

Reincarnation as Taught by Early Christians

By I. M. Oderberg

George Borrow loved the Gypsies so much that he roved with them through many parts of Britain and Europe. Several of his popular books recount his experiences with them and tell a great deal about this mysterious people whose origins are still being debated. Some scholars claim they were the original Bohemians dispersed when their small empire collapsed a few centuries ago; others point to ancient Egypt -- hence the name: "Gypsies"; or to the Phoenicians; or again to India.

In *The Zincoli; or, An Account of the Gypsies of Spain*, Borrow speculates upon the reason for his lifelong fascination with them:

Some of the Gypsies, to whom I have stated this circumstance, have accounted for it on the supposition that the soul which at present animates my body has at some former period tenanted that of one of their people; for many among them are believers in metempsychosis, and, like the followers of Bouddha, imagine that their souls, by passing through an infinite number of bodies, attain at length sufficient purity to be admitted to a state of perfect rest and quietude, which is the only idea of heaven they can form.

Metempsychosis literally means "transference of souls," and is related to the process of reincarnation. It is often asked, why was reincarnation unknown in Europe until recently? Why does not Christianity teach it?

Actually, the idea is found in the oldest traditions of Western civilization, as well as being taught throughout the ancient Near East and Orient. And there is solid evidence that during its first centuries, Christianity did indeed impart what it had learned about the pre-existence of souls and their reimpodiment.

Josephus, the Jewish historian who lived during most of the first century AD, records in his *Jewish War* (3, 8, 5) and in his *Antiquities of the Jews* (18, 1, 3) that reincarnation was taught widely in his day, while his contemporary in Alexandria, Philo Judaeus, in various of his writings, also refers to reimpodiment in one or another form. Moreover, there are passages of the New Testament that can be understood only if seen against the background of pre-existence of souls as a generally held belief. For instance, *Matthew* (16:13-14) records that when Jesus asked his disciples "Whom do men say that I am?" they replied that some people said he was John the Baptist (who had been executed only a few years before the question was asked). Others thought he was Elijah, or Jeremiah, or another of the prophets. Later in *Matthew* (17:13), far from rejecting the concept of rebirth Jesus tells his disciples that John the Baptist was Elijah.

John (9:2-4) reports that the disciples asked Jesus whether a blindman had sinned or his parents that he had been born blind. Jesus replied that it was in order that the works of God may be made manifest in the blind man, that is, that the law of cause and effect might be fulfilled. Or, as St. Paul phrased the thought: we reap what we sow. The blind man could not have sown the seeds of his blindness in his present body, but must have done so in a previous lifetime.

The earliest Christians, especially those who were members of one or other of the Gnostic sects, such as the Valentinians, Ophites and Ebionites, included reimpodiment among their important teachings. For them it enabled fulfillment of the law -- karma -- as well as providing the means for the soul to purify itself from the muddy qualities resulting from its immersion in matter and the egoism we have developed in the first stages of our journey through earth life.

*After the original generations of Christians, we find the early Church Fathers, such as Justin Martyr (AD 100-165), St. Clement of Alexandria (AD 150-220), and Origen (AD 185-254) teaching the pre-existence of souls, taking up reincarnation or one or another aspect of reimpodiment. Examples are scattered through Origen's works, especially *Contra Celsum* (1, xxxii), where he asks: "Is it not rational that souls should be introduced into bodies, in accordance with their merits and previous deeds . . . ?" And in *De Principiis* he says that "the soul has neither beginning nor end." St. Jerome (AD 340-420), translator of the Latin version of the Bible known as the Vulgate, in his *Letter to Demetrias* (a Roman matron), states that some Christian sects in his day taught a form of reincarnation as an esoteric doctrine, imparting it to a few "as a traditional truth which was not to be divulged."*

Synesius (AD 370-480), Bishop of Ptolemais, also taught the concept, and in a prayer that has survived, he says: "Father, grant that my soul may merge into the light, and be no more thrust back into the illusion of earth." Others of his Hymns, such as number III, contain lines clearly stating his views, and also pleas that he may be so purified that rebirth on earth will no longer be necessary. In a thesis on dreams, Synesius writes: "It is possible by labor and time, and a transition into other lives, for the imaginative soul to emerge from this dark abode." This passage reminds us of verses in the Revelation of John (3:12), with its symbolic, initiatory language leading into: "Him that overcometh will I make a pillar in the temple of my God, and he shall go no more out."

We need at this point to recall what happened after Constantine declared Christianity to be the state religion of the Roman empire. The church forgot the injunction about rendering unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's only, and allowed itself to become entwined with the administration of Caesar's realm -- the political arena. Its destiny became linked to the fate of the empire itself and its rulers.

The several differences in teaching among the Christian sects of the fourth century paralleled the provincial disturbances under the weak emperors, so that by the time Justinian took charge in 527, he had serious problems. He worked desperately to reunify his crumbling empire, and proceeded to do so on two lines: the first prong of his effort was the drive of his army against the petty states within the larger fold; the second set out to enforce a uniform canon of belief, to be strictly adhered to. No mean theologian himself, he launched his campaign against the beliefs of the Nestorian Christians and other minority groups, and to do so he had to circumvent the decisions of the Council of Chalcedon (451). He ordered Mennas, the Patriarch of Constantinople, to convene a local or provincial synod to deal with this and meet the demands of several churchmen who opposed certain teachings, including Origen's on the pre-existence of souls.

The local synod accepted the bans phrased by Mennas, but this did not seem to achieve much. Ten years later, Justinian called the fifth Council of Constantinople, now known also as the Second Ecumenical Council -- but this is a misnomer. It was presided over by the incumbent patriarch of Constantinople, Eutychius, with the presence of 165 bishops. Pope Vigilius had been summoned by the Emperor, but he opposed the council and took refuge in a church in Constantinople. He was not present at the deliberations, nor was he represented.

The Council drafted a series of anathemas, some say 14, others 15, mainly directed against the doctrines of three "schools" or "heretics," the documents relating thereto becoming known as "The Three Chapters." Only these papers were presented to the pope for his approval. Succeeding popes, including Gregory the Great (590-604), while dealing with the matters arising out of the Fifth Council, made no mention of Origen's concepts. Nonetheless, Justinian enforced the acceptance of the decision of what seems to have been merely an extra-conciliary session. He made it appear to have ecumenical endorsement or sanction. What concerns us here is that the clerics opposing Origen's teachings, mainly the one dealing with the pre-existence of souls, secured an official condemnation, which they tried to make binding. Although Gregory the Great made no reference to Origen when he took up the affairs of the Fifth Council, he did accept the trend toward codification of Christian belief that had been developing during the fifth and sixth centuries, and he could even say that he "reverenced" the conclusions of the first four Councils as much as he did the Four Gospels! From the point of view of public teaching, the idea of reincarnation disappeared from European thought after the provincial synod of 543 and the Fifth Council of 553 -- and this on the grounds that it conflicted with a proper understanding of the concept of redemption.

Despite the anathemas, Origen's influence flowed down the centuries like a steady stream, through leading Christians of the day to Maximus of Tyre (580-662) and Johannes Scotus Erigena (810-877), the immensely erudite Irish monk. It even reached such late figures as St. Francis of Assisi, founder of the Franciscan Order (1182-1226), and St. Buonaventura, the 'Seraphic' doctor (1221-1274), who became a cardinal and General of the Franciscans. No less a theologian than St. Jerome said of Origen that he was "the greatest teacher of the early Church after the Apostles."

*Apart from Christian sects like the widespread Cathars that included the Albigenses, Waldenses and Bomogils, isolated individuals -- such as Jacob Boehme, the German Protestant mystic, Joseph Glanvil, chaplain of King Charles II of England, the Rev. William Law, William R. Alger, and many modern clerics, Catholic and Protestant -- have supported the concept of reincarnation on logical and other grounds. Henry More (1614-1687), the noted clergyman of the Church of England and renowned Cambridge Platonist, wrote in his long essay *The Immortality of the Soul* -- a considerable study of the whole subject of the soul, with cogent answers to critics of pre-existency. His poem *A Platonick Song of the Soul* tells it beautifully:*

*I would sing the Prae-existency
Of humane souls, and live once o'er again
By recollection and quick memory
All that is past since first we all began.
But all too shallow be my wits to scan*

*So deep a point and mind too dull to clear
So dark a matter, . . .*

Speaking then to Plotinus in the poem, he adds:

*Tell what we mortalls are, tell what of old we were.
A spark or ray of the Divinity
Clouded in earthly fogs, yclad in clay,
A precious drop sunk from Aeternitie,
Spilt on the ground, or rather slunk away.*

As More said in his essay mentioned above, "there was never any philosopher that held the soul spiritual and immortal but he held also that it did pre-exist."

The general opposition of some theologians in the last century is ebbing away as their successors take a more open-minded stance upon the subject. Clergymen of varying denominations are beginning to endorse the ancient teachings about the pre-existence of the soul, reïmbodiment in general and reincarnation in particular. It is spoken about more widely than it has been for centuries, and the earlier derision based upon a misunderstanding of transmigration has given way to a more intelligent inquiry.

One of the more common arguments against the idea of rebirth is that we do not remember our past existences. But there is a memory other than that stored up among the cells of the brain. Skills, or facility to do or understand certain areas of thought or activity, often evident in early childhood, surely betoken a resumption from a past familiarity. Does it matter what the name of a personality was, if the quality expressed through that lifetime continues into the present, modified according to the kind and intensity of the earlier period of self-expression? We so often think of life and death as a pair of opposites. Whereas in reality life is a continuum, with birth and death the two doorways into and out of our earth phase. Birth, death and rebirth -- the cycle turns and completes itself over and over until we refine the dross in our nature into the pure gold of spirit.

*Works consulted for this article include *The Ring of Return, An Anthology*, by Eva Martin; *The Cathars and Reincarnation*, by Arthur Guirdham; *Reincarnation, A Study of Forgotten Truth*, by E. D. Walker; *Fragments of a Faith Forgotten*, by G. R. S. Mead; *Reincarnation in World Thought*, compiled by Joseph Head and S. L. Cranston; *The Esoteric Tradition*, by G. de Purucker; and *Essays and Hymns of Synesius*, translated by Augustine FitzGerald.*

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