

REINCARNATION- Did The Church Suppress It?

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Toward the beginning of this century belief in reincarnation was restricted to such small groups as the Unity School of Christianity, the Theosophical Society, and Edgar Cayce's Association for Research and Enlightenment. (1) By the 1980s, however, not only had these groups gained well over a million followers, but celebrities such as Jeanne Dixon and Shirley MacLaine had popularized reincarnation for the masses. While fifty years ago relatively few Americans believed in reincarnation, today roughly one-fourth of all Americans accepts it, along with about one-half of the world population. (2)

Virtually all modern proponents of reincarnation in the West claim that it "is in complete harmony with the true spirit of Christianity." The early church taught reincarnation, some say, until the sixth century when it was suppressed at a church council. In this article we will examine this claim that the church suppressed the doctrine of reincarnation.

REINCARNATION DEFINED

The doctrine of reincarnation derives from antiquity, originating in the East, but also found in ancient Greece. It "teaches that the soul enters this life, not as a fresh creation, but after a long course of previous existences on this earth and elsewhere . . . and that it is on its way to future transformations which it is now shaping for itself." (3)

According to the Eastern concept of reincarnation, man depending on his deeds in his previous existence can come back in any type of life form, including various animals, as well as human form. Reincarnationists in the West, however, generally hold that men and women can be reincarnated only as human beings. Western reincarnationists often refer to the Eastern view as "transmigration" and to the Western view as "reincarnation." Traditionally, though, the terms "transmigration," "reincarnation," and "metempsychosis" have been used as synonyms. (4) On the other hand, reincarnation is to be distinguished from preexistence of souls. While all those who believe in reincarnation must believe that the reincarnated souls preexisted, not all who adhere to preexistence of souls accept reincarnation. A modern example would be the Mormons.

The underlying, often unspoken assumption of reincarnation is "monism," the belief that only one reality exists. Since this means that all things are part of one essential reality, there is no real distinction between God, the world, and people — they are all "one." In this system of thought "God" is regarded, not as a personal Creator, but as an impersonal force or consciousness of which we are all part. (5) Thus, Shirley MacLaine states that "God" is "the word we use for a concept of incredibly complex spiritual energies," and suggests that "the tragedy of the human race was that we had forgotten that we were each Divine." (6) A soul's reincarnations, then, have classically been understood as a journey from God to God, the goal being reabsorption into the One. (7)

REINCARNATION AND THE BIBLE

The beliefs which form the context of both Eastern and Western reincarnationism are clearly incompatible with biblical Christianity. Thus, the case against reincarnation being "Christian" goes far beyond its implications for the afterlife, and involves much more than a few prooftexts from the Bible. Rather, the entire biblical revelation in its teaching about God, the world, man, sin, and salvation, stands as a whole against reincarnationism.

Nevertheless, adherents of reincarnation in the West invariably try to reconcile their belief with Christianity. The New Testament is said to have been written by unknown authors at a time too late to be reliable in their report of Jesus' teachings, and thus His teachings on reincarnation were largely lost. (Many people reject the Bible while claiming to be followers of Jesus, even though apart from the Bible we have no real knowledge of Jesus' teachings.) Also, the New Testament text is said to be riddled with deletions and interpolations foisted on the text in the sixth century and later by anti-reincarnationists, who even removed whole books, so that the text itself is unreliable. Finally, despite the alleged attempt in the sixth century to remove reincarnation from the Bible certain "vestiges" of the doctrine are said to be detectable in a scattering of texts (e.g., Matt. 17:10-13; John 3:3,7; John 9:1-3; Eph. 1:4; Rev. 3:12). (8)

It is not possible within the space of this article to give a thorough refutation of each of these arguments. (9) The issues of the date, authorship, and textual transmission of the New Testament documents have received definitive treatment by evangelical scholars, to whose works the reader is referred. (10) These scholars have shown that all of the New Testament was written in the first century, by apostles or their close associates, and that the text of the New Testament has been faithfully transmitted through the centuries. In regard to the canon (books accepted as inspired) of the New Testament, (11) it was not bias against reincarnation that motivated the acceptance of certain writings and the rejection of apocryphal gospels and other writings which were excluded from the canon. Rather, the New Testament books were accepted because they were written by apostles or apostolic associates and were traceable to the first century. The books that were excluded were not apostolic, and were written between the second and the ninth centuries. (12) Furthermore, the New Testament canon was developed in the second and third centuries and received final form in the fourth century, (13) not in the sixth century, as the reincarnationists claim. Therefore, the reincarnationists' criticisms of the New Testament are invalid.

The argument that vestiges of reincarnationist belief can be found scattered throughout the New Testament is basically incompatible with the other arguments already discussed. If the New Testament books were written by unknown authors too late to be historically reliable, and if sixth-century scribes tampered with the text of the New Testament, of what value are these alleged "vestiges"? In any case, the reincarnationists have no right to quote the Bible in defense of their beliefs if at the same time they argue that the Bible is unreliable.

A detailed examination of these alleged prooftexts for reincarnation is not possible in this article. However, several helpful studies of the question have been published by

Christians, showing that the Bible simply does not contain even a hint in favor of reincarnation, while its most central teachings contradict it. (14)

REINCARNATION AND THE EARLY CHURCH FATHERS

Reincarnationists in the West today typically argue that the early church held to a belief in reincarnation until the sixth century, when it was suppressed by the Roman emperor through the agency of a church council. In order to refute this claim, we must first examine the records to see if the early church fathers taught reincarnation. Our examination will reveal that reincarnation was not a subject of great concern to the early fathers, who held to the biblical hope of the resurrection, (15) but that whenever they discussed reincarnation they thoroughly condemned it. Reincarnationists have fabricated a false history of the early church based on 1) a deliberate reconstruction of the evidence which ignores the vast majority of the fathers' testimony; 2) partial quotations of the fathers, usually out of context; 3) interpolations into the quotations from the fathers; and 4) fabricated quotations.

Justin Martyr (c. 100-165)

Justin Martyr was one of the earliest of the church fathers. He is often claimed as "an early Christian reincarnationist. (16) Referring to chapter IV of Justin's *Dialogue with Trypho*, reincarnationists claim that "he taught that human souls inhabit more than one body in the course of their earthly pilgrimage." (17) What does Justin actually say? He does present a dialogue in which he discusses with Trypho the question of reincarnation; at the end of this discussion, the dialogue concludes as follows (note that "I" is Justin and "he" is Trypho, the Jew with whom he is debating; Trypho speaks first):

"Therefore souls neither see God nor transmigrate into other bodies; for they would know that so they are punished, and they would be afraid to commit even the most trivial sin afterwards. But that they can perceive that God exists, and that righteousness and piety are honorable, I also quite agree with you," said he.

"You are right," I replied. (18)

Clement of Alexandria (c. 155-220)

Another church father often alleged to have taught reincarnation was Clement of Alexandria, on the basis of his statement in the first chapter of his *Exhortation to the Heathen* that "before the foundation of the world were we." (19) At most this statement might be construed (apart from context) to teach preexistence of souls. In fact, though, Clement's statement in context does not even go that far. Rather, he is simply asserting the preexistence of Jesus Christ as the Word (or *Logos*), and God's foreknowledge and purpose to create and love us before creation:

But before the foundation of the world were we, who, because destined to be in Him, pre-existed in the eye of God before, — we the rational creatures of the Word of God, on whose account we date from the beginning; for "in the beginning was the word." (20)

Note that Clement carefully qualifies his statement that we existed in the beginning with the words "in the eye of God," meaning, of course, that our "preexistence" was as an idea in God's mind, not as substantial entities.

Origen (c. 185-254)

Origen was admittedly one of the most brilliant and innovative theologians of the early church. He was also, however, infamous for his theological speculations. He is the church father most often cited by reincarnationists as teaching their doctrine. One passage frequently cited is the following, from Origen's *Against Celsus* (I.32), exactly as cited by reincarnationists Head and Cranston:

Or is it not more in conformity with reason, that every soul, for certain mysterious reasons (I speak now according to the opinion of Pythagoras, and Plato, and Empedocles, whom Celsus frequently names), is introduced into a body, and introduced according to its deserts and former actions? It is probable, therefore, that this soul also, which conferred more benefit by its [former] residence in the flesh than that of many men (to avoid prejudice, I do not say "all"), stood in need of a body not only superior to others, but invested with all excellent qualities. (21)

Several comments regarding this passage need to be made. First, Origen qualifies his statement by saying, "I speak now according to the opinion of Pythagoras, and Plato, and Empedocles, whom Celsus frequently names." This qualification indicates that Origen is arguing on the basis of Celsus's beliefs, not Origen's own beliefs. One reincarnationist, Anthony J. Fisichella, omitted this entire clause when quoting the passage. (22)

Second, the insertion of the word "former" in brackets preceding the phrase "residence in the flesh" by Head and Cranston in the citation as produced above completely changes the meaning. Origen is not talking about a previous incarnation distinguished from a subsequent incarnation, but about a single incarnation.

Third, the point that Origen is trying to make in the context has been completely missed. Origen is not talking about the natural birth of an ordinary human being, but about the miraculous conception of Jesus in a virgin's womb. In the first half of the chapter Origen refutes the legendary explanation of the virgin birth which was circulating among the Jews (and had been picked up by Celsus) that Mary had committed adultery with a Roman soldier. He then puts forth the following question:

Is it at all agreeable to reason, that he who dared to do so much for the human race . . . should not have had a miraculous birth, but one the vilest and most disgraceful of all [i.e., an illegitimate birth]? And I will ask of them as Greeks, and particularly of Celsus, who either holds or not the sentiments of Plato, and at any rate quotes them, whether He

who sends souls down into the bodies of men, degraded Him who was to dare such mighty acts, and to teach so many men, and to reform so many from the mass of wickedness in the world, to a birth more disgraceful than any other, and did not rather introduce Him into the world through a lawful marriage? (23)

Then follows immediately the original quotation produced above, appealing to the Greek philosophers so respected by Celsus, to prove that according to their teaching someone as noble as Jesus obviously was could not have had so ignoble a birth as Celsus had claimed. With this context in mind, it is evident that Origen is not here arguing for reincarnation, nor does his argument even imply it. He does argue on the basis of the preexistence of souls, an opinion which he himself held, although even here he gives as the source of that opinion pagan Greek philosophy, not Christian doctrine.

Later in the same treatise, Origen made the following comment:

But on these subjects much, and that of a mystical kind, might be said; in keeping with which is the following: "it is good to keep close the secret of a king," — in order that the doctrine of the entrance of souls into bodies (not, however, that of the transmigration from one body into another) may not be thrown before the common understanding, nor what is holy given to the dogs, nor pearls be cast before swine. (24)

This statement makes it clear that Origen did hold to the heretical doctrine that human souls preexisted their physical bodies, but did not hold to reincarnations. (25)

At about the same time as he wrote *Against Celsus*, around the year 247 (and therefore toward the end of his life), (26) Origen wrote a commentary on Matthew in which he discussed at length whether John the Baptist was the reincarnation of Elijah. His answer to this question was unequivocal:

In this place [Matt. 17:10-13] it does not appear to me that by Elijah the soul is spoken of, lest I should fall into the dogma of transmigration, which is foreign to the church of God, and not handed down by the Apostles, nor anywhere set forth in the Scriptures . . . (27)

Origen then launched into a lengthy discussion of transmigration, arguing that it is contrary to the biblical doctrine of a judgment at the end of the age, and that John had not the "soul" but the "spirit and power" of Elijah (Luke 1:17). (28) No clearer statement rejecting the doctrine of reincarnation could be imagined.

It is true that Jerome, a leading church father in the early fifth century, argued that Origen held to reincarnation. Writing in a letter to Avitus about 409 or 410, Jerome accused Origen of holding to the "transmigration of souls," including the idea that both angelic and human spirits "may in punishment for great negligence or folly be transformed into brutes," that is, be reincarnated as animals. (29) However, in this same letter Jerome admits that Origen qualified his statements on the subject:

Then, lest he should be held guilty of maintaining with Pythagoras the transmigration of souls, he winds up the wicked reasoning with which he has wounded his reader by saying: "I must not be taken to make dogmas of these things; they are only thrown out as conjectures to show that they are not altogether overlooked." (30)

Since Jerome's criticism of Origen is based on Origen's earlier writings (particularly "On First Principles," written between 212 and 215), and in his later writings Origen explicitly rejected transmigration of souls, and since even Jerome admits that Origen wished to stop short of maintaining that doctrine, we may safely conclude that Origen did not teach reincarnation.

Jerome (c. 345-419)

As we have just seen, Jerome condemned Origen as a heretic partly on the basis of Origen's alleged leanings toward reincarnation. It is therefore surprising to learn that several reincarnationists claim that Jerome himself believed in reincarnation! One reincarnationist even cited Jerome's letter to Avitus as proof (31) — the very letter in which Jerome condemned Origen for teaching reincarnation!

Other reincarnationists have attributed to Jerome the following statement from his letter to Demetrius: "The doctrine of transmigration has been secretly taught from ancient times to small numbers of people, as a traditional truth which was not to be divulged." (32) A search of this letter, however, reveals no such statement. Instead, we find Jerome once again condemning the doctrine as a "godless and wicked teaching" which "lurks secretly like a viper in its hole." (33)

The Fathers' Rejection of Reincarnation

Not only did none of the church fathers embrace reincarnation — not even Origen, who did hold to preexistence of souls but they explicitly rejected the notion as wholly contrary to the Christian faith. We have already seen this in the case of Justin Martyr, Origen, and Jerome. In the ante-Nicene period alone (i.e., before the Council of Nicea in 325), church fathers who rejected reincarnation besides Justin Martyr and Origen included Irenaeus, Minucius Felix, Tertullian, and Lactantius. (34) Notable church fathers of the fourth and fifth centuries besides Jerome who rejected reincarnation included Augustine and Basil. (35) Apologists for reincarnation have admitted that many of these church fathers did in deed oppose the doctrine of reincarnations. (36)

In addition to this evidence, all of the church fathers taught doctrines which were incompatible with reincarnationist belief. The fathers taught that salvation was a gift won for us by Christ, and that at the end of the age the bodies of believers would be raised to eternal life and those of the wicked to eternal judgment. The writings of the church fathers are thus just as pervasively anti-reincarnationist as is the Bible.

THE SECOND COUNCIL OF CONSTANTINOPLE

To this point we have shown that none of the church fathers commonly recognized as orthodox during the first five centuries of the church held to reincarnation. Faced with this evidence, some reincarnationists have resorted to a last-ditch argument calculated to undermine all of the documentary evidence from the Bible and the church fathers against their doctrine. This argument is a claim that all or nearly all evidence of belief in reincarnation was eliminated from the Bible and the writings of the fathers by the Second Council of Constantinople (also called the Fifth Ecumenical Council) in 553. Leslie Weatherhead, for example, claimed that reincarnation "was accepted by the early church for the first five hundred years of its existence. Only in AD 553 did the Second Council of Constantinople reject it and only then by a narrow majority." (37) Many reincarnationists claim that this council was specifically called by the Roman emperor Justinian to condemn reincarnation and delete all references to it from the Bible. (38)

There are numerous objections which may be raised to this claim. First, the New Testament canon as we have it today was finalized, at the very latest, in the fourth century, as we have already explained. Indeed, we have numerous manuscripts of the New Testament dating from between the second and fifth centuries, as well as manuscripts dating much later. The texts of the New Testament manuscripts dating from before the sixth century do not differ appreciably from those dating from sixth century and later. This fact alone is proof that the councils 553 did not alter the Bible in order to suppress reincarnation or any other belief.

Second, the Second Council of Constantinople had nothing whatever to do with reincarnation. The main item on the agenda was dealing with the Monophysite heresy, which taught that the incarnate Christ had only one nature (instead of the two natures of deity and humanity as taught by the New Testament and the early church). Either at that council or about that same time a list of "anathemas" or condemnations were issued against (among other things) the notion of preexistence of souls (as found in Origen and some of his followers), but there was no mention made of reincarnation, which was evidently not even a live issue. (39) Indeed, other reincarnationists have even argued that because there is some doubt that the council in 553 had anything to say relevant to reincarnation, there is no reason to regard reincarnation as officially condemned by the church! (40) Of course, what this argument overlooks is the fact that Christians disbelieve in reincarnation because it is antithetical to biblical Christianity, not because they think (mistakenly or not) that it was condemned in 553.

In conclusion, reincarnation was certainly not suppressed by the church in the sixth century or at any other time. It has been explicitly rejected by church leaders since the middle of the second century, and never taken seriously as a belief that might be adopted by Christians. Origen's belief in preexistence of souls was treated as a novel aberration by the church fathers and councils which came after him. Advocates of reincarnation have had to invent nonexistent texts, interpolate words into other texts, cite anti-reincarnationist passages as if they were supportive of the doctrine, and in general present a mythical reconstruction of early church history, in order to claim that the early church ever taught reincarnation. Theories requiring such shaky defense may safely be regarded as false.

Notes

1. Mark Albrecht, *Reincarnation: A Christian Appraisal* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1982), 9.
2. E. D. Walker, *Reincarnation: A Study of Forgotten Truth* (New Hyde Park, NY: University Books, 1965), 14.
3. Walker, 11.
4. *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, s.v. "Reincarnation," by Ninian Smart.
5. On monism as it relates to the New Age movement, see Elliot Miller, "What Is the New Age Movement?" *Forward* 8 (1985), 16-23.
6. Shirley MacLaine, *Out on a Limb* (New York: Bantam Books, 1983), 279, 347.
7. See Norman L. Geisler and J. Yutaka Amano, *The Reincarnation Sensation* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1986), for a thorough analysis and critique of the several varieties of reincarnationist belief.
8. For all of these arguments, see, e.g., Joseph Head and S.L. Cranston (eds.), *Reincarnation: The Phoenix Fire Mystery* (New York: Julian Press, 1977), 134-40; Quincy Howe, *Reincarnation for the Christian* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1974), 92-97; James Dillet Freeman, *The Case for Reincarnation* (Unity Village, MO: United School of Christianity, 1986), 75-77.
9. A discussion of these questions as they relate to reincarnation is found in Albrecht, 36-43.
10. See especially F. F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1960), Norman L. Geisler and William Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible*, rev. ed. (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1986), and Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1970).
11. E.g., R. Laird Harris, *The Inspiration and Canonicity of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing Co., 1973).
12. Bruce M. Metzger, *An Introduction to the Apocrypha* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1957), 249.
13. See any standard Bible or theological dictionary or encyclopedia on this point.
14. E.g., Geisler and Amano, 133-54; see also Albrecht, 36-40.

15. On the church fathers and the resurrection, see especially Joanne E. McWilliam Dewart (ed.), *Death and Resurrection, Message of the Fathers of the Church*, Vol. 22 (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1986).

16. Geddes MacGregor, *Reincarnation in Christianity: A New Vision of the Role of Rebirth in Christian Thought* (Wheaton, IL: Theosophical Publishing House, 1978), 25.

17. MacGregor, 36.

18. Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, IV. All citations from the church fathers can be found in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, eds. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, and *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, eds. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1983 reprint).

19. Head and Cranston, 141-42; MacGregor, 48.

20. Clement of Alexandria, *Exhortation to the Heathen*, I.

21. Origen, *Against Celsus*, I.32, as cited in Head and Cranston, 147.

22. Anthony J. Fisichella, *Metaphysics: The Science of Life* (St. Paul, MN: Llewellyn Publications, 1986), 134.

23. *Against Celsus*, I.32.

24. *Against Celsus*, V.29.

25. See also Origen, *De Principiis* ("On First Principles") III.5, cited in Head and Cranston, 147; this passage proves that Origen taught preexistence of souls, but not reincarnation.

26. See the editorial notes in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. X, 411.

27. Origen, *Commentary on Matthew*, XIII.1.

28. *Ibid.*, XIII.1-2.

29. Jerome, *Letter CXXIV, To Avitus*, 4, 15.

30. *Ibid.*, 4.

31. David Christie-Murray, *Reincarnation: Ancient Beliefs and Modern Evidence* (London: David and Charles, 1981), 59, cited in Albrecht, 47.

32. Joseph Head and S. L. Cranston (eds.), *Reincarnation: An East-West Anthology* (Wheaton, IL: Theosophical Publishing House, 1968), 38.
33. Jerome, *Letter CXXX, to Demetrius*, 16.
34. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, II.33.1.5; Tertullian, *Apology*, 48; *A Treatise on the Soul*, 28-35; Minucius Felix, *Octavius*, 34; Lactantius, *The Divine Institute*, 18-19.
35. Augustine, *The City of God*, X.30; Basil, *The Hexaemeron*, VIII.2.
36. Head and Cranston, *Phoenix Fire Mystery*, 142-43, 149-51.
37. Leslie Weatherhead, *The Christian Agnostic* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1972), 209-10, cited in John Hick, *Death and Eternal Life* (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1976), 392.
38. Noel Langley, *Edgar Cayce on Reincarnation* (New York: Warner Books, 1967), 179; Leoline L. Wright, *Reincarnation: A Lost Chord in Modern Thought* (Wheaton, IL: Theosophical Publishing House, 1975), 67; etc.
39. See, for example, the articles on "Constantinople, Second Council of," and "Origenism," in *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church*, ed. J.D. Douglas, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing Co., 1978): 257, 734.
40. Head and Cranston, *Phoenix Fire Mystery*, 158.

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