

## **A Christian perspective on the Soul**

*A talk given at Somerville College, Oxford on Sunday 21 October 2018*

Thank you for the honour of inviting me to speak this evening. You have set me quite a challenge, if my task is to present a Christian view on the soul. Looking through the programme for last week, I'm assuming that your speaker made a convincing case for there being no such thing as the soul. If that was the case, I guess my job today is to make a convincing case that we do, indeed, have a soul and that, since I am a Christian minister, the soul should be understood in a Christian way. I am going to do neither of these things.

And I am speaking, not as an expert in matters of the soul, nor as an academic, but rather as a religious practitioner. Indeed, as someone who has been charged with the care of souls. My background was in Methodism, although I am now a minister in the United Reformed Church. Until I guess 40 or 50 years ago, Methodist had class meetings, which have now largely fizzled out. Each member of the church was assigned to a class, which met as a fellowship group and, at the top of the agenda for class meetings was the question 'How is it with your soul?' The idea was that you would hold each other to account for your actions since the previous meeting... and, if you were unrepentant, you would not be allowed to receive communion, the bread and wine. Now this was all a very long time ago.

Two things come out of this. First, that we make an assumption that goes without definition about what the soul is... the language, the jargon, we use in church is a shared language and we assume that we all know what we are talking about, so we never bother to define it or explore its meaning, not in the everyday life of the church. Secondly, that with the collapse of such things as class meetings and the question 'How is it with you soul' being not put any more, we no longer talk about the soul. I can't recall the last time I heard the soul given a mention in church, other than in the poetic language of prayer or ancient hymnody and then only occasionally. This is not done wilfully or deliberately, but simply that it has fallen out of fashion. The notion of the soul seems so very old fashioned in the church, which is ironic since there is often mention of things having soul in society at large... by which is often meant, things have depth and meaning.

I have never talked about the soul before, I have never preached on it. So, when you asked me to talk about the soul, you set me quite a challenge and I thank you for taking my brain to a place that it has never been to before! I would like to throw in a disclaimer that if I put my foot in it and say something controversial or, more dangerous, something original, then at least I belong to a denomination which encourages freedom of thought and expression, so I will be forgiven. And if I manage to give expression to something original, then hopefully that will add fuel to further discussion and debate later. I intend to leave you with more questions than answers!

Having said that we never mention the soul in church, there is one exception and that is in the debate over whether animals have a soul. The debate not being one about the soul at all, but about whether animals will have some kind of place in the afterlife... that if they have a soul, they stand a chance at immortality. Quoting again from the Methodist Church, whose communion service used to contain the line, 'bring us with the whole of creation to your heavenly kingdom.' A fair question, perhaps, but it doesn't help us much in our pursuit of understanding what the soul might be, unless is it whittled down to 'that which is spiritual' or 'that which is able to respond to the divine, to God'... so are spirit and soul one and the

same? Is there something in our pets that leads us to assume that, beyond their own distinctive personalities, they also have an essence (a soul or spirit or both) which will live on? As I understand it, this debate has not entered the cul-de-sac labelled 'will Tiddles be called to account for her actions on the Day of Judgement and have to wait in line for the final verdict which allows her to enter heaven'... or even to be sent to hell where at least she can sit by the fire and keep herself warm!

Perhaps the question is not 'what is the soul' but 'of what do humans consist?' Traditionally, we have thought (in the Christo-centric world) that we are made up of body, mind and soul. But this raises further questions, since the body clearly decays in death and physical existence is no more. In the absence of the body, do the emotions and that part of us which is capable of thought also perish, leaving only the soul? And if we have an expectation that in the afterlife there will be bodily resurrection, why the temporary detachment of body and mind from soul? Or if in the hereafter we are given a completely new body, then what of the mind and our capacity for thought? The honest truth is that we do not know, whatever the strength of our beliefs and our belief system.

Other options include viewing the human still in three parts, but as body, soul and spirit... making the distinction between soul and spirit, where the soul includes our intellect, our emotions and our will, while the spirit is a higher faculty which comes alive when a person becomes a Christian... that by being born again, this time of the spirit (unlike the first birth which was of water and human will), we either add to or awaken what is already there. And it is this spirit which has the capacity to see and relate to God, and this is the part of us which is enabled to pray to and worship God.

Another option views humans as being in two parts, just body and soul. This time we can use the terms 'soul' and 'spirit' interchangeably. But this view is problematic when you consider the origins of Christianity and in particular the development of the early Christian Church, where Gnosticism was a force to be reckoned with. Gnosticism divided humans similarly into body and soul, but make the distinction absolute: that which was of the body was degenerate and evil, finite and mortal... that which was of the soul, or more precisely the spirit, was good and infinite and immortal. Spirit good: body bad. And the Gnostics set out to lead lives that freed them from that which was bad and evil, as much as was humanly possible (if you'll forgive the pun)... theirs was a life of withdrawal from normal human society, with a lifestyle of extreme aestheticism and denial. An embodied mortal life was a temporary inconvenience for the hope of an immortal spiritual life free of the body.

Here the Bible is of little help to us, even before the translators set to work converting it from the original Hebrew and Greek to the vernacular. Scripture uses 'soul' and 'spirit' interchangeably: in John 12:27 Jesus says "Now is my soul troubled" and later in a similar context he says he is "troubled in spirit"... Luke 1:46-47 Mary says "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my saviour"... and people who have died and gone to hell are referred to as either 'spirits' (Hebrews 12:23 and 1 Peter 3:19) or 'souls' (Revelation 6:9 and 20:4). And, as with most theological and ethical debates, you can find scriptural verses to back whichever way you look at the soul.

Is it not more sensible to say that to speak of us as made up of three parts: body, mind and soul, is simply a useful framework or lens through which to look human beings. It is not precise, it cannot be tightly defined, nor are each of the three aspects so distinct from each other that there is no cross over, or interchangeability as in the case of soul and spirit? And

can we not rest there and say that this is the Christo-centric view we have inherited and, until we are presented with another lens, this is what we will work with?

Can we not also acknowledge that it is unfashionable to speak of the soul: it is a term for which we have little use these days. Why so? Perhaps because it is a term which has forever been appropriated in ways we find unhelpful today, to over-emphasize divine (or moreover ecclesiastical) judgement and condemnation, to bully and cajole people into behaving and toeing the ecclesiastical line: for fear of what might happen to the immortal soul as it teeters on the edge of the abyss this side of eternity. Your soul is in peril if you do not behave. You are in mortal danger.

But even if it is outmoded to speak of the soul and its usage as fraught with negative historical associations, can we not still find a use for the 'soul' in a way that connects it with a full humanity? These days the fashion is to speak of a spirituality which is disembodied. The number of times people tell me that they are not religious, but are spiritual... as if this is a virtue. Now far from wanting to cast stones, I would in the first instance wish to encourage them in their endeavours and seek to understand how they self-define as spiritual but not religious. But in the second instance, as embodied beings, it is a strange thing to separate out the spirit... whatever the adopted spirituality, it comes from somewhere: from out of their experiences, or the words of others who have set out on various spiritual paths. It is necessarily contextual, even if culturally appropriated.

Even now, the soul (without careful definition) is being appropriated to determine whether or not there is capacity in the compassion of God for animals (and all creepy things that creepeth, to quote the King James Version) to enter heaven. The question has nothing particularly to do with matters of the soul: there is simply the assumption that the soul is that bit of us (and perhaps anything, furry, feathered or scaly) which can exist on into eternity. The question is one about the nature of the afterlife, not the soul... and thank goodness you haven't asked me to come here and speak about the afterlife!

Can we not content ourselves with the definition that common usage gives us of the term 'soul'? That the soul is the living essence of a person, it is that bit of them which contains the real them, it is that which makes them unique and distinguishes them from everyone else. It goes deep and run through their values and beliefs and their ethical code. Use 'soul' and 'spirit' interchangeably as you choose, but whichever this is the part of you which goes to your core and at the same time enables you to see beyond yourself to that which, if you choose to call it, is divine. The soul may or may not separate us from the rest of the animal kingdom, who knows: can or do animals respond to the divine, it is not a question I'm particularly concerned to ask. I'm more inclined to say that what separates human beings out from the rest of creation is our ability to think that we can do without God.

And on that note I'm going to finish. I hope I have raised more questions for discussion than answers, because the very nature of the soul raises questions. There are others better able to speak about the theology of the soul, many of whom I have yet to read, but read them I will in a spare moment as my day job of taking care of souls will allow. Thank you for your invitation to speak to you, thank for listening and I look forward to chatting with you afterwards.