

BUKTI KORESPONDENSI

Judul Artikel : Christian Philosophical Reflection on Rebirth: Bring this Discussion into Our Classroom
Jurnal : Aletheia, Vol. 4, No.1, April 2023

Proses:

- Bukti konfirmasi submit artikel : 1 April 2023
- Bukti hasil review pertama : 1 April 2023
- Bukti konfirmasi submit revisi pertama : 4 April 2023
- Bukti konfirmasi penerimaan artikel : 4 April 2023

From: Dr. Magdalena Pranata Santoso, S.Th., M.Si. ojs_editor@petra.ac.id
Subject: [aletheia] Submission Acknowledgement
Date: 1 April 2023 02.55
To: Ezra ezra.a.iskandar@petra.ac.id



Ezra:

Thank you for submitting the manuscript, "Christian Philosophical Reflection on Rebirth" to Aletheia Christian Educators Journal. With the online journal management system that we are using, you will be able to track its progress through the editorial process by logging in to the journal web site:

Submission URL: <http://aletheia.petra.ac.id/index.php/aletheia/authorDashboard/submission/181>
Username: ezrais99

If you have any questions, please contact me. Thank you for considering this journal as a venue for your work.

Dr. Magdalena Pranata Santoso, S.Th., M.Si.

Aletheia Christian Educators Journal
Faculty of Teacher Education
Petra Christian University

***Bukti konfirmasi submit artikel**

***manuskrip awal**

Christian Philosophical Reflection on Rebirth

ABSTRACT

Death is a mystery. We have no idea – much less firsthand experience – of what happens when we die. There are three major competing views regarding the after-death: atheistic, resurrection, and reincarnation. Traditionally, the reincarnation view has been embraced by most people who ever lived on this planet. Rebirth is often grouped as part of the reincarnation view. Proponents of the view also raise difficulties to the Christian doctrine of resurrection or heaven and hell view. This paper will first explain what the doctrine of reincarnation amounts to, with emphasis on Buddhism, and show the reasons why it is appealing. It then proceeds to give philosophical responses to each of the reasons. The paper concludes by pointing out a major philosophical problem to the reincarnation view: the problem of personhood.

Keywords: reincarnation, rebirth, Buddhism, resurrection, Christian

Introduction

From the beginning of human civilization there have been hundreds of religions and thousands of belief-systems. Each tells its followers a story of what happens after we die. Even an atheist who denies the existence of supernaturals has a story, that is, 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 resurrection story is almost always accompanied by the belief in heaven and hell. Ancient Greek philosophy, Hinduism, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Chinese, African, and Native American religions, showed features of reincarnation (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 the age of 50 (38%) believe in reincarnation, compared with 27% of those ages 50 and older (Mitchell, 2021). The phenomenon surely invites Christians to reflect and offer intelligible responses.

Reincarnation and Rebirth

Reincarnation view holds that, upon death, one's soul will migrate from one body to another body in an endless cycle, or *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 in regards to the bad deeds: one will receive punishment in this or future life. Karmic law is neither created nor regulated by God. In fact, in this view there is no personal God the creator. Karmic law ensures that every deed, good or bad, will eventually bear its consequences. Not all the consequences, however, are received in one's current lifetime. Karma that has been accumulated but not yet received is carried to the next life, or even lives ahead. This is where the idea of reincarnation fits in: that one, after death, will be born again into one or another form of life to pay his karma. In fact, just being reborn can be karmic payment itself. Some features of one's next life, such as the family which 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 there are in fact many other things in life that are not predetermined. A car crash or winning the lottery are just accidents. Failing a class is linked to lack of effort and laziness. One still can escape from his cultural conditioning, family's economic status, or even hereditary disease; and is free to 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. On Hindu thought 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 soul, the objection is often raised against Buddhism as to what transmigrates during reincarnation. Walpola Rahula 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 what this life is, 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, but we continue. If 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 nonfunctioning of the body (Rahula, 1974)?

For Rahula, there is no soul that transmigrates during one's death in the same way there is no continuing soul during one's life. Hence, Buddhists prefer to use the term rebirth, rather than transmigration or reincarnation. To explain soulless rebirth Buddhists used few analogies. The most popular is the candle analogy. Suppose that I transfer the flame from one to another candle so that 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 just 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 appealing to the modern mind. First, the teaching does more justice than that of the resurrection view. It is thought that heaven and hell – as a reward and punishment system – are not at all just. The eternal punishment is too severe while the eternal reward is too gratuitous in comparison to one's temporal life. Second, it is more compassionate. On 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 is able to account for the problem of evil (Davis, 2015). There is no need to delve into philosophical arguments of 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 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 is the result of reading Christian theology in the light of karma. Rather, heaven and hell should be viewed as one's standing relation to his 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. There are degrees of joy and sorrow experienced by both inhabitants. Surely, those martyred holding on 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 the 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 themselves for they are looking forward to escape samsara (the continuous cycle of rebirth and redeath). In fact, the first noble truth taught by Siddhartha Gautama, the founder of Buddhism, is *dukkha*: that 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 definitely 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 that the Buddhists long for (Walls, 2015). In addition, the second chance does not necessarily lead one to betterment. If a bad man is given the 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 will most likely be reborn – due to previous karma – into a poor 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 grants him the possibility 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? It looks like the path to sanctification is increasingly difficult as one is reborn.

Instead of answering, the doctrine of rebirth merely shifts the problem of evil one step backward continuously. What makes one deserve his suffering in the current life is his karma in a previous life. What he deserved in a previous life was due to his karma in a life antecedent to the previous life. It goes on and on. In consequence, the idea of rebirth cannot square with Christian doctrine of creation. For it should explain where Adam and Eve received their karma from. Neither can it square with Darwinian evolution. For it should explain how karma transfers from the non-living to the living organisms.

Rebirth and Personhood

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, actually, being reborn. There is no single answer among Buddhists, but they all agree that whatever it is, 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 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 (Anika). “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 (Smith and Novak, 2003).”

Here is, then, the problem. Suppose that John is reborn in the next life as Jeff. Now, the doctrine of karma-rebirth is just only if it can be shown that Jeff is indeed (the reincarnation of) John. What relation is there between John and Jeff? Yes, Jeff is John’s karmic heir, but what exactly is it that makes Jeff, not Josh, John’s karmic heir? What is shared between them? It cannot be the body since one lives 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 Jeff, 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, if it were to be just, presupposes

the idea of personhood. Suppose that John is a bad man who died and is reborn as Jeff. Also, suppose that Jack is a good man and is reborn as Josh. Karma, if it were just, will ensure that Jeff is reborn into a poor family, perhaps having 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 that of Josh's since James accumulated more good karma than Jack did. If this were the case, can one attribute such a justice-mechanism to the impersonal law? When I say, for example, that the Indonesian law on corruption is unjust, what I really mean is that the persons, the corrupt politicians, behind such 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 to impersonal karma.

The third problem in denying personhood is that it always results in logical contradiction. It is obvious in many conversations between Buddha Gautama and his disciples. Here is one:¹

"...the soul & the body are the same'..."

"...the soul is one thing and the body another'..."

"...after death a Tathagata exists'..."

"...after death a Tathagata does not exist'..."

"...after death a Tathagata both exists & does not exist'..."

"...after death a Tathagata neither exists nor does not exist'... does not lead to disenchantment, dispassion, cessation; to calm, direct knowledge, full Awakening, Unbinding."

Gautama answered No to each of these. But, what does it mean for one to both exist and not exist? This kind of contradiction echoes in their contemporary. Zen thinker, Shunryu Suzuki, for example, say that

¹ Majjhima Nikaya 72, “Aggi-Vacchagotta Sutta: To Vacchagotta on Fire”

For most people everything exists; they think whatever they see and whatever they 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, 2011).

Suzuki, like Gautama, embraces logical contradiction. Of course, there are many theories among Buddhism as to what this teaching amounts to (Yandell and Netland, 2009). Regardless, the denial of self is impractical and not livable.

Conclusion

Despite its popularity, the Buddhist doctrine of rebirth pales in comparison 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 relation between one individual and his karmic heir; it presupposes personhood in the idea of karma; and it results in a logical contradiction leading to impracticality.

Works Cited

Davis, Stephen T. *After We Die: Theology, Philosophy, and the Question of Life after Death*. Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2015.

Keown, Damien. *Buddhism: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.

Kung, Hans. *Christianity and the World Religions: Paths to Dialogue With Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism*. Garden City, N.Y: Doubleday, 1986.

McClelland, Norman C. *Encyclopedia of Reincarnation and Karma*. Jefferson, N.C: McFarland, 2010.

Ryan, Thomas. "25 Percent of US Christians Believe in Reincarnation. What's Wrong with This Picture?" *America Magazine*. Last modified October 21, 2015. Accessed April 24, 2017. <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2015/10/21/25-percent-us-christians-believe-reincarnation-whats-wrong-picture>.


Smith, Huston, and Philip Novak. *Buddhism: A Concise Introduction*. New York: HarperOne, 2004. Suzuki, Shunryu, Huston Smith, Richard Baker, and David Chadwick. *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*. Edited by Trudy Dixon. Boston: Shambhala, 2011.

Walls, Jerry L. *Heaven, Hell, and Purgatory: Rethinking the Things That Matter Most*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Brazos Press, 2015.

Walpola Rāhula. *What the Buddha Taught*. 2nd and enl. ed. Evergreen E-641. New York: Grove Press, 1974.

Yandell, Keith, and Harold Netland. *Buddhism: A Christian Exploration and Appraisal*. Downers Grove, Ill: IVP Academic, 2009.

Zimmer, Heinrich Robert. *Philosophies of India*. Edited by Joseph Campbell. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969.

From: Aletheia Editor ojs_editor@petra.ac.id 
Subject: [aletheia] Editor Decision
Date: 1 April 2023 10.30
To: Ezra ezra.a.iskandar@petra.ac.id



Ezra:

We have reached a decision regarding your submission to Aletheia Christian Educators Journal, "Christian Philosophical Reflection on Rebirth".

Our decision is: Revisions Required

Here is some feedback to improve your manuscript quality:

1. An interesting idea; please add how this topic would imply to the education system or parenting tips. As Christian education journals, we require the author to give practical implications on how the study could improve our education practice.
2. For the direct citation of more than 40 words, Please refer to APA style direct citation <https://www.scribbr.com/apa-style/direct-quotes/>
3. This chapter will be fitted to our journal if the author adds some implication on Christian parenting or teaching (answering difficult questions from children or students)
4. Please elaborate on your topic in Christian education practice. It could be some practical tips on creating a productive discussion with children on this topic. Or it could be some guidance to discuss life and death in the classroom and bring them to the Christian perspective.
5. I have added some revisions to the red highlight; this draft needs a proofread before submission. The author can utilize a proofreading tool to correct grammatical errors.

Aletheia Christian Educators Journal
Faculty of Teacher Education
Petra Christian University

***Bukti hasil review pertama**

A-
Buddhi...w.docx

*Manuskrip Hasil Review

Christian Philosophical Reflection on Rebirth

ABSTRACT

Death is a mystery. We have no idea – much less firsthand experience – of what happens when we die. **Three** major competing views regarding the after-death are atheistic, resurrection, and reincarnation. **Traditionally, most people who ever lived on this planet have embraced the reincarnation view.** Rebirth is often grouped as part of the reincarnation view. Proponents of the **theory** also **challenge** the Christian doctrine of resurrection or **the** heaven and hell view. **This paper explains what the doctrine of reincarnation amounts to, emphasizing Buddhism, and shows why it is appealing.** It then proceeds to give philosophical responses to each of the reasons. The paper concludes by pointing out a major philosophical problem **with** the reincarnation view: the problem of personhood.

Keywords: reincarnation, rebirth, Buddhism, resurrection, Christian

Introduction

From the beginning of human civilization, there have been hundreds of religions and thousands of **belief systems**. 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 Christians to reflect and offer intelligible responses.

Reincarnation and Rebirth

The reincarnation view holds that, upon death, one's soul will migrate from one body to another in an endless cycle or *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

Commented [DP1]: An interesting idea, please add how this topic would imply to education system or parenting tips. As Christian education journals we requires author to give practical implication on how study could contribute to the betterment of our education practice.

Commented [DP2]: Literature review on reincarnation and rebirth

life. Karmic law is neither created nor regulated by God. 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 even lives ahead. **This is where the idea of reincarnation fits in: one, after death, will be born again into one form of life to pay his 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.** 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 his cultural conditioning, family's economic status, or even hereditary disease; and can 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. **In Hindu thought,** 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, objection is often raised against Buddhism regarding what transmigrates during reincarnation. Walpola Rahula 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 what this life is, 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, but we continue. If 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 nonfunctioning of the body (Rahula, 1974)?

Commented [DP3]: Is it a direct citation? Please refer to APA style direct citation <https://www.scribbr.com/apa-style/direct-quotes/>

For Rahula, **no soul transmigrates** during one's death in the same way there is no continuing soul during one's life. Hence, Buddhists prefer to use the term rebirth, rather than transmigration or reincarnation. To explain soulless rebirth Buddhists used few analogies. The most popular is the candle analogy. Suppose that I transfer the flame from one to another candle so that 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 just 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 appealing to the modern mind. First, the teaching does more justice than that of the resurrection view. It is thought that heaven and hell – as a reward and punishment system – are not at all just. The eternal punishment is too severe while the eternal reward is too gratuitous in comparison to one's temporal life. Second, it is more compassionate. On 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 is able to account for the problem of evil (Davis, 2015). There is no need to delve into philosophical arguments of 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 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's standing relation to his God. Those who love God (and His Son) will be in heaven and those who do not will not. Indeed,

Commented [DP4]: Findings: Christian reflection

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 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 redeath).** In fact, the first noble truth taught by Siddhartha Gautama, the founder of Buddhism, is *dukkha*: that 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 definitely 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 that the Buddhists long for (Walls, 2015). In addition, the second chance does not necessarily lead one to betterment. If a bad man is given the 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 will most likely be reborn – due to previous karma – into a poor 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 grants him the possibility 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? It looks like the path to sanctification is increasingly difficult as one is reborn.

Instead of answering, the doctrine of rebirth merely shifts the problem of evil one step backward continuously. What makes one deserve his suffering in the current life is his karma in a previous life. What he deserved in a previous life was due to his karma in a

life antecedent to the previous life. It goes on and on. In consequence, the idea of rebirth cannot square with Christian doctrine of creation. For it should explain where Adam and Eve received their karma from. Neither can it square with Darwinian evolution. For it should explain how karma transfers from the non-living to the living organisms.

Rebirth and Personhood

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, actually, being reborn. There is no single answer among Buddhists, but they all agree that whatever it is, 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 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 (Anika). “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 (Smith and Novak, 2003).”

Here is, then, the problem. Suppose that John is reborn in the next life as Jeff. Now, the doctrine of karma-rebirth is just only if it can be shown that Jeff is indeed (the reincarnation of) John. What relation is there between John and Jeff? Yes, Jeff is John’s karmic heir, but what exactly is it that makes Jeff, not Josh, John’s karmic heir? What is shared between them? It cannot be the body since one lives 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 Jeff, 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, if it were to be just, presupposes the idea of personhood. Suppose that John is a bad man who died and is reborn as Jeff. Also, suppose that Jack is a good man and is reborn as Josh. Karma, if it were just, will ensure that Jeff is reborn into a poor family, perhaps having physical disability, and or

Commented [DP5]: This chapter will be fitted to our journal if author add some implication on Christian parenting (answering the difficult questions from children)

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 that of Josh's since James accumulated more good karma than Jack did. If this were the case, can one attribute such a justice-mechanism to the impersonal law? When I say, for example, that the Indonesian law on corruption is unjust, what I really mean is that the persons, the corrupt politicians, behind such 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 to impersonal karma.

The third problem in denying personhood is that it always results in logical contradiction. It is obvious in many conversations between Buddha Gautama and his disciples. Here is one:¹

"...'the soul & the body are the same'..."

"...'the soul is one thing and the body another'..."

"...'after death a Tathagata exists'..."

"...'after death a Tathagata does not exist'..."

"...'after death a Tathagata both exists & does not exist'..."

"...'after death a Tathagata neither exists nor does not exist'... does not lead to disenchantment, dispassion, cessation; to calm, direct knowledge, full Awakening, Unbinding."

Gautama answered No to each of these. But, what does it mean for one to both exist and not exist? This kind of contradiction echoes in their contemporary. Zen thinker, Shunryu Suzuki, for example, say that

For most people everything exists; they think whatever they see and whatever they 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

¹ Majjhima Nikaya 72, “Aggi-Vacchagotta Sutta: To Vacchagotta on Fire”

exist at the same time. We say that a view of life based on existence alone is heretical (Suzuki, 2011).

Suzuki, like Gautama, embraces logical contradiction. Of course, there are many theories among Buddhism as to what this teaching amounts to (Yandell and Netland, 2009). Regardless, the denial of self is impractical and not livable.

Conclusion

Despite its popularity, the Buddhist doctrine of rebirth pales in comparison 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 his karmic heir; it presupposes personhood in the idea of karma; and it results in a logical contradiction leading to impracticality.

Commented [DP6]:

Works Cited

Davis, Stephen T. *After We Die: Theology, Philosophy, and the Question of Life after Death*. Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2015.

Keown, Damien. *Buddhism: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.

Kung, Hans. *Christianity and the World Religions: Paths to Dialogue With Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism*. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1986.

McClelland, Norman C. *Encyclopedia of Reincarnation and Karma*. Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2010.

Ryan, Thomas. "25 Percent of US Christians Believe in Reincarnation. What's Wrong with This Picture?" *America Magazine*. Last modified October 21, 2015. Accessed April 24, 2017. <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2015/10/21/25-percent-us-christians-believe-reincarnation-whats-wrong-picture>.

Smith, Huston, and Philip Novak. *Buddhism: A Concise Introduction*. New York: HarperOne, 2004. Suzuki, Shunryu, Huston Smith, Richard Baker, and David Chadwick. *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*. Edited by Trudy Dixon. Boston: Shambhala, 2011.

Walls, Jerry L. *Heaven, Hell, and Purgatory: Rethinking the Things That Matter Most*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Brazos Press, 2015.

Walpola Rāhula. *What the Buddha Taught*. 2nd and enl. ed. Evergreen E-641. New York: Grove Press, 1974.

Yandell, Keith, and Harold Netland. *Buddhism: A Christian Exploration and Appraisal*. Downers Grove, Ill: IVP Academic, 2009.

Zimmer, Heinrich Robert. *Philosophies of India*. Edited by Joseph Campbell. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969.

Christian Philosophical Reflection on Rebirth

ABSTRACT

There are only three major competing theories regarding life-after-death. Atheism holds a theory that life ends at one's death. Another theory is the reincarnation view which is held by most people who ever lived 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 or often called the heaven and hell view. Proponents of each theory attack other theories, debates have been becoming common in social media, and these often leave students in confusion. There is a significant need, then, for Christian educators to equip themselves first before preparing students to learn comparative religions. Teachers must be well-versed in answering objections to Christian faith. This paper helps teachers to understand the reincarnation theory, with emphasis on the rebirth view, and shows why the theory is attractive. It then gives philosophical responses based on the Christian worldview. The paper concludes with two short pieces of advice to Christian educators.

Keywords: reincarnation, rebirth, Buddhism, resurrection, Christian

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 Christians 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 or *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. Karmic law is neither created nor regulated by God (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 even 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 can 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, 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 what this life is, 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, but we continue. If 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 nonfunctioning 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 as granted. Hence, Buddhists prefer to use the term rebirth, rather than transmigration or reincarnation. To explain soulless rebirth, Buddhists used few analogies. The most popular is the candle analogy. Suppose that I transfer the flame from one to another candle so that 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 just 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 – as a reward and punishment system – are not at all just. The eternal punishment is too severe while the eternal reward is too gratuitous in comparison to one's temporal life. Second, it is more compassionate. On 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 is able to account for the problem of evil (Davis, 2015). There is no need to delve into philosophical arguments of 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 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's 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 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 redeath). In fact, the first noble truth taught by Siddhartha Gautama, the founder of Buddhism, is *dukkha*: that 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 definitely 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 that the Buddhists long for (Walls, 2015).

In addition, the second chance does not necessarily lead one to betterment. If a bad man is given the 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 will most likely be reborn – due to previous karma – into a poor 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 grants him the possibility 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? It looks like the path to sanctification is increasingly difficult as one is reborn. Instead of answering, the doctrine of rebirth merely shifts the problem of evil one step backward continuously. 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. In consequence, the idea of rebirth cannot square with Christian doctrine of creation. For it should explain where Adam and Eve received their karma from. 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, actually, being reborn. There is no single answer among Buddhists, but they all agree that whatever it is, 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 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 that “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 doctrine of karma-rebirth is just 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 is it that makes Jim, not Josh, John’s karmic heir? What is shared between them? It cannot be the body since one lives 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, if it were to be just, presupposes the idea of personhood. Suppose that John is a bad man who died and is reborn as Jim. Also, suppose that Jack is a good man and is reborn as Josh. Karma, if it were just, will ensure that Jim is reborn into a poor family, perhaps having 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 that of Josh's since James accumulated more good karma than Jack did. If this were the case, can one attribute such a justice-mechanism to the impersonal law? When I say, for example, that the Indonesian law on corruption is unjust, what I really mean is that the persons, the corrupt politicians, behind such 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 to impersonal karma.

The third problem in denying personhood is that it always results in 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 tells the reason behind 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 thing’ or ‘The soul and the body are different things’; or that after death, a Realized One exists, or doesn't exist, or both exists and doesn't exist, or neither exists nor doesn't exist.

Indeed, Nirvana, the ultimate destination in Buddhism itself is “beyond all terms of duality and relativity. It is therefore 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 whatever they 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, there are many theories of logic among Buddhism (Yandell and 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 making a decision 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 simply ceases her personhood, how would she, then, know whether she has achieved nirvana? Suppose a bhikkhu, in front of young monks, asks who among them have 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, then, 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 in comparison 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 the idea of karma; and it results in a logical contradiction leading to impracticality.

The above reflection brings two practical implications for Christian educators who are helping students build a coherent Christian worldview. Firstly, educators must help students to internalize the doctrine of heaven and hell in terms of grace and love. Hence, grace and love should be exemplified in the life of 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. As for the second, Christian educators should train students—as well as parents—to develop critical minds. Such training is crucial in helping students to be both intellectually and spiritually sensitive to the diversity of non-Christian worldviews. In the long-run, they are able to identify the objections to their faith and give proper responses graciously.

References

- Davis, S. T. (2015). *After We Die: Theology, Philosophy, and the Question of Life after Death*. Baylor University Press.
- Dhammananda, K. S. (1993). *What Buddhists Believe* (Fifth Edition 1993). The Corporate Body of the Buddha Educational Foundation.
- Keown, D. (2013). *Buddhism: A Very Short Introduction* (2nd edition). Oxford University Press.
- Kung, H., Stietencron, H. V., & Ess, J. V. (1993). *Christianity and World Religions* (Reprint, Subsequent edition). Orbis Books.
- McClelland, N. C. (2010). *Encyclopedia of Reincarnation and Karma*. McFarland & Company.
- Mitchell, T. (2021, November 23). 2. Views on the afterlife. *Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project*. <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/11/23/views-on-the-afterlife/>
- Okawa, R. (2016). *The Essence of Buddha: The Path to Enlightenment* (Reprint edition). Irh Press.
- Rahula, W. (1974). *What the Buddha Taught: Revised and Expanded Edition with Texts from Suttas and Dhammapada* (Revised edition). Grove Press.
- Smith, H., & Novak, P. (2004). *Buddhism: A Concise Introduction* (Reprint edition). HarperOne.
- Suzuki, S. (2011). *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind: 40th Anniversary Edition*. Shambhala.
- The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Samyutta Nikaya* (B. Bodhi, Trans.; 2nd edition). (2003). Wisdom Publications.
- Tricycle. (2010, August 30). *25% of Americans believe in reincarnation*. Tricycle: The Buddhist Review. <https://tricycle.org/trikedaily/25-americans-believe-reincarnation/>
- Yandell, K., & Netland, H. (2009). *Buddhism: A Christian Exploration and Appraisal*. IVP Academic.

From: Aletheia Editor ojs_editor@petra.ac.id 
Subject: [aletheia] Editor Decision
Date: 4 April 2023 14.27
To: Ezra ezra.a.iskandar@petra.ac.id



Ezra:

We have reached a decision regarding your submission to Aletheia Christian Educators Journal, "Christian Philosophical Reflection on Rebirth".

Our decision is to: Accept Submission

Aletheia Christian Educators Journal
Faculty of Teacher Education
Petra Christian University

A-
Buddhi...w.docx

***Bukti konfirmasi penerimaan artikel**