



# Reincarnation: revisiting the transmigration of souls as systematic and pastoral issue.

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## Abstract

The issue of reincarnation has factually been laid to rest in Christian theology at the end of Greco-Roman Antiquity. Not so in the cultural histories of European countries, where it is revived continuously, most forcefully from the 18<sup>th</sup> century onwards, as in Germany. This requires a new look at the idea, and at practices of 'past-life regression' that are widespread, from a dogmatic and pastoral perspective. Recent academic publications on the issue, reflecting different attitudes to it in theology, are therefore presented and discussed here, with further considerations added. The link of this issue to opinions about the post-mortals state of the soul, are thus included. In critique of 'whole-death' positions, in recent Protestantism and Catholicism, the Vatican's renewed affirmation of a living soul in the post-mortals state, and the call of Metropolitan Kallistos Ware, to review the rejection of reincarnation, are picked up for this presentation, that argues to connect these two.

**Keywords:** re-incarnation, past-life regression, soul, afterlife, theological anthropology

## Introduction

Metempsychosis has become a theme of culture again. In Germany, where I – a German South African - live at present, this view was widely held, by leading authors of culture, literature, and philosophy, from the mid-eighteenth century onwards, in the periods of Classicism and Romanticism. It resurged in the mid-nineteenth century, originally especially in France, in distinction from the materialistic Positivism, that prevails to the present. After a lapse, due to the ravages of the two world wars, it experienced a cultural revival, from the late twentieth century onwards. This is also reflected in theological literature and debate. In the following I will present largely German sources, keeping the wider relevance in mind.

I will discuss publications and debate on this issue in this context. I will pick up a remark by the Orthodox Metropolitan (Prof.) Kallistos Ware, about the shaky basis for the rejection of this belief in Late Antiquity, by an imperial letter to a patriarch. From a systematic perspective, I will refer to the call of the major Roman Catholic theologian, Karl Rahner, to reconsider the traditional rejection of the idea of reincarnation, on the basis of the doctrine of 'limbo' and the post-mortals living state of the soul, that provide for post-mortals development of the soul. This will be reviewed, with regard to biblical testimonies on after-life existence, and reincarnation. Theological considerations will be included.

## Beliefs in reincarnation, and their reception in German cultural and theological discourse

In 2012, a statistical survey showed that 22,1% of Germans believe in reincarnation. (Statista Research Department, 2013). The Federation of Protestant Churches in Germany, the Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland, EKD, demonstrates its awareness of the issue, with an article on its homepage on how many people in Germany believe in life after death, in which it is also discussed (EKD, 2009). Here it is said that two thirds believe in resurrection, the



immortality of the soul, or in reincarnation (“sie glaubten sehr fest oder ziemlich fest an die Auferstehung der Toten, die Unsterblichkeit der Seele oder eine Wiedergeburt.“ (ibidem). Reference is made to a major study of the Bertelsmann Foundation. Among its interesting finding is, that this belief is held twice as often among the younger age group, of those younger than those above the age of sixty (ibidem). This means, that German society is moving away from a Materialistic world view, that rejects any notions of ‘soul’, ‘life after death’ and ‘reincarnation’. Considering that this is published on the EKD’s website, it implies that belief in reincarnation is treated as one of the forms of belief in afterlife, in distinction from Materialistic views.

The article also reports, that according to this Bertelsmann study, the belief in such forms of life after death, are similarly prevalent in most European and North American countries, even with higher percentages that in Germany. Martin Rieger, the leader of this Bertelsmann study, reports that 64 of young adults in Germany are religious or highly religious. Among them there is the highest rate of beliefs in life after death, immortality of the soul and in reincarnation. (Rieger, 2007). This means that there is a strong movement of de-secularisation, in Germany, as in other countries investigated – which is not reflected by the ongoing decrease in church adherence – and that belief in reincarnation is recognised by respected institutions, such as the EKD and the Bertelsmann Stiftung, as being part of this development. This constitutes an important finding as to ‘cultural discourse’ in Germany.

Another factor is, that beliefs in reincarnation has also become connected with the ‘past-life-regression’ From the 1960’s onwards, specific forms of hypnotherapy were developed to enable past-life regressions. These were received in German speaking countries and are well established in society. They are practiced by reputable psychotherapists. Books, TV reports and internet presence contribute to their public presence. Ursula Demarmels, a prominent author, and practitioner, writes that her clients come from all walks and strata of society, often to seek to understand and heal or solve problems that do not seem to arise from their own biography. About the reasons, she writes [in my translation]:

Many people come to me because they ... suffer from fear of dying, and the insecurity of what comes next. (...) For many it is about the relation to someone close, who has already died. (...) Others decide to have a past-life regression because they want to learn more about their spirituality. What the dominant religions offer to them does not suffice them, too many questions remain open. Many people in our society are very spiritual. Some say that they terminated their membership in the church, because they did not find what they sought there. At the same time these people regard themselves as profound believers, they pray, they desire to do good, and they are truly seeking for something greater, for a mystical experience that lets them grow. (Demarmels, 2009: 29).

This extract shows that the quest for past-life regressions, is not only motivated by psychological or medical reasons, but has distinctively spiritual meaning for many clients too. It appears to be even the main motif for some. Demarmels also states, that many of her clients feel that the dominant churches – the Roman Catholic and the Protestant – do not have any ‘answers’ here. This makes the subject of reincarnation a challenge for theology, spirituality, and pastoral work of the churches.

Demarmels also discusses another important motif of clients who seek past-life regression: the quest for a deeper understanding of the self, and of determinants of one’s present existence [in my translation]:



Many clients also come to me with the desire to come into contact with their inner voice more clearly again. [...] These people are ready for a step of growth, to engage with their personalities consciously and critically. And that is, what is almost always behind it, when somebody comes for a past-life regression to me: the desire to learn more about themselves, and to develop their self. With about 80% of the people whom I may accompany, it is clearly audible that they wish to find the deeper meaning of their lives. (Demarmels, 2009: 31f.)

This motif is most ancient. It derives from the Platonic tradition. It remained alive all through the cultural history of Europe. In Byzantium, in the renaissance, the renowned theologian of Hesychasm, St. Gregory Palamas, wrote, in the context of his discussion of the motto of Delphi 'Know thyself!' [in my translation]

They teach the transmigration of souls. One cannot know oneself and be true to the precept [of "know thyself"] without knowing the body to which one has been attached before, where it has lived and what it did it heard."  
(Palamas, G., *Triads* I.1.10. (1338)

It appears that Palamas refers to a view that was widely held among philosophically educated contemporaries, by his allusion to "them". This indicates that there existed a philosophic tradition – as of Platonism, that integrated Pythagorean ideas, that came to western and central Europe in final decades of Byzantium. It has thrived there, ever since. Its resurgence in Modernity, from the 18<sup>th</sup> century on, made it a topic for new academic publications in theology from the mid-twentieth century on.

The literature by authors, who are theologians, or who are closely associated with the major churches, cover a wide range of attitudes. In the mid-twentieth century, Ernst Benz, a leading Protestant academic, wrote that the idea of metempsychosis was indeed shared and held by foremost Protestant authors of the Classic and Romantic age in German culture. (Benz, 1957: 150ff.). A vicious, and sweeping attack against past-life regressions, reincarnation, and, interestingly, near-death-experiences and -research, was written by Werner Tiede (Tiede, 1994), a Lutheran academic. The Anglican scholar, Perry Schmidt-Leukel took a differentiated view, in a collective volume, in which he defined the idea of reincarnation as a challenge to established Christian theology – and one to be met (Schmidt-Leukel, 1996: 7ff.).

The sociologist, and leading Roman Catholic layman, Helmut Zander, wrote a massive tome on the history of ideas of reincarnation, from Antiquity up to the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Zander, 1999). Zander discusses the flourishing of belief in reincarnation among German intellectuals in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century (Zander, 1999: 474). However, he declares the idea of reincarnation not to have been held by the Christian Churches, and to have no Biblical foundation [in my translation]: "No text of world history is that well researched ... In all of this, not a single indication for belief in transmigration of souls has emerged." (Zander, 1999: 119). Helmut Obst takes a more differentiated view. He indicates that there were indeed adherents of reincarnation in the Christian Church, and also in Judaism, where it is not consensually excluded. He declares that some passages of the Bible, in particular those about the prophet Elijah, and his relation to John the Baptist, in which he described to have recurred, indicate beliefs in transmigration of the soul (Obst, 1999: 89).

As to the presence of belief in metempsychosis, Obst discusses the role of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, a leading literary author and theoretician, and a Lutheran. In his influential treatise *Von der Erziehung des Menschengeschlechts*, (*On the Education of the Human Race*), published in 1780, he proposed the idea of successive lives, and of the possibility of continuous moral development through these. The spiritual aspect included the idea of increasing religious



insight, that can be described as ‘theonomy’ going along with increasing ‘autonomy’ of the self-knowing soul (Yasukata, 2003: 89ff.) – thus a revelation of things transcending this life. His views were enthusiastically adopted by Johann W. Goethe, the foremost literary author of his time, and by Immanuel Kant (Obst, 2009: 7f.), whose philosophically system does not fully cover this idea, as it defines ‘soul’ by consciousness and the continuity thereof. (Its extension across several incarnations would only be validated by past-life memories, however.) Common to these authors is that the belief in reincarnation is connected to the idea of successive moral and spiritual development. Wouter Hanegraaf, the leading researcher on Western Esotericism - with a chair for Esoteric Studies at the University of Amsterdam - has termed this idea as ‘ascending metempsychosis’ (Hanegraaff, 1998: 475ff.).

Polemics against metempsychosis have not ceased, in spite of such differentiated views. Thiede reiterated his attack recently, in a journal for Lutheran pastors, declaring that it is unacceptable, intellectually, and theologically, claiming to represent consensus among his colleagues. (Thiede, 2021: 120ff.). He also declares the concept of ‘soul’ to be a remnant of Platonic metaphysics and to be alien to Christianity. ‘Soul’ is to him nothing but a mental function of the body, as consciousness. Thereby, he distances this (Neo-Protestant) view from the Roman Catholic and the Orthodox beliefs in a human soul that is distinct from the body, and that survives bodily death. The polemics against the idea of transmigration of the soul, is thus also one of attack on the concept of ‘soul’ as such. It is related to the beliefs about the ‘afterlife’ – that does not exist, according to the ‘whole-death’ view, widely held in modern Protestantism. According to it, a human being dies completely, and will only be ‘created anew’ at resurrection. This view - called ‘Thnetopsychism’ in patristics – was revived in 20<sup>th</sup> century Protestantism, by leading theologians such as Karl Barth. According to it [in translation]:

Proponents of the theory of ‘Thnetopsychism’ – the ‘full death hypothesis’ - argue, that the doctrine of the immortality of the soul – as confirmed by the Roman Catholic Church – contradicts the Christian doctrine of resurrection. They polemicise against this view as being alien to Christianity, and as being Platonic-Neoplatonic in essence. Thus, Richard Heinzmann declares [in translation]:

... the influence of Platonic-Neoplatonic anthropology subverts the revealed truth of the resurrection of the dead, by the doctrine of the immortality of the soul, falsifying it, and robbing it of its original meaning. Resurrection, limited to the resurrection of the body – be it by the assumption of the immortality of the soul, as essentially identical with the human being - would thus be, finally, a superfluous, purely dogmatic postulate. In contrast, it is necessary, to maintain unambiguously, from a Christian perspective, that the death of the human being means its complete death, and that there is no immortal soul, that survives death, by its nature. Solely the gospel of the resurrection of the dead makes the human being hope beyond the boundary of death. (Heinzmann, 1986: 263f.)

It emerges clearly, that the polemics against the idea of transmigration of souls, of reincarnation, is to be understood in a wider context. The attack is essentially directed at the concept of ‘souls as such. (It may not be much overstated, to say, that the representatives of the ‘whole-death’ view of theological anthropology, adhere to a Materialistic conception of the human being, frames in a vague eschatology of a distant ‘day of resurrection as wholly new creation’. The answer, how the identity of those beings that are to be created anew at the ‘end of times’ with the individual persons, before their death, is to be thought, remains unanswered. It is merely postulated. The polemics against reincarnation thus appear to be part of a ‘shadow debate’. In my response (Kleinhempel, 2021: 168), I address these wider implications [in translation].:



The conviction, that the 'soul' is merely a Pagan Greek idea, that Catholicism and Orthodoxy have not fully overcome, is firmly in the Neo-Protestant mind. The (souls) reincarnation is combated as doctrine of Hinduism, of Esotericism, of Spiritism, and of research on near-death-experiences. Werner Thiede, engaged here, concludes his article on the transmigration of souls, in this journal, with a sentence that might only benevolently be called 'an expression of pathos': "Intellectual honesty does not permit any acceptance of belief in transmigration of souls in a context of the Christian Church; it is solely something for sectarians, or for an drift away to Esotericism." (Thiede, 2021: 125). To dispute 'intellectual honesty' of all, who think otherwise, is no good style. It can be shown that this accusation also targets texts of the Bible, as is to be shown. (Kleinhempel, 2021: 168).

The inclusion of Esotericism in his vicious polemics against reincarnation, indicates that he perceives it as such, as an issue in the ongoing religious competition, at a time, where spirituality and religious faith is rising in German society, whereas church membership is gradually declining. The theme is apparently not purely theologically 'academic', with the rejection of a non-materialistic anthropology - with 'soul' as distinct constituent of the human being -, that is also implied here, as the other issue at stake.

Thiede appears to be unaware, that Obst's differentiated and sympathetic presentation of belief in reincarnation have been met with sympathy in the culturally leading (moderately conservative) national newspaper, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*. In a review. Its author, Helmut Mayer, states pointedly (in my translation):

One can convince oneself in this book of the scholar of religion, Helmut Obst, who traces notions and concepts of reincarnation across the history and religions. It is truly a wide field, and as much as Christian Churches have rejected the idea of reincarnation, as deeply the inclination to it appears to be. (...)  
Attractive about these ideas is especially, that the obvious injustices in the fated life courses, and their conditions, are mollified. What would otherwise appear as injustice, could ... be corrected in later reincarnations. The benefits might be delineated as exoneration of God or creation, on the one hand, individual options for improvement in repeated (life) courses, on the other. (...)  
The Christian Church has, however, early on, voted against such wanderlust of the soul. With the rejection of the claim to a pre-existence of soul, and its final returning to God, without exception. Thus, it is not for the souls, to work for their salvation, but for the faithful to receive it as gift of grace – a fundamental theological rejection  
(Mayer, 2009)

Mayer thus describes theological issues at stake, and the revision of its rejection by literary and philosophical authors from the 18<sup>th</sup> century on.

### **The rejection of transmigration of souls by an imperial letter to the Synod of Constantinople (543 CE) and doctrinal statements on 'soul'**

In an interesting observation, the Orthodox Metropolitan and scholar, Kallistos Ware, points out that the rejection of transmigration of souls by the Church rests on weak foundations. It is



declared in a letter by the emperor Justinian to patriarch Menas, that was published at the Synod of Constantinople in 543. The letter was joined to the documents of the synod. Its main topic was the rejection of doctrines of Origenes, not transmigration of souls as such (Ware, 2001: 199f.) Therefore, he called for a revision of this rejection, and to give the issue renewed consideration. Although it has been factually received in the doctrinal history of the Church, its formal rejection and the narrow aspects of the idea rejected here, do not justify to regard this as binding indefinitely in Christian theology. A look at the text may illustrate Ware's point. Emperor Justinian wrote:

If anyone thinks or says that human souls pre-existed, that is, that they had previously been spirits and holy powers, but that satiated with the vision of God they turned to evil, and in this way the divine love in them became cold and they were named souls, and were condemned to punishment in the bodies, let him be anathema. (Justinian, (Emperor), *Anathematisms against Origen*, no. 1, Constantinople, 543)

The focus in this passage is not the idea of pre-existence of souls as such, before their incarnation, but the aspect "that is" of why they should choose to become incarnate at all, by saturation with the *visio dei*, or by weakening in the love of God. Furthermore, that incarnation is a form of punishment. This peculiar view of the reasons for incarnation, is not covered by its original presentation by Plato, in the dialogue republic, as to be discussed later. Looking at the context, it emerges that the central Christian notion of 'incarnation' is strangely subverted in subsequent paragraphs of these anathemas:

If someone says or maintains that the body of our Lord Jesus Christ with God the Logos, was firstly formed in the body of the Holy Virgin, and then God the Word, and the Soul, that existed before, were united with it, let him be anathema. (Justinian, (Emperor), *Anathematisms against Origen*, no. 3, Constantinople, 543)

If, as the emperor envisions, Jesus Christ existed as body, prior to his incarnation, then the very notion of 'incarnation' through the Virgin Mary, to become truly man, is subverted. It is in contradiction to the Nicene Creed, that states:

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only - begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all ages; Light of Light, true God of true God, begotten, not created, of one essence with the Father through Whom all things were made. Who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven and was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and became man.  
(The *Nicene Creed*)

The idea of "begotten before all ages" may hardly refer to the aspect of 'incarnation that is expressly connected to the conception by the Mother of God, by which it came happened, to realise the fully human nature of Jesus Christ conjoined with his divine nature.

In 451 the Council of Chalcedon had defined precisely, in its 5<sup>th</sup> session, on 22. October:

Following the holy fathers, we teach unanimously, to confess our Lord Jesus Christ as one and the same Son, the same is perfect in Godhead, and the same is perfect in humankind; the same is truly God and truly man from reasonable soul and body, the same is of the same nature (*o(moou/sion)*) to the Father as to Divinity, and of the same nature (*o(moou/sion)*) to us according to humanness...(Council of Chalcedon, *The Creed of Chalcedon*, 22.10.451)

The tension in the understanding of 'incarnation' to the emperor's letter is obvious. In the *Creed of Chalcedon* it rests the two constituents of human nature: 'body' and 'intellectual soul', that



are named as distinct entities, with the implication that they are united in incarnation, with neither preceding the other nor being a function of the other.

The Roman Catholic Church has reconfirmed the patristic view that the human being is composed of body, soul, and intellect, and thus the distinctness of 'soul'. (The identification of 'soul' and 'intellect' is a special development in Roman Catholic theology, by which the properties of both became united. The 'soul' became both the carrier – as an entity' and its function and content: consciousness or intellect. Thus, it is declared in the 4<sup>th</sup> Council of Constantinople (4<sup>th</sup> Council of Constantinople, 14<sup>th</sup> December 867 – 14<sup>th</sup> December 872, *Canon 11*, 28<sup>th</sup> February 870). Here the notion of two 'souls' – the one being a mortal vegetative soul, the other an intellectual soul, is rejected. The composition of the human being as having a reasonable intellectual soul is confirmed as Biblical. In Pope Benedict XIV (Josef Ratzinger) reaffirmed the doctrine of the distinct human soul:

The Sacred Congregation, whose task is to advance and protect the doctrine of the faith, here wishes to recall what the Church teaches in the name of Christ, especially concerning what happens between the death of the Christian and the general resurrection.

1) The Church believes (cf. the Creed) in the resurrection of the dead.

2) The Church understands this resurrection as referring to *the whole person*; for the elect it is nothing other than the extension to human beings of the Resurrection of Christ itself.

3) The Church affirms that a spiritual element survives and subsists after death, an element endowed with consciousness and will, so that the "human self" subsists. To designate this element, the Church uses the word "soul", the accepted term in the usage of Scripture and Tradition. Although not unaware that this term has various meanings in the Bible, the Church thinks that there is no valid reason for rejecting it; moreover, she considers that the use of some word as a vehicle is absolutely indispensable in order to support the faith of Christians.

(Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 1979)

This affirmation of the idea of 'soul' as a distinct anthropological entity is formulated, perceptibly, on the background of debates, such as the proposition of a 'whole-death-hypothesis', of a materialistic anthropology that regards 'soul' and consciousness merely as functions of the body, and of the reception of it, by some Neo-Protestant and recent Roman Catholic theologians. The understanding is emphasised, that soul is the medium and carrier of human consciousness, and that it survives the death of the body, undiminished, and continues to be active consciously (and self-consciously, by implication) after death. This includes the rejection of the idea that the souls 'sleep' or are non-existent after death – 'existing' being understood as a dynamic concept of perception, thought and activity. Pope Benedict XIV also cautions that the Christian doctrines about the afterlife do not give a full picture of what is to be expected there: "Neither Scripture nor theology provides sufficient light for a proper picture of life after death." (Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 1979). This leaves a space open, in which the re-incarnation of the soul might be envisioned.

It is evident, that on this basis the question, whether a soul can choose to become embodied once again, to re-incarnate', reveals a different ontological status, as when such a post-mortal existence (and survival) of soul is rejected altogether. In Roman Catholic theology, the influential theologian of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Karl Rahner, took the doctrine of his Church about the afterlife, and the intermediate state of soul – connected to the realm of 'purgatory', i. e. the possibility for post-mortal purification – as basis to call for a revision of the traditional rejection of reincarnation. He wrote [in my translation]:



Some difficulties about the doctrine of the intermediate (post-mortal) state, of Purgatory, can certainly still be resolved. One may merely also remind about the question, if the idea of a 'limbo', that looks to old-fashioned, might provide a basis, to respond better, and more positively, to deal with the doctrine of 'transmigration of souls', or 'reincarnation', that is considered as self-evident there – at least on the condition that such reincarnation is not understood as an infinite fate of man, that can never be uplifted. (Rahner, 1976: 438ff.)

What Rahner states here, in his systematic theology, *Grundkurs des Glaubens*, in the chapter on eschatology, the section on purgatory, is a carefully formulated call for revision of this rejection of reincarnation. In delimitation from ideas of the eternity of the world, that he ascribes to Indian religion, he states that a final access to heaven should be maintained – in agreement with the temporal character of purgatory.

In contrast, Polemics, such as those by Thiede, calling such notions "intellectually dishonest" and "misplaced in the realm of Christian theology", come across as ignorant, and disrespectful of the tradition of the Church, and of the affirmed doctrine of Churches, such as the Roman Catholic and the Orthodox. (Thiede's charge of 'sectarianism' should accordingly be mirrored to himself, for its narrow-mindedness.)

That this is no issue of Protestant versus Roman-Catholic and Orthodox theology emerges from what John Calvin wrote about the issue of 'soul':

Moreover, there can be no question that man consists of a body and a soul; meaning by soul, an immortal though created essence which is the nobler part. Sometimes it is called a spirit. But though the two terms, while used together, differ in their meaning, still when it is used by itself it is equivalent to soul (...) it is true indeed, that men cleaving too much to the earth are dull of apprehension, nay, being alienated from the Father of Lights, are so immersed in darkness as to imagine that they will not survive the grave, still the light is not so completely quenched in the darkness that all sense of immortality is lost. (Calvin, 1536, I, XV, 2)

Some of John Calvin's successors might be advised to take his words to heart, as to the soul and its afterlife in the post-mortal realm. It is interesting that Calvin ascribes the intuition that there might be an afterlife of the soul, to divine illumination. (The mere idea of it certainly appears as 'esoteric' to his Neo-Protestant successors.) In a pastoral perspective, he also notes that views about the afterlife have an impact on faith and sense of self in the pre-mortal state.

### **The origins of the European idea of reincarnation in Plato's writings, and their connection to near-death experiences**

Plato, in his dialogue *Politeia*, the *Republic*, discusses a near death experience of the soldier Er, and develops his conception of reincarnation from here. In a section from the vision of the post-mortal scenes, that Er beheld in his extended comatose state – in which he was taken for dead – Plato reports [in translation]:

All the souls had now chosen their lives, and they went in the order of their choice to Lachesis, who sent with them the genius whom they had severally chosen, to be the

guardian of their lives and the fulfiller of the choice: this genius led the souls first to Clotho, and drew them within the revolution of the spindle impelled by her hand, thus ratifying the destiny of each [...] they marched on in a scorching heat to the plain of Forgetfulness, which was a barren waste destitute of trees and verdure; and then towards evening they encamped by the river of Unmindfulness, [...] each one as he drank forgot all things. Now after they had gone to rest, about the middle of the night there was a thunder - storm and earthquake, and then in an instant they were driven upwards in all manner of ways to their birth, like stars shooting. He himself was hindered from drinking the water. But in what manner or by what means he returned to the body he could not say; only, in the morning, awaking suddenly, he found himself lying on the pyre.  
(Plato, *Republic*, X.620d-e)

This passage is situated at the threshold that is regularly observed in near-death-experiences. Those who approach it, know that they will no return to their embodied state once they cross this 'point of no return', yet, they have a vision of what happens beyond (Zaleski, 1993: 208f). In this section, Plato discusses the phenomenon that most people have no recollection of their past-life experiences. – The phenomenon of such memories has been researched empirically by the Icelandic academic psychologist Erlendur (Haraldsson) in a trans-cultural study of field research (Erlendur, 1995). The possibility of such recollections to be retrieved, is assumed as basis for past-life regressions.) Plato attributes to such '*anamnesis*' and ethical effect, of being guided by the remembrance of good and evil in one's previous life.

Plato connects the issue of past-life memories – as '*anamnesis* – to a deeper realisation of one's true and full identity (Lenk, 2004: 41ff.) its is noteworthy, that this idea is also adopted in the *Old Testament*, in *Sapientia Salomonis*, the *Book of Wisdom*, where the author declares [in my translation]: "I grew up as a gifted child, having received a good soul, moreover, good as I was, I came into an unspoilt body. I understood that I could receive the wisdom of God only as a gift..." (*Sap. Sal.* 8:19-21) than I was. The phrase: "I came into an unspoilt body" alludes to a previous existence of a soul that became united to a body. The connection of the state of the soul to near-death experiences is also evident in the writings of Pope Gregory the Great (6<sup>th</sup> century CE.) in his *Dialogues*, the *Dialogi de vita et miraculis patrum Italicorum*. The visions of the post-mortal states, made in near-death experiences, or observed on others – such as perceptions of the soul leaving a dying body – have laid the foundations for a rich mediaeval literature of this genre. In many of the texts these visions include ethical judgements, and often lead to the betterment of those who experienced or saw them (Zaleski, 1993: 46f.):

### **Biblical testimonies**

A differentiated picture emerges on this background of motifs of reincarnation that appear, from Greek Antiquity and in Christianity. They coincide that there are autochthonous traditions here. The biblical testimonies may be viewed accordingly. The renowned Biblical scholar, Klaus Berger, whose *Theologiegeschichte des Urchristentums* is a standard work on the theological history of early Christianity, gives detailed and conceptually differentiated exegeses of relevant passages. Summing up the analyses, he declares [in my translation]:

Prophets can return, fundamentally – and specifically in the form of other persons. Thus, it was assumed that Jesus ... could have been one of the elder prophets. Persons that were uplifted to heaven, like Henoah or Elijah, can return, either as themselves – in this case in a heavenly form... or transfigured, and then 'as' others (e. g. as John the Baptist



... according to Mark 9:13 parr. Matthew 17:11f. or as  
Jesus according to Mark 8:28. (Berger, 1996: 66)

This concise summary conveys astonishing implications. Berger indicates that the expectation of Christ's eschatological return in transfigured state emerged out of the specifically Biblical forms of expectation of the return of the prophets, either in a reincarnated form, in another prophet, or in a transfigured, heavenly shape – as for Christ's eschatological form. In the context of the report on Jesus' transfiguration on Mt. Tabor, (Mark 9:2-10, par. Matthew 17:1-9 and Luke 9:28-36) Jesus tells his disciples, on the way down from the mountain, about the relation between Elijah and John the Baptist – in whom he was understood to have reincarnated:

<sup>11</sup>And they asked him, 'Why do the teachers of the law say that Elijah must come first?'

<sup>12</sup>Jesus replied, 'To be sure, Elijah does come first, and restores all things. Why then is it written that the Son of Man must suffer much and be rejected? <sup>13</sup>But I tell you, Elijah has come, and they have done to him everything they wished, just as it is written about him.'  
(Mark 9:11-13. *New International Version*.)

This is a clear confirmation by the Evangelist St. Mark that Jesus shared these views on reincarnation and return of prophets in others too. Of course, there are differences to the Platonic and the Hindu conceptualisations of reincarnation, and in the expectations attached to them respectively, but in the essential understanding that persons can return in reincarnated form there is agreement – even if this is presented rather as an exception in the *New Testament*. This should be taken note of, and the implications for theological anthropology should be considered. (it is one of the strong points of Klaus Berger's *Theological History of early Christianity*, that he presents a rich collection of theological motifs that have not become received into the mainstream of doctrine in different Christian denominations.)

### **At the margins of reincarnation: return of prophets in a 'pneumatic body'**

About the issue of 'shape' and 'body' ('gestalt'), in a non-incarnate state St. Paul stated:

<sup>35</sup>But someone will ask, 'How are the dead raised? With what kind of body will they come?' [...] <sup>44</sup>it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body.  
(1 *Corinthians* 15:35.44. *New International Version*)

Now, the key word here, 'body' ('soma') is not necessarily defined by 'materiality', as a body of 'flesh and blood'. It can mean the 'carrier' of identity, also in a non-material sense. Traditionally this is understood as 'pneumatic' i. e. as 'subtle' or 'fine-mattered', as expressed in V. 44: 'soma pneumatiko/n'. The expression 'pneuma' is not to be understood metaphorically, as in the expression 'the spirit of courage'. St. Paul thus states that the 'pneumatic body' – in the post-mortual state - is distinct from the 'material body' of the incarnate state.

This notion of a 'pneumatic body' may be applied to the apparition of Moses and Elijah from the 'otherworld' in the report on the Transfiguration of Jesus Christ:

<sup>2</sup>After six days Jesus took Peter, James and John with him and led them up a high mountain, where they were all alone. There he was transfigured before them. <sup>3</sup>His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them. <sup>4</sup>And there appeared before them Elijah and Moses, who were talking with Jesus.  
(*St. Mark* 9:2-4. *New International Version*)



In agreement with the confirmation of a living post-mortal existence, proclaimed by Pope Benedict XIV in 1979, Moses and Elijah 'appear' here – in the time of the transfiguration – recognisable or their identities, and 'talk' with Jesus – presumably not as physical bodies, but as 'pneumatic' ones. The 'pneumatic body' apparently safeguard their identity with their previous incarnate states. The mode of communicating their identity to Jesus and the disciples is apparently likewise a 'pneumatic' communication, attributed to souls, also in their incarnate state. The reincarnation of the prophet Elijah, which Jesus confirms to have happened recently, in this pericope, describes a different state of being. By implication: Even if the prophet Elijah did reincarnate in John the Baptist, his previous identity – as prophet Elijah - remains accessible and active, as shown here.

### **An outlook into mystical Judaism on reincarnation**

Martin Buber, the renowned scholar of the mystical Jewish life and traditions of Eastern European Judaism, of the Hassidim, tells the following story about the famous Hassid Ya'akov Yitshak Horowitz, called the 'Seer of Lublin' (1745-1815). He was the most influential teacher of Hasidism in Poland and in Galicia at his time (Faierstein, 2010). Buber tells about it in the story *From his Seeing* [my translation]:

The Hasidim tell: "When the soul of the seer of Lublin was created, it was given to her to see from one end of the world to the other [...] when he looked at someone's front, or when he read someone's paper slip with petitions, he could see down into the roots of the persons soul, from the first human onwards, saw if she came from Cain or from Abel, saw, how often she had assumed human shape (reincarnated) on her transmigrations, und what she had spoilt and what improved in every life, in which sins she became constricted, and by which virtues she had uplifted herself. When he once visited rabbi Mordechai of Neshizh, the spoke about this gift. The one from Lublin said. 'That I see on everyone, what he has done, impedes my love of Israel. Therefore, I ask you, act, so that this faculty is taken from me.' The one from Neshizh responded: 'What heaven has decided, to that applies, what is stated in the Gemara: 'Our God gives, but he does not take back.'"  
(Buber, 1949: 461)

The story is told in this context, to show the casual way, in which these issues of reincarnation – and of the perception of past lives, was treated in this deeply devout and doctrinally firmly rooted mystical Judaism. It may show the way, to a renewed approach to the issue. Buber was certainly aware of its significance in the context of German culture with its renewed adoption of reincarnation, and its continued interest in it. He may have indicated that mystical Judaism had something to say on this issue.

### **Conclusion**

It may be advised to pick up the cue from Metropolitan Kallistos Ware to rethink the (accidental) rejection of the idea of reincarnation, and of transmigration of souls, that became received and standard in Christian theology. His indication that the formal strength of this rejection at the synod of Constantinople in 453 is rather weak, because reincarnation was not condemned as such, but with specific views attached to it, about the reason for souls to reincarnate, should be noted. It opens a gate for reconsideration and revision.



The careful declaration by Pope Benedict XIV on the status of the living soul in the afterlife, with the affirmation of its existence for Roman Catholic theology, but also the indication of limits to our knowledge of post-mortal processes and actions of the soul, provide an open gate for further considerations, and a review of the issue of reincarnation. Just briefly earlier, the call of the Roman Catholic systematic theologian Karl Rahner, to reconsider the rejection of reincarnation, on this basis, should be constructively picked up, and taken to its consequences, in the frame of Christian doctrine about the afterlife. The theology of incarnation, developed to conceptualise the natures of Christ, provide a fine basis to conceptualise the notion of incarnation and of re-incarnation of the human soul, in general, too.

In this way it might be possible to relate Christian theology to an evolving field of societal awareness of realms of reality that lie beyond the material and embodied states – as shown for the research on previous lives and on near-death experiences, that lie on the boundaries of psychology and religion or spirituality. The growing conviction in many societies, such as the German, which was in the focus here, that reality extends beyond the material can also be applied to the issue of post-mortal existence and of reincarnation. The dogmatic and exegetical probes presented here, may show pathways, and points of departure for a new venture in dogmatic theology, with influence on pastoral practice as well. The practices, based on reincarnation, and the experiential testimonies, published in books and on the internet, require further research and attention for theology.

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