

KARMA AND REINCARNATION IN THE WEST

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KARMA AND REINCARNATION IN THE WEST

Dr. Judy D. Saltzman

How do we define the West? In this essay, it will simply be defined as that pan of the world which has the continents of Europe, North and South America, the western hemisphere. Of course, Australia and New Zealand in the eastern hemisphere have been taken over by peoples of the West. If we are going to talk about karma and reincarnation in the West, we should talk about them too. However, since this would make my topic unmanageably broad, I plan to confine my remarks to the United States and/or "Modem Atlantis" with some particular attention to California, my home state. I will say a little about Europe, Australia and New Zealand, since I have recently traveled in these lands and there is excellent scholarship available on them.

For these reasons, most of what I say will be concerned with "Modem Atlantis", the technological colossus of North America. I will not say much about Canada, a nation culturally very like the United States, but about whom it is said that a higher percentage of the population, over 30% believe in reincarnation and karma. Of course, it has never been proved to the satisfaction of most geographers and oceanographers that there really was an Atlantis, as Plato, H.P. Blavatsky and other writers claim. However, if there were, it seems to have suffered from the same obsession with materialism, egotism and the frantic search for external business and social success so characteristic of the United States.

You probably know very well that the ideas of reincarnation and karma have not been dominant themes in America nor in Europe since the Eastern Orthodox bishops condemned it at the Council of Constantinople in 543 C.E. to begin the intellectual Dark Ages, in Europe. Ten years later, the Emperor Justinian anathematized Origen's teaching on the pre-existence of the soul, among otherdoctrines.¹

It is pointed out by Cranston and Head that the Catholic Church never officially condemned pre-existence, because the Eastern Orthodox were the main voters at the Council. Nevertheless, Saints Jerome and Irenaeus and the Montanist heretic Tertullian were highly hostile to the idea. Even so, to this day, I know several Roman Catholics and Anglicans who believe in reincarnation, a view, they tell me, not encouraged by their priests.

During the one thousand years of the Dark Ages in Europe, the belief was not openly entertained among the "educated" on Europe. The Albigensians and the Cathars, heretical Christians whose ideas echoed early Christian Gnosticism, became very prominent in the 12th Century. These learned people almost unseated ecclesiastical Christianity and helped start the Renaissance. The idea of the troubadours and the Arthurian Grail Legends have echoes of their spiritual teachings. Arthur, "the once and future king, shall come again full twice as fair to rule over his people."²

The idea of reincarnation was able to surface again only with the advent of the Florentine Academy in the 15th Century in Italy. Ficino had Plato translated. Pico della Mirandola openly wrote that "the soul passes out of one body into another."³ In fact, one could say that there have always been some people in Europe, even in the worst of times, who held the view of the "Alternative Reality." In his book, *Spiritual and Religious Groups in Modern America*, Robert S. Ell wood affirms that this view had always been around in Europe, promulgated underground by an enlightened minority, and resurfacing at times to threaten the stronghold of the one-life believers.

It was true that most of those who remained in the heritage of the so-called "western

religions”, the Jews, Christians and Muslims, do not know the esoteric development of their heritage. The Jews who make up 3% of the population of the United States, hardly consider the idea unless they are Hasidim or Kabalists. In the Kabbalah, die Zohar, II, 199, says that "all souls are subject to revolutions." The Kether Malkhut affirms,

If she, the soul, be pure, then she shall obtain favour.... but if she hath been defiled, then she shall wander for a time in pain and despair.... until the days of her purification."⁴

There are individual Jews I have known who believe in reincarnation, such as a Hasidic Rabbi who told a couple whose child had died at the age of two and a half that "he needed to return to have a few more years as a Jew." However, the viewpoint on reincarnation held by this man does not seem to be universal.

The passage regarding the valley of the bones in Ezekiel, could also be interpreted to mean reincarnation, often called resurrection in the *Bible*.

The hand of the LORD was upon me, and carried me out in the spirit of the Lord, and set me down in the midst of the valley which was full of bones,

And caused me to pass by them round about: and, behold, there were very many in the open valley; and lo, they woe very dry.

And he said unto me, Son of man, can these bones live? And I answered, O Lord GOD, thou knowest.

Again he said unto me, Prophecy upon these bones; Behold, I will cause breath to enter into you, and ye shall live:

And I will lay sinews upon you and will bring up flesh upon you and cover you with skin, and put breath into you and ye shall live....

Ezekiel commanded the bones to do this, and they were an exceedingly great army.

Then he said unto me, Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel; behold they say, Our bones are dried, and our hope is lost; we are cut off for our parts.

Therefore prophecy and say unto them, Thus saith the Lord GOD; Behold, O my people, I will open your graves and cause you to come up out of your graves, and bring you into the land of Israel.⁵

The Proverbs, attributed to Solomon, affirm that he was with the Creator from the beginning. *Jeremiah I*, says "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you." Here is a kind of affirmation that there never was a time when man was not, as well as the previous affirmation of "Dem bones gonna rise again!"

Of course, the Christian Testament itself is filled with references to reincarnation. *Matthew ii: 17* has Jesus affirming that John the Baptist is the reincarnation of Elias. There is also another story of a man who had been blind since birth, because he was "suffering for some sin he had committed." *The Book of Revelation* begins to make some sense when one thinks of it in terms of universal reincarnation; seven seals, seven states of humanity, seven races, seven rounds, and so on. *Rev. Chap. Hi v. 12* affirms "Him that overcometh will I make a pillar in the temple of my God, and he shall go no more out."

Indeed; what Robert Ellwood calls the Alternative Reality has a sound basis in the Scripture of the Judeo-Christian tradition as well as in Islam with certain of the Sufis, such as Rumi affirming it. In his work *Alternative Altars*, Ellwood affirms that, long before the

"reincarnation revolution of the 1960's, these ideas were developing in the West. What he calls excursus religion which does not profess the values of the main stream, but which is reflective of new and different states of consciousness was in the United States in the 18th and 19th centuries. These religious movements put their participants in a state of liminality, or a transition from one mode of consciousness to another. Liminality is the state of the initiate. Movements, such as the Shakers, although not directly teaching reincarnation did have many Gnostic elements and excursus spiritual values. They believed mother Ann Lee was the Second Coming of the Christ, therefore affirming the equality of men and women. They practiced celibacy, hard work, austere living, and ecstatic dancing. Among their accomplishments are inventions, such as washing machines, clothes pins and nailless furniture. In spite of the fact that their vision was limited to a form of Christianity* their joyous dancing and singing represented a high development in American spirituality. Shaker hymns are still sung today in Protestant churches in America. Unfortunately, the Shakers got involved with spiritualism, which was the start of their decline.

Of course, there were other 18th and 19th century communities which made an impact. The Oneida Community founded by John Humphrey Noyes was quite the opposite in some ways from the Shakers--all were married to all of eligible age. The Swedenborgians were present in America from Swedish immigration after the time of the Seer. The legendary Johnny Appleseed who really did plant a lot of trees in the early 19th century was a Swedenborgian. And his Church still survives.

All these were spiritual precursors to the development of the ancient teaching of reincarnation and karma brought to America by H. P. Blavatsky, America's first Russian citizen and the starter of what has sometimes been labelled the "New Age Movement." However, in spite of the immense impact of Theosophy, the fundamental teaching of universal brotherhood has failed to take hold. All the other so called spiritual movements which teach some form of reincarnation such as "New Thought", "I Am", Eckankar, are shadows of Theosophy. These excursus New Age religions teach the ideas of karma and reincarnation in some way. Of course, Americans have given these teachings their own particular bent and flavor. One good way to understand the deepest in American spirituality is to go back before these "new religions" to Emerson, Thoreau, Charming and Whitman. These, were among the brightest stars in American spirituality.

Sadly, American attempts at spirituality also have their dark side. This more somber side, came in the 1960's with the drug revolution in America, Lysergic acid 25 (LSD), marijuana and other consciousness expanders. While using these drugs, many people most of them of university age, discovered that there was much more to their consciousness than they ever thought possible.

In spite of this, very few ever connected these ideas of expanded consciousness to karma and reincarnation, and even fewer connected reincarnation to universal brotherhood. The "spiritual" drug movement was, unfortunately, connected to pleasure seeking. In 1964 during the free speech movement in Berkeley, I heard Prof. Timothy Leary give an address on the freedom of the inner consciousness. As the students were singing and marching outside for Martin Luther King Jr. and civil rights, Prof. Leary, born a Catholic, but calling himself an "orthodox. Hindu," told us to go home "tune on, aim on and drop out." He told us we would find God by expanding our inner consciousness. This was easy enough to do since they were manufacturing LSD in the chemistry lab in Berkeley. Timothy Leary believed in reincarnation, but also evolution. Having recently regressed himself, under LSD, back to an ape state, Leary moved forward to new possibilities. He became interested in tantra. His

sexual exploits to die delight of many young people, were published in an extensive interview with *Playboy Magazine*.

Of course, there had been a long tradition of spiritual drug use in America- The Native American Church members were allowed to take mescaline on a legal basis as a part of their religion. This activity took place mainly in the Southwest and also in Mexico. However, there is a much deeper conception of American Indian spirituality than die imbibing of this drug which was a latter day development like the Ghost Dance. Yet there is a much more profound tradition indigenous in the Native American tradition. Prof. Ake Hultkranz confirms in his book die Conception of the Soul among the North American Indians &at they overwhelmingly believed in reincarnation, the "happy hunting ground" being temporary. The distinguished anthropologist, Alberto Campo, wrote that the Hopi and Navajo stressed the importance of duty in the present life so much, that it was not discussed very much among them. The hospices with the hole in the top used to make the person comfortable and to achieve a serene state of awareness when dying; they were places to mark the end of a life and the soul's journey.

Moreover, the idea that a person may return to do a specific job is overwhelming. Earnest Thompson Seaton, "The Chief," founder of the Boy Scouts of America, describes one day how he met a mysterious old woman, introduced as a Mahatma from India. After coffee and trivial conversation, she suddenly upbraided him as they rose to leave, "Don't you know who you are?"... "You are a red Indian chief, reincarnated to bring the message of the Redman to the white race, so much in need of it Why don't you get busy? Why don't you get to your job?"⁶ And he did his job.

The young contemporary American Indian writer William Least Heal Moon also has something important to say about reincarnation. He includes the ancient maze symbol of *The Book of the Hopi* in his book, *Blue Highways*. This symbol is used by a number of tribes in America. Moon says, "Its line represents the course a person follows on his 'road of life' as he passes through birth, death and rebirth. Human existence is Essentially a series of journeys, and the emergence symbol is a kind of map of the wandering soul, an image of a process; but it is also, like most Hop symbols and ceremonies, a reminder of cosmic patterns that all human beings move in."⁷

Indeed, the Hopis clearly confirm the idea of reincarnation. They also have a worldview of evolution as well as of races and rounds (the four worlds) similar to that held in *The Secret Doctrine*, As Hultkranz, and Cranston and Head have confirmed, there arc many Native American people who are helping the newer Americans grasp a more profound meaning to existence.

However, as was said, the ideas of reincarnation and karma did not really begin to catch on in America until the sixties. There were rumblings of it with the "beat movement" of the fifties during the height of optimism in technological "Modem Atlantis." It was in the early fifties with the advent of Zen Buddhist teachings that Americans first became aware of a powerful alternative spirituality from Asia in their midst Great teachers such as D. T. Suzuki and students such as Alan Watts and Gary Snyder who became a Roshi came on the scene and wrote bestselling books. However, their Zen was "Square Zen" compared to the "Beat Zen" of Jack Kerouc's *On the Road* and *The Dharma Bums*.

Kerouc was an interesting person. Born to French Canadian immigrants, Jean Louis Kerouc was a friend of Gary Snyder who was the model for the hero of one of his novels, and who later took the path of Square Zen. Kerouc made an Impact upon the young of America in

the fifties and sixties as did Henry Miller. The Zen teaching he explores; in his novels is rather more like Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* than that of an austere Zendo: immature, raw and powerful. He had great trouble getting his books published, when he did they became best sellers. Unfortunately this talented man never really took up the teachings of the Buddha, and died young as an alcoholic.

In between beat and square, Alan Watts made an electric impact with his *The Way of Zen* and other works. However, his was a popularized Zen lacking the depth of his teacher, D. T. Suzuki Roshi. As a result of Walt's mid Kerouac's work, many young in America began practicing Zen without the faintest idea of the original teaching of the Buddha, the philosophical understanding necessary, or the renunciation involved. Shibyama Roshi of Kyoto was one of the few Zen teachers who came to America with a comprehensive Buddhist outlook, but he did not remain. Another Zen Master who does teach in the West is Rev. Roshi Jiyu Kennet, founder of Shasta Abbey in Northern California.

In the middle sixties, the New Age Movement or consciousness which had been incipient in the nineteenth century with Transcendentalism, Spiritualism and the start of Theosophy burst into full bloom. The Free Speech Movement occurred in Berkeley in 1964. The lifting of the Asian immigration restrictions brought teachers from India such as the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi whose Transcendental Meditation organization sold mantras and other techniques for \$200.00 per weekend. Meher Baba, Sai Baba and Yogananda had been around for sometime, but they became better known and more popular. The Theosophy lecture halls in Berkeley, New York, Los Angeles and San Francisco were filled with young people in various stages of dress and undress, long thick hair, blue jeans and sandals. Of course, as their hair got thinner, their incomes higher, and their dress more mature, very few remained.

The sixties, which had begun as a time of great optimism, erupted into a miasma of problems with the assassination of John F. Kennedy. Then came the civil rights movement accompanied by the student free speech movement. These were followed by all the trouble over the unpopular Vietnamese War, and finally the murders of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy. The final blow was the election of Richard M. Nixon in 1968-a President whom you moist know was forced to resign in 1974 because of the scandalous break-into the offices of his political opponents which he teamed about, but covered up. In spite of all this mess, by the end of the sixties, ideas of karma and reincarnation and also meditation permeated university campuses. However, through the young people and die Beatles rock quartet it had made its way into many American homes. Best of all, religious studies departments sprang up around the nation at numerous universities. Here the most serious study of the ideas of karma and reincarnation is undertaken, we well as the languages of Sanskrit, Pali, Hindi and Tibetan.

The 1970's proved to be a time of backlash of conservative Christian elements against the reincarnation idea. The Jesus Movement began with Rev. Fred Jordan and others going through university campuses on their bus, preaching "the end of the world", and sometimes literally kidnapping students "back to Jesus."⁸ Of course, they spoke against the pernicious doctrine of reincarnation, the drug and Hippie movement Salvation for the personal ego, resurrection of the physical body, and belief in vicarious atonement was the old new line. Rev. Jetty Falwell's "Moral Majority" and others suggested that the economic decline of die country was due to the turning from God. The dash with Shi'i (Shi'ite) Islam and the Iranian Revolution, resulting in the hostage crisis of 1979-81, only confirmed their viewpoint

However, the recrudescence of Christianity which occurred during the seventies and continued through the eighties was not so much a herald of the new development of that

religion, but of its decline. The U.S. is no longer a Protestant, Catholic, Jewish nation. Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam which is becoming larger than the Jewish community are here to stay in America. By 2000, there will be more Muslims than Jews. However unlike Hindus and Buddhists, very few Muslims believe in reincarnation. Only a few Sufis who may be less than one percent of the Islamic world, profess it.

It is interesting to note that, supporting the Sufis, the *Qur'an* has verses which may be interpreted, as affirming reincarnation. The Muslim scholar, M.H. Abdi, in his articles on the Islamic conception of reincarnation, affirms the idea of reincarnation as an esoteric doctrine in Islam. He presents verses in the (*Qur'an* which may be interpreted to mean that we come back to earth on the basis of law:

As the rains turn the dry earth into green thereby yielding fruits, similarly god brings those dead into life so that those may learn. (*Qur'an, Sura 8*).

However the idea of reincarnation was taught openly only in the most secret schools of Sufism. Small schools of Sufism which sprang up in India, Afghanistan, and Indonesia under teachers such as Meher Baba and BaPak Subud, and popularized by George Gurdjieff, still exist in the United States.

However, reincarnation as a viewpoint has not taken over generally in the United States any more than it has in exoteric Islam. By 1980, many of those young people who had been hippies or "yuppies" in places such as Berkeley, were in the full swing of "yuppieism" the materialism of the "me" generation. The ultra conservative former actor, and Governor of California, Ronald Reagan, was elected President. The interest in meditation, dieted sales of consciousness, and the attendant idea of reincarnation in the universities and among the young had died down, considerably. The same trend continues in the nineties. However, although less than 10% of the population would be willing to commit themselves to the idea of reincarnation, one might say that a growing number of Catholics, Protestants, Jews and Muslims might be willing to entertain the notion. In Canada and New Zealand the belief is much more widespread. Robert Ellwood, while doing research for Ms new book, *islands of the Dawn*, discovered that as many as 40% of the population of New Zealand believe in reincarnation. The development of alternative spirituality in New Zealand is also connected to its Ancient Maori roots.

However, there are interesting signs among the intellectual population. The Institute of Noetic Sciences, founded by former astronaut Captain Edgar Mitchell, USN Ret, holds the aims of (1) undertaking a deeper exploration of human consciousness beyond western psychology, (2) discovering human potential, (3) questioning accepted scientific paradigms, (4) re-evaluating normative educational and health science paradigms. Although there is no outward profession of belief in reincarnation and karma, a higher percentage of its 31,000 members in forty-six states than the national norm entertain the notion. These American intellectuals appear to be preferring the sort of values found in exoteric religion without necessarily belonging to any one religion.

There is an intense focus on the idea of consciousness at the Institute. These scientists who joined had come to the realization that even powerful methods of scientific inquiry, such as the linear accelerator at Stanford University are ill suited to the study of consciousness. Since the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle, it is very clear that, even in the field of physics, understanding the nature of our consciousness is essential to understanding everything else. Toward this goal a number of eminent men and women at the Institute recently signed an article, "How Do We Know what We Know? Toward an Epistemology of Consciousness."

This essay simply points out that the old ideas of objectivity and verification fail to take into account even Heisenberg's ideas. They wish to open inquiry more into the subjective element or to the subjective experience or radical empiricism discussed by William James. Some of the scientists are even willing to consider the after death and between life data gathered by the Tibetan Buddhists.

Their magazine, *The Noetic Sciences Review*, is also a very hopeful development. A recent issue has a long article on spiritual movements, including the Masonry of the Founding Fathers and Theosophy. This issue is also filled with viewpoints, such as, the universe is alive, there are alternative psychologies and medicines known to the ancients, and the sacredness of nature.

It is my view that, reincarnation and karma, although not a dominant viewpoint in the West, will continue to grow as an idea.

It is the karma of the West that the Alternative Reality has always been present, even if hidden. The incompletely spiritual and/or anti-reincarnation viewpoints have always had cultures counter to them. One might look at it this way. Just as in India the Charvakas had their Vedantist and other idealists schools, in the West the dialectic might proceed as follows:

Aristotelians	Platonists
Pharisee	Essenes ‘
Exoteric	Christianity Gnosticism
Talmud	Kabalah
Catholicism	Rosicrucianism
Astronomy	Astrology
Mathematics	Numerology
Chemistry	Alchemy

This dialectic has always been present in the West for the past 2,500 years. There is no doubt that it will continue to move. Scientific materialism and rampant greed, for example, may find their balance in the ecology movement and Schumacher's "small is beautiful" economics. Logical positivist philosophies may find themselves brought back to a new search for meaning by Asian wisdom and occultism. However, it will take much more than counter cultural movements and philosophies to bring the ideas of karma and reincarnation into the mainstream of America.

Nevertheless, the seeds of the awakening of the American consciousness were planted in the last century. The teachers from India and Japan have helped push the spark along in this century. The great interest of young people in the ecology movement is a good sign. When the rewards of the material have lessened, the spiritual has a chance to emerge. Moreover, the understanding of karma and reincarnation in America, "Modern Atlantis," will have a distinctly American character. As Robert Ellwood writes:

A perception of "non normative" religions in America, even those imported (as it seems) from the East, as essentially American in America, and so to be understood (and criticized) in terms of the themes and sociology and styles of American religious life, involves another paradigm shift which is also under way. Zen, Swedenborgianism, Theosophy or Vedanta, for example are in American life far from what they are or were in Japan, eighteenth-century England, or nineteenth-century India. Too much knowledge of their distant origins, knowledge which may be greater than that of most twentieth-century American adherents themselves, can easily be a

hindrance to the comprehension of these adherents - who may use Eastern symbols, for reasons we have explored, but the essential spiritual life is better approached through the American emergent and excursive heritage from Emerson, Thoreau and Whitman, the Shakers and the Spiritualists, to the cults of the depression era, or to the "beatniks" and "hippies."

Yet there are also books written which castigate American movements with Eastern links for failure to present the Eastern teaching in an "authentic" form and for adding to its classical text "spurious" modern sources like the writings of Blavatsky. This sort of purist critique is, of course, legitimate within the context of commitment to the classic form of any tradition, but as applied to phenomenology of religion it is unacceptable. Its ideal hardly fits the way religion really works, for religion is always in process, always undergoing modification through intercultural contact and transplantation, and always producing new books which become normative and classical in time. Often, like the Mahayana sutras placed in the mouth of the Buddha and the Tibetan *gter-ma*, alleged to have been penned by an ancient sage and hidden many centuries, these classics are back-dated and ascribed to a mind greater than that of the one whose hands gave them to the world.

I generally agree with Ellwood. As the sparks are fanned, we may well see an increase in "non-normative" religions in America, and also people of nonnative religions believing non-normative ideas. This means that the Alternative Reality, New Age Movement/Noetic Consciousness, or whatever you wish to call it will continue to grow. Then we will see an increase of those who hold the karma and reincarnation view in America, albeit in the next century. Their current materialism notwithstanding, the old Atlanteans may yet, as W. Q. Judge exhorts us, "arise to undo the errors of the past."

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3. *Ibid*, p. 243.
4. *Kether Melchut*, in W. Q. Judge, "Reincarnation in Western Religions". Bombay; Theosophy Co. P. Ltd., p.7.
5. *Ezekiel*, chap. 37 v. 1-12, *The Bible*.
6. *Op. Cit.*, Cranston and Head, p. 352.
7. William Least Heat Moon, *Blue Highways*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1982. p. 185.
8. There was a case in 1970 at California Polytechnic State University in San Obispo, California, when the people of "Children of God", came through the dormitory and persuaded some naive students to give money, watches, stereos and even themselves to Jesus. They took three minor students along. The University President called the Highway Patrol, who stopped the bus and reclaimed the students, all of whom received counselling from the campus Christian Chaplain. Ericson Enroth and Peters, *Old Time Religion in The Age of Aquarius*.
9. Robert S. Ellwood, *Alternative Altars: Unconventional and Eastern Spirituality in America*, Chicago: the University of Chicago Press, 1979, P 168-9