

WHY NOT REINCARNATION?

A New Church Perspective

BY THE REV. DAN GOODENOUGH

Human reincarnation by a person coming back to this earth in a new body after death of the old physical body, does not happen. There's a sense in which animals may be said to be "reincarnated." When animals die, the natural affections which are their souls don't dissipate, but seek new bodily expression on earth. These natural affections are not unique and distinctly individual spiritual essences like human souls but are general affections and natural desires.

And ideas and human movements can revive in new forms in later times. But individual human souls after the death of the body live on in the spiritual world in full spiritual bodies that uniquely picture and express their souls and underlying identities formed from their own inner-life decisions. The spiritual bodies we live in to eternity are full bodies with everything that our physical bodies have except that they're made of spiritual substance, not physical matter. They're real spiritual bodies, but this is not what people generally mean by "reincarnation."

One reason some people have believed in reincarnation is "second sight," or *déjà vu*—"remembering" something you know you never experienced before. Many people (including me) have felt this phenomenon at some time or other. It probably comes from some borderline mental contact with the bodily memory of some spirit who is temporarily close to us (maybe because of where we happen to be at the moment). *Heaven and Hell* 256 talks about this.

Many experiences that at first seem odd happen because of the closeness to us of the spiritual world. Although normally we're unaware of spirits, and they are unaware of us, once in a while

peculiar things happen and remind us of the reality and closeness of the spiritual world—like the unusual communications some people experience when a loved one dies. Déjà vu can occur at any time.

The western religions (Judaism, Islam, Christianity), and most “primitive” or native religions around the world, including Taoism and shamanism, believe you live just once in this life. Most of these religions believe in one God who created the universe. Reincarnation tends to grow among people who believe in many gods or who are uncertain or unclear if there is one Creator God. People who believe in creation by one God usually see creation of the universe as fundamentally good, and they tend to see God as putting us on earth for a definite reason—after which we move on to the next phase. The next phase is of course understood differently in different religions, but it’s in another realm or existence, not back on earth here. (Among the Crow people where I teach, the traditional belief is that on the fourth day after death you awaken in the new camp, which is in a spiritual realm; this is close to what I believe.)

In the New Church we believe strongly that God is love—love without end. God’s creation is good. He loves everyone, and He made us free to choose our character. We learn many things in this life, we grow through hard times and good times both, and we are kept free. We aren’t necessarily free in every action we do, but we’re free to think and become the kind of persons we wish to become, through our choices of how we wish to think and change and act. Then when we leave the physical body, the kind of persons that we’ve chosen to become define our eternal life, and we live among people (spirits and, we hope, angels) who are similar to ourselves. What matters is not so much the good or bad things we’ve “done,” but whether we have become loving people committed to do good to others, or self-engrossed people who think and care about ourselves above all else.

Heaven is where people (now angels) are together in a loving environment where they find good ways to help and benefit others. Hell exists, not as traditionally believed by many Christians, but as the spiritual “place” where people gather who care more about themselves than anything and always want their own way, period. The only punishment after death is for people (spirits) who are hurting others; you don't get punished for past sins unless you go back to them and hurt other people. Selfish people learn the rules in hell and learn how to behave to avoid getting punished, though sometimes they just can't resist causing trouble. They have “happiness” in a way, but it's pretty empty of the love that the Lord wants to give to all human beings.

If people had to come back again and again (Hindus believe thousands of times), their free decisions in any one phase would never be final, and they'd have to keep going back over their essential character decisions millions of times and redoing them. Nothing would ever be settled, good or bad. So many of the things you'd learned in one life, you'd largely unlearn as you start a new life. Everything human would always be being recycled with real progress impossible or incredibly slow through many reincarnations. This is why eastern thought sees time as circular rather than as linear and progressive and emphasizes recurrence more than progress. Still, belief in reincarnation does encourage inner change within the soul and gradual betterment (very slow) towards a kind of perfection that will eventually bring release from individual earthly life.

Reincarnation is not the work of a Creator God who loves his creation and wants to maximize happiness. Reincarnation is a more pessimistic view, seeing life in this world as fundamentally unhappy for most people and something you want to escape so that you can be re-absorbed into the infinite. Reincarnationists long for “release” to get out of the cycle of being reborn again

and again and again so that they can escape human life. A Hindu hymn sings it this way: “I am the bubble, make me the sea”—the individual person praying to be absorbed into the vast ocean and to lose individuality—no longer someone with one’s own identity.

New Age versions of reincarnation often pick and choose from traditions and use some parts of reincarnation while ignoring unappealing aspects—as if we can reinvent religious systems at will according to human whim. Whatever the variations, ongoing circles of reincarnation cannot avoid presenting earthly human life as less purposeful and constructive than creation by one God.

The crucial question about reincarnation is whether you believe in one Creator God, and if so, what that Creator God is.

ANNOUNCEMENT OF A CONFERENCE
The World Transformed: Effects of the Last Judgment on
Human Knowledge and Values

With the 250th anniversary of the Last Judgment rapidly approaching in 2007, the Cole Foundation for Renewing the Culture, supported by Bryn Athyn College of the New Church, will hold a conference of New Church scholars focusing on the effects of the Last Judgment in the natural and social world. It will be held November 2nd and 3rd, 2007, at Bryn Athyn College in Bryn Athyn, Pennsylvania.

You are invited to submit a proposal for a paper for this conference. Those interested should submit a one page proposal by February 15th, to Michael H. Hogan, Conference Chairman editor@colefoundation.org.

Those seeking more detailed information about the conference should contact Mr. Hogan at the above email address and can go directly to the Cole Foundation website at www.colefoundation.org, where a more complete description is available.