

From Breath to Soul: The Quranic Word *Rūḥ* and Its (Mis)interpretations

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A certain theologian (*baʿḍ al-mutakallimīn*) was asked in my presence about the meanings of the words *naḥs* and *rūḥ* to which he gave the answers: *naḥs* (breath) and *rūḥ* (wind), respectively. “Based on what you say,” the theologian’s interlocutor commented, “every time a person breathes (*tanaffasa*) his soul (*naḥs*) exits his body, and every time he breaks wind (*ḍaraṭa*) his spirit (*rūḥ*) does the same.”¹

This anecdote, told by the prominent author Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī (d. 400/1010), is probably meant to illustrate the absurdity of this *mutakallim*’s claims, but like many others, it also points to an underlying controversy. In this case, the controversy revolves around the terms *rūḥ* and *naḥs*, particularly whether they refer to the perceived entity that supposedly animates the human body. The understanding of *rūḥ* and *naḥs* as “soul” has long been established in Islamic thought and is generally believed to stem from, or at least to be consistent with, the Quran. Yet the anecdote shows also that even as late as the fourth/tenth century these assumptions were questioned by some, and for that matter, by a *mutakallim*, not an *aḥmaq* (fool) or an otherwise unserious contender. In this essay, I wish to explore part of this controversy by studying the word *rūḥ* in the Quran and related texts not only with the aim of understanding its meanings, but also of understanding the intellectual context in which it has been debated. A closer look at the Quran reveals that it does not use the words *rūḥ* and *naḥs* interchangeably to suggest any synonym, and that, indeed, *rūḥ* “never occurs in the Qurʾān with the meaning of ‘soul,’” as Duncan Macdonald points out.² More importantly, a diachronic study of commentaries on this word reveals a trend of growing anthropocentrism in Islamic thought that is worth exploring. To provide some context for this discussion, I will first give a brief overview of the development of the notion of soul among some schools of Islamic thought. Second, I will examine the treatment of the *r.w.ḥ* root, from

1 Al-Tawḥīdī, *al-Baṣāʾir wa-l-dhakhāʾir* i, 123.

2 Macdonald, Development of the idea of spirit 26.

which the word *rūḥ* is derived, in the Arabic dictionary *Lisān al-ʿArab*. Third, I will discuss the word *rūḥ* in the Quran. Finally, I will survey Quran commentaries from different historical periods to highlight the diachronic progression and the anthropocentric overtones in the treatment of this notion.

Conceptions of Human Nature in Early Islamic Tradition

Several modern scholars have noted that the body-and-soul conception of the human being emerged somewhat late in Islamic thought, around the second century of Islam.³ Prior to this, as Ismaʿīl Fārūqī explains, Muslims were not yet exposed to the array of ideas that both triggered and shaped discourses about human nature and related philosophical matters.⁴ This is not to suggest that to pre-Islamic Arabians and early Muslims the human being was no more than the sum of her physical self; but earlier conceptions of the non-physical dimension of the human being in the Arabian context were rather unsophisticated.⁵

When Muslims started pondering the incorporeal nature of humans during Islam's formative centuries, the body-and-soul dualism was not the only model they adopted. Early Ashʿarīs and many Muʿtazilīs conceived of the human being primarily in terms of atoms and accidents. Humans, similar to other created beings, were believed to consist of collections of atoms that served as seats for a multitude of accidents. Attributes such as life, perception, and knowledge, which later became the domain of the soul, were conceived of as accidents that were directly placed in or attached to the atoms of the body.⁶ Death did not always involve a spirit or a soul that survived the deceased, but could simply mean that a person ceased to exist,⁷ or that the accident of death replaced the accident of life.⁸ Therefore, the soul metaphor was not a prerequisite even for a more sophisticated understanding of human nature.

Notwithstanding this, many Muslims still accepted the notion of a soul. Ayman Shihadeh attributes this to the necessity of accounting for scriptural themes, maintaining that since “the Qurʾān and Ḥadīth contain frequent

3 See, for example, Homerin, Soul, in *EQ* v, 80.

4 Fārūqī, Self in Muʿtazilah thought 367.

5 Pre-Islamic society seems to have held the view that when someone is killed, a bird—which they called *ṣadā* or *hāma*—comes out of that person's head and hovers over the grave, remaining there until the person is avenged. See Ibn Qutayba, *al-Maʿānī l-kabīr* ii, 951.

6 Shihadeh, Ashʿari anthropology 465.

7 Vasalou, Subject and body 292.

8 Shihadeh, Ashʿari anthropology 447.