

Reincarnation

Responding to an Age-Old Belief

I. Some Terms

- A. *Reincarnation* believes that after death, people return to earth in another human body (cf. Latin *carne*, "flesh"). *Transmigration* is similar, saying one could become an animal (bird, cow, flea, cockroach) or an inanimate object (rock, chalk, etc.) in the next life. Reincarnationists say people may go through 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, physically, etc. If one earns more good karma, one has a higher form in the next life, but bad karma results in lower forms 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. Thus, every human and all created beings are an extension of or an emanation from God. Similar to 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 modern 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 someone vividly and accurately describes people, places, and events he or she could not have previously known. But must these be from a former life? Many "hypnotized" people have outright lied or not remembered the real details. "Although hypnosis increases recall, it also increases errors... During hypnosis, you are creating memories."² Patients under hypnosis are also mostly children or are easily influenced by leading questions, which is why law courts do not accept testimony under hypnosis. Also, why is "past life recall" mostly prevalent in south and western Asia, where "stories from a former life" are admired? If reincarnation is true, one should observe "past life recall" in all cultures, not just where it is believed.
- B. *Déjà vu* is a feeling that one has done a present action before (e.g., been at a specific place). Reincarnation advocates say this place or event occurred in a previous life, but researchers say the brain is simply fusing a similar past 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 previous language in a former life, but *cryptomnesia* is more likely (when one recalls previously forgotten data such as languages heard as a child).
- D. *Birthmarks* also supposedly support reincarnation since some are like those of deceased individuals. If these were identical, the reincarnationists might have a case, but similarity certainly does not prove that the same soul inhabited both bodies.

¹ This section and the following biblical section mostly summarizes 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). He is a research associate with Probe, former pastor, and ThM graduate of Dallas Seminary.

² Elizabeth Stark, "Hypnosis on Trial," *Psychology Today* (February 1984), 35.

- E. *The Bible* is also used to teach reincarnation. Although it agrees that man's immaterial soul and spirit never dies, it does not teach reincarnation (see below).

III. Responses to Reincarnation

A. A Biblical Response³

1. Where explanations above fail, Scripture notes the possibility of demonic possession. The NT has several examples of persons whose bodies and minds were controlled by demons. These demons, while not all-knowing, have observed humans for thousands of years and can interject knowledge into the minds of those possessed. Edgar Cayce (father of the New Age movement) and others espousing reincarnation confess that the "emptying" of their minds allowed demons to control them.⁴
2. The Bible clearly teaches that we live once, die once, and enter our eternal state. Hebrews 9:26b-28a 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..." (NIV). Jesus and all people die but once, thus excluding 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 due to his own sin or sin of his parents. Jewish belief at that time attributed birth defects to sin by the baby in the womb (cf. Jacob and Esau in Gen. 25:22) or to parental sin (cf. Exod. 20:5). However, Jesus refuted the idea of the man's blindness due to *anyone's* previous sins, so he actually taught *against* karma.
4. The Bible even gives examples of people after their death who did not go through the evolutionary process taught by reincarnation. For example, Samuel was brought back from the dead (1 Sam. 28). This would not have been possible had he already returned to earth in another body. Also, Lazarus and especially the evil and rich man (Luke 16) did not return to earth in further incarnations.
5. The Bible teaches resurrection into one body—not reincarnation into many bodies. As the crops harvested first were called "firstfruits" (Exod. 23:16), so Christ's own resurrection is deemed the "firstfruits" of believers who have died (1 Cor. 15:20, 23). After his resurrection, Jesus received an eternal body that resembled his mortal one. In like manner, Christians will also be raised 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).

³ 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.

⁴ Thomas Sogue, *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.

B. A Philosophical Response (for those who do not hold the Bible as authoritative)⁵

1. Reincarnation encourages murder. In the *Bhagavad Gita* ("The Song of God" in Sanskrit, Hinduism's most famous sacred book), the god Krishna counsels 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 can't 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."⁶ Many reincarnation proponents agree with this concept of murder not being a sin.⁷
2. Reincarnation claims that everything that happens is due to choice. This choice in one's previous or present life may be conscious or unconscious, but each individual still chooses it. Shirley MacLaine expressed this pitiful view after her daughter's acting teacher burned to death beyond recognition. MacLaine asked, "Why did she choose to die that way?"⁸ One occult leader claims, "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."⁹ But do even reincarnationists choose their deaths?
3. Reincarnationists need to have every (or close to it) type of experience possible. 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."¹⁰ Sadly, life as a murderer, prostitute, rapist, and terrorist is thus necessary in their system. Also, undergoing everything is impossible since time marches on, and no one can experience all there is in a given age.
4. Reincarnation is fatalistic, saying whatever happens in life is the best or morally correct course. No matter what happens to one, it should occur because, as one witch says, it "was the best possible thing that could happen to him."¹¹

⁵ This philosophical section summarizes Craig S. Hawkins, "A Philosophical Critique of Reincarnation and Related Worldview Correlatives," Santa Ana, CA: Apologetics Information Ministry, 1999; rev. 7/26/00 (<http://www.apologeticsinfo.org/papers/critiquereincarnation.html>).

⁶ *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.

⁷ 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).

⁸ 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.

⁹ Marion Weinstein, *Positive Magic: Occult Self-Help*, rev. ed. (Custer, WA: Phoenix Pub., 1981), 98.

¹⁰ Raymond Buckland, *Buckland's Complete Book of Witchcraft* (St. Paul: Llewellyn Pub., 1988), 17.

¹¹ Sybil Leek, *Reincarnation: The Second Chance* (New York: Bantam Books, 1975), 50.

5. Reincarnation leads one never to 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 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.”¹²
6. Reincarnationists cannot, or at least do not, live consistent to 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 did choose 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!”¹³
7. Reincarnation makes us unable to morally distinguish good from evil. If all is how it should 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 ultimate conclusion to the pantheistic belief of reincarnation: “All is God.” If all is God, then 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.”¹⁴

IV. Conclusion

Reincarnation provides no real hope for conquering evil in our world or ourselves. It is a philosophy that even reincarnationists do not believe in. They intuitively know that right and wrong exist, so they do not live consistent with the teaching that everything is legitimate. Instead of helping defeat evil in the world, reincarnation justifies more of it.

V. Thought Questions

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

¹² Hawkins, “A Philosophical Critique of Reincarnation and Related Worldview Correlatives,” after note 32.

¹³ Ibid., after note 35.

¹⁴ Ibid., after note 39.