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# LIVES-LONG LEARNING: THE EFFECTS OF REINCARNATION BELIEF ON EVERYDAY LIFE IN ENGLAND<sup>i</sup>

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**ABSTRACT:** A sizeable minority of Westerners who have no particular connection with Eastern or New Age religions nevertheless claim to believe in reincarnation. Does this belief affect their practical morality and how they think about suffering and injustice? An interview study conducted in England mapped the range of meanings such people give to reincarnation, and found: 1) Karma was widely referred to, but in the context of Western notions of self-improvement; there was little recognition of the possibility of bad karma leading to “downward mobility” in the next life, and little linking of karma to everyday action; 2) Reincarnation enabled respondents to make sense of suffering and injustice, but in a rather general way; 3) Despite the sample’s elderly bias, reincarnation was not widely reported as a comfort in illness and bereavement. The authors conclude that, outside of a culture or formal religion that embraces it, relatively high levels of personal interest in reincarnation can coincide with rather insubstantial effects on everyday morality, though individuals can and do use it to think about problems of suffering and injustice.

Around one-fifth of people in most Western countries reply positively to surveys asking if they believe in reincarnation.<sup>ii</sup> Though figures of up to 24 percent have been found for Britain,<sup>iii</sup> only 2 percent of the United Kingdom population are Hindu, Sikh, or Buddhist migrants from the Indian subcontinent, so the great majority of these reincarnationists are white Caucasians. The surveys indicate that many seem able to add reincarnation to traditional Christian beliefs, so this is not so much a new religion as a religious trend.<sup>iv</sup>

This article reports some findings from a qualitative interview study conducted in 1997 in order to elicit some of the meanings of reincarnation for those who take it seriously but do not belong to a religion that teaches reincarnation. In other articles, we have explored how contemporary English belief in reincarnation relates to the New Age,<sup>v</sup> and what it may mean regarding identity<sup>vi</sup> and the relation between body and soul.<sup>vii</sup> In this article, we ask what practical significance belief in reincarnation may have; in particular, is it associated with a morality and a theodicy that relates to everyday events? Max Weber observed that in the most consistent types of salvation religion, rebirth “becomes a quality of devotion indispensable for religious salvation, which the individual must acquire and which he must make manifest in his pattern of life.”<sup>viii</sup> In what ways, if any, is it made manifest in the lives of white Westerners?

## THEORETICAL QUESTIONS

First, let us consider morality. Christian notions of heaven and hell and also Eastern ideas of reincarnation traditionally have been central not only to religious worldviews but also for moral frameworks, and have been used in both the West and India as a form of social control. Actions in this life have consequences either for one’s eternal destiny (as in Christianity) or through the doctrine of karma for one’s future lives (as in Hinduism). Is it the case that belief in reincarnation among Westerners today provides them with an ethical framework? Alternatively, we might ask whether, detached from the Indian caste system, reincarnation would have little effect on practical morality? Further, we may note that in most of Europe, though belief in life after death is buoyant, hell has rapidly declined as a component of that belief, leaving the afterlife simply as a personal comfort; its role as moral policeman has virtually evaporated.<sup>ix</sup> Might it therefore be the case that reincarnation

has for most English people few implications for morality? Maybe most believers in reincarnation are no more scared that bad karma will have consequences in the next incarnation than most English Christians are scared that bad deeds will send them to hell or to an overlong stay in purgatory? Certainly, popular accounts of past lives to be found in writings by regression therapists in magazines such as *Reincarnation International* suggest that believers in reincarnation are more concerned with experiences in previous lives and how these might shed light on their present life, than with the karmic consequences for a future life.<sup>x</sup> Does interest in reincarnation reflect a more general re-focusing of Western religion from morality to experience?

Second, in the world religions, afterlife (or pre-life) beliefs typically have much to do with theodicy, providing an answer to the problem of suffering. For Christians, suffering on Earth is compensated by *post-mortem* heavenly bliss, though this fails to *explain* suffering; the question of how a loving God can permit suffering remains, within the Christian tradition, inherently problematic. Indeed, Christianity's affirmation of an all-powerful and all-loving God actually turns suffering from an unfortunate reality into a major religious problem.<sup>xi</sup> Hindus, by contrast, can explain suffering, or at least their current caste position, in terms of deeds in a previous life; karma (the inexorable law of cause and effect) and *samsara* (the wheel of rebirth) provide, according to Max Weber and Peter Berger,<sup>xii</sup> the most complete and rational solution to the problem of suffering among any of the world religions. Is this part of reincarnation's attraction to contemporary Westerners? But how readily may reincarnation operate as a theodicy when it is divorced from Indian social structure, and when it is an individually chosen belief? For Berger, the power of a theodicy and the *nomos* of which it is a part resides in their givenness within society and within institutionalized religion. For many Westerners, however, belief in reincarnation is held alongside conventional Christian beliefs; it is not, therefore, part of a single sacred canopy under which individuals may shelter in the storms of life. Put crudely, can pick-and-mix religion provide comfort and meaning in the face of suffering and death? If it can, it will be by means different from those identified by Berger.

Third, there is a question of justice. Given the diverse genetic and environmental heritages with which individuals are either blessed or cursed, a Christian God who condemns sinners to eternal damnation for sins in their one and only life may appear as less than totally just and less than totally loving. We are not responsible for what we are endowed with, yet are held responsible in just this one life for our eternal damnation or salvation.<sup>xiii</sup> In Indian religions, by contrast, our fortune in this life is determined by behavior in previous lives, and there is scope for progress over several lives.<sup>xiv</sup> It is at this point that the attractions of the Catholic idea of purgatory become manifest: though we cannot be expected not to sin in this one life on earth, in purgatory we can make *post-mortem* spiritual progress before finally arriving at heaven. Reincarnation might be even more attractive, as the ongoing process of purging and learning occurs in bodily form on Earth, and there is more opportunity to make up for past mistakes.<sup>xv</sup> Is there evidence that this is indeed part of reincarnation's attraction to Westerners?

## METHOD

In the first half of 1997, thirty taped interviews were conducted<sup>xvi</sup> in their own homes with adults who had expressed interest in being interviewed on the subject of reincarnation, and three group interviews were conducted with 21 schoolchildren aged 11, 14-15 and 17-18 respectively. Most of the interviews took place in and around Bristol, Bath and Taunton in the southwest of England, and interviewees were recruited from a number of sources, including personal contacts, a call for volunteers on local radio, and a certain amount of snowballing as one interviewee led to another.

This method produced a sample that was in some ways representative, in some ways not, of those who believe in reincarnation. Two-thirds of the adult respondents were female, one-third were practicing Christians, including a number of Quakers. This range is reasonably typical of reincarnationists (as identified by the European Values Survey) in respect of gender and conventional religiosity, but considerably over-represents the older age groups. Of the adult interviewees, the age distribution was as follows:

under 40	3
40 – 49	7
50 – 59	3
60 – 69	7
70 – 79	8
80+	2

The higher social classes were also over-represented. Eleven were senior professionals or senior/middle managers; thirteen were other professionals (including several nurses), junior managers, clerical or administrative workers; three were skilled manual workers; and two were semi- or unskilled manual workers.

The intention was not to assemble a representative sample, but to discover the range of meanings given to the idea of reincarnation; to this end, the interviews were very open-ended, care was taken to let interviewees speak in their own terms and not to ask leading questions. The data were analyzed by both authors, one a specialist in religious studies, the other a sociologist. While we were writing this article in 1999, the British news media ran a major story on a public figure who—unusually—lost his job because of his belief in reincarnation and its ability to explain suffering; we briefly refer to this in our analysis.

With 2 percent of the United Kingdom population belonging to religions that teach reincarnation, and perhaps another 5 percent in New Age circles where reincarnation is easily accepted, it is clear that most of the 24 percent who tell pollsters they believe in reincarnation do not circulate within religious milieus in which reincarnation is taken for granted. We were less interested in the minority for whom reincarnation is part of a given and unified sacred canopy, and wanted to access the “mix-and-matchers” who integrate reincarnation into other worldviews. To access these, the “hidden majority” of reincarnationists, we excluded from the sample Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, those from tribal societies that embrace reincarnation, and obvious New Agers.<sup>xvii</sup> Most of our respondents seriously entertain the idea of reincarnation, though only a minority categorically believe in it, and very few could talk about an actual past life or lives; nevertheless, experiences of one kind or another do play a significant role in some of their musings.<sup>xviii</sup>

The data were coded according to a number of categories, two of which were “purpose of reincarnation” and “effects of believing in reincarnation,” and it is these particular data that form the basis of this article. What did our respondents see as the purpose of reincarnation and what effects did they say it had on their lives?

## KARMA

For a considerable number of respondents, reincarnation entailed the idea of karma. One or two elderly and highly educated respondents gave elaborate expositions of karma, but several others described the idea clearly and simply:

Yes, everything has a cause and effect. For everything you do, you get something back. (#9. Female student, regular attender at a Spiritualist church)

Most of our respondents had this basic concept of “reaping what you sow.” Others directly related the idea of karma to questions of justice and suffering. Some were clearly troubled by the problem of suffering within the Christian tradition and had come to similar conclusions:

I know he is a loving God, and this is why I firmly believe in reincarnation, because karma—you build up in your life, good and bad—and we have to make amends for the bad things we've done. And we've all in different lives done the wrong things as we do in this one. It's the only thing that makes sense to me, because why Prince Charles and why the beggar in Calcutta? If this is the only chance we have, then I could not believe in a loving God. (#20. Retired nurse, practicing Anglican)

Though one respondent found the reincarnationist solution to the problem of suffering “comforting,” another got near to saying that people have brought their suffering upon themselves:

I know it seems sad to say it, but when you see a young child that has an awful illness, it's not because of what they've done here, it's because of what they did there. And they got away without being punished in the last life, but they're not going to get away with it in this life. (#24. Middle-aged printer, male)

This position, when espoused by a non-Indian, is not fashionable in Britain, as was demonstrated early in 1999 with the sacking of England national soccer team manager, Glen Hoddle, for publicly stating his belief that people with disabilities are working out karma from a previous life. Even without displaying our respondent's vindictiveness, Hoddle's statement led to a media and political storm, resulting in his being removed from his post.<sup>xix</sup>

Generally, however, respondents referred to the karmic law of cause and effect not to blame others but to explain their own current character, employing a discourse similar to that of

psychotherapy (which explains present life in terms of past traumas). This was also true of Hoddle's thinking: "It is not only people with disabilities. What you sow, you have to reap.... You have to look at things that happened in your life and ask why. It comes around."<sup>xx</sup> At this point, Hoddle may represent a considerable number of people who use karma to explain suffering. One of the findings of our study<sup>xxi</sup> is that many respondents keep their belief in reincarnation to themselves; even in 1997, before the Hoddle debacle, some of our respondents sensed that going public could lead to misunderstanding.

Only one respondent referred to reincarnation's potential for social control. She felt that if reincarnation were taught, then the young generation she spent much of the interview complaining about would behave better:

I don't think that people like Hitler or the Wests (serial murderers)...I mean it's all right them saying, "Oh, you're forgiven" and all that. I don't believe that. I think that's just a panacea. If they'd been taught reincarnation—what you've done is going to happen to you—they wouldn't do it.

*So it's a good moral control then?*

I believe God is love and there is justice, but I don't believe you do things and somebody on this plane says, "Dum di dum di dum, you're forgiven." No, I think you've got to work for it. (#13. Retired nurse, female, connections with Anglicans, Methodists and Quakers)

This woman, dismayed about the state of the world, would have fitted better into the nineteenth century when the teaching of heaven and hell was used to control the masses. But this ethical implication of life after death is largely lost in the late twentieth century in which other bases for ethics are sought, and indeed our other respondents fit the spirit of their own age. Whatever the purpose of reincarnation might be for them, it is not social control.

## LEARNING

Both Hindu and Buddhist traditions teach that the individual can generate good or bad karmic consequences and thus affect future incarnations. Additionally, in India the caste system is justified by the notion of karma. Although some of our respondents did talk of karma as an inexorable law of cause and effect, they all held to the idea of learning/progressing from one life to the next, an idea compatible with Western notions of self-determination and self-improvement. Their idea of life/lives as a school in which we learn lessons implies that we have some autonomy in choosing whether, or how fast, to learn. How soon, and in what form, we reincarnate is therefore in part up to us.

Daffodils—the same bulb comes up every year until it dies off, doesn't it? Sunflowers come back every year. So if they do, why shouldn't we? But in a different body maybe. I think this is a school and that you are learning from experience, you know, all the time. (#7. Female, retired, unskilled)

I sort of believe it (reincarnation) because I think you sort of move on in life, if that makes sense. You do one life and then you're fine-tuned and move on until you are the right level. Fine-tuned like God.... You're sort of going through generations picking up all the knowledge you need to know.

*Are we gradually getting better then?*

Well, gradually, yeah. But some people have to retake the years in the course of life, like. (15-year-old schoolboy)

Yes, well, I suppose I believe in sort of, some sort of karmic response, and I do believe that we are then invited to live again to either remedy or learn further. (#14. Middle-aged female psychotherapist, Quaker/Buddhist sympathizer)

One motive to generate good karmic consequences in this life (according, for example, to Buddhism in Asia) is to avoid coming back next time in a lower life form, such as an animal or ghost-like being.<sup>xxii</sup> Without any fear of returning as a lower species, the power of reincarnation to control humans is reduced. Yet, except in order to explain present suffering, none of our respondents conceived of the possibility of going backwards, of going back down a class. And none conceived of the possibility of going back to a non-human reincarnation, or indeed of ever having had such an incarnation. It is as though their lives on Earth are like a school in which they always go up a class. Though they may make more or less progress in any one class and promotion may be delayed, the possibility of going back down a class did not figure.

This view fits the modern Western notion of individual self-improvement much better than it does traditional Christian notions of good and evil, heaven and hell, God and the devil. (We have already

noted that belief in hell and the devil has decreased substantially in most of Europe.) It also fits a hedonistic society concerned to avoid pain, a society that is at root optimistic about the future. Or to shift metaphors, reincarnation is not so much a game of snakes and ladders as a game of ladders; each move, it is up to you whether you climb a big or a little ladder. This fundamentally distinguishes Westerners who entertain the idea of reincarnation from those in the East.<sup>xxiii</sup> One respondent conceived of the possibility of someone who messes up this time around:

I mean I've known a few people whose lives have been not...I wouldn't say disasters, but really not as whole as they could have been. And they have gone from one bad situation to another, to another, to another, and my heart goes out to them and they seem totally unable to receive.... It's as though they're incapable of learning from life around them. I just can't believe that this will be their only life.... If I believed in reincarnation, I could look at these and think, "Well, if they're on a journey then this is an experience they'll use, and the next incarnation they will be richer because of this experience." (#21. *Retired upper-middle class female, practicing Anglican*)

Several respondents, however, raised a problem with this rather pleasant idea of learning from one life to another until one eventually reaches God:

The problem is, of course, that while one's living there seems to be no recollection, nothing to connect with what has happened previously. There may be very good reasons for this, but it is very, very annoying.... I almost swear to myself that I shall not be reincarnated again in a state of ignorance.... I want to know more of the whys and the wherefores of what I'm there for. Not to go through this all over again. (#29. *Retired civil engineer, male, practicing Anglican with extensive interest in Spiritualism and Eastern religions*)

The group of fifteen-year-olds was equally aware of this problem:

*Claire:* If you make a mistake in your previous life, you could put it right.

*David:* That's what I was on about.

*Sharon:* But you wouldn't remember it, would you?

*David:* Yeah. You have to be able to remember it to understand where you've gone wrong. To think "I'm not going to start smoking at sixteen this time," or whatever.

One respondent tried to resolve the problem in terms of a conscious *post-mortem* life review:

I presume an angel shows you a record of the life that you've just left, because you are born into this thought world and you judge yourself. You think, "Well, I've gone wrong there, or I've done a good deed there. I'd better go back to this Earth and try again, and try and put right the things I done wrong," you know. But the trouble is when you are born again as a baby there's not many people.... Children can remember their other lives, but it gets knocked out of them by the time they are four or five years old. (#7. *Female, unskilled, retired*)

The only respondent who seemed to be able to answer this conundrum to her own satisfaction was a student who belongs to a Spiritualist church that teaches reincarnation. She was one of very few in our sample who talked not in terms of "I think that...", "Maybe...", "An idea I had is...", but in terms of "This is what we believe..." Her church teaches that a lot of work is done between incarnations, reviewing the previous life and choosing the right circumstances for the next incarnation; sufficient work is done in this inter-regnum period that there is no need for memory when next incarnated.

## PURGATORY

This same student, whose pre-Spiritualist religious origins lay in Anglicanism rather than Catholicism, made an explicit connection with purgatory. After replying in the negative to being asked whether she believed in hell, she added:

There's purgatory which is.... It's not a hell in the sense of fire and brimstone. But the very act of looking back through your life at what you've done is considered a purgatory for somebody who's committed murder. Because they have to relive every feeling, every experience and every emotion of that. And it can be so, you know, heart rendering [*sic*] that they will learn the lesson through it and that is the hell if you like. (#9. *Female student in her twenties, member of Spiritualist church*)

The middle-aged psychotherapist replied to the hell question similarly:

No, I don't believe in hell. There might be some sort of difficult learning, I suppose. But it's not actually hell in terms of fire and brimstone. (#14.)

Hornsby-Smith's study of English Catholics found a number who believe in reincarnation for similar purgatorial reasons. As a thirty-year-old woman who attends Mass at Christmas and Easter told him: "I think that perhaps you do get a chance at another life, you know, reincarnation of some description."<sup>xxiv</sup> Hornsby-Smith's research suggests that some Catholics - brought up with the doctrine of purgatory but becoming doubtful about eternal damnation - may find reincarnation attractive, giving them another chance at life without the trials of purgatory. Our respondents indicate that the connection between reincarnation and purgatory can also be made by people with no formal connection to Catholicism.

One respondent who definitely believed in reincarnation saw no purpose in it:

I'm not sure that there is any purpose to it, to be honest. I suppose I'd like to think that there was a sort of evolution of consciousness, so that...in some way because of it humanity was evolving and developing in a better way but I don't know if that's just being a bit fanciful. Probably there's no real purpose to it. It's something that just happens. (#16. *Female doctor in her thirties*)

With this one exception, our respondents saw the purpose of reincarnation in terms of karma/learning/purging, frequently volunteering the idea of learning. Few of our respondents had any great knowledge of Eastern religions, but many of them had worked out for themselves that reincarnation provides solutions to the problems of suffering and the purpose of life. These solutions, though by no means perfect, are more satisfying to them than those offered within Christian or secular worldviews. Alternatively, one could suggest that members of a modern society that celebrates the idea of self-improvement might find reincarnation attractive; for them, reincarnation is a spiritualized, eternal version of the secular belief in progress. Few respondents had any idea of nirvana, eschatology or completion of the process of learning; it was more that to have only one life in which to learn and develop seemed obscene to them. Perhaps it is inevitable that some busy people who see personal development as the goal of life, yet who feel there is so much to do and so little time in which to do it, will find reincarnation attractive. At the moment of writing, the United Kingdom government is promoting the idea of life-long learning. Why not extend this, our respondents seem to be saying, from the narrow sphere of education and turn it into a total philosophy of lives-long learning?

## EFFECTS

The question remains, though, whether or not all this talk of karma and learning has any practical bearing on the respondents' own lives? In fact, they were at something of a loss to say how embracing the idea of reincarnation affects their lives, not least as far as personal morality is concerned. One woman did say there was an effect, but the example she gave has little connection with her own life (we presume she is not actually contemplating murder):

In karmic terms, I do feel there's quite an influence. I'd feel very unhappy to find myself murdering somebody, not just in terms of being banged up in Holloway (women's prison), but in terms of actually what it would mean not just inside myself now but in terms of the future. (#14. *Middle-aged female psychotherapist, Quaker/Buddhist sympathizer*)

The woman who liked complaining about the state of the world answered in more down-to-earth terms, yet her morality hardly seems different from many other people's or from what she might have held to had she not believed in reincarnation:

Well, I try not to hurt anyone consciously, or...I try not to take anything belonging to anyone else. But I still have to stand up for me which is very hard when you're old and a third-class citizen and a woman. They look on you like you're an old bag; they want you to go under. (#13)

Only one respondent raised an unambiguously clear ethical implication for life in England in the 1990s:

Yes, I think it does affect how I live my life.... As far as suicide is concerned, I don't think that is really an option, because I feel that if you did that it would be worse for you. You know, it would be very bad karma, if you like to put it in a sort of glib way. And you wouldn't escape this life. You've chosen this life. You've come to live this life for a purpose. And if you take the easy way, or the hard way or whatever, if you take a way out which is not your sort of destiny, then I think you have to come back and do it again. Maybe do it again and again. So that really doesn't seem to be very much of an option. (#6. *Middle-aged graduate student, part-time clerical worker, mother of two young children*)

What did come across with at least a couple of respondents was that, without being amoral, they can be more relaxed about getting it right this time around. One man, still undecided about reincarnation, had been made to think hard about it because of seeing a televised regression in which the subject clearly described being the respondent's ancestor of three centuries ago (whom the respondent, being a genealogist, recognized). Did all this make any difference to how he thought about life?

Well, yes, it has a little bit. It's bound to, isn't it? You know, I tend to think, "Well, maybe this isn't it." You know, people say, "This isn't a rehearsal. This is the real thing." I tend to think, "Well, I don't know. I've had this experience. Maybe this is a rehearsal. Maybe we do get a second and a third and a fourth chance." (*Unemployed trainer, middle-aged, male*)

The only concrete example of moral behavior engaged in clearly because of the respondent's belief occurred, perhaps significantly, in India:

Well, we were down on the Ganges. We had to stand aside for animals to pass us. Lots of people thought that was degrading, and I didn't mind in the slightest. If there was a cow coming up, I would stand back, because it was their religion. And I would respect that, and let the cow pass, and then I would go on. Now I felt I was doing right there, and...I didn't mind in the slightest doing that. But I know some people on that tour thought it's only a cow coming by, so why should we stand back?

*So you weren't just doing it to respect the Hindu religion, you were doing it because it might be...?*

That might be someone I know coming by. Yes, yes. Now that did strike me in India forcibly. (#28. *Retired clerical worker, female*)

We may conclude then that entertaining the idea of reincarnation need not have practical ethical implications. For most of our respondents, their ethics derived from being late-twentieth-century English men and women. Reincarnation affected personal behavior (in one case only) when the respondent was temporarily in India where the whole culture presumes reincarnation. We are not saying that some English people's ethics may not be profoundly affected by belief in reincarnation; simply that on the evidence of our sample, it is perfectly possible for it not to have a marked ethical effect.

## MEANING

The most common effect that our respondents noted was that reincarnation provided meaning. It made general sense of abstract issues such as the problems of justice and suffering, and/or it made specific sense of their own lives.

In a way, the thought of reincarnation provided the answers for me. (#6. *Middle-aged graduate student, part-time clerical worker, mother of two young children*)

Oh, I think I believe in it [reincarnation] because it seems logical to me. It answers all the questions that Christianity just can't.

*In what way do you see it as being logical?*

Well, it answers questions like: What happened before? What happens after one's life? And what happens during one's life as well? ...I mean, only last year I had a tape from Judy Hall who is a psychic astrologer. I had this tape from her and it answered.... Because I have my own particular problems and she gave foundation for where those problems came from, which I found extraordinary. It really clicked. I could understand something. (#29. *Retired civil engineer, practicing Anglican with extensive interest in Spiritualism and Eastern religions, male*)

For this last respondent, the meaning provided by reincarnation is both general and specific to his own life. Later, he was more specific about how reincarnation made sense of his own life:



I do have problems in the sexual area; well, I would call them problems. And I wonder why. But the answer to that came in Judy Hall's tapes.... The answer was, she says, that I was an Egyptian priest. It must have been round about A. D. 100, and I had to perform sexually in front of the god every day or there would be no fertility in the land. Anyway, the Christian fathers burst in and killed me, and I said, "Oh well, their god's stronger than mine, and I must join them." And I became one of the desert fathers afterwards, and again a medieval monk. And she says problems with sex come from that sort of background. It clicks. What irritates me is that having been asking these questions since about 1950, I'm only now getting answers and now it's too late. (#29.)

One respondent was convinced she had been a Cathar in a previous life, but was unusual among our respondents in the detail with which she fitted her past and present lives together. To quote just one short extract from this interview:

And also another thing. I cannot stand church bells; they terrify me. And that came up. The Cathards [*sic*], when the Catholics were coming, because they were slaughtered by the Catholics, they burnt them, and they entombed them, and that was their warning, that the Catholics were coming. And I wasn't burnt, I was entombed. And I know that. Don't ask me how you know, you just know. I cannot bear to be in a dark place. I get hysterical. I used to travel on trains, and if there were no lights as we were going under a tunnel, I would go hysterical. I had to sit and strike a match. So I know that I was entombed. I got that feeling that I was entombed. (#12. *Retired nurse, female*)

Most respondents for whom reincarnation made sense of their present life, however, could gain only fleeting glimpses of the relevant events from a previous life. Only one respondent (the Cathar woman) had been regressed, and none fit the classic cases found in magazines and popular books on reincarnation in which past life regression cures phobias or neuroses.

Historically, Christianity has presented itself as providing meaning in death,<sup>xxv</sup> though many churches became reticent about the afterlife in the late twentieth century,<sup>xxvi</sup> a silence partially filled by popular New Age and Buddhist writings on the subject.<sup>xxvii</sup> Given that Westerners are currently using ideas from outside of historic Christianity to address the problem of death, we had expected that a considerable number of our respondents might use reincarnation to provide comfort or meaning when they thought of their own or others' deaths. Despite a somewhat elderly sample, however, very few respondents actually referred to their own mortality or to personal bereavement. Only one said it gave her comfort when thinking of her own death:

Everyone is uncertain about death and it [reincarnation] actually gives you something to look forward to, rather than just dying and that's the end of everything. It gives you a little comfort, I think. (#23. *Ex-bank manager, at home looking after her young child*)

In so far as many people tend not to raise spontaneously the questions of bereavement and their own death, it may be that more active questioning on this area may have produced a greater response.

## CONCLUSION

Though a substantial minority of Westerners say they believe in reincarnation, what comes across most clearly when reading the interview transcripts is how little effect belief in reincarnation, or seriously entertaining its possibility, has on the majority of our respondents. It does not affect their practical morality to any significant extent; only one out of thirty (of a by no means young sample) volunteered that reincarnation had actually provided comfort at a time of loss. Very few indeed could relate reincarnation to their own lives, except in the most fleeting of ways—"I think I must have been a gypsy in a previous life, because I'm always on the move." Nor were our respondents notably involved in vegetarianism or alternative lifestyles and values.<sup>xxviii</sup>

Hospital and hospice chaplains, along with palliative care nurses, have told us that few if any of their patients speak of reincarnation, least of all on their deathbeds. This may be in part because it is perceived as a deviant belief, and people are reluctant to admit to it, and certainly not to officials of the church or in a Christian hospice. But our interviews may shed further light on this. For our respondents, entertaining the idea of reincarnation is typically not part of an overall belief system, and few talked of reincarnation specifically in relation to their own mortality or bereavement. While it is certainly possible that a personal belief tied into neither a church nor an overall belief system could provide comfort on the deathbed, this seems likely only if its holder has, while in good health, previously related it to questions of mortality.

Our sample is not representative of those who believe in reincarnation, which may have other meanings for some other people, notably younger or lower-class people or those within the cultural milieu of the New Age. But our findings strongly suggest that it is not *necessary* that belief in reincarnation affects a person's morality and theodicy, at least not in any way that practically impinges on their lives. In England, if not in the more religious United States, few but the most evangelical Protestants or conservative Catholics still believe in hell; likewise our reincarnationists anticipate what may await them in future lives almost with nonchalance. With no realistic possibility of negative consequences ahead, afterlife beliefs hardly touch everyday morality. Those reincarnationists who, unlike our respondents, are connected to world and New Age religions that teach reincarnation might well be very different, but it seems likely they comprise only a small fraction of those Westerners who entertain the possibility of reincarnation.

It would be a mistake to see our respondents as necessarily "borrowing" ideas from other, Eastern, traditions; indeed, our earlier account of them "mixing-and-matching" reincarnation with other beliefs may also be misleading. Increased knowledge about other religions, particularly Indian religions, surely plays a part in the increase in interest in reincarnation, and some of our respondents used the word "karma." Yet, by no means all our respondents described reincarnation as an idea that they had gleaned from the study of world religions or from neighbors from the Indian subcontinent. The increase in interest in reincarnation could also be due to another factor. When children puzzle over what happens when we die and how we got here in the first place, reincarnation is one of a somewhat limited stock of answers that humans, including young humans, might come up with. In a more Christian era, children who played with the idea of reincarnation were quickly told that the idea was wrong. But the number of English children who now go to Sunday School or receive other education in the Christian faith is now very low, so children who spontaneously consider the possibility of reincarnation do not find this dismissed by authoritative adults. Rather, they are free to develop the idea in their own way. Certainly some of our respondents had considered reincarnation from an early age, and we got the impression that some had thought through for themselves the implications for theodicy and meaning.

Entertaining the idea of reincarnation, which most of our respondents prefaced with hesitant phrases such as "I think perhaps that..." rather than with confident affirmations of either personal or communal belief, reflects for them a personal attempt to explore issues concerning suffering, justice, the love of God and personal identity. In general, they concur with Weber and Berger that reincarnation provides an intellectually satisfying solution to the problem of suffering. But the solutions that reincarnation provide are not, for them, enmeshed within a religion or culture, which may account for why reincarnation has rather little effect on their everyday lives. Without a religious milieu to validate specific moral behaviors, or without a social system legitimated (as in India) by reincarnation, the practical effects of this belief on everyday behavior are likely to remain limited.

If there is a belief system into which contemporary belief in reincarnation fits, it is the increasingly popular belief that human life is a matter of personal development. For those who believe in personal development, death poses new problems. How can we learn everything in just one life? What attraction is there in an afterlife with no personal development? Who would not be bored by the Christian afterlife sitting forever on a cloud with the angels or with God? Reincarnation provides the prime solution to such questions, offering development not only in future lives but also, for some of our respondents, between lives. Based on textual study, Bednarowski has argued that a more dynamic afterlife (not necessarily reincarnation) is posited by five of the six new religions she surveyed in the United States.<sup>xxix</sup> In each of the five (Theosophy, Mormonism, Unificationism, Christian Science, New Age), as Bednarowski puts it, "the dead learn forever." It seems from our interviews that learning over a number of lives appeals also to a considerable minority of those who belong both to more conventional churches and to none.

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>i</sup> For comments on early drafts, we are indebted to Christie Davies, Edward Bailey, members of the Network for the Study of Implicit Religion, and the anonymous reviewers of *Nova Religio*. We are also grateful to the University of Reading Research Endowment Trust for funding the research.

<sup>ii</sup> Sheena Ashford and Noel Timms, *What Europe Thinks: A Study of Western European Values* (Aldershot: Dartmouth, 1992); George Gallup, Jr. and William Proctor, *Adventures in Immortality* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1982); Stephen Harding and David Phillips, *Contrasting Values in Western Europe* (London: Macmillan, 1986).

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<sup>iii</sup> See endnote 2. A lower figure, 12 percent, was found by Douglas Davies, "Contemporary Belief in Life after Death," in *Interpreting Death*, ed. Peter C. Jupp and Tony Rogers (London: Cassell, 1997), 130-42.

<sup>iv</sup> It is hard to find reliable data prior to 1970 in order to substantiate a trend toward belief in reincarnation, but two English surveys from the 1940s and 1950s reported only 4 to 5 percent believing in reincarnation. See Mass Observation, *Puzzled People: A Study in Popular Attitudes to Religion, Ethics, Progress and Politics in a London Borough* (London: Gollancz, 1947), 29-32; Geoffrey Gorer *Death, Grief and Mourning in Contemporary Britain* (London: Cresset, 1965), 167.

<sup>v</sup> Helen Waterhouse, "Reincarnation Belief in Britain: New Age Orientation or Mainstream Option?" *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 14 (1999): 97-109.

<sup>vi</sup> Tony Walter, "Reincarnation, Modernity and Identity," *Sociology* 35 (2001): 21-38.

<sup>vii</sup> Tony Walter and Helen Waterhouse, "Une Simple Coquille: Le Corps et la Réincarnation" ("Just an Overcoat: The Body and Reincarnation"), *Recherches Sociologiques* (forthcoming). A summary of all the results of the study may be found in Tony Walter and Helen Waterhouse, "A Very Private Belief: Reincarnation in Contemporary England," *Sociology of Religion* 60 (1999): 187-97.

<sup>viii</sup> Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), 145. (First published 1922.)

<sup>ix</sup> Christie Davies, "The Fragmentation of the Religious Tradition of the Creation, After-life and Morality: Modernity not Post-Modernity," *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 14 (1999): 339-60; Doctrine Commission of the Church of England, *The Mystery of Salvation* (London: Church House Publishing, 1996); Tony Walter, *The Eclipse of Eternity: A Sociology of the Afterlife* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1996), 161-71. Belief in hell is much higher in the United States and in Northern and Southern Ireland than in other Western countries; see Walter, *Eclipse of Eternity*, 32-33.

<sup>x</sup> See Walter, "Reincarnation, Modernity and Identity", 28-30.

<sup>xi</sup> See, for example, Weber, *Sociology of Religion*, 138-9.

<sup>xii</sup> Weber, *Sociology of Religion*, 150; Peter L. Berger, *The Social Reality of Religion* (London: Faber, 1969), 65-68. (First published 1967 in the United States as *The Sacred Canopy*.)

<sup>xiii</sup> John Hick, *Death and Eternal Life* (London: Collins, 1976), 297-310.

<sup>xiv</sup> Hick considers that this superficially attractive solution "is not after all a real one. For either there is a first life, characterised by initial human differences or else (as in orthodox Hindu belief) there is no first life but a beginningless regress of incarnations, in which case the explanation of the inequalities of our present life is endlessly postponed." (Hick, *Death and Eternal Life*, 308-9.) This is the sort of abstract argument a philosopher might entertain, but hardly seems relevant to how in everyday life people might believe in reincarnation: it is irrelevant that there is no "first life" when there are plenty of more proximate ones to account for this one.

<sup>xv</sup> Hick is by no means the first Christian writer to have toyed with this idea. The Neoplatonist Henry More (1614-87), fellow of Christ's College Cambridge and writing at a time when there was both widespread preaching about the terrors of hell and the beginning of philosophical doubts about hell, set out in his *Immortality of the Soul* the hypothesis that souls pass through a series of lives in which individuals have a chance to improve. See Philip Almond, *Heaven and Hell in Enlightenment England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); D. P. Walker, *The Decline of Hell: Seventeenth Century Discussions of Eternal Torment* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1964).

<sup>xvi</sup> The interviews were conducted by Helen Waterhouse.

<sup>xvii</sup> Two respondents, however, turned out to be members of a Spiritualist church in which reincarnation is taught.

<sup>xviii</sup> Waterhouse "Reincarnation Belief in Britain", 100-103.

<sup>xix</sup> His original statement, made in an interview with a journalist, was published in *London Times*, 30 January 1999. On subsequent days, the story was front-page news in all British national daily newspapers until his sacking on 2 February. Although his articulation of the law of karma was unsophisticated, had he been not white but a Hindu from India, his sacking would probably have contravened the Race Relations Act.

<sup>xx</sup> *London Times*, 30 January 1999.

<sup>xxi</sup> Walter and Waterhouse, "A Very Private Belief", 190.

<sup>xxii</sup> Not all Westerners who adhere to Buddhism allow for this possibility, chiefly because modernist Buddhism is embarrassed by "traditional" cosmology. See Ian Harris, "Buddhism and the Discourse of Environmental Concern: Some Methodological

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Problems Considered," in *Buddhism and Ecology*, eds. Mary Evelyn Tucker and Duncan Ryuken Williams (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Center for the Study of World Religions, 1997).

<sup>xxiii</sup> Likewise, Buddhism in the West is typically presented as a game of ladders, rather than snakes and ladders as in the East, possibly for the same reason: Westerners believe in progress. For further discussion of Westerners who convert to Buddhism, see Helen Waterhouse, *Buddhism in Bath: Adaptation and Authority* (Leeds: University of Leeds Community Religions Project, 1997); Duncan Ryuken Williams and Christopher S. Queen, eds *American Buddhism* (Richmond: Curzon, 1999); Charles S. Prebish, *Luminous Passage: The Practice and Study of Buddhism in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), and on converts to Hinduism, see Lucy G. DuPertuis, "American Adaptations of Hinduism," *Comparative Social Research* 10 (1987): 101-11.

<sup>xxiv</sup> Michael Hornsby-Smith, *Roman Catholic Beliefs in England: Customary Catholicism and the Transformation of Religious Authority* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 101.

<sup>xxv</sup> John Bowker, *The Meanings of Death* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

<sup>xxvi</sup> Walter, *Eclipse of Eternity*, 20-25.

<sup>xxvii</sup> Tony Walter, "Death in the New Age," *Religion* 23 (1993): 1-19.

<sup>xxviii</sup> Waterhouse, "Reincarnation Belief in Britain," 104-6.

<sup>xxix</sup> Mary Farrell Bednarowski, *New Religions and the Theological Imagination in America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 75-97.