

The Case Against Reincarnation

By Michael Stanley

This second half of the 20th century is witnessing the flowering of a New Age of spirituality, with openly expressed caring love for men and for nature, and new sciences of mind and body. But amongst all the new and revived spiritual concepts permeating our society, is an old distortion of an ancient truth, a fallacy that is a sad blemish on all that is true and beautiful in the New Age thinking. The theory of Reincarnation which is attracting the minds of so many today, and which seems to be able to call on growing evidence for its support, is a subtle misrepresentation of a fundamental truth coming down from before the dawn of history, viz. that man needs to pass through many cycles, of spiritual rebirth before he is fully prepared and matured for full participation with the Divine in loving providential care for all creation.

In this article I shall list the main reasons and evidence that have been put forward to support the faulty theory of man's cyclic rebirth into a successive series of physical bodies, and then show that the more spiritual teaching of cycles of spiritual rebirth, not only accounts for all the 'evidence' but is also a more fitting true doctrine for this new spiritual age now dawning.

The case for physical reincarnation is very briefly as follows:

1. Brevity of Life

This life is far too short for man to become fully developed spiritually. Many die in infancy or childhood anyway, having had no time at all to choose what sort of person they want to become. Many lives are needed to give a person enough time and opportunity for this development.

2. Justice and Innocent Suffering

Widely differing circumstances of birth, upbringing and environment give rise to grave injustices, innocent suffering, retarded physical, mental and spiritual development. We think, for example, of those born deformed, brought up neglected or in homes full of vice. What kind of God can allow all that? Certainly not, it would seem, the Christian God of perfect Love and Justice. But if we live a whole succession of lives, initial deprivation or suffering in one life can be compensated for in later incarnations.

3. Prodigies

How could the child Mozart, for instance (and all other child prodigies) exhibit such amazing talent in the first few years of his life? Answer: by having developed it in previous incarnations.

4. Memory of Former Lives

There are many recorded cases of people remembering former existences, or at least the details of certain places which they have never seen before in their current life. Very many people admit to having a feeling of déjà vu, of 'having been here before'. Here surely, is incontrovertible evidence for reincarnation.

Traditional Chinese Dogma

Frankly, the Christian teaching of the past has no answer to the above four serious points, except the somewhat negative one that the Bible does not teach belief in reincarnation. So, must the Reincarnation Theory be true, and the Bible wrong?

The Spiritual World After the Death of the Physical Body

Many communications are now coming through to persons on earth, purporting to come from spirits of departed men and women. The spiritual quality of these accounts is extremely variable, and the greatest caution must be exercised before accepting anything that is claimed, for it is obvious that the world is full of deceivers and charlatans. But one thing at least is clear, that from the most truly spiritual of these messages down to the most crude, they all agree that the death of the body releases a person to continue his existence in a spiritual body in a spiritual realm. Not only does the Apostle Paul vigorously support this

teaching (I Corinthians 15) but so also do all the many Out of Body Experiences and Near Death or Resuscitation accounts that are now being scientifically investigated.

Progression and Regression in the Spiritual World

Not only do we learn that man lives in a spiritual body after death, but that he also progresses towards greater spiritual perfection. His perfecting, takes place through a series of 'spiritual rebirths', which will be describes more fully at the end of this article.

Those persons in the spiritual world who are advancing spiritually become further removed from the thinking and feeling of ordinary mortals, as their hearts and minds become more pure and rarefied. But there are some who do not wish to advance in this way, but to stay as close to 'Earth' as possible and its grosser way of thinking and feeling. Many of these try to open up channels of communication with persons in the physical world. However, there is a certain type of spirit, who so hates to leave behind the things of the earth that he strives (unsuccessfully) to live again in a physical body. Some haunt particular places to which they are wedded; some vicious ones seek to possess the bodies of men on earth.

Such spirits so much want to be reincarnated back on earth, rather than progress, that they firmly 'believe' in reincarnation, and infuse their regressive belief into any one they can either in the spiritual or the natural world.

The Unique Case of Emanuel Swedenborg

Great light has been thrown on the interaction between persons in the two worlds by the unique experiences of the famous Swedish Christian scientist and teacher, Emanuel Swedenborg (1688 – 1772)

His claim was to have been given a special capacity to experience both the spiritual and the natural worlds simultaneously, for a period of 27 years until the death of his physical body. In that time, he kept a detailed record of what he experienced of the spiritual world and of the state and conversations of spirits close to him. He reports that all persons on earth are necessarily closely associated with a number of spirits in the spiritual world, through whom their inner desires and thoughts come, both good and bad.

Memories of Another Life

Normally any material details in the memory of these spirits of their former lives on earth are not reactivated or recalled, since it would retard their spiritual progress. But those spirits no wanting to progress and leave behind their material memories and possessions, occasionally infuse something from their earth memory into the mind of some person on earth with whom they are very closely associated at the time. The effect is that the earth person believes he is recalling events or scenes from a previous life.

The Reincarnationists Four Points Reconsidered

Now that God is permitting the true nature of His spiritual world to become better known on earth, we are in a position to offer a different interpretation to the points raised by those who teach the physical reincarnation of the body.

1. Brevity of Life

In our one life on earth, we are simply beginning our process of spiritual development. If knowingly and wilfully we refuse to let this process commence, we shall not want to advance spiritually after we have entered the spiritual world. Any who die as children (that is, before they could have faced the ultimate choice) are without any freedom or desire to resist it, trained and guided into spiritually more advanced ways of life in the spiritual world.

2. Justice and Innocent Suffering

God gives all men the same choice, and an eternity to develop that choice. Suffering in this world or in the spiritual world after death is permitted and used by God as a growth point for spiritual development. Without any suffering, man would remain insensitive and shallow and selfishly proud of his own successes and achievements.

3. Prodigies

There is fundamentally nothing more remarkable about these cases than about animals whose young develop their abilities (such as walking, navigation and home building) so much more rapidly than humans. Musical talents, for example, still had to develop in the young Mozart. But with him his development was more rapid than usual. He still had to be taught to play the piano. And after all, we must not neglect the influential factor of heredity through which so much innate talent is passed on, and which is typified by the widespread music talent of the Bach family.

4. Memory of Former Lives

Apart from the somewhat vague and limited flashes of *déjà vu*, these cases are very uncommon and are caused by the reactivation of the earth memory of a spirit in the spiritual world, very close to earth, and in intimate mental contact with the mind of a person on earth. The occurrence is rare and rather disorderly (that is, confusing and lacking any useful purpose).

Spiritual Rebirth

The ancient truth is that man is led by God through many cycles of rebirth, sloughing off old ways and putting on new ones. Whenever we perceive the truth more deeply and maturely, so that we see the error or crudeness of our former idea, the old idea 'dies' and the new perception has become born in us. Christians rightly talk of the need to have the 'old man' die so that 'the Christ' may be born in us. The Old Testament, spiritually understood, describes under the image of the children of Israel and cycles of the Jews, the many cycles of 'death and rebirth' every man must go through before Christ can truly be born in him, and even then, the Christ within must 'die' in order to be resurrected to 'glory'.

This cyclic, yet every progressive rebirth of the spirit within men, is the original truth, mankind once knew so well. But like all truths, it could and was so easily distorted into error, into the doctrine of physical rebirth or reincarnation. For me it seems fitting to leave the last word with Jesus Christ and his conversation with Nicodemus, words which show up so clearly that Jewish ruler's inability to conceptualise and understand spiritual matters.

Jesus: *Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the Kingdom of God.*

Nicodemus: *How can a man be born again when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?*

Jesus: *That which is born of flesh is flesh. That which is born of the Spirit is spirit.*

John 3: 3-6

The following are extracts from Swedenborg's *Heaven and Hell*.

The numbers refer to paragraphs.

249. Talking with spirits is rarely allowed nowadays, though, because it is dangerous.¹ The spirits then actually know that they are with us, which otherwise they would not; and evil spirits by nature harbor a murderous hatred for us and crave nothing less than our total destruction, body and soul. This is what actually goes on in people who regularly lose themselves in delusions, even to the point that they lose touch with the pleasures appropriate to their natural person.

There are some people who lead solitary lives who sometimes hear spirits talking with them without risk; but the Lord keeps these spirits a little space away so that they do not know they are with these individuals. Most spirits, you see, are not aware that there is any other world than the one they are living in or therefore that there are people anywhere else. So we are not allowed to talk back to them, since if we did, they would know.

People who are constantly thinking about religious matters, so wrapped up in them that they practically see them within themselves, also begin to hear spirits talking with them. This is because when we voluntarily get wrapped up in religious matters, no matter what kind, without the interruption of various useful activities in the [external] world, these matters enter into us very deeply and take substance there

so that they occupy our whole spirit, move into the spiritual world, and affect spirits there. However, people like this are visionaries or fanatics, and no matter what spirit they hear, they believe it is the Holy Spirit, even though the spirits they hear are fanatical. Spirits like this see false things as true; and because they see them as true they convince themselves and also convince the people into whom they flow. Further, since spirits like this who command obedience have also begun to urge people to do evil things, they have gradually been moved away. Fanatical spirits can be differentiated from other spirits by the fact that they believe they are the Holy Spirit and that what they are saying is divine. They do not harm us, because we offer them divine worship.

I have talked with them on occasion and the unspeakable things they instill into their worshipers have come to light. They live all together toward the left, in a desert area.

256. No angel or spirit is allowed to talk with one of us from the angel's or spirit's own memory, only from that of the individual in question. Angels and spirits actually have memory just as we do. If a spirit were to talk with us from his or her own memory, then it would seem to us entirely as though the thoughts were our own, when they would really belong to the spirit. It is like remembering something that we have never seen or heard. I have been granted knowledge of the truth of this by experience.

This is why some of the ancients were of the opinion that after some thousands of years they would return to their former life and all its deeds, and that they had in fact returned. They gathered this from the fact that sometimes a kind of memory would come up of things that they had never seen or heard. This happened because spirits had flowed from their own memory into the images of these people's thoughts.

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