

## Article

# Belief in Reincarnation and Some Unresolved Questions in Catholic Eschatology

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**Abstract:** Mainstream Christianity has always rejected reincarnation teaching in all its varieties, e.g., Greco-Roman, Albigensian, Hindu, Buddhist, New Age, etc. as being incompatible with the biblical understanding of the uniqueness, dignity, and value of the human person, a teaching that is ultimately rooted in the radical understanding of divine mercy and love toward every human being proclaimed by Jesus himself. Nevertheless, there are two strong arguments advanced by reincarnationists against the teaching of one earthly life. The first argument regards reincarnation as a more reasonable expression of divine mercy and love than the disproportionate and unfair infliction of eternal punishment by God upon a human being for a single morally corrupt lifetime. The second argument finds reincarnation to be necessary for the continued exercise of creaturely freedom required for true moral and spiritual maturation. Catholic teaching, by contrast, asserts that a single earthly life followed by purgatory is sufficient for the perfection and completion of the human person. However, in both the satisfaction and sanctification models of purgatory the human person is entirely passive, not actively contributing to its own completion. Such an approach would seem to devalue free human participation in the process of perfection.

**Keywords:** reincarnation; purgatory; resurrection; Christian anthropology; punishment; free will; divine love; dualism

The compatibility of reincarnation belief with Christian teaching has been the subject of repeated theological discussion and often heated debate since almost the beginning of Christianity's history. Though regularly dismissed by Christian theologians as an incoherent and unpersuasive doctrine, reincarnation teaching has persistently reappeared throughout the centuries in both European and Asian cultures and now also in the Americas, equipped with formidable arguments both in its defense as well as in its challenge to the coherency of Christian teaching about a single earthly life.

We presently find ourselves in the third great period of Christianity's engagement with reincarnation teaching. The first period took place during the second to sixth centuries, when Christian theologians found themselves confronted by Gnostic, Manichaean, and Neoplatonist versions of reincarnation.<sup>1</sup> The second great encounter, not nearly as extensive as the first, took place from the twelfth to fourteenth centuries and involved the Cathars and Albigenses, heterodox Christian groups in France and Italy. This second confrontation was not treated primarily on the theological level, however. Rather, the Cathar attempt to harmonize reincarnation teaching and its attendant anthropological dualism with Christian faith was answered in large part with the violent Catholic

<sup>1</sup> There is no record from this time period as to whether reincarnation belief was an issue for Christian communities in India. Very little reliable information about Christianity in South Asia prior to the fourth century C.E. is available to the historian. The most comprehensive presentation of the history of specifically *Western* notions of reincarnation, including Christian engagement with reincarnation teaching, is Helmut Zander, *Geschichte der Seelenwanderung in Europa: Alternative Religiöse Traditionen von der Antike bis heute* (Zander 1999, p. 869).

persecution of reincarnation's adherents.<sup>2</sup> The third and present broad encounter, beginning in the second half of the twentieth century, involves a wide range of reincarnation beliefs,<sup>3</sup> but as a whole the seeds for such beliefs seem to have been planted by exposure to traditional Hindu and Buddhist teaching on reincarnation in the late eighteenth and entire nineteenth century as more and more reliable information on the religious heritage of India began filtering its way down from the university lecture halls of European Indologists and philosophers to become more widely available to the non-specialist.

One of the striking characteristics of this present third great encounter, especially in recent decades, and what distinguishes it from the previous two eras, is that today there is less heated polemic taking place between advocates and opponents of reincarnation and more attentive listening going on, a greater readiness to acknowledge the merits of the other's argument while recognizing simultaneously the continued value but also the possible limitations of one's inherited teaching or at least the way that teaching has been articulated. We are no longer always talking past each other, as we have so often done during the past 2000 years. We often find ourselves today, representatives of different ancient faiths, grappling with the interlocking mysteries of life, death, human identity, and hope. Can we continue to learn from each other without compromising or abandoning the most precious insights of our wisdom traditions? How far can our doctrines bend and adjust themselves to the insights of the other without breaking? Or must we finally conclude that our respective positions on the human person and post-mortem existence are finally incompatible?

Traditionally, the main Christian response to reincarnation teaching has been flat-out rejection. The critiques of reincarnation presented by Christian apologetes have been expressed in various ways: sometimes the approach was more philosophical in nature; at other times it was more theological and Bible-based. What has been the general underlying conviction of all the different critiques is the incompatibility of reincarnation with the dignity, unity, and irreplaceable uniqueness of the human person. This understanding of the person is ultimately grounded in God's love for each and every human being. The Christian argument against reincarnation is, then, finally an argument based on divine love and mercy for the human person.

From the Christian theological point of view, then, it is not that reincarnation teaching is unreasonable—in fact, in some respects, and with certain presuppositions, it is a very reasonable position to take with regard to the afterlife—it is just that in the Christian understanding reincarnation is *unnecessary* in view of God's merciful preserving and transforming of the human person in its entirety after death. The Christian position, and not just the specifically Catholic position, is that God's love for each human being is so great that every person is called into permanent union with God *as this particular human individual*. I will come back to that point in a bit with some of the questions and objections that go with it.

It was while studying Catholic theology in Germany more than 30 years ago that I started thinking about reincarnation. I was involved in conversations with a number of people who believed in reincarnation, some of whom were Christian and some of whom were not. Why, they asked, did Christianity not teach reincarnation, when it was such an obviously reasonable and compelling doctrine that solves so many of life's questions, especially questions having to do with the inequality of human suffering and fate? The fact is, I did not know at the time whether the Christian theological and magisterial traditions had ever addressed the question of reincarnation. So I took up the topic for

<sup>2</sup> The Catholic persecution of the Cathars and Albigensians was not solely based on doctrinal disagreements, however. The new movements emerged as a deliberate challenge to the authority of the Catholic clergy and hierarchy, which were regarded as morally corrupt and unchristian. However, a Catholic theological—rather than violent—response to reincarnation from this period was offered by Thomas Aquinas in *Summa Contra Gentiles*, II, c. 83 and in *Scriptum Super Sententiis* IV, d. 44, q. 1, a. 1. Aquinas rejected reincarnation on the basis of his understanding of the soul's natural orientation to the body. See Marie George, "Aquinas on Reincarnation," (George 1996, pp. 33–52).

<sup>3</sup> See Ludger Mehring, *Die Sehnsucht des Menschen nach Heil: zwischen Reinkarnations-Faszination und Auferstehungshoffnung* (Mehring 1993, pp. 36–46). The entries from this footnote and Footnote 1 are evidence that the great bulk of Christian, especially Roman Catholic, theological literature on reincarnation comes from German-speaking countries.

my master's thesis in theology. What I learned surprised me. It turned out that Christian theology, not just that of the magisterium but also of a good number of Christianity's most famous and influential theologians over the centuries, had a long history of responding to reincarnation teaching, going back all the way to the second century. Throughout history, as indicated earlier in this essay, Christian theologians were responding in most instances to people who were not Christian or whom they did not regard as Christian: Gnostics, Manichaeans, and Neoplatonists in the early centuries; Cathars and Albigensians in the Middle Ages;<sup>4</sup> Hindus, Buddhists, and New Age adherents in modern times. It is clear that these reincarnation teachings are all very different, and so are their anthropologies. They do not all agree on what exactly it is that reincarnates<sup>5</sup> and into what forms of life. Most reincarnation models around the world teach the existence of a soul, but some do not. Some teach reincarnation in animal and plant life forms, while others teach reincarnation only in human bodies. Some even teach that the soul reincarnates in two human bodies at the same time. Yet the problem with all of these versions of reincarnation teaching, from the Christian point of view, even if reincarnation is limited to human life forms, is that they fall short of affirming the final value of the human person as a unique composite of body and soul. In the words of Paul Williams, the famous scholar of Mahayana Buddhism and a fairly recent convert from Buddhism to Catholicism, who converted in part because of his rejection of reincarnation: "Christianity is the religion of the infinite value of the person."<sup>6</sup> By person he meant the human being in her unique totality of body and soul.<sup>7</sup>

Of course, to say that Christianity is the religion that values the human person so highly is problematic, given what we know about the violence, exploitation, and other abuses that have been inflicted upon human beings in Christian history. However, theologically speaking, assertions about the extraordinary value given to the human person in Christian teaching should take as their starting point and justification neither the actual Christian historical record in its more dismal dimension nor its opposite, i.e., the positive achievements of Christianity with regard to the championing of human rights and social justice. The starting point, against which all subsequent Christian teaching and praxis about the human person must be measured, should be Christianity's foundation, which is biblical revelation, the unveiling of God's love for humanity, of how God interacts with people and for what purpose, a revelation history that begins with the Jewish people and culminates in Christ. According to biblical revelation, the human person is the focal point of divine mercy. The human person is so valued by God that he or she is called into a permanent union with the divine as this very same person who exists now on earth. All versions of reincarnation teaching are thus seen to fall short of this understanding of the uniqueness, dignity, and value of the human person before an infinitely merciful God who calls each person into a permanent union of love. The human person, then, in standard Christian teaching, is neither the soul alone nor pure changeless consciousness, despite the possibility of remarkable spiritual experiences that give great emphasis to awareness and little emphasis to the body. Even when a human being is able, in some rare instances, to attain a superior state of ego-annihilation, self-realization, or loving union with the divine on earth, as, for example, seen in such Hindu sages as Ramana Maharshi and Sri Ramakrishna, from the Christian point of view,

<sup>4</sup> Of course, the Cathars and Albigensians saw themselves as decidedly Christian.

<sup>5</sup> See Ivo Coelho, summarizing the position of Richard De Smet, SJ (1916–1997), a Catholic philosopher and Indologist, with regard to reincarnation in Hindu thought: "there is no unanimity about that which migrates, which tends to be understood in widely differing ways: as the *liṅgaśarīra*, or the *jīvātman*, or the *manomaya* (the soul-body unity), or the mind, or the *ahamkāra*, or the *jīva* or the *liṅga*, or the *ātman* understood in different ways . . ." In popular modern understanding these many concepts have been frequently reduced to simple language about the "soul." See *Brahman and Person: Essays by Richard De Smet* (Coelho 2010, pp. 18–19).

<sup>6</sup> *The Unexpected Way: On Converting from Buddhism to Catholicism* note 27 (Williams 2002, p. 227); See also p. 83: "Reincarnation is incompatible with the infinite value of the person."

<sup>7</sup> See here Julius Lipner, *Hindus: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices* (Lipner 1994, p. 241), who points out the "dualistic nature of the human person" that is "a basic presupposition of the doctrine of karma and rebirth." While he is here referring to specifically Hindu versions of reincarnation, I think that this assertion applies to most other varieties as well.

such spiritual attainment still does not go so far as to affirm the lasting value and completion of the human person in her unique totality, in union with God, in the face of death.

The transformation of the human person, whereby human identity and awareness are retained and elevated by God in the final state of perfection,<sup>8</sup> after one's time on earth has ended, is what is meant in Christian teaching by resurrection existence. Resurrection is the final perfected state of the human person, and it is caused entirely by God, given as a gift, just as our lives here on earth are a gift of God. Resurrection entails the completion of the human person in a new liberated mode of existence and awareness, a total integration and full participation of the human person in the life of the divine, whereby each person perfectly reveals the glory and beauty of the creator in a unique and singular way.<sup>9</sup> Resurrection is therefore not the transcending of the human as such, though it does involve the transcending of a previous limited way of being human in favor of a new mode of human existence, in what in Eastern Orthodox Christianity is called *theosis* or deification. Resurrection means the transformation of the human person in all her dimensions, including the bodily.<sup>10</sup> However, it is important to also note here the perfected awareness, the higher consciousness, as a component of this new state and not to focus exclusively on the new mode of bodily existence. Resurrection involves a full blissful awakening to the divine mystery, but it is also an awakening to one's particular human mystery, identity, and ultimate value in loving union with the divine.<sup>11</sup>

The Christian theological traditions have always been aware of the limitations of speaking about this new state of transformed existence.<sup>12</sup> It is a condition that transcends our present ontological categories and experience, though not entirely. Even the New Testament accounts of Christ's resurrection appearances, which provide the most important evidence of the nature of the final state that awaits all people, display a noticeable tension. Some passages witness to a degree of bodily *continuity* between the pre-Easter Jesus and the resurrected Jesus, while others emphasize the newness and *discontinuity* of the old body with the new mode of spiritual-physical existence. However, in each case Jesus has not appeared as a mere spirit or ghost. In at least one resurrection appearance he reveals the wounds of his crucifixion.<sup>13</sup> The two kinds of resurrection appearance passages found in the Gospels, i.e., both those emphasizing bodily continuity as well as those giving greater emphasis to discontinuity, must be read together as pointing beyond themselves to a new state of transformed creaturehood. The New Testament writings emphasize that it is the same Jesus in his entirety as a human being who God has made appear to his disciples. Yet this new mode of existence is, quite plainly, very mysterious. The various New Testament accounts should be read together as a kind of informed stammering about the mystery of resurrection existence, all based on the encounter of the disciples with their Lord in his new glorified mode of being. It is clear that there is much about resurrection existence that we are unable to grasp this side of death. Nevertheless, if resurrection stands for anything, it stands for God's infinite love and care for every human being. Resurrection, in

<sup>8</sup> For a good imaginative account of how post-mortem transformation deepens one's awareness and appreciation of their dignity and value as a human person in union with a God of love, see C. S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce* (Lewis 2015).

<sup>9</sup> See Bede Griffiths, "Moksha in Christianity," in X. Irudayaj and L. Sundaram (eds.), *Inter-Faith Dialogue in Tiruchirapalli* (Griffiths 1978, pp. 15–18).

<sup>10</sup> See Philippians 3:21: "He will change our lowly body to conform with his glorified body by the power that enables him also to bring all things into subjection to himself."

<sup>11</sup> Islam likewise teaches resurrection existence after death. With regard to the new perfected awareness that occurs in this final state, see the following famous saying, which is of unknown Muslim origin: "People are asleep, and when they die, they awake." Annemarie Schimmel (1922–2003), the great Christian scholar of Sufism, likewise writing about Muslim belief in the resurrection and emphasizing its dynamic growth in awareness, states: "Once the journey to God is finished, the infinite journey in God begins." Here she is summarizing the thought of Muhammad Iqbal (1877–1938). See her *Deciphering the Signs of God: A Phenomenological Approach to Islam* (Iqbal 1994, p. 239).

<sup>12</sup> See 1 Corinthians 2:9: "What eye has not seen, and ear has not heard, and what has not entered into the human heart, what God has prepared for those who love him." See also 1 John 3:2: "Beloved, we are God's children now; what we shall be has not yet been revealed. See, too, 1 Corinthians 15:35–44 comparing earthly and resurrection bodies.

<sup>13</sup> See John 20:20, where Jesus shows his hands and side.

Christian teaching, is the intended divine final goal for all of humanity. Jesus is therefore called “the first-born of the dead.”<sup>14</sup>

Having said this, theological honesty means acknowledging that there are problems with the Christian teaching<sup>15</sup> of one earthly life. The problems are essentially two, and sometimes they are formulated by followers of other religions and philosophies against Christian teaching, and sometimes they are formulated by Christian theologians themselves.

The first objection against only one earthly life has to do with God’s alleged punitive activity toward people after they die. This objection involves questions about the existence of hell and God’s relation to it. If hell exists and is a place of physical torment, would a God of love really create such a place and send a person there for all eternity—let alone for even one moment—as punishment for the sins of a single lifetime on earth? This would seem to be unreasonable and unbecoming of a God who is supposed to be supremely loving and merciful. Reincarnation would thus seem to be a more reasonable expression of divine mercy and love than the disproportionate and unfair infliction of eternal punishment by God upon a human being for a single morally corrupt lifetime. However, with reincarnation, unlike standard Christian teaching, a person—or perhaps more accurately, a soul—would always get another chance to make amends for past moral transgressions and be able to start anew on the path toward spiritual perfection and liberation.

However, it is not at all clear that contemporary Catholicism actually teaches an understanding of hell as a place or a state of punishment *actively inflicted* by God, despite long-standing doctrine. There are today two Catholic theological positions in tension with each other, perhaps even in opposition to each other, with regard to God and hell. Ambiguity on this topic can be found even in official Church documents and pronouncements. The Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC), for example,<sup>16</sup> appears to advocate teachings that speak both for and against the idea of God inflicting punishment. In support of the notion that God actively administers torment, the CCC cites certain New Testament passages. One of these is the Gospel of Matthew 13:41–42, where Jesus speaks of God’s angels who will “gather . . . all evil doers, and throw them into the furnace of fire.”<sup>17</sup> In addition, phrases like “everlasting damnation” are used in the Catholic Catechism.<sup>18</sup> Here God actively inflicts punishment on sinners. Yet, perhaps surprisingly, a second position on hell can be found in the very same section of the CCC. Hell is understood now as “a state of definitive *self-exclusion*<sup>19</sup> from communion with God and the blessed.” It is a “state” of being separated forever from God’s mercy through one’s own choice,<sup>20</sup> of freely and willfully refusing the offer of God’s love, a love that is intended to complete a person and bring them into full participation in the divine life.<sup>21</sup> Here the

<sup>14</sup> Revelation 1:5. Cf. Roman 8:29.

<sup>15</sup> I will limit myself here primarily to Catholic eschatology, i.e., Catholic teaching on the final perfected state of the human person and the post-mortem process by which this state is made possible. Eschatology more broadly also refers to the final state of the world as a whole.

<sup>16</sup> The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (hereafter CCC) was promulgated in 1992 by Pope John Paul II. It is a summary of Catholic teaching, written by cardinals, bishops, and other theological experts.

<sup>17</sup> See CCC, article 1034. It is understood here that these punishing angels are doing what God commands of them. However, there are no parallel verses in the other Gospels to these particular verses from Matthew. This raises the question as to whether the words here are authentically from Jesus or whether the writer of Matthew’s Gospel placed them in Jesus’ mouth.

<sup>18</sup> CCC 1022.

<sup>19</sup> Italics are mine.

<sup>20</sup> Yet we might ask ourselves under what conditions such a radical and free refusal would even be possible. St. Gregory of Nyssa (pp. 335–94), an early Christian saint and theologian, was convinced by the logic of God’s infinite power that not only would all people be saved by God’s love penetrating the walls of human resistance, but that even the demons themselves would be converted and rescued. Not all scholars today whose expertise is the early centuries of Christian theology are agreed that universal salvation was the expressed teaching of St. Gregory. However, his name does nonetheless regularly appear as an advocate of this doctrine, along with Origen (pp. 185–254) and Isaac the Syrian (pp. 640–700, also called Isaac of Nineveh).

<sup>21</sup> CCC article 1033. See similarly the late Pope John Paul II on hell: “rather than a place, hell indicates the state of those who freely and definitively separate themselves from God, the source of all life and joy.” These words were offered at a General Audience at the Vatican on 28 July 1999. See [https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/audiences/1999/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_aud\\_28071999.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/audiences/1999/documents/hf_jp-ii_aud_28071999.html). Pope Benedict, in his General Audience on 12 January 2011,



suffering experienced by the human person after death is not a physical torment willfully imposed by God, such as being plunged into a lake of fire. The pain is rather an interior and spiritual one, an inner darkness that is the result of the absence of love. It is the state of a self-destructive and self-enclosed ego that refuses all transcendence, all love, all wholesome inter-personal relations. The point is that in this particular Catholic understanding, hell is a state of willful separation from divine love.

Yet immediately after the pronouncement that hell is a freely chosen *state* of exile from God, we read that those who die in a state of mortal sin “descend into hell, where they suffer the punishments of hell.”<sup>22</sup> This clearly sounds like a *place* of punishment and torment prepared by God. In the same discussion about hell in the Catechism there are also passages that quote Jesus—again, from the Gospel of Matthew—who speaks of God *actively banishing* sinners into hell, for example in 25:41: “Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire.”<sup>23</sup>

The ambiguity of hell as presented in the Catholic Catechism is ultimately rooted in uncertainty about Jesus’ own teachings with regard to the relation of divine mercy and hell. It is clear from the Gospels that the center of Jesus’ proclamation is a God of unconditional love and mercy. Jesus calls his listeners to emulate God’s unending mercy, to be perfect as the heavenly Father is perfect (Matthew 5:48). This means an infinite readiness to forgive, even forgiving “seventy times seven times” (Matthew 18:22), which is Jesus’ way of saying that we must forgive without end. We thus see here a tension with regard to God’s activity in the Gospel of Matthew, but it is found in the other Gospels, as well.<sup>24</sup> This is not to deny that Jesus did, indeed, speak of hell and punishment; it is more a matter of how exactly he understood it.

Among contemporary Catholic theologians, despite the ambiguous teachings of the Catholic Catechism, the idea of God actively sending evil people to a place called hell has practically disappeared. The emphasis is now more on God’s infinite mercy and how this mercy is greater than a judgment based on justice alone. Thus the argument that the God of reincarnation is more merciful than the God proclaimed by Catholicism is now more difficult to sustain than in the past, in view of contemporary Catholic thought.

Remaining a bit longer with the Catholic Catechism in its section on the resurrection, we find that reincarnation is briefly mentioned, but it is immediately rejected: “When ‘the single course of our earthly life is completed, we shall not return to other earthly lives. ‘It is appointed for men to die once’ (Hebrews 9:27). *There is no ‘reincarnation’ after death.*”<sup>25</sup> This is a succinct and unequivocal statement, but no explicit explanation is given here as to the possible problems associated with reincarnation teaching from the Christian standpoint, nor is there any discussion of the merits of reincarnation belief. The Catechism’s rejection of reincarnation is explicitly based on scripture, in particular on Hebrews 9:27.<sup>26</sup> However, the next several verses provide an indirect explanation of why reincarnation is rejected, and this aligns with what has already been discussed in this essay. Reincarnation is rejected, because resurrection of the whole person is affirmed. “We believe in the true resurrection of this flesh that we now possess.”<sup>27</sup> In other words, human beings are called into permanent union with God precisely as human beings.<sup>28</sup>

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likewise spoke of purgatory as a process, not a place. “Purgatory is like a purifying fire burning inside a person, a painful experience of regret for one’s sins.” Consequently purgatory takes place both in this life and in the life to come. See <https://www.ncronline.org/news/vatican/purgatory-process-not-place-pope-says>.

<sup>22</sup> CCC 1035.

<sup>23</sup> CCC 1034.

<sup>24</sup> See Luke 3:7; 13:27–28; 13:34–35; 16:19–31; 21:20–24; Mark 9:43. There is noticeably less talk of hell in Mark, the oldest of the Gospels, than in the other three.

<sup>25</sup> CCC 1013. Italics are mine.

<sup>26</sup> “It is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment.”

<sup>27</sup> *Catechism* 1017, quoting the Council of Lyons II from the 13th century.

<sup>28</sup> At this point it bears repeating that in Christian thinking, generally speaking, resurrection is not understood as a mere resuscitation of the person into unending life, by which they would live forever in roughly the same mode of existence as before, but rather it is a transformation and integration of the human person in the divine life in conformity with the divine mode of being.

This raises the question of whether any process is described in the New Testament by which God completes and perfects the human person after death. The answer is no. The question of “how” has not been crucial in Christian understanding to believing that this transformation occurs. It is simply the power of God at work. The conviction that this transformation does occur at all is based, as noted earlier, primarily and originally on Jesus’ unexpected resurrection appearances to his disciples, as provided by the New Testament.<sup>29</sup> In the Christian understanding God made Jesus appear after death to his disciples in a new glorified state, but no theological explanation is provided in the key scriptural passages with regard to the exact nature of his resurrection body or the process by which God caused his resurrection.

The second objection to belief in only one earthly life is the possibility of integrating reincarnation into Christian teaching. It is based on the dignity of human free will and the idea that it might contribute to one’s spiritual development and final liberation. In contemporary Christian theology reincarnation has sometimes been posited as a possible solution to a particular Christian dilemma involving human free will, a solution articulated most notably by one of Catholicism’s most famous 20th-century theologians, Karl Rahner (1904–1984).<sup>30</sup> Rahner presented what to date is perhaps the strongest argument in favor of at least considering reincarnation on the basis of Christian theological principles. The dilemma he addressed concerned the extent and role of human freedom in the process leading to salvation. The problem may be summarized as follows.

According to Rahner<sup>31</sup>, the perfection and final happiness or blessedness of a human being can only be thought of as the consummation of a real historical freedom. Rahner’s starting point was the dignity of the human person and their exercise of free will. This has to be a freedom that can consciously and willfully choose to open itself to transcendence. Now the Christian doctrine that declares that at death human freedom is both ended and finalized<sup>32</sup>—in heaven, hell, or purgatory—must be seen as relating to the *normal* human life in which a real freedom has at least begun. What of the great number of lives in which a real human freedom, a real decision for or against transcendence, has not yet begun? Rahner’s focus was on the death of the unborn and of very young children, but he did not exclude from his considerations the criminally insane and those who have suffered some kind of acute mental or spiritual damage. How are we to imagine the consummation of their freedom and love without their contributing in some way to their own development? How fragmented or abbreviated human lives can be completed after death remains a dilemma in Catholic theology. To imagine, as Catholic doctrine declares, that baptized infants may enter into a blessed state without having first experienced a real freedom is very difficult. How could this consummation take place? Must it be thought of as an external decree and miraculous intervention of God entirely disconnected from human choice and freedom? Such “blessed ones” (Seligen) would be actively loving God for all eternity through no choice of their own, i.e., without having first passed through the normal gate of human freedom. Rahner suggested that this solution did not take seriously the dignity of human nature and freedom. He therefore called it “horrible” (schrecklich).<sup>33</sup>

Rahner consequently raised the question of whether the doctrine of reincarnation, a teaching that has found broad acceptance in the history of religions, might provide some help in solving the dilemma as to how those human persons who have not enjoyed even the beginnings of a normal freedom might reasonably attain a consummation of their freedom in God. The answer would have to

<sup>29</sup> Jewish resurrection belief already existed prior to Jesus’ own resurrection. The Pharisees believed in it, whereas the Sadducees did not. Resurrection, then, was a belief Jesus shared with the Pharisees, even before his own death and resurrection.

<sup>30</sup> Other Christian thinkers who have been more confident than Rahner in asserting the necessity of integrating reincarnation teaching into Christian doctrine include John Hick, Geddes MacGregor, Keith Ward, and Perry Schmidt-Leukel.

<sup>31</sup> See Rahner, “Fegfeuer,” in: *Schriften zur Theologie* (Rahner 1980, pp. 435–49). See also his *Grundkurs des Glaubens*, in: *Sämtliche Werke*, (Rahner 1999, pp. 416–17).

<sup>32</sup> See *Catechism* 1021: “Death puts an end to human life as the time open to either accepting or rejecting the divine grace manifested in Christ.”

<sup>33</sup> (Rahner 1980, “Fegfeuer” p. 447).

be some kind of modified reincarnation teaching, said Rahner, one that would only be *applicable to some people, but not to most*. It would only apply to those human beings who have never truly experienced earthly freedom. Reincarnation would offer the possibility of a moral and spiritual development after death on the basis of an ongoing, self-determining freedom.

The emphasis on the freedom of the will as a necessary component of spiritual development resonates with Hindu theologies as well. Both Hindu and Christian theologians value the freedom of the will to help shape one's final spiritual destiny. Free will is at the heart of their respective soteriologies. In addition, both Hindu teaching on reincarnation and Catholic teaching about purgatory converge with the conviction that spiritual development is possible after death. There is, in fact, post-mortem transformation. However, as Rahner pointed out, this transformation does not occur, at least according to Catholic doctrine, on the basis of a continued exercise of freedom after death. It is perhaps surprising, then, when free will is so highly valued in the Catholic vision of life, that Catholic eschatology rejects the possibility of human free will contributing in some way to one's post-mortem spiritual development. Reincarnation, by contrast, values free choice both in this life and in the life or lives to come. This would then seem to be the advantage of reincarnation doctrine over Christian teaching: it offers further opportunity after death for self-determining freedom.

However, Rahner wrote, were reincarnation teaching to be integrated into Christian teaching, it would face an insuperable anthropological obstacle: it would have to reduce the identity of the human person to a spiritual substance alone.

Understandably, after placing such restrictions on the process of reincarnation, Rahner was unable to even begin describing what this new Christian teaching of reincarnation might look like. He was only suggesting. He felt that any talk of reincarnation must inevitably run up against the kind of anthropological dualism that Christianity expressly repudiates, one that emphasizes the ultimate value of the soul alone, not of the human person in his or her entirety.<sup>34</sup> Rahner finally left such questions about the post-mortem completion of human beings who had never experienced earthly freedom to God's unimaginable mercy and power.

It is perhaps worth going a bit more deeply into Catholic teaching on purgatory, in order to understand both its value and its limitation in thinking about post-mortem spiritual development, especially when compared to reincarnation teaching. In Catholic teaching those who are in the state of purgatory will eventually reach a state of perfect union with God; there is no possibility of them being lost. However, as Rahner pointed out, quite correctly, in Catholic teaching, after death there is no continuation of decision-making for or against God, for or against the good, for or against love, transcendence, etc. Nevertheless, purgatory teaching, like reincarnation, recognizes the need for continuing spiritual development and completion after death, since the great majority of human beings die in an unfinished and imperfect state.<sup>35</sup>

There are two purgatory models here: "satisfaction" and "sanctification." The first is punitive; the second is not. The satisfaction model has, until recently, been the one more emphasized by

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<sup>34</sup> This is perhaps the reason that Origen (ca. 185–254), one of the greatest Christian theologians of all time, postulated a novel theory of rebirth in his *First Principles*. Instead of teaching the journey of a soul through *multiple* bodies (he argues against this in his *Commentary on Matthew* and *Against Celsus*), he advocated that each person, existing as a *unity of body and soul*, traversed *multiple* worlds, i.e., a succession of ever-higher spiritual environments, until finding its completion in the resurrection. This allowed Origen to preserve the integrity of the human person as a composite of body and soul while allowing that person more than a single lifetime to reach its ultimate goal. This was a new version of the need for a succession of lives, but multiple worlds now replace multiple bodies. Origen considered human perfecting to be a very long process, indeed; hence the need for multiple lifetimes. His theory may be seen as evidence that biblical anthropology and biblical witness to Christ's resurrection finally dominated his thinking over his dualistic tendencies of valuing the soul alone. The emphasis that Origen placed on human freedom and the long road to perfection thus makes him an ancient precursor of a modern reincarnation motif, though he would not have advocated reincarnation itself.

<sup>35</sup> Some of the most creative thinking on purgatory in recent years has been offered by Jerry Walls. See especially his *Purgatory: The Logic of Total Transformation* (Walls 2012) and *Heaven, Hell, and Purgatory: Rethinking the Things That Matter Most* (Walls 2015).



Roman Catholicism, but nowadays Catholic theologians, including the late Pope John Paul II,<sup>36</sup> have begun articulating the doctrine of purgatory in more personalistic terms, describing the spiritual transformation that takes place after death when the human person finds herself in the unmediated presence of a personal God of infinite purity, love, mercy, and truth.<sup>37</sup> This more personalistic or even mystical understanding of purgatory is, then, the position expressed by the sanctification model.

In the alternative view of purgatory, i.e., in the *satisfaction* model, to put it somewhat crudely, divine justice demands that people be punished for earthly sins they have committed, even if God has already approved their eventual entry into heaven. According to this punitive understanding of purgatory, it is only right and just that people are forced to pay the price for their sins before being allowed to enter into the eternal presence of a God of infinite holiness and justice. In this model God *sends people away to a place* called purgatory, which may or may not be a realm of fire, depending on one's theology, in order to be punished and purified. Purgatory here is a place of strict retribution and divinely administered pain for venial or minor sins committed on earth. This is more or less a legalistic courtroom-like understanding of God, who is presented here as an exacting judge, more concerned with demanding justice and punishment than with offering mercy and boundless love. It is almost as if God is saying, "I will be your God of love and mercy, but I am so offended by your behavior and sin that I command you to be first sent away from my presence to a place of punishment. After you have paid the price for your sins you may experience my love in heaven." Some theologians who understand purgatory in this way add that the punishment meted out by God in purgatory is a way of *making people pure enough to enter into the divine presence*. This explanation is puzzling. It fails to explain how people are made pure through punishment or why a God of unconditional and infinite love would inflict it. It is not clear how a purely penal understanding of purgatory would help make the sinner holy. The God of love seems to have vanished and been replaced by a God of strict and unbending justice. The emphasis in the satisfaction model is not even on the sinner's possible contrition and remorse, but rather on the act of God's just punishment.

To counter this understanding of a God who does not allow impure persons to enter into God's presence, one need only cite the many passages in the New Testament that show God unconditionally loving and seeking out the sinner through Jesus, i.e., of Jesus reaching out to those persons in society who were regarded as the most impure and godless, such as the prostitute and the tax collector. He engages them as they are and even shares a meal with the tax collector Zacchaeus. All are allowed to stand in his presence. He does not preach to them from afar. He does not set conditions for their interaction.

By contrast, the *sanctification* model does not understand purgatory as a place set apart from the divine presence. Purgatory is rather a process of interior purification, suffering, and growth that takes place through one's *living encounter* with a God of infinite love, purity, truth, and mercy. Here judgment and mercy are one. Purgatory in this understanding is the process of painful and blessed change a person undergoes in the presence of a Person of infinite love, goodness, and truth. It is a process that deepens one's capacity to love God. It is a state whereby we become gradually detached from earthly attachments that prevent us from loving God as we ought. The sanctification model is thus a more spiritual and mystical understanding of purgatory than the satisfaction model. Yet in neither the satisfaction nor sanctification models of purgatory do we find anything like the active exercise of free will contributing to one's union with God. In both models the human subject appears to be entirely passive.

There are a number of other things here that I do not have time to address at great length, three of which are perhaps worth at least briefly mentioning. The first is the Catholic teaching, articulated

<sup>36</sup> See note 21 above and also especially the writings of Hans Urs von Balthasar (1905–1988).

<sup>37</sup> See here the now classic essay by Gerhard Lohfink, "Was kommt nach dem Tod?" in: *Naherwartung, Auferstehung, Unsterblichkeit: Untersuchungen zur christlichen Eschatologie* (Lohfink 1975, pp. 133–48). This theological reflection has never been translated into English.

especially by Aquinas, that after the death of the body the soul continues to exist in an interim or in-between state until the day of the resurrection, a time when the human person in their entirety as body and soul is restored and brought into perfect union with God. In this interim state the soul exists in an unnatural condition without the body, but the soul does exist, nonetheless.<sup>38</sup> This understanding of post-mortem existence has been challenged in recent decades by some Catholic theologians as dualistic and not in conformity with the biblical and more holistic understanding of the human person. What is striking about the interim-state teaching in the context of reincarnation discussion is that such a Catholic interim-state anthropology resembles much of Hindu reincarnation anthropology, the very anthropology that Catholic theology normally rejects as dualistic.

The second point is this: if the sanctification model of purgatory is to be regarded as an expression of divine love, then further theological reflection is needed to show how a person might grow in freedom and love after death without being able to exercise their free will. Is the human person entirely passive after death or not?

The third and final point has to do with issues involving the identity of the human person as including the body. This essay has not addressed these issues from a philosophical or psychological perspective. This is an approach that is central to the arguments of many adherents of reincarnation as they offer reasons why the body should not be regarded as an essential component of selfhood. This essay has attempted rather to respond to the value of the person and the hope of the resurrection from a theological point of view rooted in biblical revelation and the experience of God's love in Christ. However, these differing convictions about the body should not obscure the fundamental agreement between Christians and followers of other religions who believe in reincarnation, namely that bodily existence in the world is experienced as a problem to be overcome. One desires to transcend the limitations of earthly embodiment. The earthly body is finally experienced as unsatisfactory. It is a place of illness and disease. The body ages and withers, and one eventually suffers a gradual diminishment of physical and mental powers. People, in addition, experience themselves as a reality that transcends their own body. They experience the body as an object of their awareness. A person, therefore, has the conviction of being more than the body or, from a different perspective, as finally not being a body in any ultimate sense. One's relation to one's body is such a mysterious thing that it is no wonder that so many interpretations have been given to it by the different religions and philosophies throughout history.

In light of Christ's incarnation and resurrection, Christians are called to see each person they meet as an embodied expression of God's love, as someone loved by God into existence and called into eternal life as God's special beloved. Resurrection faith can lead to an opening of one's eyes, as it were, to a deepened appreciation of the particularity of the other. In the words of the Christian philosopher Chad Meister, "if you truly love someone, you would not want that person to cease to exist." (Meister 2014, p. 111).

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<sup>38</sup> Most Protestant eschatologies reject the interim state teaching. Rather the whole person dies, and the whole person is restored to life by God in the resurrection. There is no continuation of an immaterial part of a person, i.e., the soul, after death and prior to the resurrection. There is, therefore, also no purgatory after death.

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