Reincarnation's Western Embodiment
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MY TURN

Reincarnation's Western Embodiment

Belief in the soul's rebirth is found in Judaism, early Christianity and other tribes

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From time immemorial and across the world's continents and cultures, human beings have expressed the belief in reincarnation, that is, rebirth of the soul into another body. The doctrine is reflected in the scriptures, literature and mythology of diverse cultures. However, in the West this doctrine has somehow become obscured, invisible to the eye of all but the most clear-sighted and most persistent seekers of the Truth. In fact, for centuries in the West adherence to and expression of a belief in reincarnation meant, at best, ostracism and, at worst, excommunication--or even death. People from Western cultures often dismiss the doctrine of reincarnation variously as illogical and irrational, far-fetched and esoteric. To them, reincarnation is rooted in the strange and exotic teachings of the mysterious East. It is a doctrine at once foreign and forbidding. Contemplating my own intuitional predilection toward this point of view, I wondered why the subject of reincarnation has for centuries been pushed under the rug by Western thinkers.

Traditionally, Eastern philosophies and religions tend to be inclusive and non-materialistic, while those of the West are inclined to be exclusive and materialistic--except, of course, for the mystical sects. But nowadays, with the emergence of new archaeological evidence, even Western scientists are beginning to open their minds and to recognize that the doctrine of reincarnation is implanted in Jewish, Christian and other traditions. A re-reading of the Bible offers a view of reincarnation that has for centuries been obscured in the West.

The Jews continually expected the reincarnation of their prophets. For example, Moses was Abel, son of Adam; and their Messiah was to be the reincarnation of Adam, himself, who had already come a second time as King David.

In his Antiquity of the Jews, the Jewish historian, Flavius Josephus (a.d. 37-100) writes that there were three sects of philosophy among the Jews: the Essenes, the Pharisees and the Sadducess. The tenet of the Sadducess was that the soul died along with the death of the body, but Josephus affirms that both the Essenes and Pharisees believed in rebirth.

And with the new archaeological discoveries, we have information about the Gnostics, who many scholars believe may have been the descendants of the original Christians and who may have inherited the original teachings of Jesus. The Gnostics believed in reincarnation. So did the early Christian fathers--for example, Justin Martyr.

Furthermore, did you ever learn in school that the Toltecs and Aztecs believed in reincarnation and that other native Americans, including Eskimos, also understood reincarnation, as well as African tribes and Pacific Islanders? Reincarnation appears in the metaphors included in their writings and in their myths: the phoenix, the butterfly, the wheel of life. The philosophy of reincarnation is preserved in the teachings of the mystical sect of Persian Sufis, too.

In our search for Truth we cannot and should not deny that these roots are intermingled with those in the East. For if one studies the religious, cultural and intellectual histories of the world with an open mind and heart, one discovers that our cultures, traditions and religions are intertwined and that the doctrine of reincarnation is far from alien to Western culture.

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