

Reincarnation: Responding to an Age-Old Belief

I. Definitions

- A. *Reincarnation* holds that people return to earth in another human body after death (cf. Latin *carne*, “flesh”). *Transmigration* similarly says one could later become an animal (e.g., a bird, cow, flea, or cockroach) or an inanimate object (e.g., a rock or piece of chalk). Reincarnationists say one may have hundreds, or even millions, of reincarnations.
- B. *Karma* (good and bad thoughts, words, and deeds in this life) decides the status of the new body—economically, intellectually, and physically. If people earn more good karma, they have a higher form in the next life, but bad karma results in a lower form of existence.
- C. *Pantheism* (Greek *pan*, “all” + *theism*, “God”) is the worldview of reincarnation in which God is an impersonal force; the universe is God, and God is the universe. Therefore, every human and all created beings are an extension of or an emanation from God. Like this is *panentheism*, which teaches that God is not all things, but God is *in* all things.
- D. Buddhists and Hindus have long believed in reincarnation, but a recent Gallup Poll noted that one in four Americans also believe in it. One current author, Gary Zukav, has popularized reincarnation in his book *The Seat of the Soul* (Fireside, 1990; 256 pp.) and through regular appearances on the Oprah Winfrey show. The adherents are growing.

II. Five Arguments of Reincarnation Critiqued¹

- A. *Hypnotic regression* is when people vividly and accurately describe people, places, and events they could not have previously known. But must these be from a former life? Hypnotized individuals often misrepresent or forget real details. “Although hypnosis increases recall, it also increases errors... During hypnosis, you are creating memories.” Most patients who undergo hypnosis are either children or individuals easily influenced by suggestive questions, which is why legal courts reject testimony given under hypnosis. Furthermore, what makes “past life recall” especially prevalent in South and Western Asia, regions where people admire stories of earlier lives? If reincarnation were real, past-life recall would occur across all cultures, not just among those who believe in it.
- B. *Déjà vu* is a feeling that one has done a present action before (e.g., been at a certain place). Reincarnation advocates say this place or event occurred in an earlier life, but researchers say the brain is simply fusing a similar experience in this life with the current one.
- C. *Xenoglossy* is a sudden ability to speak a language one has never learned. Reincarnation attributes this to one’s earlier language in a former life, but *cryptoamnesia* is more likely (when one recalls previously forgotten data, such as languages heard as a child).
- D. *Birthmarks* prove reincarnation if they resemble those found on people who have died. If these were identical, then reincarnationists might have a case, but similarity certainly does not prove that the same soul inhabited both bodies.
- E. *The Bible* also supposedly teaches reincarnation, but the following disproves this view.

¹ Summarized from Patrick Zuckerman, “The Mystery of Reincarnation,” Richardson, TX: Probe Ministries, n.d. (<http://www.probe.org/docs/reincarn.html> or email him at pzuckeran@probe.org).

III. Responses to Reincarnation

A. A Biblical Response (for those who hold the Bible as authoritative)²

1. Where explanations above fail, Scripture notes the possibility of demonic possession. Throughout the New Testament, demons influenced people's physical and mental abilities. These demons, though not all-knowing, have seen humans for thousands of years and can influence the minds of individuals possessed by demons. Edgar Cayce (father of the New Age movement) and others espousing reincarnation confess that the "emptying" of their minds allowed demons to control them.³
2. The Bible teaches clearly that we live once, die once, and then enter our eternal state. Hebrews 9:26b-27 states, "But now [Christ] has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself. Just as man is destined to die once and after that to face judgment, so Christ was sacrificed once..." Jesus and all people die but once, thus excluding the supposed reincarnation teaching in the Bible.
3. Reincarnation advocates often appeal to John 9:1-3. Here, the disciples asked Christ whether a man was born blind because of his own sin or because of his parents' sin. Jews at that time attributed birth defects to a baby's sin in the womb (cf. Jacob and Esau in Gen. 25:22) or to parental sin (cf. Exod. 20:5), but Jesus refuted the man's blindness due to *anyone's* previous sins, so he actually taught *against* karma.
4. The Bible shows that, after their death, people did not undergo reincarnation. For example, Samuel came back from the dead (1 Sam. 28), which would be impossible had he already returned to earth in another body. Also, Lazarus, and especially the evil rich man (Luke 16), did not return to earth in later incarnations.
5. The Bible teaches resurrection into one body—not reincarnation into other bodies. The first harvest was known as "firstfruits" (Exod. 23:16), which is why Paul referred to Christ's resurrection as the "firstfruits" for believers who have passed away (1 Cor. 15:20, 23). After his resurrection, Jesus received an eternal body that resembled his mortal one. Likewise, Christians will also rise into new, glorious bodies—not return to earth in different mortal bodies. Similarly, after judgment, unbelievers will rise to inhabit indestructible bodies, yet for punishment (Rev. 20:14-15; cf. Luke 16:19-31).

B. A Philosophical Response (for those who do *not* hold the Bible as authoritative)⁴

1. Reincarnation encourages murder. In the *Bhagavad-Gita* ("the song of God" in Sanskrit, which is Hinduism's most popular sacred book), the god Krishna counsels

² For biblical critiques of reincarnation see Mark Albrecht, *Reincarnation: A Christian Critique of a New Age Doctrine* (Chicago: IVP, 1982, 1987), 35-50, 105-26; Norman L. Geisler and J. Yutaka Amano, *The Reincarnation Sensation* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1986), 105-7, 113-54; Walter Martin, *The Riddle of Reincarnation* (Santa Ana, CA: Vision House, 1977); Craig S. Hawkins, *Witchcraft: Exploring the World of Wicca* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 121-27; and Craig S. Hawkins, *Goddess Worship, Witchcraft and Neo-Paganism* (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1998), 65-68; cited by Hawkins, n. 1 at <http://www.apologeticsinfo.org/papers/critiquereincarnation.html>. See also Robert M. Bowman, "Reincarnation—Did the Church Suppress It?" in the *Christian Research Journal*, Vol. 10, no. 1 (Summer 1987): 8-12; Paul Edwards, "The Case Against Reincarnation: Part 1," *Free Inquiry* 6 (Fall 1986): 24-34; "The Case Against Reincarnation: Part 2," *Free Inquiry* 7 (Winter 1986/87): 38-43.

³ Thomas Sugue, *The Story of Edgar Cayce: There is a River* (Virginia Beach: Association for Research and Enlightenment, 1973), 219, as cited by Geisler and Amano in *The Reincarnation Sensation*, 79.

⁴ See Craig S. Hawkins, "A Philosophical Critique of Reincarnation and Related Worldview Correlatives," Santa Ana, CA: Apologetics Information Min., 1999; rev. 7/26/00 ([apologeticsinfo.org/papers/critiquereincarnation.html](http://www.apologeticsinfo.org/papers/critiquereincarnation.html)).

the warrior Arjuna not to worry or mourn over killing anyone in battle. Why not? Murder is not a sin but is virtuous since it helps the murdered deal with their karma. Krishna says that Arjuna cannot really kill anyway, since “Death is certain for the born. Rebirth is certain for the dead. You should not grieve for what is unavoidable.... Die, and you win heaven. Conquer, and you enjoy the earth. Stand up now, Son of Kunti, and resolve to fight. Realize that pleasure and pain, gain and loss, victory and defeat, are all one and the same: then go into battle. Do this, and you cannot commit any sin.”⁵ Many reincarnationists agree with this idea of murder not being a sin.⁶

2. Reincarnation claims that everything that happens is due to choice. This choice in one’s earlier or present life may be conscious or unconscious, but everyone still chooses it. Shirley MacLaine shared this sad view following the tragic death of her daughter's acting teacher burned beyond recognition. MacLaine asked, “Why did she choose to die that way?”⁷ One occult leader says, “Many other deaths do not seem to be choices: accidents, illnesses, murder, the deaths of young people... But in the occult view, these deaths were not arbitrary nor beyond the control of the people involved. The death-choices were subconscious choices, but choices just the same for any of a myriad of reasons.”⁸ But do even reincarnationists choose their own deaths?
3. Reincarnationists need to have every (or nearly every) type of experience. This may be to pay off negative karma, actualize their potential, or learn from different experiences in their “evolution as a deity.” The witch Raymond Buckland states, “Why should one be born crippled, another fit and strong?... because we must all eventually experience all things.”⁹ Sadly, their system requires lifetimes as a murderer, prostitute, rapist, and terrorist. Also, experiencing everything is impossible, since time marches on, and no one can experience all there is in each age.
4. Reincarnation is fatalistic, saying that whatever happens in life is the best or morally correct course of events. No matter what happens to one, it ought to occur because, as one witch says, it “was the best possible thing that could happen to him.”¹⁰
5. Reincarnation leads one to never care for others. “If a woman gets raped (or any other tragedy occurs to someone) in this life, does that mean she raped someone in a previous (or will in a future) life, or committed (or will commit) some other equally despicable act to bring about her own rape? Therefore, she is only getting what she has sown (deserves?), thus reaping her own karma? Hence, why should we feel sorry for her or attempt to intervene? (Furthermore, how can we punish the rapist if he is only fulfilling the law of karma, and actually helping the women?) These are

⁵ *Bhagavad-Gita: The Song of God*, translated by Prabhavananda and Christopher Isherwood, with an introduction by Aldous Huxley (New York: Mentor Books, 1944, 1951), 38-39.

⁶ Rajneesh clarifies the *Bhagavad-Gita* (including the section cited above): “Even if you kill someone consciously, while fully conscious it is meditative. That is what Krishna was saying to Arjuna...Kill, murder, fully conscious, knowing fully that no one is murdered and no one is killed....Just become the instrument of Divine hands and know well that no one is killed, no one can be killed” (Rajneesh, *The Book of the Secrets: Discourses on Vigyana Bhairava Tantra* [New York: Harper Colophon, 1977], 1:399; as quoted in John Ankerberg and John Weldon, *Cult Watch*, 290). The founder of Transcendental Meditation wrote in his commentary on the *Bhagavad-Gita* that Arjuna should attain “a state of consciousness which will justify any action of his and will allow him even to kill in love in support of the purpose of evolution” (Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, *On the Bhagavad Gita: A New Translation and Commentary* [Baltimore, MD: Penguin, 1974], 76; as quoted in Ankerberg and Weldon, *Cult Watch*, 290-91).

⁷ Shirley MacLaine, *It's All in the Playing* (New York: Bantam Books, 1987), cited by Ron Rhodes, *New Age Movement* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 17.

⁸ Marion Weinstein, *Positive Magic: Occult Self-Help*, rev. ed. (Custer, WA: Phoenix Pub., 1981), 98.

⁹ Raymond Buckland, *Buckland's Complete Book of Witchcraft* (St. Paul: Llewellyn Pub., 1988), 17.

¹⁰ Sybil Leek, *Reincarnation: The Second Chance* (New York: Bantam Books, 1975), 50.

detestable views... if these ideas were true, one could rightly ask if anything is unjust, wrong, or evil. But this flies in the face of our intuition, our innate sense of sympathy, right and wrong, good and evil, and fairness.”¹¹

6. Reincarnationists cannot, or at least do not, live consistently with their views. If devout reincarnationists could live consistently by their philosophy, then the following scenario could genuinely happen: “Imagine that Shirley MacLaine's house is broken into and that many of her valuable possessions are destroyed or stolen, and she and her household are badly beaten up and abused. Suppose further that just after her assailants are done and getting ready to leave, Shirley MacLaine musters what little strength she has and says, ‘Thank you, thank you so much. I really mean it. Oh, and don't worry about me calling the police and trying to see you punished; you have done me a great favor. Now, actually, I owe you a great favor; you have helped me work off a great [amount] of negative karma, and of course, after all, I chose to have this happen, and besides, I needed to experience this, sooner or later, so thank you. Have a nice day!’ [... Why won't she respond like this? We all know that this crime] is wrong, and the perpetrators ought to be held responsible for their actions!”¹²
7. Reincarnation makes it impossible to morally distinguish between good and evil. If all is the way it ought to be, morality is unnecessary and irrelevant. If things that look “bad” or “evil” are actually good, how can one know whether one is accruing negative or positive karma by “helping” others or oneself? To make such a judgment would be arbitrary without objective standards of right and wrong. Ironically, Satan himself promised us the ability to tell right from wrong (Gen. 3:5b). What a lie.
8. Reincarnation teaches that the divinity is responsible for all the pain, suffering, and evil that has, does, or ever will exist. This is the conclusion of the pantheistic belief in reincarnation: “all is God.” If all is God, then both good and evil are aspects of this One who ultimately becomes responsible for evil. Reincarnation in witchcraft thus sustains Satan's first lie—that sin makes us “be like God” (Gen. 3:5a).
9. Reincarnation believes that evil is eternal. In fact, “we can have no assurance that the deity(ies) or divinity can or wants to defeat evil. Nor can we be sure that this is even an appropriate question, since in the [pantheistic or panentheistic] worlds evil is always part of the deity's or One's very nature.”¹³

IV. Conclusion

Reincarnation will not conquer evil in our world, or us, as even reincarnationists do not believe it. They intuitively know that right and wrong exist, so they do not live consistently with the teaching that everything is legitimate. Instead of defeating evil, they justify it further.

V. Thought Questions

- A. Why is reincarnation a popular theory—especially in the West, where it is new?
- B. How can we prove the finality of death as opposed to the reincarnation theory?

¹¹ Hawkins, “A Philosophical Critique of Reincarnation and Related Worldview Correlatives,” after note 32.

¹² *Ibid.*, after note 35.

¹³ *Ibid.*, after note 39.