

reincarnation, unless we suppose that the disciples thought a foetus could sin whilst in its mothers womb. But if many early Christians believed in reincarnation, then how did we arrive at the situation that we have today?

Well, it was in the second church council of Constantinople in the year 553 AD that the idea of reincarnation was made heresy. This came about through the instigation of the Roman Emperor Justinian. His motivation behind this was that he thought that if people were given one earthly life only, then they would be more diligent and obedient. *"Give them one life only"*, he said, *"Give them one life then give them heaven or hell."* Even the Pope at that time, who was named Vigilius, had reservations about what was happening. The matter was put to a vote but the participants of this council were deliberately composed of heads of the church known to oppose the idea of reincarnation. Because of this the Pope himself boycotted the actual vote. It is as a direct result of this political manipulation that the doctrine of reincarnation would become banished from the orthodoxy of Christianity, right up to present times.

Islam

The picture we have in Islam concerning the nature of eternal life is one where only a small minority of those Muslims belonging to some of the more esoteric sects believe in reincarnation. The Koran doesn't really make it clear one way or the other whether it supports the idea of resurrection or that of reincarnation. However we do find in Islam the idea of the 'batin' which suggests the existence of hidden meanings in the Koran and the sayings of Muhammad. This is the idea that Muhammad withheld key esoteric doctrines from most Muslims and only imparted these truths to a select group of the early Muslim community, that is those he felt would be best able to grasp them. When we consider that the sects which believe in reincarnation such as the Druze, Ismaili, Alawis, Alevi, Yazidi and various Sufi groups, are exactly those branches of Islam associated with its more esoteric aspects, then it is reasonable to suppose that reincarnation may be one of those hidden teachings of Muhammad. This pattern is very similar to the situation that we have in Christianity and Judaism where a fantastical and wishful but easy to grasp version of eternal life is given to most of the religious

believers, but a more abstract and mysterious vision of the afterlife is reserved for a select minority. So even though most Muslims don't believe in reincarnation, at Islam's mystical heart we find a clear and firm belief in reincarnation.

Scientific Evidence for Reincarnation

There is a great deal of scientific research which has been done into the reality of reincarnation. And the evidence to support reincarnation is overwhelming.

Dr Gerald Netherton, who was raised as a fundamentalist Methodist, has successfully used past life regression on 8,000 patients. He was initially sceptical but as a result of his experience is now convinced of the effectiveness of past life regression. He says, *"Many people go away believing in reincarnation as a result of their experience...What is the logical answer? That it actually happened!"*

Summary

There is a case to be made for reincarnation being a common unifying thread throughout all World religion. Far from being exclusively an exotic 'Eastern' doctrine, reincarnation can be said to be part of the Western tradition as well. Furthermore, when we consider that many of the great luminaries of ancient Greek civilization such as Socrates, Plato and Pythagoras, and also others who were involved in the various mysteries, were firm believers in reincarnation, then the idea of reincarnation really lies at the foundations of Western civilization.

It is a healthy trend that today and in recent times, belief in reincarnation is on the increase. This trend has been particularly pronounced in industrialized Western countries. This trend encourages the hope that perhaps in the future, the idea of reincarnation will become the dominant doctrine concerning the nature of eternal life.



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Is There Life After Death?

Sikh Dharma

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Introduction

This essay deals with one of the eternal questions of life, that is 'What happens when I die?'

Perspective of an Atheist

To the atheist or the materialist, the whole idea of life after death is an absurdity. To them it might seem like some invention designed to deal with the fear of death, or some fantasy that allows religious people to better cope with the passing away of loved ones. The debate between those who believe in eternal life and those who dismiss the idea of it, has been going on throughout history. For those who don't believe in life after death, keep reading!

Resurrection and Judgement Day

Most Christians and Muslims of this world believe in the idea of 'resurrection'. That is after death we return to life with the same physical bodies that we had during our lives on Earth. This 'resurrected' body will then inhabit for all eternity either some sort of paradise in heaven, or else will be condemned to some sort of hell. Often it will also be believed that we may meet again deceased friends and loved ones, who will also be similarly physically reconstituted in this imagined after world.

Reincarnation

There is another widely held belief about eternal life which is common to the mystical heart of all world religion. This is the well known but not universally believed idea called reincarnation or the transmigration of souls.

Reincarnation is the belief that after a life form dies, it is reborn again as another life form. The type of life form that a soul is granted depends on its karma, which is a summation of good and bad actions.

Over half of the world population believes in reincarnation including people who follow, Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism, Sikh dharma, Native American Culture, New Age faith, Paganism, Spiritism, practitioners of certain African traditions, and students of esoteric philosophies.

Why Does Reincarnation Exist?

The purpose of life is to become one with Truth-Infinity-God. So the cycle of birth and re-birth is a natural process that allows a soul to grow spiritually and eventually reach Godhead. The things that keep people tied down to the transmigration cycle are lust, anger, greed, attachment and ego. Some quotes from the Sikh scripture are as follows:

"Engrossed in the intoxication of sexual desire and anger, people wander through reincarnation over and over again."

"Those who do not become Gurmukh do not understand the Naam; they die, and continue coming and going in reincarnation."

"Practicing falsehood again and again, people come and go in reincarnation, and forfeit their honour."

Relationship between Judgement day, Paradise and Reincarnation?

For a Sikh every day should be considered judgement day. When the physical body stops functioning then angels will assign the soul either back to the transmigration cycle or the soul will be granted access to the court of the Lord. The Sikh scripture states, *"Receiving the summons from the Lord of the Universe...you must arise and depart with the actions you have committed. You are not allowed a moment's delay; the Messenger of Death seizes you with firm hands. Receiving the summons, people are seized and dispatched. The self-willed manmukhs are miserable forever. But those who serve the Perfect True Guru are forever happy in the Court of the Lord. The body is the field of karma in this age; whatever you plant, you shall harvest. Says Nanak, the devotees look beautiful in the Court of the Lord; the self-willed manmukhs wander forever in reincarnation."*

The Heaven or Paradise in mainstream Abrahamic thought would be analogous to Nirvana, Enlightenment and the Lords Court in Sikh dharma. The aim of the Sikh way of life is to cut the cord of transmigration and release the soul back to its essence. The Sikh scripture states, *"Meeting with the True Guru, you shall not have to go through the cycle of reincarnation again; the pains of birth and death will be taken away."*

"The Gurus beloved focus their consciousness on the True Bani, and their comings and goings in reincarnation are over."

Reincarnation in Abrahmic Faiths

When we examine the Abrahamic group of religions more closely then we find one of two things. Firstly that the idea of reincarnation has either been once prevalent but then later suppressed. Or else secondly we discover that reincarnation is believed by the mystics at the heart of their respective religions.

Judaism

In modern times, matters of eternal life in Judaism are considered mainly by the mystically inclined Kabbalists. Kaballah, also known as the hidden teachings of Moses, can be considered the mystical heart and spiritual well spring of Judaism. At the heart of Kaballah is the belief in reincarnation. The Zohar which is the central text of the Kaballah from mediaeval times onwards is unequivocal. In it is to be found the passage, *"The souls must re-enter the Absolute, from whence they have emerged. But to accomplish this end they must develop the perfections; the germ of which is planted in them. And if they have not developed these traits in this one life, then they must commence another, a third, and so forth."*

The founder of the orthodox Lubavitcher Hasidim sect Bal Shem Tov who was a Kabbalist rabbi appropriately enough also believed firmly in reincarnation.

Christianity

One doesn't normally associate the idea of reincarnation with Christianity. However if we examine the early history of Christianity then we discover that a half dozen or so of the church fathers believed in reincarnation, namely the likes of Clement, Origen, Justin Martyr, St Gregory, Arnobius and St Jerome. Also if we read the gospels then it is clear that the disciples of Jesus certainly entertained the idea of reincarnation. We may infer this from the passage in John 9:2 where the disciples ask Jesus, *"Was this man born blind because of his sins or because of his parent's sin?"*. This question certainly contains within it a reference to