

Resurrection, Reincarnation, and Humanness

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What is human existence? Philosophers, poets, sages, gurus, and theologians have pondered that question throughout history.

Gautama Buddha declared, "Human life is suffering."¹ He explained,

- The world of transmigration, my disciples, has its beginning in eternity. No origin can be perceived, from which beings start, and hampered by ignorance, fettered by craving, we stray and wander. A mother's death, a daughter's death, loss of kinsmen, loss of property, sickness, all these have you endured through long ages—and while you felt these losses and strayed and wandered on this long journey, grieving, weeping because you were bound to what you hated and separated from what you loved, the tears that you shed are more than the water in the four oceans.²

However, the psalmist described human existence as the deliberate and special creative product of the Almighty God: "What is man, that Thou dost take thought of him? And the son of man, that Thou dost care for him? Yet Thou hast made him a little lower than God, and dost crown him with glory and majesty" (Ps 8:4–5). The Prophet Isaiah described human existence as purposeful, designed by the Creator for His glory (Isa 43:7).

Both views of human existence are ancient, and both offer a starting point for the search for human fulfillment. The two views are, however, mutually exclusive, for the first, the Eastern view exemplified by Buddhism, assumes that suffering inheres in human existence, whereas the second, the Judeo-Christian view, assumes that purposeful beneficence inheres in human existence.

The concepts of reincarnation and resurrection, of karma and atonement flow from different world views, different theologies, and different anthropologies. A proper understanding of the nature of man and his relationships to God and the world shows the inadequacies of reincarnation and affirms the cogency of the biblical concept of resurrection, typified and empowered by the resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Second Adam.

Definition of Terms

Reincarnation

Five terms are used to describe what is commonly considered reincarnation. *Metempsychosis* is probably the most precise term for reincarnation, meaning, "the changing of bodies," that is, some sort of continuity of existence occurs in sequence from one body to another.

The Greek term *palingenesis*, or "origin again," indicates the idea that one's physical birth is an "origin again," or a new starting point for something that had another origin previously. *Metempsychosis* is a term used to describe the classic Greek idea that the soul or spirit changes the form or body, through which it expresses itself. *Reincarnation* is the term familiar to most Western laypersons. Its literal meaning, "enfleshing again," describes the soul's travel from one physical lifetime to another. In contemporary usage this term usually refers to the soul's travel from one human body to another, not to that of an animal or inanimate object.

Rebirth is an ambiguous term favored especially by reincarnationists attempting to identify reincarnation with the biblical idea of the new birth (John 3).

Transmigration is used more generally than reincarnation. A soul can transmigrate from one kind of life form to another, say, for example, from that of a man to that of a cow. Most contemporary

Western reincarnationists reject the possibility of a human soul becoming incarnated in anything other than another human.

Anthropology

The study of man, the nature of humanness, has developed in three clearly demarcated directions: Eastern, classical Western, and Judeo-Christian. Eastern anthropology usually assumes that human existence is a cyclical struggle between the body and the soul, the material and the spirit, the unreal or transitory and the real, the transitory and the eternal. This struggle follows the inexorable laws of cause and effect which reign supreme over existence.

Classical Western anthropology, exemplified by the Greek philosophers, including Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, also sees man as a microcosm of the universal struggle between flesh and spirit. But the fate of the Greeks is not the dreadful taskmaster of Eastern karma. One will eventually achieve release, even if one's soul is not particularly committed to hastening that release through personal conscientious effort.

The Judeo-Christian understanding of man uniquely affirms the dual unity of man's physical and spiritual aspects. Man, who is both physical and spiritual, is the crown of God's creation. His moral standing, his present existence, and his eternal destiny involve his body and his spirit.

Resurrection

According to the Bible, man's resurrection is empowered totally and completely by God, the Creator and Sustainer. This resurrection is bodily, visible, physical, and in numeric identity with the body that dies. It is not a new body for an old spirit. Resurrection imparts incorruptibility and immortality to the body that was dead. It is not merely resuscitation of a person near or at death. Jesus Christ was the first One to be resurrected. In fact He had prophesied that He would raise Himself from the dead (e.g., John 2:19–21). His resurrection demonstrated His authority over death (Col 1:18).

Resurrection is promised to all humans. The just will be raised to glorification (1 Pet 1:3–4) and the unjust will be raised to eternal, conscious separation from the presence of God (Rev 20:11–15).

World Views

Reincarnation is inconsistent with the Bible's description of the world and man. Biblical anthropology is intricately connected with biblical theology and a biblical world view.³ Understanding humanness and resurrection from a biblical perspective includes accepting a biblical world view.

The Eastern World View

The Eastern mind understands existence as a unitary whole. What is real is one, unchanging, and undifferentiated. Differentiation, individual egos, the linear appearance of history, subject-object distinctions, Creator and created, good and bad, perceiver and perceived—all this is illusory, or at best transitory.

The Supreme Personality is ultimately swallowed up in the impersonal sublimity of existence. History is illusionary; there is only the endless cycle or wheel of life by which life continuously dies and is born again. The ultimate knowledge of the self is the denial of the self in the other. Creator becomes created. Bad is only the other side of good. The perceiver is looking in a mirror. Christian philosopher Stuart Hackett describes this world view as it was finally articulated by the Hindu philosopher, Sankara (A.D. 788–820):

- What is virtually indisputable is that his philosophy became the fulcrum on which most of the subsequent development of classical Indian philosophy turned. The term *advaita* (non-duality) supplies the key to Sankara's whole outlook: for he holds that all differences and distinctions are ultimately superficial and, at the highest level of being and truth, unreal, and that therefore...reality is a single, all-inclusive, yet absolutely non-differenced Being, of which all else is the misinterpreted appearance, and with which all else is essentially and indistinguishably one.⁴

This monism (all existence is one) is the base of the Eastern world view, despite the popular status of the many hundreds of demi-gods with which Westerners tend to associate Eastern thought. After all, even the gods and goddesses are caught up in the eternal cycle:

- What could the gods do? Their celestial realms, however splendid they may be, and their life, however glorious one may imagine it, are dominated by the same laws of decrepitude and dissolution as ours. They are our giant brothers; perhaps redoubtable tyrants, perhaps compassionate protectors; but they have in no way saved the world from suffering; they have not even freed themselves from it.⁵

The Hindu Upanishads describe the ultimate One as Brahman, a term that developed in several thousand years of Hinduism as animistic, polytheistic, monotheistic, pantheistic, and, ultimately, monistic. The later Hindu interpreters explained Brahman as the ultimate origin and goal of all existence, with only appearances of differentiation, duality, and personality. Curiously the development of the concept of zero in Indian mathematics helped solidify this monistic Brahman.

- A further contribution to the monistic theory was the notion of zero, introduced by Indian mathematicians in the fourth century A.D., which was "conceived as a symbol of brahman and nirvanam...[as] the unifying point of indifference and the matrix of the All and the None." The ancient realistic view of life was no longer regarded as valid. Zero represented the reconciliation of opposites, of plus and minus, of light and darkness, of opposite moral values, of all dualistic concepts, a notion which by means of yogic techniques was of great therapeutic value in resolving psychological problems. Zero also confirmed the use of the expression "as if," or "as it were" (*iva*) in the *Brhad-Ar. Up.* (II.4,14), which declares that it is only "as if" there were any duality (*dvaitam iva*).⁶

The Classical (Western) World View

The world view of the classical Greeks (5th century B.C. and later) and later the Hellenistic period (through the 3rd century A.D.) differs from what many people believe it to be. The hundreds of Greek and Roman anthropomorphic gods and goddesses were not pagan multiple counterparts to the eternal, omnipotent biblical God. Instead they were demigods, suffering the same limitations and frustrations as mortals, but on a supernatural scale.

- Superior to the gods was moira (fate). Even Zeus was unable to interfere with its workings. Moira and Ker (doom) come close in meaning, and the heroes' fates were literally in the balance when Zeus hung out his scales. Sometimes Zeus was the instrument of moira, but he never controlled it in the final outcome.⁷

As early as the sixth century B.C. Greek philosophers and literary figures promoted a rationalism and demoted the importance of the many deities. Heraclitus of Ephesus and Zenophanes of Colophon, followed by the Sophists, Euripides, and Aristophanes all contributed to the philosophical climate of an impersonal Oneness of ultimate reality. By the time of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, the gods were part of mythology and folk religion, but were not viewed as existing divine beings. In fact the overriding world view of this period was closer to the Eastern world view. In this classical Western world view, ultimate reality was similar to the view of ultimate reality in Eastern thought. Godwin gives an example of this from the Orphic school of classical mystery religions:

- The Orphics called this sphere of the visible universe the Circle of Necessity; Buddhists call it the Wheel of Existence.... Both believe, moreover, in the eventual liberation of all souls. The Pythagoreans, who were a sect of Orpheus' school, held that at the end of a Great Year all were restored to their primal purity in a Golden Age, as the whole of Creation joins its source. The final destiny of all humanity—indeed of all creatures—is therefore the realization of Divinity. The Mystery initiate differs from the others simply in moving consciously towards that goal.⁸

In their developed and articulated forms the world views of both the East and the classical West were ultimately pantheistic if not (impersonally) monistic.

The Judeo-Christian World View

"The God who made the world and all things in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands; neither is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything, since He Himself gives to all life and breath and all things.... Being then the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and thought of man. Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all everywhere should repent" (Acts 17:24–25,29–30).

The biblical world view sees an essential differentiation between God and the world in which humankind lives. God is the Creator and Sustainer of all things; He is not the essence of all things. This strict demarcation between the Creator and the created sets the Judeo-Christian world view apart from either the Eastern or the classical Western world views.

The strict monotheism of the Old and New Testaments is distinct from unsophisticated polytheism or the more complex pantheism or monism. God created everything by His power (Heb 11:3), but not out of His own substance (Gen 1:1–3; Rom 4:17). The creation is dependent on God for its creation (Heb 3:4) and its continued existence (Ps 121; Acts 17:25–26; Col 1:16–17). Future fulfillment, then, could not be by assimilation into God, for the creation was never a part of God. Rather, ultimate fulfillment must be the realization of the perfection in which God originally created it. Paul wrote of this process by which the creation moves toward fulfillment:

"For the anxious longing of the creation waits eagerly for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will, but because of Him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God" (Rom 8:19–22).

Reincarnation is an integral part of the cyclical process of assimilation into the One. It is incompatible with the linear process of Creation, the Fall, and redemption described in the Bible.

Metempsychosis (Reincarnation)

Many people think reincarnation is a uniquely Eastern concept. However, the idea of metempsychosis, the change from one body to another (of a soul, spirit, or some principle of life), is an ancient concept found in primitive religions⁹ and classical Western religion, as well as in the Eastern world. In fact some sects or cults in the traditionally monotheistic religions of Islam, Judaism, and Christianity have embraced some form of metempsychosis.

Primitive religions

Most concepts of reincarnation in primitive religions are distinguished from others because they do not depend on the idea that material existence is evil, illusory, or transitory. Instead, the typical primitive view of reincarnation centers on the value of life. World religion expert Geoffrey Parrinder notes,

- A fundamental characteristic of African belief is in the importance of life on earth. Contrary to the world-denial and asceticism of some Asian and European religions, this world and all its elements are cherished. This appears in beliefs in reincarnation, which in African expressions is rebirth on to this warm earth to perpetuate the family of the past, whereas in Asia it is often an effort to get away from the sufferings of this life into the indescribable bliss of Nirvana. A symbol of rebirth in African art is the snake, which sheds its skin to go on living, and which with its tail in its mouth is an apt representation of an endless circle, a ring of eternity.¹⁰

Reincarnation in many primitive religions is the process by which life goes on in this world. Reincarnation is not an answer to karmic debt, a step on the path to absorption into the All, or a spoke on the Wheel of Life. Primitive reincarnation is within the web of material existence.

- In primitive religions, belief in multiple souls is common. An example is that of the Poso Alfur of Celebes in Indonesia, who have a concept of three souls—the *inosa*, or vital principle; the *angga*, or intellectual principle; and the *tanoana*, the divine element that leaves during sleep and is of the same nature in many plants and animals. Thus the soul is commonly viewed as capable of leaving the body through the mouth or nostrils and of being reborn, for example, as a flying creature, such as a bird, butterfly, or insect. The Venda of South Africa believe that when a person dies the soul stays near the grave for a short time and then seeks a new resting place or another body—human, mammalian, or reptilian.¹¹

Eastern concepts

Hinduism. Hinduism nurtured the development of reincarnation as an integral part of the salvation story of Eastern thought. Hinduism developed the concept of *karma*, the law of cause and effect that underlies personal existence. *Karma* is a Sanskrit word that means "action" or "deed." Each action or deed performed by a person (*atman*) carries with it consequent liabilities or credits by which the *atman* is either hampered or helped in its journey to enlightenment (*moksha*, a term that also refers to the process of liberation from the endless rounds of birth, death, and rebirth, and from *maya*, the illusory world of material, differentiated existence). The inexorable law of *karma* almost necessitates a belief in reincarnation, or the *atman*'s multiple lifetimes, so that the natural working out of its law of retribution and reward can reach its fulfillment. Reincarnation and *karma* are closely related.

- The actions we do will have an effect—a direct effect—on what happens to us later in this life, but, more importantly it affects the sort of rebirth we have. The *atman* is reborn time and time again, but its status in each rebirth is caused by the karma it has developed in its previous life. Karma arises, in Hindu thought, from any action.... In Hinduism, the intention is to accumulate good karma which results in better and higher rebirths until eventually union with Brahman, or *moksha*, release, is achieved.¹²

Traditionally the Eastern concept of reincarnation has included the idea of transmigration, that is, the *atman* can transfer not only from a human body to another human body, but across life forms.¹³

Buddhism. The Buddhist idea of reincarnation includes the principle of *impermanence*, the view that reality is a series of separate events and atoms that only seem to have durative or material existence. The three general characteristics of Buddhism are the impermanence of all aggregates, the suffering inherent in all aggregates, and the absence of ego in all aggregates. Suffering is caused by experiencing that for which one has an aversion, and by longing for what one does not possess. Suffering ceases only by a realization of the truth of reality, which can be accomplished through Buddhism's Noble Eightfold Path.

Reincarnation in Buddhism is not the reembodiment of a soul, spirit, or person, but is the transference of the impermanence of karmic bundles of action from one life to another. Reincarnation in Hinduism, on the other hand, is of the ego along with its karmic burden. Both mainstream Hinduism and Buddhism escape strict determinism by allowing initiative actions by the *atman* (or Buddhist *anatman*, impermanent "nonperson"). An individual cannot escape the law of karma, but he can initiate his own action in correspondence with karma. In various forms of Hinduism, these actions are called *yogas*. In Buddhism this is accomplished through following the Eightfold Path. Through such personal involvement, one may shorten the individual cycle of reincarnation and hasten absorption into the One.

Western concepts

Western ideas of reincarnation can be divided into three categories: (1) those arising from classical Greek thought; (2) those attached to degenerative cults¹⁴ of the Western monotheistic religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam; and (3) those generated by the New Age Movement. *Classical Greek concepts.* By the time of Plato (427–347 B.C.) preexistence of the soul and a more complex concept of reincarnation were popular. Robillard summarizes how Plato explained it in his *Timaeus*:

- The Demiurge created as many souls as there are stars, and then laid down the laws by which their destinies would be governed:
- "At the first birth the condition of all souls will be equal so that there will be no disadvantaged among them; entering into Time and distributed throughout the universe, these souls will take on the nature most capable of honoring the gods.¹⁵

"However, human nature being dual, superiority must be deemed to reside in the *virile* sex. Once souls have been implanted in bodies...he who has lived right will mount towards the particular star assigned to him to dwell there in a condition of happiness that conforms to the state of his soul. However, he who has failed the test will be reborn again, changing his nature for that of a woman.

"If, in this new nature, the soul does not cease and desist from its malice, it will be reincarnated continuously into animal bodies according to the nature of its vice. Through such continued metamorphoses, it will never see the end of the penalties it must suffer." Having made known to souls these dispositions of the laws by which their destinies would be governed—definitely not foreknowing the malice to which any of them might become prey—the Demiurge thrust the created souls into Time, distributing them throughout the earth and moon.¹⁶

According to the Greek Orphics a preexistent soul that dies is later reincarnated in a human or other mammalian body, eventually fulfilling its fate and achieving release to return to its pure state.¹⁷

Jewish cultic ideas. Reincarnation is inconsistent with the world views, theologies, and anthropologies of the major monotheistic religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. However, cults of these religions have flirted with the ideas of preexistence (the soul exists before its incarnation) and reincarnation.

Some Jewish rabbinical teachings around New Testament times expressed a belief not in reincarnation but in a weak form of the preexistence of the soul. The souls of the unborn are referred to in *Niddah* 13b and *Genesis Rabbah* VIII, 7.¹⁸ John 9:1–3 may even allude to such a belief: "And as he passed by, He saw a man blind from birth. And His disciples asked Him, saying, 'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he should be born blind?' Jesus answered, 'It was neither that this man sinned, nor his parents; but it was in order that the works of God might be displayed in him.'" This is not to suggest that Jesus or His disciples believed in preexistence, but that one interpretation is that the disciples were referring to a contemporary belief that a soul could have existed before its physical birth. Much more common Jewish beliefs at the time were that one could sin in the womb or that birth defects were a sign that sins of individuals were being visited on their progeny.¹⁹

Later in Jewish history (starting around the 13th century A.D.), the mystical kabalists adopted a form of belief in reincarnation. The kabalist's classical commentary on the Pentateuch, the *Sephar ha-Zohar* (or Book of Splendor) teaches that God's left hand (of judgment and punishment) is balanced by His *sephirah* of love. However, the outworking of this judgment-love balance came through what the Zohar called *gilgul*, a Pythagorean theory of reincarnation.

- While the philosophers held that the injustice of undeserved suffering in this world will be balanced by eternal bliss in the world to come, the kabalists saw the balance in different *gilgulim* (cycles of reincarnation). Alternatively, some kabalists asserted that new *gilgulim* are opportunities for sinners to overcome the errors of their previous life, while others espoused the notion that infant mortality is to be explained by the punishment of one who sinned in a previous *gilgul* by causing that person to die immediately in the new one.²⁰
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Christian cultic ideas. Though some of the mystery sects of Christianity and Gnosticism in the first centuries after Christ held a number of heretical beliefs and practices, no attempt was made to

integrate into Christian belief either preexistence or reincarnation until the time of the church father Origen (A.D. 185–254). (A debatable statement is from Justin Martyr, written about A.D. 155 in his *Dialogue with Trypho*, but that is counterbalanced with his affirmation that transmigration does *not* occur.²¹ Some reincarnationists quote Jerome to support the idea of reincarnation, although he is clearly critical of Origen and his ideas of preexistence, calling Origen "a fountainhead of gross impiety."²²)

Origen speculated on the preexistence of the soul and at least in his earlier works seemed to believe in it. However, his writings²³ specifically deny transmigration after the initial incarnation of the soul. In fact he devoted two essays to refuting the idea of transmigration—including reincarnation—in his "Relation of the Baptist to Elijah. The Theory of Transmigration Considered" and "'The Spirit and Power of Elijah'—Not the Soul—Were in the Baptist." In these he declares,

- In this place 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.... I have thought it necessary to dwell some time on the examination of the doctrine of transmigration, because of the suspicion of some who suppose that the soul under consideration was the same in Elijah and in John.... For, observe, he did not say in the "soul" of Elijah, in which case the doctrine of transmigration might have some ground, but "in the spirit and power of Elijah." For the Scripture well knows the distinction between spirit and soul.²⁴

Islamic cultic ideas. Islam is distinctly monotheistic. Its monotheism probably derived from Muhammed's early contact with Jewish and Christian believers around Mecca. In fact one of the earlier Surahs (chapters) of the Koran acknowledges the limited power of the local deities of the ka'ba.

Though Islam denies reincarnation, its strong belief in kismet, or fate, has opened the door for Islamic cults to teach reincarnation. The most popular and enduring Islamic cult embracing a belief in reincarnation is *Sikhism*. Sikhism is a blend of Islamic and Hindu belief, founded as a religious movement in the late 15th century A.D. by Nanak, a Hindu bhakti follower who was also influenced by Islamic Sufi mysticism. Nanak believed that both Islam and Hinduism had truth about God, but that this truth had been obscured by each religion's addition of rituals and traditions.

Nanak believed in one supreme God, but he believed that God can be discovered only through personal, inner contemplation. "From Hinduisim he retained a belief in reincarnation, karma and moksha, or mukti, but he rejected all notions of caste, insisting that all his disciples ate together as equals, and frowned on pilgrimages, idols, fixed ritual prayers, and ceremonial washing."²⁵

Contemporary New Age concepts. The New Age movement is without doubt the most common source today for Westerners' beliefs in reincarnation. A 1987 *USA Weekend* poll showed that 23 percent of Americans believe in reincarnation.²⁶ Thirty percent of college-age persons believe in reincarnation, 17 percent of those who regularly attend church affirm reincarnation, and 21 percent of Protestants and 25 percent of Roman Catholics believe in reincarnation.²⁷

New Age reincarnation is America's current religious fad because it makes reincarnation seem compatible with a Western, "Christian" world view. The New Age movement does not fit the traditional sense of "cult," because it does not have a unified organization, with one particular founder or group of founders, with headquarters and its own universally accepted "scriptures." Instead, the term "New Age movement" has been coined to describe a loose coalition of groups and individuals who share common beliefs, including pantheism, karma, and reincarnation.²⁸ The typical Hindu observes human suffering (starvation, drought, epidemics, monsoon flooding, etc.) and explains it by means of karma and reincarnation. On the other hand many though not all Westerners in the New Age movement are young affluent "yuppies." Who should get the credit for this affluence? Certainly not an omnipotent, benevolent God. The credit goes, they say, to *themselves*. Karma and reincarnation explain these *positive* results. They must have had some

great karma from a previous lifetime to enable them to self-actualize to such an extent in this lifetime. Reincarnation for the New Age person is his justification for patting himself on the back, and his consolation prize if he experiences some setbacks.

New Ageism ignores the Hindu concept of the evil, illusionary, or transitory nature of the material world. Instead material acquisitions are evidence of the New Ager's superior karma and privileged current incarnation. The New Age movement ignores the Buddhist concept of impermanence and nonself. Instead, possessions indicate spiritual wealth. New Ageism ignores the Gnostic dichotomy between flesh and spirit. Instead the gratification of the flesh is one's goal, and the spirit is fed through the stomach. New Ageism ignores the monotheistic cult concept of the eternal wheel of life. Instead today is the only reality.

Anthropology

What is it about the biblical understanding of human existence, the human condition, and human eschatology that forever separates it from compatibility with reincarnation?

Eastern Anthropology

Among the many forms of Eastern belief, there are numerous subtle assumptions concerning human nature, the body, and the self. However, there are a few common foundations on which are built the Eastern differentiations concerning human nature.

First, human nature is also divine nature. The substance of man is the substance of the universe, which is the substance of god. This is based on the Eastern concept of pantheism or monism. This aspect of the divine origin of mankind in Eastern anthropology is illustrated in Japanese Shintoism.

- The Shinto view of man is affirmative and even optimistic. Human nature is accepted, perhaps with some naivete, as it is. The idea of original sin as found in Christianity does not exist in Shinto. In Old Japanese, *tsumi* ("evil") was an indifferenced notion. It included not only moral transgressions but also natural disasters, physical disfigurements, and disease. Evil or badness was in essence pollution or filthiness, physical as well as spiritual, while goodness was identified with purity. Man was considered originally clean. Evil was a secondary accretion, a negative entity which could and should be removed by means of *misogi harai* (ritual purification).²⁹

Second, the material or physical aspect of human nature is illusionary, transitory, and/or evil. This is based on the Eastern idea of maya. The false idea of the reality of matter traps the spirit on the material plane. Freedom or escape from maya is moksha, or liberation. That liberation is realized in unity with the One. In Hinduism the Sanskrit term *manu* refers to human nature and describes mankind's goal this way:

- The *Manu-smṛti* points out inter alia that the ultimate aim of mankind is not to achieve individual immortality, such as that of the ancestral *pitrs*, but to attain complete undifferentiated union with *brahman*. The main part of this *sastra* thus serves as a kind of preparation for that ideal, though not initially envisaged as such. Divine revelation (*sruti*) and empirical knowledge (*smṛti*) are drawn upon to define the Law of Conduct and to apply it, though not always impartially, to all classes of the community.³⁰

Third, individuality is illusory, evil, transitory, and/or immature. The goal of the individual is to lose his individuality in the vast sea of Being—god. Buddhism takes this impersonal anthropology to its extreme.

- Where is the man? Man is nothing but a bundle of activities, and these activities give rise to other groups of activities, which are beings. Pure deeds produce pure deeds; evil deeds produce more evil deeds. They store up, in the general Karman, germs of happiness or of suffering respectively; they assemble, in this general Karman, the cause of the round of rebirth, complexes of energy tending to good actions and complexes of

energy tending to evil actions, and these complexes are called, by us, beings, and appear to us as individuals.³¹

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Fourth, human soteriology is a return to original perfection and unity with the divine essence of the universe. It involves individual (ritual) effort and/or belief, toward undifferentiated Being, through the cosmic law of karma worked out in reincarnation. Geisler and Watkins aptly summarize the implications of this classic Hindu supposition, ending with an appropriate quotation from the "Taittiriya" in *The Upanishads*:

- If the universe does not exist, if Brahman is the only reality—then who or what is man? Is man nonexistent or is man Brahman? Vedanta pantheism says that man is Brahman. Maya, or the illusory universe, has deceived man into thinking that he is a particular in the universe. But if man would just clear his senses and his mind of maya and meditate upon his true Self (*Atman*), then he would come to realize that Atman is Brahman, the one true reality. That is, the depth of a person's soul is identical to the depth of the universe: "Having attained to Brahman, a sage declared: 'I am life.... I am established in the purity of Brahman. I have attained the freedom of the Self. I am Brahman, self-luminous, the brightest treasure. I am endowed with wisdom. I am immortal, imperishable.'"³²

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This progressional thought in Eastern anthropology has implications for man-with-man, or man in society, as well as for the individual. If the material world is illusion, individuality a deception, and oneness with Brahman the goal, then social activism has little justification.

- Whereas Western thought (in its non-religious form) sees man as "the measure of all things," and so veers in an individualistic direction, the Hindu regards mankind as part of a cosmic whole and this involves respect for life in all its manifestations. Life "apart" (an individualist approach) is seen as the disintegration of life. Hence the demand for a strict discipline (yoga) and meditation, so that the individual may reintegrate into the whole.
- The rejection of individualism can lead to the rejection of activism. And there is often an element of passivity in Indian life, although the element of freedom would still be claimed and a charge of fatalism rejected. As a result, scientific knowledge and material progress have not traditionally been the goals of Indian endeavor.³³

Eastern anthropology sees human nature as a single, nonmaterial, eternal, divine nonperson, temporarily trapped in the material illusion of body, personhood, individuality, and "sin."

Classical Western Anthropology

Classical Greek and Hellenistic anthropology is closer to the Eastern view than the Christian biblical view. First, a dichotomy is seen between the material world and the spiritual world. The Greeks were dualists in their anthropology. That is, man was both *soma* (body) and *psyche* (soul). These terms are not to be understood in the same sense Paul used them in the New Testament. In Greek thought the soul is more pure and divine—even more "real"—than the body. This concept developed over the centuries before Christ, beginning with the Homeric period, when body and soul were distinguished, and were separated at death, but the differences between them were not discussed. In fact *soma* was the term most often used for "corpse." (The allusion then would be that the *psyche* referred to the life principle.)

The mystery religions before Plato made a more marked distinction between body and soul. Gundry notes, "Especially under the influence of Orphism, Pythagoreanism, and the mysteries, the distinction between body and soul becomes more important.... Death continues to be the separation of body and soul, but now they are pitted against each other in earthly life."³⁴ Godwin comments on the understanding of man in the mystery religions.

- Ultimately, all paths bring knowledge to those who tread them: whatever their effect in the world outside, their inner purpose is to bring man closer to the knowledge of God.

The warrior and the monk, each in his own way, allies himself with the side of what he sees as the Divine, rejecting all else, that he may more closely know that to which he belongs. The magician strives to know God's mind as it is exteriorized in the cosmic patterns. Philo says that man reaches out to God through mediators: the Logos and Angelic Powers—but that ultimately man is allied to God himself through his Intellect.³⁵

• Even Aristotle partially recognized a dichotomy between body and soul by acknowledging that the mind can exist in isolation from and after the death of the body. The Stoics added the idea that the soul is a substance in its own right.

For the Greeks, the universe was man-centered. Realism is seen in ancient Greek sculpture, the Greeks emphasized the physical body and its prowess as seen in the Olympic games, and Greek mythology included many anthropomorphic gods and goddesses. Popular Greek religion said man has dual natures, body and soul. The body is a pale, clouded mirror image in the "real" world of spirituality, while the soul without the body is said by metaphor to be a pale replica in this material world of the materiality of the body.

- Man consisted of a body (*soma*) and a soul (*psyche*). The *psyche* was the death rattle, the last exhalation of breath, visualized as a pale replica of the living person; it flew away gibbering to the house of Hades, attracted, according to Plutarch, by the music of the Sirens, whose monstrous forms crowned tombs. The beliefs of certain ascetics—known as followers of Orpheus, the legendary minstrel—that the body was the prison of the soul and that everyone ultimately shared in the divine gave rise to the dualism familiar in Plato.³⁶

• Plato's idea of forms exemplifies this ultimate antagonism between the material and the spiritual realms.

Classical and Hellenistic Greek anthropology set the stage for the development of religious Gnosticism in the second and third centuries after Christ, with its elaborate schema of emanations from pure spirit devolving to base matter.³⁷

In summary, classic Western anthropology divided the body and the soul, usually assuming an antagonism between the two, and usually considering the soul divine and immortal, while the body was usually considered materially temporal.

Judeo-Christian Anthropology

Human nature as revealed in Scripture is completely different from both Eastern and classical Western concepts of humanity. It goes beyond simple statements such as "Man is not god," and "Man is created body and soul in union." The biblical view of man is rooted in theology proper and cosmology.

First, the Bible distinguishes God from every created thing. Genesis 1 describes how the universe, inanimate and animate, was created by God from nothing, not out of His substance nor as an extension of His Being. The Apostle John, stated that God the Son, the Logos, is not one of the created things: "All things came into being by Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being" (John 1:3). God is even the Creator of invisible things, as Paul pointed out clearly in various passages, including Colossians 1:16. Pantheism is intolerable in a Christian world view.

Second, the Bible describes God as personal, eternal, undivided,³⁸ loving, just, and the creating Source and Sustainer of everything else. God interacts with other persons (e.g., Exod 3), has no beginning or ending (is a Necessary Being; Rev 21:6), never changes (Mal 3:6), acts in a protective and gracious manner toward His creation (1 John 4:8,16), and both created and sustains the created world (Col 1:17). The biblical view of God cannot be identified in any ontological way with either the material universe or what is immaterial.

Third, man, according to the Bible, was created by God as a deliberate and good act. Man did not come into existence as a mistake in divine thinking nor as a figment of the divine imagination. He is not the byproduct of divine Mind, a pantheon of multiple personalities. Man also is not the product of a long evolutionary process from earlier life forms.

Created both material and spiritual (Gen 2:7),³⁹ man was designed in God's image (Gen 1:26)⁴⁰ to worship and serve Him.

Resurrection, Reincarnation, and Humanness—BSac—V148 #590—Apr 91—148

(Isa 43:7). This dual unity of body and soul in man is distinctive among religious anthropologies.

- The question that naturally rises is, "Now that I have a body, what am I to do with it? What is the purpose of it all?" There are three possible views that one can take of the place of the body in the life of man. (1) That it is the prison-house of the soul. (2) That it is the only part of man that counts; and so let us eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die. (3) That it is the "partner" of the soul, the expression of the Ego, and the means of glorifying God and growing in the true life....

When we first considered this question, we put it in the natural form, "What am I to do with my body?" In other words, we made a distinction between Ego, or I, and my body. We feel that there is some sort of relationship between an inner and an outer Me. The body is the expression of myself in relation to the world of time and sense.... It is the sole means that I have of glorifying God in this world, just as it is the sole means that an athlete has of winning the race. As partners we shall need to follow the athlete's practice of discipline and denial; yet denial will not be an end in itself, but only a means to an end.⁴¹

Man is not the epiphenomenal duality of secular humanism. He is not the dichotomy of spiritual reality and material illusion of Eastern thought; nor is he the emanational dualism of the classical West.

- There is no making of Paul into a Greek. The distance of Paul from Philo, who attempted to combine Jewish theology and Hellenistic philosophy, clearly shows the comparatively un-Hellenistic character of Pauline anthropology. Rather, the Hebrew concept of man was not monadic even though it was unitary. The anthropological duality of the OT...developed clearer exposition in Judaism of the Hellenistic age but usually resisted a dualism in which body and soul oppose each other. Paul's recognition of the duality of man reflects the Jewish theology of his time and neither contradicts the OT nor denies the unity (but not monism) of man as a whole being.⁴²

This psycho-physical dualism reflects man as a complete being with both body (materiality) and soul (immateriality).

Part of man's responsibility to God is to oversee and nurture the created, physical world (Gen 1:28-30; 2:15 {Gen 2:15}).

- Since the relation between God and man is personal rather than mechanical, it has from the very first a covenantal aspect. There is election and promise on the one side, required response on the other. There is task on the one side, responsibility and obedience (or disobedience) on the other. Grace is balanced by gratitude, faithfulness by fidelity, the initiative of love by the response of love.⁴³

This authority and power was, of course, under the ultimate power and authority of God. "Yet just as we possess no life that is independent of the will and Spirit of God so we also possess no independent authority; mankind's authority within creation is to be the delegated authority of a steward; we are accountable to God."⁴⁴ The material world was not bad, base, evil, or illusory.

Fourth, man was created without sin and perfect (Gen 1:26–31), but with the will to choose obedience to God or to sin (2:16–17 {Gen 2}). The first man chose to sin (3:6–7 {Gen 3}), and thus plunged his progeny into sin also (Rom 5:12–14). The story of creation became the drama of redemption (1 Cor 15:45–49).

Fifth, man's ultimate destiny is the redemption, glorification, and perfection of his nature, both physical and immaterial (Phil 1:6; 1 Pet 1:23; 2 Pet 1:4). This is accomplished through the power of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, who died for man's sins (Rom 3:23–26). Jesus Christ was raised from the dead in the same body that had hung on the cross (Luke 24:39), yet was glorified and perfected (Col 1:18), the firstfruits of those who will follow (1 Cor 15:20). Those who believe in Him will be raised like Him, body and spirit, whole for all eternity (Rom 8:11). Man was created as a dual unity, and he will spend eternity that way, complete and perfect in the redemption of Jesus Christ (Rom 8:28–30), or because of his continued disobedience and disbelief, he will spend eternity in torment and separation from the presence of God (Matt 25:46; Rev 20:10–15).

The Resurrection

"But now Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who are asleep. For since by a man came death, by a man also came the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all shall be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, after that those who are Christ's at His coming, then comes the end, when He delivers up the kingdom to the God and Father, when He has abolished all rule and all authority and power" (1 Cor 15:20–24).

Belief in reincarnation is completely contrary to the biblical teaching on the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Jesus was not reincarnated; He was resurrected. He did not promise man further incarnations; He promised resurrection to His followers.

The body is not illusory, transitory, or evil. Man is not complete in his creation or his redemption without his body. The goal of redemption is not liberation from the body but liberation *of* the body.

Conclusion

Reincarnation denies the biblical view of God. Pantheism and monotheism can never be compatible. God is the Creator and Sustainer of all things; He is not the *essence* of all things. This strict demarcation between the Creator and the created sets the Christian world view apart from either the Eastern or the classical Western ideas of God and man.

Reincarnation denies the biblical view of the world. The material universe is not bad⁴⁵ in its created sense; neither is it illusory or transitory. It was created good by the personal creative agency of God and will be renewed at the end (Rev 21–22 {Rev 22}).

Reincarnation denies the biblical view of man. Man was created with a dual nature, physical and spiritual. He is marred by sin and is lost without Christ. But through redemption the faithful will be perfected both spiritually *and* physically, to serve the Lord forever in the body and the spirit. Reincarnation denies the biblical view of the resurrection. Christ's resurrection is the strongest testimony the world has against the claims of reincarnation. Since the resurrection of Christ is a highly attested fact of history, then reincarnation is a lie.

What is human existence? The Apostle Paul said it best when he wrote, "I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish in order that I may gain Christ, and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith, that I may know Him, and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death; in order that I may attain to the resurrection from the dead" (Phil 3:8–11).

Notes

- 1 Alexandra David-Neel, *Buddhism: Its Doctrines and Its Methods* (1939; reprint, New York: Avon Books, 1977), p. 24. David-Neel's book is the classic Western introduction to Buddhism and is especially noted for its careful descriptions of Tibetan Buddhism.
- 2 Samyutta Nikaya, cited by David L. Johnson in *A Reasoned Look at Asian Religions* (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1985), p. 120.
- 3 A number of Christian books discuss biblical and other world views, including, for example, Norman L. Geisler and William Watkins, *Worlds Apart* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1989).
- 4 Stuart Hackett, *Oriental Philosophy* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1979), p. 147.
- 5 David-Neel, *Buddhism: Its Doctrines and Its Methods*, p. 29.
- 6 Margaret and James Stutley, *Harper's Dictionary of Hinduism* (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1977), p. 50.
- 7 John Richard Thronhill Pollard, "Greek Religion," in *Encyclopædia Britannica* (Chicago: Encyclopædia Britannica, 1978), *Macropædia*, 8:408.
- 8 Joscelyn Godwin, *Mystery Religions in the Ancient World* (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1981), p. 37.
- 9 The term "primitive religions" describes those religions that are usually localized to a specific region or culture and are usually superseded or assimilated by a version of one of the major world religions. The term is not used to suggest the evolutionary theory of religion.
- 10 Geoffrey Parrinder, *Encountering World Religions* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Co., 1987), p. 128.
- 11 "Reincarnation," *Encyclopædia Britannica, Micropædia*, 8:488.
- 12 Richard Kennedy, *The International Dictionary of Religion* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Co., 1984), p. 107.
- 13 Some minority Hindu commentaries even postulate transmigration into inanimate objects.
- 14 "Cult" is used here to mean a religious group that claims connection to a parent religion and yet denies at least one essential belief of that religion.
- 15 For Plato "the gods" is more a metaphorical term than an allusion to polytheism.
- 16 Edmond Robillard, *Reincarnation: Illusion or Reality?* (New York: Alba House, 1982), p. 151.
- 17 "Reincarnation," *Encyclopædia Britannica, Micropædia*, 8:488.
- 18 See also Robert H. Gundry, *Soma in Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1987), p. 93.
- 19 For a discussion of this view see Norman L. Geisler and J. Yutaka Amano, *The Reincarnation Sensation* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1986), p. 93.
- 20 Phillip Sigal, *Judaism: The Evolution of a Faith* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1988), p. 159.
- 21 Justin Martyr *Dialogue with Trypho*, trans. Thomas Falls (New York: Christian Heritage Press, 1948), p. 155.
- 22 Jerome *Letter to Demetrius*.
- 23 Written toward the end of his life, some 20 years after his statements on preexistence.
- 24 Allan Menzies, ed., *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 5th ed. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1980), 10:474–76.
- 25 Kennedy, *The International Dictionary of Religion*, p. 174.
- 26 "Looking into the Beyond," USA Weekend, January 9–11, 1987, p. 5.
- 27 Geisler and Amano, *The Reincarnation Sensation*, pp. 7–8.
- 28 For further information on the New Age movement see Douglas Groothuis, *Confronting the New Age* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986); idem, *Unmasking the New Age* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988); and Elliot Miller, *A Crash Course on the New Age Movement* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1989).
- 29 Agency for Cultural Affairs, *Japanese Religion* (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1972), p. 15.
- 30 Margaret and James Stutley, *Harper's Dictionary of Hinduism*, p. 182.
- 31 David-Neel, *Buddhism: Its Doctrines and Its Methods*, p. 188.
- 32 Geisler and Watkins, *Worlds Apart*, p. 81.
- 33 Raymond Hammond, "Escape from Life?" in *Eerdmans' Handbook to the World's Religions* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1982), p. 196.
- 34 Gundry, *Soma in Biblical Theology*, p. 85.
- 35 Godwin, *Mystery Religions in the Ancient World*, p. 31.
- 36 Pollard, "Greek Religion," p. 408.

37 See Edwin Yamauchi, *Pre-Christian Gnosticism* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1973).

38 "Triune" or "tripersonal" does not mean divided in substance.

39 Since the purpose of this article is to contrast biblical anthropology with reincarnational anthropology, it is not necessary to discuss here the problem of whether man is two part (dichotomous) or three part (trichotomous). Both views agree at least that man is material and immaterial. For a good discussion of this problem see James Oliver Buswell, Jr., *A Systematic Theology of the Christian Religion* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1962), Part 2, p. 243.

40 When the Bible states that man is created in God's image, it does not mean man's physical nature, since God is spirit (John 4:24) and spirit does not have corporeality (Luke 24:39). At the core of God's image in man is man's personality, his ego, his ability to distinguish himself from others, his will, and his self-cognizance. He is a self-initiating, rational, cognizant being.

41 J. Stafford Wright, *What Is Man?* (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1955), pp. 25–26.

42 Gundry, Soma in *Biblical Theology*, p. 83.

43 *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (1979 ed.), s.v. "Anthropology," by Geoffrey W. Bromiley, 1:133.

44 J. E. Colwell, "Anthropology," in *New Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Sinclair B. Ferguson and David F. Wright (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), p. 29.

45 Nonpersonal beings cannot be "bad" in a moral sense, although the material universe bears the scars of *man's* moral failure and must be renewed by God at the end of the age in order to return to its created perfection.