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Fakultas Keguruan dan Ilmu Pendidikan

Universitas Kristen Petra

Jl. Siwalankerto 121-131

Surabaya 60236, Indonesia

Phone: 031-2983355

E-mail:

aletheia_journal@petra.ac.id

Homepage:

<http://aletheia.petra.ac.id>

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CHRISTIAN PHILOSOPHICAL REFLECTION ON REBIRTH: BRING THIS DISCUSSION INTO OUR CLASSROOM

Ezra Anantawikrama^{1*}, Samuel Soegiarto²

Departemen Mata Kuliah Umum, Universitas Kristen Petra
Jl. Siwalankerto 121-131, Surabaya
e-mail : ^{1*}ezra.a.iskandar@petra.ac.id, ²samuel.sugiarto@petra.ac.id
^{*}Penulis korespondensi

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ABSTRACT

Keywords:

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There are only three major competing theories regarding life after death. Atheism holds the theory that life ends at one's death. Another theory is the reincarnation view held by most people on this planet. Rebirth is often grouped as part of the reincarnation view. The last theory, held by Judeo-Christian and Islam religions, is the resurrection, often called the heaven and hell view. Proponents of each theory attack other theories, and debates have become common in social media, often confusing students. There is a significant need for Christian educators to equip themselves before preparing students to learn comparative religions. Teachers must be well-versed in answering objections to the Christian faith. This paper helps teachers understand the reincarnation theory, emphasizing the rebirth view and showing why the theory is attractive. It then gives philosophical responses based on the Christian worldview. The paper concludes with two short pieces of advice for Christian educators.

INTRODUCTION

Death is a mystery. We have no idea – much less firsthand experience – of what happens when we die. From the beginning of human civilization, hundreds of religions and thousands of belief systems have been trying. Each tells its followers a story of what happens after we die. Even an atheist who denies the existence of the supernatural has a story; there is no sequel to human biological life. Two other major stories are resurrection and reincarnation. Judeo-Christian religions and Islam believe in the former. The belief in heaven and hell almost always accompanies the resurrection story. Ancient Greek philosophy, Hinduism, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Chinese, African, and Native American religions showed reincarnation features (Kung, 1986). According to the data released by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life in 2009, not only do a quarter of Americans believe in reincarnation, but 24 percent of American Christians expressed a belief in reincarnation (Tricycle, 2010). After the Covid-19 pandemic, the percentage increased significantly. Last year's survey indicated that nearly four-in-ten adults under 50 (38%) believe in reincarnation, compared with 27% of those ages 50 and older (Mitchell, 2021). The phenomenon indeed invites Christian educators to reflect and offer intelligible responses.

LITERATURE REVIEW ON REINCARNATION AND REBIRTH

The reincarnation view holds that, upon death, one's soul will migrate from one body to another in an endless cycle of samsara. Central to the teaching of reincarnation is the idea of karma (*kamma* in Sanskrit means action). Karma is the law of cause and effect governing one's future

fate. If one does good deeds, he will receive rewards in the future. This is equally true regarding evil deeds: one will receive punishment in this or future life. God neither created nor regulated Karmic law (Dhammananda, 1993). In this view, there is no personal God, the creator. Karmic law ensures that every deed, good or bad, will eventually bear consequences. Not all the consequences, however, are received in one's current lifetime. Karma accumulated but not yet received is carried to the next life or lives ahead (Rahula, 1974). This is where the idea of reincarnation fits in: one, after death, will be born again into one form of life to pay her karma. Just being reborn can be karma payment itself. Some features of one's next life, such as the family one is born into, physical appearance, and personality, are thought to be predetermined by previous karma. Thus, leading some Buddhists to adopt fatalism (Keown, 2013). Some other Buddhists maintain that many other things in life are not predetermined (Okawa, 2016). A car crash or winning the lottery are just accidents. Failing a class is linked to a lack of effort and laziness. One can still escape from her cultural conditioning, family's economic status, or even hereditary disease; and form a new set of attitudes and behaviors.

The Buddhist teaching of life after death finds its root in Hinduism. There is, however, one significant difference: Hinduism affirms the idea of atman (soul) while Buddhism does not. Hinduism teaches that men are parts of Brahman (the impersonal energy of the universe), called atman. Atman is what transmigrates from one body, upon death, to another body. Due to its denial of the soul, the objection is often raised against Buddhism regarding what transmigrates during reincarnation. Walpola Rahula (1974) explains this at length:

If there is no permanent, unchanging entity or substance like Self or Soul (atman), what is it that can re-exist or be reborn after death? Before we go on to life after death, let us consider this life and how it continues now. What we call life, as we have so often repeated, is the combination of the Five Aggregates, a combination of physical and mental energies. These are constantly changing; they do not remain the same for two consecutive moments. Thus, even now, during this lifetime, every moment we are born and die, we continue. Suppose we can understand that in this life, we can continue without a permanent, unchanging substance like Self or Soul. Why can't we understand that those forces themselves can continue without a Self or a Soul behind them after the non-functioning of the body? (p. 33)

For Rahula, no soul transmigrates during one's death. In the same way, there is no continuing soul during one's life. This fact should be taken for granted. Hence, Buddhists prefer to use rebirth rather than transmigration or reincarnation. To explain soulless rebirth, Buddhists used a few analogies. The most popular is the candle analogy. Suppose I transfer the flame from one candle to another so both candles are lit. Are they the same flames or different? Now, the flame represents one's life. When the former candle is blown out, the new candle continues the flame from the previous candle. That is, life continues from one body to another body. A modern analogy is the billiard balls: "If one ball (life) is in motion until it hits another ball (life) which then picks up the motion, is the motion of the first ball the same or different from that of the second ball (McClelland, 2010)?"

There are three reasons why the teaching of karma-rebirth is attractive to the modern mind. First, the teaching does more justice than that of the resurrection view. It is thought that heaven and hell are not just a reward and punishment system. The eternal punishment is too severe, while the eternal reward is too gratuitous compared to one's temporal life. Second, it is more compassionate. On the resurrection view, there is no second chance. Died once, one's ultimate destination is already decided: heaven or hell. This is not a problem for those going to heaven, but for those going to hell, eternally punished, they would want to have their second chance. The doctrine of rebirth allows one to be sanctified and perfected through many lives. Third, this teaching can account for the problem of evil (Davis, 2015). There is no need to delve into philosophical

arguments about God's attributes in the face of pain and suffering. The solution is straightforward: no suffering and injustice are undeserved. Those who suffer deserve to suffer due to their karma in a previous life(s).

Christian Reflection

Several responses can be made to show that the reasons – in favor of rebirth – are not sound. First, the proponent of the rebirth view is mistaken in thinking that the Christian concept of ultimate destination – heaven and hell – is merely a system of reward and punishment. Such thinking results from reading Christian theology in the light of karma. Rather, heaven and hell should be viewed as one standing relation to her God. Those who love God (and His Son) will be in heaven, and those who do not will not. Indeed, love is the primary characteristic of Christianity. Out of his love, God created the world. Out of his love, too, He redeemed it (John 3:16). Second, one is mistaken in thinking that each person stands in the same relation to God in either heaven or hell. It is simply false. Both inhabitants experience degrees of joy and sorrow. Surely, those martyred holding on to faith will experience greater joy in heaven – knowing that their hope is not in vain (1 Cor 15:32) – than the Christian soldiers who died in a war. It is equally true for the inhabitants of hell: some people will be more sorrowful than others (Mat 10:15).

For the second reason, Christians can reply that it is wrong to think that the doctrine of rebirth is compassionate. At least, this sounds bizarre to the Buddhists, for they look forward to escaping samsara (the continuous cycle of rebirth and death). The first noble truth taught by Siddhartha Gautama, the founder of Buddhism, is *dukkha*: to live is to suffer. Suppose that John is a person who lives such a life that – given that Christian truth is the metaphysical reality – will go to hell upon death. It is hard to tell whether John would prefer to be eternally reborn – for to live is to suffer – rather than end up in hell. In contrast, suppose that Jane is a person who lives such a life that – given that Christian truth is the metaphysical reality – will go to heaven upon death. Jane will choose heaven over rebirth. In short, the odds are against the teaching of rebirth. This is perhaps because heaven and hell claim to be the ultimate, final destination of the endless journey the Buddhists long for (Walls, 2015).

In addition, a second chance does not necessarily lead one to betterment. If a bad man is given a second chance to be reborn, what guarantee is there that he will be a good man? If the doctrine of rebirth were true, a bad man would most likely be reborn – due to previous karma – into a low-income family, not physically attractive, and having bad character. Could he not be a bad man again? Or, what about an evil man who becomes even worse than a mere bad man? The doctrine of rebirth allows him to be reborn as a rat or even lettuce. How should a rat live a life so that it will be reborn as a man again? The path to sanctification is increasingly difficult as one is reborn. Instead of answering, the doctrine of rebirth merely continuously shifts the problem of evil one step backward. What makes one deserve her suffering in the current life is her karma in a previous life. What he deserved in a previous life was due to her karma in a life antecedent to the previous life. It goes on and on. Consequently, rebirth cannot square with the Christian doctrine of creation, for it should explain where Adam and Eve received their karma. Neither can it square with Darwinian evolution, for it should explain how karma transfers from the non-living to the living organisms.

On top of these objections, the most difficult problem for the doctrine of rebirth is the problem of personhood. The first part of the problem is what is being reborn. There is no single answer among Buddhists, but they all agree that whatever it is, it is certainly not self or soul. It is not that the Buddhists believe that the soul will not endure and survive death; rather, it is because of their belief that there is no such thing as a soul. There is no self since nothing in nature is identical to what it was the moment before. Every single thing in nature is in constant change. This is called the doctrine of impermanence (*Annika*). Huston Smith (2003), an expert in religious study, claims,

“In this, the Buddha was close to modern science, which has discovered that the relatively stable objects of the macro world derive from particles that are so ephemeral that they barely exist.”

Here is, then, the problem. Suppose that John is reborn in the next life as Jim. Now, the karma-rebirth doctrine is only if it can be shown that Jim is indeed (the reincarnation of) John. What relation is there between John and Jim? Yes, Jim is John’s karmic heir, but what exactly makes Jim, not Josh, John’s karmic heir? What is shared between them? It cannot be the body since one life after another dies. It cannot be memory either since memory is part of one’s personhood – and Buddhism denies it. If it cannot be shown what links John to Jim, then it is intelligible to claim that the karma-rebirth doctrine is just.

The second part of the problem is the coherency of Buddhism as a worldview. Can a coherent Buddhist worldview be established without admitting the concept of personhood? It seems not. First, the doctrine of karma presupposes the idea of personhood if it were to be. Suppose John is a bad man who died and is reborn as Jim. Also, suppose Jack is a good man and reborn as Josh. Karma, if it were, will ensure that Jim is reborn into a low-income family, perhaps having a physical disability and or character vices. Meanwhile, karma ensures that Josh will receive exactly the opposite. Now, suppose further that James is a better man than Jack, who, upon death, is reborn as Jay. Karma will also ensure that Jay’s life is comparatively better than Josh’s since James accumulated more good karma than Jack. If this were the case, can one attribute such a justice mechanism to the impersonal law? When I say, for example, that the Indonesian corruption law is unjust, I mean that the persons, the corrupt politicians, behind such a law are unjust. Justice is the attribute of a person. It is not within our common sense or everyday language to attribute justice to natural law – which is impersonal – as in “It is just that the snow falls after two sunny weeks.” We should not attribute it either too impersonal karma.

The third problem in denying personhood is that it always results in a logical contradiction. In Buddhist scripture Majjhima Nikaya part 72, Buddha conversed with his disciples and told about a group of monks who cannot escape rebirth. Buddha says their failure is due to the logical nature of the monks’ quarrel.

‘The cosmos is eternal’ or ‘The cosmos is not eternal’; ‘The world is finite’ or ‘The world is infinite’; ‘The soul and the body are the same things’ or ‘The soul and the body are different things’; or that after death, a Realized One exists, or does not exist, or both exists and does not exist, or neither exists nor does not exist.

Indeed, Nirvana, the ultimate destination in Buddhism itself, is “beyond all terms of duality and relativity. It is beyond our conceptions of good and evil, right and wrong, existence and non-existence” (Rahula, 1974). Trying to escape rebirth by engaging in intellectual and logical discourse is not the preferred way to arrive at nirvana. A contemporary Buddhist Zen thinker, Shunryu Suzuki (2011), embraces logical contradiction this way: For most people, everything exists; they think whatever they see and hear exists. Of course, the bird we see and hear exists. It exists, but what I mean by that may not be exactly what you mean. The Buddhist understanding of life includes both existence and non-existence. The bird both exists and does not exist at the same time. We say that a view of life-based on existence alone is heretical.

Suzuki, like Gautama, embraces logical contradiction. Indeed, Nirvana is “beyond logic and reasoning” (Rahula, 1974).” Of course, Buddhism has many logic theories (Yandell & Netland, 2009). However, one is warranted to conclude that the denial of self is impractical and not livable for two reasons. First, one has a first-person experience of her personhood. Through sensory perception, one sees, hears, and touches the world. Through intuition, she knows that she is the subject who perceives. She knows that she is the ‘I’ who is a person – a center of consciousness who thinks, feels, and wants. Even in deciding to escape rebirth and achieve nirvana, one should embrace the ‘I’ because the ‘I’ who has achieved Nirvana is surely different from others who have

not. If one ceases her personhood, how would she know whether she has achieved nirvana? Suppose a bhikkhu, in front of young monks, asks who among them has trained hard to let go of personhood. Let us also suppose that one certain young monk has been training hard. If the young monk raises her hand and answers, “I,” would this be seen as contradictory to her denying personhood? It seems parallel to someone who claims that she is very humble. This supposedly shows that once one denies the notion of personhood, one is trapped in contradiction and lives an incoherent life.

CONCLUSION

Despite its popularity, the Buddhist doctrine of rebirth pales compared to the Christian doctrine of heaven and hell; it is not as just and compassionate as its defenders claim. Also, it does not answer the problem of evil properly. More importantly, the rebirth doctrine suffers from the problem of personhood. It fails to establish the relationship between one individual and her karmic heir; it presupposes personhood in karma, resulting in a logical contradiction and impracticality.

The above reflection brings two practical implications for Christian educators helping students build a coherent Christian worldview. Firstly, educators must help students internalize the doctrine of heaven and hell regarding grace and love. Hence, grace and love should be exemplified in the life of a Christian school. One example, which does not implicate the karmic model, will be formulating a system of punishment – or a system of grace – which does not accord with the degree of students’ violation. Second, Christian educators should train students—as well as parents—to develop critical minds. Such training is crucial in helping students be intellectually and spiritually sensitive to the diversity of non-Christian worldviews. In the long run, they can identify the objections to their faith and give proper responses graciously.

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