

COMPARATIVE THEOLOGY

Topic: Resurrection and Reincarnation
Convener: Catherine Cornille, Boston College
Presenters: Cornelia Horn, Saint Louis University
Paul Griffiths, University of Illinois at Chicago
Leo Lefebure, Fordham University

Among the many different possible conceptions of life after death, the belief in a reincarnation of the body in this (or some other) world appears to represent the most popular and widespread alternative to the belief in the resurrection of the body. It constitutes a central component of the worldview of most of the religious traditions of Asia. And it has also come to exercise a certain appeal among Christians. Some have argued that traces of a belief in reincarnation may be found in early Christian sources, while others contend that it is not irreconcilable with Christian faith, regardless of its consideration and fate in biblical and Patristic thought. The papers in this panel focused not only on these important historical questions, but also on the possibility of fruitful exchange and dialogue between the two types of eschatology, and on their respective relationship to violence.

Cornelia Horn discussed the Patristic perspectives on resurrection or reincarnation. She argued that reincarnation represented an insignificant idea in early Christian anthropology, soteriology and speculative theology. Most of the biblical passages which are often cited to imply belief in reincarnation (James 3:6, John 3:7, Matthew 17:10-11, and John 9:1-7) do not warrant such interpretation upon closer exegetical scrutiny. For example, the notion of the “wheel of birth,” mentioned in James 3:6, may be understood as a metaphor for life itself, rather than referring to a process of transmigration. Early Christian writers such as Justin Martyr and his disciple Tatian broached the subject of reincarnation only to reject it. Irenaeus of Lyons, Tertullian and Augustine all ascribed the belief in reincarnation to heterodox Gnosticism. Horn argues that Origen of Alexandria’s work, which has often become the locus classicus for early Christian belief in reincarnation, offers no evidence for such belief. Origen was condemned not for teaching reincarnation, but for proposing the preexistence of the world and the return or restoration of all creation, including fallen angels, to the heavenly realm. While not unfamiliar, the belief in reincarnation was thus clearly and unambiguously rejected in early Christianity.

Agreeing with Horn that the classical notion of a reincarnation of the soul in a series of earthly bodies is irreconcilable with Christian faith, Paul Griffiths nevertheless proposes a broader understanding of reincarnation as implying the belief that “the selfsame human being who was once present to us in a particular body, can be physically present to us again after the death of the body in or as which she was once present to us.” He argues that this generic understanding of reincarnation may be found in most religious traditions. It informs the accounts of Jesus’ resurrection and it forms an integral part of the general Christian faith in the resurrection of the body. But it is in the Catholic teaching on purgatory that the belief in a continuous

series of incarnations (between the earthly body and the ultimate glorified body) becomes evident. Since Christianity has traditionally been vague on the relationship between body and soul and that of the continuity between the earthly body and the body in purgatory, Griffiths proposes that the scholastic traditions of Indian Buddhism may offer some insight and inspiration. Within Buddhism, the individual person is constituted by an interplay of five constitutive elements (form, perception, feeling, impulses and consciousness), which are continuously reconstituted. The death of the physical body represents only one moment in the continuity of causal moments. Such belief, Griffiths suggests, may be fruitfully brought into discussion with the Aristotelian-Thomist hylomorphic understanding of the relationship between the corporeal and the noncorporeal aspects of the human being, as well as serve as a basis for understanding the continuity between the various spheres of existence in Christian eschatology.

Leo Lefebure discussed the beliefs in resurrection and reincarnation from the perspective of ultimate justice and retribution. He traced the origin of the biblical notion of the afterlife and the reward and punishment of the dead beyond this life in the context of the violent persecution that challenged Israel's traditional faith. Within the Hindu and Buddhist beliefs in reincarnation, the notion of accountability may be seen to be more inherent. Both traditions represent responses to problems of violence that are unresolved through human systems of justice. One of the striking analogues between the two conceptions of the afterlife, according to Lefebure, is the often disproportionate relationship between the crime and the violent punishments. He also pointed out that, counterbalancing the working of karma in both Hinduism and Buddhism, there are figures of compassion who offer a way out.

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