

QUESTIONS ARISING FROM OUR CLASS READING AND DISCUSSION

Archbishop Tutu and the Dalai Lama Prompt These Questions

What is the difference between "mind" and "brain"?
What is the difference between "soul" and "spirit"?

Part I - These terms will be reviewed from a biblical (Judeo-Christian) perspective

Part II - These terms reviewed from a modern and interfaith (especially Christian-Buddhist) perspective

The questions Aileen has raised are modern questions. "Mind" and "brain" are terms that come to us from non-biblical and scientific world-views. Hebrew and early-Christian peoples did not think

in those terms. We have learned terms like "mind" and "brain" from enlightenment philosophy and modern science. "Soul" and "spirit" however - are important themes from our Judeo-Christian religious heritage, influenced by early Greek thought.

According to Hebrew tradition, humans are alive in a "spirited" way. The Hebrew Bible speaks of the emotional and reflective capacity of humans (nephesh, ruach). These are sometimes translated as "spirit" or "soul" and used interchangeably. When taken in this manner, they don't imply a soul that leaves the body at death and goes on to eternal life. They are "this worldly" aspects of being human.

The Hebrews believed that when humans die, "the body" returns to dust, and our "breath" to the air, and nothing can survive death. This suggests a link between "spirit" and "breath." The Hebrews also believed that "body" and "spirit" form an essential unity (Ps. 63:10) while the Greeks created a division/dualism between them. Early Christians inherited this confusing set of understandings from Hebrew and Greek thought and tried to integrate the two (see Paul, below). Death breaks up the body and nothing but a slight memory of the deceased continues in Sheol (the place of the dead) or in the memory of descendants.

Only at the very end of the period of the Hebrew Bible (before Christ) does a belief begin to grow that the creator God will be able to continue a faithful love for humans after death. The Hebrews attached great importance to the present life and what happens here and now, since there was no afterlife.

What is a human being? The "body and spirit" together form a human being. The Bible does not give the "brain" and its relation of thoughts and feelings the isolated significance given it today.

In the Bible, "heart" is the seat of feelings and mind alike and the governing centre that makes people who they are (Ps. 51:10). "Soul" is the seat and action of spiritual experiences and emotions (Song of Solomon 1:7). "Flesh" or "body" indicates vulnerable body existence within a social/kinship group. "Spirit" is the life-giving power that comes from God with the one who is thus empowered (Job 34:14).

These terms emerge not as medical or psychological analyses, but from the way people live.

A second important feature of human nature is that the importance of the individual is bound up with the identity of the group or nation as a whole. An individual's behavior reflects on the whole group.

In the Christian era, the concept of "eternal life" emerged and continued to be developed. Paul said "Just as Christ was raised from the dead, we too shall live after we die as we

participate in his death and resurrection.” (I Cor. 15). Paul coined the idea of the “spiritual body” - so that our “mortal nature will put on immortality”. (I Cor. 15:54)

Notes developed from The Complete Bible Handbook, by John Bowker. (DK Publishing, 2001)