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Journal Item

How to cite:

Waterhouse, Helen and Walter, Tony (2003). Reincarnation belief and the Christian churches. Theology

For guidance on citations see [FAQs](#).

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Version: Accepted Manuscript

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:

<http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.1177/0040571x0310600104>

<http://www.spck.org.uk/cat/theology.php>

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Reincarnation Belief and the Christian Churches¹

Helen Waterhouse & Tony Walter

WORD COUNT 3443

Reincarnation has never been part of mainstream Christian theology. This is true in spite of periodic speculations by Christian theologians, and in spite of the fact that reincarnation believers sometimes wrongly impute belief in reincarnation to prominent Christian thinkers². Even so, in 1984 Paul Badham was able to point to statistics which indicated that as many Anglicans believed in reincarnation as believed in heaven and hell³. This paper is based on the responses of the many Christians who were among informants in an interview study we conducted in 1997 in the south-west of England; our purpose was to investigate European Values Survey (EVS) statistics which suggest that around a quarter of all British people and, indeed, of Europeans more generally, believe in reincarnation⁴.

A summary of the methods and results of the study can be found in the journal *Sociology of Religion*⁵ but here we focus on responses from those interviewees who are closely connected with mainstream Christian Churches. Among the findings of the EVS was that those who reported belief in reincarnation were more likely than others to say they also hold conventional Christian beliefs. In keeping with this, of the fifty people in our study, the great majority of whom either believe in reincarnation or seriously entertain the possibility that it happens, half have a close connection with a Christian church and a third are actively involved in church activities, for example, by regular attendance at meetings and services. We spoke to reincarnation believers who

regularly attend Anglican, Roman Catholic, Baptist, Quaker, Methodist and Unitarian churches.

In a summary account of contemporary belief in life after death Douglas Davies found that, “Even the churchgoer may entertain firm ideas about reincarnation or the finality of death.”⁶ Here, using extracts from our interviews, we offer some examples of the ways in which churchgoers may reconcile their ideas about reincarnation with Christian beliefs and practices. We then draw on the interviews and on opposing clergy views to indicate, briefly, some reasons why reincarnation belief among church attenders remains largely hidden.

For most of the people in our study reincarnation is a gut feeling rather than a doctrinal belief. This is partly because, with the exception of a small number of spiritualists, we excluded people such as Hindus, Buddhists and Sikhs who believe in reincarnation because it is part of their religion. Our interviewees often reported that they regard reincarnation as logical or as the explanation for what happens after death that makes the most sense. Others like the idea that they have several chances at life and therefore they chose to believe that reincarnation happens or they at least seriously entertain the idea that it might happen. However, asking people who entertain the idea of reincarnation or even categorically believe in it how reincarnation might work was asking them to turn a gut feeling or an attractive idea into a doctrinal position. Two of our male informants, both professional men of whom one is a Christian believer, had already gone through this process and had detailed and sophisticated explanations for how and why reincarnation happens. Others seemed to work out a form of doctrine for the first time in the context of the interview or in preparation for the interview. Others

still did not attempt the task preferring instead to retain their vague feelings that reincarnation might happen but offering no explanation for how it could function.

THE INTERVIEWS

The first example from our interviews is a practising Roman Catholic, a well educated woman in the middle years. Though born into an atheistic family, A was sent to a convent school and she reported that from an early age her identity has been intimately bound up with her Catholic beliefs and practices. She described her belief in reincarnation in the following terms:

There must be more than just this life and then we die and we go to Heaven which is what my Church teaches.... I just know that the me that I am now has existed before.... I just don't think that when I die I go to heaven straight away. I mean why? Why, if there's this great God out there did he think well 70 years sounds good? A tree lives for 400 years...70 years, no.

A was asked whether she could reconcile her ideas about reincarnation with the teachings of the Catholic church and she replied,

I reconcile it basically because I do believe eventually I go to heaven, that my soul does....that my body has... its span and therefore my soul will go to heaven. Perhaps the coming back and continuing the life is to make you a better person and therefore a better whatever you are, Christian or whatever you want to be. So that by the time your span is up, you do die finally and go to heaven, then your soul is in a better shape than it was perhaps the first time round.

The idea, raised in this extract, that multiple lives provide opportunities for learning, a version of purgatory on earth, was common among our informants. In an age in which

personal development seems to be of paramount importance many saw multiple lives as an opportunity for learning from diverse experiences with the chances to learn extending from life to life as well as occurring within lives⁷. Life for many in the modern west is more sweet than ‘nasty, brutish and short,’ so it may be more attractive for some to think that their souls are cleansed in successive lives on this earth than in a disembodied purgatory.

Michael Hornsby-Smith has argued, in relation to Catholic reincarnation believers, that, “there is the suspicion...that flirtations with reincarnation are derived not only from folk religion but also in the search for more convenient and comfortable versions of what are perceived as unacceptably harsh official doctrines of the final judgement, hell and eternal damnation”⁸. A does not entirely fit this pattern. There was no mention in her account of final judgement, hell or damnation; instead she seems to assume that, as a good Catholic, her place in heaven is assured. Her reincarnation belief does not therefore save her from unpalatable thoughts about post death destinations including hell and judgement. Indeed, A explained that her belief in reincarnation probably began when, twenty years ago, she experienced the loss of a small baby. She strongly believes that her daughter is now living another life on earth. On this evidence, A is more concerned with death and the end of earthly life than with any unpalatable ideas about a post mortem existence beyond the world, as suggested by Hornsby-Smith.

Another Catholic informant was less able to reconcile his Christian belief with his ideas about reincarnation. He said,

I was brought up in an extremely strict Catholic religion.... I know that after death that we have to go to a place called purgatory to atone for the wrong doings we've done in this world and if you don't die in a state of mortal or grave sin you will go to heaven. If you die in a state of mortal sin then you have to go to hell. I don't know what hell is... You must go to this place called purgatory to atone for your sin before you go to the Kingdom of Heaven. I think that. I believe that.

B "knows" that this is what happens because it is what he has been taught: he has faith in the church's teachings.

B was neither willing nor able to offer any reconciliation between his musings about reincarnation and his Catholic beliefs. He made no attempt to do so in spite of direct questioning⁹. It seems that B manages to hold the two opposing sets of beliefs in tension. It is clear that he accepts the orthodoxy of his church. Yet, at the same time, he says he regards reincarnation as "logical" and there is within his account the idea that reincarnation is a form of justice; the circumstances of each life depend upon actions carried out in preceding lives. B was unusual among our informants in that his account of reincarnation included the possibility of returning to earth in non-human forms.

The logic or meaning of reincarnation was also cited by C, an elderly Anglican woman whose Christian faith appeared to operate at a more experiential and less doctrinal level than B's. She described her faith in the following terms,

...if I have problems about anything in the Christian faith I can take it or leave it. I don't sort of worry at it. I think when I'm ready to understand it, it will be

revealed and I can just leave it, whereas some people spend half their life time worrying about these things and not getting on with the ordinary business of living.

This woman regularly attends her local parish church and has held roles of responsibility in a number of broader Anglican organisations. The interview was replete with accounts of her faith and the practices she carries out and also with reference to Biblical stories. Her flirtation with ideas about reincarnation comes in part from the observation that some people, for no apparent reason, seem to lurch from one mistake to another. Her reincarnation provides an explanation for why people fail to thrive. She has no problem with fitting this into her Christian faith because she is happy to leave doctrinal threads untied. Her faith in God means that she does not need to know how everything works.

Knowing that she was to be interviewed about reincarnation, however, C was ready with a theory. She suggested a possible connection between the Old Testament prophets and reincarnation.

I thought it could sort of come into the heading of the Old Testament Prophets. I mean we call them prophets as though they were looking into the future with nothing behind them and I've been thinking a lot lately, I wonder if that's true. I wonder if there was some other life; that they have brought the experience with them so that they can... they have this deeper knowing. So all those queries have gone on in my mind for a long time... I would love to believe in reincarnation because it would answer so many seemingly unanswered questions.

C's comment, that she would, "love to believe in reincarnation" was typical of many informants. Reincarnation seems to them to be logical and to represent an acceptable theodicy which fits their experience of the world. C, like others in the study, was initially prompted to wonder about whether reincarnation happens because of a 'memory' which does not fit into her experience of life this time around. She described a childhood memory of holding onto a metal bed while being laced into corsets. This experience had a non-dreamlike quality, she said, and acted as a powerful suggestion that she may have lived before. Our data shows that experience plays an important role in shaping ideas about reincarnation¹⁰. Some of our respondents had memories or at least impressions of past lives and others are influenced by accounts of the experiences of others¹¹.

The study produced other examples of Christian believers and practitioners who cannot dismiss the idea of reincarnation or indeed who claim to believe in it. These accounts are highly personal and individual, many of them are emotionally charged, but the people who hold these ideas are otherwise unremarkable and there is nothing to mark them out from those sharing the same pews on a Sunday morning. We now discuss, briefly, attitudes to reincarnation belief among church professionals, mainly through the accounts of two Anglican priests. We shall draw on more of the experience of some of our informants within the churches as we do so.

THE ROLE OF CHRISTIAN PROFESSIONALS

A study of clergy attitudes to reincarnation belief did not form an intentional part of our research. However, in the course of talking about the research on occasions when

hospital and hospice chaplains or other Christian professionals have been present, we have been told by several of them that they never come across reincarnation belief in their ministry, while rather fewer say that this is a belief which they encounter regularly¹². Some of those who fall into the latter category have developed strategies for coping with reincarnation belief such as reassuring the believer that “nothing is wasted” by God or suggesting that the equivalent to reincarnation in Christian teaching can be found in resurrection and renewal. It seems surprising, given the extent of reported reincarnation belief among the general population, that any Church minister should be unaware of the widespread nature of this belief. Even if Davies and Shaw’s modest finding that 12% of the population believe we come back as someone or something else is a truer reflection of the popularity of belief in reincarnation than the EVS statistics, with their broader question, this still means there are apparently around 7 million reincarnation believers in Britain. These numbers cannot be accounted for solely by reference to people (no more than 1.5 million) who operate within religious traditions which teach reincarnation.

As we have seen, for some of our informants, belief in reincarnation does not form part of a coherent world-view but instead is creatively mixed with, or held in tension with, mainstream Christian theology. It may be partly because of this that we have little evidence that the belief is sturdy enough to find expression at the time of death. A’s ideas, reported above, may have been prompted by her daughter’s death but there is no suggestion that they developed until after her daughter had died.

In order to illustrate the contrast between priests who do encounter reincarnation belief and those who do not we offer here examples of the two extremes. An evangelical

Anglican priest from a semi-rural Somerset parish, who was interviewed at the outset of the project, seems to confirm the idea that some clergy dismiss the idea of reincarnation belief among Christians precisely because it is unformed and impressionistic. Rev D claimed that he simply does not come across what he referred to as ‘classical reincarnation belief’ either in his present parish or where he worked before. He conceded that such a belief is to be found in Buddhist Societies but claimed that outside of these he found, “virtually no interest at all or no expressed interest in it at all”. Faced with the EVS statistics on reincarnation belief he was largely dismissive, and could offer little explanation. He said,

I guess from your point of view in terms of the work you are doing an unpalatable explanation would be that people are sufficiently confused about terminology to have added that one. I mean is there a possibility that, for some, the idea of Jesus rising from the dead might be a re-incarnation?

He may be partially right. Confusion about Christian doctrine, may indeed account for some of the reincarnation belief statistics. This confusion is itself perhaps something of an indictment on contemporary church teaching on death. It is well documented that there are few accessible publications these days on death and afterlife written from a Christian perspective¹³, in spite of wide discussion of the topic in other contemporary religious circles¹⁴. In keeping with this, the popular Alpha training courses, initiated by Holy Trinity Brompton and run, in 1999, by over 14,000 churches throughout Britain¹⁵ do not feature death and dying as a separate topic¹⁶. As we know from our study, however, there are people who profess to be Christians who also believe in reincarnation and who do not confuse this belief with resurrection. Rev D’s explanation is not therefore wholly convincing.

Another parish priest from rural Somerset reported a contrasting experience. Rev E said in complete opposition to his evangelical colleague,

Of the doctrinal questions that have been asked of me..... reincarnation has been top of the list.....

He qualified this astonishing claim, however, by putting it into context. People have, he said, asked him about reincarnation, “between half a dozen and a dozen times over the last seven years” with four people wanting to talk about it “at some length”. Given the rarity with which, he says, people want to discuss doctrinal issues with him, reincarnation rather surprisingly becomes a hot topic of conversation in his experience. Even if reincarnation belief seldom forms part of a coherent world view for our informants and is not sufficiently robust to emerge at the time of death, this does not explain why some Christian clergy encounter reincarnation belief in their non-dying congregation members while others do not. Much of the explanation for the different experiences of the two Anglican clergy we have described seems to come down to their personal characteristics. Rev E describes himself as a liberal Christian and his parishioners report that he is open to ideas. Indeed, in complete contrast to his evangelical colleague, Rev E was able to put us in touch with several reincarnation believers. Although not a reincarnation believer himself, this priest does not dismiss the idea of reincarnation and he reported experiences which, he agrees, would be explained if reincarnation happens.

Our study gives clear evidence that reincarnation believers can shrink from discussing reincarnation belief with their churches’ representatives because they suspect that Christian clergy will be unsympathetic or disapproving. Here are some examples.

Informant A, the Catholic mother quoted above, said,

I've often thought about trying to discuss this with my priest but..... the one I've got at the moment isn't very approachable and I need to find the right priest to discuss this with.

An elderly Anglican woman who plays an active role in her church says she has not talked to the new lady vicar about reincarnation because she does not think she would understand. A Baptist woman when asked whether her minister knows she believes in reincarnation replied: "I don't think we discussed reincarnation". This example is particularly surprising given that this woman has a colourful religious past which she made a point of explaining to the minister when she applied for church membership. In spite of that, this reincarnation-believing woman seems to have avoided discussion of her after life beliefs, although it seems that these beliefs are strongly held.

We have argued elsewhere that reincarnation is a very personal belief that is often kept secret for fear of ridicule¹⁷. It seems clear from these informants that, for some, the belief is also kept quiet in order to avoid conflict with church professionals. Douglas Davies has argued that "If bereaved people are the primary beneficiaries of a funeral, those who conduct funerals must be prepared to minister to a variety of faith positions, whether these merge with or become separated from the official teachings of traditional churches."¹⁸ It is clear from our research that there certainly are people in the Christian churches who do believe in reincarnation but who feel they need to keep this secret from church ministers.

CONCLUSION

It is not only within Christian churches that religious adherents make decisions not to trouble the professionals with certain matters of belief or practice. In another religious context, Robert Florida¹⁹ reports that a prominent Buddhist monk in Thailand told him that in his twelve years as an abbot he had never been approached for solace or advice about abortion and that he therefore concluded that abortion was 'unthinkable' for the lay people attached to his monastery. In reality abortions in that area are frequent and have become an accepted part of traditional life. According to your perspective, this ignorance makes the monk seem either impressively unworldly or hopelessly out of touch with the people he is trying to support. Closer to home is Gillian Bennett's finding that Christian clergy have no idea about how many of their flock talk to and see the dead²⁰. If Christian professionals are not approached by members of their congregations about the possibility that humans come back as something or someone else, this does not mean that people are not toying with such ideas. Equally, the fact that people are toying with such ideas does not mean they will necessarily see it as proper, or desirable, to discuss them with priests or ministers. The churches must decide for themselves how they wish to cope with this development. Denial is indeed one of the options.

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¹ We are grateful to the University of Reading Research Endowment Trust for funding the research.

² John Hick, *Death & Eternal Life* (London: Collins, 1976) p292 n2.

³ Paul and Linda Badham, *Immortality or Extinction?* 2nd edition, (London: SPCK, 1984) p117.

⁴ Sheena Ashford and Noel Timms, *What Europe Thinks: A Study of Western European Values*, (Aldershot: Dartmouth, 1992). In 1995, Davies and Shaw found that 12% answered yes to the related question of whether we come back as someone or something else, 'Contemporary belief in life after

death,' in Peter Jupp and Tony Rogers (eds.) *Interpreting Death: Christian Theology and Pastoral Practice* (London: Cassell, 1997), p136.

⁵ Tony Walter and Helen Waterhouse, 'A Very Private Belief: Reincarnation in Contemporary England,' *Sociology of Religion* 60:2 (1999) pp187-97.

⁶ 'Contemporary belief in life after death', p137.

⁷ Tony Walter and Helen Waterhouse, 'Lives-Long Learning: The Effects of Reincarnation Belief on Everyday Life in England,' *Nova Religio* (Fall 2001).

⁸ Michael Hornsby Smith, *Roman Catholic beliefs in England: Customary Catholicism and Transformations of Religious Authority*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1991), p112.

⁹ When this was pointed out to him after the tape recorder had been turned off, he was both surprised by and interested in his own reactions.

¹⁰ Helen Waterhouse, 'Reincarnation Belief in Britain: New Age Orientation or Mainstream Option?' *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 14:1 (1999) 97-109.

¹¹ Ian Stevenson is the name most often connected with academic work on memories of past lives (e.g. Ian Stevenson, *Twenty Cases Suggestive of Reincarnation*, (New York: American Society for Psychical Research, 1966)). As Badham points out (*Immortality or Extinction* p102), there is really no evidence to support the idea that Stevenson has fabricated his evidence. Indeed sufficient numbers of our informants cited experiences and memories of past lives to confirm some of his work. However, Badham also suggests that the evidence from reincarnation memories and experiences is not sufficient to prove that it happens and is therefore irrelevant to the question of personal immortality or extinction (p117).

¹² The Provost of Southwark Cathedral, London, is an example of someone who (not as a result of our research!) has moved from the first position to the second. See Colin Slee, 'New Religious Movements and the Churches' in Brian Wilson and Jamie Cresswell (eds.) *New Religious Movements: Challenge and response* (London: Routledge, 1999), p.172.

¹³ See for example, Tony Walter, 'Death in the New Age' *Religion*, 23(2) (1993) 1-19. John Hick, 'Present and Future Life' in Paul Badham (ed.), *A John Hick Reader*, (London: Macmillan, 1990), p145.

¹⁴ For example New Age and Buddhist writings.

¹⁵ David Barrett, *The New Believers*, (London: Cassell, 2001) p237.

¹⁶ In Bath Abbey Bookshop, one of the Christian bookshops where Waterhouse went hunting for books about death and afterlife, she was told by the attendant that although death and dying does not feature separately in the Alpha course, in the particular men's group which he attends the topic features most weeks because one of his fellow attenders is a reincarnation believer who won't stop talking about that! This anecdotal evidence, offered without prompt from Waterhouse, rather neatly supports our findings.

¹⁷ 'A very private belief'.

¹⁸ 'Contemporary belief in life after death', p141.

¹⁹ Robert Florida, 'Buddhism and Abortion,' *Contemporary Buddhist Ethics*, Damien Keown (ed.) (Richmond: Curzon, 2000) p.154.

²⁰ Gillian Bennett, *Traditions of Belief*, (London: Penguin, 1987).