1 | Do Christians need souls? Theological and biblical perspectives on human nature

1. Prospect and problems

One thing we have in common with the first Christians is this: we have available to us a wealth of conflicting ideas about what a human being, most basically, is. It is important to be aware of this fact since whatever we believe on this subject will influence how we think about a great number of other issues, for example: What happens to us after we die? Is an embryo a person? Ordinarily we do not discuss our theories of human nature, so these disagreements are kept largely below the surface of our debates. Here is an example: when Dolly the sheep was cloned I received calls from media people looking for a Christian reaction. One reporter seemed frustrated that I had no strong condemnation of the idea of cloning humans. After his repeated attempts to provoke me to express some sort of horror at the prospect, light dawned for me. I asked him, "Do you read a lot of science fiction?" "Well, some." "Are you imagining that if we try to clone a human being we'll clone a body but it won't have a soul? It will be like the zombies in science fiction?" "Yes, something like that." "Well," I said, "don't worry. None of us has a soul and we all get along perfectly well!"

Because we seldom discuss our theories of human nature it is difficult to know what others think. I have had to resort to informal polling whenever I get the chance. I ask students in various classes and often ask my audiences when I lecture. Here are some options. The first can be called either physicalism or materialism. This is the view that humans are composed of only one "part," a physical body. The terms

"physicalism" and "materialism" are nearly interchangeable in philosophy but "physicalism" is more fashionable now, and it is more appealing to Christians because "materialism" has long been used to refer to a *worldview* that excludes the divine. So even though a materialist account of the person is perfectly compatible with belief in God, "materialism" does carry those unhappy connotations for Christians.

The second option is dualism, and we recognize two sorts these days, body–soul and body–mind dualism. The terms "mind" and "soul" were once (nearly) interchangeable, but in recent years "soul" has taken on religious connotations that "mind" has not.

A third theory regarding the composition of human beings is called trichotomism. This view comes from Paul's blessing in 1 Thessalonians 5:23 (NRSV): "May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ." So trichotomists hold that humans are composed of three parts: body, soul, and spirit.

I believe that these are the main competitors today, but another view has been important in the past. This view is also monistic, as is physicalism, in holding that humans are made of only one kind of substance, but here the whole is resolved into the spiritual or mental. This was an important position in earlier centuries when idealism was popular in philosophy. Idealism is the metaphysical thesis that all of reality is essentially mental. I understand that some New Age thinkers have similar views. I'll call this view idealist monism.

Here is the quiz:

Which of the following comes closest to your understanding of human nature?

1. Humans are composed of one "part": a physical body (materialism/physicalism).
2. Humans are composed of two parts:
   2a. A body and a soul.
   2b. A body and a mind (dualism).

3. Humans are composed of three parts: body, soul, and spirit (trichotomism).
4. Humans are composed of one "part": a spiritual/mental substance (idealism).
5. Who cares?

The results I usually get are as follows: among my Evangelical students at Fuller Theological Seminary, as well as with a general audience, dualism and trichotomism compete for first place. There are usually only one or two physicalists and one or two idealists. In groups of specialists the numbers are quite different. If I were to ask scientists, I am sure I would find that most biologists and especially neuroscientists are physicalists. However, it is not so easy to predict what chemists or physicists will say. Answers here are related to the issue of reductionism, which I shall address throughout this volume. If I ask philosophers, their answers will depend largely on whether they are Christians or not. Secular philosophers are almost all physicalists – I only know one exception.[1] Christian philosophers are divided between dualism and physicalism. When I speak at seminaries on the liberal end of the spectrum all but incoming students are physicalists. At more conservative institutions faculty members are split between dualism and physicalism. Item 5, "Who cares?" is included at a teaser, since I shall argue that it actually represents the biblical view.

My quiz and category system make it appear that there is agreement at least to the extent of our having only four theories. But if one asks individuals what they mean by "soul" or "spirit" or even by the word "physical" one gets almost as many different answers as there are people! I read a recent book review claiming that 130 different views of the human person have been

[1] This is William D. Hart, who delivered a lecture titled "Unity and dualism" at a symposium on mind and body at Westmont College, Santa Barbara, CA on February 15, 2002.

documented.[2] Why do we agree so little about something so important? Much of this has to do with the fact that a number of different disciplines have an influence here – science, philosophy, and theology – and each has contributed to changing views over the centuries. Another important factor, I shall argue, is the fact that *the Bible has no clear teaching here*. This has made it possible for Christians in different eras to recognize a variety of views in the texts, and, perhaps more importantly, to have read a variety of views *into* the texts.

My plan for this volume, then, is to examine in this first chapter the biblical and theological issues, but the theological story cannot be told without some attention to ancient philosophy. The history is complex: there have been a number of changes in what Christians have believed over the years, but this is complicated by conflicting views among historians *about* what Christians have believed over the years. There seems to be no other enquiry into which we humans are more likely to project our own views. So I shall begin with recent historiographical disputes, and then, armed with a good dose of suspicion, I shall go back to look, first, at the philosophies that contributed to the development of doctrine and then to the Bible itself. I shall end with some attention to the implications of a physicalist anthropology for systematic theology, and some recommendations for Christian spiritual formation.

In my second chapter I shall concentrate on the scientific issues. Here I shall examine the impact of three developments: the introduction of atomism in early modern physics, the Darwinian revolution, and, finally, current developments in the cognitive neurosciences. A significant consequence of modern physics was to create what is now seen to be an insuperable problem for dualists: mind–body interaction. Evolutionary theory, with its

[2] Review by Graham McFarlane of N. H. Gregersen *et al.*, eds., *The Human Person in Science and Theology* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 2000), in *Science and Christian Belief* 14, no. 1 (April 2002): 94–5.

emphasis on our continuity with animals, raised the question of how it could be that we have souls while the (other) animals do not. The significance of contemporary neuroscience is this: all of the capacities once attributed to the mind or soul now appear to be (largely) functions of the brain.

In both of these first two chapters I shall be arguing either directly or indirectly for a physicalist account of human nature. However, physicalism has not been a predominant view in either philosophy or theology until recently. There are a number of philosophical problems that need to be addressed if physicalism is to be acceptable to Christians. In my third and fourth chapters, then, I shall alert you to the most significant of these problems and sketch out some rough indicators of where solutions might lie.

A central philosophical issue is reductionism, what neuropsychologist Donald MacKay called "nothing-buttery." The essential question is this: if humans are purely physical, then how can it *fail* to be the case that all of our thoughts and behavior are simply determined by the laws of neurobiology? In chapter 3, I first explain what is wrong with reductionism in general, and then sketch out an account of how our complex neural equipment, along with cultural resources, underlies our capacities for both morality and free will.

In chapter 4, I address a variety of other philosophical problems. One is simply the question of how we know physicalism is true. I argue that if it is treated as a scientific hypothesis rather than a philosophical doctrine we see that it has all of the confirming evidence one could hope for (much of it sketched in chapter 2).

The two remaining issues are related to the difference between reductionist and *non*-reductionist versions of physicalism. First, if humans have no souls, what accounts for the traditional view that we have a special place among the animals; in other words, in what does human distinctiveness lie? I shall focus on morality and the ability to be in relationship with God. I argue that our capacity for religious experience is enabled by culture and by our complex

neural systems, just as is our capacity for morality. However, a relationship is two-sided; thus I next address the issue of how God relates to us if we are wholly a part of the physical order.

Finally there is the question: if there is no soul, what accounts for personal identity over time? More particularly, how can we say that the person after resurrection is the same person as before if the resurrection body is so different from the earthly body? I offer an account of personal identity in terms of the identity over time of the high-level capacities that our bodies enable: consciousness, memory, moral character, interpersonal relationships, and, especially, our relationship with God.

2. History's ambiguous message

When I first became interested in the topic of human nature I believed that a close look at the Bible and at the development of Christian theology could settle the issue of what Christians *ought* to believe about human nature. Surely I could grab a book from the library that traced the history of this issue. So far I have failed to find one. Since I am not competent to do primary research in either early church history or biblical studies, I turned to secondary sources in order to try to put together my own account. I was further frustrated to find very little on this topic in histories of early Christian thought.

My next resort was to reference works, both theological and biblical. I looked up relevant words such as "body," "soul," "spirit," "immortality," and "resurrection." I discovered something interesting: the views attributed to biblical authors varied considerably from one source to another. I came to the conclusion that they were a better indicator of the views *assumed* in the era in which they were written than of what the biblical authors actually believed. So one important part of the history of these ideas needs to be an account of the *oversimplifications* and even falsifications of earlier history.

Further complications in recent history are the differences between Protestant and Catholic views, and especially between liberal and conservative Protestants. My conclusion is that to do justice to this topic one would have to write not a single book, but a series of volumes. So what can I write in one short chapter that does not contribute to the history of oversimplifications of history? Rather than telling the story from beginning to end, I shall begin with some of the twists and turns in biblical criticism and history of doctrine in recent centuries.

There seem to be only three points in Christian history when teaching about the metaphysical composition of the person has become a focal point. The first was when Christianity spread from a largely Hebraic context to the surrounding Mediterranean world. The second was during the Aristotelian revival in the middle ages, occasioned by Islamic scholars' presence in Europe. The third was a response to the rise of biblical criticism and critical church history in the modern era. Critical church history provided modern thinkers with a sense of the historical development of doctrine, which allowed questions to arise in a new way about the consistency of later church teachings with those of the Bible.

2.1 *Contradictions in historical criticism*

Historical criticism of the Bible itself has had a major impact on modern conceptions of the person, but there have been *contradictory tendencies*. Notice that Christians have two strikingly different conceptions of what happens after we die. One is based on dualism: the body dies and the soul departs to be with God. The other is the expectation of bodily resurrection. For centuries these two ideas have been combined. The body dies, the soul departs, and at the end of time the soul receives a resurrected or transformed body. Biblical scholarship has teased out these two ideas, immortality versus resurrection.

In the eighteenth and especially the nineteenth centuries many New Testament scholars cast doubt on the historicity of miracles in general and the great miracle of Jesus' resurrection in particular. Skepticism about Jesus' resurrection led to increased emphasis among theologians on the immortality of the soul as the only basis for Christian hope in an afterlife. Philosophy was important here as well. Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) has been the most influential philosopher in the development of liberal theology. He devised a "transcendental" argument for the soul's immortality, which nicely reinforced the tendency among theologians to see body–soul dualism as the "Enlightened" Christian position. Consider Adolf von Harnack's neat summary of the kernel of Christian doctrine: the fatherhood of God, the brotherhood of man, and the infinite value of the human *soul*.[3]

Meanwhile – and here is the contradictory tendency – biblical scholars had begun to question whether body–soul dualism was in fact the position to be found in Scripture. One important contribution here was the work of H. Wheeler Robinson, an Old Testament scholar whose book, *The Christian Doctrine of Man*, went through three editions and eight printings between 1911 and 1952.[4] Robinson argued that the Hebrew idea of personality is that of an animated body, not (like the Greek) that of an incarnated soul. However, while arguing that the New Testament is largely continuous with the Old in conceiving of the person as a unity rather than dualistically, he also said that the most important advance in the New Testament is the belief that the essential personality (whether called the *psyche* or the *pneuma*) survives bodily death. This soul or spirit may be temporarily disembodied, but it is not complete without the body, and its

[3] Adolf von Harnack, *Das Wesen des Christentums* (1900); translated as *What is Christianity?* (1901).

[4] H. Wheeler Robinson, *The Christian Doctrine of Man* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1911). While Robinson's account of Old Testament teaching struck a blow against dualism, it did not support physicalism directly since Robinson interpreted theories of human nature in terms of his idealist philosophy.

continued existence after bodily death is dependent upon God rather than a natural endowment of the soul. So here we see the beginning of the recognition that dualism was not the original Hebraic understanding. He sees a modified dualism as a New Testament invention.

Theological thinking on these issues around the time Robinson wrote can only be described as confused. This can be seen by comparing related entries in reference works from early in the twentieth century. In *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge* (1910) there is a clear consensus that the whole of the Bible is dualistic.[5] The general understanding was that the human soul is bound to corporeality in this life, yet it survives death because it possesses the Spirit of God. Resurrection is understood as God's giving new bodies to souls that have rested in God since the death of the old body.

Yet in a slightly earlier work, *A Dictionary of the Bible* (1902), two sharply opposed views appear.[6] An article on "Soul" says that throughout most of the Bible, the terms usually translated as "soul" such as the Hebrew word *nephesh* or the Greek *psyche* do *not* in fact refer to a substantial soul. Instead they are simply equivalent to the *life* embodied in living creatures (4:608). The article on "Resurrection," however, subscribes to body–soul dualism. Resurrection is described as "the clothing of the soul with a body" (4:236). So some of the authors in this dictionary assume dualism while others explicitly deny that it is the anthropology of the Bible.

This tendency to juxtapose incompatible accounts of biblical teaching continued through the middle of the twentieth century, when several new factors gave the issue greater prominence. One was the rise of neo-orthodox theology after World War I. Karl Barth and others made a sharp distinction between Hebraic and Hellenistic conceptions, and strongly favored the former. Barth

[5] Samuel Macauley Jackson, ed. (New York and London: Funk and Wagnalls Company, 1910).

[6] James Hastings, ed. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1902).

also argued for the centrality of the resurrection in Christian teaching. The biblical theology movement in the mid-twentieth century continued to press for the restoration of earlier, Hebraic understandings of Christianity.

A decisive contribution was Rudolf Bultmann's claim in his *Theology of the New Testament* that Paul uses *sōma* ("body") to characterize the human person as a whole.[7] In 1955 Oscar Cullmann gave the lectures that were published as *Immortality of the Soul or Resurrection of the Dead: The Witness of the New Testament*. Here Cullman drew out the contrast between biblical attitudes toward death, along with expectation of bodily resurrection, and Socrates' attitude given his expectation that his soul would survive the death of his body.[8]

2.2 *So where do we stand?*

A survey of the literature of theology and biblical studies throughout the twentieth century, then, shows a gradual displacement of a dualistic account of the person, with its correlative emphasis on the afterlife conceived in terms of the immortality of the soul. First there was the recognition of the holistic character of biblical conceptions of the person, often while still presupposing temporarily separable "parts." Later there developed a holistic *but also physicalist* account of the person, combined with an emphasis on bodily resurrection. One way of highlighting this shift is to note that in *The Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics* (published between 1909 and 1921) there is a lengthy article on "Soul" and no entry for "Resurrection."[9] In *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (published in 1992) there is no entry at all for "Soul" but a very long set of articles on "Resurrection"![10]

[7] Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, vol. 1 (New York: Scribner, 1951).
[8] Oscar Cullmann, *Immortality of the Soul or Resurrection of the Dead?* (New York: Macmillan, 1958).
[9] James Hastings, ed. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1909–21).
[10] David Noel Freedman, ed. (New York: Doubleday, 1992).