

# SERMONS

FROM RIVERSIDE


THE CHRISTIAN FAITH AND REINCARNATION

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## THE CHRISTIAN FAITH AND REINCARNATION

Ernest Becker in his recently published Pulitzer Prize-winning work contends "that the human animal is characterized by two great fears that other animals are protected from: the fear of life and the fear of death." 1

We may push death aside, but it haunts us nonetheless; terrorizing the margins of our life if not its center. We talk of man-power and woman-power, white and black power, green power, too; but what are these, separately or together, in the face of death power!

One of the benefits of the Christian Year is that it helps us keep a full and rounded faith in view. Today is All Saints' Sunday in the Christian Year. It is a day on which we look beyond the immediate problems of human existence, think about our sainted dead and ponder the wonders of the world to come.

\* \* \*

Christians do not live on what they negate but on what they assert and confess. Yet, it is possible for us to come to a better understanding of what we believe by comparing our convictions with those of other people. I propose today that we consider the Christian view of death as it contrasts with a belief in reincarnation.

The choice of this contrary reference is not capricious. For a variety of reasons -- some good, some bad -- eastern religions are in vogue in the west. In two of those religions, Hinduism and Buddhism, reincarnation is taught and believed. Indeed, it may well be the case that more people in the world affirm reincarnation than deny it. But, of course, numbers alone are not a sufficient test for truth.

To believe in reincarnation, or the transmigration of the soul, is to believe that after death the

soul goes into the body of a lower animal or into the body of another human being. In the Tibetan Book of the Dead - a work that excited Carl Jung, among others - it is clear that in at least one form of Buddhism the belief in reincarnation has been so refined as to specify that on the 49th day after death the departed soul is re-born.

While we must refrain from overly dogmatizing on the subject, the church has followed the words and intimations of the Scriptures to formulate convictions on life after death that cannot be made to square with reincarnationist views! Let me try to state those convictions in a positive way.

\* \* \*

The Christian faith holds tenaciously to the principle of individual accountability. As Christians we are quite aware of inherited traits and characteristics. We acknowledge as well the Collective Unconscious of which Jung spoke. Yet, I am responsible for me, and you are responsible for you! As the Epistle to the Hebrews has it, "... it is appointed to men to die once, and after that comes judgment." (Heb. 9:27)

At bottom, I am not a composite of many selves or a residue of many different beings. I have no recollection of previous existences. I recognize or implicate no others in this being known to me as "I." Our accountability cannot be blurred or scattered. We are, each of us, responsible for herself!

Moreover, the Christian faith holds to an active rather than a passive view of life. In reincarnation one's present life is held to be based on the most recent previous existence. One's next embodiment depends on how well one accepts the present experience of life. Most unfortunately, this works out to a benign acceptance of the status quo.

Many of us have developed a warm-hearted interest in India, perhaps because of the achievements of

Mahatma Ghandi. Yet it is clear that the persistent acceptance of their status by the outcasts and untouchables of that land has kept that nation from rising to anything like its full potential. When one is taught to believe that the next time around the situation will be better if one stoically endures present conditions, it has the effect of paralyzing the will and causing men and women, states and nations to live passively before the onrushing forces of history.

The Christian view is quite different. We will not pass this way again. Hence, it is our belief that we must work with all we have to better the human condition. And at the end of it all, there is not the elimination or eradication of history but rather its fulfillment, for we look for a new heaven, yes, and a new earth wherein dwelleth righteousness.

In addition, the Christian faith holds to the importance of the body to human personality. In reincarnation the soul is the thing. The body is disposable. It is reduced to an incidental, interchangeable sheath. The ultimate goal of most reincarnationist belief is a bodiless immortality.

Contrast that view with the ringing affirmation of the church: We believe in the resurrection of the body. In Christian understanding it is the person, not the soul, that matters. And the person is a combination of both soul and body.

With the advent of psychosomatic medicine we became aware of the influence of the mind on the body. We have neglected the corollary to that - the fact that the body has a significant influence on the mind and soul. A mere reincarnation of my soul would not be a reincarnation of me, for I do not know myself apart from my body. While it is true that this conviction is clothed in mystery (we can hardly begin to fathom what Paul means when he speaks of our being raised a "spiritual body") we do believe that the body is an integral part of our identity.

Thus Paul, when he writes to the Phillippians about last things, speaks positively of God "who shall fashion anew the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, according to which he is able to subject all things unto himself ...." (Phil. 3:21)

Let us go on to notice that the Christian faith holds to continuing identity after death. In reincarnation the soul passes from one body to another until it is purified. Then, at least in the case of Hinduism, it returns to the All and is merged in the cosmic Over-soul.

To convey the Christian position I think it is better to hang a few pictures than to try to delineate a series of propositions. Think of David, for example, facing the imminent death of a little child that will be taken away from him because of what he did to Uriah in taking that man's wife. David is deeply sorrowful, yet not altogether void of hope. See him as he pours out his soul: "but now that he is dead why should I fast? ... I shall go to him, but he shall not return to me." (II Sam. 12:23)

Or think of the apostle Peter on the Mount of Transfiguration, his sensitivity rapturously heightened, as he discerns that present with his Lord are the noble figures of Moses and Elijah, long since dead. Or, picture Jesus turning as best He can towards the penitent thief on an adjacent cross and saying, "This day shalt thou be with me in paradise." (Lk 23:43) Paul, when he spoke on the subject, did not leave us in the dark. Plainly he said, "To be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord." (2 Cor. 5:8)

All of this rests on grace. The reincarnationist position holds that through multiple incarnations the soul will be "laundered" until it reaches a final state of acceptable perfection. In Biblical theology, man's position before God rests not on what he is but rather on what God does. This is why in the Book of Revelation the predominant symbol is the figure of a lamb



slain from before the foundation of the world.

Into that world to come we are given a look through John's eyes. He sees them there before the throne of God where they serve Him day and night and are sheltered by His presence. Then John goes into that impressive list of "no mores;" no more hunger, no more thirst, no more sun or scorching heat, no more crying, no more death. (Rev. 7:16) And when we ask about the basis of such incredible benefits, the answer is clear: the Lamb is in their midst, and they know themselves as beneficiaries of God's amazing grace. This is why they sing, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits upon the throne; and to the Lamb." They know themselves as those who have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

Let me say, lastly, that the Christian faith holds that life after death is not static but dynamic. It is generally agreed that those who hold to a reincarnationist position moved in that direction because of the obvious inequities that we see in life around us. A child at the age of four is taken in death. Or, a person with less than a full mind dies in his seventieth year with the understanding of an eight-year old. The reincarnationist argument is that there must be another time around, another time through, for such wrongs to be redressed.

But I believe it to be a legitimate inference from Scripture that there is a lot of growing and developing and rounding out to be experienced on the other side! Why do we make the vision of the life to come so incredibly dull?

Arthur Koestler, in his readable book The Art of Creation, tells us that "when F.W.H. Myers became interested in people's attitudes to religion he questioned an elderly widow on what she thought about the whereabouts of her departed husband's soul. She replied, 'Oh well, I suppose he is enjoying eternal bliss, but I wish you wouldn't talk about such unpleasant subjects.'" 2

I don't know where the picture came from, but we tend to think of that larger life as a fixed plane of existence in which we will spend our time strumming harps, lounging on fleecy clouds and joining in a non-stop, grand scale sing-along of The Hallelujah Chorus!

But we read in the book of Revelation that "His servants shall serve Him." (Rev. 22:3) To serve a living, loving, ever-moving God can never be a static experience! This is why Peter Taylor Forsyth said, "The Christian ground for immortality is that the Lord hath need of him." 3 Thus, we anticipate one surprise after another, passing from one experience to the next -- each one better than the last!

\* \* \*

About the life to come, God told us only a little -- lest our heads and hearts be turned from the present and its needs. Our steadying inner gyroscope throughout the years and beyond is the knowledge that God cares. In the moment in which man ceases in death to be able to have a relationship to himself and the world, God's relationship with him continues. "Take no thought for tomorrow," said Jesus, "what you shall eat or what ye shall drink or what ye shall put on." (Mat. 6:25) This counsel holds whether that tomorrow opens on this side or the other.

John Greenleaf Whittier says it for me and I hope for you:

"I know not what the future hath  
of marvel or surprise,  
Assured alone that life and death  
His mercy underlies.  
And so beside the silent sea  
I sait the muffled oar:  
No harm from Him can come to me  
On ocean or on shore.



"I know not where his islands  
    lift their fronded palms in air;  
I only know I cannot drift  
    Beyond His love and care.  
And Thou, O Lord, by whom are seen,  
    Thy creatures as they be,  
Forgive me if too close I lean  
    my human heart on Thee." 4

#### CLOSING PRAYER

*O Thou, who art able to keep that which  
    we have committed unto Thee,  
We thank Thee for our sainted dead  
    whom we have loved long since  
    and lost awhile.  
Hear our prayers for them  
    and theirs for us,  
And let the power of the unseen  
    church above comfort our souls,  
    nerve our wills  
    and keep our hearts in peace --  
    until that day.  
    Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

#### FOOTNOTES:

1. Becker, Ernest, The Denial of Death, p. 53,  
The Free Press, New York, New York 1973
2. Koestler, Arthur, The Art of Creation, pp. 69-70,  
Dell Publishing, New York, New York 1964
3. Forsyth, P.T., This Life and The Next, p. 32,  
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4. Whittier, John G., "The Life in Christ," Hymn 282,  
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