

WHY BELIEVE IN THE RESURRECTION (Part 2)

“Can you believe in reincarnation and still be a Catholic?” the young woman asked. The idea took me by surprise. Not that someone growing up in a modern Western society might believe in reincarnation, but that someone should be looking for some association between a faith that believes in the Resurrection and the notion that we are re-born continually. I asked her why it was she “believed” in reincarnation; her response was a good one. She felt that “getting it (life) right” was not possible for one lifetime only but needed many. By her own admission, she knew little of what is understood by reincarnation.

In simple terms, religions or philosophies like Buddhism or Hinduism believe that salvation from all human suffering lies in *Nirvana*, a state of existence free of the impact of the cycle of life from birth to death. This freedom depends upon spiritual practices like meditation which enable the believer to separate herself/himself from the vicissitudes that have their origin in our material existence. Progress in that state would depend on a person's *kharma* or what they do in this life.

If *kharma* is good, a person would find themselves after death in a higher state of existence, as someone more enlightened or more privileged; if their *kharma* is bad, their destiny for the next life is as a lower creature, i.e., any kind of animal, insect. Success in this spiritual path lies in “quenching” or “blowing out” the fires (=passions) which enmesh us in a material world that is the cause of endless birth and death. Desire, whether for good or ill, is eliminated for the experience of peace. There is no longer a sense of self.

While one could find correspondences in any religion, including Christianity, with these notions of salvation and life after death (*kharma* strikes me as a kind of human impulse explained by Jesus to “taking up the cross”), the stark difference with our revealed Faith (revealed by God) is the value and importance for human life for Creation. In religions of reincarnation, the good things of this earth are not really good at all, but rather a means to an end, which is a pure spiritual existence. Our Catholic Faith tells us, both in scripture and our liturgy, that the Lord created THINGS to

exist: “For you love all things that exist, and you loathe none of the things which you have made, for you would not have made anything if you had hated it... You spare all things, for they are yours, O Lord, lover of life.” (Wisdom 11:24-26) Our destiny is a New Creation, a new Heaven and Earth, joined as they once were. It's real!

The problem with believing in reincarnation and the philosophy that follows upon it? Ultimately focused on self, our relations and loves in this life become irrelevant. Howsoever the reincarnated man or woman returns, it is never with reference to those we love. In truth, the idea of reincarnation renders all our relationships in this life as not even a distant memory. There is no joy in reunion, no hope of a life lived together forever without the pain of separation. Separation is inevitable and permanent.

The young woman was not completely off the track. Her sense of getting life right spoke of a love for the blessings which God gives us in this life and a desire to not take any moment for granted. Malcolm Muggeridge wrote of how death's nearness often “makes what is left behind - the earth itself, its shapes and smells and colors and creatures, all that one has known and loved and lived with - the more entrancing.... One casts a backward look at the old place, overcome with affection for it, almost to the point of tears.” (*Confessions of a Twentieth-Century Pilgrim*)

Christian faith is centered upon the news that Jesus Christ is risen from the dead. In the second Preface prayer for Mass during the Easter season, we pray “Through [Christ] the children of light rise to eternal life and the halls of the heavenly Kingdom are thrown one to the faithful; for his Death is our ransom from death, and in his rising the life of all has risen.” Resurrection proposes to us true and eternal freedom from the endless cycle of suffering and death that has become so much part of human life that we have a difficult time believing in anything apart from it.

This core belief is essential to our faith because it confirms for us that God really does care about “every hair on our head”. Not only is our eternal destiny so important that He would give his only begotten Son over to death on a cross, but so are the gifts of love He gives us in this life. In the final reckoning, only the Resurrection makes sense to the human heart.