



A Closer Look

at Reincarnation

Is It Compatible With Christianity?

More than ever, Americans are accepting as fact the idea of reincarnation—that a soul leaves one human body upon death and enters a newly born one. Surveys show that nearly 60 percent of Americans believe reincarnation is possible.

The broad acceptance of reincarnation can be attributed to several factors. Among them are purported scientific evidence; testimonies from prominent people, such as actress Shirley MacLaine and actor Glenn Ford, who tell of their "former lives"; best-selling books (such as MacLaine's *Out On a Limb*) that describe the afterlife and rebirth cycle; and such "Christian" reincarnationists as Jeanne Dixon and the late Edgar Cayce. Tabloids such as the *National Enquirer* also have helped spread the belief in reincarnation with constant attention to the topic.

In the late 1960's and early 1970's, books such as Richard Bach's *Jonathan Livingston Seagull* and Ruth Montgomery's *A World Beyond* sold briskly and planted the seeds of Hindu and occult philosophy, from which the doctrine of reincarnation springs, in the minds of the readers. By the late 1970's, the ideas of Bach and Montgomery largely had been replaced by those of Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, writer of such books as *On Death and Dying* and *Questions and Answers on Death and Dying*, and Raymond Moody, writer of *Life After Life* and *Reflections on Life After Life*.

These two writers propose that physical death is the beginning of another, spiritual life and that all people find rest and peace in that new life. Both Kubler-Ross and Moody reject the Christian notion of a judgment by God. Both also believe in reincarnation.

While some Christians have offered a critique of reincarnation, much of the church has remained ignorant about its implications. Faced with the widespread silence from the church and apparent evidence, many Christians may have come to the conclusion that reincarnation is real—or at least they are not ready to rule out the possibility that it is real.

WHAT IS REINCARNATION?

Reincarnation, the teaching that a soul moves from body to body in a birth–death–rebirth cycle, is a development of the Hindu-Buddhist teaching of soul transmigration. Transmigration includes the possibility that a soul can be born into the body of an animal. The status of the body a soul is born into, ranging from a housefly to a well-to-do person, is an indication of the quality of life that soul lived in its previous body. A good life brings rebirth into a higher form; a bad life brings rebirth into a lower form. This upward and downward graduation fulfills the Law of Karma, a central tenet of Hinduism. Karma teaches that good deeds are rewarded and bad deeds are punished. Hinduism's goal is for the soul to break out of the Karma cycle and become one with the universe.

The Western mind, apparently not liking the idea of being reborn as a mosquito or a slug, has excluded animals from the cycle.

Reincarnationists also believe that souls have preexisted eternally. Montgomery, in *A World Beyond*, a book she claims was written by automatic writing and transmitted from medium Arthur Ford, who was waiting in the spirit world to enter another body, writes:

"Now let us start with the premise that each person is a continuing entity through all eternity. No beginning and no ending, despite what some moralists say about our life beginning with physical birth as a baby and ending with Judgment Day. Bosh! There has never been a time when we were not, and we always will be, even though in constantly changing forms and stages, for we are as much God as God is a part of us." (page 7)

WHAT IS ITS APPEAL?

The most obvious appeal that reincarnation holds for Westerners is its promise that life goes on and we get as many chances to get it right as we need. If there is reincarnation, man has no compelling need to make peace with a righteous God in this life or even to treat his fellow man with love and respect. If a man has as many lives as he needs to attain perfection, he might think, "Why not live it up this life and leave good works and making peace with God for another life?"

The need to make peace with God actually would never occur to true reincarnationists, who do not believe in a personal deity. Reincarnation goes hand in hand with pantheism, the belief that everything is God and God is in everything, including each human. The doctrines of pantheism and reincarnation are the cornerstones of both Hinduism and occultism, which have grown popular in the Western world.

In his book *Miracles*, C.S. Lewis says this about the appeal of pantheism and reincarnation to mankind:

"Pantheism is congenial to our minds not because it is the final stage in a slow process of enlightenment, but because it is almost as old as we are. It may even be the most primitive of all religions. . . . Pantheism is in fact the permanent natural bent of the human mind; the

permanent ordinary level below which man sometimes sinks . . . but above which his own unaided efforts can never raise him for very long." (pages 84-85)

WHAT IS THE EVIDENCE?

However, modern man is not about to admit that his thinking has sunk to this spiritual lowest common denominator, so he looks for evidence to justify his beliefs. His efforts have produced plenty of "evidence" supporting the doctrine of reincarnation.

The most common defense for reincarnation is the phenomenon of "past-life recall"—the ability to remember details of apparent previous lives. It can be achieved through hypnosis and spontaneous or intuitive recall, which sometimes is called *deja vu*.

Some past-life accounts given by subjects under hypnosis can be attributed to the subject's fantasizing or leading by the hypnotist. The June 1985 issue of *Scientific American* reports on the problem of "Hypnotic Misrecall" stating:

"Researchers found the subjects had improvised freely or filled in forgotten sections by fabricating passages in the style of the author. Numerous other studies support the conclusion that although a subject seems to remember more while hypnotized, the increase in reported detail is generally accompanied by loss of accuracy. Preconceptions held by the subject or the examiner can further distort recall. For instance, a hypnotized subject is more easily swayed by leading questions than a subject who is not hypnotized." (page 73)

However, there are two other explanations. One could be called the "Bridey Murphy Effect," which was detailed in the popular book *The Search for Bridey Murphy*. The book told the story of a woman who, when under hypnosis, could give details of Ireland and even speak Gaelic, a language apparently unfamiliar to her. Her ability was attributed to her living a previous life in Ireland. However additional research turned up the fact that she once had been cared for a Gaelic-speaking grandmother who used to tell her tales of old Ireland. The "past-life memories" turned out to be forgotten childhood experiences brought out by hypnosis.

Some recalls hold up under all scrutiny and appear genuine. To understand these, we must realize that a person who is under hypnosis is surrendering control of his or her mind to someone else. The hypnotist may take the reins. He or someone else may plant suggestions in the mind. In his book *Reincarnation and Christianity*, Dr. Robert Morey says that "a hypnotic trance is the exact mental state which mediums and witches have been self-inducing for centuries in order to open themselves up to spirit or demonic control." (page 24)

This being the case, it is not hard to imagine a demonic being taking over the will of the hypnotic subject and speaking through him. The demon, with access to knowledge from all of history, could piece together memories and have the hypnotic subject speak them, thus encouraging the idea that the subject is recalling past lives. Perhaps—and maybe more likely, given

the nature of demons—he spins plausible tales that are impossible to either disprove or verify. What fun they must have, duping gullible humans with tales from a dozen different people, all claiming they once were Cleopatra!

Dejá vu, the feeling a person gets upon encountering a strange place or a person he has never met that he has seen that place or person before, often is used to buttress the reincarnation teaching. Most every person can recall such an experience. Prof. Walter Martin, in a tape of an address called “The Riddle of Reincarnation,” cites an experience he had while viewing a mountain in Switzerland. He knew that he had seen this particular vista before, even though he had never been to Switzerland.

Upon returning home, Martin discovered the reason for his recall: a postcard with a picture of the very mountain he had seen. A person actively uses only 10 percent of his brain, which continually is storing information that is never recalled unless prompted by an experience such as Martin’s.

DOES THE BIBLE TEACH REINCARNATION?

Reincarnationists sometimes cite Scripture to support their belief. The four references they use most often are John 3:3, Matthew 11:14, Hebrews 7:2,3, and John 9:2.

In John 3:3, Jesus tells Nicodemus that to see the Kingdom of God one must be born again. Jesus, the reincarnationists say, is teaching that a series of rebirths is necessary to achieve perfection. This interpretation does not hold up, however. Nicodemus expressed his puzzlement and spoke of a second physical birth (not exactly like the one spoken of in reincarnation, but similar). Jesus promptly corrected Nicodemus, calling the rebirth He was speaking of a spiritual one (see John 3:4-5). Thus, Jesus did not expound the Law of Karma, but refuted it.

Reincarnationists also call attention to Jesus’ statement in Matthew 11:14 that John the Baptist was Elijah. However, one must look further in Scripture. Luke 1:17 says that John the Baptist would precede Christ “with the spirit and power of Elijah.”

John the Baptist, a man who was filled with the Holy Spirit from the time he was in his mother’s womb, himself denied that he was Elijah (see John 1:21). Scripture also states that Elijah never experienced physical death (see 2 Kings 2:11) and during the earthly ministry of Christ still existed as Elijah, as is evidenced by his appearance with Moses at the Mount of Transfiguration (see Matt. 17:3).

Another pet Biblical passage among reincarnationists is Hebrews 7:2,3. This verse, they say, tells us that Jesus was Melchizedek in a previous incarnation. However, one need only read the verses cited to see that the Old Testament character Melchizedek was “made like unto the Son of God,” not that he was Jesus (the Son of God). The writer of Hebrews is saying only that there is no record of Melchizedek’s birth, death, or family. Moreover, Melchizedek’s priesthood was unique in that it was not transferred to another. Melchizedek was only being likened to Christ, not being called a previous incarnation of Him.

The fourth Scripture often cited by reincarnationists is John 9:1-3, which tells of a man born blind and the disciples' question as to whose sin was the cause of his blindness. The question may, on the surface, appear to be in accord with the Law of Karma. However, Christ's reply that the man's blindness was in no way related to sin renders the reincarnationists' stand indefensible.

Having looked at what the Bible does not say in support of reincarnation, let us turn to what the Bible does say against reincarnation.

MAN'S ONE CHANCE

In just one verse, the Bible devastates the concept of reincarnation. Hebrews 9:27 says that "it is appointed for men to die once, and after this comes judgment."

Those seeking more Scripture can turn to James 4:14, which says: "Yet you do not know what your life will be like tomorrow. You are just a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away." The Psalms are full of references to the temporary nature of man's life. Psalms 39:5; 103:15; and 144:4 are only three examples.

These verses also refute the theory that souls have preexisted eternally, as does the account in Genesis 2 of man's beginnings.

THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

While the Law of Karma appears to deal with evil with its system of rewards and punishment, on a larger scale, it leaves the problem unsolved. Mark C. Albrecht, in his book *Reincarnation—A Christian Critique of a New Age Doctrine*, writes:

"Reincarnation's endless cycles never solve the problem of evil; evil is eternal. The idea of evil continuing forever is unthinkable in Christianity. Evil was conquered by the death and resurrection of Christ and will be put away forever when he returns to judge the world." (page 119)

REINCARNATION AND SPIRITISM

Reincarnationists also often violate the biblical injunction against spiritism.

The Bible is clear in forbidding attempts to contact spirits of the dead, which many reincarnationists try to do when a soul purportedly is "between" incarnations. Leviticus 20:6,27, Deuteronomy 18:11, Isaiah 8:19, 1 Samuel 28, and 1 Chronicles 10:13 make clear that God does not want His people engaged in such activities. No New Testament writer ever said this ban had been lifted. Noted reincarnationists such as Ford, Cayce, Dixon, Montgomery, and Kubler-Ross openly admit their spiritualistic and mediumistic practices.

Worse yet, some of these authors, most notably Cayce and Dixon, claim that their beliefs are compatible with Christianity. In Matthew 7, Christ warns His followers that false prophets will come as wolves in sheep's clothing. These self-proclaimed "Christians" are fulfilling Christ's warning.

Reincarnation is in no way compatible with the Christian faith. The Bible teaches that "the wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23); reincarnation is the same lie that Satan told Eve in the Garden of Eden: "You surely shall not die." The Bible teaches that salvation from sin and its eternal consequences is a gift that God freely gives (see Eph. 2:8,9); reincarnation teaches that salvation will come when a person perfects himself.

Christ, who created us, knows we have only one life and He has seen what we do with our only chance. That is why He offered Himself as a sacrifice for our sins. Our Savior took our "bad Karma" upon Himself. "My yoke is easy, and My load is light," He said in Matthew 11:30. Even if we could come back again and again, there is no reason to.

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