

A Christian Response to Reincarnation

Have I lived before? What lies beyond the other side of the grave? Shall I come back again in the same form of existence? If death is the end of life; what is the purpose of it?

Several cults, especially those that are rooted in Hinduism - such as Hare Krishna and Theosophy - believe that the human spirit returns after death and lives on earth again as another being. This teaching is called reincarnation and is becoming increasingly popular in the Western world.

Do you know that Sir Winston Churchill is supposed to have been a reincarnation of his ancestor, John Churchill, first Duke of Marlborough? His characteristics and many of his circumstances are said to have been the same. For example, both Churchills had been adventurous opportunists and rebels against authority.

Some claim that Napoleon Bonaparte was either a reincarnation of Julius Caesar or Hannibal. Napoleon had many traits in common with Caesar, both in appearance, characteristics, and parallel lives in war. But say others, Caesar left a permanent mark on the world. Hannibal nor Napoleon never did. Even the Code Napoleon was based on Old Roman Law.

Some of the greatest thinkers of the world wrote about reincarnation - Plato, Cicero, Origen, Lessing, Albert Schweitzer, Leslie Weatherhead and Paul Tillich. The great philosopher Plato taught that the soul is pre-existent. At death the body simply disintegrates, but the soul returns to the heavens, if its course of action has been just and honourable, and if not, it must appear again in some other form of existence - such as another man or an animal.

"Know that if you become worse you will go to the worse souls," wrote Plato, "or if better to the better. and if in every succession of life or death you will do and suffer what like many fitly suffer at the hands of like.

Cicero linked education and reincarnation together. (This thinking is still prevalent today in both Western and Eastern views on reincarnation). Knowledge is brought back, even though one may not remember what it is what has been learned, each time one returns to the earth. So we can take advantage of the lessons learned in previous lives.

Cicero said: "It is again proof of men knowing most things before birth that when mere children they grasp innumerable facts with such speed as to show that they are not taking them in for the first time but remembering and recalling them."

Origen, one of the early church-fathers, believed in the pre-existence of souls and held reincarnation to be "a very plausible doctrine." He wrote in *De Principiis*: "Every soul comes into this world strengthened by the victories or weakened by the defects of the previous life. Its place in this world as a vessel appointed to honour or dishonour is determined by its previous merits or demerits. Its work in this world determines its place in the world which is to follow this."

The famous German writer and dramatist Gotthold Ephraim Lessing believed in the trans-migration of souls (reincarnation) as one life-time was not considered sufficient for a human being to come to full fruition.

Numerous authors have had reincarnation as one of their themes. Some of the famous are among them - William Blake, Thomas Carlyle, Dostoevsky, Voltaire and du Maurier. In John Buchan's *The Path of the King*, the hero withdraws for mental safety, on account of his suffering, to his earlier lives and finds in them the reason for his failures in the present one.

The Bible has been combed of course for proof for the doctrine of reincarnation. Jesus is said to have demonstrated "precognition" when he saw Nathaneal under the fig tree (John 1:48). The apostle John, when exiled on the isle of Patmos, underwent some type of psychedelic experience akin to "blowing your mind." A favourite proof text is Matthew 17:10-13, the story of Elijah and Moses appearing on the Mount of Transfiguration.

Eastern

The doctrine of reincarnation is peculiarly Eastern. It has remained a vital part of Hindu and Buddhist life. A man's spiritual destiny is determined by what he does in this life on earth. Earth and earth alone is the scene of man's struggle. The deeds are not just combined acts, but include every thought, feeling, impulse, imagination, not only in the present life, but also deeds done in all past lives. The path of a good man leads to a new body appropriate to a new and higher realm of being. The opposite is true for the evil man.

Reincarnation is closely associated with the doctrine of karma, which teaches that "a man of good deeds becomes good, and a man of evil deeds becomes evil." The cycle of reincarnation ends when a man becomes one with the divine impersonal Being and so reaches at last the end of his journey. His individual soul becomes dissolved in the All-Soul.

In Hinduism, salvation is by human merit and good works. Each individual has endless chances to be saved as Hinduism knows no eternal damnation. However long it may take, ultimately every man will receive liberation, regardless how many lower or higher returns to life he may have experienced.

Why is this ancient doctrine. gaining popularity in the West with so many having little understanding of Buddhism, Hinduism or ancient Greek philosophy?

The doctrine of reincarnation offers comfort and hope in the question of death. Death is seen as leaving as it were school for the holidays and returning for the next term to mark further advancement in the lessons of life and the way of perfection. Of course, this hope is only valid if one is reborn into a higher form of life in the next existence.

Numerous authors stress that only the doctrine of reincarnation provides an answer to the injustices multitudes experience in life. Who will revenge innocent victims? Man craves for justice to redress the wrong. Rebirth provides a way to settle accounts, both credits and debits. It also gives a chance to prove oneself through living in the next existence a decent and respectable life.

Response

What is the Christian position on reincarnation? Reincarnation is contradictory to the message of Jesus Christ. The Church recognized this already centuries ago. The Second Council of Constantinople in A.D. 553 decreed an anathema against it.

The Bible teaches that human life is decisive and wholly unrepeatable. Each human being, as God's image-bearer, is unique. We are responsible to God for our actions in the here and now. Death is not a transfer to a possibly higher existence depending on our behaviour on earth. The wicked, rich man in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus could not return to earth again. The Bible says: "...it is appointed to man once to die, but after this the judgment" (Hebrews 9:27).

The Christian confesses that God's justice prevails. He may not be able to understand God's ways, but he believes that all things "work together for good to them that love God" (Rom. 8:28). God's grace works even in the worst of circumstances. Suffering has meaning in the light of the cross of Christ. And we may not take retribution for injustice into our own hands. "Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord" (Rom. 12:19).

The future blessedness of believers is not merely the continued existence of the soul. The believer looks forward to the resurrection of the body. He shall become like the risen and ascended Christ. "When he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is" (1 John 3:2).

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