

The Concept of Body, and the Concept of Soul in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam

July 26-28, 2019, Catholic University Eichstätt-Ingolstadt

I The Concept of Body in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam

1 The Concept of Body in Judaism

(Prof. Dr. Giuseppe Veltri, University of Hamburg)

The Biblical account of the creation of man states both that humans were created “in the image” (*bə-tselem*) of God and that they were created “male and female.” Rabbinic texts interpret this as the creation of a unique being “neither man without woman, nor woman without man, neither of them without the Divine Presence” (Bereshit Rabba 8:9) (cf. the Platonic idea that the first human being was androgynous (189 e)).

The canonical status of the Song of Solomon, whose account of the perfect body provides an anthropology with a sexual focus, was debated in Rabbinic writings, with opinions ranging from seeing it as an unclean book to regarding it as particularly holy. The latter reveals the special importance of the body in some opinions within Jewish anthropology, which see no real difference between body and soul – the soul is the energy of the body, not a separate entity. The commandment to bathe in the public bath also shows the high value of the body in that caring for the body is a *mitzvah* because it is created in the image of God, even though the idea of the “image” of God is not to be taken literally, since God does not have a body, but is rather expressed that way because our understanding cannot go beyond human language. However, a negative view of the body also exists in the Jewish tradition, most likely due to the influence of Neoplatonic philosophy.

For medieval Jewish philosophers, the weaknesses of the body had their place in a just creation: Saadya Gaon, for instance, thought that sicknesses fulfill the purpose of keeping those affected by them from sinning. Levi ben Gershon wrote about the abilities and “tools” (such as sharp hearing, flight, claws or fur) that animals possess but humans lack and insisted that in humans all these abilities were replaced by intellectual ability.

2 The Concept of Body in Christianity

(Prof. Dr. Gregor Etzelmüller, University of Osnabrück)

As a medium of divine revelation, the human body occupies a central place in Christian theology. The fact that both the Hebrew and Greek Bible use the same terms for human and animal flesh suggests that humans and animals possess the same living materiality. Living beings are

conceived of as a self-moving unities of body and psyche. In the rituals of baptism and the Eucharist, the body is also intimately involved in the spiritual life of the community. Generally, the liturgy is centered on physical actions, making the body closely involved in ritual. The biblical appreciation for the body clashed with the ideal of the rule of reason over the body that was present in the philosophical traditions of late antiquity. But even within the New Testament itself, there is a tension between the appreciation of the body as locus of spiritual life and the ascetic idea of flesh as susceptible to temptation, especially in the Pauline Epistles. There we find an unease with sexuality, perhaps connected with the power discourse around human sexuality which prevailed in late antiquity. This unease only grows in the early Christian tradition, where a rejection of sexuality could function as resistance against pressure from both nature and society, in favour of spirituality. Among some of the Church Fathers, a hostility towards the body as a “prison” or a danger to the soul developed (Origen and Augustine are two examples). However, even dualistic writers insisted on the idea of bodily resurrection, suggesting that human corporality does hold some positive potential. A similar tension between positive and negative view of the body is seen in the mystical tradition, which on the whole emphasises ascetic control of the body, but a tradition of sensual mysticism also exists.

Much later, the theology of the 19th century still had a dualistic view of the human being, placing a great emphasis on the soul over the body. A holistic view of the embodied soul has only more recently been re-discovered, opening up possible areas of dialogue with Judaism in acknowledging the radical finitude of human life as bodily life. There are also differences between the views of different Christian denominations on the role of the body: To modern Protestants, what happens to the (dead) body is of no theological interest, whereas in Orthodox Christianity, the dead body keeps its value as an icon of God. For this reason, cremation is forbidden in Orthodox Christianity, just as in Judaism and Islam. Taking up insights from Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the Incarnation can be seen as divine validation of corporality, despite the distrust of the body ingrained so deeply in Christianity.

3 The Concept of Body in Islam (PD Dr. Abbas Poya, FAU Erlangen-Nuremberg)

There are two fundamentally different attitudes to the human being in the Islamic tradition: While the Qur’ān reflects a view of humans as physical beings, focusing on immediate experience of physical realities even in descriptions of the afterlife, later theology and philosophy place a much stronger emphasis on their spiritual side. Arabic terms used in the Qur’ān to refer to the body include *badan* (human body, especially the torso), *jism* (generally body, shape,

mass, thus also human body), *jasad* (can mean both a human and a non-human body). Of these, *badan* reflects the meaning of “living, human body” most closely. Its counterparts are *rūḥ* (spirit, cf. Hebrew *rūaḥ*) and *nafs* (soul, cf. *nafas* “breath”, and Hebrew *nephesh*). There is a *ḥadīth* that relates that the earth Adam was made of came from all parts of the world, making man a microcosm.

The body occupies a central space in Islamic law. Many of the primary duties of believers involve physical exertion and high priority is given to physical integrity. In a similar way as in Judaism, this is connected to the fact that the human body is seen primarily as the creation of God, which has ethical implications in that the created body also belongs to God (leading, for example, to the prohibition of suicide). However, execution and physical punishments can be included in Islamic law since these laws are also God-given, and God, unlike humans, has power over the body. Organ donation, on the other hand, is widely accepted by modern scholars since it saves other created human bodies.

Early Islamic theology saw God as also physical, though not in the same way as terrestrial bodies (*jism lā ka-l-ajsām*). A body-soul dualism developed later. Possibly due to Greek influences, Muslim philosophers were more concerned with the immaterial in humans, even though many philosophers were also physicians and therefore had to study the human body, too. The *nafs* is not physical, but gives life to the human body, survives the body’s death, and is what makes us human.

II The Concept of Soul in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam

1 The Concept of Soul in Judaism

(Prof. Dr. Alan Avery-Peck, College of the Holy Cross, Worcester)

The idea of a “soul” is a cognitive conceptualisation of the self. Therefore, diverse conceptions of the soul reflect the experiences of people in different contexts. The mind-body division results from day-to-day experience, which often feels as though our mind is distinct from our body. The words used for soul in the Hebrew Bible (*rūah*, *nephesh*, *nāshāmā*) mean “spirit” or “life-force,” usually in the concrete sense of breath or blood. The idea of the soul / life-force being in the blood is one of the reasons behind the purity laws regarding blood and the rules about the slaughter of animals. There is, however, no problem with blood transfusions in modern medicine, as the positive value of healing supersedes these laws. *Nephesh* also sometimes means “self” or “person.”

The life-force of divine origin gives life to an earthly body; it has, in the earliest texts, no pre- or postexistence without the body. The idea of an afterlife developed later in the rabbinical tradition. After the disastrous events of the first and second century, the Jewish conception of human life was radically altered, which helped make sense of the Biblical promise of salvation which was clearly not being immediately fulfilled. According to rabbinic writings, all souls were created in the initial creation, are then implanted in a body, and will be re-united with it on Judgment Day. The actions of an embodied soul are committed by both the body and soul together; neither of them is capable of sin on its own, but neither is good in itself. Unlike in Christianity, there is no strong, widespread idea of original sin in Judaism.

2 The Concept of Soul in Christianity

(Prof. Dr. Eberhard Schockenhoff †)

Unlike the Greek (and later Greek-influenced Christian) philosophical tradition, Biblical anthropology presumes a unity of body and soul. Expressions like “soul”, “heart” or similar always refer to the whole of a person. In the New Testament, specifically the Epistles of Paul, there are two main terms for body: *sarx*, lit. “flesh,” used to mean physicality in the sense of a sinful distancing from God, and *sōma*, which refers to the creatural mould of human agency and has more positive/neutral connotations.

Aristotelian hylomorphism, which was adopted by Christian philosophers for a long time, allowed a distinction between body and soul without abandoning the unity of the whole human being. Neither body nor soul is a living human being on its own. Rather, a person is a concrete human being as long as the unity of body and soul persists. However, a human being is not

simply a composite being, as bodies do not exist before the union with the soul. What this means for the afterlife differs between denominations. The Catholic Church has cemented the doctrine of the immortality of the soul at the Fifth Lateran Council, whereas many Protestant churches reject this doctrine, teaching instead that humans die completely and are only later returned to life.

3 The Concept of Soul in Islam

(Prof. Dr. Dr. Bernhard Uhde, Catholic University of Applied Sciences Freiburg)

When we talk about the soul, we are also, in a way, talking about ourselves. That makes this concept particularly important, but also particularly difficult to speak about. In Greek philosophy, the soul was understood as a principle of self-movement. The Qur'ān mentions several inner parts of the created soul: *rūḥ*, *nafs*, *qalb*, and *'aql*. All of these are unseen “essences” of the human being, and all of these, except possibly the *qalb* (heart) are thought of as immortal. In a narrower sense, the soul or *rūḥ* is regarded as belonging to God in that it is similar to God's essence. Just like God's essence, its exact definition is therefore beyond human understanding. This is also a part of the soul that animals do not possess. The Qur'ānic statement that humans were created from one soul can be understood to mean that all individual souls are really part of one essence.

Four main aspects of the soul are mentioned in the Qur'ān: The soul commanding evil, the soul which blames itself, the soul inspired to change, and the soul at peace (*al-nafs al-muṭma'inna*). These four stages reflect the path of the soul towards redemption. The last one also signifies the pure oneness or emptiness in the soul that the Sufī traditions regard as the highest form of *tawḥīd*. While death is the movement of the soul to heaven or hell, the absence of movement in *al-nafs al-muṭma'inna* signifies its unmoving presence in heaven.