

REINCARNATION AND CHRISTIANITY

By Geoffrey Hodson

Members of the Christian faith sometimes object to the doctrine of reincarnation on the grounds that to accept it would be a violation of Christian doctrine. While it is true that a Council of Constantinople in the sixth century A. D. pronounced belief in the pre-existence of the soul to be heretical, an examination of the Scriptures strongly suggests that the doctrine of rebirth was generally accepted in those days and that Our Lord himself believed it. Whether this be the case or not, the student of the Christian doctrine may well ask whether a decision made by a group of men in the sixth century should be regarded as binding today.

This objection to reincarnation by Christians, on grounds of doctrinal fidelity, is sufficiently important to merit a somewhat detailed examination. From this it is found that reincarnation has neither been proclaimed nor condemned by any general council of the Church or by any creed accepted by a general council. The Council of Constantinople held in 543 A.D., which proclaimed heretical Origen's teaching of the preexistence of the soul and affirmed the doctrine of special creation, was not a general council, and so not universally authoritative. It was a local and not an ecumenical council or synod. Furthermore, it did not condemn reincarnation but only pre-existence, which has nothing to do with rebirth. Origen taught that all souls were created at the beginning of creation as angelic spirits. In this condition they sinned and for their apostasy were transferred into material bodies. It was this view of pre-existence which was proclaimed heretical. In any case, heresy thus condemned so long ago need not be regarded today as of major importance. Truth matters a great deal more and a condemned heresy may turn out to be a truth, as happened, for example, when a local church of Rome condemned Galileo's heliocentric doctrine and forced him to recant. Galileo was right and the church in question was wrong. It is therefore quite legitimate for both clergy and laity of the Christian faith to preach and believe in both preexistence and reincarnation.

ELIJAH AND JOHN THE BAPTIST

The testimony of the Bible itself, although admittedly inconclusive, does suggest a general belief in the doctrine of rebirth at the time of Our Lord. In the Old Testament the prophets foretell the reappearance of one of themselves. Isaiah speaks thus of a forerunner and a Messiah:

The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord,
make straight in the desert a highway for our God. (Isaiah 40:3)

The Prophet Malachi wrote:

Behold, I will send you Elijah, the prophet, before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord. (Malachi 4:5)

This prophecy is fulfilled in the New Testament. In his first chapter, St. Luke tells of the conception of John the Baptist as promised by the angel to the future father, Zacharias. Elizabeth, his wife, he was told, would conceive and bear a son. In verse 17 Gabriel proclaims:

And he shall go before him in the spirit and power of Elias to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just; to make ready a people prepared for the Lord. (Luke 1:17)

Although stricken in years, Elizabeth conceived and according to ancient prophecy John was born, as a forerunner of the Lord, sent in the spirit and power of Elijah. In the sixth month, the same angel, Gabriel, appeared to Mary in Nazareth and foretold the birth of Jesus, who later was born in Bethlehem. In the midst of His ministry, as St. Matthew records, Our Lord, speaking of John the Baptist, said:

And as they departed, Jesus began to say unto the multitudes concerning John, What went ye out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken with the wind?

But what went ye out for to see? A man clothed in soft raiment? Behold, they that wear soft clothing are in king's houses.

But what went ye out for to see? A prophet? Yea, I say unto you, and more than a prophet. For this is he, of whom it is written, Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, which shall prepare thy way before thee.

Verily I say unto you. Among them that are born of women there hath not risen a greater than John the Baptist: notwithstanding he that is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

And from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and the violent take it by force.

For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John.

And if ye will receive it, this is Elias, which was for to come.

He that hath ears to hear, let him hear.

(Matt. 11:7–15)

Later in his Gospel, St. Matthew says:

When Jesus came into the coasts of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, saying, Whom do men say that I the Son of man am? And they said, Some say that thou art John the Baptist; some, Elias; and others, Jeremias, or one of the prophets." (Matt. 16:13–14)

This reply reveals the popular view founded upon both prophecy and a general belief in the possibility of rebirth.

References are to be found in the works of the Jewish historian, Josephus, showing that belief in reincarnation must have been common among Palestinian Jews of that period. His remarks to Jewish soldiers who preferred suicide to capture by the Romans provide an interesting example:

Do ye not remember that all pure spirits who are in conformity with the divine dispensation lived on in the lowliest of heavenly places, and in course of time they are again sent down to inhabit sinless bodies; but the souls of those who have committed self-destruction are doomed to a region of darkness in the underworld?

(De Bello Judaico)

This is also made obvious in the instance of the man born blind:

And as Jesus passed by, he saw a man which was blind from his birth.

And his disciples asked him, saying Master, who did sin, this man, or his parents, that he was born blind?

Jesus answered, Neither hath this man sinned, nor his parents: but that the works of God should be made manifest in him.

(John 9:1-3)

The question as to whether the man himself had sinned and in consequence had been born sightless shows the clear thought that justice demanded that the transgression should have occurred in a physical body. As this could only have happened in a former life on earth, belief in reincarnation is implicit in the question. Our Lord's answer, which appears to deny rebirth, is susceptible of more than one interpretation. It is technically correct to say that the new personality, with its name, nationality and characteristics, was not responsible for the actions of which his blindness was the result. The actor was distinctly another man with another name and personality, even though the Spiritual Soul within both bodies was the same. The identity or sameness is not of bodily person but of the God within which is undergoing a pilgrimage toward perfection in order that, as Our Lord further said, "the works of God should be made manifest in him."

Although the question obviously implies belief in, or at least knowledge of, reincarnation on the part of the questioners, the answer given by Christ by no means implies denial of the truth of that doctrine. Rather does it seem to concede the point, for the disciples were not rebuked nor was the implication denied. The interrogators were informed that in this particular case prenatal sin was not the cause of the blindness. It may have come upon the man from other causes. The inner Self may possibly have accepted physical blindness to assist him in the inward search for truth,

even to drive him thereto in the new body, blindness being regarded by it rather as a help than a punishment. Or it may be that blindness was accepted somewhat vicariously for the fulfillment of some spiritual purpose. Greatness of soul does appear to be indicated in later verses of the same chapter in which, despite the rule that any man who confessed that Jesus was the Christ should be put out of the synagogue (John 9:22), the man who was healed stoutly affirmed the fact. Furthermore, when he was expelled and Jesus sought him out and conversed with him, his spiritual insight was sufficient to enable him to say, "Lord, I believe," and thereafter to worship the Christ.

When considering this question, it should also be remembered that the Bible is written in the language of symbols, a special category of literature designed both to conceal and to reveal spiritual truths. Blindness is a symbol for temporary unawareness of spiritual light. The Christ partly represents spiritual intuitiveness. When one who is spiritually blind becomes intuitively awakened and active or, symbolically, enters the presence of the Christ and is healed by him, the scales are said to have fallen from his eyes. This I believe to be the true symbolical interpretation; for I look upon the story as one of the many beautiful miniature mystery dramas to be found in the Bible, portraying in allegory and symbol the soul's awakening from darkness to light. Nevertheless, symbolism apart, the answer given by the Lord was, as stated above, doctrinally and technically correct.

The disciples later asked the Master why it had been written that Elijah should appear first, and received a remarkable reply. St. Matthew records the incident thus:

And his disciples asked him, saying, Why then say the scribes that Elias must first come?

And Jesus answered and said unto them, Elias truly shall first come, and restore all things.

But I say unto you, that Elias is come already, and they knew him not, but have done unto him whatsoever they listed. Likewise shall also the Son of man suffer of them.

Then the disciples understood that he spake unto them of John the Baptist.

(Matt. 17:10-13)

St. Mark repeats this:

But I say unto you, that Elias is indeed come, and they have done unto him whatsoever they listed, as it is written of him.

(Mark 9:13)

This is unequivocal and inescapable. It is the reincarnation of Elijah, foretold by a prophet, believed in by the Jewish people and affirmed by Jesus, the Christ. Elijah,

who had been translated to heaven many centuries before, had returned to earth as John the Baptist, assuming a new physical body which displayed certain characteristics of his previous incarnation, particularly ruggedness of appearance and "a girdle of leather about his loins" (2 Kings 1:8 and Matt. 3:4).

John the Baptist himself denied that he was Elijah (John 1:21–25). It is, however, very unusual for any person to remember former lives before the attainment of a certain degree of spiritual and occult development. Our Lord spoke with superior knowledge and also said that although John was a great prophet, "he that is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he" (Matt. 11:11). This suggests that John was not comparable in spiritual stature to an Initiate, even of the first degree. This statement by Our Lord is somewhat supported in the Epistle of James 5:17: "Elias was a man subject to like passions as we are." Under these conditions, it is not at all surprising that John should have no recollection of his past lives, and in any case his denial would not have the same weight as the affirmation made by Our Lord himself.

THE SINS OF THE FATHERS

In the second commandment, God is made to say that he visits "the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation" (Exodus 20:5). Those who hold the doctrine of reincarnation sometimes speak of the personalities of preceding lives as the parents of those which follow, somewhat in the same sense in which a proverb states, "The boy is father to the man," meaning that the boy is the man in embryo. Similarly, each life is the product of its predecessors, particularly as regards inborn capacities, qualities of character and special faculties. Taken thus, the statement is strictly true.

If, on the other hand, there be but one life and the children who are made to suffer for their fathers' iniquities are entirely different spiritual souls, then the enactment of a grotesque and barbarous injustice is attributed to the All-Father; atheism or agnosticism would be preferable, for as Roger Bacon said: "It is better to have no opinion at all of God than such an opinion as is unworthy of him, for the one is unbelief, the other is contumely." If, however, the Biblical statement is regarded in the reincarnationist sense that man reaps in his present body the fruits and results of actions committed in bodies worn in previous lives, then the words attributed to God become a statement of ideal justice. A great Theosophist and seeress has written:

The Ancient Wisdom tells us that somewhere in the memory of Nature every act of each one of her children is self-engraved, and that from this self-written record under the guidance of Angelic Ministers, the changing destiny of men and nations flows. Thus is it claimed that our present attainments of talent and capacity are what we have won in the past; that our present thoughts and

activities will determine our future, and that in the sum of things nowhere is there any injustice, and nowhere caprice or favoritism.

Annie Besant

THE ATTAINMENT OF PERFECTION

Reference has already been made to the command given by Christ to his followers: "Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect" (Matt. 5:48). If man is granted but one life in which to accomplish this perfection, such attainment would be an impossibility for almost every human being; and Our Lord would have presented to mankind an ideal which is impossible of fulfillment. Since his wisdom was perfect, it is extremely unlikely that he would have taken this course. If, however, each man is granted almost unlimited time and every needed opportunity throughout successive lives in which to reach the goal which is set for him, then Our Lord's words are less an injunction than a description of the destiny of every man. Indeed, in the original Greek and in the Revised Version, the behest becomes a simple statement of fact: "Ye therefore shall be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect."

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