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CHRISTIAN
REINCARNATION?

by
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CHRISTIAN REINCARNATION?

By the Revd Donald MacGregor

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The influence of Eastern religions and past life experiences has placed the issue of reincarnation firmly into the mindset of many free thinkers in the West today. Evidence of child geniuses, the sense of déjà vu, hypnotic regression and past-life recall are all quoted in support. It is increasingly common for people in Western Europe to embrace reincarnation as a way of making sense of life. As an inter-faith issue, if reincarnation is seen as a totally false understanding of the way things work spiritually, it is very hard for traditional Christian theology to engage with, for example, Hinduism as another route to God.

Difficult Questions

Within mainstream Christianity, many find themselves faced with difficult questions about heaven, hell and salvation that could be helped by a belief in reincarnation. The traditional view is that at the end of life we will be judged to be fit to spend eternity in either heaven, heaven preceded by purgatory, or hell. The Reformers excluded purgatory, which makes the division even more stark. Whatever we understand by heaven and hell, this doctrine leaves many questions hanging. How could a merciful God give his people only one opportunity to get to heaven? Is it not inconsistent for an all-loving God to consign living beings to hell after only one chance to redeem themselves? Loving parents will give their wayward offspring as many opportunities as possible to come back to them. Is God's love less than that of a loving parent? Questions like this abound around the doctrines of salvation, judgement, resurrection, purgatory, paradise, Christ's second coming, hell and heaven. Doctrines arose in the Middle Ages which were based on an understanding of the universe that is very different from today's. Reincarnation and all it could offer as a way to understand the spiritual world was discounted, based on earlier proclamations of the Church.

This paper aims to address three issues within the arguments around reincarnation. We shall consider briefly:

- the biblical evidence - is there any justification for reincarnation within the Bible and Christian tradition?

- the early centuries in theological debate and formulation of church doctrine - has the Judaeo-Christian tradition always rejected reincarnation, or was it just the Church that imposed its decision in the early centuries for political rather than theological reasons?
- more recent considerations - what are the current issues that are making us re-examine this contentious subject?

Definitions

First we need to define some words to be used:

- **reincarnation / transmigration of souls / metempsychosis** – these words are largely interchangeable in meaning– taken to mean the soul incarnating in different human bodies as it progresses on its spiritual journey, eventually to be released from the cycle on attaining higher spiritual consciousness. They can also include the idea of souls moving from lower animals to humans, and the possibility of the other direction. Early Church Fathers mostly used the term ‘transmigration of souls’. I shall use the term reincarnation, and am only referring to the realm of humanity.
- **pre-existence** – the idea that souls pre-exist before conception, rather than are created at the moment of conception (or at some time between conception and birth).
- **immortality** of the soul – that it continues after this life, into eternal life, whether clothed in a spiritual body or not.

Biblical evidence

Commonplace conceptions of heaven would seem to rule out reincarnation - surely heaven is where we go after some form of judgement, and eternal life follows. But the Bible is not clear on what heaven is, other than being with God. We enter 'eternal life' as we leave our body and become aware of our eternal nature as spirit. The possibility that we may go before God in some way for a judgement, or life review, before being placed in our next incarnation is simply not touched on, as it is beyond the biblical perspective.

It has to be said that biblical evidence for reincarnation is not great, but it does exist in part. When we put on theological spectacles which say that reincarnation may be considered, we begin to see signs of it in many texts. However, all these texts are traditionally interpreted in other, quite valid ways. Space prevents a detailed exegesis of each passage, weighing up the arguments, but in an appendix at the end of this paper I present some obvious considerations which seem to be overlooked by most commentators, because reincarnation is considered 'taboo'. It has to be honestly stated that the evidence is not overwhelming, and the verses can be interpreted with validity in other ways as well. But reincarnation is not the scriptural impossibility we have been led to believe. The difficulty is that the Bible does not say much about what happens after death, and what it does say can be interpreted in many different ways. The words of Jesus, as recorded in the gospels, indicate a concern to encourage people to live in right relationships with God and each other, and to seek the kingdom of God as a hidden treasure, something to be lived out in the here and now, with the promise of eternal life to come. He was not so concerned about imparting any definitive teaching about the afterlife, about what eternal life was to be, other than being with God. If eternal life is something which is 'dipped into' in between incarnations, it is not mentioned in the Bible.

One difficulty is that the Church's understanding of salvation has been so underpinned with the idea of one life, one chance to turn to Christ, that any attempt at inclusion of the idea of reincarnation has knock-on effects for many other of the major doctrines of the

Church. It calls for a major overhaul of Christian theology, which has been gradually happening in some academic spheres in the last century and has percolated to the pews in some areas, but has not yet interpenetrated the institutions.

Early Church evidence

Reincarnation has not always been so unacceptable to Church doctrine. In the early Church, as doctrinal matters were being formulated, there was a vigorous debate about the pre-existence of souls and transmigration of souls (reincarnation). Some of the early Church Fathers, such as Clement of Alexandria (AD 150-215), Justin Martyr (AD 100-165), St. Gregory of Nyssa (AD 330-395), Arnobius (d. circa 330), and St. Jerome (AD 342-420) considered reincarnationist thinking and did believe in the pre-existence of souls. Reincarnation was a common Greek belief at the time and was discussed as a Christian possibility, especially by those with some knowledge of Greek philosophy, but it was not adopted officially. Even St. Augustine of Hippo, in his *Confessions*, entertained the possibility of reincarnation:

Did my infancy succeed another age of mine that dies before it? Was it that which I spent within my mother's womb?... And what before that life again, O God of my joy, was I anywhere or in any body?¹

The most outspoken and influential early Christian theologian in this area was Origen (AD 185-254). He was one of the most prolific Church Fathers. St. Jerome said of him that he was the greatest teacher of the Church after the apostles, and St. Gregory of Nyssa honoured him as "The prince of Christian learning in the third century". Origen conjectured about transmigration on numerous occasions, but then seemed to step back to a more orthodox stance. Jerome, a leading Church Father in the early fifth century, argued that Origen held to reincarnation. Writing in a letter about 409 or 410, Jerome accused Origen of holding to the "transmigration of souls", including the idea that both angelic and human spirits "may in pun-

¹ Pusey, E. (trans.), *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, Book 1, Harvard Classics, (P.F. Collier, New York, 1909)

ishment for great negligence or folly be transformed into brutes”, that is, be reincarnated as animals. However, in this same letter Jerome admits that Origen qualified his statements on the subject:

Then, lest he should be held guilty of maintaining with Pythagoras the transmigration of souls, he winds up the wicked reasoning with which he has wounded his reader by saying: “I must not be taken to make dogmas of these things; they are only thrown out as conjectures to show that they are not altogether overlooked”.²

Elsewhere, Origen seemed clear that souls were reincarnated into other bodies:

By some inclination towards evil, certain spirit souls come into bodies, first of men; then, due to their association with the irrational passions after the allotted span of human life, they are changed into beasts, from which they sink to the level of plants. From this condition they rise again through the same stages and are restored to their heavenly place.³

Toward the end of his life, Origen wrote a commentary on Matthew in which he discussed at length whether John the Baptist was the reincarnation of Elijah. His answer to this question was unequivocal:

In this place [Matt. 17:10-13] it does not appear to me that by Elijah the soul is spoken of, lest I should fall into the dogma of transmigration, which is foreign to the church of God, and not handed down by the Apostles, nor anywhere set forth in the Scriptures.⁴

So, although Origen may have believed in reincarnation for some of his lifetime, it seems he may have recanted later, under some pres-

² Jerome, *Letter CXXIV, To Avitus*, 4, 15.

³ Origen, *On First Principles*, Book 1 Ch.8. Also Book II, chapter 8:3 “Those rational beings who sinned and on that account fell from the state in which they were, in proportion to their particular sins were enveloped in bodies as a punishment; and when they are purified they rise again to the state in which they formerly were, completely putting away their evil and their bodies. Then again a second or a third or many more times they are enveloped in different bodies for punishment.”

⁴ Origen, *Commentary on Matthew*, XIII.1

sure maybe. He had his supporters, however, and Origenism became hotly debated after his death. It was condemned first at a Council in Alexandria in 400AD, then later at the Second Council of Constantinople in 553AD (also known as the 5th Ecumenical Council): *“If anyone asserts the fabulous pre-existence of souls and the monstrous restoration which follows from it, let him be anathema.”* The ‘monstrous restoration’ was the idea of rebirth of the soul. However, it is thought that there were some political manoeuvrings going on here. This was one of many condemnatory ‘anathemas’ that were largely politically inspired by Emperor Justinian. In order to make ‘good citizens’, it was thought best that the people believe they had only one life, then heaven or hell. This would focus them more productively in life and help the empire in its purpose of gaining secular power. Pope Vigilius actually refused to attend on the final day, and seemed to be mixed about Origen’s views. Some would say the anathemas were never officially recognised by the Pope and therefore the Christian Church.⁵ Some New Age writers go on to claim that the Church then removed any biblical references to reincarnation, but there seems no definite evidence for this and there are many manuscripts surviving from before 553 which indicate otherwise.

Since 553AD, the rumour of Christian reincarnation has been kept alive by many down through the ages. In the Middle Ages, it was kept alive by the Cathars and the Albigenses, both of whom the Church persecuted for their beliefs. St. Anselm was known to be a great admirer of Plato, who taught pre-existence and transmigration of souls, and he is said to have been wrestling with the problem of the origin of souls even on his deathbed. Pre-existence of the soul was taught in post-reformation England by Anglican clergy Henry More, Joseph Glanvill and William Law in his later years. In the mystical tradition, there are many who would embrace reincarnation, such as Jacob Boehme and Meister Eckhart. From a Christian/New Age perspective, writers such as William Bloom have tried to

⁵ Steven Rosen, *The Reincarnation Controversy*, (Torchtlight Publishing, 1997), pp78-83

espouse reincarnation. From an esoteric view, Alice Bailey's works from the 1940's have given a whole spiritual hierarchy and cosmology which uses much Christian terminology, but owes more to Theosophy in its theology.

More Recent Considerations

In the 20th Century, Dr. Leslie Weatherhead, one-time president of the Methodist Conference, taught reincarnation.⁶ Anglican priest, the Revd Dr. Martin Israel, author of many books on prayer, mysticism, meditation and healing, sees reincarnation as giving a much better understanding of the problem of suffering in Christian doctrine.

The value of accepting a past history of the soul, one that precedes its present incarnation, is that it puts suffering in a wider perspective of time, and sees life as a series of lessons, or initiations, into greater sanctity.... The risen Lord works ceaselessly towards the healing of the whole cosmos. It comes about that the karmic retribution of the unenlightened unfolds into the karmic opportunity of the fully awakened. The round of rebirth ceases to be simply a way of self-improvement ending in a final state of absorption into the Absolute, but becomes instead the vehicle of healing for all the world's suffering, until all creation enters transfigured into the divine presence. This to me is the essential contribution of the Atonement of Christ when one has entered into the undemanding love of Christ.⁷

The Rt Rev Hugh Montefiore, ex-Bishop of Birmingham, has written about his belief and ways in which he believes it adds to Christianity: In an article in 'The Christian Parapsychologist', he begins:

The sad fact is that reincarnation has never been taken seriously or properly investigated by Christian theologians... with the result that it has been rejected without proper consideration.

⁶ Leslie Weatherhead, *The Christian Agnostic*, (Hodder & Stoughton, 1965) ch 14: *Reincarnation and Renewed Chances*

⁷ Martin Israel, *The Pain that Heals*, (Arthur James, London, 1992) p.168

His conclusion is:

It is impossible to prove that reincarnation takes place. It can, however, be demonstrated that reincarnation is not only possible but probable, and that when it is understood in the ways described in this article, far from creating obstacles to Christianity, it can even show benefits that are in keeping with the nature of God as revealed in Christ.⁸

Some of the benefits of reincarnation which he mentions are:

- what happens to young children who die? The injustice of an undeveloped life cut short has led to different ideas from the state of 'limbo' to the idea that they are 'de-created'. Reincarnation gives a much more positive view of another chance to attain maturity and potential.
- for those who have not had the chance to develop their potential for other reasons and circumstances, it holds hope for a fuller life again, and would reflect God's goodness to give another chance.
- for those who have greatly advanced spiritually, there is the possibility that they may return to encourage others, to enlighten them and lead them closer to God by their example of holiness.

Dr. Geddes MacGregor (no relation to the author) is the Emeritus Distinguished Professor of Philosophy at the University of Southern California, and has written over twenty books, one of which is *Reincarnation in Christianity*.⁹ In this scholarly work he concludes by thinking about the soul in terms of energy, an energy that can be embodied thousands of times, an energy that grows through the abdication of self-centred power and turning in love to God. He sees that a total absence of that energy would lead to hell, a final extinction. But where there is the slightest budding of the love that puts us in communion with God, then he posits that the energy will seek

⁸ *The Christian Parapsychologist*, Vol 15, no.4, Dec 2002, pp.121-125

⁹ Geddes MacGregor, *Reincarnation in Christianity*, (Quest Books, Illinois, 1989)

embodiment through which to love God more.

I see no reason why a Christian should not entertain the suggestion that the re-embodiment should occur over and over again, giving the individual opportunity to grow in the love of God. That re-embodiment I would call reincarnation.¹⁰

We now live in a world very different from that of the early Church, a global culture, one where much more is known about other beliefs, and there are many different experiences to try to understand. Theosophy and studies of mystery religions has brought an awareness of cosmologies that go far beyond the biblical.¹¹ Alternative and complementary therapies and healing techniques raise questions about subtle energies as yet undiscovered by science, auras and energy centres which may be connected with reincarnation and the outworking of karma. Quantum physics gives us questions about consciousness and the existence of the soul as an information field at the level of quantum energy, a field which could possibly be held 'in the mind of God', and placed in different physical bodies. Channelled communications from those more spiritually advanced who have ascended from the physical body give insight into spiritual hierarchies which are only hinted at in scripture.

All of this goes *beyond* what is revealed in the Bible and Christian tradition. It does not dismiss Christian theology any more than Einstein's Theory of Relativity dismissed Newtonian physics – it just went further and deeper, giving new understandings and revelations into the nature of the universe. There are spiritual understandings that go further and deeper than Christianity, and reincarnation may be part of that understanding. But it does not take away from the basis of a God of love to question whether there is something beyond the traditional Christian doctrine of 'one life and then heaven or hell'. So much of what we now see in terms of spirituality, cos-

¹⁰ Op cit p.171

¹¹ Writers such as the theosophists Helena Blavatsky and Alice Bailey have been very influential.

mology, healing techniques, and experiential evidence makes more sense if reincarnation is taken as a part of the framework of belief.

Implications

What are the implications of a belief in reincarnation for other areas of Christian theology? A belief in reincarnation opens the door to a Christian cosmology that can embrace and give meaning to most other religions and schools of esoteric thought. The ancient mystery religions and initiations can be seen in the light of growing into Christ through many different lives. Jesus the man can be seen as anointed with the Christ, receiving the highest level of 'Christhood', the first fruits for all of humanity to follow. He can be seen, in truth, as the son of God, a human living to the fullest of his potential, imbued with the Spirit of God. We all have that divine spark within, 'Christ within you, the hope of glory',¹² which is our destiny through many lives. He is the way that we are all to follow, the trailblazer, the light of the world, showing the narrow path for us all. Our fulfilment in one life is to be raised before God in Christ, but also to hold the possibility of continuing to grow in God's love in another embodiment.

It would mean a radical new theology of the atonement and the sacraments, moving Christianity away from medieval and early Church interpretations of original sin and substitutionary atonement, but maybe bringing a much closer alignment with the original teachings of Jesus as recorded in the gospels. Atonement theology could embrace the concept of karma if Jesus' death on the cross is understood as overcoming world karma through love, forgiveness and self-sacrifice, hastening a new consciousness in humanity.¹³ Through our own lives of self-sacrifice and love we identify ever more closely with the Christ within us, until we can be released from earthly incarnation to remain with God in what we term 'heaven'.

¹² Colossians 1:27

¹³ See Christine Morgan, *Forgiveness*, Caduceus issue 54, Winter 2001/2, pp.27-9

Summary

Because the Bible is not conclusive about various issues does not mean that they are wrong. The Bible is not conclusive about what heaven and hell are, about the Trinity, about slavery, women priests, homosexuality, and a myriad other issues. Reincarnation is not condemned within the Bible, although it was a popular belief at the time of the New Testament. It is simply not addressed. The teaching of Jesus is more focussed on establishing the kingdom of God on earth, about how to live our lives here and now, than giving any detailed teaching on the hereafter (or the ‘herebefore’).

Politically, due to the machinations of Emperor Justinian and the 553 council, reincarnation may have had a raw deal back in the 6th century AD, which has affected Christian understanding of it since. Yet, through the last 2000 years, there have been those who have argued for it, written books about it, and pleaded for the Church to listen again to the arguments. To believe in reincarnation is not anti-Christian – it can add greatly to Christianity, strengthening it in many ways, but involving some radical reinterpretations as well. Perhaps, in the challenging context and global culture of the 21st Century, the Church may be prepared to begin a serious exploration of Christian reincarnation.

APPENDIX

BIBLICAL NOTES

1. Elijah and John the Baptist

One of the major scriptural arguments for reincarnation centres around the Elijah-John the Baptist debate. This stems from the Old Testament book of Malachi, looking ahead to the last days

See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes. (Malachi 4:5)

These verses were taken by Matthew, Mark and Luke and woven into the story of John the Baptist and who Jesus was said to be. How was the prophet Elijah to be sent? In Luke, the angel Gabriel speaks to John's father:

And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah. (Luke 1:17)

'In the spirit and power of Elijah' sounds like a perfectly reasonable description of reincarnation, the same spirit that inhabited the body of Elijah being sent to another incarnation in John.

According to Matthew, Jesus spoke clearly to identify John with Elijah:

And if you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who was to come. He who has ears, let him hear. (Matthew 11:14,15)

This enigmatic saying makes the thought of reincarnation spring immediately to mind. Jesus could easily be meaning, "For those who understand about these things, John the Baptist was also an incarnation of the spirit in Elijah." John the Baptist himself clearly did not see it this way, as evidenced by his denial of being Elijah in John 1:21. However, all this shows is that John was unaware himself, as virtually all of us are, of any previous incarnations.

This line of thinking can also be seen in Matthew 16, 13-14, 17:9-13, and Luke 9:7-9. Jewish leaders and people of the time were asking the question "Who are you – are you Elijah come back to us?", and this would seem to imply a belief in reincarnation. This is

not surprising, as Israel was a cosmopolitan place, a through route by land from Egypt to Babylon, Persia, Greece and Rome, and had been exposed for hundreds of years to various Eastern mystery religions and elements of Jewish mysticism. Reincarnation was not denied, just not affirmed either.

2. Born Again?

Other words of Jesus in John's gospel can also be seen afresh in the light of reincarnation. In his discourse with Nicodemus (John 3:5-7), what exactly does Jesus mean by being 'born again'? Traditionally, this is taken to mean a spiritual re-birth - we must be born 'again', or 'anew', or 'from above' to enter the kingdom of God. Is this just a spiritual renewal, or is it another life? Again, there is no definitive answer.

3. Sin in previous lives?

And as he was passing by, he saw a man blind from birth. And his disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who has sinned, this man or his parents, that he should be born blind?" Jesus answered, "Neither has this man sinned, nor his parents, but the works of God were to be made manifest in him." (John 9:1)

In this passage, given the fact that the man has been blind from birth, we are confronted with a provocative question. When could he have made such transgressions as to make him blind at birth? The obvious answer is in a previous life. The question as posed by the disciples presupposes existence in another life before birth, unless there is some way a foetus could be construed to have sinned in the womb, or the doctrine of original sin is pushed to its limits. It will also be noted that Jesus says nothing to dispel or correct the presupposition. He simply gives another reason. This sort of situation would have been an ideal opportunity to correct the disciples reincarnationist thinking if Jesus thought it was wrong.

4. Riches of Future Lives?

There is another possible reference to reincarnation in all three Synoptic Gospels; an indirect reference, yet an unmistakable one. Jesus said:

No one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or wife or children or land for me and the gospel will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age - homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields ... and in the age to come, eternal life. (Mark 10:29-30)

Taken literally, outside of the doctrine of reincarnation it is difficult to imagine how such a promise could be fulfilled. In one lifetime, one can only have a single set of real parents, and no one seriously proposes that each of the 70 original disciples, who actually did leave their homes and families, ever received as compensation a hundred wives, a hundred fields, and so on. But it could happen via reincarnation. Of course, it could also be taken to refer to entry into the Christian family, with sharing of possessions and a new spiritual family.

5. Escape from Rebirth?

The following passage in the Book of Hebrews, especially the italicised sentence, is a clear statement of the concept of reincarnation.

All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth. People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. *If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return.* Instead, they were longing for a better country-- a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them. (Hebrews 11:13-16)

This seems to imply that those who have their lives fixed on earthly things are given the chance to return, but those who are freed from the illusion of the material to see the riches of the spiritual will be freed from the cycle of rebirth.

6. The Mechanics of Reincarnation

There are Bible verses that are highly suggestive of the ‘mechanics’ of reincarnation. Before his arrest, Jesus stated:

All who take the sword will perish by the sword. (Matthew 26:52)

Common sense tells us that not all people who live ‘by the sword’ will die by the sword. This statement can only be true if meant in the context of a future life. If in this life you ‘live by the sword’, you will most certainly die, if not in the same life but a future life, ‘by the sword’. In fact, this concept is the ancient doctrine of ‘karma’ as it is known in the East. We see it expressed in Galatians 6:7 in that we will reap what we sow. This is normally taken to refer to this life only – but can be extended. This way of thinking is present in a number of other Bible verses.

7. Arguments Against Reincarnation

In the New Testament, one verse in particular is often used to refute reincarnation:

... man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgement....
(Hebrews 9:27)

This is often assumed, reasonably enough, to declare that each human being lives once as a mortal on earth, dies once, and then faces judgement. Reincarnation states that the soul leaves the body at death, faces a form of ‘judgement’ or ‘assessment’, and then can enter a new and different body at a later time. The verse does not refute reincarnation because it is not the same body that dies again. It implies one body/one death, which fits with reincarnation. But this verse does refute some concepts of bodily resurrection. It was a late development of Old Testament Jewish thought which held that after a body dies, the same physical body will rise from the grave at a later day to face possible death again and judgement. This has been the prevailing view at other times in Christian thought – that resurrection will involve “the collection and revivifying of the material particles of the dead body”. So it is not reincarnation that is refuted, but a bodily resurrection.

8. Other Scriptural Support

There are many other Bible verses that are difficult to make sense of without a belief in reincarnation:

Ephesians 1:4 raises the question of pre-existence and predestination:

He chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ. (Ephesians 1:4)

How we can be predestined before we exist is difficult to understand, but if we are destined to undergo many different incarnations to prepare us for this time, then it becomes much clearer.

Malachi 1:2-3 and Romans 9:11-13 both state that God loved Jacob, but hated Esau even before they were born. These verses are highly suggestive of pre-existence.

In the Wisdom of Solomon, canonically recognised by the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches, is the following verse:

... I was given a sound body to live in because I was already good. (Wisdom of Solomon 8:19-20)

Surely a person can only be good before they are given a body if they were in a previous incarnation.

Questions for Pondering or Discussion

What are the main objections to reincarnation that come to mind for you?

What are the main attractions of reincarnation for you?

Which issues from the above two questions do you feel it would be helpful for you to look into?

In what ways would Christian reincarnation be a help or hindrance in dialogue with other faiths?

