

Reincarnation in world thought

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As a man casts off his worn-out clothes and takes on other new ones, so does the embodied soul cast off its worn-out bodies and enters other new ones.

Bhagavad Gita

Karma and reincarnation has been a part of religion for at least five thousand years, and probably much longer. As there was mass migration of peoples around the ancient world, spiritual ideas spread out in waves and there is a surprising congruence of beliefs about the afterlife and the reward or retribution which will follow acts on earth. The concept occurred in ancient Egypt, Greece and Rome; in Judaism and Christianity; and in Celtic thought. The Celts were such strong believers in rebirth that they would happily take a pledge to repay a debt in a future life if it could not be fulfilled in the present.

That what has gone before, whether in one life or many, can create sickness and disease is a universal belief, as is the concept of a judgement after which the wicked cease to exist and the good are rewarded by eternal life. That the actions of the soul whilst on earth played a considerable part in the Afterlife is a consistent belief in most western religious systems. Gnostic Christians accepted – and many still accept - reincarnation but orthodox Christianity banned the idea. ‘Heresies’ such as Catharism revived reincarnation, as did Theosophy. In some countries, it still forms part of orthodox Christian belief. The Syrian church in India, for instance, is said to have been founded by the Apostle Thomas and its adherents firmly believe in reincarnation within the sect.

Karma and rebirth are an integral part of the teachings of Hinduism and Buddhism, as it is in Jainism. All these religions agree that there is a chain of cause and effect at work.

Karma and reincarnation in the East

Hinduism

Those whose conduct here has been good will quickly attain a good birth as a brahmin or other superior caste. But those whose conduct has been evil will have an evil birth as a dog, a pig, or an untouchable outcaste.

Brihad Aranyaka

In a survey carried out in the 1990s in Northern India, one in five hundred people remembered a previous incarnation. The core purpose of Hindu rebirth is to restore unity with the cosmic reality that lies behind the illusion of separation. The aim of human incarnation is to purify the individual soul (atman), recognise that this soul is divine and reunite with the energy of universal soul (Brahman). Until the individual soul does so, it will incarnate again and again into a new body. In the Bhagavad Gita, the Lord Krishna states:

As a man throweth away old garments and putteth on new, even so the dweller in the body, having quitted its old mortal frames, entereth into others which are new.

According to Hindu Scriptures, the difference between the gods and humans is that the gods know they are divine – but may choose to incarnate and thus have memories of their former births. The god Krishna told his disciple Arjuna:

I have been born many times, and many times hast thou been born. But I remember my past lives, and thou has forgotten thine.

In Hinduism there are three bodies, the physical body into which the atman or individual soul incarnates; the causal body; and a subtle, invisible body (the linga sharira or mind body) that survives death and which carries the karmic traces (samskaras) that enter into a new incarnation. The linga sharira subtle body carries traits, perceptions and emotions that pass at conception into the new body and modify its genetic inheritance to reflect the soul's karma:

Through his past works he shall return once more to birth, entering whatever form his heart is set on.

In other words, the body and form are created by the reincarnating entity based on what was known, accomplished and desired in the past.

Hindu cosmology posits three realms, between which the individual soul can move. The lower realm, the infernal, is a place where desire totally dominates. The soul that is held here is trapped by its own desires and it experiences bestial, hellish spectres which are the ghosts of the imagination. The middle realm is the earthly realm. Here desire prevails but does not totally dominate. The soul has the possibility to free itself from its desires and move to the celestial realm. In the celestial realm, desire no longer holds the soul in bondage. It is free to evolve. At death, the soul will travel through all these realms until it finds the one with which it resonates most strongly. If it holds unfulfilled desires, then it will find itself either in the infernal regions, or the earthly realm once more. The soul that has moved beyond desire may well inhabit the celestial realm for a space as it evolves. The soul that has evolved little, being bound to desire, will reincarnate quickly.

In the Hindu Bhagavad-Gita the Lord Krishna defines karma as 'the force of creation, wherefrom all things have their life' and warns that 'Because thou art in the bondage of Karma, of the forces of thine own past life; and that which thou, in thy delusion, with a good will dost not want to do, unwillingly though shalt have to do'. In other words, what a person does in your life influences what has to be done in another.

Hindus believe that karma arises in a causal chain of lives stretching back into the far past. This view of karma is fateful and not a matter of choice. In Eastern eyes, all suffering is caused by karma. The soul takes the sum total of its actions with it after death, and they accompany the next rebirth. The Bhagavad Gita states that the earth is 'the world of actions...' 'All embodied selfs, having here performed good or evil actions, obtain the fruit...' It tells us that at death the 'soul dropping out of the body, is surrounded on both sides by his own actions, his own pure and meritorious, as also his sinful ones' and goes on to explain that at birth 'Coming to your body after another, they [souls] become ripened in their respective ways... As a blazing lamp shines in a house, even so does consciousness light up bodies. And whatever action he performs, whether good or bad, everything done in a former body must necessarily be enjoyed or suffered. Then that is exhausted, and again other action is accumulated.'

For Hindus, the wheel of rebirth is fixed and unchanging. Karma and past lives determine the circumstances and status of the present life. Hindu society is stratified and the soul must live a

particularly good life if it is to achieve a higher caste in a future life. Brahmins, the high, priestly caste, have and always will be Brahmins – unless they accumulate considerable ‘negative karma’, or until they step off the wheel. Stepping off the wheel is achieved by recognizing that one is, and always has been, part of the divine. To merge with this quality is to achieve ‘salvation’ or immortality. It is a long process and is rarely achieved in one life.

In the Bhagavad Gita, a man, Arjuna, enquires of the god Krishna what happens to a righteous man after death. Krishna replies: ‘ The man whose devotion has been broken off by death goeth to the regions of the righteous, where he dwells for an immensity of years and is then born again on earth in a pure and fortunate family or even in a family of those who are spiritually illuminated... Being thus born again he comes in contact with the knowledge which belonged to him in his former body, and from that time he struggles more diligently towards perfection.’ However, the man who has what Krishna describes as a ‘dead soul’ will not have a good rebirth. This is the man who had had insatiable desires and was ‘full of deceit, insolence and pride’ and whose highest aim was sensual enjoyment. It is this man of whom Krishna says: ‘In the vast cycles of life and death I inexorably hurl them down to destruction, these are the lowest of men, cruel and evil, whose soul is hate. Reborn in a lower life, in darkness birth after birth, they come not to me, Arjuna; but they go down the path of hell.’ And so they will continue, life after life.’ Hindus believe that remission of karma is possible. In the Kumbh Mela festival that takes place every twelve years, pilgrims come to bathe in the waters of the Ganges at Allahabad. This is the site of a titanic battle that took place aeons ago between the gods and the demons of Hinduism. They fought over a pitcher containing the nectar of immortality. Where drops of the nectar spilt, the river became holy. Bathing in the river is said to bring Moksha or salvation, a release from the round of rebirth. Karma is cleared. Merit karma may also be earned. In a television interview, a policeman on duty at the Kumbh Mela festival said that, whilst he would be too busy to bathe himself, in aiding other people to bathe he would be fulfilling his karma – which he interpreted as duty. He would earn merit from this act. He declared that it was better to have helped two other people than to bathe himself. [source: interview on Channel 4 Kumbh Mela: the Greatest Show on Earth 14 January 2001]

Allahabad is also said to be the site where the subterranean Saraswati river merges with the Ganges. This is a symbolic river signifying man’s knowledge and learning so the site is an appropriate one to bathe away the ignorance that underlies karma. Whilst immersion in the river does not guarantee release from rebirth, for someone close to obtaining this goal, the act may be the final impetus needed. It may signify the end to rebirth for that particular soul.

Jainism

In Jainism karma is seen not just as a process but as a substance, invisible and subtle, but nevertheless having solid, material form. This substance, in the form of miniscule particles, interpenetrates soul or living substance causing bondage to the cycle of rebirth.

Jains believe that karma can be neutralized. But it requires many lives of unceasing penance to release from previous acts. Ideally, these lives should be lived as a monk. With a 'concentrated mind' a monk can destroy his karma – acquired through acts of both love and hatred – by six acts of penance: Abstaining from destroying life, abstaining from lying, refraining from taking anything not freely given, celibacy, having no personal property and eating only at night. In addition to this, the monk must destroy his illusions, remove obstructions to knowledge, and practice many disciplines and abstinences. Having achieved all this, when his death approaches he must then enter into pure meditation, shut down his mind and his bodily functions, and allow his soul to pass once more into its pure form, in which he 'gains enlightenment and puts an end to all misery'.

Buddhism

If you want to know the past, look at your present life. If you want to know the future, look at your present.

The Buddha

Buddhism arose out of Hinduism and has mutated into several forms. The Southern version, Theravada found in India, Sri Lanka and South East Asia, teaches the concept of skandas or psychic residues with no personal identity passing from life to life. In the Northern form, Mahayana, found in Tibet, China and Japan, said to contain remnants of teachings given by Buddha to his inner circle, there is less reliance on skandas as carriers, and more on on-going identity and continuity of mind. Buddhists prefer the term rebirth to that of reincarnation.

Buddhism's founder, having been brought up in a privileged position from which he broke free, pondered deeply on the causes of rebirth. He identified Four Noble Truths that underlay life on earth. In his view, the dissatisfaction or misery experienced in physical incarnation arose out of desire or craving for pleasure, power and continued existence. It was this craving, and the illusion of being a separate ego, that fuelled the wheel of rebirth. The Buddha taught that attachment, especially to suffering, created karma which locked into a cycle of rebirth. Buddhists believe that,

by gaining a state of complete emptiness through discipline and meditation, one can leave the wheel of birth and rebirth. By following the precepts of the Eightfold Path, a person achieves liberation from desire. The aim is also to be freed from the delusion of having a separate identity, or ego. But more than this, realisation that there is no separate, eternal Self releases from rebirth.

As the aim of an incarnation is to step off the wheel of rebirth, belief in a soul is seen as a trap for the unwary. As Buddha put it:

Whosoever believes in a soul, believes in things pertaining to a soul; believing in things pertaining to a soul, they become attached to the skandhas as they form a soul and things pertaining to a soul.

Buddhists hold to what is known as Dependent Origination. That is to say, things change from moment to moment and it is the ego that holds things together. Dependent Origination is extremely subtle. It is often defined as a chain of causation that lies behind pain, suffering and rebirth. One thing arises out of another that in turn arose out of prior conditions. These things are links in a chain but Buddhism has no interest in first causes as everything is in a state of becoming. Events happen in a series, one interrelating group producing another, which creates bondage to rebirth due to ignorance of the true state of affairs – which would appear to imply that an entity such as a soul is involved but Buddhism strenuously denies this idea. The bondage or chain of causation has twelve stages: the first two of which relate to a previous life and thus explain the present.

Chain of Causation behind the Cycle of Existence

Ignorance

Karmic Predispositions

Consciousness

Form and Body

Five sense organs and the mind

Contact

Feeling responses

Craving

Grasping for an object

Actions

Birth

Old Age and Death

So, for example, if a man's eyes look at a woman and the sensation is pleasing, his karmic predisposition being towards lust, he will lust after her (if his predisposition was towards sexual indifference, he would ignore her). This desire may lead to 'holding onto' her. Seeking pleasure, he may have the illusion of ownership and of power over her. This creates a bond, or karma, between them and could lead to rebirth:

'Beings are heirs to their deeds; bearers of their deeds, and their deeds are the womb out of which they spring, and through their deeds alone they must change for the better, remakes themselves, and win liberation from ill.' (The Majhima verse 135)

This sounds as though the karma is carried from life to life on an individual basis. But, a disciple of the Buddha stressed that:

To believe the doer of the deed will be the same as the one who experiences its results (in the next life), this is the one extreme. To believe that the doer of the deed, and the one who experiences its results are two different persons, this is the other extreme. Both these extremes the Perfect One has avoided and taught the truth that lies in the middle of both.

So, it would seem that from the Buddhist view, whilst karma does transmigrate and has a loose attachment to the new incarnation it is not an entirely individualistic thing.

In the Buddhist view, the ego dissolves at death leaving five skandas, mental and physical aggregates, conditioned by ignorance and actions or karma, and motivated by craving, carry the predominant impression of the last thought before death. After death these skandas separate and recombine with psychic residues from others so there is no personal reincarnation. Skandas exist in any or all of six realms, three of which are physical and three non-physical.

Six realms of transmigration

Realm of the gods

Realm of demons

Realm of hungry ghosts

Lower states of life

The animal world

The human world

There is no on-going sense of identity or ego, although there may be a continuity of mind in some forms of Buddhism such as the Tibetan (see below). In taking on name and form, that is, individual identity, a false sense of ego and separateness is created and the process of individuality begins. The five senses and the objects they perceive lead to illusion as the mind coordinates sense impressions and creates its own reality from these. The contact between objects and the five senses leads to sensation, which gives rise to ‘thirst’ or desire, which results in ‘grasping at’, or holding onto, the object desired. This sets karma in motion.

Most Buddhists see life as fated. That is, it has an appointed course to run – a course conditioned by karma and, although Buddhists apparently do not believe in the same soul reincarnating, much of the literature reads as though the same soul returns. In the Questions of King Melinda a Chinese Buddhist text dating back to the first or second century AD, for instance, the sage Nagasena is questioned by the King about premature death:

‘Venerable Nagasena, when beings die, do they all die in fullness of time, or do some die out of due season?’

The sage replies that there is such a thing as death at the due time and such a thing as premature death. Some deaths occur in the fullness of time, others do not. He gives an example of a fruit which is ripe and mature and therefore falls in due season. But he also helps the king to see that some fruits fall because ‘they are bored into by worms, some because they are knocked down by a long stick, some because they are blown down by the wind, some because they have become rotten’, and that these fruits fall out of due season.

Out of due season may not, however, necessarily, be out of due time. The king, with whom he is debating, acknowledges that the soul who dies in the womb, in the first month of life or at an advanced age is dying at the appointed time. So, it would appear, there are no accidents. And yet, the sage goes on to say that there are seven kinds of men for whom time could be said to run out while they still have a portion of their allotted span to run. These are men who starve or who die from thirst, men who are killed by snake bite and those who take poison, men who die from fire or drowning, and those who die from a ‘dart’ (sword or knife). With the exception of these inadvertent deaths, all deaths are karmic and fall in due season. And yet, Nagasena goes on to say, some of those seven deaths could also be due to retributive karma:

But there are some men, O king, who die through the working of some evil deed or other

they have committed in a former birth. And of these, O king, whosoever has starved others to death, after having been himself through many hundreds of thousands of years tormented by hunger, famished, exhausted, emaciated and withered of heart, dried up, wasted away, heated, and all on fire within, will, either as youth or man or old man, die of hunger too. And that death will be to him a death at the appointed time...

And so on through all the different deaths, each causing exquisite torment to the former tormenter. This tormentor, so it would appear from the text, has a chain of incarnations as an individual soul who reaps the rewards of his previous actions.

Tibetan Buddhism

Once you believe in the connection between motivation and its effect, you will become more alert to the effects which your own actions have upon yourself and others.

Dalai Lama

In Tibetan Buddhism there is a much stronger concept of individual reincarnation and personal karma. Tibetan Buddhists refer to mind or consciousness rather than soul, but they nevertheless believe that the thoughts and actions of one life will affect the next. What has gone before governs the next incarnation, which may be into animal or other forms as well as human. Tibetan monks, for example, expect to be reincarnated as dogs if they have not fully conformed to their vows. Such a rebirth does not apply only to monks. Nor does rebirth take place merely on the physical, earth plane. It can occur in other realms depending on karma. As the Venerable Lama Lodo explains:

Because of individual karma... and the results of negative and positive actions, there are four different ways to be reborn ...: from a womb (human being); from an egg (certain animals); as a result of the attraction to heat (certain insects); and from instantaneous transformation (certain gods). This last example is a result of great merit, but yet not perfect merit since conflicting emotions still remain.

When questioned whether the next rebirth could be changed or whether it was an unalterable fact – that is, fate – the Lama replied that it could be changed, 'but only by the force of

all the actions that you do now'. He explained that accumulating considerable positive karma would have a favourable effect whilst doing many negative deeds would change it for the worst. To wait until the moment of rebirth would be too late as the karmic process was already in motion.

Tibetan Buddhism incorporated the ancient shamanistic Bon religion into Buddhist thought and is more mystical and metaphysical than Indian Buddhism. Its monastic tradition includes a rigorous search for the next incarnation of a recently deceased lama. Most tulkus, reincarnated lamas, can trace their incarnations back to the origin of their line and receive their spiritual authority from this source. In Tibetan Buddhism there is, therefore, more emphasis on permanent identity and the transmigration of the mind rather than the soul.

The Dalai Lama, the exiled spiritual leader of the Tibetan people, is the fourteenth incarnation of himself. In *My Land and My People* he wrote:

The immediate source of a body is that of its parents. But physical matter cannot produce mind, nor mind matter. The immediate source of a mind must, therefore, be a mind which existed before the conception took place; the mind must have a continuity from a previous mind.

So, for the Tibetans, it is 'mind-stuff' that reincarnates. As the Dalai Lama, explains:

Reincarnation is part of the history of human origin. It stands as proof of the mindstream's capacity to retain knowledge of physical, vocal, and mental activities. The theory of reincarnation is integral to Tibetan Buddhist life-style and applies equally to the good and bad mind.

When a high lama dies, the oracle is consulted as to where to find the new incarnation. A diligent search is made by lamas who knew the deceased incarnation. One of the first tests is that the child should recognise these lamas from his past. He is also given objects to identify as his. When the new incarnation was confirmed, the child used to be taken back to his monastery. With the occupation of Tibet by China this became problematic and more and more high lamas are choosing to incarnate outside Tibet.

The fate of the reincarnated Panchen Lama, second in authority to the Dalai Lama, shows how vital the correct recognition of a lama can be. When the last Panchen Lama died in China, a

search was made in China by agents of the Dalai Lama. A child, Gedhun Choekyi Nyima, was found and confirmed as the new incarnation by high ranking Tibetan lamas. The Chinese Government, however, put forward their own candidate and took both claimants into so-called protective custody. The Tibetan candidate, has not been seen since his imprisonment at the age of 7 and there are grave fears for his safety. Although the Chinese choice has been seen since as he is being trained, in China, to take over the role of Panchen Lama, even he now appears to have disappeared from sight. This is a serious matter as the Panchen Lama will have charge of the search for the next incarnation of the Dalai Lama. It is his responsibility to ensure that the unbroken line of incarnations continues. Should this be in the hands of a Chinese-trained puppet lama, it is more likely to be a political choice than a true spiritual one. Tibetan Buddhism could quickly die out without its spiritual leader although it has now become one of the fastest growing religions in the West. No Western government has yet made a move towards restoration of the true Panchen Lama – or, at the time of writing, protested against the continued occupation of Tibet by China. The latest move by China is the banning of monks from seeking the new incarnation of a deceased lama.

In Tibetan Buddhism it is possible to aid others to dissolve their negative karma, and to work on your own karma in the same way. By practising and expressing compassion, karma is alleviated. The Tibetan teacher Sogyal Rinpoche speaks in his book on living and dying of how compassion can purify karma through the practises of phowa and tonglen. Tonglen, which means giving and receiving, can be put to work by those who care for the dying or to aid anyone who is suffering pain. It can also be used by those in pain themselves. Sogyal Rinpoche feels that Tonglen is one of the most useful and powerful of all spiritual practices because it unblocks the heart and purifies the mind. By opening to the truth of the suffering of others, any forces blocking the heart are destroyed as is estrangement or separation from another person. By opening to this loving practice, bitterness and despair are dissolved. '[Tonglen] is effective in destroying the self-grasping, self-cherishing, self-absorption of the ego, which is the root of all our suffering and the root of all hard-heartedness'.

Tonglen takes on the suffering of others by identifying with it, drawing it into oneself for transformation, and then breathing out love, compassion, peace and well being to transform the pain. It works for physical pain, mental distress and emotional disturbances, and any other form of suffering. It can also be used with forgiveness. Accepting total responsibility for your actions, without trying to justify them, acknowledgement is made for what has gone, or been done wrong, and forgiveness requested wholeheartedly. When breathing out, reconciliation, forgiveness and

healing are sent to the other person.

Phowa, which means transferring consciousness, is used to prepare for your own death and to aid anyone who is dying or has already died. In one form, it is a prayer addressed to whichever deity or spiritual force you associate with truth, wisdom and compassion, accompanied by a visualisation and a merging of consciousness with the golden light flowing from the chosen deity, so that this light melts karma. In other forms, the prayer is omitted, moving straight to the experience of union. Done for oneself, this practice prepares for death, so that it becomes automatic at the moment of death to transfer consciousness to the highest possible state and allow the karma to be dissolved. Carried out on behalf of someone who is dying, it aids them in transferring their consciousness. The prayer is:

Through your blessing, grace, and guidance, through the power of the light that streams from you:

May all my negative karma, destructive emotions, obscurations, and blockages be purified and removed.

May I know myself forgiven for all the harm I may have thought and done,

May I accomplish this profound practice of phowa, and die a good and peaceful death,

And through the triumph of my death, may I be able to benefit all other beings, living or dead. [Sogyal p.215]

Whilst it may feel presumptuous to take into oneself the suffering of others, this is nevertheless a very effective practice that can be carried out by anyone provided that it is done with compassion and not with arrogance.

Islam

In Islam the soul that survives death is known as the ruh. In conventional Islam it passes after death to another realm to await Judgement and Resurrection. However, from the beginning of Islam, successors to the Prophet claimed that there was an inner, esoteric teaching taught only to a carefully selected few. Accepted teachings in early Islam were that a spiritual teacher could reincarnate after death and that ordinary men could be reborn in addition to the occasional incarnation of the divine. There is a glimpse of the transmigration of souls in the Koranic verse:

Allah generates beings, and sends them back over and over again, till they return to Him.

The Islamic religion split into two sects quite early in its history. Sunni Moslems do not believe in transmigration but the Shi'ites and their offshoot the Ismails do so and have a much stronger concept of freewill.

Sufism

Sufism, the more mystical arm of Islam, purports to carry on the inner teaching of Mohammed and also incorporated ideas from outside Islam. Sufis seek direct experience of the divine and perfection of the soul through a complex, interweaving series of worlds. Of twelve Sufi sects, two – the Halulis and the Halljis – were considered heretical because of their belief in reincarnation and transmigration of the soul. Nevertheless, the thread of reincarnation runs through Sufi writings:

O Brother, know for certain that this work has been before thee and me in bygone ages, and that each man has already reached a certain stage. No one has begun this work for the first time. (Sharf-U'D-Din-Maneri)

But the position is far from clear and little has changed since the Spanish-born Sufi poet Ibn 'Arabi (1164-1240) commented:

There is some difference of opinion among the Muslim learned men as regards the method of Resurrection. Some of them say that Resurrection will be by reincarnation and quote passages from the Quran and authenticated sayings of the Prophet in support of their contention.

The Bektashee Sufi sect from Turkey are said to believe in the transmigration of the soul into animals – and for this reason forbid the killing of animals.

The Druze of Lebanon

The Druze of Lebanon are the source of several well-researched and compelling modern-day reincarnation stories. The Druze came into prominence in the 11th century and their beliefs combine aspects of Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Gnosticism, Tibetan Buddhism and Zoroastrianism. The religion arose out of the coming together of persecuted minorities and has a

strong reincarnational aspect. Today there are almost a million Arabic speaking adherents, all of whom believe they are the reincarnation of former Druze. Scattered throughout Lebanon, Jordan, Syria and Israel, all live within a few hours of their sacred mountain, Mount Hermon.

The Druze believe that the souls of the righteous pass after death into progressively more perfect embodiments until they are reabsorbed back into the divine. However, those who were not righteous in life, pass into lower embodiments. They also believe that all souls existing today came into being when the soul was created. No new souls are made, and old souls cannot be destroyed. Reincarnation is usually continuous, the soul taking a new Druze body immediately after death unless there has been a war resulting in a large number of deaths.

Some Druze say that the Prophet Mohammed's brother Hamsa went to Tibet in 625 A.D in search of secret wisdom. He then reincarnated as H'amsa, the founder of Druze, in the 11th century. From that time on he has reincarnated successively in the body of the Chief Druze in the same way that the Dalai Lama is reborn as himself. As reincarnation is a fundamental doctrine and children are encouraged to remember their past lives, several of the best documented cases of past life memory come from the Druze community in Lebanon.

Karma and reincarnation in the West

Judaism

Judaism bridges ancient western and near-eastern thought. The concept of *mazal* is usually translated 'luck' or 'fortune' but can also be seen as fate: what is written. So the aphorism *mazal toff* is usually seen to mean 'good luck', a clearer translation could be 'good fate'. A man has to do what is allotted to him, which could be said to be his karma. This fate is, however, allotted to him by his God to whom retribution for wrong doing belongs. This fate is something more than personal karma. It belongs to the people as a whole and so is an example of racial or tribal karma, which overrides the purely personal level. According to the Law of Moses the Jews belong to their God and he has total control over them. In Deuteronomy, Moses, as the spokesman of this God, warns:

If you do not observe and fulfil all the law ... then the Lord will strike you and your descendants with unimaginable plagues, malignant and persistent, and with sickness, persistent and severe. He will bring upon you once again all the diseases of Egypt which you dread, and they will cling to you... until you are destroyed... The Lord will scatter you among all peoples from one end of the earth to the other... Among those nations you will find no peace, no rest for the sole of your foot. Then the Lord will give you an unquiet mind, dim eyes, and failing appetite. Your life will

hang continually in suspense, fear will beset you night and day, and you will find no security all your life long. (Deuteronomy 28 v.58ff.)

However, as part of this covenant made by Yahweh with his people, they are also offered a positive outcome if they obey him, and also the possibility of forgiveness and restitution should they, or their descendants, turn away and then repent:

If you turn back to him and obey him heart and soul in all that I command you this day, then the Lord your God will show you compassion and restore your fortunes. He will gather you again from all the countries to which he has scattered you. Even though he were to banish you to the four corners of the world, the Lord your God will gather you from there, from there he will fetch you home.. and when you turn back to the Lord your God with all your heart and soul, he will again rejoice over you and be good to you. (Deut. 30)

In early Judaism, the soul goes to Sheol, a place of shadowy existence where it slowly fades away. It has no inherent life of its own. But as Judaism developed so too did the notion of soul, possibly from contact both with Babylonian and Egyptian views of the soul and the afterlife. Within the Old Testament there is no specific mention of reincarnation as a fundamental Jewish belief, although some passages have been suggested to be reincarnational. Several of the prophets, such as Elijah, are expected to return in time of need. The book of Malachi closes with the prophecy:

I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes. He will reconcile fathers to sons and sons to fathers, lest I come and put the land under a ban to destroy it. 4:6

According to scripture, Elijah never actually died – he was taken up to heaven, so his body as well as his soul would be awaiting return. Traditionally he will return to his people at a time of great crisis. Josephus an historian who wrote around the time of Christ, states that out of the three Jewish sects, the Sadducees believed that the soul died with the body, but the Pharisees and the Essenes believed in rebirth:

The Pharisees believe that souls have an immortal vigour in them. [The virtuous] shall have power to revive and live again. For their doctrine is this, that bodies are corruptible, and that the matter they are made of is not permanent, but that the souls are immortal, and continue for ever.

Despite Josephus' assertions, in the collection of scrolls from the Essene community at

Qumran there is little evidence to suggest a belief in reincarnation. The Dead Sea Scrolls appear to indicate a form of spiritual resurrection in a post-Messianic age rather than rebirth into the physical realm. However, there is a thread of rebirth running through Jewish writings. The Talmud brings together interpretation of Jewish law by esteemed Jewish teachers and a collection of legends and traditions. It was based on an oral tradition that was, in parts, much older. It states that Adam was reborn as David and will come again as the Messiah; and points to a certain number of souls whose destiny is to be reborn until the Day of Judgement comes. It also mentions that Moses was Abel, son of Adam, who had in between times been Seth.

Judaic law can be seen as dealing with several kinds of karma – albeit in one life. In Leviticus, Moses passes on the Lord's words:

When one man strikes another and kills him, he shall be put to death. Whoever strikes a beast and kills it shall make restitution, life for life. When one man injures and disfigures his fellow countryman, it shall be done to him as he has done; fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth; the injury and disfigurement that he has inflicted upon another shall in turn be inflicted upon him (Leviticus 24 v.17-20)

This is 'boomerang karma' at work. What a man does, how he acts, comes back to him with exactitude. Judaic law also sets out with clarity the actions that are required to acquire 'merit karma' and a just reward:

At the end of every third year you shall bring out all the tithe of your produce for that year and leave it in your settlements so that the Levites... aliens, orphans and widows... may come and eat their fill. If you do this the Lord your God will bless you in everything to which you set your hand. At the end of every seventh year you shall make a remission of debts... everyone who holds a pledge shall remit the pledge of anyone indebted to him... There will never be any poor among you if only you obey... [and] the Lord your God will bless you with great prosperity... When one of one countrymen ... becomes poor, do not be hard-hearted or close fisted... Be open-handed towards him and lend him on pledge as much as he needs. See that you do not harbour iniquitous thoughts when you find that the seventh year, the year of remission is near, and look askance at your needy countryman and give him nothing. If you do, he will appeal to the Lord against you and you will be found guilty of sin. Give freely to him and do not begrudge him your bounty, because it is for this very bounty that the Lord your God will bless you in everything that you do or undertake. (Deut. Chapter 14-15)

In a modern Hebrew prayer book, obtainable anywhere for a few shekels (pence) a very

ancient prayer is set out. This prayer is recited each night before going to sleep. It offers, and asks for, forgiveness of sins not only in the present life but also in a past life:

Master of the universe, I hereby forgive anyone who angered or antagonized me or who sinned against me – whether against my body, my property, my honour, or anything of mine; whether he did so accidentally, wilfully, carelessly, or purposely; whether through speech, deed, thought, or notion; whether in this transmigration or an other transmigration - I forgive. May no man be punished because of me. May it be one will my G-d and the G-d of my foregatherers, that I may sin no more. Whatever sins I have done before you, may you blot out in your abundant mercies, but not through suffering or bad illnesses. May the expression of my mouth and the thoughts of my heart find favour before you my Rock and my Redeemer (translator Bryan Gundle).

This prayer quite clearly sets out the possibility of boomerang karma, that is, actions being punished by suffering or illness but requests that grace should operate in this respect. It also asks pardon for thoughts as well as deeds, knowingly or unknowingly committed, and seeks to release from karmic consequences both the doer and the 'done-against' in this respect.

Kabbalah

Kabbalah is claimed to be the secret doctrine behind Judaism. It was traditionally taught to a man in his forties, who was deemed mature enough to understand its significance. Kabbalah specifically points out:

All souls are subject to the trials of transmigration; and men do not know ... how many transformations and mysterious trials they must undergo... The souls must re-enter the absolute substance whence they have emerged. But to accomplish this end they must develop all the perfections.. and if they have not fulfilled this condition during your life, they must commence another, a third and so forth, until they have acquired the condition which fits them for reunion with God.

If a man be niggardly either in a financial or a spiritual regard, giving nothing of his money to the poor, or not importing of his knowledge to the ignorant, he shall be punished by transmigration into a woman.

Whilst there is no specific mention in the Old Testament of karmic consequences in another life, there are many references to karma affecting a future life in the equally ancient oral tradition, the Talmud, and in the much more esoteric Kabala. Kabbalistic wisdom warns that:

'If a man be niggardly either in a financial or a spiritual regard, giving nothing of his money to the poor, or not importing of his knowledge to the ignorant, he shall be punished by transmigration into a woman. [Yalkut Reubeni.No1]

Kabalists see the Kabala as underlying all knowledge and all religions. It came first and had a profound effect upon world thinking. In the kabbalistic view, transmigration and rebirth are a natural progression for the individual soul and for the cosmic soul as it seeks to evolve.

Kabbalah continued to exert a strong influence on Jewish thinkers and has widened its sphere of influence right up to the present day. Sholem Asch (1880-1957), for instance, elucidated why so few people have memories of their former lives although a few have clear recall:

If the lore of the transmigration of souls is a true one, then these, between their exchange of bodies, must pass through the sea of forgetfulness. According to the Jewish view we make the transition under the overlordship of the Angel of Forgetfulness. But it sometimes happens that the Angel of Forgetfulness himself forgets to remove from our memories the records of the former world; and then our senses are haunted by fragmentary recollections of another life. They drift like torn clouds above the hills and valleys of the mind, and weave themselves into the incidents of our current existence.

The Apocrypha

The Apocrypha is a body of writings found between the Old and New Testaments in the Christian bible. However, it is not part of the orthodox Jewish canon, being a series of writings in Greek mainly intended for Jews who were in exile in Egypt. The prophet Ezra was a captive of the king of Persia when his God spoke to him. His words form the books of Esdras in the Apocrypha. Like all prophets he has a warning of retribution for the wicked and ungodly people around him. But Ezra makes promises too on behalf of his God. He tells his people that if they obey the law, care for their children, bury the unburied, etc., then they will not need to be 'anxious when the time of trouble and hardship comes; others shall lament and be said, but you shall have happiness and plenty...' [2]

Esdras 2 v.27-30]. The mysteries of human destiny, and collective karma, are revealed to Ezra in a dream. An angel tells him how evil goes back to Adam:

The evil about which you ask me has been sown, but its reaping has not yet come. Until the crop of evil has been reaped as well as sown, until the ground where it was sown has vanished, there will be no room for the field which has been sown with the good. A grain of the evil seed was sown in the heart of Adam from the first; how much godlessness has it produced already! How much more will it produce before the harvest! Reckon this up; if one grain of evil seed has produced so great a crop of godlessness, how vast a harvest will there be when good seeds beyond number have been sown. (2 Esdras 2ff)

In other words, both group and collective karma are operating here. The effect is cumulative and the 'evil' or 'bad karma' has to be worked off before the 'good karma' can take effect. When Ezra asks about the fate of individual men, particularly those who have gone before, the reply is: 'I will compare the judgement to a circle: the latest will not be too late, nor the earliest too early.' This judgement is clearly described:

Then the Most High shall be seen on the judgement-seat, and there shall be an end of all pity and patience. Judgement alone shall remain, truth shall stand firm and faithfulness be strong... open payment [shall] be made; good deeds shall awake and wicked deeds shall not be allowed to sleep. Then the place of torment shall appear and over against it the place of rest; the furnace of hell shall be displayed, and on the opposite side the paradise of delight. ... Every individual will be held responsible for his own wickedness or goodness. [7 v.34-36]

According to Ezra, therefore, no matter how much karma was inherited, it was still up to each man to live righteously and to create for himself the conditions whereby he could gain eternal life.

The Apocrypha also contains The Wisdom of Solomon. In this wisdom text, the soul says: 'As a soul I was born to excellence, and a noble soul fell to my lot; or rather, I myself was noble, and I entered into an unblemished body' (8 v.19-20). This verse is often quoted as pertaining to reincarnation but it may simply point to a belief in the pre-existence of the soul which, having been with God, was deemed to be pure rather than having good karma.

Egypt

The Afterlife was a fundamental tenet of life in ancient Egypt. Indeed, life itself was a preparation for the next world and much of the religious ritual was concerned with placating the dead or helping them to have a good rebirth – either in the hereafter or into a new physical body.

In a book first published in 1878, James Bonwick stated that:

The Ritual [Egyptian Book of the Dead] is full of allusions to the doctrine [reincarnation]... the funeral books show us clearly that resurrection was, in reality, but a renovation, leading to a new existence, a new infancy, and a new youth... [The] soul was reborn in order to accomplish a new terrestrial existence under many forms.

He is convinced that the Egyptians believed in karma, going on to say:

The pampered sensualist returned a beggar; the proud oppressor, a slave; the selfish woman of fashion, a seamstress. A turn of the wheel gave a chance for the development of neglected or abused intelligence and feeling.

If the incarnating soul had not lived a good life, then it had much to fear. The Egyptian soul, for instance, who faced the Judgement of Osiris after death had to declare that it had not committed sins such as adultery or greed:

Behold me: I am come to you, void of wrong, without fraud, a harmless one... I subsist upon Righteousness.. I have given bread to the hungry, water to the thirsty, clothes to the naked, a boat to the shipwrecked... I am one whose mouth is pure and whose hands are pure... [trans. Hieroglyphs in the Afterlife p.110-1]

If the soul could not make such a confession, then it was doomed to extinction. Consumed by the Eater of Souls, it existed no more - although some tomb paintings show such a soul passing into the body of an animal or undergoing terrible torments. If it could pass the Judgement, then the soul travelled on through the other world, aided by the correct amulets and incantations to open the Gates.

Advice on living life to the best advantage, and so as not to accrue karma, was given by the sage Ptah-Hotep: 'Do nothing to excess... A man whose heart is powerful and stable, a man who is not the slave of his belly's demands – that man can hope to hear God.' [source Christian Jacq

The Black Pharaoh, p.245] This man would pass the Judgement of Osiris which weighed the heart of the deceased against the feather of Maat, truth or, more properly, balance.

The French Egyptologist Christian Jacq found an intriguing tale of magic which shows that the idea of return to earth to carry out a karmic intention was no stranger to the Egyptians. In it, Siusire, son of Setna, successfully takes up a challenge laid down by an Ethiopian magician to read a sealed envelope – clearly part of a larger karmic power struggle that went on throughout ancient Egypt's history. Angered at Siusire's success, the magician makes four porters and a litter out of wax. Muttering incantations, he infuses them with life and orders them to bring the ka or astral body of the Pharaoh to Ethiopia. Here the King is given five hundred lashes and much magic has to be invoked to save him. A great magical battle then takes place between the god Horus and the magician, who is narrowly defeated when he turns himself into a bird. A birdcatcher is about to stab the magician-bird when the magician's mother intervenes to beg for mercy. They both promise not to return to Egypt for 1500 years. It seems that Siusire was an incarnation of Horus, who had himself died 1500 years earlier but returned to overcome the magician. It was his karma to save Egypt twice - as he had previously overcome the nefarious plans his wicked uncle Seth to take over the country. Once the task was accomplished a second time, the manuscript tells us that Siusire simply vanished before the eyes of his father and Pharaoh. [source: Christian Jacq p.101ff]

Greece

Greece inherited many of the Egyptian beliefs as the great philosophers travelled to Egypt for initiation but it had its own strand of teachings too. The concept of karma underlay the Greek perception of rebirth and, with the spread of the Roman Empire, passed down into Christianity through an infusion of Jewish and Romano-Greek thought. Many of the ancient Greeks strongly believed in both the afterlife and in reincarnation. In reincarnation, the soul was given a new body in accordance with its deeds in a former life. So, in his play *Timaeus*, the philosopher Plato sets out the fate of men as he sees it. Not all of them will come back as human beings:

'He who lived well during his appointed time was to return and dwell in his native star, and there he would have a blessed and congenial existence. But if he failed in attaining this, at the second birth he would pass into a woman, and if, when in that state of being, he did not desist from evil, he would continually be changed into some brute who resembled him in the evil nature which he had acquired, and would not cease from his toils and transformations.' [Dialogues of Plato tr. Jowett p.246ff]

Timaeus goes on to say that birds were created out of 'lightminded men' and 'wild

pedestrian animals' evolved from men who had no philosophy, whilst the 'most entirely ignorant and senseless of all evolved into the creatures of the sea.

In Greek belief, the departed soul went to Hades where it spent time in one of several realms according to the nature of his former deeds. Plato had a somewhat kinder view of the afterlife, although there is still a strong concept of due punishment whilst the soul remains in the Hades, the Greek underworld. The possibility, however, remains open for the soul to find forgiveness and move onto rebirth. In *Phaedo* Plato has Socrates graphically vividly describe the different realms found within Hades. After the ubiquitous Judgement, those who are judged to have lived a 'neutral life' are sent to the Acheron where they undergo purification and 'are both absolved by punishment for any sins that they have committed, and rewarded for their good deeds, according to each man's deserts'. But 'those who on account of the greatness of their sins are judged to be incurable, as from having committed many gross acts of sacrilege or many wicked and lawless murders... these are hurled by their appropriate destiny into Tartarus, from whence they emerge no more'. [Last Days of Socrates] If a soul has been judged guilty of a sin which, though great, is redeemable, then they too are cast into Tartarus but only remain for a year until the underground river washes them out again. So, if a soul has, in a fit of passion, offered violence to a parent but spent the rest of their life in penitence, even if they committed manslaughter, they have the opportunity of forgiveness. To find this, they must track down the person they killed or misused whilst they are being carried along by the river. If forgiveness is given, then they are freed from Tartarus. If not, the river takes them back again and a yearly cycle commences from which release is not possible until forgiveness is gained.

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down the person they killed or misused whilst they are being carried along by the river. If forgiveness is given, then they are freed from Tartarus. If not, the river takes them back again and a yearly cycle commences from which release is not possible until forgiveness is gained.

From there, after sufficient preparation, the soul was given the cup of forgetfulness and moved into a new physical body on earth. That body too was conditional upon what had gone before. Nevertheless, Plato warned, through his rendition of the last discourse of Socrates, that it is not only the words and deeds of a departing soul that can influence the next life – whether in Hades or on earth. The words uttered by those around a dying man can also have their effect. Speaking of his friend and follower Crito, who was much troubled at the thought that Socrates was about to drink the poisoned cup and who had not entirely taken on board Socrates assurance that his soul was immortal and would leave his body at death, Socrates says:

I would not have him sorrow at my hard lot, or say at the burial, Thus we lay out Socrates, or Thus we follow him to the grave or bury him; for be well assured, my dear Crito, that false words are not only evil in themselves, but they infect the soul with evil. [Phaedo Jowett trans. P.173]

The idea that the last words a soul heard could change the course of its passage through the afterlife is one which Tibetan Buddhism shares. Monks are carefully prepared for their demise and rituals are conducted to carry their souls through the Bardo states that follow – states which bear a remarkable resemblance to the descriptions given in Egyptian tomb paintings and papiri relating to the afterlife and to the Greek accounts of the soul's passage through Hades.

Plato's ideas were woven into a philosophy known as neo-platonism. Neo-platonist ideas wove down through the centuries carrying with them themes of rebirth and karma. They occurred and reoccurred, subtly influencing many religions and sects including Christianity and Sufism.

Christianity

In The First Letter of Paul to the Thessalonians, Paul, a Jew, refers to 'spirit, soul, and body' (5²³) suggesting that he believed that there was a separate soul - the spirit to which he refers is the indwelling spirit of Christ. As with Judaism, the Christian notion of soul evolved through the years as did the fundamental teaching on its fate after death.

Early Christianity was a collection of different sects, all having received their teaching from disparate sources and all believing widely differing versions of Jesus' teaching. The early church taught resurrection and sold salvation. It was awaiting the Second Coming – after which the world as it had been known would end. So there was little time left for reincarnation. The concept of an afterlife was founded upon physical resurrection of the body – the soul being in a state of

suspended animation whilst it awaited the Last Trump. Nevertheless, remnants of a very different teaching creep into even the most orthodox of sources.

As a result of the dispersion of the early church, there were some four hundred gospels and associated writings in circulation for the first two or three hundred years after Christ's death, some of which included reincarnation doctrine. Eventually the Council of Nicea in 325CE cut these to a mere four gospels and the various acts and epistles found in the New Testament today.

St Paul in his letter to the Romans reveals 'God's way of righting wrongs'. He warns that a 'divine retribution' will fall from heaven upon all the 'godless wickedness of men'. For Paul, the cardinal sin is not acknowledging God. All other sins stem from this and sin can also be called karma. However, Paul sees sin, or karma, as arising out of the freedom which God has given to men to do what they will:

He has given them up to their own depraved reason. This leads them to break all rules of conduct. They are filled with every kind of injustice, mischief, rapacity and malice; they are one mass of envy, murder, rivalry, treachery, and malevolence; whisperers and scandal-mongers.. insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent new kinds of mischief, they show no loyalty to parents, no conscience, no fidelity to their plighted word; they are without natural affection and without pity...[Romans 1 v.18-32 NEB]

The consequences are dire: 'In the rigid obstinacy of your heart you are laying up for yourself a store of retribution for the day of retribution when God's just judgement will be revealed and he will pay every man for what he has done... There will be trouble and distress for every human being who is an evil-doer. [2 v.1-16]

In Paul's eyes, the only way to overcome the possibility of retribution is to die to the old self and be 'resurrected in Christ'. To rise above what Paul calls the 'lower nature' and move into the spiritual nature. As he says: 'A man reaps what he sows. If he sows seed in the field of his lower nature, he will reap from it a harvest of corruption, but if he sows in the field of the Spirit, the Spirit will bring him a harvest of eternal life. So let us never tire of doing good, for if we do not slacken our efforts we shall in due time reap our harvest.' [Galations 6 v.7-10] That harvest is eternal life.

The notion of harvest was a common one, indicating something coming to fruition, linking to what has been referred to as 'the fruitage of lives', or karma. In Luke's rendering of the teaching given in the Gospel of Thomas, Jesus says: 'There is no such thing as a good tree producing worthless fruit, nor yet a worthless tree producing good fruit. For each tree is known by its own fruit... A good man produces good fruit from the store of good within himself; and an evil man from

evil which produces evil. For the words that the mouth utters come from the overflowing of the heart.'(Luke 6:43-5).

Jesus himself gave many teachings which could be called karmic. In the body of teachings that were gathered together and became known as the Sermon on the Mount, he expands upon Jewish law saying: 'You have learned that our forefathers were told: 'Do not commit murder; anyone who commits murder must be brought to judgement .' But what I tell you is this: Anyone who nurses anger against his brother must be brought to judgement. If he abuses his brother he must answer for it to the court; if he sneers at him he will have to answer for it in the fires of hell.' (Matthew 5 v.17ff). In other words, it is what a man holds in his heart that determines the reward or retribution that will come to him and which will influence the future course of his life – or afterlife.

Jesus goes on to say that if a man recalls that his brother has a grievance against him, then he should go and make his peace with his brother before offering up a sacrifice. In other words, at each moment in time, the karma should be cleared. It should not be left to accumulate. That a thought is as significant as a deed is made clear in the statement: 'You have learned they [forefathers] were told: 'Do not commit adultery.' But what I tell you is this: If a man looks on a woman with a lustful eye, he has already committed adultery with her in his heart.' (5 v.27-8).

In the same body of teaching, Jesus reverses the 'eye for an eye' edict, saying 'Do not set yourself against the man who wrongs you. If someone slaps you on the right cheek, turn and offer him your left.' He specifically instructs: 'Pass no judgement, and you will not be judged. For as you judge others, so you will yourselves be judged, and whatever measure you deal out to others will be dealt back to you' (7:12ff) – an example of 'boomerang karma' at work. He sums up the Law as 'Always treat others as you would like them to treat you.' That a karmic account is kept is clear from Jesus statement: "There is not a thoughtless word that comes from men's lips but they will have to account for it on the day of judgement.' (12:36)

An example of reaching karmic equilibrium, how one thing will be balanced by another is given in the teaching:

How blest are you who now go hungry, your hunger shall be satisfied.

How blest are you who weep now, you shall laugh...

But alas for you who are rich; you shall have had your time of happiness.

Also for you who are well-fed now; you shall go hungry.

Also for you who laugh now; you shall mourn and weep...

(Luke 6: 20ff)

But the most direct mention of karma – and of reincarnation - is in the story of the man who was born blind reported in St John's gospel. St John's gospel is the most mystical of the four, clearly showing the influence of Greek thought. His gospel is the closest to gnosticism – and indeed the gospel opens with the statement: 'In the beginning was the word' or gnosis.

'As he went on his way Jesus saw a man blind from his birth. His disciples put the question: 'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents?' Why was he born blind?'. 'It is not that this man or his parents sinned' Jesus answered; 'he was born blind so that God's power might be displayed in curing him...' (John 9 v.12ff)

In asking if the man had done something to cause him to be born blind, the disciples and the onlookers are implying that he lived before his birth, and that his blindness could be a punishment for some previous event – in other words, his karma. Jesus' answer, however, brings out an important aspect of karma. The blindness is part of the greater purpose. It could be seen as redemptive karma. Richmond Lattimore's modern translation renders that sentence: 'Neither he nor his parents sinned, it was so that the workings of God might be made manifest in him. We must do the work of him who sent us while it is day.' In other words, it was the man's karmic purpose to be born blind so that he would be available to be healed when the time came, but, at the same time, it could be said to have been his fate or destiny. Jesus' answer, however, brings out an important aspect of reincarnation. The blindness is part of a greater purpose which could be a soul's choice rather than a result of karma. St John's gospel is the most mystical of the four, clearly showing the influence of Greek thought, which included reincarnation.

When he came to the territory of Caesarea Philippi, Jesus asked his disciples, 'Who do men say that the Son of Man is?' They answered, 'Some say John the Baptist, others Elijah, others Jeremiah, or one of the prophets'. (Matthew 16:¹³⁻¹⁴)

After the Transfiguration – when Jesus took Peter, James and John to a high mountain and they saw the spiritual forms of Moses and Elijah appear – the disciples asked him:

'Why do our teachers say that Elijah must come first?' He replied: 'Yes, Elijah will come

and set everything right. But I tell you that Elijah has already come and they failed to recognise him, and worked their will upon him; and in the same way the Son of Man is to suffer at their hands'. Then the disciples understood that he meant John the Baptist.
(Matthew 17:1-13)

In this, Jesus is directly saying that John the Baptist was Elijah come again. Although it sounds an apparent contradiction to say this after the disciples had just seen Elijah appear in spiritual form, in reality there is no conflict. In a mystical experience such as this, ordinary, everyday reality is suspended – as when Elijah was taken up to heaven without dying first. St Paul as an orthodox Jew but even Paul refers to the pre-existence of the human soul:

Even before they had been born or had done anything good or bad [Rebecca] was told: 'The older shall serve the younger'. As it is written 'I have loved Jacob but I have hated Esau'
(Romans 9:10-18)

There is no karma implied here, they have 'done nothing good or bad'. But the clear statement is made that God loved Jacob and hated Esau before their birth – and so, must have known them in a former existence. That existence might have been spiritual rather than physical and cannot, therefore, be taken as proof of a belief in reincarnation but it certainly confirms a belief in the pre-existence of the human soul.

Reincarnation and the early church fathers

Esteemed church fathers wrote letters over a period of four hundred years in which reincarnation was mentioned quite matter-of-factly and without condemnation. 'Phololaus, the Pythagorean, taught that the soul was flung into the body as a punishment for misdeeds it had committed'.

Arnobius wrote in 290: 'We die many times, and often do we rise from the dead'.

He also informs us that Clement of Alexandria wrote wonderful stories of metempsychosis (the passing of a soul from one body to another). St Augustine (354-430), a convert to Roman Christianity said:

The message of Plato, the purest and most luminous in all philosophy, has at least scattered the darkness of error, and now shines forth mainly in Plotinus, a Platonist so like his master that one would think they lived together, or rather – since so long a period of time separates them – that Plato is born again in Plotinus.

It was Augustine who asked:

Say, Lord to me did my infancy succeed another age of mine that died before it? Was it that which I spent within my mother's womb? For of that I have heard somewhat, and have myself seen woman with child? and what before that life again, O God my joy, was I anywhere or in any body? For this I have none to tell me, neither father nor mother, nor experience of others, nor mine own memory.

Augustine appears to believe that what God creates then exists forever and his question regarding the possibility of a former life, points to his belief in the transmigration of the soul – whether from the spiritual to the physical, or the physical to the physical. His predecessor Origen, one of the most prominent and influential of all the early Church Fathers enquired in much the same fashion:

Is it not more in conformity with reason that every soul for certain mysterious reasons ... is introduced into a body, and introduced according to its deserts and former actions?

And stated:

Every soul... comes into this world strengthened by the victories or weakened by the defects of its previous life. Its place in this world as a vessel appointed to honor or dishonor is determined by its previous merits or demerits.

Some two hundred years later, Origen was condemned as a heretic and his teachings banned. At the time he was writing, however, he was one of the pinnacles of the early church and there was no contention with his teaching of the pre- and continuous existence of the human soul and its return into the body.

Renaissance Christianity

The idea of reincarnation arose again during the medieval period in 'heresies' such as the Cathars – who believed that the soul migrated from body to body - but came into prominence during the Renaissance. Cosimo Medici founded a Neo-Platonist academy in Florence under Marsilio Ficino. Several hundred original Greek manuscripts were translated and the teachings of the Neo-Platonists rediscovered. This had a profound effect on the innovative thinkers of the next century, and led to several of them being executed for heresy. Giordano Bruno was burned at the stake by the Inquisition in 1600 after a lifetime spent travelling and teaching – including a spell at Oxford University lecturing on immortality and reincarnation. His ideas included the notion that the soul was intended to progress from incarnation to incarnation, and that bad behaviour or failing to take up opportunities would cause reincarnation into worse circumstances. His profession of faith at his trial included the statement:

I have held and hold souls to be immortal... and speaking as a philosopher, since the soul is not found without a body and yet is not body, it may be in one body or in another, and pass from body to body.

Modern Day Christianity

The idea of reincarnation continued to be revived periodically, with a surprising number of church theologians and philosophers stating their belief to support or condemn it. In the modern church, many people have embraced the idea. In Britain, the Churches Fellowship for Psychic and Spiritual Studies conducted a lively debate on reincarnation through the pages of its journal *The Christian Parapsychologist*. Bishop Hugh Montefiore was typical of those Christians who looked on reincarnation as a positive challenge. He questioned why opportunities should be limited to one life?

The Fellowship also stimulated a debate between Max Payne and Oxford theologian the Reverend Professor John Hicks – who asserted that reincarnation was not accepted by the early church, and that Origen believed in the pre-existence of the soul but that after your earth life, the remainder of life would be spent in the heavens. Nevertheless, Hicks was open to the possibility that 'whilst reincarnation is not and never has been an orthodox Christian belief, it could in principle become one, and that the theological arguments for an absolute incompatibility are not nearly as strong as they may at first appear'.

Gnostic Christianity

A large proportion of the early Christians were what came to be known as Gnostics. In 1945 fifty two texts were discovered at Nag Hammadi in Egypt which revealed the less orthodox side of early Christianity. These suppressed gospels and writings are much more mystically orientated and incorporate ideas from both Judaism and Greek philosophy. They became known as the Gnostic Gospels from the word Gnosis or knowledge. Gnostic Christians sought direct experience of God not as an external being, but as the God-within. To them, the soul was divine. From the Nag Hammadi scrolls, it is clear that the Gnostics believed in the eternal nature of the human soul. In *The Exegesis of the Soul*, the writer gives an account of the soul's fate after it has separated from God and entered into incarnation. In an extremely graphic manner, the fall of the soul is charted and likened to a woman who separates from her husband and enters into prostitution. The restoration to God is seen as a spiritual marriage:

They will become a single flesh.

For they were originally joined to one another when they were with the Father.

Gnostic Christianity flourished for the first four hundred years after Jesus death. Many of the early Christian bishops were gnostics and several taught reincarnation and karma. Most had studied neo-platonist and other Greek teachings. St Clement of Alexandria (AD150-220) for instance wrote that: 'Philolaus, the Pythagorean, taught that the soul was flung into the body as a punishment for the misdeeds it had committed, and his opinion was confirmed by the most ancient of the prophets.' Whilst Origen, one of the most prominent of the early church fathers asked:

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...) is introduced into a body, and introduced according to its deserts and former actions. Is it not rational that souls should be introduced into bodies, in accordance with their merits and previous deeds, and that those who have used their bodies in doing the utmost possible good should have a right to bodies endowed with qualities superior to the bodies of others?'

In *The Gospel of Peace of Jesus Christ*, a Gnostic Gospel translated from original Aramaic texts written in the first century after Christ's death, the resurrected Jesus points out to the sick how their condition arises out of their former actions:

I tell you truly, great and many are your sins. Many years have you yielded to the enticings of Satan. You have been gluttonous, winebibbers and gone-a-whoring, and your past debts have multiplied. And now you must repay them, and payment is difficult and hard'

The payment is immediate, but is open to grace and forgiveness.. The sick are advised to wait seven days until the Sabbath and then go with 'humble and obedient heart' before their Heavenly Father so that he may forgive them their sins and all past debts'.

The idea of a record of all good and evils deeds is also an ancient yours, appearing in many cultures. In this Gnostic Gospel Jesus goes on to declare:

'Happy are those that persevere to the end, for the devils of Satan write all your evil deeds in a book, in the book of your body and your spirit.. there is not one sinful deed, but it is written, even from the beginning of the world, before our Heavenly Father... And when you come before the face of God, the devils of Satan bear witness against you with one deed, and God sees your sins written in the book of your body and of your spirit.. . [But if you continue to repent, God] frees you from the clutches of Satan and from suffering... Long life does he give you, and you shall never see disease.' The Angels of God then records the good deeds done and the former sinner is rewarded with everlasting life.

For the writer of this text, purported to be the beloved disciple John, karmic reward and punishment are a combined effort by God and Satan. Later in the same text the listeners are warned:

Commit not whoredom, by night or by day, for the whoremonger is like a tree whose sap runs out from its trunk. And that tree will be dried up before its time, nor will it ever bear fruit. Therefore, go not a-whoring, lest Satan dry up your body, and the Lord make your seed unfruitful.

This text, contemporary with New Testament, is one of several hundred accounts originally forming part of the canon of the early Christian church but banned at a Council of Nicea two centuries later.

The Sixth Book of the Pistis Sophia, a gnostic Christian text believed to be as old, if not older than the gospels, gives in great detail the words of Jesus concerning the chastisements of the soul after death. The slanderer for instance is lead into:

The chaos before Yaldabaoth and his forty-and-nine demons, and every one of his demons fall upon it another eleven months and twenty-and-one days, scourging it with their fiery whips. Thereafter they lead it into fire-rivers and boiling fire-seas, to take vengeance on it therein...they carry it to the Virgin of light... that she may nudge it....[she hands it to her receivers who] lead it to a water which is below the sphere; and it becometh a seething fire and eateth into it until it purifies it utterly... And then [after receiving the cup of forgetfulness] they deliver it unto a body which will spend its time being afflicted.'

If the soul belongs to a murderer or a blasphemer rather than a slanderer, then it is 'destroyed and dissolved utterly' after many chastisements. An arrogant soul ends up in a 'lame and deformed body, so that all despise it persistently'. Future prospects are not much better for a righteous man who has 'done good persistently' but omitted to be initiated. Whilst he will be greeted in the afterlife with 'joy and exultation' when it is time to incarnate again, the poor soul will be given, in addition to the cup of forgetfulness, a cup filled with 'thoughts and wisdom and soberness' which will cause it to 'whip its heart persistently to question about the mysteries of the Light until it find them'. However, the Pistis Sophia holds out the hope that any man, no matter how great the sin committed, can neutralise the karma through being initiated into the mysteries. After this, no rebirth will be necessary.

The mechanism of transmigration of the soul in Gnosticism is an involuntary one, based on ignorance and not having received the mysteries, but it is finite. When the cycle ends, the souls who have not yet been perfected will be consigned to outer darkness and will be without hope.

The Pistis Sophia contains teachings given to the disciples which are said to be post-resurrection – that is they occurred after Jesus' death. The documents of which it is comprised were not for public consumption. This is a teaching for initiates into a mystery religion. In the text, the Pistis Sophia speaks of how Jesus 'brought to rebirth the souls of John the Baptizer and of the disciples':

I found Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptizer, before she had conceived him, and I sowed into her a power which I had received...that he might be able to make proclamation before me and make ready my way.... Moreover in place of the soul of the rulers which he was appointed to receive, I found the soul of the prophet Elias in the aeons of the sphere, and I took him thence, and took his soul and brought it to the Virgin of Light and she gave it over to her receivers; they brought it to the sphere of the rulers and cast it into the womb

of Elizabeth... And the twelve powers of the twelve saviours of the Treasury of Light which I had received from the twelve ministers of the Mist, I cast into the sphere of the rulers. And the decans of the rulers and their servitors thought that they were souls of the rulers; and the servitors brought them, they bound them into the body of your mothers.

Gnostic Christianity was declared a heresy in the third century A.D. but its ideas continually resurfaced over the next two millennia, and remnants of the church are found today in Syria and the near east. The orthodox churches campaign against Gnosticism culminated in the Emperor Justinian's Anathema against the pre-existence of the human soul. An apocryphal story suggests that it was actually the Emperor's wife who was the moving force behind the Anathema. The story goes that she was a wild, hard-living woman. Having heard of the torments to come in the next life if she continued her current lifestyle, she decided to suppress the whole idea of reincarnation.

However, church-politics could well have been the origin of the anathema, which was signed by the Bishops of the Eastern Churches. It is known that in 543 the Emperor Justinian (having already closed the last Neo-Platonist University of Athens in 529, a school which taught Plato's concept of reincarnation) condemned the teachings of Origen. Ten years later in 553 he issued the Anathema:

If anyone assert the fabulous pre-existence of souls, and shall assert the monstrous restoration which follows from it: let him be anathema...

If anyone shall say that the life of the spirits shall be like to the life which was in the beginning while as yet the spirits had not come down or fallen, so that the end and the beginning shall be alike, and that the end shall be the true measure of the beginning: let him be anathema.

In other words, the Church was henceforth to believe that the soul comes into existence at birth and when the body dies, it has to await a physical resurrection not rebirth. The soul does not return to God and the spirit realms. After this, Gnostic Christianity and reincarnation went underground but it was kept alive by sects such as the Manicheans, Bogomiles, Cathars, Paulicians, and Nestorians.

In Gnostic Christianity, karma created the circumstances of the next incarnation. After

undergoing terrible torments and retribution in the between-life state, robbers, thieves and men of 'overweening pride' are first handed the cup of forgetfulness and then are cast into: 'a lame, halt and blind body, for instance. A curser is cast into a body 'which will spend its time continually troubled in its mind'. But a worst fate is reserved for a man who has 'persistently done good' and yet not been initiated into the mysteries. After he has been through purification in the afterlife, 'Thereafter there cometh a receiver of the little Saboath.. He himself bringeth a cup filled with thoughts and wisdom and soberness is in it; [and] he handeth it to the soul. And they cast it into a body which can neither sleep nor forget because of the cup of soberness which hath been handed unto it; but it will whip its heart persistently to question about the mysteries of the Light until it find them.'

The Gospel of Thomas is one of the texts discovered at Nag Hammadi in Egypt. It is a collection of teachings translated from Greek into Coptic and preserved by the Egyptian church. It is closely related to the source document drawn upon by Matthew and Luke (writers of gospels accepted by the orthodox church) and is believed to date back to the first or second century, some scholars asserting it was written only a few decades after Jesus' death. Many scholars believe that the Gospel of Thomas preserves most closely the actual words of Jesus. It purports to be 'the secret sayings which the living Jesus spoke'. In other words, it is the collection of esoteric or hidden teachings given to the inner circle of disciples.

Whilst the Gospel of Thomas does not explicitly mention karma, Jesus does tell his followers:

Grapes are not harvested from thorns, nor are figs gathered from thistles, for they do not produce fruit. A good man brings forth good from his storehouse, an evil man brings forth evil things from his evil storehouse, which is in his heart, and says evil things. For out of the abundance the heart he brings forth evil things'.

As this gospel is a 'guidebook to achieving eternal life' and returning the soul to its primordial, pristine state of oneness, it is sensible to suppose that the 'storehouse' concerned is a karmic one, whether from one life or many – most gnostics being believers in reincarnation.

Theosophy and modern esotericism

The revival of the doctrine of reincarnation in the West owes a great deal to Theosophy. Theosophy teaches that the divine must be directly experienced and that there is an inner, esoteric meaning to religion. One of its major tenets is that of the transmigration of the soul into successive

bodies, although not necessarily on earth. It follows on from Pythagoras, Neo-Platonism and Renaissance thinkers such as Bruno and Paracelsus but its fundamental source is in the Upanishads, Vedantas and Buddhist teachings of India. Its main proponent in the modern world is the Theosophical Society, founded in New York City in 1875 by the Russian mystic, Helena Blavatsky.

Madame Blavatsky claimed to channel teachings from Great Masters, spiritual beings who guided the evolution of humanity. The language she used is convoluted and difficult to follow, especially as she included many Eastern words without clear definition – as did her early followers. She postulates a complex, interweaving hierarchy of races, beings and rays evolving over great cycles of existence. The evolution is from a lower state back to the higher force from whence it came. She also sees the possibility of 'higher beings' becoming involved in human evolution to aid the transition:

In ancient Symbolism it was always the Sun – though the Spiritual, not the visible Sun was meant – that was supposed to send forth the chief Saviours and Avatars. Hence the connecting link between the Buddhas, the Avatars, and so many other incarnations of the highest Seven. The closer the approach to your Prototype in 'Heaven', the better for the mortal whose Personality was chosen, by his own personal Deity as its terrestrial abode. For, with every effort of will towards purification and unity with that 'Self-God', one of the lower Rays breaks, and the spiritual entity of man is drawn higher and ever higher to the Ray that supersedes the first, until, from Ray to Ray, the Inner Man is drawn into the one and highest Beam of the Parent Sun.

For Blavatsky, transmigration of the soul is an onward progression, so that reincarnation is not necessarily back into a physical body on earth. Indeed, in *Isis Unveiled* she specifically says that 'rebirth onto the same planet is not a rule of nature' but rather an exception that takes place when, for reasons of lunacy, abortion, accidental death and such-like, the soul's spiritual evolution is frustrated. In these cases, the soul is thrust back into physical incarnation because man 'cannot skip over the physical and intellectual sphere of the terrestrial man, and be suddenly ushered into the spiritual realm above'.

However, in other material, she lays out time periods between physical incarnations so this issue was not clear cut.

Intimately, or rather indissolubly, connected with Karma, then, is the Law of Re-birth, or of the reincarnation of the same spiritual Individuality in a long, almost interminable, series of Personalities. The latter are like the various characters played by the same actor, with each of which that actor identifies himself and is identified by the public, for the space of a few hours... The inner, or real Man, who personates those characters, knows the whole time that he is Hamlet only for the brief space of a few acts, which, however, on the plane of human illusion, represent the whole life of Hamlet. He knows also that he was, the night before, King Lear, the transformation in his turn of the Othello of a still earlier preceding night.

Blavatsky believed that life was particularly difficult for Europeans because they were taught to believe that the circumstances of their life were the result of 'blind hazard' rather than karma. But, in her view only karma and reincarnation can explain those circumstances. It was the only thing that explained 'inequalities of birth and fortune, of intellect and capacities...' For Blavatsky knowledge of karma was what kept one from cursing life and the creator in the face of the helplessness experienced:

when one sees honour paid to fools and profligates, on whom fortune has heaped her favours by mere privilege of birth, and their nearest neighbour, with all his intellect and noble virtues – far more deserving in every way – perishing of want and for lack of sympathy. [Secret Doctrine page 318]

But she warned against blaming everything on karma because the reincarnated man had a part in what was created as well as the patterns he carried from other lives:

Karma creates nothing, nor does it design. It is man who plans and creates causes, and Karmic Law adjusts the effects, which adjustment is not an act, but universal harmony, tending ever to resume its original position, like a bough, which, bent down too forcibly, rebounds with corresponding vigour... Karma has never sought to destroy intellectual and individual liberty. Karma is an Absolute and Eternal Law in the World of Manifestation.

For Theosophists, the germs of that old life are carried in the Permanent Mental Atom, a particle that travels with the astral body after death and then incarnates once again, but which can also pass down through the family. One of her followers defined the Permanent Mental Atom as 'a collector of the fruitage of lives...[a] storehouse of the acquired tendencies of lives.' (Charlotte E. Woods.)

Annie Besant developed the concept of karma still further, saying: 'the knowledge of karma... removed human thought and desire from the region of arbitrary happenings to the realm of law, and thus places man's future under his own control in proportion to the amount of his knowledge.' [Besant, A Study in Karma The Theosophist Office, Madras no date p.1] According to Besant karma is the law of causation '– law eternal, changeless, invariable, inviolable, law which can never be broken, existing in the nature of things' and, as such, can be modified. She points out that whilst some 'uninformed people' might say: 'You must not interfere with his karma' in actual fact, karma, being a natural law like gravitation for instance, can be neutralised, circumvented or turned aside 'exactly according to our knowledge of its nature and working, and the forces at our disposal. Karma is no more 'sacred' than any other natural law'. She defines a natural law as 'a sequence of conditions'. Left to themselves, the conditions will take a natural course. But if intelligence and knowledge is applied, then the natural law is set aside.

To Annie Besant karma was not an inevitable destiny imposed from outside. She believed that, by having knowledge of their karma, a man or woman could change his or her nature. She insisted that 'karma is not a power which crushes, but a statement of conditions out of which invariable results accrue.' Nevertheless, given insights and intention, that inevitable outcome could be amended by the creation of new habits and the implementation of thought, desire and action in a new way. These new habits would be put to work on the physical, emotional and mental level. If change could not be brought about fully, then adapting to circumstances was recommended, especially so if they could be brought round to advantage. Besant saw the working of karma as partly fate and partially free will. She said: 'We are partly compelled and partly free. We must work amid conditions which we have created, but we are free within them to work upon them... we... are inherently free but we can only work in and through the thought-nature, the desire-nature, and the physical nature, which we have created; these are our materials and our tools, and we can have none other till we make these anew'. It was her contention that there were many strands of karma that interwove throughout life, some good, some bad.

Notwithstanding, in A Study in Karma it is obvious that much of the karma Annie Besant spoke of is what would be regarded as 'boomerang' or retributive karma. She specifically says that hereditary and congenital diseases are 'reactions from past misdeeds' and that 'a 'bad heredity' is the reaction from wrong activities in the past'. In speaking of karma as 'perfect justice' she says: 'Extreme cruelty inflicted on the helpless – on heretics, on children, on animals – reacts on inquisitors, on brutal parents and teachers, on vivisectors, as physical deformity, more or less revolting and extreme, according to the nature and extent of the cruelty'. For her, seemingly,

deformity and disability in the present life are inevitably linked to 'misdemeanors' in a past life. Nevertheless, she does also say that the motive behind acts will affect the consequences, even when that motive is 'intellectually misdirected'. So, for instance, if a vivisector carries out the act in order to save others from the ravages of disease, then the karmic consequences will be somewhat different: 'Hence we may find a person born deformed, with a gentle and patient character, showing that in a past life he strove to see the right and did the wrong.' On the other hand, where 'lust for power and indifference to the pain of others have mingled their baleful influences with the infliction of cruelty, there will be found also a mental and emotional twist'.

Madame Blavatsky and Annie Besant had a profound influence on the esoteric groups of the twentieth century. Many of the groups seeking metaphysical understanding, and a number of the individuals concerned with opening up awareness, were grounded in their teachings. However, the view of karma has, in the century following the setting up of Theosophy, evolved somewhat. The modern esoteric view of karma is much less deterministic and retributive. The soul is recognised as a spiritual being who is on a human journey of evolution, and yet at the same time remains part of the greater whole. A viewpoint which considerably opens up the idea of cause and effect. As Ruth White, a modern karmic teacher, puts it: 'Karma and reincarnation give space for compassion and a deeper understanding of the process of human evolution'.

Madame Blavatsky's understanding of the world passed into the modern mystery schools. Virtually every Western esoteric tradition has, at least in some part, its roots in her work. Other late nineteenth/early twentieth century metaphysicians such as Rudolf Steiner, a former theosophist and founder of the Anthroposophical Society, and P. D. Ouspensky also contributed to the debate on reincarnation. Ouspensky taught eternal recurrence rather than reincarnation. In individual eternal recurrence, the soul goes over and over the same lesson, gradually progressing and almost imperceptibly changing events as it evolves. In a much wider kind of eternal recurrence, the cosmos too undergoes great rounds of repetitive action.

Anthroposophy

Whilst Theosophy and other Western metaphysical schools turned to Buddhism and the East for inspiration, Rudolph Steiner (1861-1925) was a Christian occultist who sought to re-establish a spiritual science that incorporated Christianity. Steiner began his spiritual search by joining the Theosophical society and he took on some of its ideas but he gave much more weight to the Christ spirit, whom Steiner believed had become the Lord of Karma.

Steiner envisaged spiral evolution for the human soul. According to him, consciousness was evolving upwards (fulfilling cosmic karma) and, although a certain amount of repetitive experience would be required, on the whole the soul was moving ever onwards.

It was Steiner's view that spiritual evolution was being blocked by an increasing attachment to materialism. One of Steiner's fundamental teachings is that of reincarnation as a basis of soul-learning and it is his suggestion that, for instance, those souls who incarnate into a disadvantaged body may well be evolved souls who return with the specific intention of allowing others to learn through caring for that body - that is, they practise redemptive karma. Steiner's view of the soul was the familiar Eastern one. The soul or atman was the inner 'spirit man'. He differed from Eastern religions, however, in that rather than seeing reincarnation as circular, he envisaged spiral evolution. Consciousness was evolving upwards and although a certain amount of repetitive experience would be required, on the whole the soul was moving ever onwards.

For Steiner, thought was the creator of matter and the world responded to a set of spiritual laws or principles. He postulated that a soul would make use of factors such as heredity and the collective unconscious or racial memory in its incarnations, but would not be governed by these. So, thought would create both the physical body and the environment around it. It would also form a matrix which would interpenetrate the physical body and the more subtle bodies that survive death. In this way, memories and karma could be carried from life to life and into the spiritual planes where they would be held in the Akashic Record, a record of all that has or will happen that exists in a non-physical form but which can be accessed from earth. This matrix would then be moulded by the new ego – which Steiner thought of as a spiritual force rather than a personality-based ego – to form the next incarnation experience. To Steiner, a man could 'become one with his fate'. It was his understanding that:

However the blows of fate may have fallen, whether bringing good or ill – we are now what we are now through all the hard and kind blows of fate: we are in the end nothing but the result of this fate of ours.. and in making this reflection we grow into our fate.

By allowing fate to flow through the inner being, the Separate Self became one with the stream of events in its fate and a soul could see how it made itself what it was in the present incarnation. It became what it was meant to be. Steiner also posited that the soul, by expanding its awareness through self-knowledge could explore its past incarnations:

Through this spiritual-scientific research the human soul learns what expands memory beyond the horizon along which alone it can otherwise roam... When the will extends itself over fate and man becomes one with fate, and when the will in man grows to such power that he embraces the hard and gentle blows of fate and knows that he has made them himself – memory grows back beyond former experiences, back into the times that represent earlier human experience on earth... intimately connected with the extension of will to cover fate is the knowledge that man does not only complete your life on earth, but that this your life is the sum of earlier lives on earth, so our consciousness experiences that what we now learn through the will becomes the origin of later life on earth and influences it.

Steiner formulated various laws that governed reincarnation. He saw three stages of soul evolution. An archaic stage where there was only a glimpse of individuality, a middle stage where individuality held sway, and then the present stage where individuality would begin to give way to a desire to reunite with the divine whole. He envisaged groups of souls travelling together, drawn together by a common intent and supporting each other and learning from joint experiences. He also stated that souls alternated their gender from incarnation to incarnation, coming back first as male and then female.

Steiner also postulated three types of memory, linked to the bodies that the soul inhabited. There was the day to day memory which had the possibility of awakening to individual consciousness if the spiritual faculties were integrated. However, this individual awareness fell away after death unless it had been linked to the etheric rather than the physical body. The next level of memory was a universal one. Personal memories passed into the Akashic Record and became part of the soul memory of the planet. Finally, memory could pass into the astral body which existed after the physical and the etheric bodies had passed away. It was through the astral body that memories of other lives could be accessed and karma could work itself out.

Steiner postulated one further memory unit, that of the 'I' which preserved karma and previous life memory. This was earth-based rather than spiritual because it recorded experiences whilst in incarnation, and held memories of karmic responsibilities. There was, however, a complementary 'spiritual-I'. If the spiritual-I was awakened in an incarnation, it would combine with the memories and intention of the earth-I and bring to mind spiritual purpose. This would awaken the ability to aid humanity's evolution. In Steiner's view, in the past advanced spiritual beings had

incarnated to aid this transition but it was now time for humanity itself to take on this task.

To Steiner, a man could 'become one with his fate', that is, he could merge with his karmic intention. It was Steiner's understanding that: 'However the blows of fate may have fallen, whether bringing good or ill – we are now what we are now through all the hard and kind blows of fate: we are in the end nothing but the result of this fate of ours.. and in making this reflection we grow into our fate.' The soul became what it was meant to be.

Steiner taught that certain souls, such as the prophet Elijah (whom Steiner believed became John the Baptist, the Renaissance painter Raphael and finally the German romantic poet Novalis) incarnated again and again to help humanity evolve through their teachings – that is, they practised redemptive karma. These 'great spirits' were responding to an evolutionary rhythm which could be said to be cosmic karma in action.

In a series of lectures on karma given in 1910, Steiner laid out his karmic understanding of how the personal karma of individuals interwove with the karma of large groups and ultimately with the collective. To him, karma was much more than mere abstract cause and effect. It was a 'teaching which not only tells us how different things in the world relate to one another, but will make our lives more satisfying and rich.' [Steiner Manifestations of Karma p.2] The richness arose from becoming one with soul intention and karmic purpose.

Steiner also taught that a cosmic battle was taking place between the forces of light and the forces of darkness. First one would be in the ascendancy, then the other. This was a fundamental part of both human and cosmic evolution. He spoke of 'higher beings', Lucifer and Ahriman who, just like humanity, were seeking to evolve. The two could aid each other but they could also be at cross purposes. Ahriman's influence could be positive but was equally likely to involve illusion and deception, particularly at a spiritual level. Lucifer's influence worked through the astral body in the area of feelings, instincts and passions. However, neither of these forces was solely 'bad', the two were a counter-point to each other each bringing up different karma. It was Steiner's contention that some souls would be particularly open to the these forces – or the beings that were attuned to them - acting through them and so could become involved in the cosmic progression but, at the same time, the soul's karma would be 'fructified by the general karma that streams through the world'. This would ultimately lead towards spiritual evolution for the whole.

Appendix 2: Who Was Who and who said what?

It is conceivable that I might well be reborn as a Chinese coolie. In such a case I should lodge a protest.

Winston Churchill

Born in 1877, Edgar Cayce was an American psychic known as 'the sleeping prophet'. During his life he gave over 15,000 psychic readings, many given at a distance, and over 2,500 - made between 1925 and 1944 - referred to past lives, a number of which were devoted to the karmic cause of illness. In Cayce's work there are telling examples of attitudinal karma and its consequences, together with the reasons behind relationships, or the lack of them. A devout Christian who attended revival meetings and read the entire bible every year, Cayce nevertheless came to believe in reincarnation from the readings he produced when in hypnotic trance. Readings that were meticulously documented by a stenographer, Gladys Davis, and which can still be consulted today.

Cayce saw himself as Pythagoras and several early spiritual teachers. If he did not do the work he was intended to do in his present life – his readings – then his throat closed up and he could not speak, a repeating pattern from the past. Cayce stated that he had accrued karma as an Egyptian priest who broke his vow of celibacy in order to create 'a perfect child'. He was reborn twice as John Bainbridge, once in the 17th and then again in the 18th century. Both men had a lustful disposition and were restless and unhappy. Cayce said that he had had to undergo those lives as he needed to know extremes before he could help others. At the end of the second John Bainbridge life, he gave his own life to save that of another. But Cayce is not the only person to have seen his own past lives.

The American film star Steven Seagal has been recognized by the head of the Nyingma Tibetan Buddhist school as the reincarnation of a 17th century lama from eastern Tibet. The actor has not been enthroned and has not undergone the extensive program of training and study that it is customary for a tulku. He is not the only famous person to be involved in reincarnation and even a past Chief Constable of Manchester professed to remember his past lives.

John Lennon, the former Beatle, was convinced that he was the reincarnation of Napoleon and that Yoko Ono had been Josephine. Lennon looked on Yoko as a soul mate of the kind described by Plato. Literally, his other half who had been torn from him when the gods became

angry at the overweening pride of humans. As John Lennon put it:

Before Yoko and I met we were half a person. You know there's an old myth about a person being one half and the other half being somewhere else, in the sky or somewhere, like a mirror image. But we were two halves and now we are whole.

Lennon's controversial biographer Albert Goldman claims that John Lennon also thought that he and Yoko had been other famous lovers and that they had been Pharaoh and Queen in ancient Egypt. Apparently a psychic told Yoko Ono that a sarcophagus that was coming up for sale contained the body of herself in this former incarnation. Yoko and John hurriedly purchased it but Yoko was furious to find that the mummy mask looked nothing like her. When the two travelled to Egypt, John Lennon wandered around the Step Pyramid at Saqqarah murmuring: 'This is a magical, magical place. I've been here before!'

Napoleon Bonaparte himself had believed in reincarnation and asserted that it is people's past that befits them for their present destiny. Bonaparte, who rose from humble beginnings in Corsica to become Emperor of the French, claimed he was the reincarnation of the Emperor Charlemagne. He gave instructions to his marshals to: 'Tell the Pope that I am keeping my eyes open; tell him that I am Charlemagne, the Sword of the Church, his Emperor, and as such I expect to be treated.' In his memoirs, Prince Talleyrand, a diplomat who held high office under Napoleon, describes a stormy meeting between Bonaparte and Church dignitaries at which Napoleon insisted: 'You wish to treat me as if I were Louis le Debonnaire. Do not confound the son with the father. I am Charlemagne.' The surrealist painter Salvador Dali remembered life as St John of the cross.

Almost from pre-history, records exist that tell the reincarnation stories of the famous and not-so-famous. Diogenes Laertius in the Life of Pythagoras states that:

Pythagoras was accustomed to speak of himself in this manner: that he had formerly been Aethalides, and had been accounted the son of Mercury; and that Mercury had offered him any gift he pleased except immortality. Accordingly he had requested that, whether living or dead, he might preserve the memory of what had happened to him... At a subsequent period he was reborn as Euphorbus, and was wounded by Menelaus at the siege of Troy, and so died. In that life he used to say that he had formerly been Aethalides; and that he had received as a gift from

Mercury the memory of his soul's transmigrations, also the gift of recollecting what his own soul and the souls of others had experienced between death and rebirth.

Some well-respected people have had particularly strong reincarnation memories. Charles Emerson (1808-1836) a scholar and the brother of Ralph Waldo Emerson recalled his own experiences:

The reason why Homer is to me like a dewy morning is because I too lived while Troy was, and sailed in the hollow ships of the Grecians to sack the devoted town. The rosy-fingered dawn as it crimsoned the tops of Ida, the broad seashore covered with tents, the Trojan hosts in their painted armor, and the rushing chariots of Diomde and Idomeneus – all these I too saw: my ghost animated the frame of some nameless Argive. We forget that we have been drugged by the sleepy bowl of the present.

Many creative people have a close connection to their previous lives, Salvador Dali claimed:

As for me, I am not only a mystic; I am also the reincarnation of one of the greatest of all Spanish mystics, St John of the Cross. I can vividly remember my life as St John... of experiencing divine union, of undergoing the dark night of the soul of which he writes with so much feeling. I can remember the monastery and I can remember many of St John's fellow monks.

American poet and philosopher Henry David Thoreau had a strong memory of his previous lives – and those of his friends:

I lived in Judea eighteen hundred years ago, but I never knew that there was such a one as Christ among my contemporaries. And Hawthorne, too, I remember as one with whom I sauntered in old heroic times along the banks of the Camander amid the ruins of chariots and heroes... As the stars looked to me when I was a shepherd in Assyria, they look to me now a New Englander.

An inventor gave reincarnation as the reason for his abilities:

Genius is experience. Some seem to think that it is a gift or talent, but it is the fruit of long experience in many lives. Some are older souls than others, and so they know more.

His name was Henry Ford and, as he explained in a newspaper interview:

I adopted the theory of Reincarnation when I was twenty six... Work is futile if we cannot utilize the experience we collect in one life in the next. When I discovered Reincarnation it was as if I had found a universal plan. I realised that there was a chance to work out my ideas. Time was no longer limited. I was no longer a slave to the hands of the clock.

Even the greatest of sceptics Harry Houdini – who spent much of his time trying to prove that Spiritualist mediums were a fake – nevertheless believed in reincarnation:

I myself, have entered some Old World city for the first time in my life, so far as I was aware, and found the streets familiar, known just where to go to locate a certain house.