

Reincarnation

By Eric Pement

Introduction

Reincarnation is the popular belief that after death the human soul or inner self leaves its former body and is eventually reborn into a new body. An earlier term is *transmigration of the soul*, indicating that the soul can migrate from one body to another. The ancient Greeks called it *metempsychosis* (“after ensoulment”) and *palingenesis* (“repeated birth”).¹ Reincarnationist ideas have appeared in many lands, including island cultures having no contact with religions from the mainland.

Though Greek philosopher and mathematician Pythagoras (570–495 BC) left no writings, his students claimed he remembered four previous lives and promoted metempsychosis. The works of Plato (428–348 BC) have been well preserved; he taught reincarnation, as did his Greek successors. The theory of reincarnation flourished in four religions from India: Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism. It is not in the oldest Hindu scriptures (the Vedas), but it appears in the Upanishads (about 700 BC) and later works.² All four religions differ significantly in how they explain reincarnation.

In Europe and America, the details were modified perhaps to sound more acceptable to Western ears, but the core theme remained: the soul is immortal and death is not final—only a recurring transition in an endless cycle of birth, death, and rebirth into a new form. Many reincarnationists believe that when one reaches sufficient spiritual illumination, the cycle of rebirth will cease and the soul will reunite with God, Brahman, or whatever they deem Ultimate Reality.

Fundamental Questions

Beliefs about reincarnation vary widely. Perhaps the best way to focus the topic is to ask a few questions.

What is reincarnated? Most reincarnationists believe we have a soul, a spirit, or a personal identity that can persist after death. Surprisingly, classical Buddhism does not believe the soul or one’s personal “self” exists to go into another body. This view is required by the Buddhist doctrine of *anatta* (literally, “no soul”), so after death there is no enduring “self” to exist in another body.³

Yet Buddhists believe in reincarnation! So what is it that reincarnates? Within Buddhism, the fundamental human problem is desire (cravings, lusts, attachments). The goal of Buddhism is to achieve a state of desirelessness. If we do not become awakened or enlightened, our cravings will inhabit someone else’s body after death. It will not be *us* in that body, but those desires will persist. (Note: Buddhism takes on many forms, so there are *also* Buddhists who reject the doctrine of *anatta* and believe each person has a soul.)

Apart from Buddhism, reincarnationists typically hold that human souls are eternal and uncreated fragments or temporary nodes of a larger “oversoul” or divine essence, on a long journey from original oneness with God or Brahman, passing through various lower life forms, eventually to merge again with the universal God or ultimate reality. Everyone is on a journey, as the Hare Krishnas would say, “back to Godhead,” with reincarnation being the means to this end.

Reincarnated into what? In tribal cultures, the spirits of the dead can migrate into animals, trees, lakes, clouds, or mountains.⁴ Westerners prefer reincarnation only into humans (not necessarily of the same gender); the idea of being “reborn” as an inanimate object is distasteful. In traditional Hinduism, souls migrate only into living creatures (including plants),

not as inanimate objects. The Jains believe one can be reborn as an insect. Jain devotees avoid stepping on ants and wear face masks to avoid accidentally inhaling gnats.

Most Westerners deny that we can be reincarnated as animals, insects, or plants. At this juncture, we note that vocabulary will differ. Some writers define *reincarnation* as rebirth in human form, contrasted with *transmigration* as rebirth in non-human form. Others treat the two words as synonyms. Helena Blavatsky, the founder of Theosophy, taught that the “monad” (primitive entity) evolves through vegetable, animal, and human stages, but after reaching human form, it never reverts backward into animal bodies.⁵

Most Westerner reincarnationists believe they will reincarnate only on this planet. However, Hindu teaching holds that one can be reborn with a “subtle body” (invisible spirit body) on a wide range of spiritual planets. According to the Bhagavad-Gita, “Those situated in a mode of goodness gradually go upward to the higher planets; those in the mode of passion live on the earthly planets; and those in the abominable mode of ignorance go down to the hellish worlds.”⁶

Contemporary adherents of Wicca, Scientology, and the “new spirituality” allow for past and future lives as animals and also on other planets. The time gap “between” incarnations varies among its advocates, from occurring immediately to delays lasting hundreds of years.

What makes it all work? Not every religion asks what makes reincarnation occur. For those that do, the most common answer is the Hindu law of *karma*. Reincarnation occurs due to karma, a purported law of cause and effect which demands that souls must suffer for the evils they commit—if not before death, then in a subsequent life. Karma literally means “actions” or “works,” whether good or bad. Though Hinduism has gods and deities, karma does not issue from any single deity, but is somehow above or beyond them. Yet karma is tied to Hindu beliefs, so that performing *yoga* or Hindu rituals adds to one’s “good” karma, while killing animals or violating Hindu holy places increases one’s “bad” karma.

Karma is philosophically useful because we wonder why some are born talented, healthy, or in pleasant surroundings, while others are born crippled, diseased, or in great misery. If karma is true, the inequities of life can be explained partly by one’s deeds in a previous life.

Not all reincarnationists believe in karma. Scientologists, for example, believe most people have had “past lives,” but they shun calling this reincarnation. This is because (to them) the term “reincarnation” necessarily implies a doctrine of karma, and they do not believe in karma, yoga, or the Hindu deities.

Is reincarnation a good thing? Most Westerners think of reincarnation as a “good” thing, giving us an opportunity for spiritual survival over millions of lifetimes, with eons of time to evolve to enlightenment. Put simply, Westerners like the idea of reincarnation.

Surprising to many, most Hindus think of reincarnation as a “bad” thing, something to be avoided. Most Hindus do *not* look forward to another cycle of death and rebirth. They seek an end to the wheel of *samsara* that never seems to stop.⁷ Reincarnation is viewed as a curse because so few ever reach *samadhi*, the state of undifferentiated awareness or total enlightenment. In Hinduism, each successive incarnation is far more likely to bring additional “bad” karma than it is likely to bring one closer to a state of enlightenment.

Reincarnation in the Bible

Reincarnationists sometimes claim that the Bible supports their beliefs. Typically, Galatians 6:7 is cited as teaching the law of karma: “Whatever a person sows, that he will also reap.” It is also common to hear that Jesus taught that John the Baptist was the reincarnation of Elijah (Mt. 11:14, 17:10–13, etc.). Some writers believe Jesus’ disciples were contemplating something like reincarnation by asking what sin a man committed that caused him to be born blind (John 9:2). Advocates have said that reincarnation was originally in the Bible, but was removed by bigoted Church leaders.⁸ They typically hold that the verses cited above escaped the scissors of Christian censors.

Their argument, however, is not based on evidence, but on *missing evidence*. The argument does not use (for example) a rare manuscript of the Gospel of Luke that endorses reincarnation because no such manuscript exists. Instead, it merely assumes the original presence of these teachings, now universally absent. This is a logical fallacy, of course—one might as easily

presume the original presence of leprechauns in the Bible, also removed by prejudiced church leaders.

In response to the Bible's statement about sowing and reaping, this is not speaking of past or future lives. Paul quotes this proverb to remind us that those who pursue things of the "flesh" (sexual or physical appetites, lusts for food, possessions, etc.) will find themselves reaping "corruption" through disease or loss. One remembers Jesus' warning not to lay up treasure on earth, where "moth or rust corrupts" (Mt. 6:19-20). By contrast, those who sow to the Holy Spirit will receive everlasting life (Gal. 6:8). While this passage *does* speak generally of rewards and consequences in both the immediate and distant future, it is *not* teaching about the transmigration of souls into successive embodiments on earth.

In response to the argument that John the Baptist was Elijah reincarnated, based on Jesus' words, "he is Elijah, who was to come" (Mt. 11:14), this statement is a metaphor, like "The Lord is my shepherd" or "God is a consuming fire." It is not intended to be taken literally. Jesus did not say that Elijah's spirit was now in the body of John or that Elijah had been "reborn" as John the Baptist. Indeed, the "real" Elijah, whose history is recorded in 1 Kings 17-21, never actually died. He was taken up alive into heaven (2 Ki. 2:9-15) and appeared alive *as himself* 900 years later with Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration (Mk. 9:2-8). If reincarnation is true, the real Elijah must die before his soul can pass into John the Baptist—but Elijah never died.

In response to the argument about the man born blind, to say the disciples were thinking about reincarnation is pure conjecture. Jesus' disciples did not suggest a chronology for his sin and punishment, and they absolutely did not ask if he sinned in a "previous life"!

There are far more likely explanations for the disciples' question. They could have been wondering whether the man sinned in *this* life, and God in His foreknowledge caused him to be born blind to punish a sin he would later commit; whether the man sinned in the womb before birth;⁹ or whether he sinned as a spirit in heaven.¹⁰ This third suggestion is fraught with theological problems. Even if valid, a belief in a preexistence in heaven before birth is *not* the same as reincarnation.

A Biblical Response

Resurrection: Neither Christianity, Judaism, nor Islam accept reincarnation. Instead, they affirm resurrection, a future event when the dead will rise bodily to give account of their lives to God.¹¹ The Christian faith is crystal clear on this point. The "resurrection of the body" is an article of the Apostle's Creed, affirmed by all branches of Christendom. Admittedly, the New Testament provides more detail than the Old Testament on the afterlife, and the Gospels record Jesus' controversies with the Sadducees, a Jewish sect which denied a future resurrection.¹²

Jesus proved that the Sadducees were wrong and that resurrection was literal in three ways: by appealing to the Torah,¹³ by raising people from the dead (such as Lazarus), and by predicting and accomplishing his own resurrection. The resurrection of Jesus Christ is the "firstfruits" or preliminary harvest of a future, greater event in which God will raise all the dead—both the evil and the good—on the Day of Judgment (John 5:26-29).

The Christian response is grounded in solid proofs beginning with resurrections in the Old Testament, and in the ministry of Jesus Christ and the early Church. When Jesus was raised from the dead, his physical body was transformed and given immortality (he cannot die again).¹⁴ At the return of the Lord Jesus, the believing Christian will be raised immortal (1 Cor. 15:53, 1 Thess. 4:16-17), and a future death will be impossible.

Reincarnation: The Jewish-Christian Scriptures exclude the possibility of reincarnation for multiple reasons. In the beginning, only God existed (Gen. 1:1). Mankind appeared later, the deliberate creation of a personal God. Man is not a fragment, manifestation, or temporary personalization of an impersonal deity. Humanity did not come into existence as a part of God that forgot its divinity (an essential component of most reincarnationist thinking).

Second, humankind is obliged to recognize God, worship, and glorify Him (Rom. 1). The Bible treats man and woman as morally responsible agents and their misdeeds as sin (transgression of God's laws). Indeed, the closer we move to God, the more we become aware of our inability to live up to God's standards. The Hindus who view reincarnation as a hopeless burden are correct in this respect: having additional lives would only increase our debt of sin.

Third, the Bible does not permit a cycle of deaths and rebirth for the same soul. Each person experiences death only once. Hebrews 9:27 says “it is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment,” a stake with prongs on both ends. On the one end, people face death *once*, not repeatedly over multiple lifetimes. On the other, after death comes *judgment*, not a second life or a repeat performance on another planet.

Fourth, the biblical doctrines of *substitutionary atonement* and *justification* exclude the concept of inescapable karma. The traditional reincarnationist believes there can be no forgiveness for his past misdeeds except through suffering and good works in future lives. However, the apostles proclaimed that “through this Man [Jesus] is preached to you the forgiveness of sins; and by him everyone who believes is justified from all things . . .” (Acts 13:38–39). Since the blood of Jesus “cleanses us from all sin” (1 Jn. 1:7), the consequences of karma can be broken.

Fifth, the biblical doctrine of *grace* argues strongly against reincarnationist principles. For example, some may argue that God may use reincarnation to give each soul a “fair chance” to hear the Gospel and accept salvation. God, however, is under no obligation to give anyone a chance to hear the Gospel. The Bible teaches that men are condemned and guilty for their sins and, being truly guilty, deserve God’s wrath (Rom. 3:9–23). The biblical doctrine of grace means God does not “owe” salvation (or a chance for salvation) to anyone, but offers it to us without any compulsion to do so. If God is morally obligated to offer forgiveness to sinners, the Bible is totally silent on this matter. Moreover, this would imply that sinners have a counterclaim against the righteous judgment of God. The Bible teaches the reverse: all the world is “guilty before God” (Rom 3:19), not “deserving before God.”

Finally, the reincarnationist vision often depicts mankind merging with or being absorbed back into God at the end of time. The Bible’s picture of heaven or paradise is quite different. It shows individuals (not composite souls), with resurrected and immortal bodies (showing that the body is important) (1 Cor. 15:35–57), worshiping God, praising God, glorifying God in a community of many tribes, languages, and nations (Rev. 5:9–10)—not seeing themselves become merged into God once more. Personal identity is a temporary and shifting condition in reincarnationist thinking. In the biblical picture, personal identity is not only one of the attributes of God, but is part of our significance as creatures made “in the image of God” (Gen. 1:27). Our personal identity is preserved and upheld within the promise of everlasting life (John 3:16).

Notes

- 1 Not the same term as “born from above” or “born again” in John 3:3 and 3:7.
- 2 Scaria Thuruthiyil, “Reincarnation in Hinduism.” Retrieved from <http://www.spiritual-wholeness.org/faqs/reincgen/hinrein.htm> on 2010-05-29. Some writers say that reincarnation is taught in the Vedas, by including the Upanishads as part of the Vedas.
- 3 *Anatta* (no self) “... affirms no soul or any permanent entity in man.” While a few Buddhist terms may be employed with limited success to help explain some Christian beliefs to those in Buddhist cultures, the doctrine of “...*anatta* proves more difficult due to the biblical concept of immortality.” Bong Rin Ro, “Asian Theology,” in the *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*. Ed. Walter A. Elwell. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984, p. 90. See also, “Anātman,” in *The Oxford Dictionary of World Religions*. Ed. John Bowker. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997, pp. 63–64.
- 4 See Watchman’s Profile on Animism by James C. Ventress, “Animism,” *Profile Notebook* (Arlington, Texas: Watchman Fellowship, Inc. 1994–2010).
- 5 Helena P. Blavatsky, “Thoughts on Karma and Reincarnation,” in *Collected Writings* 11:137–138 (1889). For more information on Blavatsky, see Watchman’s Profile by Viola Larson, “Theosophy,” *Profile Notebook* (Arlington, Texas: Watchman Fellowship, Inc. 1994–2010).
- 6 Bhagavad-Gita 14:18. Translation by A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada (1971). On “hellish planets,” see the graphic description in the Srimad Bhagavatam, 5th canto, part 2.
- 7 See Vishal Mangalwadi, *When the New Age Gets Old*, chapter on “The Reincarnation of the Soul” (1992).
- 8 Such arguments were advanced by Hans Holzer in *The Reincarnation Primer: Patterns of Destiny* (1974) and Shirley MacLaine in *Out on a Limb* (1983) and *Dancing in the Light* (1986).
- 9 While in the womb, John the Baptist “leaped for joy” at the sound of Mary’s voice (Luke 1:44). John Gill’s commentary on this verse lists four rabbinical references to ancient Jewish belief in pre-birth response to God.
- 10 This third suggestion was proposed by Origen (A.D. 185–254). He is often credited with promoting reincarnation, but in fact he refuted “the dogma of transmigration” at considerable length in his commentary on Matthew’s Gospel as being “foreign to the church of God, and not handed down by the Apostles, nor anywhere set forth in the Scriptures.” “Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew,” Book 13, Part 1, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* 10:474 (1884–1887; reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989–1990).
- 11 All the dead will rise, even those who have been cremated, dissolved, or whose remains have been dispersed into outer space.
- 12 On the Sadducees, see Mark 12:18 and Acts 23:8.
- 13 *Torah*, or law, refers to the five books of Moses. Jesus’ proof occurs in Mk. 12:18–27.
- 14 See 1 Cor. 15:42–57 for details on the dead being transformed and made immortal.



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