

A Message from the Patriarch of the Apostolic Orthodox Church

Is Reincarnation A Christian Doctrine?

I recently received a letter from a somewhat perplexed young man studying towards his Masters Degree in Theology at a Roman Catholic institution in a city not far distant. He had taken a quite conservative view of theology, being raised in a family where several aunts and uncles were Nuns and Priests. He had happened upon the works of Dâesirâe Joseph Cardinal Mercier (1851 – 1926), an eminent and extremely conservative Catholic scholar and theologian. He forwarded to me the following excerpt from the Cardinal's famous work, *Psychologie*, which I've taken the liberty to reprint below:

Under the term *Wiedermenshwerdung*, metempsychosis, or the transmigration of souls, a great variety of ideas may be understood: either 1) a series of repetitions of existence under the twofold condition that the soul maintains consciousness of its personality and that there is a final unit in the series of transmigrations; or, 2) a series of repetitions of existence without any final unit, and yet with the presupposition that the soul maintains consciousness of its personality; or finally, 3) an endless series of repetitions of existence with the loss of consciousness of personal identity. *So far as concerns the first assumption, we do not see that reason, if left to itself, would declare this to be impossible or certainly false.* (Emphasis added)

Further, this young man found a reference to the above in another work, *A Manual of Modern Scholastic Philosophy*, in which the Cardinal again states that the first view “cannot be shown either to be impossible or even to be false.” (Emphasis added) You can imagine his consternation upon reading this! So he wrote to me the question which appears as the title of this *Message*. My answer to him was, “Yes, it is.”

History, both secular and ecclesiastical, tells us that Christianity sprang from that sect of Judaism known as the *Essenes*, to whom we have referred in earlier *Messages* and in other publications of the AOC. The *Essenes*, indeed, Judaism as a whole, accepted reincarnation as one of its mystical tenets, referring to it as *gilgul* (גִּלְגּוּל) meaning, “to complete the circuit.” (It is interesting to note that the word is taken from the Chaldean *gilgal*, or “wheel,” as reincarnation has often been called “the wheel of existence.”) In what has been called the “Father” of Jewish mystical texts, the *Zohar*, the great Rabbi Simeon ben Jochai writes in Vol. II,

The souls must reenter the absolute substance whence they have emerged. But to accomplish this end, they must develop all the perfections, the germ of which is planted in them; and if they have not fulfilled this condition

A Message from the Patriarch of the Apostolic Orthodox Church

during one life, they must commence another, a third, and so forth, until they have acquired the condition which fits them for reunion with God.

These words were well known to the Apostles, as Rabbi ben Jochai was their contemporary. Perhaps it was these very words that prompted the Apostles to ask Jesus when they saw a man born blind, “Master, who sinned, *this man* or his parents, that he was *born* blind?” (Emphasis added) Ask yourself how a man could sin before being born, meriting blindness. In his mother’s womb? But, knowing the Apostles accepted the doctrine of *gilgul*, the above question becomes quite logical.

Conspicuously missing, other than the Scriptures, are references by the early Fathers of the Church. To comment on this would take this *Message* far beyond its intended scope; however, one may readily find our subject favorably discussed by such theologians as Saint Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Saint Gregory of Nyssa, Saint Jerome, and Saint Augustine. Why and how reincarnation fell into disfavor is another story entirely, and a long one. Perhaps one day we will discuss that.

But what of the young man who asked the question that prompted this essay? When I presented him with the information and asked, “May a Christian believe in reincarnation?” Some weeks passed without a word, then yesterday I received his reply. It was simply, “He must.”

May the Light of Lights enfold you!

Mathias Mar Yusef, Patriarch

May 2, 1999