
Rebirth - Resurrection or Reincarnation?

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'I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.' So reads the words of Jesus to rabbi Nicodemus in John 3:3. Nicodemus responded with the sarcastic comment: 'How can a man be born when he is old? . . . Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!' (3:4). Whether reincarnation ever entered Nicodemus' mind at that time we shall never know but one thing is certain, for him as a Jew the whole idea of a reincarnation would have been a non-starter. Jesus confirmed that he himself was not talking about physical but spiritual rebirth.

Today's Climate of Opinion

People in the west have for many centuries generally accepted the Judaeo-Christian beliefs that each individual person has one life in this world, is accountable to God for that life on the great day of Judgment and that there will be a resurrection of the body. However, there is now an increasing tendency to look favourably on the theory of reincarnation. It is, of course, the predominant view in Asia but numbers are growing in the West. 27 % of adults in the UK are said to believe in reincarnation. The growing interest can be seen in the stock of books on the subject in our high street bookshops. Some are even trying to Christianize the idea, making out that the Bible teaches it. Such texts as Mt 11:14, Jn 3:3f, and 9:1ff are forced into serving this purpose. This very relevant subject does need to be considered and the Christian answer to it made clear.

Reincarnation or *metempsychosis*, to give it its technical name, is an ancient and widespread belief, particularly in the East. The Greek philosophers believed in it and developed the idea of the transmigration of souls, ie that immortal souls do not die at physical death but are reborn into different bodies many times over. From around the 7th century BC the cycle of rebirth became a fundamental presupposition with Hinduism. The soul may go through thousands, even millions of incarnations. When sufficient merit has been earned the soul achieves salvation (*moksha*), which involves being absorbed into the divine. In the 6th century the Buddha built his entire system on the teaching of reincarnation, influenced as he was by Hinduism. It is Buddhists who use the term *rebirth*. They do not believe in a soul as such, or in the transmigration of immortal souls. At death, it is not the soul that continues to exist but 'the germ of consciousness', the bundle of characteristics representing the sum of an individual's action, that survives. It is the *karma* of the person (ie, the consequence of one's good and bad deeds) which survives and passes on, giving rise to a new individual. Final escape is *Nirvana* in which all desire and passion is eliminated and perfect bliss is attained. Jainism and Sikhism also believe in reincarnation, under the influence of Hinduism.

Why should this teaching be of interest to modern, materialistic Westerners? First of all, we should recognise that the world has become a global village where ideas and religions spread very rapidly. Our cities have become cosmopolitan so that the customs and beliefs of the East are more familiar to us. Schools are now making children more aware of other religions and cultures. We cannot ignore the influence of the pop culture of the 1960's,

particularly the Beatles with their interest in eastern mysticism. Indian gurus have come to Britain in their droves to sell their teachings. In such a climate the so-called *New Age Movement* has been gaining ground, which is a hotchpotch of modern fringe activities, eastern philosophies, astrology and the occult. The actress and entertainer, Shirley MacLaine is one of the main propagators of New Age ideas and such people influence a rising generation seeking meaning to life. A generation had grown up having been taught that the material world is the only reality there is and, quite rightly, many are coming to question the whole notion that we are nothing more than machines or a mix of chemicals. Unfortunately, the 20th century professing church has generally gone along with the opinions of scientific humanism. Over the last 100 years liberal and modernistic theology has had a devastating effect on hundreds of clergy graduating from theological colleges and consequently on their congregations.

The Evidence

1. Close encounters with death

Dr Raymond Moody in his book *LIFE AFTER LIFE* (1988, Bantam Books) produces case studies of 300 people who either had close encounters with death or who were actually pronounced clinically dead by doctors, but revived. These people claimed that during their experience of death they left their bodies, saw and heard the doctors who were trying to revive them, met dead relatives, other spirits and the presence of a great Light. This evidence, if you are prepared to accept it, is mainly for belief in the soul as distinct from the body. Dr Moody has to admit that his case studies do not necessarily mean that reincarnation has taken place.

2. Recalling past lives

Reports of people who can recall past lives and can speak intelligently of places and individuals they have never seen is put forward as one of the strong proofs of reincarnation. Two main types of past-life recall can be identified:

- a) hypnotic regression - where people are led under hypnosis to delve into their past lives.
- b) spontaneous recall - often found among children, where, without prompting, they claim to have been somebody else and they talk of their past lives.

Most of the cases, however, lend themselves to very natural explanations. The fact that a person under hypnosis is asked to remember previous lives means the person is expected to believe he or she had previous lives. And let no one forget the power of our subconscious mind to store data. Under hypnosis it is possible to tap into this store-house. One person under hypnosis spoke Oscan, a 3rd century BC Italian language. Was this proof of a previous existence? Not at all, for it was later discovered that he had looked at an Oscan grammar in a library a few days before being hypnotised. Phrases of the language had obviously registered in his subconscious mind.

Cultural and religious conditioning where belief in reincarnation is encouraged also accounts for many cases, especially among children. We ought not to underestimate, either, the spirit world of evil in deceiving people into thinking they have had previous lives.

3. Other possible evidence

It is often argued that love at first sight and child prodigies are pointers to lives lived in a previous existence. But such evidence proves too much. Why is it that child prodigies are very few and far between if we have all had previous existences? Again, for every child who claims to remember his previous life, there are millions upon millions who do not remember. If love at first sight is a result of a relationship in a previous life why does it happen after puberty? Why don't all souls reincarnate with experiences or memories of previous lives? It would be of great help to a believer in reincarnation to know about one's previous lives in order to break the cycle of birth and rebirth!

The Supposed Advantages

1. It gives a plausible explanation of the inequalities and sufferings of life

To believe that the good and bad actions of a previous life (*karma*) determine future incarnations is said to be a satisfying way of explaining undeserved suffering, of children born deformed or diseased, and all the other apparent injustices of life.

2. One life-span is insufficient to gain salvation

One short life of about 70 years is insufficient to achieve one's full potential, to find the truth and to gain perfection. So, belief in reincarnation gives hope that through experiences received from previous lives one can eventually gain perfection.

3. It seems to give respect for all life

As one writer puts it, 'if animals and plants have souls, and if there is a possibility that I may be reborn as an animal or a plant one day, then I ought to treat all life with respect and develop ecologically responsible behaviour' (Mangalwadi, p 137)

The Case Against Reincarnation

1. **There is no objective evidence.** It is all very subjective and pragmatic. This does not worry the eastern mystic but it should concern those genuinely interested in finding out the truth.

2. **It destroys personal responsibility and morality.** Far from giving an adequate explanation of the inequalities of this life, it is the most unjust idea imaginable. The theory of *karma*, which lies behind reincarnation, undermines the very foundation of moral order. If I am unfortunate enough to be born blind, as a punishment of an action in a previous existence of which I am completely unaware, this is most unjust. Punishment can only be meaningful if I know the evil for which I am being punished. Moreover, morality becomes a purely mechanical cause and effect system, an effect which is felt in another life situation in this world. MacLaine in her book *OUT ON A LIMB* justifies her own blatant immorality on the grounds that she is working out the *karma* of a previous life. She even puts forward the tentative suggestion that the millions of Jews killed in Hitler's camps were simply working out their collective *karma* from previous lives.

3. **It hinders the relief of suffering.** If you believe that a person is suffering because of bad actions in a previous life then to alleviate his sufferings would amount to interfering with the cosmic justice of the law of *karma*. Acts of compassion on behalf of people in trouble is foolish according to one professor at Delhi university because if we did cut short someone's suffering, he would have to be reborn to finish off the prescribed period of suffering, so what is the use of interfering with the law of *karma*? Never forget, that as a result of the Christian gospel social concern is not only a part of everyday life in our country but exists in countries of the East dominated by this philosophy of *karma*.

4. **This teaching encourages self-centredness**, where deliverance from the cycle of rebirths involves detachment from this life, and concern and active compassion for others in the world around us is not encouraged. The best that Buddhism can offer is detached compassion without commitment.

5. **It justifies racism and sexism**. MacLaine finds it a comfort to think that a soul can be born sometimes a male, sometimes a female. For her it implies the equality of the sexes. (By the way, homosexual practices are justified on the basis that souls were of a different sex in the previous life). But while MacLaine sees reincarnation supporting equality this is not how the eastern world thinks. In his book *A HISTORY OF INDIA* (Penguin 1975, p 46), Romila Thapar comments: 'The doctrine of *karma* also provided a philosophical justification of caste. One's birth into a lower caste was also dependent on one's actions in a previous life.' So the logic of reincarnation has been: 'You are born an untouchable or a woman to serve me because of your past *karma*'. It became news here, some years ago, when two 15 year-old Indian boys were hanged for wanting to marry girls of a higher caste. The villagers demanded it.

6. **It leads to the loss of the significance and value of the individual**. While people are looking to these eastern religions in order to find themselves they do not appreciate that belief in reincarnation means that the individual person is an illusion. Who am I? Well, I am Philip Eveson in this life but I may have been Cleopatra in a previous existence or even somebody's pet rat and there is no telling what I might be next because of all my wrongs in this life.

7. **It trivialises death**. In India it has justified the widespread practice of widow and leper burning, infant drowning and human sacrifice. Did you know that lepers were burnt alive on the ground that such an end purified the body and ensured a healthier state in the new life? It was the result of the preaching of William Cary, the evangelical missionary to India, that such burnings were stopped and infanticide declared illegal. But unwanted infant daughters are still killed and this is rationalised on the grounds that death is unreal and that she will come next year as a boy. Reincarnation is being used in the West to justify abortion. What is the point of an unwanted pregnancy, making life difficult for the mother or the rest of the family, when the baby can be reborn to someone else who wants it?

8. **It breeds pessimism**. While believers in reincarnation start out well, thinking that more than one life is needed to gain deliverance and perfection and to be absorbed into the divine, they have to admit that the goal of perfection could well take many thousands of rebirths. Buddhists agree that very few, if any, have attained Nirvana after the Buddha and he lived over 2500 years ago. From the Hindu scriptures, likewise, it would seem that very few attain salvation. What a gloomy prospect! An endless cycle of being reborn into this sad, suffering world, always hoping and struggling to get out of the vicious circle. No wonder it leads many to hate life and to commit suicide.

The Christian Position

Presenting these other religions with their belief in reincarnation and then presenting the Christian position is not like a TV commercial for soap powder where one powder is only marginally different from another. The Christian position is so radically different from other religions that they cannot be compared but must be contrasted.

1. **Souls are not eternal**. God alone is eternal. This one true and living God is a personal Being. He is the creator of everything seen and unseen. Human beings owe their existence to God. We are personal beings made like God to have contact and communion with God.

We are created body and soul. Each human being is a distinct person - body and soul. Each person, each soul is responsible for his or her own actions done in the body before God the Judge.

2. God created human beings not as robots but with the freedom to choose to do God's will. The first human couple chose to rebel against God and this brought suffering and death into our world, part of the consequences of rebelling against God and this is what we are having to live with today. Death is God's judgement on sin. Death is an evil, an enemy. It is not natural. Physical death involves the unnatural separation of what belongs together - body/soul. But physical death - the separation of soul or spirit from body is symbolic of spiritual death, to be cut off from the life of God, to be dead in sin. That is the condition of each one of us born into this world, and physical death is a pointer to this sad spiritual condition. What is more, if we die in this spiritually dead state our future is very bleak. The Bible speaks of a second death - eternal separation from God in hell.

Salvation from this spiritually dead state and this future doom does not depend on our efforts. In fact we cannot save ourselves. The Bible is realistic. God knows we cannot. These other religions encourage us to believe that we can make it but their own teachers have to admit that few reach the supposed goal. For the overwhelming mass of people there is nothing in this theory of reincarnation to look forward to but to come back to this sad, often hell-like world.

3. Christianity, however, offers real hope. That is why it is 'gospel', good news. The living God, our creator has provided for our salvation. Salvation is not by human effort in millions of lives but is the result of God's gracious action in one unique life - Jesus Christ, who is God in human flesh. The God-Man, Jesus Christ is the only person who has lived the good life, who found joy in doing the will of God perfectly; the only human being conceived with the life of God in him and who was not subject to death. And yet he came into our world as a human being in order that he might die as a human being in the place of human beings and suffer the second death to save sinners. He has paid the penalty which sinners deserve that all who rely upon him as saviour might never experience such an awful death. God calls us to acknowledge the fact that we are in rebellion against him, that we belong to a race of guilty sinners, that we deserve to be for ever punished for our sins. He calls us to repent of our sins, to turn our backs upon our past state and to trust the Lord Jesus Christ to save us, to free us from our sins, to cleanse our sinful lives and to put us in a right standing and relationship with God. For this to happen there has to be rebirth, a spiritual birth. It is like a new creation, where the old has passed away and all things become new. The true believer has the life of God in him now. He has eternal life. This new birth, this resurrection in Christ is our salvation. The Christian is at peace with his Maker and his guilt is removed. There is forgiveness of all sins and safety and security in the Lord Jesus for ever. Nothing can ever separate the believer from the love of God in Christ Jesus. This salvation does not mean losing our identity but living for ever as God's children, personally loved and known by name.

4. There is another rebirth to which the Christian looks forward, the rebirth of creation. The apostle Paul speaks of the entire creation groaning as in the pains of childbirth (Rom 8:22). In fact, spiritual rebirth here and now anticipates the future universal rebirth. The Bible speaks of a new heaven and a new earth where only what is right and good will be found. God will create all things new and all who are found belonging to the Lord Jesus Christ will belong to that new creation. He is preparing us now for that new state.

5. Coupled with this future hope is the resurrection of the body. Not only does the Bible speak of spiritual resurrection it also speaks of bodily resurrection. Bodily resurrection is not the same as resuscitation, where someone who revives from the dead dies again. The resurrection of the body means that physical death, the last enemy, is conquered. All those who have been reborn spiritually in this life, who have been raised from spiritual death even though they may have to die physically, will be bodily raised from the dead, to live in this new creation. All those who belong to Jesus will have glorified bodies like Jesus' glorified body. The Christian position on the resurrection of the body is not that of Muslim belief with its very materialistic, self-indulgent, male-dominated view. In his resurrected body in Paradise the Muslim looks forward to reclining on soft couches, drinking wine he was never allowed to have on earth, served by lovely maidens, of whom he may marry as many as he pleases. The Christian message focuses all attention on the delight of knowing God and being with the Lord who created us and saved us. There will actually be a general resurrection from the dead to face Almighty God the Judge to give an account of the things we have done in the body in this world. Those who have the Lord Jesus as their Saviour, who have been prepared for the coming glory, will enter the new creation. Those who do not know God and have not received salvation will be forever lost in hell.

6. The resurrection of the body is based on the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ, one of the best attested facts of history. His body which had lain in the tomb was raised and glorified. The evidence is there, from which we can draw our conclusions: the empty tomb; the appearances of Jesus to individuals and groups of people at different times of the day; the changed disciples. Lew Wallace thought he could expose what he thought were the myths of Christianity. But his researches led him in an unexpected direction. He couldn't write the book he intended His wife told him to write another book. BEN HUR was the result. Frank Morison was another who thought he could disprove the resurrection of Christ. In the end he had to admit his failure and wrote a best-seller WHO MOVED THE STONE? An Orthodox Jewish scholar, Dr Pinchas Lapide, has recently written: 'Christianity as a historical religion is based on two fundamental events - the death of Jesus of Nazareth on the cross and his resurrection. . . According to my opinion, the resurrection belongs to the category of the truly real. . . Something must have happened which we designate as a historical event since its results were historical... Without the resurrection of Jesus after Golgotha, there would not have been any Christianity.' Jesus' resurrection is the vindication of his good and perfect life and of his substitutionary death on behalf of sinners. It already introduces us to the new creation. When Christ rose from the dead he did so in a representative capacity. It is in association with this fact that the Christian is spiritually reborn and raised to newness of life. Jesus' resurrection is also the guarantee of the Christian's bodily resurrection when Jesus returns in power and great glory.

Conclusion

This truth concerning the resurrection puts paid to any idea of reincarnation. Resurrection and reincarnation cannot coexist. We only have one body and one life in this world. It is appointed for human being once to die and after death the judgment. I do not become somebody else in the next life but the same 'me' in the same body, is raised and glorified just like the crucified body of Jesus was raised and glorified.

The resurrection clearly affirms that we are more than a body but neither does it minimise

the body; the resurrection affirms personal responsibility. Body and soul are reunited to face the Judge for the deeds done in the body. Each human being is responsible for his own life in the body. The resurrection means that there is no loss of human identity and individual significance.

Unlike the ideas we have been reviewing, the Christian position does not trivialise death. Death is the wages of sin. Death brings to an end our life in this world. And yet death is seen as something unnatural, an enemy, an intrusion, something to be resisted. Far from trivialising it, the Christian message speaks of God coming in the person of Jesus Christ to taste death, to go through it and to come out of it victorious. Resurrection conquers it and overcomes it.

The resurrection hope, far from breeding pessimism, gives purpose to life and all that we do in this world. After the great chapter on the resurrection hope the apostle Paul closes with these words: 'Therefore my beloved brethren, be steadfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as you know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord.' (1 Cor 15:58)

It is because of this wonderful hope that Christians have wanted to share this message with others and urge them to repent and believe this good news. Because each individual is precious and unique Christians have gone to the furthest parts of the world with the love of Christ, to show compassion and to relieve the sick and the dying. It is Christians who have been at the forefront of medical advance and social concern. Instead of leading them to be detached from the world this heavenly perspective has enabled Christians to be of more use in the world, to have concern for suffering humanity and to have respect for all life.

Rebirth - resurrection or reincarnation? There is no question to answer, it is resurrection. Jesus Christ is the living proof.

"Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade - kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time." (1 Pet 1:3ff)

This is the substance of an address given in November 1991. I have read a number of works on the subject but I am particularly indebted to an article by an Indian scholar, Vishal Mangalwadi, *The Reincarnation of the Soul*, reprinted in *EVANGELICAL REVIEW OF THEOLOGY*, Vol 15, No 2, April 1991, pp 135-147.

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