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A Very Private Belief: Reincarnation in Contemporary England

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Survey data indicate a substantial minority of westerners who have no attachment to Eastern or New Age religion but who nevertheless believe in reincarnation. This paper summarizes the findings of a small intensive interview study of a group of English people who take seriously the possibility of reincarnation: 1) Many of them hold reincarnation alongside Christian belief; 2) Most are less than dogmatic about their belief; 3) Some entertain the possibility of reincarnation because of experience (first or second hand), for others reincarnation solves intellectual problems, e.g., concerning theodicy; 4) They see bodily incarnations in the context of long-term spiritual progress, and they value spirit over body; 5) Their belief in reincarnation has rather little effect on the rest of their lives. It is concluded that rising belief in reincarnation heralds neither a spiritual nor a moral revolution, but fits easily into the privatized religion that characterizes contemporary western societies, and England in particular.

The numbers of westerners interested in reincarnation greatly exceed the numbers of westerners attached to Eastern or New Age religions. The doctrine of reincarnation belongs to neither of western society's two major belief systems, namely Christianity and secularism, which makes it particularly interesting to sociologists: it is a deviant belief which people "ought" not to hold. This article explores what reincarnation means to some of those who believe in it, why they find it attractive, and how it relates to other aspects of their life — not least the religious organizations to which they belong but which do not teach it. In particular, the article asks whether the twentieth century privatization of belief makes it easier to hold beliefs not taught by one's church. After a brief review of the survey data on belief in reincarnation, we summarize the findings of an intensive interview study of a small number of English people who entertain the idea. We conclude that reincarnation is indeed for them a very private belief, detached from religious and other affiliations, from the New Age, from popular literature on the subject, and from everyday life.

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SURVEY DATA

Belief in reincarnation — returning to this world in a series of bodily lives — appears to be on the increase in the West. A survey in 1947 was surprised to find 4 percent of a random sample of a London suburb spontaneously mentioning belief in reincarnation (Mass Observation 1947: 29-32); Geoffrey Gorer found 5 percent of the English he interviewed in the early 1950s saying they believed in reincarnation and only 2 percent a decade later (Gorer 1965: 167). More recent surveys — notably the European Values Surveys (EVSs) of 1981 and 1990, show the figures to have risen to around a fifth to a quarter in several European countries, a proportion that now appears to be rather stable, and paralleled in the USA (Gallup and Proctor 1982: 137-8). The 1990 EVS figure for Great Britain is 24 percent (Ashford and Timms 1992). Some recent surveys, however, have produced rather lower figures, 12 percent, for example, in one English study (Davies and Shaw: 1995: 92; Davies 1997).

Reincarnation (or re-birth) is a belief that is taught in several Eastern religions and is part of many tribal belief systems, but is not formally part of either Christianity or secularism. Given that the figures for belief in reincarnation in Europe and North America far exceed the number of Hindus, Sikhs, and Buddhists (in the UK these amount to no more than 2 percent of the total population), one might be tempted to suppose that reincarnation is an alternative to Christianity and secularism, or might be broadly categorized as part of the New Age, that is to say, held by those who have a sense of inner spirituality but who do not wish to confine this to Christianity.

The 1990 EVS data do not confirm this supposition, at least for the UK. They consistently show that belief in reincarnation is associated with *conventional* Christian beliefs. One smaller North American study found little belief in reincarnation, from 3-11 percent, in a representative sample of congregations belonging to six Protestant denominations (Donahue 1993), but so far this is the only study to contradict the statistical association between conventional Christian believing and belonging on the one hand, and belief in reincarnation on the other.

Interview Data

Because the survey data pose intriguing questions, we conducted a small-scale interview study in order to elicit the meaning of reincarnation to those who believe in it.¹ In the first half of 1997, Helen Waterhouse conducted thirty taped interviews with adults, in their own homes, who had expressed interest in being interviewed on the subject, and three group interviews were conducted

¹ We acknowledge the University of Reading Research Endowment Trust which funded this research.

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 South West 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.

Two-thirds of the adult respondents were female; a third were practicing Christians, including a number of Quakers. Our sample is reasonably typical of reincarnationists (as identified by the European Values Survey) in respect to gender and conventional religiosity, but considerably over-represents the older age groups and the higher social classes. Of the adult interviewees, the age distribution was: under 40 (3); 40-49 (7); 50-59 (3); 60-69 (7); 70-79 (8); and 80 + (2). Occupational distribution was: senior professionals, senior/middle management (11); other professionals (including several nurses), junior management, clerical and administrative (13); skilled manual (3); semi- and unskilled manual (2). 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 interviewers were careful not to ask leading questions. The data were analysed by both authors, Waterhouse coming from a religious studies perspective, Walter from sociology.

We deliberately excluded Hindus, Sikhs, and Buddhists — we were not interested in the meanings given to reincarnation by people who believe it because their religion tells them to. For the same reason, we did not seek out obvious New Agers. Most of our respondents seriously entertain the idea of reincarnation, though only a minority categorically believe in it, and even fewer could talk about an actual past life or lives.

Detailed analyses of the data in relation to particular theoretical issues may be found in a series of articles: Walter (1998a,b,c) and Waterhouse (1999). This article differs in a) summarizing all the main findings together, and b) framing them within the debate about the privatization of contemporary religion. Berger (1969) argued that religious beliefs have, in the modern era, become a matter of personal choice. With religious diversity and the complexity of modern life, it is hard to claim one religion as true in all situations and for all time, so each individual American chooses a church from the religious supermarket. Grace Davie (1990, 1994) has argued that, though the Church of England still exercises a public function at times of personal or national crisis, only very small numbers of English people actually attend church. Belief is so private that no need to belong to a congregation is perceived: the English believe without belonging. Davie observes that in Scandinavia the pattern appears to be the opposite — belonging to the established church (not least in order to book one's burial plot) but not actually believing. One might wonder whether there are not elements of this too in England, in that the English claim an affiliation with the Church of England and utilize its rites of passage, but believe whatever they like.

This is especially marked in the English countryside. Whichever way, unlike in North America, belief is detached from regular church attendance and from the pressure to conform to orthodoxy. Sociologists also often assume that western secularization has so marginalized religious belief that it now has little influence on moral attitudes and behaviour, though this has recently been called into question by Gill (1998).²

If there is a private belief par excellence, it could well be reincarnation. Though the subject generates considerable public discussion in books, magazines, and television, until the survey figures were published, no-one had any idea that so many people might actually believe in it. Nurses at our local hospice can recall no instances of patients believing in reincarnation. Though the survey data indicate that church members are more, not less, likely to believe in reincarnation, clergy we have talked to generally say their parishioners rarely if ever mention the subject. It is not a belief that people wear on their sleeves, but then the English rarely do wear their religion on their sleeves. Do churchgoers who believe in reincarnation illustrate that one can indeed belong without having to believe orthodox doctrine? Is the entertaining of unorthodox beliefs such a normal part of English religious life that it causes no difficulties, or do these deviant Christians feel they have to keep quiet about their belief in reincarnation? Does their belief in reincarnation affect their private morality or public behaviour? The same questions might also be asked of those who are not church members — how does their belief in reincarnation tie in, or fail to tie in, with a life that might otherwise appear secular?

FINDINGS

Religious Associations

Half our adult respondents revealed some connection with a church, and a third actually had some active involvement in one, far more than the English population at large. Given our method of assembling the sample, these figures mean nothing by themselves, but they do broadly fit the EVS data and provide an opportunity to research why reincarnation can be attractive to Christians.

Our respondents covered a range of religious affiliations and connections, but certain connections were notable for their presence or absence. Eight of our thirty adults had had some involvement with spiritualist churches, and this was connected with their belief/interest in reincarnation — some, though not all, spiritualist churches teach reincarnation. Studies of spiritualism in the UK are now somewhat dated (cf., Barrow 1986; Skultans 1974), but there is evidence of

² The privatization thesis has not gone unchallenged. Kepel (1974) and Casanova (1994) argue that in several modern western societies, not least the USA, world religions do still exercise a public function and have influenced certain public debates about morality. Though privatization exists, it is not an inevitable consequence of modernity.

widespread contemporary involvement in a number of provincial towns, not least Bristol where several of our interviews were conducted. Though a few of our respondents displayed a knowledge of Eastern thought, and a couple had been to India, spiritualism played a more important role than Eastern religions in introducing them to the idea of reincarnation. Some older respondents said they had been introduced to reincarnation through earlier involvement in Theosophy and Anthroposophy. This involvement was typically *prior* to appropriation of these two movements by what has now come to be known as the New Age, and it would therefore be misleading to suggest that these respondents had been influenced by the New Age.

We asked respondents whether they were involved in the green movement, alternative healing, vegetarianism, yoga, or other indicators of an alternative lifestyle (adherence to alternative lifestyles is probably more popular in the West Country where we conducted our interviews than in much of the rest of the UK). There was no clear pattern here. Some were, some were not; some were into one or two alternative ways of living, but others were not. What is certain is that, once researchers move outside obvious adherents of the New Age, belief in reincarnation need not be part of an alternative package — it can stand more or less alone. This is a significant finding, complementing the EVS data.

Of course, defining “the New Age” is notoriously difficult, and on a broad definition (e.g., Bruce 1995; Heelas 1996) many of our respondents could be said to be influenced by the New Age. We would maintain, however, that broad definitions can become so broad as to be meaningless; there was no clustering of reincarnation with other beliefs typically seen as part of the New Age package; and on an intuitive level our respondents simply did not seem to us like New Agers. Virtually none of our respondents nor their homes exuded typical images of the New Age such as Indian skirts, crystals, or New Age music. Clearly many New Agers are interested in reincarnation (otherwise, there would not be adverts for past-life regression therapy in New Age magazines such as *Kindred Spirit*); our point is that those interested in reincarnation are not necessarily card-carrying New Agers (the magazine *Reincarnation International* does not carry adverts for New Age products and services). Interest in reincarnation, like New Age ideas, is diffused widely, but the two diffusions do not necessarily coincide (See Waterhouse 1999 for a sustained argument on this point).

The Nature of Belief

The EVS and other surveys typically ask “Do you believe in reincarnation?” — “Yes, No, or Don’t know?” Only a minority of our respondents clearly said “I believe,” and when asked to elucidate the details and meaning of reincarnation even these were much more likely to say “I think . . .,” “Maybe . . .,” “Perhaps. . . .” Other respondents who were far too positive about reincarnation to be categorized as “Don’t know” nevertheless didn’t say “I believe . . .” but prefaced

every statement with "I think. . . ." Only two respondents (each belonging to a spiritualist church) stood out from this diffident crowd, affirming "We believe . . . ," and were able to state clearly what happened, for example, between death and re-birth. These two were unlike our other respondents in that they explicitly connected their belief in reincarnation to the dogmas of the church to which they belong. One other respondent used that most definite of prefixes "I know;" her knowledge is based on the loss twenty years earlier of her infant daughter, yet she was also open to the possibility that her "knowledge" could be explained psychologically. She was at the same time both our most absolute and our most relativist respondent. Two other women clearly believed in reincarnation, but would rather not! One was old, tired, and wanted a rest from incarnation for quite a while, while the other did not want to come back because she had had a bad life this time around.

For several others, reincarnation was an idea they found intellectually attractive, something they would like to believe but were not sure if they actually did believe, not least because they had not had a personal experience suggestive of reincarnation. For them, a survey question "Do you find the idea of reincarnation attractive?" would be easier to answer than "Do you believe in reincarnation?" A few others had had an experience, such as pre-cognition or *déjà-vu*, that they did not know how to interpret but that left them open to the possibility of reincarnation. For two or three elderly intellectuals, reincarnation was part of an elaborate personal worldview, but for many other respondents reincarnation was a possibility that they saw no great need to integrate with other beliefs. Many had great difficulty articulating their musings, especially when it came to discussing what happens between death and re-birth; several said that the interview was the first time they had been required to articulate their thoughts, hopes, and beliefs on the matter. Others referred to the way in which in everyday conversation people joke about coming back as or about having been a cat or swan or some other creature in a previous life.

We conclude that to attempt to categorize belief in reincarnation into the categories *yes-don't know-no*, as most surveys do, bears little relationship to the way in which people think and talk about the concept, at least in the situation of an unstructured interview. It is therefore unclear what the statement that x percent of the population believe in reincarnation means. Walter (1996: ch.2) has argued that other afterlife beliefs are similarly difficult to capture in simple *yes-don't know-no* answers, but the problem is particularly acute with a belief such as reincarnation for which contemporary culture and official religion provide little legitimation. This is why we characterize our respondents as comprising not a sample of those who believe in reincarnation but a sample of those who seriously entertain the idea.

Sources of Belief

On what basis do our respondents entertain the idea of reincarnation? Three influences stand out.

1) *Intellectual / Non-experiential*. For several, reincarnation solves intellectual questions, notably about suffering and justice. As one woman put it:

How can so many bad things happen in the world if you have a loving God? It was along those sort of lines that this sort of developed, my belief in reincarnation. . . . In a way, the thought of reincarnation provided the answers for me.

It has often been noted that Christianity, by compensating for suffering in a future heaven rather than — as in Hinduism — explaining suffering in terms of past lives, has a weak theodicy. Several of our respondents were grappling with this problem. Although they were clearly trying to work out their own answers, the majority could identify influences on their thinking. Half had been marginally influenced by Eastern religions, yet only one or two had anything like a clear grasp of Eastern philosophical ideas. As noted above, Theosophy and especially Spiritualism were more important influences.

2) *Second-hand Experiences*. Some informants had been made to think by reading about (and in one instance seeing on the television) those who claim to have memories of past lives through hypnosis, dreams, or other manifestations. These informants felt there must be something in it if people were having such experiences; few raised alternative possible explanations. Yet only three had tried to instigate experiences themselves, and only one had experienced a classic past-life regression.

3) *First-hand Experiences*. Some respondents spoke of personal experiences that they took as more or less suggestive of a previous life — precognition or familiarity with places, people, music, and in one case food. We cannot emphasise strongly enough, however, that — with one exception — the references to previous lives were fleeting and insubstantial, and not at all like the spectacularly detailed case histories to be found in popular books on reincarnation and past-life regression (e.g., Sutphen and Taylor 1983; McClain 1994; Carpenter 1995). Our respondents' belief in reincarnation is often rooted in experience, but — with one or two exceptions — they are in no way equivalent to those spiritual superstars whose faith is rooted in some profound mystical experience. As with any religious belief, it can be very misleading to extrapolate from devotional and theological books to the religious lives of ordinary believers. In this very ordinary sense, our respondents' beliefs were idiosyncratic and in no way conforming to any doctrinal party line.

The Content of Belief

What do our respondents see as the purpose of reincarnation? Several used the concept, or even the term, karma. Said one person: "Yes, everything has a cause and effect. For everything you do, you get something back."

Both Hindu and Buddhist scriptures teach that the individual can create good or bad karma and thus affect his or her future incarnations. However, when our respondents talked of karma they all held to the idea of learning and developing from one life to the next, ideas compatible with the western notions of self-determination and progress. They all felt we have some autonomy in choosing whether, or how fast, we learn, and hence how soon, and in what form, we reincarnate. This westernization of the notion of karma is also found in many westerners who formally convert to Hinduism or Buddhism (DuPertuis 1987; Mellor 1991; Waterhouse 1997).

A few respondents made connections between reincarnation as a school for learning and the Catholic idea of purgatory. The doctrine of purgatory has been downplayed since the Second Vatican Council (Lodge 1981; Walter 1996), but the possibility of spiritual purification still attracts. Perhaps the prospect of doing one's lessons down here on (for members of affluent western societies) an increasingly enjoyable earth is more attractive than the Catholic purgatory, and certainly more attractive than the Protestant refusal to let anyone re-take any lessons at all once this life is over.

It cannot be said, however, that our respondents found bodily reincarnation more attractive than the Christian heaven because they were members of a late-modern society that rates the body highly. To the contrary, they came across strongly as people who valued the spirit world — the spirit, of which the body is an incarnation, being rated more highly than the body. The overall thrust of many of our respondents was on spiritual progress across incarnations; none seemed to see any intrinsic value in the state of being incarnated. Though not all agreed about the length of time between incarnations, the image of the body as 'just an overcoat' expresses the majority opinion. Said one respondent: "Well, my understanding is that we go out of one body straight in another. Well the spirit does obviously. This is just an overcoat, in my belief, for the spirit."

Nobody was a keep-fit fanatic, the late-modern person much beloved of analysts such as Giddens (1991), in love with their bodies and therefore desperate to construct a bodily afterlife.

Interviewer: Do you like the idea that you've got another life after this one?

Respondent: Oh yes. Not embodied. I rather think I'd like to get away from embodiment. I quite enjoy embodiment but I think I'm fat and middle aged and the idea of laying aside. . . . I would hope that if I had another embodiment I would perhaps make a better fist of it, and perhaps experience something different. I'm not fussed really. I mean I'm interested in the experience but the essence of experience does seem to me in the non-physical bit of it.

We were interested to know whether our respondents played with past identities in the way they might try on new clothes just to see how they felt in them, as postmodernist theory might suggest. In fact, we found little evidence of this. We found instead a lot of thoroughly modern people accepting, playing with, or rejecting reincarnation in order to confirm or amplify their sense of self. These are not postmodern, but reflexive and individualistic modern people (Giddens 1991). Nor did we find that the Buddhist indifference to self figured at all significantly, nor the African tribal idea of being reincarnated in younger members of the same family. If we can list four major concepts of self,

- tribal: the self identified with the group
- Buddhist: disinterest in the self
- modern: a strong sense of the individual self
- postmodern: the playful deconstruction of self

then the huge majority of our respondents embraced a modern concept of self.

Effects

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 vast 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 provided comfort in bereavement; very few indeed could relate reincarnation to their own life except in the most fleeting of ways. Our findings suggest that whatever the 20 percent figures for belief in reincarnation signify, they do not signal a spiritual or ethical revolution. Entertaining the idea of reincarnation is rather like being a nominal Christian — a part of one's belief system, but with no great effect on one's life. Everyday actions and values are more likely to be influenced by culture than by personal religious beliefs that have no strong social support. Just as all but the most fundamentalist Protestants or most conservative Catholics no longer really believe in hell, so reincarnationists have a benignly pleasant anticipation of what may await them in future lives. We would suggest that the modern notions of progress and the right to happiness can be countered only within a very strong and all embracing religious group, such as a fundamentalist sect or the Catholic church. With no realistic possibility of negative consequences ahead, afterlife beliefs hardly touch everyday morality in this life.

CONCLUSION

Starting with survey data of the kind that "x percent of the population believe in reincarnation," we set out to document how those who entertain the idea of reincarnation actually think and talk. Our interviews confirm that it is

perfectly possible both to go to church and to believe in reincarnation, and that those who entertain the idea of reincarnation need not accept large chunks of a "New Age" or "alternative" package. Of course, some reincarnationists do display clear adherence to the New Age, but we excluded them from our sample; our point is that one does not have to be a New Ager to take the idea of reincarnation seriously.

What do our findings indicate about religion at the end of the twentieth century? For our English respondents:

- Entertaining the idea of reincarnation has little to do with their membership of a church (except for two spiritualists).
- It has little to do with the New Age, unless one defines that movement so diffusely as to be unmeasurable. Our respondents were not notable for displaying the lifestyle trappings, Aquarian hopes, or holism of the New Age.
- Reincarnation is one way of tackling issues of suffering that Christianity struggles with, but this private solution need not entail leaving the institutional church.
- Their experiences of reincarnation are but a pale shadow of those found in the popular literature on reincarnation.
- The idea of reincarnation has very little effect on their everyday lives.

We do not, therefore, consider that reincarnation belief signals a major religious revolution. It is easily subsumed within the private and less-than-world-shattering religion (Davie 1994) that the English know so well. Reincarnation may prove prototypical of a kind of new religious belief that requires no church, sect, or cult for its sustenance. It is similar to old style folk religion in that it need not be integrated into a systematic worldview, but is unlike folk religion in that it is not handed down within a local community. It is perhaps the folk religion of the media age, where the television, the bookshop, and the internet transmit bites of religious 'information' in which private individuals take an interest, without any demonstrable consequences for their behavior, conversation, or affiliations. It is the ultimate detached, private belief.

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