

REINCARNATION  
ONE SOUL--MANY LIFETIMES

by  
Anne Wondra

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Dr. Dan DiDomizio

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Ever wonder what happens to a person after they die? I suspect most everyone has.

We've been taught about heaven and hell--heaven for good persons and hell for the bad. And those of us with a Roman Catholic upbringing were also taught about purgatory--the place for those who were not quite good enough for heaven yet, but were still too good for hell. Descriptions were always vague, abstract, and mysterious. We were assured, however, that heaven was a place of great happiness; hell, a place of unending pain and suffering; and purgatory, a place of penance or purification to make up for past sins. Eventually, however, the souls in purgatory would move on to heaven.

For centuries people have accepted that explanation more or less on faith. After all, what human being could challenge it with any solid evidence to the contrary. Only one who had been there and back would be a qualified witness to tell us about death, about the soul's life afterwards, and the truth about what God looks like. To our knowledge, only Jesus took such a route, and his testimony was carefully preserved in what we now know as the Bible or the Scriptures. But even so, there is still disagreement about exactly what some of his statements meant.

In the Eastern tradition, and in early Christian times,

there was a widely accepted belief in reincarnation--the belief that bodily death is not the end, but rather, that the soul, usually after a period of rest, is reborn into another human body in an effort to become more and more like its creator.

In recent years, doctors, scientists, psychologists, archeologists, and experts in numerous other fields have assisted in efforts to investigate the claims of people who believe they have lived in this world as someone else in another time and place. Three researchers of reincarnation cases are Frederick Lenz, Ph.D., author, lecturer, and Professor in Eastern Philosophy at the New School for Social Research in New York City; Dr. Ian Stevenson, Carlson Professor of Psychiatry at the University of Virginia Medical School; and distinguished Professor of Philosophy Geddes MacGregor, an Anglican (Episcopalian) priest and author of numerous works on religious subjects, including Reincarnation in Christianity: A New Vision of the Role of Rebirth in Christian Thought and Reincarnation as a Christian Hope. All of these gentlemen have worked extensively with persons who have experienced past-life remembrances. Dr. Lenz' book, Lifetimes: True Accounts of Reincarnation, documents one hundred twenty-seven cases that he investigated. Of those,

the great majority of the experiences occurred to adult subjects. In addition to relating the commonalities among the accounts, Lenz also compares the accounts with the ancient Eastern writings of the Tibetan Book of the Dead and the Bhagavad Gita. The comparison is astounding. It's interesting to note, too, the diversity of backgrounds in Lenz' subjects:

- 1) 74 women  
53 men
- 2) 10 under age 25  
47 between 25 and 40  
46 between 40 and 55  
24 over 55
- 3) 95 U.S. residents  
13 from Canada  
19 from Great Britain
- 4) 30 are professionals (doctors, lawyers, etc.)  
13 blue-collar workers  
27 housewives  
13 government jobs  
15 agrarian and farm-related professionals  
10 students  
19 either self-employed (artists, writers, etc.)  
or unemployed
- 5) 119 had no prior belief in reincarnation  
5 neither believed nor disbelieved  
3 acknowledged belief prior to experience

Unlike Lenz, Dr. Ian Stevenson specializes in the case histories of children, generally under eight years of age. Young children often start speaking of their former lives at

very young ages, and because they have limited access to outside information at this time, the children are less likely than adults to impose any such information.

(A)s most of the children start speaking of their former life between the ages of two and four, they have limited access to information upon which they could consciously or subconsciously build a case of reincarnation. In addition, the children in many of Stevenson's published cases go into incredible detail concerning their former lives, correctly naming relatives and towns or villages where they lived. They accurately describe houses in which they dwelt, where money, jewelry, or weapons have been secretly hidden. Thus their stories are not the product of childish imagination. "One thing you look for in a good case," says Stevenson, "is richness of obscure detail."

Another strong feature of these cases is that they lend themselves to accurate verification because most of the previous lives terminated only a few months or years prior to the present incarnations. Consequently, former parents and relatives are still alive to attest to, or contradict, what the children say.<sup>1</sup>

As of 1977, Stevenson had compiled five large volumes of case histories of children around the world who provide evidence, often in incredible detail, that they lived before. Their claims have usually been found 90 percent accurate.<sup>2</sup>

What's more, Stevenson's research is recognized by the American Medical Association as meticulous, extensive, and painstaking:

In reviewing the first volume in Stevenson's series *Cases of the Reincarnation Type*, the Journal

of the American Medical Association spoke of his "meticulous and extended investigations," saying he has "painstakingly and unemotionally collected a detailed series of cases in which the evidence for reincarnation is difficult to understand on any other grounds....He has placed on record a large amount of data that cannot be ignored"(December 1, 1975).<sup>3</sup>

Stevenson's research, too, involves subjects of diversified backgrounds:

1339 cases on file  
 324 U.S. residents  
 139 Burma  
 135 India  
 114 Turkey  
 111 Great Britain  
 516 Other parts of the world

With that, let us consider first, what reincarnation is--who and what is behind it according to traditional teaching; second, the case histories of persons who have experienced past-life remembrances that either concur or contradict tradition; third, what insights we might gain for ourselves; and finally, how reincarnation may or may not contradict Christian beliefs.

According to Far Eastern doctrines, the process of reincarnation was started by God when he created the world.<sup>4</sup>

The Hindus and the Buddhists believe that when the soul is first created it is not fully developed. In order for it to fully develop it must pass through the process of reincarnation. But God does

not compel the soul to incarnate. If it wishes, it can stay in one of the many beautiful nonphysical worlds. (Note freedom of choice--consistent with Christian scriptures.) But some souls feel the necessity to consciously evolve toward a higher level of perfection in order to please God. They choose to incarnate into the physical world because only there can they attain complete perfection. (Conf. "In a word, you must be made perfect like your Holy Father is perfect." Matt. 5:48) Souls who choose to incarnate on earth will eventually reach more advanced levels of development and enjoy much more peace and bliss than those who choose not to. (Question: Are there other worlds besides ours? Conf. "I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must lead them, too, and they shall hear my voice. There shall be one flock then, one shepherd." Jn. 10:16)

Souls who incarnate on earth pass through a specific series of stages in their evolution. New souls who are starting their journey incarnate first in the mineral kingdom, then progress through the plant and animal kingdom, and finally enter the human kingdom. After thousands of human incarnations, in each of which the soul progresses to a higher level of development, it reaches a perfected state and stops incarnating on earth (or it can choose to return to help others reach a more perfected state). (Conf. "The Father loves me for this: that I lay down my life to take it up again. No one takes it from me; I lay it down freely. I have the power to lay it down, and I have the power to take it up again. This command I received from my Father." Jn. 10:17-18) It will then go to a nonphysical world, where it will continue to exist in a state of total bliss and joy for eternity....

In each lifetime the soul evolves to a higher level. All of the experiences and knowledge it gains in each lifetime is stored within itself. When the soul chooses to leave a particular body, it passes through a number of nonphysical worlds, after which it comes to rest in its own world. After resting, it selects a new incarnation and starts the

process over again.

The soul seeks different experiences in each of its bodies. In some bodies, it chooses to experience suffering, poverty, illness, and other difficulties. In other incarnations, it chooses to experience fame, fortune and power. But in and through all of these experiences the soul remains in a state of joy. It is only concerned with progressing toward perfection. It welcomes all experiences that will help it to reach its destined goal.<sup>5</sup> (Parenthetical notes mine.)

Lenz records in his book, cases that parallel all of these steps. But before I elaborate, I should explain what a "past-life remembrance" is. A past-life remembrance is generally not a split-second flashback. To the contrary, they often last ten to twenty minutes. The following is a model of the typical past-life remembrance, based on the one hundred twenty-seven interviews conducted by Frederick Lenz:

A man is engaged in normal activity when he hears a high-pitched ringing sound. The sound grows in intensity until it blocks out all others sounds in the room. He feels his body becoming very light, as if it is floating in the air. His surroundings start to grow hazy, and he sees many different-colored lights passing before his eyes. The entire room starts to vibrate; he sees patterns formed by these vibrations in the air and the objects around him. He loses sight of his physical surroundings and feels that he has gone beyond his body. He begins to feel ecstatic. He is filled with such a profound sense of well-being that he does not worry about or question what is happening to him. He discovers that he has stopped thinking, but finds that he can understand things without having to think. He is totally conscious of



everything that is happening to him; he feels that he has never been more conscious of anything in his life.

A variety of different scenes and events flash rapidly before his eyes. Each scene is suspended in time, and his momentary glance allows him to experience every part of it. He feels that he is watching a play or a movie. He can see people, hear their conversations; and he gradually becomes aware that the scenes and the people are from one of his past lives.

After realizing that they directly concern him, he watches the scenes more intently. Soon he can distinguish one particular character in the "movie" whom he recognizes as himself in a previous life. He does not see every aspect of his former life; he sees only parts of it.

His awareness changes, and he finds that instead of just watching the "movie" of his former life, he is now actually participating in it. He talks, feels sensations, smells odors, and completely relives moments from his past. His consciousness alternates: some moments he is aware that he is watching the "movie," and other moments he forgets that he is viewing a past life and becomes totally absorbed in experiencing it.

Eventually the visions begin to fade, and he starts to become aware of his physical body. Soon the visions stop and his experience comes to a close.<sup>6</sup>

As I noted earlier, Lenz' interviews revealed examples of nearly all of the evolutionary stages of the soul described in the Hindu and Buddhist traditions. Perhaps most surprising are the experiences of Wendy, a dental assistant in Ann Arbor, Michigan, who discussed a previous incarnation in which she

was a bird; and of Nat, a computer designer for a small electronics firm in the New York area, who saw three of his prehuman incarnations--once as a bird, then a giant sea turtle, and then a whale. First Wendy:

I viewed hundreds of my lives one earth. I was this and that person. I went further and further back. I viewed some of my first human lifetimes in which I was little more than a savage. The voice that had been talking to me through all of my visions told me that I had been an owl in my last animal life. Then it happened. I became the owl from the inside out, from every possible angle. It was like flash, flash, flash, flash. First I would be inside it, then outside it. I saw exactly what I looked like with these orange eyes, and these sort of brown and white feathers. I saw it from every possible 360-degree angle. Then I experienced the consciousness of an owl. It was absolutely blank, like there was nothing there. It was totally empty. The experience lasted maybe for three minutes. It was absolutely fascinating, like a movie show. At times I was in the movie, and at times I was watching it.<sup>7</sup>

And now Nat:

I had the sensation that I was flying through the air. The ground below me was clear; I could pick out the slightest detail. I was conscious in a very different way. I did not have thoughts exactly; they were more impressions that darted through me. I could feel my bird body pulsing each time I moved my wings. The wind was against me, so I had to pump hard. I felt freedom; I was free to fly and sail in the wind. I caught a breeze and glided; the sensation was unbelievable....

In the next incarnation I was in the water. I felt I was a turtle--a giant sea turtle. I had a

sense of timelessness. I can remember being in the water, then crawling on land. I could not see well; the world seemed so bright when I was on land. I remember that the birds bothered me. It seems funny now that I was so incredibly slow on land but so agile when I was in the water.

The earliest one I saw is the most difficult to describe. I was in the water again. I was a whale. I could feel the cold black water moving past me. Eating, hunger, constantly feeding--these were my main concerns. I did not have much awareness, only the feeling of constant movement. I simply ate and swam, although I could feel a kind of protective emotion toward the other whales around me. We traveled in a group, and I was always aware of the others, particularly the young. They needed my protection.<sup>8</sup>

It was interesting, too, to note how some people described a "chain of lifetimes:"

Some individuals reported that the guide showed them an overview of all of their lifetimes. When they viewed this "chain of lifetimes," they were able to see how they had progressed from one lifetime to another. Some persons reported seeing hundreds of lifetimes, while others saw only a few:<sup>9</sup>

"Pearls on a string--that's what they were like. Each one was like a little globe. As I looked at it, I got a distinct feeling from each one of them. It was like looking at photographs from each year of your life. You could see how you had grown in each one."<sup>10</sup>

"Clear bubbles, clear globes filled with a kind of viscous liquid. Each one was perfect. The guide told me about each one, about what each had meant. There were many of them. I had the feeling that I hadn't accomplished much in them, though. I had lived so many ordinary lives and not really done much so far."<sup>11</sup>

"I was amazed by how much progress I had made. The first lifetimes I could see didn't seem human. I was hardly a conscious being. In the middle ones I was very unkind. I was selfish, vain and egotistical. In the most recent ones I was no longer like that. I had become more involved in giving, sharing and loving. I was a better person."<sup>12</sup>

Most of the people I spoke with about their chain of lifetimes felt that they had progressed at a very slow rate from lifetime to lifetime. They felt that God had given them the opportunity to evolve to a higher state in each life, but that they had held back their own development by not striving for higher moral and spiritual values.<sup>13</sup>

So, now, assuming that reincarnation does exist, as documented evidence suggests, who and what is behind this phenomenon? According to Eastern beliefs and the past-life remembrances of Lenz' subjects and other sources, God, the Creator, is behind the reincarnation process. To answer the "what" part, recall the Eastern terms "samsara" and "karma." In the Eastern view, the world is constant and endless, yet in a cyclic process of change--birth, death, and rebirth.<sup>14</sup> This world view is known as "samsara." "Karma" is the law of cause and effect. "Simply put, the law of karma says that every time an individual acts, whether his action is on the physical, mental, or psychic level, he creates an effect that will be returned to him either in his current lifetime or in a future lifetime."<sup>15</sup> In a sense, our Western thought is

similar. We too believe that we will reap what we sow; if not in this world, then in the world to come.

In the Judeo-Christian tradition, when a person commits a sin he is punished. If his sin remains unabsolved by God, he will be punished eternally. But the Hindus and Buddhists believe that there is no such thing as evil; there is only Light and less Light. Since God exists in all things, they reason that all things must therefore be good.

According to this view, God exists in different degrees in all things. He exists in both the light of wisdom and the darkness of ignorance. The purpose of karma is to teach a person to prefer the light of wisdom to the darkness of ignorance, to lead him to perfection by showing him where he has left the path that leads to truth and to encourage him to return to that path.<sup>16</sup>

In addition, Far Eastern doctrines also teach that "Although the law of karma is binding for all people, it is possible, through the grace of God, for a person to skip over much of his bad karma. If God observes that an individual is truly sorry he has done wrong and will not repeat his mistake, he can nullify that person's bad karma."<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, "One should never worry about one's past karma because that only binds one more firmly to one's karma."<sup>18</sup>

The case of Bob, an employee for a large aerospace firm in Seattle, seems to concur. In Vietnam one May afternoon, while he and his squad were pinned down under heavy mortar fire, and while he was waiting for the shelling to stop, he had the

following remembrance:

I saw several lifetimes. The one thing that was constant throughout everything I saw was what I can only call a guide. The guide kept telling me when I had learned and when I hadn't. For example, I saw several lifetimes in which I was a warrior. There was one in particular in which I was a Roman officer....But at the end of my life, when I lay dying, I saw all the things that had happened to me in that life pass before my eyes. I saw nothing but the killing and other bad things I had done. I saw one good thing though, when I had saved those Christians. At this point I heard the guide again. It told me that because of all the harm I had done others, I might have suffered in my next life, but because I had done this one positive thing, much of that suffering was not going to take place.

The guide told me that doing one positive thing cancels many of the negative things we have done. It told me that the same was true in the life I am currently leading. It told me to help others instead of hurting them. The guide went on to explain that I could rectify my current mistakes if I would only do positive things that would help others. The guide constantly emphasized that the most important thing I needed to learn in my current life was to love those around me. The guide told me that I should not worry about the harmful things I had already done. If I would resolve from that point on to do the right things, then I could easily overcome the negative things I had done thus far.<sup>19</sup>

Other karmic references are also documented: Mario of Jersey City, New Jersey, lost his sight in an industrial accident. Subsequent to that he had a remembrance of a past-life incident that he believes had something to do with it. He saw himself as a king who had, in a fit of rage, had his wife's eyes put out.<sup>20</sup> Or take Leon who lives in

Chicago. He and his wife were unable to have children. And although they had visited many doctors, no one had been able to find a satisfactory explanation. But in a vision of one of his past lives, Leon believes to have found the cause. In that life he found himself walking in a jungle with a large group of other men. All of them were carrying spears. They came to a village, occupied at the time by women, children and old men. They attacked the village and he had killed a pregnant woman. As she was dying she cursed him, and it was revealed to him that because he had taken her life and that of her unborn child, he would not be allowed children in his present lifetime.<sup>21</sup> A third example is that of an airplane pilot from Philadelphia who says his life has been very easy. He recalls a vision he had during the Second World War of one of his past lives that he feels might have something to do with it: He found himself in a town where the people were all dressed like Arabs and the buildings were made out of a whitish sandstone. He saw himself as an old man dressed in robes that were old and worn, with a group of young boys seated at his feet. He recorded the following:

I had been a wealthy landowner. I had spent every waking moment of my life in earning more and more money. One day I met a man who told me of a higher truth. I listened to him speak, and his words touched my heart. He told me to renounce my

belongings and live humbly and simply. I was so moved by what he said that I started to live a spiritual life. I gave my possessions to others and spent my time teaching and giving instruction. I saw that my later years had all been for the service of others.

When I was seeing these things, I heard a voice talking to me. The voice was explaining that good things came to me in this life because I had been kind to others in my past. The voice told me, "You will return to your country after the War. You will live and go on to work for others. You must love others. You must serve others. This is where true happiness lies. Those who have wealth, fame and pleasure only delude themselves. These things only rob them of their real treasures, their awareness of truth. In this life you do not need to give all your belongings away as you did then. You need material things to help you help others. What is important is not your wealth, but how you use it. If you help others with it, then it is good. If you use it selfishly, then you gain nothing and will be unhappy."

The voice said other things about how to run my life. It assured me that I would live, which seemed unlikely to me at the time. I did live, and I have tried my best to follow the advice of the voice. It is true what it said about being happy. I am happiest when I help others. I use a great deal of my free time in community service projects and in helping members of my family.<sup>22</sup>

According to the Buddhist view, it is the nature of an action and the intent of the person who performs that action that determine which actions are considered good karma and which are considered bad karma. Any action that harms another individual becomes bad karma. But just as our own legal



system recognizes the importance of a person's intentions when committing a crime, so too the law of karma appears to make the same allowances.<sup>23</sup>

Several persons in Dr. Lenz' study recalled past-lives in which their death had been self-inflicted. Here, too, the law of karma seems to apply. Consider the following excerpts:

Those who recalled committing suicide in their past lives have said that the penalty for their self-destruction was incalculable. They had to go through a long period of time before they could reincarnate, much longer than persons who have died of natural causes. They further stated that they actually regressed after their suicide, and they had to go through many other lifetimes in order to attain the level of development they had reached before they had taken their own lives. These extra lifetimes were usually quite horrible.... Only after many of these painful lifetimes did they work out what they describe as their penalty and start to lead normal lives again.<sup>24</sup>

The following comes from Willie, a taxi driver in Detroit:

I was sure it was wrong to do it. The entire time I was dying I kept thinking, "My God, what have I done to myself?" When I left my body I knew that I wasn't going where everyone else went. I went into an awful world. The pain was worse than being boiled alive in oil. My lives, when I started to be born again, were terrible too. I was born deformed, mongoloid; I died as a child. It was terrible. I had to accept it; it was my fault. I had thrown away the gift of life. After many, many of these lives I feel I was forgiven. I had learned my lesson. Then my lives were like before. It all came back to normal again.<sup>25</sup>

From another source, consider the following story of Sinha and

Marta:

In Rio Grande do Sul, the southernmost state of Brazil, a baby was born to a prosperous rancher, Senor C.J. de Oliveira. The child was named Maria, but everyone called her Sinha...She purposely neglected herself by inviting exposure to cold, damp weather and engaging in exhausting activities. Her voice became hoarse, a throat infection spread to the lungs, and tuberculosis set in. In a few months she was gone.

Before she died, Sinha confessed to her dear friend Ida that the illness had been self-caused. She then made two solemn predictions: first, she would be reborn as Ida's daughter; and second, "when reborn and at an age when I can speak on the mystery of rebirth in the body of the little girl who will be your daughter, I shall relate many things of my present life, and thus you will recognize the truth." Ida shared this confidence with her schoolteacher husband, but they agreed simply to await developments and say nothing to their family or to others.

Months after Sinha died, a daughter was born to the Lorenz family and given the name Marta. Save for character similarities, the earliest indication that she could have been Sinha reborn occurred when Marta was less than a year old and Sinha's father visited the Lorenz family. Another family acquaintance, a Mr. Valentin, happened to drop in at the same time. The latter evinced great friendliness to the child, but Marta immediately went to Sinha's father, and despite his forbidding, unwelcome attitude toward children, she caressed his beard and said, "Hello, papa." This had no significance for him; not until eleven years later was he informed of Sinha's supposed rebirth as Marta....

During the next few years, Marta made 120 separate declarations either about the life of Sinha or of recognitions of persons known to Sinha. Her present father kept detailed records of these

statements. Some of these concerned matters entirely unknown to him, to his wife, or to the other children of the family, but they subsequently proved correct....

Another unexpected confirmation occurred when Marta was nineteen and employed on a ranch to teach children. The family there were strict Roman Catholics, and she dared not breathe a word about such unorthodox subjects as reincarnation. An elderly black woman employee was especially drawn to Marta and exclaimed to others: "This girl looks like Sinha!" The woman turned out to be one of the former black servants who had worked at the Oliveiro ranch and whom Marta mentioned when she was a child of two and a half.

Sinha's unfortunate act of suicide through self-neglect--causing her death from tuberculosis of the lungs and larynx--apparently had two karmic repercussions on the present life. First was her extreme susceptibility to colds and bronchial troubles. None of the other Lorenz children were thus afflicted. When these troubles arose, she felt she was about to die and also felt her body to be large as if she were an adult. Dr. Stevenson comments: "The laryngeal pain and hoarseness evidently led through association to the full reproduction of the last scenes in the life of Sinha....I believe that we may reasonably consider Marta's vulnerability to bronchitis and laryngitis a kind of 'internal birthmark' related to the previous life and death of Sinha."

The second consequence was a tendency, when life became difficult, to wish to destroy herself....26

Conversely, like our own justice system, not all infringements of the law deserve punishment.

It would appear that in some cases of suicide, extenuating circumstances can lessen or totally wipe out this karmic penalty. When a person commits

suicide to escape an ignoble death (as in the case of a soldier who has been captured by the enemy and kills himself rather than allowing the enemy to destroy him), there appears to be no penalty. For one who is dying of natural causes in a particularly painful or degrading manner (as in the case of a terminal cancer patient who commits suicide instead of watching his body slowly deteriorate), there appears to be no penalty. In instances in which a person sacrifices his own life so that others may live, or when a husband or wife dies and the other partner prefers death to living without his mate, there appears to be no penalty. The punishment is apparently applied to the person who has committed suicide to escape from problems and difficulties that he could have overcome had he tried.<sup>27</sup>

The following are two more examples of suicide deaths in a past lifetime. The difference, however, is that there appear to be no adverse karmic affects in these cases. The first is from Jack, a student at the University of Texas, who recalls his past death as a prisoner of war. The second is from Elaine who works as a waitress in a resort hotel in Miami, Florida. Her past life she feels took place in India.

Jack: I was a prisoner of war. They used to beat us every day. We had no food, and the men around me were dying like flies. I was forced to do hard labor and then beaten. We found out that our troops were coming back. They were going to kill us all before our troops could rescue us. I killed myself by swallowing broken glass....After I died, an angelic being came to me. She told me that I did not have to suffer for killing myself because I wasn't running away. She told me that those people who made me suffer would suffer in the future.

Elaine: I saw one life in which I lived in India. My husband died. In India at that time it was the

custom for the wife to die with her husband, to go into his funeral pyre. I wanted my soul to go with my husband's soul. My life was meaningless without him. I gladly threw myself into the fire. I died with great love for him.

I did not suffer because I had ended my own life. I made a strong bond with my husband's soul because of what I did. I was with him in many lives after that because I had so much love for him. God was aware of why I did it and forgave me. He allowed me to be with him again after that because my love was so strong.<sup>28</sup>

It occurred to me while reading the above that perhaps there's a message of truth for us in this as well. I was reminded of the Japanese Kamakazi pilots, of the ancient tribal custom of suttee described in Elaine's account, and of our court cases involving voluntary euthanasia and mercy killing. Do we cling too tightly to these physical bodies of ours? Or maybe we're too concerned with the wrong questions (i.e. upholding the letter of the law at the expense of the spirit of the law). There is a command of "Thou shall not kill" (including thyself). But somewhere in there, there is also a line about mercy being desired, rather than sacrifice; and further, that it is the spirit that gives life, while the flesh is useless. Question: When has the spirit left, that the flesh may be mercifully released? And when is it more merciful to let the body die?

According to the theory of karma, there are two instances

in which karma can be nullified. The first is through the grace of God, illustrated earlier in the example of Bob, the Roman officer in a past lifetime. The second instance occurs when a person is under the guidance of a Self-Realized guru, and the guru chooses to accept some of the burden of his student's bad karma. The following illustration is from Justin, a Franciscan monk. He believes the past life took place in Tibet:

(T)he thing I remember was living in a monastery there. Everyone dressed in ochre-colored robes. My parents took me to the monastery in that life when I was only twelve. I studied with the master of the monastery. He seemed to take a shine to me right away. I was his personal attendant, bringing him food, washing his clothes, doing things of that nature. I venerated him because I knew he was a very holy man. I was ill, though; there was something wrong with my heart. I became sick very easily and wasn't as strong as the other monks in the temple were. The master changed all of that for me. He explained that my illness was the result of the bad things I had done in past lives. He healed me by taking it upon himself. Then my heart was fine; I did not get sick the way I had before. I lived to serve him for many, many years.<sup>29</sup>

So far, I've spoken of the evolutionary cycle of the soul--from its basic creation, through its cycle of many nonhuman lifetimes, to its incarnation into human lifetimes. I've also spoken of the karmic laws affecting those incarnations. In addition, according to the doctrines of

reincarnation, the soul goes through a series of developmental stages once it enters human incarnations--much like the moral, psychosocial, psychomotor, physical, cognitive, and spiritual development stages we go through in our present lifetimes.

According to the Bhagavad-Gita, the soul has three distinct stages of development.

In the first stage, persons have a limited awareness of their intellect and little or no awareness of their souls. For the most part they perceive life primarily through their senses, are ruled by their desires, and have little or no conscious control over their actions. If they have a spiritual awareness, it is a limited one in which they see God not as a being of infinite light and love, but as a wrathful God who must be appeased with ritualistic sacrifices and offerings.

After the soul has had many incarnations in which the individual is ruled by his senses and passions, it seeks a higher birth. In this second stage a person will look at life through his mind. He or she will discover that intellectual pleasures are more fulfilling than the physical pleasures sought after previously. But eventually the person will realize that lasting happiness cannot be found in either physical or mental pursuits. After many lifetimes developing

one's intellectual capacities, the soul will lead one on to the third stage of human evolution.

In the third stage one seeks fulfillment through development of one's spiritual self. By entering into states of meditation and contemplation, one discovers that the physical body is only a small portion of what one really is. The continued exploration of the nonphysical parts of one's being leads to states of mystical knowledge and spiritual fulfillment. One then consciously progresses toward the higher states of illumination, Liberation, and Self-Realization.<sup>30</sup>

It is in this third stage that a person will often enter into a contemplative life. "He may follow an established spiritual path such as Christianity, Hinduism or Judaism, or he may formulate a path of his own. But eventually he will seek to attain a higher degree of self-knowledge than he has been able to attain on his own or under the auspices of a conventional religion."<sup>31</sup> It is here where one's search for higher truth enters into the realm of mysticism.

At that time he will seek a spiritual guide who has already attained total self-knowledge. By studying with this spiritual master, he will eventually be able to fathom the mysteries of life....A guru or spiritual master can come from any part of the world. He can come from the Buddhist, Christian, Yogic, Hasidic, or some other school of



spiritual development. But,...a true spiritual master is one who has become fully conscious of all levels of reality, who can see and feel God twenty-four hours a day.

Under a spiritual master's guidance, the student makes rapid progress, ascending to higher and higher levels of self-knowledge. The methods employed by various spiritual masters to lead the student to these states of spiritual illumination will vary, but the state of enlightenment they eventually achieve is the same. In most schools of mysticism the most common forms of spiritual practice are meditation, prayer and self-giving. But there is a great deal of variety in how and to what degree these different forms of spiritual practice are applied....

After a number of years of study in which the student has sought to follow the teacher's precepts, the student experiences his first illumination....(A)ccording to Far Eastern mystical doctrines, when the student has his first illumination he totally transcends the limitations of his physical mind and body and experiences the essence of his soul. He discovers that everything he had thought, heard or read about the nature of existence was totally wrong; these were all conceptual ways of looking at something that could not possibly be understood intellectually. He experiences a bliss beyond expression and in a "flash" perceives the true nature of higher reality.

The experience of illumination can last from a few minutes to a few hours. After the experience ends, the student slowly comes back to a more mundane level of awareness. But his experience has totally changed his understanding of himself and of the world in which he lives....32

It's curious to contrast and compare that description of illumination with the past-life remembrances described in this

essay and elsewhere. There are surprising common elements, such as, the illumination experience of totally transcending physical limitations of mind and body and experiencing the essence of one's soul and the influx of new, higher knowledge; the feeling of extreme well-being; the duration of the experience; and the subsequent total change in one's understanding of oneself and the of the world. Compare the following examples:

During Joan's meditation remembrance in which she saw herself as a elderly woman, she feels that she came to "know" that she had a soul. She had been told that since she was a child, but the idea had always seemed vague and elusive to her. During her remembrance, this knowledge came to her in an intuitive flash. She felt it was a process more of remembering than of learning something new.

"When I was a young girl, we would have religious instruction one afternoon a week. They used to tell us about the soul--how it lived forever and all that. I always believed what they told me; it made sense to me. I always thought of it as being a little tiny glowing thing. My ideas are changed now, to say the least! I saw my soul, and it was much bigger than I had ever thought. It wasn't something that I could say was so many feet long or so many feet high or anything like that. It wasn't a thing that was made out of matter. And it was so bright! It shone brighter than the sun ever could."33

Now consider this one from Harry, owner of a small sporting goods store outside of Albany, New York:

The experience increased in intensity to the point where I didn't know if I could handle it. My

mind had stopped thinking, and I felt like I was in another place where there was no time and no physical dimensions. I was still aware of what was going on around me, but at the same time I was seeing another side of existence. I knew more about life in those few minutes than from all the perceptions and ideas that I had formulated during an entire lifetime. I realized that every idea I had had about myself and this world was wrong. It was all perfectly clear to me now. Life no longer seemed drab. I felt that it was an incredible gift just to be alive.<sup>34</sup>

The obvious contrast between the mystic illumination and the past-life experiences is the years of study under a spiritual master. It's as if some Higher Power chose to step in and allow a few short-cuts. Puzzling,...but interesting.

The soul's progress after illumination is "pretty deep" according to our way of thinking. But on the possibility that there may be a "higher" or "deeper" reality, let me proceed on to the Far Eastern teachings of "Liberation" and "Self-Realization.

After a student has had a number of illuminations, he will eventually reach a state of Liberation from the world of desire, meaning he has overcome all of the desires, fears, worries, and limitations other human beings are subject to.<sup>35</sup>

When a person has attained Liberation, he can choose to stop incarnating. He has attained a high degree of spiritual knowledge and can stay at his current level of development in one of the

nonphysical worlds (described later), or he can choose to return to earth to help other souls reach higher levels of spiritual enfoldment. In that case he consciously returns to the world, but he cannot be bound by it.<sup>36</sup> (Conf. "The Father loves me for this: that I lay down my life to take it up again. No one takes it from me; I lay it down freely. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again." Jn. 10:17-18) (parenthetical notes mine)

Note again the element of choice in the soul's action.

But there is an "incentive plan."

According to Far Eastern teachings, Liberation can only be achieved here on earth; it cannot be attained on any other planet or any other plane. (Other worlds than ours? Maybe Star Trek was more than "science fiction"?) If a being exists in another world or plane and wants to progress, . . . he must take human incarnations on this earth and progress through the cycle of reincarnation. . . .<sup>37</sup> (parenthetical notes mine)

Secondly, at this point in development, there is no concern of falling backward spiritually in the course of earthly human incarnations:

Once a being has attained Liberation, he will not fall backward on the spiritual path. Until that time it is possible for a person to be overcome by the forces of desire and illusion and to regress temporarily. But unlike learned abilities that do not always carry over from one life to another (but sometimes they do), spiritual knowledge stays with a soul permanently.<sup>38</sup> (parenthetical note mine)

And thirdly, "(i)f a soul chooses to become one with God, he must go one step higher on the ladder of consciousness to Self-Realization."<sup>39</sup>

(A) Self-Realized soul...has free access to all knowledge and is capable of guiding other souls to Liberation and Self-Realization....(T)he Liberated soul can enter into the Supreme Self at will and stay in the higher nonphysical worlds as long as he likes...But the Self-Realized soul has gone one step further....Instead of only having free access to the Supreme Self, he has become one with the Supreme Self....

The Self-Realized soul is a conscious embodiment of the Supreme Self. He has realized his Self. He has become one with his "father" in heaven. The...Realized soul is conscious of the fact that he is an extension of the Supreme Self that exists within and beyond all of life. He has become a clear and perfect channel of the will and power of the Supreme Self and thus is able to aid others in their spiritual journey. An ordinary soul is also an embodiment of the Supreme Self, but he is not conscious of this fact. Because he is less conscious of his true nature, he is unable to reach his full potential.

According to the Far Eastern perspective, the greatest spiritual teachings of all time--Sri Rama, Sri Krishna, Buddha, Christ, Sri Chaitanya, and Sri Rama Krishna--were all Self-Realized souls. They led their disciples to higher states of existence and inspired the world at large to lead better and higher lives. But, according to these teachings, a time comes when even the Self-Realized teachers no longer choose to incarnate on earth. From that time on, their souls remain in the higher worlds. From these higher worlds they can continue to help persons on earth to evolve by meditating on them and sending them peace, light, bliss and spiritual guidance.

From a Christian perspective, the suggestion that Jesus Christ, along with many other great spiritual teachers, was, in truth, a Self-Realized soul, having gone through the normal

cycle of thousands of prior human incarnations is unacceptable and controversial--to say the least. Yet the possibility could be considered. Or, perhaps Jesus Christ was the exemplary case where the Supreme Being (God) once again intervened in human affairs, this time to the extent of becoming both the biological and spiritual Father of a child born on this earth over two thousand years ago. In that case, the Christian claim of the Divine-human nature of Christ would stand--without negating the Eastern claim that the greatest spiritual teachers of all time were, in fact, ordinary human souls that have reached Self-Realization. Just another curious possibility to ponder.... Secondly, consider further the statement that Jesus was "a great spiritual teacher who led his disciples to higher states of existence..." as this essay unfolds.

To anyone who has studied the Eastern religions, these levels of spiritual development are common knowledge. Yet even in our own culture, many of us have known people who were much more spiritually in tune than ourselves, and who in some cases, often seem to "stray" from the path of traditional institutional religions to a higher, more mystical view of spirituality and religion. In my research of reincarnation,

perhaps the most startling discovery was that reincarnation is NOT necessarily in conflict with Christianity. In fact, it is quite possible that reincarnation was a commonly accepted belief in the very roots of Judaism and Christianity. For purposes of this essay, I will limit my remarks primarily to the Christian vision, even though there are numerous indications of reincarnation belief in the Hebrew traditions, as well.

The source of much of the information to follow is Professor Geddes MacGregor, an Anglican (Episcopalian) priest and author of numerous books on religious subjects, including two on reincarnation: Reincarnation in Christianity: A New Vision of the Role of Rebirth in Christian Thought and Reincarnation as a Christian Hope. His background is quite impressive:

(Professor MacGregor) is emeritus distinguished professor of philosophy at the University of Southern California, where, from 1960 to 1975, he taught the philosophy of religion. He was also dean of the university's School of Religion. Among the many honors showered on him was his appointment in England as special preacher at St. Paul's Cathedral (1969), and at Westminster Abbey (1970). MacGregor graduated from the University of Edinburgh and received his doctorate from Oxford. He has received two post-doctorate degrees: the French State and Doctor of Divinity from Oxford. Hebrew Union in the United States has conferred on him the honorary degree of doctor of humanities. Among his many books are He Who Lets Us Be, God Beyond Doubt, The

Bible in the Making, The Nicene Creed Illumined by Modern Thought, The Vatican Revolution, The Coming Reformation, and The Hemlock and the Cross.  
(Cranston and Williams, p.200)

In addition, Professor MacGregor has also given several courses on reincarnation at the University of California (Berkley) and at the University of Iowa. From his background, he appears to be well-versed in both Christian theology and reincarnation from a broad base of knowledge and experience.

On the subject of reincarnation, Professor MacGregor writes:

Reincarnation is one of the most fascinating ideas in the history of religion, as it is also one of the most recurrent themes in the literature of the world. It is widely assumed to be foreign to the Christian heritage, and especially alien to the Hebrew roots of biblical thought. That assumption is questionable....It has persistently cropped up in various crannies along the Christian Way, from the earliest times down to the present. It has also flourished in Judaism. Wherever western thinkers have learned to love the Christian Way well enough to strip off dead dogma without destroying living tissue, it has found a place in the Church's life. (Cranston and Williams, p. 200; Geddes MacGregor, Reincarnation in Christianity, Wheaton, Illinois: Quest Books, 1978, p. ix)

Professor MacGregor is also sensitive to the apprehension his Christian readers may have to the mysterious and somewhat taboo idea of reincarnation's compatibility with the Christian church. In his second book, Reincarnation as a Christian Hope, he assures his readers: "I am immensely sympathetic to those of my fellow Christians who suspect reincarnationism as



one of the extraneous weeds that has no place in the ongoing life of the Church," and that it is "as ill-fitting as a pagoda atop a Gothic church....Nevertheless, I believe their fears on this particular score to be entirely unwarranted. Dangers, however, do abound; not all forms of reincarnationism are compatible with an authentic Christian hope. That is why I stress so much the necessity of seeing in what form reincarnationism can properly be christened."(Cranston and Williams, pp. 200-201; Geddes MacGregor, Reincarnation as a Christian Hope, London: Macmillan, 1982)

The most common claim AGAINST reincarnation from Judeo-Christians is that it diverges from the ideas of life and death that we have been brought up with, in particular, the resurrection of the flesh. But "when these (ideas) are viewed objectively, they are seen to be more paradoxical than that of reincarnation," an example being "the idea of 'resurrection of the flesh' notwithstanding the dispersion of the dead body's material by cremation or by incorporation of its particles into the living bodies of worms, sharks or vultures."(Cranston and Williams, p. 201; C.J. Ducasse, 1960 Garvin Lecture, "Life After Death Conceived as Reincarnation," published in In Search of God and Immortality (Garvin Lectures 1949-1969). Boston: Beacon Press, 1961, pp. 142-44)

The second claim against reincarnation is the verse from the letter to the Hebrews (9:27) that, in the King James Version, appears to rule out the possibility of human rebirth: "It is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment." Regarding this verse, scripture scholars have determined that the word "the" was an interpolation when the Bible was retranslated. The Revised Standard Version and the New American Version give the verse this way: "It is appointed for men to die once, and after that comes judgment." Dr. MacGregor's response, when he was asked about this verse in Hebrews, was:

I do not think that is a great difficulty really. Of course, there is judgment; there is judgment all the time, and the notion that there is a special judgment for the world--the whole of this planet--all that is perfectly comprehensible, and perfectly compatible with the notion of reincarnation. It is appointed for me, that is, the present me, once to die. I do not die anymore than once in my present incarnation, and I am also judged. The law of karma or however you like to put it, symbolizes the concept of judgment. We are all being judged if there is any moral law at all; we are being judged all the time, but there is a special judgment when I die. (Cranston and Williams, p. 207, MacGregor, taped lecture "Reincarnation in Christianity")

With the prevalent claims against reincarnation disposed of, let us now turn to some positive indications of reincarnation's compatibility with Christianity. "At the

outset, it can be stated without qualification that Jesus in the four Gospels and St. Paul in the books of the New Testament attributed to him say not one word against the teaching of reincarnation....On the other hand, when we come to the selections from the Gospels themselves, there are a number of places where reincarnation seems clearly expressed."(Cranston and Williams, p. 201) For example, the case of Elijah and John the Baptist. Elijah the prophet is believed to have lived in the ninth century B.C. II Kings 2:11 records how he was taken up by a fiery chariot with horses of fire. Malachi later delivers God's prophecies that Elijah the prophet will return "before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes" (Malachi 4:5). Because the disciples of Jesus identified Christ as the Messiah, they naturally believed that the prophesy of Malachi should apply to him. So they asked Jesus to explain the prophesy. He made he astonishing reply that Elijah had already returned; that he had come back as John the Baptist (Matt. 11; 17:10-13; Mk. 9:9-13).(Cranston and Williams, pp. 208-209)

A second example is Jesus' own claim: "Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I AM (Jn. 8:56-58). Had his soul too been among human beings in a previous time?

It has been suggested that reincarnation was a very

commonly held belief at the time--as was the law of karma--and in fact, that Jesus himself recognized the process of reincarnation.

His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, was it his sin or that of his parents that caused him to be born blind?" "Neither," answered Jesus: "It was no sin, either of this man or of his parents. Rather, it was to let God's works show forth in him." (Jn. 9:2-3)

Although reincarnation seems clearly expressed in a number of places in the Gospels, the record is not very expansive. But according to MacGregor, there may be good reasons. "Christ's disciples expected the world to end shortly after his death. Hence there was no need to think of future lives, which would never be lived." (Cranston and Williams, p. 201) Furthermore, if reincarnation was such an assumed fact that it was taken for granted, then, too, Gospel writers would have considered little need to elaborate. How could they have known a belief so common would be a controversial issue two thousand years later.

The Gospels do tell us, however, that Jesus had two teachings, one for the multitudes and the other for his trusted disciples. (Cranston and Williams, p. 212) To the multitudes he taught in parables--simple stories, that the common peasant could understand. To his trusted disciples he

explained everything--in greater detail--so that his disciples could understand a yet deeper meaning (Mk. 4:33-34). Yet Jesus also indicates that there were even some things he never told his disciples.(Cranston and Williams, p. 212) "I have yet many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all truth." (Jn. 16:12-13) And finally, we know that the New Testament does not contain all that Jesus knew or that he taught to his disciples. "There were also many other things which Jesus did; were every one of them written, I suppose the world itself could not contain the books that would be written." (Jn. 21:25). If there were many other things that Jesus did, could one not presuppose that there were also many other things that Jesus taught? It would be unwise, therefore, to insist that only those things are true that may be found in the Bible, and that one is not permitted to investigate further.(Cranston and Williams, p. 213) Therefore, let us investigate, for it is also written, "You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free" (Jn. 8:32).

In his letter to the Corinthians, Saint Paul makes it clear why the full mysteries of Christ were not as yet to be shared with all:

I, brethren, could not address you as spiritual men, but as men of the flesh, as babes in Christ. I fed you with milk not solid food; for you were not ready for it; and even yet you are not ready, for you are still of the flesh. For while there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh, and behaving like ordinary men? For when one says, "I belong to Paul," and another, "I belong to Apollos," are you not merely men? (I Cor. 3:1-4)

How mature are we today as spiritual men and women? And are all of us at the same spiritual maturity level? It's been said that one of the hallmarks of maturity is the ability to live with ambiguity and uncertainty, and still feel a sense of peace and security. Can we loosen our grip on some of our tightly held traditional beliefs long enough to open-mindedly sift through Christianity's more "unusual" versions of the story? For the history of Christianity is not limited to the orthodox version of the story. There were numerous Christians who were totally dedicated to Christ as their teacher and savior but who disagreed with the conservative majority on many fundamental issues. It is among these peoples that reincarnation was taught as basic to Christianity. (Cranston and Williams, p. 213)

These people, in particular, were those of the Gnostic movement. With the 1945 unearthing of long-lost Gnostic writings, the history of Christianity is being rewritten. Scholars and theologians around the world have taken a renewed

interest in the Gnostic movement that troubled the church in the second century. The fact that some Gnostic sects used Gnostic notions in wrongful and strange ways can not to be denied. Yet, even today, there are countless abuses and misrepresentations--by fundamentalists, t.v. preachers, cult leaders, and the like-- in the name of Christianity. However, it is now well known that the views of the Gnostics were grossly distorted by the church--their bitterest theological enemy. All Gnostic treatises that could be found were destroyed, and it was hoped that the views of their authors would be silenced forever.(Cranston and Williams, p. 213) Professor Elaine Pagels notes in her renowned work, The Gnostic Gospels, that "the efforts of the majority to destroy every trace of heretical 'blasphemy' proved so successful that, until the discoveries at Nag Hammadi, nearly all our information concerning alternate forms of early Christianity came from the massive attacks upon them."(Cranston and Williams, p. 214; Elaine Pagels, The Gnostic Gospels. New York: Random House, 1979, p. xxiv.)

This brings to mind an interesting question: Why? Did the Church honestly view Gnosticism as a heresy, an untrue doctrine that would lead Christians astray? or was there a more selfish reason? Perhaps Christian Gnosticism presented a

major threat to the power and authority of the Church hierarchy. Consider the following from the works of Reverend MacGregor:

One of the chief reasons for antagonism against Christian Gnosticism was its independence from such theological authorities as popes or bishops. There were no Gnostic temples. It was not a church. Gnosticism was rather, says MacGregor, "a climate of thought: an extremely pervasive one. It encouraged going beyond the symbols of popular religion to truths Gnostic teachers said were to be found underlying them. Transmigrationism (reincarnationism) found ready hospitality in such a climate."(Cranston and Williams, p. 214; MacGregor, Reincarnation as a Christian Hope, p. 63)

And the source from which the Gnostics of the second century claimed to have derived their teachings? Smith and Wace in their Dictionary of Christian Biography write that the Gnostics averred "to be in possession of genuine apostical traditions, deriving their doctrines, some from Saint Paul, others from Saint Peter, and others again from Thomas, Philip, and Matthew." They were supposedly secret teachings, "professed to have been received by oral tradition." The Gnostics also "appealed to alleged writings of the apostles themselves or their disciples."(Cranston and Williams, p. 214; London: John Murray, 1883, article "Irenaeus," III, p. 269)

In her book, The Gnostic Gospels, Elaine Pagels emphasizes that the Christian Gnostics were really Christians,



though up until the 1945 discoveries, the effort from early Christian times was to claim that they were not. Their orthodox contemporaries tried to say that their teachings were founded on "Greek philosophy, astrology, mystery religions, magic, and even Indian sources." "However," writes Pagel, "much of the literature discovered at Nag Hammadi is distinctly Christian."

There is the precious Gospel of Thomas--which the Jung Institute at Zurich was fortunate in acquiring, the Gospel of Philip, the Secret Book of James, the Apocryphon of John, the Apocalypse of Paul, the Letter of Peter to Philip, the Apocalypse of Peter--all Christian in nature.

"Those who circulated and revered these writings," Pagels states, "did not regard themselves as heretics, but as Gnostics--that is Christians who possess knowledge (gnosis) of Jesus' secret teaching--knowledge hidden from the majority of believers" until they have "proven themselves to be spiritually mature." She cites the verse we previously quoted from the gospel of Mark, wherein Jesus said to his disciples, "To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables" (Mark 4:11). (Cranston and Williams, p. 217)

Dr. Pagels further writes that "achieving 'gnosis' involves coming to recognize the true source of divine power--namely, 'the depth' of all being. Whoever has come to know that source simultaneously comes to know himself and discovers his spiritual origin: he has come to know his true Father and Mother." (Cranston and Williams, p. 217-218) Note here that

with many of the Gnostics, God, the Supreme Source of all, is not exclusively masculine, but rather "embraces both masculine and feminine elements."(Cranston and Williams, p. 218) So, too, the human soul, which comes from the Supreme Source, is neither masculine nor feminine, but from a reincarnational viewpoint, can alternately incarnate in male and female bodies, depending upon which type of experience is needed.(Cranston and Williams, p. 218) This differs with the Hindu traditional teaching, but corresponds exactly with the past-life remembrances recorded by Lenz and other reincarnation case studies described earlier.

From the 1945 discovery and subsequent study of the Gnostic writings it is obvious to many scholars and theologians that reincarnation was a prominent idea in Christian Gnosticism. But its source, remarks Elaine Pagels, was not Eastern religions, but, according to the Gnostics, original Christianity itself. Geddes MacGregor also affirms that "reincarnational views were commonplace in the Gnostic climate in which Christianity developed."(Cranston and Williams, 219; MacGregor, Reincarnation in Christianity, pp. 43-44.) To further collaborate, G.R.S. Mead, an eminent Greek and Latin scholar and author of several volumes on Gnosticism and a translator of the Gnostic texts, writes in his Fragments

of a Faith Forgtten that the whole of Gnosticism "revolved round the conception of cyclic law for both the universal and the individual soul." "Thus," he states, "we find the gnostics invariably teaching the doctrine not only of the pre-existence but also of the rebirth of human souls. They held rigidly to the infallible working out of the great law of cause and effect."(Cranston and Williams, p. 219; G.R.S. Mead, Fragments of a Faith Forgotten. New York: University Books, 1960, p. 142)

To those wishing to study the Gnostic view of reincarnation further, the Gnostic manuscripts to find are called Pistis Sophia. The words Pistis Sophia have been variously translated as "Faith-Wisdom" and "Knowledge-Wisdom," the knowledge being transcendental in nature.(Cranston and Williams, p. 220) From his translation of the documents, G.R.S. Mead writes in his introduction:

Our Gnostics found no difficulty in fitting transcorporation (or reincarnation) into their plan of salvation, which shows no sign of the expectation of an immediate end of all things--that prime article of faith (of the orthodox Christian) of the earliest days. So far from thinking that reincarnation is alien to gospel-teaching, they elaborately interpret certain of the most striking sayings in this sense, and give graphic details of how Jesus...brought to rebirth the souls of John the Baptist and of the disciples, and supervised the economy of his own incarnation. In this respect the Pistis Sophia offers richer material for those

interested in this ancient and widespread doctrine than can be found in any other old-world document in the West. (Cranston and Williams, p. 220; The Pistis Sophia, trans. G.R.S. Mead. London: John M. Watkins, revised edition, 1921, pp. 220, 262-63, 293-94, 313, 315, 320, 322-23)

Though I won't go into great detail here, I will give you but a sampling--that you may compare the Christian reincarnationist writings with those of the Eastern religions mentioned herein, and further, just to share some food for thought from our early brothers and sisters in Christ.

On the law of karma, the law of cause and effect:

In one portion, Christ instructs the disciples as to how serious personal defects have repercussions in an ensuing life. A person who curses others will in the new life be "continually troubled in his heart." He wished trouble for others and is now himself troubled. "An arrogant overweening person" could find himself in a deformed body, which is looked down upon by others. And similarly, Christ indicated, each vice had its appropriate effect. (Cranston and Williams, p. 220)

About the "waters of forgetfulness:"

Prior to incarnating, he (Christ) further teaches, such persons--as do most people--drink of the waters of forgetfulness and therefore do not remember what transpired during the time between incarnations. (Cranston and Williams, p. 220)

On being "saved:"

The disciple John...wonders if there is any hope for a person who "has committed all sins and all iniquities, but at last has found the mysteries of the Light, is it possible for him to be saved?" The Savior replies: "Such a man who has committed

all sins and all iniquities, and finds the mysteries of the Light, performing and fulfilling them, and ceases to sin, will indeed inherit the Treasury of the Light."

John persists with still another question: What will happen to a person who has committed no sin, but has done good persistently, yet has not found the mysteries? Such a person before birth, says Christ, does not drink of the waters of forgetfulness. He receives rather "a cup filled with thoughts of wisdom, and soberness is in it." He is then reborn "into a body which can neither sleep nor forget because of the cup of soberness which has been handed to it. It will whip his heart persistently to question about the mysteries of the Light until he finds them, through the decision of the Virgin of Light, and inherit the Light forever.

Christ emphasizes again and again that the ultimate achievement is so stupendous that freedom from sin cannot by itself bring about his consummation. Knowledge of the Mysteries is essential. "Amen, Amen, I say to you: Even if a righteous man has committed no sins at all, he cannot possibly be brought into the Light kingdom, because the sign of the kingdom of the mysteries is not with him." (Cranston and Williams, p. 220-221)

What's heaven like?

On another occasion, the disciples are told by Jesus that "there is no mystery which is more excellent than these mysteries on which you question, in that it will lead your souls to the Light of lights, into the region in which there is neither male nor female, nor are there forms in that region, but a perpetual indescribable Light.

And, "Wouldn't the prospect of many incarnations encourage putting off one's salvation?":

During this conversation with Jesus, Mary Magdalene is puzzled as to whether the prospect of

many incarnations will not encourage putting off one's salvation. She uses a novel expression for rebirth, calling it "coming in at another circuit," and asks, "My Lord, if souls come into the world in many circuits and are neglectful of receiving the mysteries, hoping that, if they come into the world at any other circuit, they will receive them, will they not then be in danger of not succeeding in receiving the mysteries?" In reply, Christ addresses all the disciples. "Herald unto the whole world and say to men: Strive thereafter that you may receive the mysteries of the Light in this time of affliction and enter into the Light-kingdom. Join not one day to another, hoping that you may succeed in receiving the mysteries if you come into the world in another circuit."

He then warns that there is a time limit for attainment of perfection in any world. When "the number of the perfect souls shall be at hand, I will shut the gates of light and no one from that time onwards will enter in nor will any one hereafter go forth (into incarnation again) for the number of the perfect souls is completed, for the sake of which the universe has arisen."

When this happens and our world ends, there will be a purifying fire, says Christ. But this will not be the final end, because according to the Gnostics worlds too are reborn. (Cranston and Williams, p. 221)

The choice to accept or reject any of the Gnostic writings as truth is yours. For in discerning truth, one must match or "test" all new information against personal human experience and that which one already believes as truth. Then begins the questioning process: Does it make sense? Could it be possible? Does it fit with my human experience of truth? Does it conflict with my basic values? my image of God? Does

it conflict with or reaffirm the Scriptures? If the Spirit of Truth is present, what are the fruits of this spirit?

May I suggest, however, that neither the above writings, nor the belief in reincarnation, are in conflict with the Christian image of God or the Scriptures--though caution and further study are warranted in either case. Further, reincarnation does fit with human experience--both my own experience and the thousands of researched and documented cases on file. And it does make sense, especially if one considers our traditional Roman Catholic teachings about purgatory--a time of purification preceding perfection and eternity in heaven.

Curious, isn't it, that even now, over forty year after the rediscovery of the Gnostic writings, and in a society where reincarnational ideas are becoming more prevalent, the general public--Christians in particular--are not made aware that the Gnostics were Christians, that the Christian Gnostics were reincarnationists, and that rebirth was a live option in early Christianity. Or maybe it isn't so curious. To any institutional church, the notion of reincarnation could be somewhat threatening. Geddes MacGregor addresses his issue in his book, Reincarnation as a Christian Hope:

It has a special tendency to cause those who believe in it to feel able to dispense with the institutional aspects of the Christian Way....For reincarnational systems of belief particularly call attention to the role of the individual will. They stress freedom of choice and the individual's capacity to make or mar his or her own destiny. My destiny is up to me. The Church can be immensely helpful to me. I may deeply reverence its teachings and thirst for its sacraments....Yet if I accept a reincarnationalist view I recognize that in the last resort I can do without the Church, as a boy can do without his mother, deeply though he may love her.(Cranston and Williams, p. 222)

The perceived threat of the Gnostic writings may have been to the authority and power of the institutional Church, prompting Church hierarchy to call for the swift, drastic suppression measures of declaring the teachings heretical and blasphemous, destroying every literary trace, and exacting the death penalty for being a Gnostic. To this, MacGregor wryly comments:

Few Church leaders are either humble enough or sufficiently mature in the spiritual life to be ready so to abdicate power....We all know how jealously the leaders of any organization hold on to such power and authority as is conceded to them either by tradition or by acclamation. This has always been notably the case in the Church and has come to be widely recognized as one of the Church's greatest weaknesses as a conduit of spirituality....(Cranston and Williams, p. 222-223)

A great Church though we may be, our leaders are, and were, also powerful, stubborn, proud, and self-righteous when it comes to "letting go" of any power or authority--and very slow



in admitting wrongs. Regarding the letting go of power and authority, one need only look at the role of the laity in the Church, in particular the role of women. Regarding admission of wrongs, consider Galileo, Martin Luther, the Holocaust, and recognition of the Jewish state of Israel. Pride has stood in the way of Truth more than once.

In the following section, I will address the question of heaven and what happens to a soul when a person dies. Here, too, read with an open mind--open to wonder, and open to the images of the Creator God in your own soul, and open to a glimpse of heaven that may surprise and delight you, and finally, open to a release from any fear of death.

The readings that follow are taken primarily from Frederick Lenz' study of Eastern literature and the actual accounts of past-life remembrance cases he's investigated. Incredibly, some of these people (fifteen of the one hundred twenty-seven cases) have even seen their soul's journey after their body's death in a previous life. What's even more astounding is that their descriptions not only compare with each other's, but also parallel the death to rebirth cycle described in the ancient Eastern volume known as The Tibetan Book of the Dead. Furthermore, none of the people who

described their remembrances had had any prior knowledge of the ancient Eastern volume or any others like it. Here's a summary of the soul's journey from The Tibetan Book of the Dead:

The Book of the Dead explains that immediately following a person's death, he may not realize he has died. After he has recognized that his body has died, he will become distressed and will try--without success--to re-enter his old body. After death the soul may linger in its old environment on earth for several days, visiting familiar places where it has lived during its former life. In some cases the soul will also linger to observe its former body's funeral and to see to what extent others mourn its death.

According to the Book of the Dead, after a soul has lingered on earth for a time, it will feel a pull to go beyond this world. At that time it will begin its journey through the "higher worlds." The first world the soul enters into after it leaves the physical world is a vital world filled with chaos. The Book of the Dead describes many unpleassant-looking beings who live in this vital world who try to torment the soul. After staying in the vital world, the soul will then enter into a mental world that is composed of abstract ideas and qualities. After passing through this world, it enters into a number of beautiful psychic worlds filled with pleasing colors, scents, and beautiful beings that will help the soul on its journey. Finally, the Book of the Dead describes the soul's own world, where it will rest and reflect upon the experiences it has had in its most recent lifetime. After it has rested some time in its own world, it will retrace its course and be reborn. (Lenz, pp. 88-89.

As fictional as the above may sound, out of the one hundred twenty-seven cases investigated by Dr. Lenz, fifteen

recorded past-life remembrances where they saw their death at the end of that past life, the passage of their soul through the higher worlds after their death, and then their rebirth in their next incarnation. (Lenz, p. 89) What's more,

(i)n each of these cases of between-life remembrance, people experienced similar phenomena in exactly the same sequence. It is also interesting to note that although none of the persons were familiar with the Book of the Dead prior to their remembrance, their descriptions of both the order and the nature of their experiences are strikingly similar to the descriptions of the death and rebirth process found in the Tibetan Book of the Dead. (Lenz, p. 89)

The excerpts that followed in Lenz's book were graphic and detailed--and fascinating. From the vital world as a place of disturbing unpleasantness, conflict, distortion, bickering, and brokenness; to the mental world of unlimited knowledge, and "messengers" who carry bits of that knowledge to us on earth when we're seeking to make new discoveries; to the psychic world of indescribably beautiful scents and colors and pleasantness; and finally, to the soul's world, that place of rest and reflection and the presence of God, that Being of Light. Let me share a few; then decide for yourself, "Could it be?".

The Vital World:

I felt like I was in a foreign country. I had a body but it was not physical, although it was the

same shape as my physical body had been. I found myself in this bleak landscape, and near me there were two people fighting and arguing. The fight was one of tremendous violence; one of them had the other by the neck and was trying to throttle him. Both of them had disheveled hair, and they were shrieking like beasts. And although they kept hurting each other, it seemed as if they could not do any permanent damage to each other. The shrieks coming from them were so ungodly, so appalling, that my only thought was to get away from them. They fought on and on without getting tired....I thought I recognized someone I knew, a friend who had died several months before me. I was happy to see him at first. I stepped out in front of him and called his name. He said something to me that was very rude and pushed me aside and went right past me. I was very unhappy in this world. When the time came for me to leave, I felt like I was being let out of prison. It was a great relief to leave that place behind.(Lenz, pp. 97-98)

I was killed in an accident. I saw myself dying, and then I saw myself going into the other worlds....The first world I came to was a terrible place. You have to understand, though, that when I saw this world I wasn't watching it from a distance or anything like that; I was experiencing it myself. It was dark, like a polluted city. Everything there was dirty and ugly, and it was filled with terrible creatures. I saw them bothering other people who were there. They were chasing them and trying to scare them. They didn't come after me; they left me alone. I wondered why this was, and I sensed it was because I had been a missionary. I had spent all my time helping others and giving of myself. I believe that because I was so good I was protected while I was there. I sensed that these "things" bothered people who had been bad in life. People suffer there who have done wrong things in life, but those who have been good don't suffer so much. This place wasn't hell; it was a kind of purgatory. It was just a place that you pass through on your way to better worlds.(Lenz, pp. 98-99)

I found myself in a disgusting place. I was tormented by the people there. They were deformed and awful. They kept chasing me and asking me questions about my life. It was a nightmare. One of them, the biggest one, kept asking me why I had harmed people during my life and if I enjoyed it. I knew the life I had led had not been good. These "things" that kept bothering me seemed to know that also. They kept tormenting me. I cannot tell you how long I stayed there....There was no feeling of time passing. (Lenz, p. 99)

Various sounds were also reported from the vital world. Among the most common were a constant thundering sound, a crackling like fire, sounds of howling winds and crashing waves, and sounds of earthquakes and avalanches. The experiences of the vital world are each different. But it almost seems as if each one is perhaps confronted with whatever needs purging from their past life. Next, the Mental World:

The mental was described as a place in which all knowledge exists in "seed" form....Several people said they witnessed the movement of knowledge from the mental realm to the earth. They described "carrier beings" who transported knowledge to people on earth who were trying to discover or invent something. They also stated that knowledge from this world usually reaches the mind of a person on earth without that person's being conscious of its place of origin. The person on earth assumes that he created the idea himself, not realizing that he has unconsciously borrowed it from the mental world. (Lenz, p. 100)

It was a great place. I would have been happy to have stayed there forever. I could create a complex of ideas in an instant. I was in a state of rapt contemplation and simply enjoyed pure knowledge in all its pristine clarity. I was in a world

filled with ideas, symbols, images, and higher conceptions. Millions of them were swirling all around me. It was never confusing; they were all so clear to me. Whenever I wanted to know something, it would appear at once. I did not have a body there. I was pure thought. My thoughts were not couched in words; they were energy. All of my thoughts had different colors, and I understood their essence by seeing the colors. It was a world of abstract existence. (Lenz, p. 100-101)

#### The Psychic World:

There was nothing but joy there, and colors--such beautiful colors. These were not like the colors on earth; they were deeper and richer. They had sounds and scents too....There were many types of beings there. Beautiful beings like angels. They came to me and helped me. They were so innocent and pure. They told me that I would soon be going to an even higher world where I would rest and that they were here to help me understand everything that was happening to me. (Lenz, p. 102)

I felt that all my life I had been dressed in a costume but I didn't know it. One day the costume fell away and I saw what I really had been all along. I was not what I thought I was. All my life I had thought of myself as a person, as a body. I thought to myself, "I am so and so, a woman, a mother, a secretary," and things like that. When I went into this world I realized that all along I was not those things. I was a soul, not a body. I couldn't die; I couldn't be born. I lived forever. I wasn't a male or a female. It was like waking up after having amnesia. I was overjoyed to be "me" again. I had been all along, but I had lost sight of it and thought that I was a physical body. My body was only a thing I used for my life on earth. When it wore out, I got rid of it. (Lenz, pp. 101-102)

#### The Soul's World:

I found myself in a vast place. I felt as

though I had come home. I had no apprehensions, fears or worries. I no longer remembered my former life on earth. Nothing existed for me but a quiet fulfillment. I was not conscious of time in the usual sense; everything seemed timeless. I felt as if I had always been there. It was similar to the feeling I have when I wake from a dream that has seemed very real, only to discover that it wasn't real but only a dream. That is how I felt. My former life on earth had been a passing dream which I had now awakened from.

I did not have the sense that I was moving in space. Everything was consciousness and pure awareness; there were no dimensions there. I moved through thousands of levels. On each level different souls were resting before being born again. The lower levels were much darker. I somehow knew that the souls on these levels were not as mature as those on the higher levels. Finally I reached a level that I was comfortable on. I stayed there. I sensed that there were many levels above the one I had stopped at and that souls that were more advanced than I would go there. (Lenz, pp. 104-105)

Most intriguing for me, though, was that the soul's world was not merely a place of rest, but that it is also composed of many subworlds, subworlds that are "realms of pure art in unmanifested form" and that "It is the individual's soul which channels these artistic ideas and brings them into being." (Lenz, p. 105) For example, this excerpt is from Alice, an art teacher and sculptor in a small town in southern Indiana:

There is a constant activity in these worlds of art, but it is a joyous activity. It does not have any of the vulgarity of activity in the physical world. In these worlds it is all a play of light, and if

music is played, there is a corresponding display of light related to the tonalities that are sounded. The same is true of perfumes and flowers and so forth. And since there isn't a heaviness and obstructiveness of the physical mind to contend with, intention is brought to fruition very quickly, and creative people, of course, have a time of tremendous joy. Painters can paint anything in the time it takes to snap your fingers. Composers can compose just like that. They create endlessly here, with a freedom they could never find when they were on earth. And their creations are so much more beautiful. Instead of having the usual number of colors in the physical spectrum, an artist has many more colors that exist in these worlds but not on earth. The same is true of musical tones, and so on. I visited several of these worlds and observed many souls creating there. I also had the feeling that there were many more of these art worlds that I did not see. (Lenz, p. 106)

From a personal perspective, a heaven like that makes more sense than one where everyone arbitrarily plays a harp and prays all day. Rather, a place where one can follow one's heart, one's own unique calling, to fully enjoy and create to the ultimate in whatever area one's hobby or talent may be. From other accounts, it sounded like there were corresponding subworlds for every art form or hobby on earth. Playing harps and praying for eternity might be heaven for one with harp music and traditional prayer in their soul, but for an artist or a carpenter or a lover of the out of doors, it would sound stifling, unpleasant, and confining. But with the many subworlds described, heaven would indeed be the place of



ultimate happiness, where one could pray and praise the Lord best by doing (creating) what one was created to do and enjoys doing. That, too, sounds like the soul's "becoming a little more like God,"--after all, isn't God's main business also creating?

"What does God look like?" It's a question we've probably all asked from little on. Some of us have seen God; others aren't too sure. But Myron, a camera store clerk in a small Delaware town has. The following is his account of his memorable vision of God that occurred shortly before rebirth:

I saw God. He was beautiful beyond description. No words, no pictures, no language could ever describe Him. All forms emanated from Him; I saw all of the universes, all of the persons, all of the worlds contained in Him. I expressed my feelings to Him, my sorrows at having failed before. He seemed undisturbed by my failures. He was encouraging me try again. With this new inspiration I came back to life, determined this time to help others, to serve the world, and to become fully conscious of both my inner and my outer existence.(Lenz, p. 109)

One, of course, can't claim that Myron's vision is the only description of God. We're all limited by human language and vocabulary, and each of us draws from our own experiences. But it is what Myron saw and felt the need to share, and perhaps, too, there's a message to

ponder for each of us there as well.

When I began this project, I was a bit apprehensive about what I'd find. I'd been more or less led to believe that reincarnation was a work of Darkness, and that it was not of God. What I found in the course of this project did NOT bring me to the face of Darkness, but rather much closer to the face of Light. I still don't have all of the answers. In fact, I've acquired a few more questions that others are investigating as well. For example, how much do genetics and reincarnation overlap? How much of the total person is genetic makeup, and how much is the soul? And what about the mystery of birthmarks correlating with past deaths? How about the abilities of the gifted and talented and unexplained genius? Yes, there's much I still don't know. But, there are some things I do know.

I know, for example, that reincarnation exists here and now. There are literally hundreds of verified, documented, and consistent human witnesses. Many of these accounts were researched and verified by qualified, competent professionals in the fields of science, medicine, history, geography, archeology, psychology,

religion, and a multitude of other disciplines. There are also a few parallels of cases in my own life experience.

Secondly, I know that reincarnation is not a work of Darkness--at least NOTHING of what I came across was. It was more definitely the work of God--the very same loving Creator God who made us from the beginning. What I've read has only reinforced that over and over again. Furthermore, it is written that you shall know a tree by its fruits. The "fruits" of these past-life remembrances have only been good, not evil. People resolved to live better lives; they came to a understanding of the laws of the universe, of their souls, of their God, and of themselves; and the message they brought back to share from their experiences paralleled closely the same message taught by Jesus and found in our Scriptures. The message contained the same supreme command to love one another. Those don't sound like works of Darkness, and none who recounted their experiences portrayed them as such. Rather, it was much to the contrary.

And finally, our Western culture tends to see a fragmented world, divided into domains of science, philosophy, religion, history, music, and the like. So

too in our Christian Church. We've been taught by Church leaders that resurrection/reincarnation is an either/or situation--either resurrection OR reincarnation, but NOT both. But why not both? One does not negate the other. The soul could indeed have many human lifetimes while it's waiting the final coming. And then there can still be a resurrection of body and soul. Which body, none of us knows--but does it matter? The Scriptures tell us that we will have "glorified" bodies. And who's to say how closely they're going to resemble our physical bodies. It's always been a mystery to me why Mary Magdalene didn't recognize the resurrected Jesus when she first saw him; neither did his two disciples on the road to Emmaus; and neither did the disciples who were fishing when Jesus invited them to eat with him. These were people close to Jesus, who should have recognized him immediately--or at least thought or reflected that there was something "vaguely familiar" about him. But for some reason, they did not. I suggest that reincarnation and resurrection involve a both/and situation--that is, we have one soul with many life times, and at the end of time, we will experience resurrection in some type of perfected bodily form, whatever that may be.

There is much we've yet to learn, but Truth is in many forms. I believe all of God's works are good, and for myself, I can't put God in a box or on a leash, or tell God what God can or cannot do. But in my search, I can look at the fruits of what I see and experience, and test whether or not they are in line with the fruits of God's Spirit as taught in the Scriptures. And if they are, the spirit of God in me will recognize its brother or sister--and it has.

NOTES

1. Sylvia Cranston and Carey Williams, Reincarnation: A New Horizon in Science, Religion, and Society, Julian Press, a division of Crown Publishers, Inc., New York, 1984, p. 54.

2. Ibid., p. x.

3. Ibid.

4. Frederick Lenz, Ph.D., Lifetimes: True Accounts of Reincarnation, The Bobbs-Mewrrill Company, Inc., Indianapolis New York, 1979, pp. 73-74.

5. Ibid., pp. 74-75.

6. Ibid., pp. 47-48.

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9. Ibid., pp. 67-68.

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14. Thomas Berry, Religions of India: Hinduism, Yoga, Buddhism, The Bruce Publishing Company, New York, 1971, p. 13.

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19. Ibid., pp. 66-67.
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28. Ibid., pp. 123-124.
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35. Ibid., pp. 80-81, 83.
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