

Resurrection or Reincarnation?

A Christian Response to New Age Reincarnation

Many would agree that this present existence is not the optimum one. Something better must lie ahead. Everyone's desire to live forever has troubled virtually every known religion and the New Age is not excluded. "Something's not right" is the lament of many religious beliefs and the new Age offers reincarnation as its comfort to this vexing predicament. All is not well in this life and, according to New Age thinking, it is necessary for the soul to return to the body for another life span. "What happens after death" is a crucial question and those who take this seriously offer one of three answers, (1) annihilation, (2) resurrection, or (3) reincarnation. While striving for oneness with the One, the soul is filled with unrest and New Age presents reincarnation as the road to ultimate peace.

Reincarnation Defined

Reincarnation in the New Age is similar to the Eastern view. While Eastern views vary and are far more complex than New Age beliefs, (e.g., the soul may, depending upon its karma, reincarnate into some other physical existence such as animal, mineral, vegetable, etc.), the basic concept of reincarnation is retained. The essential person or soul is preserved at death and passes from one physical existence into another. This reincarnated physical existence is, on a popular level, almost always a human existence for New Age. The soul shares in numerous personalities in order to realize its connectedness with the divine Soul.

In accordance with pantheistic monism where everything is one with the One (God), New Age believes that everyone is on the way to merging with the One. No one is excluded in this progressive evolutionary climb toward oneness—all will arrive. The way in which one moves from one stage of development to another—the *modus operandi*—is reincarnation. Working from the presupposition that all individuals will "accomplish their moral and spiritual development as they live out the consequences of prior actions, from this life and the previous ones, over a period of successive lifetimes in physical body" (Melton, *New Age Encyclopedia*, xvi), the New Age seeks to bring hope. If one doesn't get it right in this life, another will follow.

This type of response answers not only the intellectually curious but the psychologically fearful soul who cowers at death's imminence. Bemoaning the "something's-not-right" dirge, reincarnation posits a healthy outlook where death is merely a transition to a better existence in another life. New Age thought portrays the next life as a move up the

ladder toward deification and death is simply the door of entrance to this new life. Numerous lives may be necessary, but the New Age brings consolation to all that death is not the end but the beginning of another chance at discovering deity.

Rather than acknowledge a distinct and sovereign Creator who mysteriously permits evil and suffering, reincarnation attempts to soothe the soul with explanations of karma. This are the way they are because something in the past caused them to be that way. Literally karma means action. In the religious realm karma is an impersonal force or moral principle of cause and effect where one reaps in the present life rewards or punishments for a previous life. Karma is both sowing the seed—action—and reaping the consequences—fruit of action— (see, Sunand Sumithra, *Right With God*, D. A. Carson, ed., pp. 216-217). While injustice does seem to occur and many of the less fortunate lose out in this life, reincarnation will eventually equalize the soul's torment in lives to come.

Karma assumes a cyclical view of time and history. Instead of being accountable for actions to some other personal being at the end of one life, time just spins around like a wheel offering as many lives as needed to “get it right.” Consequences suffered in this life will yield better and more developed souls in the next life. The cycle of time is endless rather than having a fixed beginning or end, so in the larger scheme of New Age reality one does not need to worry so much about ethical behavior. Categories of right and wrong, good and evil, truth and error combine into one timeless reality that offers tranquility to the soul.

New Age theology insist that God is love and that eternal punishment for sin is unthinkable. Just as biological evolution takes place (an assumption of most New Age thinkers) so, too, reincarnation is a kind of moral evolution. The appearance of good and evil in morality came about as a result of individual souls becoming separated from the God force. Karma and reincarnation is not a path unto condemnation but deification. Due to God's infinite (though impersonal) love, no one will perish and all will enter heaven after karma works to “eliminate the artificial concepts of good and evil” (Shirley MacLaine, *Dancing in the Light*, pp. 339-340).

Appealing to the longing for perfection and peace, New Age belief in reincarnation promises a new consciousness where individuals see the connectedness of all things rather than the supposed distinctions within reality. Every individual takes responsibility for his or her own actions rather than some distant deity holding people responsible. Bizarre calamity is thought of as payment of karmic debt from a past life.

Reincarnation Deposed

Problems with reincarnation are so numerous it would be difficult to expose them all. However, the fatal ones are in the areas of logic and the Bible. Reincarnation is impossible to hold to coherently and biblically. In the realm of logic, reincarnation suffers from many conceptual difficulties. First, if reincarnation gives numerous chances or lives for moral improvement and, according to New Age thought, every life is an expression of the morally perfect One, then what can moral improvement *really* mean to an already morally perfect being? Aspirations of becoming more “this” or more “that” are meaningless. This appears to be a classic form of question-begging.

It could be argued that the status to attain is not moral perfection but rather a new state of consciousness whereby one *realizes* the perfection already possessed. This makes the “god within” a morally perfect being who is still incomplete in something, viz., a new or different stated of consciousness that is necessary for improvement. Why anyone would want to go through countless lives in hope of being one with a god that can’t realize itself is more difficult than most New Agers are willing to admit.

Second, while it is true that the origin of evil is an extremely difficult problems for Christianity, it becomes insurmountable with reincarnation. According to karmic theory, the (apparent) existence of evil is explained by way of a past life. Circumstances are awry because of a previous incarnation. But what causes that previous incarnation to result in the present experience of evil? Another previous incarnation? What caused that? Ultimately, an infinite regress results where no explanation of evil’s appearance is given (see, Amano and Geisler, *The Reincarnation Sensation*, pp. 101-102). Reincarnation is helpless at this juncture.

Christianity offers a viable option to the origin of evil. Moral evil, according to Augustine and many others, is a metaphysical reality in moral agents (a.k.a. human persons). Moral evil manifests when humans misuse something good such as freedom. God is no more responsible for the misuse of freedom than are car manufacturers responsible for drunk driving. Also, ti could be that God has a reason, unknown to us, for allowing other kinds of evil (e.g., natural evil). With this option it is logically possible for evil and the God of Christianity to co-exist. This response will not satisfy every inquisition regarding the existence of evil, it can provide a meaningful framework for further study and it could appear more satisfying than the infinite regress of New Age reincarnation.

Third, if reincarnation is the great moral equalizer where everyone gets what he/she deserves, then where is the justice in being punished for past lives that one can't remember? Not only is it unfair to hold someone responsible for being born blind, it is cruel to inform them they should have known better! Jesus thought quite the opposite and believed misfortune can in some cases, have a better explanation (Jn. 9:1-3).

Fourth, if there are no ultimate standards for actions to be judged by, then karmic debt is really impossible. How does karma know the difference between rewards and punishment? Conceptually it cannot. More importantly, how can the individual know that the present life is *better* than a previous life? Even if reincarnation is logically possible, no one could assert that the present life is "better" than a previous life apart from some criteria against which to measure progress (Douglas Groothuis, *Unmasking The New Age*, p. 151). At best, the reincarnationist can only claim that the present life is *different* from a previous life. And being different is a long epistemological distance from being better.

Fifth, reincarnational thinking assumes that one lifetime is not enough for adequate moral progress. This is probably related to the ideas that (1) existentially most, if not all, don't get it right the first time around and (2) God is live and would not send another to eternal damnation where the chance for another go-around is forever lost. Therefore, individuals will have as much time as necessary to realize their oneness with the One. Yet is not one life, indeed one hour, long enough to make a lifetime decision (Amano and Geisler, *The Reincarnation Sensation*, p. 130)? In addition, Christianity does not expect anyone to "get it right." In fact, Christianity would post that no matter how many times one has a go of it, humanity could never get it right apart from God's direct and supernatural intervention (Jn. 6:65).

Biblical Christianity offers the only hope for justice and a coherent belief system regarding the issue of life after death. Jesus said "no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again" (Jn. 3:3-7); cf., also 2 Cor. 5:17; Gal. 6:15; Jm. 1:18; 1 Pt. 1:3; 1 Jn. 2:29). This not reincarnation into another existence but regeneration of the soul in the present existence. *Regeneration is that activity of God wherein he radically transforms the moral fiber of a person through the unique work of the Holy Spirit. Being born again is not a reward from a past life but a cleansing of the present life.* The new birth has its start and finish in God the Holy Spirit who alone brings it about without respect to human activity (Jn. 1:13; 3:8; Tit. 3:4-7).

Titus 3:5 says that (1) salvation is offered solely on the basis of God's mercy, (2) it is *not* contingent upon any human effort (note: "He save us") and (3) the means employed by God is

through (*dia* with the genitive indicating means) the “washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit.” Paul clearly states here and elsewhere (Rom. 4:4-5; Gal. 2:16-17; Eph. 2:4-5, 8-9) that regeneration is God’s activity. Value system are wholly renovated, not just altered. Old impulses and habits are replaced with new ones (Gal. 5:19-24; Col. 2:11-12) and a death takes place of the old self (nature) that was dominated by sinful desires and activities (Rom. 6:1-11; Gal. 2:20).

After his death, Jesus was miraculously brought back to life as the resurrected Lord of the universe (Phil. 2:9-11). The *fact* of his resurrection squares with every line of evidence. The tomb was empty (Lk. 24:24). His grave clothes were undisturbed (Lk. 24:12; Jn. 20:6-7). Appearances to the disciples cannot be explained any other way other than a resurrected Jesus. Continued existence of the Church in the midst of torture and persecution remains an unsolvable mystery if Christ is not raised. Given the reliability of the NT documents, the existence of the Christian Church, and lives that continue to be transformed by the Gospel, the resurrection of the Nazarene can only be disputed on irrational and anti-historical grounds. Rather than countless lives and deaths as in reincarnation, the resurrection of Jesus guarantees believers hope in the face of death (1 Cor. 15:20, 23, 51-57), power to live a life pleasing to God (Eph. 1:18-20), and eternal life with God (1 Thess. 4:14-17).

The resurrection of Jesus is the paradigm for life after death. Paul’s whole point in 1 Corinthians 15 is to show how death was dealt a final blow by Jesus’ resurrection. In the future all will be resurrected like him (1 Cor. 15:54-57). Rather than another round of life in the body as in reincarnation, resurrection is the beginning of life eternal. Reincarnation maintains that death is a repeated experience. Resurrection maintains death is the last enemy to contend with us (1 Cor. 15:26) and upon the return of Jesus Christ believers will be raised imperishable, never to die again (1 Cor. 15:52).

The return of Jesus will be the great moral equalizer that sets the record straight for all. When Jesus comes, he will determine the fate of all for eternity (Mt. 25:21-46). Death occurs only once and judgment follows (Heb. 9:27; 10:27, 30). Reincarnation gives endless chances at attaining a reality that doesn’t exist—the deification of humankind. In the process, reincarnation maintains that it can’t be known whether or not one is in a better existence than the last, since there are no standards to go by. While the apparent reign of evils persists (Job 21:7-9; Ps. 73:3-4; Jer. 12:1), God has promised that, even though death will come, eternal life is offered to those who have faith in his Son (Jn. 11:25-26; 1 Jn. 5:11-13).

The desire to live forever is fully satisfied in the historical reality of Jesus' resurrection and the inspired Word of God. The Bible admits that "something's not right" and explains the reason (Gen. 3). Christianity affirms that this present world is not the best possible world. But, like no other religion has done, Christianity provides real hope for the present and future. For those who maintain reincarnation consistently, the result is despair. The psychological reality of hope in a resurrected life is tied directly to the historical reality of Jesus' resurrection. Reincarnation is tied to esoteric metaphysical presuppositions about the nature of ultimate reality (the One) that give no historical hook on which to hang one's hat.

Reincarnation in New Age pantheism is a judgment that one serves for wrong behavior in past lives. Reincarnation in the New Age is seen as moral progression and increased consciousness of becoming united with the One. It is viewed as a mechanism to escape the reality of ignorance. Resurrection, on the other hand, is a once-for-all reality that brings not only immortality but the individual fact to face with the living God of Christianity. To deny resurrection is to dispute Old Testament teaching and call Jesus a liar (Mk. 12:24-27; Jn. 5:28-29). Choices made do have eternal significance, not before an impersonal, amoral principle of karma, but before a just and merciful Creator who welcomes those who, through faith in his Son, enter into eternal fellowship with him.