

The Chinese Taoists believe that after death, the soul crosses a bridge to the next life where it undergoes a process of judgment. Once on the other side of the bridge, judges in ten courts decide whether the deceased person has lived a good or bad life. If the person has lived a good life, the soul is allowed to pass through the courts and go to heaven. If the person was judged to have been bad, a punishment is ordered before the soul can go any further.

Following the burial of the coffin, paper models of houses, cars, and money are burned to assist the soul in the afterlife. It is believed that these items will help the deceased “pay his or her way” through the courts of judgment. The son of the deceased burns the most important and “influential” paper models.

Ten years after the burial, the coffin is then dug up. The remains, or the bones of the deceased are taken to be cleaned and then placed in a pot which is then sealed by a priest. The priest finds the “right place” to bury the pot in a special ceremony called

CHINESE TAOIST JOURNEY TO THE NEXT LIFE

feng-shui. They believed it important to bury the bones in a place where the dead person will be happy, or else his or her ghost might return to punish the family. Annually, the Chinese festival, *Ching-Ming*, is held to pay tribute to and honor the deceased.

SOURCES:

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knowledge of karma acquired from prior life experiences, the holy books of Eastern faiths teach reincarnation with none of the reluctance of the West.

The chief theological work of the Hindus, the Upanishads, expresses the doctrine of rebirth in the poetic imagery of a goldsmith who takes a raw piece of gold and shapes it into another more beautiful form. “So verily, the Self, having cast off this body and having put away ignorance, makes another new and more beautiful form.”

The Anguttara Nikaya, a Buddhist text, observes that “the wise priest knows he now must reap the fruits of deeds of former births. For be they many or but few, deeds done in covetousness or hate, or through infatuation’s power, [he] must bear their needful consequence.”

Although the Qur’an, the holy book received by the prophet Muhammed, doesn’t really address the concept of past lives and rebirth, Sufism, a mystical sect of Islam, accepts transmigration of souls as a reality. In the words of the Sufi teacher Sharf-U’D Din-Maneri: “O Brother, know for certain that this work has been before thee and me in bygone ages....No one has begun this work for the first time.”

Orthodox Judaism also rejects reincarnation as doctrine, but the Hasidic sect and those who follow the teachings of the Kabbalah, a collection of mystical texts first published in 1280, accept the belief in the transmigration of souls as a firm and infallible doctrine. Rabbi Manasseh ben Israel (1604–1657), the revered theologian and English statesman, said that reincarnation was a fundamental point of their religion: “We are therefore duty bound to obey

and accept this dogma with acclamation...as the truth of it has been incontestably demonstrated by the Zohar, and all the books of the Kabbalists.”

In *Religion and Immortality*, G. Lowes Dickinson presents his view that reincarnation offers “...a really consoling idea that our present capacities are determined by our previous actions and that our present actions again will determine our future character.” Such a philosophy, Dickinson observes, liberates people from the bonds of an external fate and places them in charge of their destiny: “If we have formed here a beautiful relationship, it will not perish at death, but be perpetuated, albeit unconsciously, in some future life. If we have developed a faculty here, it will not be destroyed, but will be the starting point of later developments. Again, if we suffer...from imperfections and misfortunes, it would be consoling to believe that these were punishments of our own acts in the past, not mere effects of the acts of other people, or of an indifferent nature over which we have no control.”

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BUDDHISM

The Buddha (563–483 B.C.E.) believed in the karmic laws that gripped and held those who did not understand the true nature of life and death. But because the universe and reality are always in a state of flux, forever changing and reshaping themselves, there can be no single, unique soul of any individual that is caught up in the cycle of death and rebirth. The various components that make up a human being are in a perpetual process of change but always

held by the laws of karma, which determine the nature of a person's rebirth.

THE Buddha believes the laws of karma determines the nature of a person's rebirth.

There are many schools of Buddhism, and certain scholars point out that the so-called “Northern Buddhism” of Tibet, China, and Japan, emphasizes the doctrine of a permanent identity which serves to unite all the incarnations of a single individual. Such an emphasis is closer to the Hindu interpretation of a continuity of a soul linked to its karma than the strict Buddhist teaching that only psychic residues remain of an individual's traits of personality and character. As might be expected, Northern Buddhism claims to have preserved the true teaching given by the Buddha to his initiated disciples. Since karma is one of the key teachings of the Buddha, they insist that the concept becomes virtually meaningless unless it is applied to the idea of a single reincarnating ego. The teachers of Northern Buddhism also recall that according to tradition, the Buddha's dying words were: “All compounds are perishable. Spirit is the sole, elementary, and primordial unity, and each of its rays is immortal, infinite, and indestructible. Beware of the illusions of matter.”

CHRISTIANITY

Although many of the great minds who have shaped the intellectual and religious climate of the West held firm beliefs in reincarnation, historically, at least since the fourth century, Christian theologians have spoken out against the doctrine of rebirth. Reincarnation is not taught in any of the mainstream Christian churches, and most denominations condemn the concept.

Origen (185–254 C.E.) devoted his life to the preservation of the original gospels and is considered by many scholars to have been the most prominent of all the church fathers, with the possible exception of Augustine (354–430



Six-year-old Gyaltsen Norbu is installed as the eleventh Panchen Lama in Beijing, China. (AP/WIDE WORLD PHOTOS)

C.E.). A prolific Christian writer and leader, Origen preached a relationship between faith and knowledge and explained the sinfulness of all men and women by the doctrine of the pre-existence of all souls. In *Contra Celsum* he asked, “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 response to the query, Origen continues: “The soul, which is immaterial and invisible in its nature, exists in no material place without having a body suited to the nature of that place; accordingly, it at one time puts off one body, which is necessary before, but which is no longer adequate in its changed state, and it exchanges it for a second.”

In the *Des Principiis*, Origen states that every soul comes into this world strengthened

by the victories or weakened by the defeats of its previous life. The soul’s place in this world in terms of dwelling within a physical body of honor or dishonor is determined by its previous merits or demerits. Its work in this world determines its place in the world to follow.

At the Council of Nicaea in 325, Origenism was excluded from the doctrines of the Christian Church and 15 anathemas were proposed against Origen himself. The Origenists, those who favored including the ethics of karma and the doctrine of preexistence in the official Church teachings, had lost by only one vote. But, as stated by Head and Cranston in *Reincarnation: An East-West Anthology* (1968), “Catholic scholars are beginning to claim that the Roman church never took any part in the anathemas against Origen....However, one disastrous result of the mistake still persists, namely, the exclusion from the Christian creed of the teaching

In England, until the fourteenth century, the Christian Bible was considered the preserve of the priestly classes. *The Vulgate* was a Latin translation by Saint Jerome, read and interpreted only by the clergy, as the Church deliberately discouraged common people from reading vernacular bibles. They believed those outside the Church would misinterpret the text in the Bible, which would then lead to heresy. In fact, it was a crime to possess a vernacular bible.

In the centuries that followed, however, the efforts of men who challenged the Church, and the invention of the printing press, made the Bible available in plain English, to ordinary men and women.

In his *New York Times* article "Where Is it Written? Right Here," Simon Winchester discusses the men who sought to put the Bible in commoners' hands. Among them is William Tyndale, who was strangled and burned at the stake for "such a heretical presumption." Winchester also comments on two interesting books, which go into detail about how the Bible revolutionized England: *Wide as the Waters: The Story of the English Bible and the Revolution It Inspired*, by Benson Bobrick, and *In the Beginning: The Story of the King James Bible and How It Changed a Nation, a Language and a Culture*, by Alister McGrath.

Winchester states that the more important points in these books are about the realizations that came from the brave actions taken to make the Bible available to all, and how the popularization of the Bible led to the establishment of the individual's inviolable rights and the formation of equal government, for and of the people. "In other words, the essentials of popular democracy were inspired by writings first set down on papyrus and in manuscript two millenniums ago in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek—words since translated and then printed for the benefit of all, by the courageous and long-suffering heroes," Winchester said.

THE CHRISTIAN BIBLE

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McGrath, Alister. *In the Beginning: The Story of the King James Bible and How it Changed a Nation, a Language and a Culture*. New York: Doubleday, 2001.

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of the preexistence of the soul, and, by implication, reincarnation.”

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While the official position of the Christian churches still holds with those anathemas against reincarnation, a more liberal attitude exists among many Christian laypeople, who, in modern times, need not fear being branded as heretics and threatened with burning at the stake. A 2001 Gallup poll of public opinion indicate that nearly 25 percent of the people in the United States, including Christians, believe that they may have past-life memories of their own. Those Christians who accept at least the possibility of reincarnation insist that there are many passages in the New Testament that imply a belief on the part of Jesus (c. 6 B.C.E.–30 C.E.) and his disciples in the reality of past lives.

In his *Lux Orientalis* (c. 1670), Joseph Glanvil states that the preexistence of humankind was a philosophy commonly held by the Jews; and he maintains that such a theological position is illustrated by the disciples' ready questioning of Jesus when they asked (John 9:1–4): “Master, was it for this man's sin or his father's that he was born blind?” If the disciples had not believed that the blind man had lived another life in which he might have sinned, Glanvil argues, the question would have been senseless and impertinent.

When Jesus asked his disciples who the crowds said he was, they answered that some said John the Baptist, others Elijah, others Jeremiah or one of the prophets (Matthew 16:13–14). Again, Glanvil reasons that such a response on the part of the disciples demonstrates their belief in preexistence.

At another time, Jesus' disciples asked him why the scribes had said that Elijah must come first before the Messiah, to which Jesus answered (Matthew 17:10–13), “Elijah truly

shall first come and restore all things. But I say unto you that Elijah has already come, and they knew him not!” The disciples then understood that Jesus was referring to John the Baptist.

Information gained from the Dead Sea Scrolls, which were discovered near Qumran in 1947 and are slowly being translated and released to the public, may have a great effect on both the Jewish and Christian religions. These scrolls refer often to a great Teacher of Righteousness and a great warfare between the Sons of Light and the Sons of Darkness. The Qumran sect, known as the Essenes, forms a definite link between Judaism and Christianity, and many scholars have suggested that Jesus was a member of the group. The Nag-Hammadi scrolls, discovered in Egypt in 1945, also give a strong indication that Jesus may have been an Essene, a student of the Essenes, or at least closely associated with this apocalyptic sect during the so-called “silent years of Jesus,” ages 12 to 30. It is generally believed that the Essenes incorporated certain aspects of reincarnation in their teachings. Certain scholars have also speculated that Jesus may have studied various mystical traditions in Egypt, India, and Tibet, all of which would have introduced him to the teachings of reincarnation.

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HINDUISM

The Bhagavad-Gita, the holy text of the Hindus, observes that “...as the dweller in the body experiences childhood, youth, old age, so passes he on to another body.” In 2:19–25, the holy book declares that a man who regards himself as a slayer, or another who thinks he is the slain, are both ignorant: