

Reincarnation and Karma

According to a study done by the Pew Research group belief in “reincarnation” by Christians (and Agnostics) was almost 30%.

While this does not in any way mean that the concept of Reincarnation is present in the Bible or is part of any Christian doctrine or theology, it does show that a significant portion harmonize this belief with their Christian faith.

While reincarnation certainly has Eastern roots, this idea is also present in the Kabbalah¹ teachings of גילגול (gilgul) and in the Ancient Greeks such as Plato and Old Norse literature.

Aside from these, most people, when asked, would state that Reincarnation and Karma are central to either the Hindu or Buddhist belief system. Before discussing an Orthodox view on these concepts, it is best to begin with a definition of both Reincarnation and Karma and a discussion of how they are applied in the Eastern Tradition.

Reincarnation: also referred to as **rebirth** or **transmigration**, is the philosophical or religious belief that the non-physical essence of a living being begins a new life in a different physical form or body after biological death².

Karma: is defined as an action, work, or deed and refers to the spiritual principle of cause and effect wherein intent and actions of an individual (*cause*) can influence the future of that individual (*effect*): good intent and good deeds contribute to good karma and happier (higher level) reincarnations, while bad intent and bad deeds contribute to bad karma and bad (lower level) reincarnations³.

Buddhism

Buddhism is based on four noble truths; suffering, the cause of suffering, the cessation of suffering and the path to the cessation of suffering.

As with Plato, Buddhism sees Mankind as being trapped in the cycle of existence known as samsara in which he will experience suffering throughout his life. To heal this condition of “sin”, man must find its cause, and then, through application of the teachings of Buddha, eliminate this suffering, at the end of

Six-in-ten Christians, 'nones' hold at least one New Age belief

	Believe spiritual energy can be located in physical things	Believe in psychics	Believe in reincarnation	Believe in astrology	NET Believe in at least one
All U.S. adults	42%	41%	33%	29%	62%
Christian	37	40	29	26	61
Protestant	32	38	26	24	57
Evangelical	24	33	19	18	47
Mainline	43	44	33	30	67
Historically black	41	43	38	34	72
Catholic	47	46	36	33	70
Unaffiliated	47	40	38	32	62
Atheist	13	10	7	3	22
Agnostic	40	31	28	18	56
Nothing in particular	61	52	51	47	78

Source: Survey conducted Dec. 4-18, 2017, among U.S. adults.

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¹ In stark contrast to mainline Judaism, reincarnation or metempsychosis is the Kabbalic doctrine of Bahir rooted in the Biblical verse from the Book of Ecclesiastes, "One generation passes away, and another generation comes. (Eccles. 1:4), which is taken to mean that *the* generation that passes away *is* the generation that comes.

² Encyclopedia of Reincarnation and Karma, Norman C. McClelland (2010).

³ Karma und Wiedergeburt im indischen Denken, Wilhelm Halbfass, (2000)

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which is enlightenment. However, this enlightenment should not be seen as accomplished through reincarnation.

Buddhism also speaks of five (5) *skandhas*, or elements: *form, feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness*. After death, the five elements still exist, but as the matter of which they were composed (atoms and molecules) and the karma, or actions, that the person performed during their lifetime is what continues but not as a distinct personhood in the Orthodox sense.

This path towards enlightenment continues through *“thousands if not millions of rebirths in every possible realm we can imagine. We should remember that if we met ourselves in our last lifetime, we wouldn’t know ourselves at all. It’s not me that gets reborn. If we could see ourselves in the next lifetime we would be a completely different being. We should not then cling too tightly to our personal identity as there is just a stream of consciousness going forward which as long as we do believe in an “I,” will be endless.”*⁴

Karma, as previously stated simply means "action" that operates in the universe as a continuous chain reaction of cause and effect. It is a common Eastern belief that human beings are constantly giving off physical and spiritual forces in all directions and that in accordance with the physical law of conservation of energy this spiritual and mental action, or energy, is never lost but transformed. A person’s actions, thoughts, and words, release spiritual energy to the universe and is in turn affected by influences coming to them. The entirety of this energy surrounding a person is their *karma*.

However, karma should not be confused with fate which is the idea that a person’s life is preplanned by some external power over which the person has no control (expressed as destiny). Because humans are sentient beings, Karma can be changed since man is aware of his karma and can thus work to change the course of events.

It should be noted that these ideas stand in sharp contrast to the uniquely American (somewhat Platonic) version of Reincarnation in which a person’s soul, (comprised of ego + subconscious) is *reincarnated or reborn* as the “aware self” just as if the person had never died, so that the soul goes out of one body and enters another body. In Buddhism there is no concept of a “personal soul” that inhabits a body which, after physical death, takes another form.

Taoism and the Daojing

While Buddhism does contain elements of Eastern Taoism⁵, there are distinct differences mainly concerning; a) belief in the Eternal, b) the purpose of life is not to escape suffering, and c) no stated belief in reincarnation. In this respect Taoism aligns more closely with Christianity. When considering a) and c) above compare these extracts from Book One of Daojing (The Book of the Way) by Lao Tzu and Orthodox doctrine of God as eternal and unnamed and Christ.

⁴ Quoted from Tenzin Palmo, a female Buddhist monk in the Kagyu school of Tibetan Buddhism. Her title is Jetsunma, or Venerable Master, by His Holiness the 12th Gyalwang Drukpa, Head of the Drukpa Kagyu

⁵ Also referred to as Daoism

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“Emptiness” is what I call the origin of heaven and earth; The Nameless is the beginning of heaven and earth; the named is the mother of all things. Appreciate Emptiness, that we may see nature of the Way’s versatility. Appreciate Existence, that we may see the extent of the Way’s possibilities.”

“To be heavenly is to follow the Dao. Following the Dao one will become immortal. Such a man will never die even though his body passes away.”

Just as when Moses asks God for His name and He responds, “I am that I am” so too the Daojing sees God as Eternal and Nameless. Equally the term Dao translates to “Way” and is continuously referenced in the manner in which Christ spoke of Himself and how Orthodoxy sees Christ as the Word through which the heavens and the earth were created. Lao Tzu sees Nature as a way of life and being one with Nature as a goal. In chapter 25 of the Daojing the wording seems very similar to the Scriptural account of Creation as the work of the Eternal (Father) and the Way (Christ) when it says,

“In the beginning, before the formation of heaven and earth, Something had already existed amid the confusion⁶. This lonely existence was totally independent of anything else, And it would not change, It only moved in its own way tirelessly. Only it could have been the mother of heaven and earth. I do not know its name, I would just call it “the Dao.”

Orthodoxy and Buddhist Concept of Reincarnation and Karma

From what has been discussed thus far the following Orthodox concepts would be in disagreement with each of the Buddhist concepts presented, that is;

- a) belief in the Eternal
- b) the purpose of life is not to escape suffering.
- c) the concept of an individual and unique soul
- d) no stated belief in reincarnation

a) Orthodox Tradition and Dogma fully supports and recognizes the existence of a Creator God which is Eternally Existing and that the “Way” and the “Truth” is His co-eternal Son, Jesus Christ. Of course, this concept of God as Trinitarian is uniquely Christian.

b) Orthodoxy does not see the suffering of Man as a punishment but as a consequence of the Fall which brought the disease of sin and death into the world. God created Mankind in His image and likeness, good and immortal, and desired that he be constantly in communion with his Creator. From this viewpoint our “salvation” is not seen as a perpetual cycle of learning from our negative karma so that we can achieve a heightened state of awareness. Nor do we believe that our *ὄντος* and *vous* (essence and self) is merely pre-existent energy which will eventually return to the universe. Suffering does have the ability to transform us but through our faith and dependance on Christ and not our own efforts of repairing negative karma which we have created during our lives. While Orthodoxy would agree that we suffer consequences for our immoral, unethical, or unvirtuous actions, this suffering is not the result of

⁶ The phrase “*amid the confusion*” is strikingly similar to the Hebrew term *תְּהוֹ וָבֹהוּ* (*tohou wa bohou*) of Gen 1.1 which describes the beginning of Creation as formless and void but can also be translated as emptiness and confusion.

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the actions of a past life that, through karma, we are now experiencing. In Buddhism the path to salvation is from within (personal achievement) while in Orthodoxy the path to salvation is without (Christ).

c) The Orthodox theology of the human soul and body is clearly expressed in the Fifth Ecumenical Council under the *Anathemas of the Emperor Justinian Against Origen*, which states:

Whoever says or thinks that human souls pre-existed, i.e., that they had previously been spirits and holy powers, but that, satiated with the vision of God, they had turned to evil, and in this way the divine love in them had died out (ἀψυγγείσας) and they had therefore become souls (ψυχάς) and had been condemned to punishment in bodies, shall be anathema.

Additionally, concerning Christ, the canons state:

If anyone says or thinks that the soul of the Lord pre-existed and was united with God the Word before the Incarnation and Conception of the Virgin, let him be anathema.

Orthodoxy also rejects Plato's idea of the human nature presented by in the Account of Er⁷ that spoke of reincarnation and rebirth into a new life which had no memory of a past identity or personhood. Orthodox theology understands that from the first beginnings of our human existence there is an indispensable and enduring expression of our total personhood⁸.

d) While Orthodox theology does not support the concept of reincarnation, it certainly sees the salvation of humanity in the event of the resurrection of both the soul and body which preserves the *όντος* and *vous* (essence and self). This concept of remembering our identity is found also in Scripture⁹. The Orthodox also support the idea of "rebirth" but as a rebirth into the Holy Spirit, as Christ meant it when He said to Nicodemus,

"Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit... You must be born again (or anew)."

⁷ The Account of Er is part of Plato's Republic (375 BC) and relates the story begins as a man named Er (Ἡρός), son of Armenios of Pamphylia dies in battle. His soul is taken to a place where the soul of each person was required to come forward to choose his or her next life. After choosing and then drinking from the River of Forgetfulness each soul forgot everything after which each soul was lifted up into their rebirth. This account greatly influenced successive religious, philosophical, and scientific thought.

⁸ Source: *"The unity of the human person: The body-soul relationship in Orthodox Theology*, by Bishop Kallistos of Diokleia.

⁹ Luke 16:25 *"But Abraham replied, 'Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things..."*