

## ISLAM AND THE PERSON: HISTORICAL AND CONTEMPORARY DEBATES<sup>1</sup>

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### INTRODUCTION:

The histories of both Christianity and Islam have been marked by great debates. Often the debates within the two faiths have concerned similar topics and have been based on similar arguments. A recurring topic in both faiths has related to the concept of personhood: what it means to be human and the nature of the relationship between the individual person and God.

In this paper we will place a particular focus upon the discussion of the nature of person within Islam. We will especially consider approaches taken by Muslim scholars who were on the one hand inclined to literal interpretations of the Qur'an and, on the other, those inclined to reason-based interpretations of Islam's sacred text.<sup>2</sup>

Scholars inclined to literalism are best represented by the '*ulama*', usually formally trained in religious schools who influence religious decision-making processes, legal committees and so forth. Also relevant to this category are the radical revivalist groups, who are often not formally trained in the Islamic educational system.

By contrast, scholars inclined to reason-based interpretations of the Qur'an are sometimes formally trained in Islamic educational systems but express more liberal approaches in addressing the challenges of today.

This article will first consider how different streams of Islamic thinkers, drawn from across the centuries to give a sense of the breadth of debate among Muslims, have addressed key topics of relevance to the question of

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<sup>1</sup>. This article represents a summary of a more substantial study of this topic that will be published in 2021.

<sup>2</sup>. This division reflects the great debate between the *Mu'tazila* and the *Ahl al-Hadith* in the 8<sup>th</sup> century.

what it means to be human: the purpose of creation of humans; the nature of humans; guidance versus free will; human freedom to question; the individual's relationship with God and society and so forth. The article will then address two issues of contemporary debate – contraception and abortion – and how these issues speak Islamic perspectives on the concept of person.

## COMMON TERMINOLOGY FOR PERSON IN THE QUR'AN

A range of terms is used in Arabic in the Qur'an and associated literature to express the concept of person. On occasions the concept is expressed by the term *al-nas*; most commonly 'person/people' in English translation is used to render *nafs/anfus*; occasionally 'person/people' is used to render *rajul/rijal*. Penrice's 'Dictionary of the Qur'an' explains *nafs* as 'A soul, a living soul or person'<sup>3</sup> as seen in the following verses:

Q. 6:98 It is He Who hath produced you from a single person (*nafsin wahidatin*); here is a place of sojourn and a place of departure: We detail Our Signs for people who understand. Some verses use *nafs* to refer specifically to the physical person:

Q. 12:54 So the king said: 'Bring him unto me; I will take him specially to serve about my own person (*nafsi*). While a more inner notion of 'soul' is prominent within *nafs/anfus* in the following verse:

Q. 6:93... If thou couldst but see how the wicked (do fare) in the flood of confusion at death! The angels stretch forth their hands, (saying), 'Yield up your souls (*anfusakum*): this day shall ye receive your reward, a penalty of shame, for that ye used to tell lies against Allah, and scornfully to reject of His Signs!'

## VIEWS OF THE LITERALISTS

We could begin our discussion with an important question: 'What makes a person whole?' For the literalists, the answer was to be found in a person fulfilling his God-given duties.

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<sup>3</sup>. J. Penrice, *A Dictionary and Glossary of the Koran*, London, 1873, 149.

## THE PURPOSE OF THE CREATION OF MAN

The 20th century Islamist writer Gamal al-Banna (1920-2013) argues that man's primary purpose in Islam derives from being *khalifa* (vice-gerent) 'who has to relate to this earth on behalf of God, and in accordance with his guidance and values, not just by pursuing personal interest.'<sup>4</sup> Al-Banna points to Qur'anic verses which say that man was created for a specific purpose by God:

Q. 51:56. I have only created *jinn* and men (*ins*), that they may serve Me.

Q. 51:57. No Sustenance do I require of them, nor do I require that they should feed Me.

Though al-Banna speaks of relationship, in his view man's relating to God is one of unquestioning subservience.

## THE NATURE OF MAN

The nature of the *nafs* means that guidance is needed for a person to be able to fulfil his God-given purpose of service. The great exegete al-Tabari (d. 923), a champion of the literalist stream of interpretation,<sup>5</sup> argues for three main states of *nafs* in his commentary on *Surah*<sup>12</sup> verse 53, which states 'the soul is certainly prone to evil'.

First is the '*nafs al-ammara bi al-su'*, 'the soul which commands towards evil'. This is the soul, which inclines its owner to every wrong or evil deed. The second state of soul is the *nafs al-lawwama*, 'the soul that blames'. This refers to the soul, which is aware of its own imperfections. The third state of soul is the *nafs al-mutma'inna* (the soul at peace). Al-Tabari, citing the follower Qatada b. Di'amah (d. 735) from Basra, describes this soul in the following terms: 'It is the soul of the believer, made calm by what Allah has

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<sup>4</sup> M. Baraka, "Islam and Development from the perspective of an Islamic thinker and a labour unionist: Gamal al-Banna", *Islamic Quarterly*, XXVIII/4 (1984), 208.

<sup>5</sup> Although al-Tabari reported different interpretations of the Qur'anic text by drawing on the first three centuries of scholars, his approach was essentially literalist in his heavy dependence on Hadith reports, in contrast with the much more philosophical and rationalist approaches of later exegetes such as al-Zamakhshari and al-Razi.

promised. Its owner is at rest and content with his knowledge of Allah's Names and Attributes, and with what He has said about Himself and His Messenger (*pbuh*), and with what He has said about what awaits the soul after death: about the departure of the soul, the life in the *Barzakh*, and the events of the Day of *Qiyamah* which will follow. So much so that a believer such as this can almost see them with his own eyes. So he submits to the will of Allah and surrenders to Him contentedly, never dissatisfied or complaining, and with his faith never wavering. He does not rejoice at his gains, nor do his afflictions make him despair - for he knows that they were decreed long before they happened to him, even before he was created....'<sup>6</sup>

Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya (d. 1350), one of the greatest scholarly writers on *nafs*, stressed that the above did not reflect three independent entities. Rather they were states which could change from one to the other, aiming for the *nafs al-mutma'inna* as a final 'aim of perfection...'<sup>7</sup> In order for this to occur, a person needed to serve God as laid down in the scriptures, which were revealed through the prophets.

## GUIDANCE IS PROVIDED

Though separated from Ibn Qayyim by many centuries, the prominent 20th century Egyptian Islamist Sayyid Qutb (d. 1966) reminds us of the enduring relevance to many Muslims of literalist exegesis. He comments upon Chapter 114 of the Qur'an, stressing each person's responsibility to follow the guidance given him, and the calamitous result of not doing so. Though the agent of evil seems formidable, it is easy for a person to ward off his temptations, simply by seeking refuge with God:

'Though [Allah] has permitted Satan to attack, He has supreme power over him and He has also provided guidance for man. Allah leaves to Satan only those who neglect Him their Lord, Sovereign and Deity, but those who live

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6. Al-Tabari: *Jami' al-Bayan an Ta'wil Ay al-Qur'an*, vol. 13, Bulaq 1323/1905, cited in A. Afifi al-Akiti, "The Meaning of Nafs", <https://www.ummah.com/forum/forum/library/islamic-lectures-reminders/491030-the-meaning-of-nafs>, copied 20 July 2019.

7. *Madarij as-Şalikin fi Manazili Iyyaka Na'budu wa Iyyaka Nasta'in*, vol. 1, 308, cited in al-Akiti, "Meaning".

in consciousness of Him are safe and protected against his intimidations and incitements.<sup>8</sup>

## DEBATES ABOUT THE NATURE OF GOD

Such contemporary thinkers as al-Banna and Qutb looked for inspiration to the medieval literalist Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328), who claimed that 'man's purpose is not to know [God], but to obey Him.'<sup>9</sup> Ibn Taymiyya had little time for Islamic philosophers who argued that human reasoning could uncover eternal truths about God.<sup>10</sup> Abul A`la Mawdudi (d. 1979) writes: 'the sphere of human perceptions as against the vastness of this great universe is not even comparable to a drop of water as against the ocean.'<sup>11</sup> Some questions seemed to be taboo, according to the literalists. A much-debated example was whether God's attributes were integral to His essence (*dhat*) or were additional to it. The Patani Malay scholar Dawud al-Fatani (d. 1847) draws on the Egyptian Shafi'i scholar Muhammad al-Suhaymi (d. 1764) in writing as follows:

'It is not required... to discuss the attributes [of God] and their relations, whether they are the *dhat* or not. In fact, the Companions of the Prophet and their followers themselves abstained from addressing such issues. [Indeed they] forbade discussion of them. It is better and much safer for us not to discuss something which is beyond our intellectual ability.'<sup>12</sup>

Thus in the view of the literalists, a person is a created human being, distinguishable from Allah in every significant respect, created not to wonder why but rather to serve Allah and to follow His guidance as contained in the sacred Scripture and the revealed Law. A person becomes whole by serving Allah and following His guidance.

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8. Sayyid Qutb, *In the Shade of the Qur'an* Vol. 30, London, 1979, 366

9. J. A. Williams, *Islam*, London, 1961, 206.

10. Williams, *Islam*, 209-10.

11. Abul-A`la Mawdudi, *The Meaning of the Qur'an*, commentary on *Surah* 72, [http://www.unn.ac.uk/societies/islamic/quran/intro/i072.htm#H\\_072\\_3](http://www.unn.ac.uk/societies/islamic/quran/intro/i072.htm#H_072_3)

12. *Al-Durr al-Thamin*, cited in M. F. Bin Abdul Mukti, *The Development of Kalam in the Malay World: The Teaching of Shaykh Dawud al-Fatani on the Attributes of God*, PhD dissertation, Univ. of Birmingham, 2001, 148.

## VIEWS OF THE REASON-BASED SCHOLARS

How do reason-based scholars answer the question: 'What makes a person whole?' Al-Hasan al-Basri (642-728) was an early rationalist thinker who agreed essentially with the earlier-stated view of the purpose for mankind's creation. He commented '[God] ordered them to worship Him which is why He created them.' He nevertheless allowed the individual person a considerable measure of free will, presenting reason-based arguments as follows: 'God would not have created them for a purpose and then come between them and (the purpose) because He does not do harm to His servants.'<sup>13</sup>

## THE INDIVIDUAL'S RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD AND SOCIETY

The Indonesian theologian Jalaluddin Rakhmat adds another dimension to the rationalist quest: 'All Muslims feel that Islam is not just about regulating the relationship between mankind and God. All groups agree, both fundamentalists and liberals, that in our religion there must be a relationship between the individual and God, but one must still be cognizant that one is part of a society. What then becomes a challenge is to formulate our position in the midst of that society.'<sup>14</sup>

## GOD IS TRANSCENDENT

Views emphasizing a relationship between the individual and God such as articulated by Jalaluddin Rakhmat might run the risk of reducing God in his majestic transcendence. The modern Muslim academic Professor Mahmoud Abu-Saud seems to anticipate and address this in the following reason-based approach to transcendence:

'(a) God, the sole Creator of all beings, the Lord and the Owner of everything, the Absolute and the Ultimate; (b) the human community as an

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<sup>13</sup>. Cited in A. Rippin & J. Knappert, *Textual sources for the Study of Islam*, Chicago, 1986, 116.

<sup>14</sup>. Jalaluddin Rakhmat, "Tentang Syariat, Islam Fundamentalis dan Liberal", *Tempo Interaktif*, 11 December 2000.

entity integrated in the cosmos; (c) the human individual who is ordained to be responsible for himself, his collectivity and his environment; (d) Man is made of matter and spirit. He attains cognition by means of the logistics of his meditative faculty and the awareness of his spirituality; (e) the revealed standard of values, commandments and basic criteria which regulate, govern and guide human behaviour.<sup>15</sup>

Abu-Saud's final point emphasizes guidance and acts as a brake on the risk of overstating human freedom. Abu-Saud expands God's purposes in creating man beyond the simple idea of creating man for worship. He argues that the first purpose is indeed to worship God. The second is to represent God in the guardianship over the creation; man is selected for this role rather than any other creature as only man has the required faculties. Finally, man is created 'to cause growth on earth and make it more resourceful for his own benefit, welfare and prosperity.'<sup>16</sup>

## ISLAMIC RESPONSES TO TWO CONTEMPORARY ISSUES

We will conclude with a consideration of two topics of contemporary debate, which pertain to the issue of the concept of person.

### a) Contraception: Prevention of a Person

Muslims no less than Christians have been challenged by certain ethical issues which involve human medical intervention in domains traditionally seen as the preserve of God. Muslim scholars and thinkers are facing increasing questions such as 'should human beings interfere via contraception with the God-given process which creates life?' Some conservative Muslim theologians and groups who lean towards literalism question contraception, citing Qur'anic verses such as:

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<sup>15</sup>. Mahmoud Abu-Saud, "Economics Within Transcendence", *Islamica* vol. 1, no. 2 (March 1993), 6

<sup>16</sup>. Abu-Saud, "Economics", 6

Q. 11:6 "There is no moving creature on earth but its sustenance dependeth on Allah."<sup>17</sup>

Their concerns are several. First, by practicing uncontrolled contraception, humans may be seen to be derogating the role of God. Second, as suggested in somewhat conspiratorial terms by the British Islamist group *Al-Muhajiroun*: 'the idea of birth control propagated [sic] nowadays stretches far back to a historical and an ideological conspiracy which the disbelievers concocted against the Muslims for fear of the rapid demographic growth of the Islamic *Ummah*, which was threatening their objectives, their areas of influence and their interests... Indeed the growing birthrate of the Muslims does not only concern the Jews, but the whole world, for their proliferation would make them a major force.'<sup>18</sup>

Abu Fadl Mohsin Ebrahim,<sup>19</sup> who belongs broadly within the camp of the literalists, is willing to exercise some flexibility on the question of contraceptive use, writing as follows:

'...where pregnancy may injure the health of the woman or may even threaten her life, the higher purpose of protecting life... would prevail, requiring a woman to make use of contraceptive devices to protect her health or life.'

His next statement points us clearly in the direction of his primary points of reference and suggests a measure of discomfort which he feels regarding contraceptive use: 'The use of contraceptive devices for other reasons by mutual consent between the husband and wife is *makruh* (undesirable, improper)... but not necessarily *haram* (forbidden) under the *shari'ah*.'<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup>. Cf. the Islamist group *Al-Muhajiroun*'s statement "Islamic Verdict on Contraception", <http://www.almuhajiroun.com/Islamic%20Topics/Islamic%20Fiqh/Contraception.htm>, copied January 2003. Reproduced at <https://www.facebook.com/Shariah4Mauritius/posts/2002265896722278>, copied 17 August 2019.

<sup>18</sup>. *Al-Muhajiroun*: "Islamic Verdict on Contraception"

<sup>19</sup>. This scholar took his PhD under Isma'il al-Faruqi at Temple University and teaches at the University of Durban Westville, South Africa.

<sup>20</sup>. Abu Fadl Mohsin Ebrahim, *Abortion, Birth Control and Surrogate Parenting: An Islamic Perspective*, Indianapolis, American Trust Publications, 1989, 102



With the increasing availability of birth control methods, questions about the acceptability of using contraception are increasingly evident in online fatwa sites. For example, the fatwa site of *Darul Ifta, Darul Uloom Deoband*, received the following question:<sup>21</sup> “I am a medical student. I am planning to *nikah* next year with a girl who is completing her education. At the time of *nikah*... two years will be left [for her studies] & after that she will come to live with me ... my question is can we meet & do sex during these two years?”. The response from this conservative group was quite curt: “(1) Yes, you can meet and have sexual relation after *nikah*. (2) It is against the will of *Shari’ah* to use contraceptive method without exigent need.”<sup>22</sup>

The *Darul Fiqh* online platform, launched in 2011 by British trained scholar Mufti Faraz Adam, would similarly be considered as leaning towards literalism. On the question of whether contraception is permissible in Islam, Mufti Adam argues for two macro-types of contraception: irreversible contraception (vasectomy and hysterectomy) and reversible contraception (barrier methods and hormonal methods). He argues that the former is almost always unacceptable under *Shari’ah* Law, whereas the latter is acceptable under certain circumstances: health issues, while travelling, impending divorce and so forth.<sup>23</sup>

Reason-based scholars, however, are more relaxed about contraceptive use. Fazlur Rahman ridicules as “infantile” the use of Qur’anic references to God’s power and promise such as Q. 11:6 above: “The Qur’an certainly does not mean to say that God provides every living creature with sustenance whether that creature is capable of procuring sustenance for itself or not.”<sup>24</sup> Abdulaziz Sachedina<sup>25</sup> prescribes only the broadest of limits

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<sup>21</sup> Edited for improved English style

<sup>22</sup> Fatwa: 1695/1387/D=1430, <http://www.darulifta-deoband.com/home/en/qa/16023>, copied 17 August 2019

<sup>23</sup> Mufti Faraz Adam, “Is contraception permissible in Islam?”, 2012, <http://darulfiqh.com/is-contraception-permissible-in-islam/>, copied 17 August 2019

<sup>24</sup> “The Right To Contraception And Abortion In Ten World Religions”, [http://www.religiousconsultation.org/islam\\_contraception\\_abortion\\_in\\_SacredChoices.htm](http://www.religiousconsultation.org/islam_contraception_abortion_in_SacredChoices.htm), copied January 2003

in affirming that ‘birth control is... permissible if the prescribed method does not have any adverse impact on the health of either spouse and if it does not lead to permanent sterilization.’<sup>26</sup>

Nevertheless, at the macro level, both literalists and reason-based scholars are broadly in agreement on the issue of accepting a measure of contraceptive use, though more conservative scholars impose stricter limits. Above all, there is no suggestion that contraceptive use is a matter of personal choice which individuals can take on the basis of considerations of pleasure and sexual fulfillment, especially outside wedlock, as is widespread in the West.

#### b) Abortion: Termination of a Person

What about the thorny issue of terminating life, especially abortion, which is such a controversial topic in the West? The literalists point to Scripture in seeking a solution. Abu Fadl Mohsin Ebrahim reminds his audience that ‘Analysis of the ethical issues in bio-medical technology should be derived from the guidance of Allah, Who alone has absolute knowledge of good and bad.’<sup>27</sup>

Medical specialist Shahid Athar (1945-2018)<sup>28</sup> points to several Islamic verses as suggesting a prohibition on abortion:

Q. 17:31 Kill not your children for fear of want: We shall provide sustenance for them as well as for you. Verily the killing of them is a great sin.

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<sup>25</sup>. A Tanzanian-born American citizen who is a Professor in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Virginia

<sup>26</sup>. Abdulaziz Sachedina, “Muslim Beliefs and Practices Affecting Health Care”, <http://www.people.virginia.edu/~aas/issues/care.htm>

<sup>27</sup>. Ebrahim, *Abortion*, 101

<sup>28</sup>. Born in India and educated at the University of Karachi, Pakistan, Dr Athar specialised in endocrinology in the USA and served as Clinical Associate Professor at Indiana University School of Medicine. He authored seven books and many published articles on medical and Islamic topics.

However, in unpacking the issue, Athar concludes that where the mother's life is in danger, abortion is acceptable as a last resort. Under any other circumstances, says Athar, abortion of a viable fetus is equivalent to infanticide.<sup>29</sup>

Nevertheless, Muslim scholars debate this issue at length. Islamic Law schools differ in the rigidity and flexibility of their interpretations. The Hanafi School of law takes the most liberal approach, allowing the woman the right to abort under certain circumstances without her husband's consent, while the Maliki school of law prohibits abortion under all circumstances. Ja'fari (*Shi'i*) jurists tend to take a middle position. After the Iranian Revolution of 1979, abortion was made illegal, though a decade later it was permitted under strict conditions, where the mother's life was in danger or where the fetus was abnormal.<sup>30</sup>

The General Authority for Islamic Affairs and Endowments (*Awqaf*) of the United Arab Emirates has been offering call-in fatwa advice in English<sup>31</sup> since late 2010 and in Arabic<sup>32</sup> since several years earlier.<sup>33</sup> In late 2016 the service employed fifty religious scholars, including three women, to issue fatwas to callers. One caller explained that she had previously had two stillborn babies and was pregnant again. Her doctor indicated that the fetus was experiencing severe complications and was likely to die. The woman asked whether Islam would permit her to have an abortion. One of the female religious scholars employed by the *awqaf* service, Moroccan scholar Sheikha Naeema, advised the woman as follows, suggesting strict limits on circumstances when abortion is acceptable: "If the fetus is severely ill and will not survive, you may have an abortion... You must take advice from

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<sup>29</sup> Shahid Athar, "The Islamic Perspective in Medical Ethics", in Shahid Athar (ed.), *Islamic Perspectives in Medicine*, Indianapolis, American Trust Publications, 1993, p. 190.

<sup>30</sup> Ziba Mir-Hosseini, *Islam and Gender: The Religious Debate in Contemporary Iran*, London, Tauris, 1999, pp. 39, 41.

<sup>31</sup> <https://www.awqaf.gov.ae/en/Pages/Default.aspx>, copied 18 August 2019

<sup>32</sup> <https://www.awqaf.gov.ae/ar/Pages/default.aspx>, copied 18 August 2019

<sup>33</sup> Anwar Ahmad, "Awqaf's online fatwa service also on its English website", *Khaleej Times*, January 11, 2011, <https://www.khaleejtimes.com/nation/general/awqaf-s-online-fatwa-service-also-on-its-english-website>

your physician - he will guide you. Religion does not conflict with medicine.”<sup>34</sup>

The reason-based thinker Abdulaziz Sachedina allows a greater measure of flexibility, commenting as follows: ‘Abortion is permitted where the mother's health is in imminent danger. In addition, before the fetus attains personhood, that is, during the first hundred and twenty days, abortion is permissible if the woman would stop lactating for another child. Rape is also a valid reason for abortion if there is a fear of psychological damage and problems that could lead to physical symptoms.’<sup>35</sup>

Nevertheless, there is no clear divide between literalist and reason-based scholars on this issue as Muslim scholars are still reflecting on the question of abortion though the strong tendency is towards clear restrictions. In no case is there a prominent group of Islamic thinkers who argue for abortion on demand. Both literalists and the more reason-based theologians would see such a policy as hijacking what rightfully belongs in the domain of God; i.e. the creation and sustaining of human life.

## CONCLUSION

In discussing the concept of person in Islam, we might ask whether we should start with human beings or with God. The literalists would respond that of course we must start with God as all things start with God, and indeed, the question itself should not even be posed. Mankind might be the ‘crown of creation’, but the ultimate authority of God is beyond question: ‘... every human being has the right to be born, the right to be, and the right to live as long as Allah... permits.’<sup>36</sup>

In answer to the question ‘What makes a person whole?’, Muslims of various ideological persuasions would probably state that wholeness is

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<sup>34</sup>. Hamida Ghafour, “The fatwa hotline: ‘We have heard everything’”, *The Guardian*, 20 August 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/aug/20/heard-everything-women-fatwa-hotline-abu-dhabi>, copied 18 August 2019

<sup>35</sup>. Abdulaziz Sachedina, “Muslim Beliefs and Practices Affecting Health Care”, <http://www.people.virginia.edu/~aas/issues/care.htm>

<sup>36</sup>. Ebrahim, *Abortion*, 102

achieved by following the revealed Scripture and Law, not by engaging in navel-gazing. The focus should be on God, not people.

In response to a quest to define 'personhood', a technical answer from within Islam might be as follows: 'Islam holds that Man consists of two essential elements, one material which is the body, the other spiritual which is the soul (*nafs*). Life exists in the human body as long as the soul is joined to it, and it ceases when the soul departs from the body.'<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup>Zaki Badawi, "Organ Transplant", <http://www.ummah.net/bicnews/Articles/organ.htm>, copied May 2001

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