

# REINCARNATION: A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

## THE POPULARITY OF REINCARNATION

According to recent surveys, approximately twenty-three percent of the population of the United States believes in the possibility of reincarnation. Its advocates proudly include themselves in an elitist group of "true believers" such as Plato, Socrates, Shakespeare, Arthur Conan Doyle, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry Ford, and even "allegedly" Jesus Christ Himself.

Much of reincarnation's popularity in today's otherwise materialistic and scientifically oriented society can be credited to Hollywood's almost omnipresent influence on public views. The list of celebrities and motion picture personalities that have embraced reincarnation and expound such a belief in interviews and public appearances is seemingly endless, and still growing. Among those in the public spotlight that believe in reincarnation are the late Peter Sellers, Sylvester Stallone, and John Travolta, to name but a few.

Though the roster of celebrity proponents of reincarnation is increasingly large, none has done more to champion its cause than actress Shirley MacLaine. With six autobiographical books to her credit, and an aired, made-for-television mini-series detailing her "conversion" to Eastern philosophy, MacLaine has become a household name to many metaphysical enthusiasts. Her good-natured charm, as well as frequent appearances on afternoon talk shows and in such women's periodicals as **Ladies' Home Journal** and **McCalls**, have drawn millions of housewives across the country into her bizarre theological ensemble of past lives, UFOlogy, Eastern meditation, and psychic experimentation.

## THE RETURN TO "GOD-CONSCIOUSNESS"

Though belief in the Eastern concept of reincarnation has reached fad proportions in this country, few have an accurate understanding of what it actually entails. The word "reincarnation" itself is a composite of two other words in Latin—"re", or "again", and "incarnere", or "in flesh". Literally, it means to "come again in the flesh". Depending upon which version (i.e. Eastern or Western) of reincarnation is being discussed, it denotes the constant cycle of transmigration of souls into either human bodies or other lower forms of life. The student of the theory will immediately recognize the distinction between Eastern reincarnation, as found in Hinduism and Buddhism, and its diluted, and somewhat perverted form in the Western hemisphere.

According to the "pure" form of the theory the soul's original state of being was God-consciousness, or a completely unindividualistic existence within "Brahman". The "fall" and subsequent manifestation of the physical realm occurred when the soul inexplicably "forgot" its true nature of divine union with the Absolute, and erroneously sought to establish its own identity apart from Brahman. Hence, the now alienated soul, or "atman", must enter "samsara", the cyclic wheel of repeated reincarnations, until it reaches the

point of realization that all things, including itself, are merely "maya", or illusionary extensions of the one true Reality—Brahman. In other words, the soul really does not exist, is in a fallen state because it *thinks* that it does, and must suffer repeated rebirths until it is once again absorbed back into a blissful non-existence ("nirvana" in Buddhist thought). Bizarre as it may seem, this is Hindu salvation, and is the ultimate goal of all Eastern practices such as meditation, yoga, and vegetarianism, to name but a few.

When reincarnation was introduced to the "Christianized" population of the United States beginning in the late nineteenth century, it underwent considerable transformation. Since the idea of rebirth into animal bodies proved largely unacceptable to American tastes, the theory was thus socially accommodated so that reincarnation occurred only into human beings.

## **WAS REINCARNATION DE- CANONIZED?**

Following in the footsteps of "Christian" reincarnationists like Edgar Cayce and Jeane Dixon, the typical Western advocate of the theory today does not regard his or her belief system as an opposition to the teachings of true Christianity. In fact, it is believed to have been the original faith of the Jews and the sect known as the Essenes, as well as that of the Apostles and the fathers of the early Church. The doctrine of reincarnation was even claimed to have been a pre-eminent concept in the Bible before it was conspired against and deleted from the scriptural canon by a Church council that viewed it as a threat to their authority over the average layman. Amusingly, reincarnationists can never seem to reach an agreement on which council was actually responsible for this alleged censure. Some blame Constantine and the Council of Nicea in 325 A.D., while others point to the Fifth Ecumenical Council, or Constantinople II, in 553 A.D. under Justinian. It should be noted, however, that a careful study of Church history clearly indicates that reincarnation was not even a matter of discussion at either council, much less removed from the Bible by overzealous fundamentalists.

Furthermore, there is no indication that the contents of our present Bible are lacking in any way from what was included in its original text. With over 24,000 partial or complete manuscripts in existence, the new Testament is the best documented literary account of ancient history that we possess today (coming in a distant second is **The Iliad and the Odyssey**, by Homer, with 643 contradictory manuscripts). Even if all of the new Testament manuscripts were somehow destroyed, it would still be possible to reconstruct all but approximately ten verses from the writings of the early Church fathers, all done prior to the third century.

## **THE EARLY CHURCH FATHERS**

The earliest recorded Christian reference to reincarnation is a passing remark made by Justin Martyr about 150 A.D. in his *Dialogue With Trypho IV*. He is claimed by many reincarnationists to have herein stated his belief that human souls were repeatedly reborn into other bodies, but a look at the quotation in question reveals otherwise:

"Therefore souls neither see God nor transmigrate into other bodies; for they would know that so they are punished, and they would be afraid to commit even the most trivial sin afterwards."

A few decades later, in his exhaustive attack on the Gnostics, *Against Heresies*, Irenaeus also criticized reincarnational beliefs, pointing out the lack of recollection of past lives on the part of the general public. Reincarnation was likewise unfavorably discussed in the second century by Tertullian (*On the Soul*, chapters 23-24, 29-35), and Arnobius (*Against the Heathen II*, chapter 16). Other opponents were Lactantius in the third century (*The Divine Institutes*, Book III, chapters 18-19), Gregory of Nyssa in the fourth century (*On the Making of Man*, chapter 29), and Augustine in the fifth century (*The City of God*, Book X chapter 30).

The Church Father most often cited by reincarnationists is Origen, who not only was known in the third century for his brilliant scholarship, but for his theological speculations as well. However, though he did indeed hold to the doctrine of pre-existence of human souls before their physical births, this can in no way be misconstrued to indicate that he believed in successive incarnations following the initial one. This he demonstrated in his voluminous *Against Celsus*, in which he wrote:

"But on these subjects much, and that of a mystical kind, might be said; in keeping with which is the following: 'It is good to keep close the secret of a king', -in order that the doctrine of the entrance of souls into bodies (not, however, that of the transmigration from one body into another) may be thrown before the common understanding... (parenthesis in original)."

Toward the end of his life, Origen also produced a commentary on the Gospel of Matthew, in which he discussed at great length whether or not John the Baptist was the reincarnation of Elijah. His conclusion on the matter was undeniably apparent:

"In this place (Matthew 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."

It is quite obvious from the above statement that Origen did by no means support reincarnation or even suggest its possibility. Incidentally, Origen was posthumously declared a heretic because he taught against eternal hell.

### **DID JESUS TEACH REINCARNATION?**

Reincarnationists that profess a Christian faith, are, of course, forced to believe that Jesus Christ Himself accepted and promoted transmigration of souls, which He allegedly was taught in India during the eighteen "silent years" of his adolescence and early adulthood. Most often cited in support of this claim, is the conversation between Christ and Nicodemus found in the third chapter of the Gospel of John:

*"(Nicodemus) came to Jesus at night and said, 'Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him.'*

*"In reply, Jesus declared, 'I tell you the truth, no one can see the Kingdom of God unless he is born again (John 3:2-3).'"*

Erroneously resorting to a literal method of interpretation of the above, reincarnationists insist that when Jesus spoke of being "born again", He was actually implying cyclic rebirth. However, if this indeed was His implication, it unfortunately was entirely lost on Nicodemus:

*"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 (verse 4)!"*

Instead of rebuking the Jewish religious leader for his lack of understanding of the presumably widespread doctrine of reincarnation, Jesus then went on to explain the true meaning of His words:

*"I tell you the truth, no one can enter the Kingdom of God unless He is born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at My saying, you must be born again (verses 5-7)."*

In the above passage, Jesus made it quite clear that He was not speaking of a physical birth, or a series of them for that matter, but one of a spiritual nature. Actually, the correct rendering of this text from the original Greek should use "born from above", for that is precisely what is involved. Mortal human beings mate and bring forth offspring that were mortal and subject to death like themselves ("flesh gives birth to flesh" - verse 6.) However, the "birth" that Jesus spoke of was not achieved through natural reproductive means, but as an event initiated by God alone (John 1:13). When a

person is "born again" as a child of God through faith in Christ's redemptive provision of Himself on the cross, the Holy Spirit imparts to him a new nature that is not physical and therefore perishable (I Peter 1:23). Continued rebirth does not necessitate itself, for the individual has already entered God's Kingdom of eternal life (John 5:24).

## **WAS JOHN THE BAPTIST ELIJAH?**

Reincarnationists further attempt to solicit the endorsement of Christ for their doctrine by claiming that Jesus had alluded to His belief in reincarnation many times in his private conversations with His twelve disciples. One of these instances are said to be found in Matthew, in which Jesus allegedly taught that John the Baptist was actually the reincarnation of the Old Testament prophet Elijah:

*"The disciples asked (Jesus), "Why then do the teachers of the Law say that Elijah must come first?"*

*"Jesus replied, "To be sure, Elijah comes and restores all things. But I tell you, Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but have done to him everything they wished..."*

*Then the disciples understood that He was talking to them about John the Baptist (Matthew 17:10-13. Parenthesis added)."*

It is quite understandable how this passage can be misunderstood to support reincarnation. Frequently, the phrase "this is" is actually intended to be understood as "this represents", and "this is like" as "this is a fulfillment of". Examples of this literary method of expression can be seen in such passages as Matthew 26:26, Hebrews 12:29, I Corinthians 10:4, etc. It would not be unreasonable, therefore, to assume that John came merely as the *functional*, not *literal*, fulfillment of Elijah's ministry, operating in the "power and spirit" of the prophet (Luke 1:17), as also did Elisha (II Kings 2:15).

The absurdity of the reincarnationists' association of John with Elijah can be more clearly seen when another important fact is realized. In II Kings 2:11, we are informed that the prophet never experienced a physical death, thereby rendering his soul unavailable for future rebirth in the body of the Judean baptist. Furthermore, he showed himself to be still alive and in his original body on the Mount of Transfiguration (Luke 9:30-33). And finally, to dispel any remaining doubt, when asked, "*Are you Elijah?*", John plainly answered, "*I am not* (John 1:21)".

## **THE PROBLEM OF EVIL**

Though its leading proponents would have us believe otherwise, reincarnation does not, and indeed cannot, solve the problem of evil. In truth, it actually perpetuates it. For example, according to the "cause and effect" Law of Karma, to which the biblical text "*a man reaps what he sows*" (Galatians 6:7) is often misapplied, the soul of a man who habitually beats his wife will accumulate negative karma relative to his crime. To alleviate this debt, he must then be reborn in his next lifetime as a wife who is beaten by her husband, who then must in turn be likewise reborn as the beaten wife, and so forth en infinitum. Where is there a reasonable resolution to the sin of wife-beating in this endless cycle? The answer is an obvious "nowhere".

Though the above is admittedly a mere hypothetical illustration, the same inherent concept may be likewise applied to any area of human fallibility. Furthermore, when karmic law is followed out to its logical conclusion, it inevitably produces apathy, not the compassion towards one's fellow man that the Bible so expressly demands. Since poverty, sickness, or misfortune are to be accepted as an individual's punishment for previous sins, the attempt of another to alleviate such suffering, as did

the "Good Samaritan" in Luke 10:30-37, is therefore discouraged, and even viewed as a sin itself. The end result of true Hinduism is perhaps best exemplified by the adverse living conditions found in most of India, in which the care and feeding of the destitute rests squarely upon the shoulders of Christian missionaries and those that they have directly influenced (see Matthew 25:31-46).

In its final analysis, the Law of Karma falls hopelessly short of the Christian doctrine of propitiation, for while believers in Christ's substitutionary work on the cross are candidates for God's forgiveness, reincarnationists are not. I John 1:9 offers the hope and comfort that no sin is too great to be forgiven the offender, while the Law of Karma demands an uncompromisingly rigid payment for each and every ill thought or deed.

Throughout history, man has sought to escape accountability before his Maker and to install himself as his own redeemer and god (see Isaiah 44:24). However, Scripture tells us that no matter how many consecutive attempts are made, human beings can never reach a point of self-righteousness, for we are by our very nature, unholy sinners separated from an infinitely holy God (Isaiah 59:2). This is the reason that it was necessary for God to incarnate Himself into human flesh (John 1:18, Colossians 2:9) to bear the condemnation that our sins have incurred (Isaiah 53:4). Acceptance of the cleansing power of Christ's Blood in our lives is the only way that we can receive the free gift of salvation (John 1:12). On the other hand, the consequence for rejection of this simple truth is spiritual death (Romans 6:23), not future opportunities through cyclic rebirth.

The Bible says in Hebrews 9:27; "It is appointed to each man once to die and then comes judgment." Contrary to the false promises of reincarnation, this present life is all that we are granted to work with. Beyond the veil of death, the expanse of eternity awaits us all. The decisions that we make now will ultimately determine our place in it.

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