

## The Soul (*Ar-Rūh*)

Imam A. M. Khattab

The topic of the Soul – *Ar-Rūh* – is often a subject of discussion, and people have many questions about it. I am going to explain it in both Arabic and English, to inform you exactly where Islam stands on these questions. While it is frequently mentioned that Christianity and Judaism have been corrupted by beliefs and practices which are not part of religion, Islam is presumed to have remained free of such accretions. However, there are a lot of, what can be called, religious books which are full of myths that are completely un-Islamic.

What is the “Soul” and what is its definition? No one knows the definition of Soul. The Qur’an talks about the Soul but the interpretation of that verse differs from one scholar to the other. The verse says:

وَيَسْأَلُونَكَ عَنِ الرُّوحِ : They ask you Muhammad, about the Soul (*ar-Ruh*),

قُلِ الرُّوحُ مِنْ أَمْرِ رَبِّي : Tell them: This is confined to the knowledge of God.

وَمَا أُوتِيتُمْ مِّنَ الْعِلْمِ إِلَّا قَلِيلًا : Whatever knowledge you have been given about that is a very little portion” [17:85].

Some scholars say the word *Ruh* in this verse does not

mean “Soul”, but it means the Qur’an. [Then, the translation of the verse would be as follows:]

“And they will ask thee about the nature of divine inspiration. Say: ‘This inspiration comes at my Sustainer’s behest; and you cannot understand its nature, O Men, since you have been granted very little of real knowledge.’”

When the people who refer to *Rūh* as “The Qur’an” are questioned as to how they arrived at that conclusion, they say, the Qur’an is called *Rūh* in the Qur’an itself. [Imam quotes Arabic verse. The English translation is:]

“He causes the angels to descend with this *Rūh*, bestowed at His behest upon whomever He wills of His servants: ‘Warn all human beings that there is no deity save Me: be, therefore conscious of Me’” [6:2].

In this regard it has no connection with the Soul.

Another being identified with the term *Rūh*, in the Qur’an, is the angel Gabriel, who came with revelations to the Prophet. [Imam quotes Arabic. The translation is:]

“Now, behold, this Qur’an has indeed been bestowed from on high by the Sustainer of all the

worlds: the Spirit of Faith and Truth (الرُّوحُ الْأَمِينُ) has alighted with it from on high directly upon thy heart [O Muhammad] so that thou mayest be among those who preach in the clear Arabic tongue” [26:192-195].

So, the word *Rūh* could have several meanings but the definition of Soul, as we understand it, eludes us. When the ulama<sup>1</sup> talk about the Soul, they talk about its characteristics only; they do not talk about what it is. Some scholars say it is like the water in a rose, or any flower; it gives it life. Others, nowadays, offer an analogy with electricity in a wire: if there is electricity flowing in the wire, it is said to be live, if not, the wire is dead. And how do we know if it is live or dead? We know it only through its manifestations: if it shocks you, or, by pushing a button, a light comes on, then, we know it is a live wire. But the Soul, *per se*, no one has been able to define it until now, and the field is wide open for more thinking; it is not closed. We are urged to seek knowledge about the Soul. We may not reach our goal, but we have to try.

And this is the other question: Where was the Soul before it entered the body? Nobody knows. All we know is that the Soul is the second stage in the creation of a human being. The Qur’an describes it in Chapter Al Mu’minūn: Adam was created out of clay; the second generation, after Adam, is the true creation, as we understand it.

“Now, indeed, We create man out of the essence of clay, and then We cause him to remain as a drop of sperm in the womb’s firm keeping, and then We create out of the drop of sperm a germ-cell, and then We create out of the germ-cell an embryonic lump, and then We create within the embryonic lump bones, and then We clothe the bones with flesh – and then We bring all this into being as a new creation: hallowed, therefore, is God, the best of artisans” [23:12-14].

“Then We bring all this into a new creation” means that a “Soul” has entered that new creation.

Then comes the third question: When the Soul separates from the body, upon death, where does it go? And what happens to it? This brings attention to

some ideas which are common in areas like China and India where they believe in reincarnation. Islam rejects the notion of reincarnation, and neither can it be accepted by logic, because, considering the population of the world today, and comparing it with the population of the world one hundred years ago, there has been an increase of about 75%. Then, according to the theory of reincarnation, there would be a shortage in the number of Souls today.

*Al mawth*, or death, is a separation of the material element, the body, from the spiritual element, the Soul. The body goes back to the earth from where it came, and the Soul goes back from where it came. The Qur’an says: “From the earth We created you and to it We will return you.”<sup>2</sup> But the Soul, since we don’t know what it is, and since it is a secret, we don’t know where it goes.

Sometimes the question is asked about why we visit the graves of our loved ones? Some ulama think that the Soul, in certain contexts, continues to hear and to observe. The practice of visiting the grave especially after ‘*Asr*<sup>3</sup> on Thursday, and on Friday morning, is on the basis of this opinion, because some ulama say that the Soul visits the grave, in which its body is buried, at those times. And those same ulama say the Soul hears that greeting of *As-Salām*, and that it observes those visitors who offer the greetings. But, in the final analysis, they say that the place of the Soul is with God, and its position differs according to what that person did during his life. These are the *ijtehad*<sup>4</sup> of the ulama. But, the concept of the Soul is shrouded in mystery and secrecy, and it is very hard to discover its secrets, though we are urged to seek knowledge about it.

Some people claim that they can bring the Souls of deceased persons to talk to them, and even elicit information from them about the Unseen. This is the same idea of enlisting the help of the *jinn*. Islam refutes all that.

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<sup>1</sup>Scholars

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<sup>2</sup> 20:55

<sup>3</sup> The start of the time when the third ritual prayer (salah) is observed

<sup>4</sup> A sincere effort to make an educated, enlightened and informed opinion explaining an issue related to Islam