

Essay

# One-Birth, Many-Births: A Conversation Reborn A Response to “Perspectives on Reincarnation: Hindu, Christian, and Scientific,” a Thematic Issue of *Religions*

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“Interrogating Rebirth: Hindu-Christian Debates and Their Contemporary Relevance” was a panel at the Dharma Association of North America (DANAM) meeting in conjunction with the American Academy of Religion Annual Meeting in November 2016. The panel contained four papers, by Nalini Bhushan, Gerald Larson, Jeffery Long, and Bradley Malkovsky, which in their finalized form appear in the current issue of *Religions*. I was the respondent to the panel.

The panel aimed at putting forth relevant and substantial materials regarding multiple births as a teaching and lived practice of Hindu tradition, and, in many of the essays, as a plausible and relevant doctrine still workable in the 21st century. As such, it succeeded in raising many of the right issues. Well before the panel occurred, I had had a conversation with Jonathan Edelmann, one of the contributors to this thematic issue of *Religions*, on the state of theology and Hindu theology in academe, and the need for scholars to take up and analyze issues of faith in terms of scripture, history, culture, reasoned argumentation, and ethical ramifications, lived and theorized. While the temptation today is to treat matters of faith as personal, even private, and hardly to be debated, we thought that we should be able to discuss the matter, even debate it. After all, what would be more worrisome than to find (as we fear may be the case) that it is almost impossible to have a sustained conversation or intelligent argument on the topic today? The impression may be given that no religious position is open to reasonable scrutiny, because none is reasoned. But it takes hard work to show that this is not the case, that as all traditions have believed, reasoning can be a valuable tool and ally in advancing the understanding of religious beliefs in a tradition, and across the boundaries of traditions.

We wanted, then, to show that with all these factors in mind, we could move forward a conversation in an academic setting that would take seriously theology across religious borders. We thought—as I recall our informal conversation—that the topic of “one birth, many births”—a double theme, since it cannot be just the latter that is interrogated—seemed an ideal topic for academic consideration, because it relates to intimate matters of death and life, is relevant to how humans see the meaning of life, tests the limits of reasoned argumentation on a difficult and subtle matter—and is, to be sure, the site of ancient and long-running controversies across religious boundaries.

I was happy then to see the 2016 panel take shape and to be asked to be respondent to it. I am all the more happy to see this journal issue take shape, enriched by the papers of the original authors and now with ten more papers, and to have it come out so very well. Together, these fourteen papers constitute a promissory in favor of future discussions we may now better undertake, know more, and better, about why the topic is important. Like my response at the DANAM panel, what follows is however simply a reflection on several of the issues arising in or across the essays.

(Full disclosure: Although I have been studying Hinduism for over forty years, I am a practicing Catholic, a Catholic priest, and a Jesuit. I am a one-birth believer, but not because I have been overwhelmingly convinced by the Christian apologetic arguments, nor because I disrespect toward

those who believe in multiple births. Rather, in ways that will be intimated below, I hold to a one birth view of life because of my sense of the infinite love of God manifest in Jesus Christ, more than enough to affirm the value of this life, its adequacy, and to enable people to reach perfection now. But I offer that only as context, since I turn now to the essays, in order to focus on them and the issues they raise.)

First, some of these essays simply give us a richer sense of the Hindu traditions which have believed, imagined, vividly portrayed, and explained in a rational manner multiple births as a meaningful claim on, interpretation of life. Ithamar Theodor, Steve Rosen, Chris Chapple, and Jonathan Edelman all serve us well by showing the coherence and depth in Hindu religious tradition of multiple births discourse, how people have thought, imagined, and lived out the prospect of multiple births. These essays show us that in practice arguments defending multiple births are most usefully thought of as consequent upon the living out of the multiple births view of life. The views and experiences of the people who live in accord with this belief come first, and rational explanations, for insiders or in defense against the competing views of outsiders, come later. Without it, we run the risk of abstraction, vague claims about what “they” say about multiple births, or reasons purporting to lead to faith, rather than faith prompting the finding of the reasons.

C. Nicholas Serra and Lee Irwin remind us of the complicated modern reception of multiple births, reminding us that belief in multiple births is not to be relegated to the East, or India, or the ancient Mediterranean, but has also flourished in modern times in the West. Serra draws on the example of William Butler Yeats while Irwin distinguishes and connects the many strands of the complicated American scene. It has become Western and American too, and in ways that do not simply replicate ancient Indian versions of the same. This new rebirth exploration does not mesh or conflict with Christian views according to the standard models. The old arguments do not directly and completely work against these new formulations of belief in multiple births. Indeed, Christians too need to think about one-birth and multiple births, since the latter is no longer simply what “they” believe “over there”.

In this context the essays by American scholars Gerald Larson and Jeffery Long are doubly valuable, since they complement their considered arguments in favor of multiple births with some personal perspective. Larson writes into his study of the language of multiple births in Samkhya and Yoga a poignant perspective on late-life issues. His statistics on life expectancy get our attention right at the start, on the limits of life, satisfactory or not, in this world, and the need we have to find meaning in and beyond death, and thus postulating a deeper meaning for life before death. One’s life is in one’s own hands and by one’s own deeds: Larson finds this a satisfactory view, and finds no need to turn, as Jews, Christians, Muslims, and at least some Hindus do, to a saving God. Long takes a different but still personal path, reviewing rebirth in light of his memories of his original Catholic identity and the choices he has made over many years as a Hindu. He makes his case for multiple births without entirely dismissing the Christian viewpoint known to him in his youth. Both Larson and Long are defenders of multiple births, and hold to its reasonableness, and personal meaningfulness. This makes good sense, and is a corrective to a deracinated approach which would reduce the whole matter of one-birth and many-births to sets of reasons pro and con, as if only the debating points count.

As I mentioned above, “one birth” beliefs ought not be taken for granted, as unchanging (and unyielding) and as perfectly univocal and clear. They too have complex histories, not just in apologetic contexts, but in people’s lives, and as such stand in need of explanation and personal narratives of their meaning in people’s lives. We must then rethink the Christian, for instance, on the model of these essays; in the longer run, many more essays will be required to take seriously and learn from how Jews, Christians, and Muslims make sense of the one birth scenario. If the essays by Serra and Irwin just mentioned help us to recast the Western and Christian context in the modern era, Colas writes from a still longer historical perspective. His case study shows the motivations behind and pitfalls in trying to untie the one birth-many births knot simply by very clear reasoning and very pointed arguments. He takes up the case of an 18th century Sanskrit translation of a Tamil-language Jesuit text originally by Robert de Nobili, the 17th century missionary in Tamil Nadu. My own research regarding

the Jesuits of the 17th–18th centuries—in Japan and China, in Vietnam, in Tibet and India—suggests that their attacks on the idea of multiple births were intended to undercut the very foundations of the religions of Asia, the religious economy of their logic. Such texts were not merely occasional pieces in the repertoire of preachers. Reading the Sanskrit translation of de Nobili closely, Colas pinpoints philosophical and linguistic choices, choices in vocabulary and in some case the invention of new analogues, all offered in the hopes of creating mutual understanding as a prelude to persuasion and possibly too refutation. The result is creative, fresh, interesting—but perhaps a failure too since, as Colas points out, the novelty of the Jesuit arguments—crammed as it were into Sanskrit terminology—made it hard or impossible for the Hindus to respond to new arguments and new implied worldviews, only seemingly couched in familiar Indian terms. Nor did European thinkers on the whole show much interest in these Jesuit versions of the attack on multiple births, if they even knew of a text such as this one. Later Jesuits, even in the 18th century, kept up the project of attacking multiple births, but with increasingly sophisticated comparative and historical sensitivities.

Nalini Bhushan reports and assesses the arguments in the 20th century debate between the famed Christian missionary and professor of philosophy, A. G. Hogg and Hindu scholar Subrahmanya Sastri. The debate circles issues of ethical import, since their argument is in part about whether the multiple births doctrine enhances or hinders responsible human life in this world. Bhushan reports too the added rejoinder by S. Radhakrishnan, who argued that contrary to Hogg's critique, responsibility for the neighbor is innate to Hinduism too, and not simply a Christian value incompatible with the self-focused economy of karma. Again, we see that the argument about rebirth, as an item on the missionary agenda and as a substantive philosophical issue, ends up having to do with life in this world now, and the kind of human community we envision. How does it matters now, that we envision this to be our only life, or one of many?

Bradley Malkovsky's magisterial essay still further broadens our understanding of the Christian one birth viewpoint. He gives us an overview of Christian views regarding multiple births, noting three stages of Christian thinking on one birth and many births. First, the earliest Christians had to clarify and defend their views among great and powerful pagan majorities across the Graeco-Roman that were comfortable with the idea of multiple births. Second, the matter had a new life internal to the Church in the 12th to 14th centuries, when the Albigenses sought to reimagine Christian identity by a new calculation of purity and of how souls and bodies relate, with the corollary that many births could be desirable. This was an inner debate, which unfortunately was resolved by deadly force rather than by honest debate and shared reflection on scripture and tradition. Third, in the midst of today's increasing pluralism, Christians have to face up to issues of secularism, and the prioritization of individual personal meanings over questions about community. The essays by Serra and Irwin again come to mind here. Issues that were once simply outside the Church, or relegated to the status of unfortunate heresies, are now regaining a certain vitality within Christianity.

Writing too as a theologian, Malkovsky correctly notes how the Christian experience of God's love in Christ is the primary value at the heart of the Christian one birth worldview, rather than an embrace of the notion of eternal reward and eternal punishment. The language of hell and damnation has been central for a long time, and now is relatively easy to reject, given the spiritual and moral implausibility of an unending, eternal sentence of condemnation. Distaste for what seems a merciless model rather easily opens the way for a model that offers more chances: the death penalty and life in prison without parole, vs. limited punishment and rehab. But attention to the advantages of multiple births over the mercilessness of hell has obscured the overwhelming message of divine love most fundamental to Christian tradition (and, with different nuances, to Judaism and Islam). Christians see things in terms not of what humans fail at, over and over, but according to what God has done, finally and in deep love. If God's love is profound and abundant, then even one birth is quite sufficient. So too, one might add, the Christian belief in the resurrection of the body is relevant here. For a Christian, the body is not the problem, and escape from it is not the solution. Changing bodies turns out, from their perspective, to demean even one's current body.

But for all of this to become clearer, Christians will have to do a better job in presenting what is important in the Christian worldview. Insofar as Christian theologians can let go of the old polemics against multiple births, they will better be able to present positively and in depth the positive reasons why they are content with the prospect of one birth, despite all the very obvious imbalances and injustices of our so brief existence on earth. The arising of new voices among Christians who want to be Christian and also hold to believe in many births, needs to be attended to respectfully, but without overlooking the crucial positive reasons why most Christians have opted to find that one birth suffices.

In any case, we have, or should have, a lot to argue about, or so I hope. At the start of this response I mentioned my concern, in conversations with Edelmann, that if we can no longer argue about one birth and many births, we will find ourselves in an unhealthy situation that will turn out to be detrimental to both Hindus and Christians. Believers might then, in their silence, seem to agree with the skeptics who think that none of these religious issues can be seriously thought, much less argued. But if we believe that reason plays a role in the life of faith, then the matter is too important simply to agree politely to disagree. But arguments today cannot be merely historical—repeats of the past or exposure of minority views in the past—nor merely by way of polemic, fueled by general ideas we have about what the others actually say in detail.

Deracinated philosophical considerations are therefore insufficient. Context therefore matters greatly, lest the issue of one birth, many births be argued by a deracinated rationality that itself is detached from the traditions it seeks to defend or offend. Ankur Barua's essay offers insightful comments on a recent debate in *Philosophy East and West* around a 2005 essay by Whitley R. P. Kaufmann, on the reasonability of the one birth position and the inadequacy of belief in multiple births. Barua notes approvingly the response to Kaufman several years later in the same journal by Monima Chadha and Nick Trakakis. Barua agrees with them on the limited value of rehearsing and assessing religious arguments on strictly rational grounds, particularly if this proceeds as a matter of logic and without taking note of the metaphysical presuppositions—for example, regarding the body, the identity of a human being, the cultural frame for our experience as human beings. The large cultural and religious context is needed to make full sense of any particular arguments put forward, and so there is no way around the hard work of reading deeply in the traditions, and getting to know people of the other tradition, if we are to make any progress in really understanding one another.

Yet we would be risking another kind of violation of responsible research and argumentation were we to ignore the data of new modes of research. The way forward must include respect for the latest scientific evidence on identity and memory, and likewise surveys, interviews and personal narratives regarding how attitudes toward one-birth and multiple-births shape attitudes toward death and the meaningfulness of life here and now. Ted Christopher's welcome essay shows us how we can bring scientific data to bear, for instance on the nitty-gritty technicalities of DNA and heritability. Science can support, clarify, and challenge religious beliefs. But the opposite is true as well, as religious wisdom regarding karma residues can provoke us to think differently about what scientists discover and propose. But as in other areas of study where science and religion converge and conflict, science is not on its own decisive since such information will be received and interpreted according to religious or non-religious dispositions that themselves need to become topics for discussion.

To conclude: this excellent set of essays merits the attention of all who wish to go deeper into the mysteries of one birth and many births. As excellent, they show themselves to be only a start, not a conclusion. The new conversation will be costly, but worth the price, since it will require much more hard reasoning and argument, *after and in the context* of the deeper involvement of religious intellectuals with one another. We need to tell our stories about this life and listen to others' stories, without being so tone-deaf as to reduce personal stories to arguing points or the merely anecdotal. More interreligious learning will be necessary, situated in better communities that are humane, academic, and spiritual, if we will really be able usefully to debate this issue, without enmity or caricature. One birth or many, life is too precious to waste on merely repeating ourselves without actually listening.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.



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