vital points, there remain several aspects not known to us as confirmed by the Quran. We therefore should not delve into the unseen matters, nor should we extract proofs only to support our afterthought views, interpreting it according to our personal opinions and desires. We ultimately say Allah knows the best where decisive knowledge about matters is not clear to us. Only then can believer save his Soul and body from the eternal destruction, only then can he have the honor of looking at the Countenance of His Lord.

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