

What is the soul, if there is one?



Highland Views

Chris Highland
Guest columnist

In his new translation of the Hebrew Bible, completed after two decades of work, Robert Alter presents a refreshingly novel understanding of “soul,” as this article explains (“A New Hebrew Bible,” *New York Times*, December 20, 2018):

“The problem with this “soul,” for Alter, is its Christian connotations of an incorporeal and immortal being, the dualism of the soul apart from the body. Nefesh, to the contrary, suggests the material, mortal parts, the things that make us alive on this earth. The body ... that Hebrew word, nefesh, can mean many things. It can be ‘breath’ or ‘life-breath.’ It can mean ‘throat’ or ‘neck’ or ‘gullet.’ Sometimes it can suggest ‘blood.’ It can mean ‘person’ or even a ‘dead person,’ ‘corpse.’ Or it can be ‘appetite’ or something more general: ‘life’ or even ‘the essential self.’ But it’s not quite ‘soul.’”

I immediately connected this with Walt Whitman’s proclamation: “The soul is not more than the body and the body is not more than the soul” (*Song of Myself*, 48).

As with many words used by religious folks, “soul” can mean just about anything anybody thinks it means. In my way of thinking, dividing the human person into mind/body/soul/spirit can be interesting but ultimately we need to put ourselves back together. I suspect, like Humpty Dumpty, we’ll have a pretty hard time doing that, given centuries of cracking the individual (the undivided person) into neat divisions.

Yet, couldn’t our deepest emotions and highest feelings of exhilaration be called “soul”?

The NYT reporter asked Alter, “(Doesn’t) ‘soul’ help dramatize (some of the Bible’s) intense emotion? I mentioned another instance of the word nefesh, the terrifyingly evocative line from the King James’ translation of Psalm 69: “For the waters are come in unto my soul.”

“Oh, yes,” Alter said, with a smile. “That one does have a certain emotional resonance to it. But it’s not what the



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poet had in mind. And, I would add that the line ‘for the waters have come up to my neck’ ... is also rather dramatic.”

We have a flair for the dramatic, preferring the strange and mysterious to the normal and commonplace. As I often say, Nature and our earthly life just doesn’t seem to be enough for many people. I enjoy a good mystery as much as anyone. My wife and I like to watch “Inspector Lewis,” “Elementary,” “Father Brown” and other mystery shows. Investigating clues and searching for the truth is fascinating. We’re not as interested in the “paranormal” stuff.

Whitman took his sense of soul a huge step further: “And no one, not God, is greater to one than one’s self is.”

Which brings us to our “selves.” I’m not a psychologist (one who studies the psyche — the human person) but I’m not sure it really helps us to chop ourselves into selves, souls, persons. The dictionary can’t help too much when it comes to the “self”: “a person’s essential being that distinguishes them from others.”

Are we left with “I am” and “You are”? Maybe so.

In Hindu belief, each “self” is a part of the great, eternal “Self.” We are small gods in the Big God. I don’t see this as much different than the notion in Jesus’ prayer (John 17) when he asks his divine Parent that his disciples “may be one as we are one.” This suggests something more than a Trinity — perhaps a Quadrangle that includes humans?

The “Queen of Soul,” Aretha Franklin, sang her powerful anthem for “Respect” as a woman, a black woman, a person. She, along with many others, might say there’s something spiritual about that, but it’s a demand for personal respect before anything else.

Yet, that’s quite different from the “soul” faith traditions talk about. That soul can be “lost” and “saved,” “healed” or “enlightened.” The religious “soul”

can always change and move. “Her soul went to heaven” or “He sold his soul” or “They are good faithful souls.”

Definitions of “soul” range from “the spiritual or immaterial part of a human being or animal, regarded as immortal” to common usages like “in the depths of my soul” or “I’ll never tell a soul.”

The word “spirit” further complicates the jigsaw puzzle of personhood.

But don’t ask anyone to explain how soul and spirit are distinct. That’s because no one knows, and if they say they know, we can be sure they don’t. Hebrew words for soul and spirit are different as they are in Greek, and English. All of these, in my view, are guesses because we so desperately want to understand ourselves — to take us apart and put us neatly back together. A nice idea.

I guess I’m not much of a soul man.

Chris Highland served as a Protestant minister and interfaith chaplain for many years. He is a teacher, writer, freethinker and humanist celebrant. Learn more at chighland.com.

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