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Never Having to Say You're Dead? The New Interest in Reincarnation

Few concepts can match reincarnation in terms of being incompatible with Christian doctrine and the Christian worldview. The biblical view of history is linear, not cyclical.

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Dr. Paul DeBell believes that he was once a caveman. Not only that, he is fairly certain that his life as a caveman ended violently. "I was going along, going along, going along, and I got eaten," said the psychiatrist.

To his life as a caveman, Dr. DeBell adds his knowledge of previous lives as a Tibetan monk and "a conscientious German who refused to betray his Jewish neighbors in the Holocaust." Dr. DeBell's account is found in "Remembrances of Lives Past" by Lisa Miller of *Newsweek* magazine, published in the August 29, 2010 edition of *The New York Times*. Miller writes of the growing acceptance of the idea of reincarnation among Americans.



The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life reported last year that a quarter of all Americans now believe in reincarnation. As Lisa Miller notes, the report found that women are more likely to believe in reincarnation than men, and registered Democrats are more likely than Republicans. In any event, the popularity of reincarnation is rising, and Dr. DeBell is but one example. A psychiatrist trained at Cornell University, Dr. DeBell is one of the voices on behalf of reincarnation, but he is not alone.

In her report, Lisa Miller also introduces Peter Bostock, a retired teacher in Canada, who believes that he was once a large estate manager in England, and that he was then in love with his present wife, who was then a cook in the estate's kitchen. Their forbidden love in a past life gives meaning, he suggests, to their marriage today. He told Miller that the couple shares a powerful attraction "that a soul makes when it encounters the familiar."

The most influential figure in Miller's report is Dr. Brian Weiss, who has pioneered what is now called "regression therapy," based in the remembrance of past lives. A graduate of Columbia University and the Yale Medical School, Weiss became a lightning rod for controversy within psychiatric circles after he published an account of his treatment of a woman by hypnotizing her and assisting her to remember several past lives. Dr. Weiss now holds weekend seminars that attract hundreds of participants. He also claims that such therapeutic approaches are gaining credibility within the psychiatric profession.

Miller, who recently wrote a book on the afterlife, recognizes that the growing acceptance of reincarnation points to a retreat of Christian beliefs. In her words: "In religious terms, the human narrative — birth, life, death and rebirth — has for millennia been relatively straightforward in the West. You were born. You lived. You died. After a judgment you went to heaven (or hell) forever and ever. Eternity was the end: no appeals allowed."

Reincarnation offers an escape from that linear view of history and human destiny. The Eastern conception of time common to Confucian cultures is deeply cyclical, with events and persons appearing again and again throughout time. As

Lisa Miller summarizes the worldview: “You are born. You live. You die. And because nobody’s perfect, your soul is born again — not in another location or sphere, and not in any metaphorical sense, but right here on earth.” There is more to it, of course. Hinduism teaches that eventually, after however many lives, the soul reaches perfection and release. Until then, the soul takes on life after life.

One of Dr. DeBell’s patients told of finding relief from grief over her mother’s death by discovering that in previous lives she had been an Italian merchant who sold textiles along the Amalfi Coast, an herbalist in Africa, and a freed slave in New Orleans.

Readers of the report are likely to note some strange patterns. Why is it that these people seem only to recover knowledge of such noble past lives? A German who refused to betray his Jewish neighbor during the Holocaust? Where are the people who claim in past lives to have been concentration camp guards or complicit neighbors?

Put bluntly, even if you set Christian concerns about reincarnation aside momentarily, the picture looks dubious. Furthermore, the therapeutic application of reincarnation as a concept looks like just the latest fad. Do these people actually believe what they claim? Some do, of course, but Lisa Miller acknowledges that the nature of these recovered “lives” is slippery. She explains that psychiatrists “have begun to broaden their definition of ‘memory,’ leaving aside the question of whether a scene uncovered during hypnosis is ‘real’ or not.” That is a difficult question to leave aside. Most people would probably want to know if their neighbor really believes that he was a galley slave on a Viking ship in a past life.

Lisa Miller suggests that reincarnation is growing in popularity because Christianity is in retreat, especially among the young. But Stephen Prothero of Boston University asserts that increased interest in reincarnation is tied to the relative prosperity of the American people. Americans like their lives and their possessions, he argues, and they like the idea of postponing eternity. “Reincarnation means never having to say you’re dead” he offers.

In reality, few concepts can match reincarnation in terms of being incompatible with Christian doctrine and the Christian worldview. The biblical view of history is linear, not cyclical. The Bible assumes and claims a past-present-future orientation, with the end bringing the perfect judgment and justice of God. History is not a great wheel, but a chronological current.

The Bible states clearly that “it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment” [Hebrews 9:27]. There is no “do-over,” and no great cycle of life.

Lisa Miller has a point when she suggests that the growing acceptance of reincarnation is tied to a loss of Christian knowledge and conviction among Americans. Nevertheless, it seems very likely that this new acceptance of reincarnation is more a matter of therapeutic fads and cultural fashions than a huge theological shift. The shift we are seeing is more likely a loss of Christian conviction in the face of secularization — not a comprehensive embrace of Eastern worldviews.

Nevertheless, it is important to know that a growing number of Americans now believe in reincarnation and are accepting ideas from Eastern religions and worldviews. But, even as this development is important in missiological terms, it is still hard to take very seriously.

Even in these confused times, how many Americans really want to consult a psychiatrist who believes he was once a caveman who got gobbled up?

I am always glad to hear from readers. Write me at mail@albertmohler.com. Follow regular updates on Twitter at www.twitter.com/AlbertMohler.

Lisa Miller, “[Remembrances of Lives Past](#),” *The New York Times*, Sunday, August 29, 2010.

Photo: The Great Wheel of Life atop Jokhang Temple in Lhasa, Tibet.

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