

Winter 1991

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Recommended Citation

Keifert, Patrick R., "Resurrection and the New Age" (1991). *Faculty Publications*. 114.
http://digitalcommons.luthersem.edu/faculty_articles/114

Published Citation

Keifert, Patrick R. "Resurrection and the New Age." *Word & World* 11, no. 1 (1991): 44–49.



Resurrection and the New Age

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During the 1980s much has been made of the new age movement. Early in the decade it gained greater attention in scientific, business, and academic circles, especially on the west coast.¹ As the decade proceeded it gathered a wider popular audience and could hardly be described as uniquely a west coast phenomenon.²

Some pundits are predicting it will increase its influence in American culture.³ Others believe it has peaked; already they can see the apex of its influence behind us.⁴

Be that as it may, as a general indicator of developing religious sensibilities in American culture, I believe New Age bears continued Christian interest. It remains, at the very least, a very important resource for understanding trends in American culture and for identifying opportunities for Christian theology and mission.

Among these opportunities that New Age movements provide for Christian theology and mission is the opportunity to address religious and metaphysical questions which for many years have been of little interest to a general audience. These metaphysical questions include popular discussion of cosmology, ontology, God, the soul, free will, and a renewed interest in religious experience.

This rebirth of metaphysical and religious interests arises from a number of sources, many in reaction to technological developments. The space program of the '60s, for example, popularized traditional questions regarding cosmology. It forced the popular imagination to adjust to the vastness of the universe and the relative insignificance of our planet, solar system, and even our galaxy. It led to reconsidering not only the nature and purpose of the universe, but, more poignantly, of the earth and the human species' place within it.

¹See Marilyn Ferguson, *The Aquarian Conspiracy* (Los Angeles: St. Martin's, 1987).

²For an excellent summary of the New Age Movement by a religion writer for the *Los Angeles Times*, cf. Russell Chandler, *Understanding The New Age* (Dallas, TX: Word, 1988).

³John Naisbitt and Patricia Aburden, *Megatrends 2000: Ten New Directions for the 1990s* (New York: Morrow, 1990) 280-84.

⁴Martin E. Marty, "Will the New Age Outlast the New Decade?" *Context* 22 (January 1990) 1-2.

Less successful or even menacing technological developments have also raised traditional metaphysical questions. When technological developments seem to destroy as often as they create, to divide humanity as often as unite, to threaten life in the biosphere as often as nurture, more and more people begin to rethink technological knowledge and the philosophical and religious assumptions upon which it is based.

The outcome of this rethinking of technological knowledge is that more and more people are questioning the doctrine of liberal progress, the belief that the new is inherently better than the old. Although “new” and “improved” remain very important marketing devices, fewer persons are convinced that every new technology merits development, or, more importantly, that technological knowledge will solve all the problems facing humanity. At least in this life.

I. NEW AGE AND LIFE AFTER DEATH

Which brings up my main interest: the New Age movement and life after death. Under the influence of this questioning of the doctrine of liberal progress, concern for life after death is resurfacing in contemporary American culture. It is resurfacing in two traditional doctrines regarding life after death: reincarnation and resurrection. They are often confused or melded together in some Christian circles.

1. Reincarnation or Resurrection: Is Death for Real?

I tripped across this confusion this last summer, while teaching an adult Bible study at a church Bible camp. I asked in passing what the qualifications were for candidacy for resurrection. After an awkward silence, I proposed, among other qualifications, that the candidate, like the wicked witch of the east, must be not only *merely* dead, but physically, spiritually, and most sincerely dead. The silence before my remark, though awkward, was short by comparison to the silence afterward.

One woman broke the silence by saying that she thought Christians did not die, but that they went to heaven. Another woman agreed with this thinking that Christians did not die. She also thought that no one does, but that our souls move on. Some might be reincarnated and others go to heaven. No one in the group was willing to disagree and no one took up my suggestion that the candidate must actually be dead.

Whence the silence on the topic of resurrection and reincarnation? Some knew better than to talk about such touchy topics within a group where you did not know where everybody stood. Still others were, perhaps, uncomfortable about speaking up before an official theologian. But most, as time would show, were simply confused. They were not sure *where* they stood. They wondered about reincarnation and asked about its contemporary popularity. They were confused by talk about resurrection or immortality of the soul.

The popularity of a doctrine of reincarnation, according to many representatives of the New Age movement, results from the influence of Eastern religions. Reincarnation, according to these New Agers, provides a better answer to the age-old questions regarding a just, moral world order. To put the question too simply: “How is there any justice in a world in which human lots are so unequally and unjustly assigned?”⁵

⁵Shirley MacLaine, *Out On a Limb* (New York: Bantam, 1983) 50.

2. Reincarnation: The Argument from Retrospect

The doctrine of reincarnation, argues Hans Küng, provides two sets of arguments. The first set of arguments looks back, and the second set looks forward through the lens of reincarnation to answer the question of a just, moral world order.⁶

The first set of arguments holds that if there is any chance for a just, moral world order,

there must be a life before this present life. Otherwise, how can one justify the present inequities of opportunity and individual situations? Surely, if there is any justice, these people must have deserved their present situation because of their behavior in a previous life. If they were particularly good in their previous life, then they deserve their above-average opportunities in this present life. On the other hand, if they were bad in their previous life, they have no grounds to complain.

I recently counseled a couple who have become active in a New Age congregation in the Twin Cities. He has decided to file for divorce; she, though reluctant, has agreed. They have not agreed, however, on much else. They are particularly divided over parenting and child custody.

The effect of their disagreements over parenting and child custody has been devastating to their children. Noticing this devastation, the father also noted with remarkable equanimity that the children must deserve their present circumstances. I asked him why he thought this to be the case and he replied that it was their *karma*—i.e., “deed” or “work”—the result of their behavior and decisions in previous lives. In effect, since they deserved this awful experience, his responsibility and accountability were lessened, at least for this life.

Even if this anecdote is simply regarded as a person misusing a traditional doctrine, it leaves me wondering how effective a response to theodicy—the question of divine justice—the doctrine of reincarnation is. For if these children’s present tragedy is explained as just by their previous life, it only presses the question of theodicy into an infinite series of rebirths. It does not explain the origin of evil nor does it account for the creation of a universe so unsuccessful that it is capable of developing into a situation whereby children deserve such tragedy.⁷

As in the case of this father, I suspect that most use of retrospective reincarnation reinforces an ahistorical individualism that already dominates in American culture. It sustains the American habit of identifying the human as a disembodied free will, unencumbered with biological inheritance, early childhood experience, and intergenerational family systems.⁸ In effect, it allows individuals to remain for the time being irresponsible for their behavior.

For the Christian, this retrospective argument for reincarnation seems to exchange the love of God for the cosmic justice of karma. Observing this exchange, the Christian soon realizes how unsatisfactory is the traditional Christian appeal to the mystery of God for contemporary persons who are used to having everything

⁶Hans Küng, *Eternal Life?: Life After Death as a Medical, Philosophical, and Theological Problem* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1985) 61-63.

⁷*Ibid.*, 61.

⁸For evidence of such ontological individualism in contemporary American life, cf. Robert N. Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California, 1985) 33-35.

under control and explained. But is karma a better explanation for why the “seemingly innocent” suffer?

Would I rather live with neighbors who have an eternity to work out their karma, who are in no hurry to be held responsible? Or is it not better to live with neighbors who believe they stand now and in the future before a divine judge? Is it not better to live with neighbors of the latter sort, even though they believe that judge to be merciful, and at the same time that they are

held accountable here and now for their part in the suffering of the innocent? To be sure, these same Christian neighbors are unable to explain without remainder why that Judge would allow such innocent suffering. They cannot get either God or themselves off the hook of responsibility for innocent suffering.

3. *Reincarnation: The Argument from Prospect*

Whatever one makes of this first set of retrospective arguments, the second set of prospective, or looking-forward, arguments must be taken seriously in understanding the appeal of the doctrine of reincarnation. Once again, the concern is to explain a just, moral world order. How, for example, are we to explain the fact that gross malefactors go unpunished, if there is a just, moral world order? Or, if humans are capable and expected to achieve moral perfection, how are we to account for the few who do so? Must there not be reincarnation both for paying off works—both good and bad—and for making possible a future moral perfection?⁹

As attractive as the possibility of future lives for moral perfection and punishment might be to our sense of cosmic justice,¹⁰ several questions arise that cannot be ignored. Once again, does this sense of cosmic justice take history seriously? Specifically, what of the unrepeatability and uniqueness of historical events? Is the common notion of the irreversibility of temporal succession mere illusion? If so, then the proponent of reincarnation would be questioning more than liberal progress, they would be setting aside one of the primal experiences of Western humanity.¹¹

Even if we could imagine an ahistorical existence, are there not human acts and events that can never be set right by another human action or event? Is it not better to imagine these particularly horrendous deeds being forgiven and erased rather than worked out by a system of ahistorical cosmic justice? As Kūng puts it, “Instead of the pitiless law of causality of karma, why not the God of mercy?”¹²

While I would not *a priori* exclude any possibilities of learning from other religions and even of integrating new insights into the Christian tradition, there are major problems in the present use of the doctrine of reincarnation in Christian circles. Christians have generally rejected the Hindu doctrine of the human soul as a substance independent of the body, surviving any decay of the human body.¹³

⁹Kūng, *Eternal Life*, 62.

¹⁰“Cosmic justice” is Ms. MacLaine’s term in MacLaine, *Out On A Limb*, 98.

¹¹Kūng, *Eternal Life*, 62.

¹²Ibid.

¹³John Hick, *Truth and Dialogue* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979) 297-396, esp. 392-94; and *Death and Eternal Life* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976). See also Hans Schwarz, *On the Way to the Future: A Christian View of Eschatology in the Light of Current Trends in Religion, Philosophy, and Science* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1972) 94-95.

II. RESURRECTION, NOT REINCARNATION: A LESSON FROM THE HISTORY OF THEOLOGY

Here it is important to set aside a common assumption of much contemporary Christian flirting with New Age religion: namely, the assumption that the doctrine of reincarnation is essentially an Eastern phenomenon and, therefore, Christians have not really given it a fair

hearing. On the contrary, the doctrine of reincarnation is as common in ancient Western culture as it is in Eastern culture. Furthermore, the church had plenty of opportunity to consider it as a part of Christian teaching and practice. It is worth noting that the church consistently rejected the doctrine of the immortality of the soul and reincarnation in an environment that was predisposed toward it.

Such an environment predisposed toward reincarnation and immortality of the soul was the experience especially of the Alexandrian theologians, Clement and Origen. Under the influence of Middle Platonism, Clement of Alexandria held that the individual had a “dual being like the centaur of classical myth, made up of body and soul.”¹⁴ With this dualistic anthropology, dependent upon the Middle Platonic view of the immortal soul, it would have been natural for Clement to equate resurrection with the doctrine of the immortal soul. At times, he appears to do so.¹⁵ However, Clement finally draws a polemic against understanding resurrection as simply the immortality of the soul.¹⁶

Origen is perhaps a more complex case. He asserts both a literal, physical resurrection and an allegorical one. For him the doctrine of a literal resurrection of the physical body was “preached in the churches . . . for the simpleminded and for the ears of the common crowd who are led on to live better lives by their belief.” However, for Origen himself, the literal doctrine of the resurrection was an allegorical teaching that “in the body there lies a certain principle which is not corrupted from which the body is raised in corruption.” According to Pelikan, Origen held that it was not the same body that died which was raised; rather, a body “appropriate to the new and immortal life” would be raised.¹⁷

For Origen, the principle that lies in the body is a preexistent soul, since he also taught that “the life of the soul did not begin when the soul was joined to the body.” The soul preexisted and fell from an earlier state. He thus joined this doctrine of the immortal soul, borrowed from Greek philosophy, with the biblical doctrine of the resurrection without providing a fully consistent and coherent explanation how the two went together. However disturbing this oil and water mixture may appear to the contemporary Christian,

[e]liminating either pole of Origen’s thought would make him more consistent; but it would be an oversimplification and a distortion of his thought, for biblical doctrine and philosophical speculation are both essential components of his theology.¹⁸

Origen’s theology, to be sure, underwent severe criticism in subsequent

¹⁴Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100-600)*, vol. 1 of *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1971) 47.

¹⁵Pelikan, *Emergence*, 47-48.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 48.

¹⁷*Ibid.*

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 49.

Christian doctrine. However, on the subject of immortality of the soul and the resurrection, his influence and the influence of Middle Platonism endured. Gregory of Nyssa, whose theology,

unlike Origen's, received the stamp of orthodoxy, also reflects Platonic philosophy's conception of the immortal soul.¹⁹

Pelikan reminds us that the doctrine of the immortality of the soul and the doctrine of the absoluteness of God represent the enduring hold of Greek philosophy on Christian theology. In summary and support of this point, Pelikan cites Augustine: "God and the soul, that is what I desire to know, nothing more."²⁰ We are also reminded that Thomas Aquinas and Philip Melancthon, among many other theologians, wrote treatises "with the title *On the Soul* whose content was determined more by philosophical than by biblical language about the soul."²¹

In response to this metaphysical dependence upon Greek anthropology, the theologians of the church overwhelmingly rejected, in the name of the biblical doctrine of the resurrection, the notion that the soul was of its own self immortal, or that the soul existed independently from the creating activity of God. Thus, Irenaeus taught, "The soul participates in life because God wills it to live; thus it will not even have such participation when God no longer wills it to live."²²

Indeed, the doctrine of the resurrection, in contrast to the doctrine of the immortality of the soul, grew out of and reinforced the doctrine of creation to the mind of orthodoxy. The human did not have life apart from the Creator, much less life after death without the Creator's new creation. The continuity of creation and resurrection is placed, thereby, not in the immortal soul, but in the eternal God and creator of us all.

The present fascination with reincarnation is not only a means of responding to "new ideas" from the East, but also the sustaining of very old habits in the West: granting to the self an independent, metaphysically necessary existence, apart from the ongoing creative activity of God. The present fascination sustains both the ancient Greek belief in an immortal soul and the more recent ontological individualism detected in modern American culture.

The present fascination with reincarnation also reinforces the normal human need to deny death. It allows us to imagine ourselves as disembodied and indestructible consciousness. However, you might ask, does not a common understanding of resurrection do the same? Do not many, if not most, funeral sermons deny death by preaching *de facto* the flight of an immortal soul into heaven? So they do.

The fact that so many Christians cannot distinguish between reincarnation and resurrection is a product of common ignorance about both doctrines, and also of our need to deny death. The inability to distinguish between them calls for a serious study of both doctrines and a reexamination of our pastoral practice and preaching regarding Christian hope in the face of death. Such a study and reexamination, occasioned by the New Age movement, could lead to a renewed appreciation for central truth claims of the Christian gospel for our contemporary setting.

¹⁹"Gregory of Nyssa: Sermon on the Sixth Beatitude," in *Theological Anthropology*, ed. J. Patout Burns, S.J. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981) 29-38.

²⁰Pelikan, *Emergence*, 51.

²¹Ibid.

²²Ibid.