In the name of Allah, the Compassionate, the Merciful.

Synopsis of the Friday Sermon delivered by Ameer Mustapha Elturk on January 29, 2016:

Synopsis - Dawah with Insight - Part 13

Know Thyself – The Islamic view on the Human Psyche

Adam and Eve settle on earth and begin the human experience. Through them, the process of procreation begins and the human race is born. “O people! Be mindful of God who created you from a single soul, and from it created its mate and from the two spread a multitude of men and women.” (al-Nisa’, 4:1)

We find ourselves born into this world having no choice in the matter. If the goal in life is success and happiness, the goal for the next life, for a believer, must be salvation. What must we then do to attain salvation?

We must begin by knowing ourselves, knowing our real selves – according to the Ancient Greek aphorism, “Know Thyself.” “O You who believe! Be mindful of God, and let every soul look to what it has sent forth for tomorrow; and fear God, for God is well aware of everything you do. And do not be like those who forget God, so God made them forget themselves (their souls): they are the rebellious ones.” (al-Hasr, 59:18,19)

The basic philosophy of the Qur’an regarding the human individual, as we learned, is that the human personality is a composite of two components, the animal and the spiritual components. Two fully conscious and independent beings, the animal being and the spiritual being, mysteriously joined together to form the human being or the human soul. In other words, man is a composite of a body and a spirit.

On the one hand, we have animal characteristics. All the instincts found in animals are present in the human being. Self-preservation and preservation of the species are common to both animals and humans. Just like animals, humans have the innate desire to stay alive and an instinctive tendency to preserve their own species. Two basic and important necessities for self-preservation are food and water. A human being cannot survive without these two essentials. Similarly, the innate attraction between the opposite sexes is put in place for the continuation of the human race, i.e. preservation of the species.

In every human being there are animal characteristics and a divine spirit. This concept is explicated in the Qur’an, “And mention (O Prophet) when your Lord said to the angels, ‘I will create a mortal (bashar) out of dried clay, formed from dark mud.’” (Al-Hijr, 15:28) This is the human body or the animal aspect of man. The next ayah presents the other aspect, the divine spirit, “And when I have fashioned him and breathed into him of My spirit, fall down before him in prostration!” (Al-Hijr, 15:29) The Qur’an calls this aspect of the human personality the spirit (ruh). Philosophers call it “the Self” thus “Know Thyself.”

It is this soul people have a tendency to forget, “And do not be like those who forget God, so God made them forget themselves (their souls).” The entire philosophy of the self of Sir Muhammad Iqbal (Philosopher/Poet of Islam) is based on this ayah.

One may ask, does anyone forget his own body? Does anyone forget to eat? The requirements of the body are always fulfilled. When the body falls ill, we seek treatment. In truth, no one is unmindful of his or her animal existence. It is the inner self, the real self, or the spirit (ruh) within them that they have forgotten. It is the spiritual aspect of our being that is ignored.

Man’s essential nature is divine. It is lost due to his animal inclinations and ignorance. As described by ancient philosophers and sages, “Man in his ignorance is wrapped in the material sheaths that encompasses the true self.” It is on the basis of this reality Adam became the vicergerent (khilafah) of Allah (SWT) and the angels were commanded to prostrate before him. They prostrated before him because of the divine spirit that was breathed into him. All angels, including Jibril, Israfeel, Mika’il and Izraeil, fell down in prostration honoring this unique creature that possessed the divine spirit.
As mentioned above, both the human spirit and the human body make the human soul or *al-nafs*. The Qur’an identifies three types of souls, 1) The inciting soul (*al-Nafs al-ʾAmmārah*), 2) The self-accusing soul (*al-Nafs al-Lawwamah*); and 3) The contented soul (*al-Nafs al-Muṭmaʾinnah*).

Modern psychology concurs with the fourteen-century-old concept of the human psyche or human personality. Sigmund Freud, who is regarded as the father of psychoanalysis, articulated the above mentioned three types of souls as the id, ego and super ego, all developing at different stages of our lives. According to Freud, “The personality of the newborn child is all id and only later does it develop an ego and super-ego.”

According to the Qur’an, the lowest of these souls is the inciting nafs (*al-Nafs al-ʾAmmārah*), the soul that incites us to commit evil. This type of soul is directly related to the lower baser self of the human personality. It requires immediate sensual gratification. The instincts for survival are blind and demand instant fulfillment and satisfaction. This is what modern psychology calls the id. The id is the impulsive (and unconscious) part of our psyche that responds directly and immediately to the instincts.1

An example of the id in action is the story of Yusuf (AS) when he met the wife of al-Aziz, the chief minister of Egypt. Upon first sight of Yusuf (AS), she immediately fell in love with him and ultimately seduced him, although her attempts at seduction were thwarted. The Qur’an describes the intense love and lust the wife of al-Aziz had for Yusuf, “And she, in whose house he was (living), sought to seduce him. She closed the doors and said, ‘Come to me.’ He replied, ‘God forbid! He (your husband) is my master who has made my stay honorable. Truly, wrongdoers will never prosper.’” (Yusuf, 12:23)

The lustful desire and sexual appetite is so compelling that it spares no one except those upon whom Allah (SWT) bestows His Grace, “And indeed she did desire him and he would have inclined to her desire had he not seen the evidence of his Lord. Thus (it was), that We might turn away evil and fornication from him. Surely, he was one of Our sincere slaves.” (Yusuf, 12:24)

A prophet of Allah (SWT) who was spared from such an act does, however, admit how potent the sexual urge is. He confessed, “I do not claim to be innocent myself. Verily, the human soul is inclined towards evil, save those upon whom my Lord bestows His grace. Verily, my Lord is Forgiving, Merciful” (Yusuf, 12:53). The human “self” is not invincible against temptation. It certainly inclines to commit evil.

We must not forget that prophets are also humans. Prophet Muhammad (SAW) was asked to explain this fact, “Say (O Prophet) I am a human being (bashar) like you, (but) revelation has come to me that your God is One God” (al-Kahf, 18:110). The strong connection and constant communication with their Lord enabled them to curb their carnal desires.

The second type of soul is the self-accusing soul (*al-Nafs al-Lawwamah*). This is the soul that is conscious of its imperfections. At this stage the conscience is awakened. The giant spirit within is stimulated and the self accuses the soul of its intended evil actions. The soul is reproached and scolded when an evil act is committed. Hasan al-Basri (RA) said, “You always see the believer censuring himself and saying things like ‘Did I want this? Why did I do that? Was this better than that?’”

We are reminded by this type of soul in surat al-Qiyamah when Allah (SWT) swore by the anticipated Day of Resurrection, “Nay, I swear by the Day of Resurrection; and nay! I swear by the self-reproaching soul.” (al-Qiyamah, 75:1,2)

This is the stage wherein the self is fully aware and cognizant of its reality. The knowledge of good and evil is infused in the human soul from inception, “(Consider) the human self, and how it is formed. And how it is inspired with (the consciousness of) its evil and its self-righteousness” (al-Shams, 91:7,8). The soul recognizes its weaknesses and desires perfection. The soul of a believer always repents and seeks forgiveness from God.

At this stage there is an inner struggle between the lowest soul and the self-accusing soul. The closer one is to God the more difficult the struggle becomes. It is for this reason Muhammad (SAW) called it the supreme jihad. It is the clash between the animal instincts “*al-nafs al-ʾAmmārah*,” the commanding or passionate soul that incites people to evil, versus the desire to obey and please God. The Prophet (SAW) was once asked, which jihad is most supreme? He (SAW) replied, “To strive against your own soul in order to obey God.”

This is the supreme jihad. It is that inner battle against all evil forces that prevent one from achieving the higher goal. Those who resist, struggle and wage jihad against their passion, urges and desires in order to obey God’s commands are promised guidance, “As for those who strive hard (jahadu) in Our cause, We shall certainly guide them to Our paths, for God is indeed with those who do good.” (The Spider, 29:69)

1 http://www.simplypsychology.org/psyche.html
It is through individual development (tarbiyah) and purification of the soul (tazkiyah) as well as the frequent remembrance of God (zikr), one may reach the next and final stage, the soul that is at peace.

The third type of soul is the self-contented soul (al-Nafs al-Mutma’inah). This is the stage of maturity in belief. At this level, one’s entire life is dedicated to serving God. They declare what Muhammad (SAW) was instructed, “Say, ‘Verily, my prayers and sacrifice, my life and death, are all for God, Lord of the worlds.’” (al-An’am, 6:162)

At this level, one is firm in their faith. They are in total control of their animal instincts. They are beyond the world of matter, focused on the next world to come and are absolutely satisfied with the Will of God. The soul is at peace even at times of hardship and adversity. In praising such people, the Prophet (SAW) says, “How amazing is the affair of the believer. There is good for him in everything and that is for no one but the believer. If good times come his way, he expresses gratitude to Allah and that is good for him, and if hardship comes his way, he endures it patiently and that is better for him.” (Muslim)

The soul is no longer in search of the Truth. It finds Him and longs for departure, “O you tranquil soul! Return to your Lord, well-pleased (with Him), well-pleasing (to Him). Enter, then, with my (true) servants, enter My Paradise” (al-Fajr, 89:27-30). This is the basic philosophy of the human soul according to the Qur’an.

In conclusion, there can be three possibilities concerning the animal and the spiritual being of man. One, either the body overtakes the spirit fulfilling only the demands of the carnal desires allowing the soul to commit evil (al-Nafs al-Ammarah), or, two, the body and the spirit are at par with one another. The soul is in a tug of war between the body and the spirit. The soul is in a constant struggle between fulfilling the demands of the body and the demands of the spirit. This is the status of the self-accusing soul (al-Nafs al-Lawwamah). The third possibility is that the spirit overwhelms the body and rises above the animalistic nature of man. The process of the purification of the soul continues until it reaches the status of the self-contented soul (al-Nafs al-Mutma’inah).

Comparing the three states of souls with the three levels of our faith; Islam, Iman and Ihsan, one may conclude that each of those souls correspond to a particular level of faith. Muslims just like any other humans share the same carnal desires and unless one possesses real faith (iman), we fall victim to our passions and find ourselves subdued by our evil inclinations ((al-Nafs al-Ammarah). Once one attains the level of real faith, the soul begins to censure the individual toward inclination to commit evil (al-Nafs al-Lawwamah).

The last level of faith is Ihsan, which is the highest level one may attain. It is, according to Muhammad (SAW), “To worship God as though you see Him, and while you don’t see Him, then indeed He sees you.” It is that inner dimension of faith that helps the soul become at peace (al-Nafs al-Mutma’inah).

Those who are concerned with their status and are willing to reach the stage of a self-contented soul may ask, how do I get there? The answer is given to us by Allah (SWT), “Those who believe and do good deeds will not be blamed for what they have consumed [in the past], so long as they have taqwa (are mindful of God), believe and do good deeds, then they have (more) taqwa (awareness of God) and believe, then they have (even more) taqwa and devoted themselves to excellence (in worship—Ihsan). And God loves al-Muhsineen (those who reach the state of spiritual excellence).” (al-Ma’idah, 5:93). Thus, God-consciousness (taqwa) is the only driving force that can help us endure the struggles in this world and draw us close to Allah (SWT) satisfied.

In the end, one only suffers when falling prey to one’s carnal desires for temporary worldly pleasure through illicit means. According to Prophet Muhammad (SAW), “An intelligent and wise person is the one who subdues his soul (al-Nafs al-Ammarah) and does noble deeds to benefit him after death.”

Salvation in the hereafter is reserved for those who purify their soul, “Successful indeed is the one who purifies his whole self” (al-Shams, 91:9). May Allah (SWT) help us attain the status of the self-contented soul (al-Nafs al-Mutma’inah). Ameen.