

A Comparison and Contrast of the papers ‘Inconsistency of Belief among Roman Catholic Girls: Concerning Religion, Astrology, Reincarnation’ by T. Brink and ‘A Very Private Belief: Reincarnation in Contemporary England’ by T. Walter and H. Waterhouse.

This essay compares and contrasts the paper of T. L. Brink ‘Inconsistency of Belief among Roman Catholic Girls: Concerning Religion, Astrology, Reincarnation’¹ with the paper of Tony Walter and Helen Waterhouse ‘A Very Private Belief: Reincarnation in Contemporary England.’²

The aim of Brink’s study was to confirm a hypothesis concerning the ability of a person to adhere to multiple faiths simultaneously, whereas the aim of Walter and Waterhouse was ‘to discover the range of meanings given to the idea of reincarnation.’³ This difference in intent between the two studies resulted in a difference in research technique and therefore resulted in a difference in the resulting data and conclusions drawn thereof. Other different factors including the time of study, background of the scientists impacted the results.

T.L. Brink is a renowned American psychologist and sociologist. He has published several books and numerous scientific articles. His main areas of research are clinical assessment, the treatment of mental disorders in later life, religious phenomena, consumer behaviour and big data analytics. He is a member of several American psychological and sociological scientific societies.

Brink gives an overview of his study in a short introduction. He hypothesised that a simultaneous belief in Catholic doctrine, astrology and reincarnation is incompatible⁴. To test his hypothesis, he conducted a survey of 227 junior and senior girls at a Catholic school with the help of a questionnaire with a total of 14 closed questions. Of these subjects of the study, most of the girls had been in parochial schools for many years, had come from working families of Polish or Italian immigrants and lived in Chicago.⁵

¹ T. L. Brink ‘Inconsistency of Belief among Roman Catholic Girls: Concerning Religion, Astrology, Reincarnation.’ *Review of Religious Research*, 20, (Autumn, 1978) pp 82-85.

² Tony Walter & Helen Waterhouse ‘A Very Private Belief: Reincarnation in Contemporary England’ *Sociology of Religion*, 60, (Summer 1999), 187-197.

³ Tony Walter & Helen Waterhouse ‘A Very Private Belief: Reincarnation in Contemporary England’ *Sociology of Religion*, 60, (Summer 1999), 189.

⁴ T. L. Brink ‘Inconsistency of Belief among Roman Catholic Girls: Concerning Religion, Astrology, Reincarnation.’ *Review of Religious Research*, 20, (Autumn, 1978), 82.

⁵ T. L. Brink, p 83.

The data were evaluated quantitatively and statistically using the chi-square method. He then discusses the results of his study.

He searched for an explanation for his results. As possible causes, he describes social developments that offer an interest in alternatives to the original belief system of religion that the participants were raised in. He refers to the studies by Bellah: 'there are numerous and competing cultural influences on the development of religious belief in an individual'⁶ and Wuthnow: 'the higher the index of marginality, the greater the likelihood of belief in astrology.'⁷

Brink's hypothesis was not confirmed by his study. He asserted 'Acceptance of one belief system was no assurance that incompatible beliefs would be rejected,' also stating 'Believers in astrology or reincarnation are not significantly less likely to express a belief in Roman Catholic religion'⁸.

His own studies also indicate that a tolerant religious education and religious teachers who are open minded and willing to discuss interests and theories in Eastern religions and humanistic philosophy could be a reason for the acceptance of several belief systems side by side^{9,10}.

For a further possible explanation, he lists considerations on the function of faith. He quotes several authors who see faith as protection of the ego^{11,12,13}. He also describes

⁶ Robert Bellah, 'Christianity and symbolic realism.' *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 9, 1970 (Summer): 89 – 96.

⁷ Wuthnow, Robert, 1976, 'Astrology and marginality.' *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 15, 1976 (June): 157-168.

⁸ T. L. Brink, p 84.

⁹ T. L. Brink, 'Adolescent development and adolescent catechist.', 1976, *Catechist* 10:16.

¹⁰ T. L. Brink, 'A psychotherapeutic model for religious education.' *Religious Education* 72, 1977, (July/August): 409-413.

¹¹ Daniel Katz, Irving Sarnoff, and Charles McClintock 'Ego defense and attitude change', *Human Relations* 9, 1956, (February): 27-45.

¹² Milton Rokeach, 'The Open and Closed Mind', 1960, New York: Basic Books.

¹³ Milton Rokeach, 'Beliefs, Attitudes, and Values', 1968, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

considerations by Sigmund Freud, who sees religious faith and belief in reincarnation as an attempt to explain physical death¹⁴.

Brink concludes that the individual affirmation of several belief systems could be like a multiple safeguard for the people to protect their ego from a fearful situation by adherence to different beliefs¹⁵.

The study was conducted in 1978. According to the ethical guidelines of the Belmont Report published in 1979, the study has deficiencies and would no longer meet ethical standards today. The Belmont Report was created in 1979 by the National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Behavioural Research to serve as a core reference on ethical principles for institutional review boards dealing with research on human subjects¹⁶.

Brink formulates a hypothesis and examines it using a questionnaire with 14 closed questions¹⁷. 12 of the questions concern the Catholic faith, and only one each concerns astrology and Roman Catholicism.

There is not enough information surrounding the circumstances under which the student took part in the survey. There can be some doubt about the student's willingness to participate as the surveys were taken under school conditions, under which the students may have felt pressured or expected to answer in a certain way. Therefore, these conditions cannot be considered neutral.

Consent and the agreement of participants of surveys now is considered of the highest priority. There is also no confirmation of parental consent mentioned in the paper, no mention that the student's answers were anonymous, nor is there any mention that the participants of the questionnaires were given any rights or reassurances regarding data protection. There is no information about who distributed and collected the questionnaire.

All of these are likely to have had an impact on the participants' responses, calling into question the validity of the results to an extent. There was no evidence that there was any control of the group beyond the sample of participants being taken from who was in the class that day. Additionally, there is no information about whether or not the participants were even informed of the intentions of the study, or if they were participants of a study at all.

¹⁴ Sigmund Freud, 'Thoughts for the times on war and death', 1915, *Imago* 5:7-33.

¹⁵ T. L. Brink, 'Inconsistency of Belief among Roman Catholic Girls: Concerning Religion, Astrology, Reincarnation.' *Review of Religious Research*, 20, (Autumn, 1978), p 85.

¹⁶ Monique Hennink, Inge Hutter, Ajay Bailey, 'Qualitative Research Methods', 2011, London, California, New Dehli, Singapore: SAGE publications Ltd., 62-79.

¹⁷ T. L. Brink, p 83.

The first twelve questions were heavily weighted towards the catholic faith, with only the final two questions regarding other faith options following these, visually for the participants at the bottom of the questionnaire¹⁸. This creates a significantly unbalanced questionnaire, with catholicism-affirming questions forming the bulk of the questionnaire.

Additionally, the nature of the question regarding the catholic faith, the faith which the participants already subscribe to, can be viewed as strongly associating Catholicism with morality. For example, 'It is important to lead a moral life' and 'I would like to be married by a priest,' Additionally there is a question put to the participants 'I would like to receive the last rites,'. To be reminded of the religious practice which confirms your commitment to the catholic faith before death, before being asked to answer a question about your belief in an alternative faith may be emotive enough to affect the answer to the question.

There is no information detailing who distributed the questionnaires. If it was the class teacher or other similar familiar authority figure, this would have had further effect on how obligatory the questionnaires seemed. Furthermore, if it was the teacher of religion, then further biases toward Catholicism may have had an impact.

Furthermore, Brink did not give any details about his own views, experiences and knowledge of reincarnation and astrology as part of the survey. In summary, the study lacks validity. It was not conducted with precision and does not comply with current ethical guidelines. The study is outdated by today's standards.

The paper 'A Very Private Belief: Reincarnation in Contemporary England'¹⁹, was written by Tony Walter and Helen Waterhouse in 1999.

Tony Walter is a professor emeritus. He worked in the Department of Social & Policy Science at the University of Bath in the field of death studies. At the time of publication of this article in 1999, he was working as a lecturer and reader in the Department of Sociology at the University of Reading²⁰. Helen Waterhouse (1913 -1999) was a British archaeologist and classical scholar specializing in prehistoric Laconia (Sparta)²¹.

¹⁸ T. L. Brink, p 83.

¹⁹ Tony Walter, Helen Waterhouse 'A Very Private Belief: Reincarnation in Contemporary England', *Sociology of Religion*, 60, 1999,187-197.

²⁰ University of Bath, researchportal.bath.ac.uk/en/persons/tony-walter, 2025.

²¹ British School at Athens, bsa.ac.uk/2022/05/12/archiving-women-in-archaeology-helen-thomas-waterhouse, 2022.

The two authors cite the studies of Ashford and Timms²², Davies and Shaw²³ and Davies²⁴, and used the data from the European Values Study (EVS) collected in 1980 and 1991. Survey results conducted in Great Britain between 1990 and 1997 indicate an increase of belief in reincarnation rate of between 12% and 24%²⁵.

The intention of Tony Walter and Helen Waterhouse was to gain an insight into the respondents' individual ideas about reincarnation. The aim was not to obtain representative results. For this reason, the interviews were kept with open questions and no leading questions were asked²⁶.

Tony Walter and Helen Waterhouse investigated attitudes to reincarnation by conducting small scale interviews. No questionnaires were used. Most of the interviews were conducted in the Southwest region of England in the areas of Bristol, Bath and Taunton. Participants were recruited in a variety of ways: through personal contacts; a call for volunteers on local radio and a snowballing effect from word of mouth as one interviewee led to another²⁷.

Followers of religious beliefs in which reincarnation is an integral part were excluded. Hindus, Sikhs and Buddhists were therefore excluded from the survey. New Agers were also not included in the study.

Helen Waterhouse conducted thirty taped interviews with adults in their own homes and a further three group interviews with 21 school children at the ages of 11, ages between 14 - 15 years of age and between 17 – 18 years of age. Two thirds of the adults surveyed were female. One third were practising Christians. The study considerably over-represents the older age groups and the higher social classes²⁸.

The interviews were conducted with open-ended questions. The respondents' connection to an alternative lifestyle, such as vegetarianism, yoga, alternative medicine, or the green movement, was also explored. No clear pattern could be identified. Some respondents had a connection to alternative lifestyles, others did not²⁹.

²² S. Ashford, N. Timms, 'What Europe thinks: A study of Western European values.' Aldershot: Dartmouth. 1992.

²³ D. Davies, A. Shaw, 'Reusing old graves: A report on popular British attitudes.' Crayford: Shaw and Sons. 1995.

²⁴ D. Davies, 'Contemporary belief in life after death.' In *Interpreting death* edited by P. Jupp and T. Rogers, 130-42. London: Casell, 1997.

²⁵ Tony Walter, Helen Waterhouse 'A Very Private Belief: Reincarnation in Contemporary England', *Sociology of Religion*, 60, 1999, p 188.

²⁶ Tony Walter, Helen Waterhouse, p 189.

²⁷ Tony Walter, Helen Waterhouse, p 189.

²⁸ Tony Walter, Helen Waterhouse, p 189.

²⁹ Tony Walter, Helen Waterhouse, p 189.

The authors point out the typical nature of questionnaires from the EVS and other surveys with questions like "Do you believe in reincarnation?" and the usual answers "Yes, No, or I don't know?" They dispense with this format and structure the interviews very openly. Participants' answers therefore show more personal interpretation of the question of reincarnation. They responded, for example, with 'Maybe..., Perhaps...I think...' ³⁰. The authors also asked respondents about the basis of their beliefs about reincarnation.

Walter and Waterhouse categorised into three categories the sources of the participants belief in reincarnation: intellectual/non-experiential, second-hand experiences, such as reading about those who claim to have memories of past lives through hypnosis, dreams and other manifestations and first hand experiences for instance with precognition or familiarity with places, people and music ³¹.

The abstract and the introduction provide an overview of the study. The research data used are studies carried out on the topic of 'Belief in reincarnation' from 1947 to 1997. The authors also refer to data from European Values Surveys (EVS). Information on the interviews conducted and the selected group of people is then explained under 'Interview Data'. The subsequent section 'Findings' takes up the most space and is divided into 'Religious Associations', 'The Nature of Belief', 'Sources of Belief', 'The Content of Belief' and 'Effects.' The conclusion provides a clear interpretation of the findings.

There are some flaws to be found in the conduct of the study. The study is limited to a regional area in the southwest of the United Kingdom. It is uncertain whether a higher proportion of a particular socio-demographic population lives in this region, or a particular religious community lives there. It is questionable whether this study is representative of the United Kingdom as a whole.

The call for local volunteers being on a local radio station may have meant that the group or participants was narrowed by this method requesting for participant volunteers. It is known that local radio stations will be targeted at specific demographics, and so this will have influenced the participants. The 'snowballing' effect, otherwise known as chain sampling, has the drawback of only recruiting participants from the same social network. The Data is also not representative for all of the UK and the region, as only a small region was represented.

Additionally, recordings of methods can be considered incomplete. The authors do not describe in detail the conduct, collection and analysis of the data from the group interviews with school children aged 11-18 years. The authors excluded the "New Ager" group from their survey. However, they do not describe exactly how they define "New Ager" ³².

The recording of the division of tasks and labour during the process of the survey is also incomplete. There is no record of Who conducted the three group interviews with the schoolchildren or whether the interviews were conducted by both scientists. Therefore,

³⁰ Tony Walter, Helen Waterhouse, p 189.

³¹ Tony Walter, Helen Waterhouse, p 193.

³² Tony Walter, Helen Waterhouse, p 189.

there is no information with which to allow for differences in the questioning method. With the role of the interviewer being so crucial in drawing responses from participants, differences between the two interviewers in aspects such as gender and social manner as well as their academic background and areas of interest will have had an impact on the way the interviews were conducted, and therefore the responses of the participants. The lack of consistent recording of the interview process can raise further questions around neutrality.

Despite a closely related area of study, there are significant differences in the two studies. There are 21 years between Brink's study and the study of Walter and Waterhouse. Brink used only closed questions in the questionnaires, while Walter and Waterhouse used open interview questions which allowed the participants to express themselves in depth in a private atmosphere. It's also worth noting that Walter and Waterhouse were given some funding by Reading The University of Reading Research Endowment Trust, which could have affected the study with its own biases and priorities, and influences.

The methods of each study are different. The use of a questionnaire which only allows closed answers contrasted with the method of open-ended interview have created different results. Additionally, the fact that Brink's study was designed with the view to confirm a specified view limits its scope. On the other hand, the study of Walter and Waterhouse with the open-ended interviews has the benefit of unlimited participant responses. Both have the flaw of a limited demographic and cannot be viewed as totally representative as a fieldwork sample.

Additionally, there is no evidence that the conductors of either study had any previous education of the subjects of astrology and reincarnation, nor is there any information of their attitudes or personal relationships towards the topic. This could have had an effect on the responses of the participants in both studies. There was no background information of these topics, which may have made it harder. In Brink's questionnaire there is only one question: 'Do you believe in astrology,' and only one question 'Do you believe in reincarnation,' with no contrasting. In the study of Waterhouse and Walter could have influenced the manner of questioning, with limited personal knowledge having the potential to limit depth in questions.

Ultimately, the flaws in Brink's study, including the shortfall in ethical practice and imbalance of the study mean that the conclusions derived from it add limited significant data to the field of study. The data collected in the study by Waterhouse and Walter conclude 'The openness of the data collected presents conclusions that it's perfectly possible to go to church and to believe in reincarnation. Entertaining the idea of reincarnation has little effect on their day to day lives.'³³

³³ Tony Walter, Helen Waterhouse 'A Very Private Belief: Reincarnation in Contemporary England', *Sociology of Religion*, 60, 1999, p 196.

The study gave participants the opportunity to share experiences and intellectual engagement with the topics, provided useful information and insight into the private views held by the participants that would have otherwise been unrecorded.

Both studies have a logical structure which is easy to follow and deliver enough literature to dive in deeper into the topics. Brink also added the subject of astrology and the catholic religion to sociological study and writes in a more academic prose. The study of Walter and Waterhouse contains more emotive language and has more of a narrative style than that of Brinks. Both studies contributed data, with the different aims of study being reflected heavily in the study's' executions.

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