

**A MISSIOLOGICAL EVALUATION OF CHRISTIAN RESPONSES TO
REINCARNATION**

BY

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SUMMARY

This dissertation is a missiological evaluation of the challenges presented to Christian faith by reincarnation. Owing to the far-reaching theological implications of reincarnation, I have made use of an analytical grid to structure the research. It consists of seven sections, namely God, anthropology, ethics, hamartiology, soteriology, theodicy and history. This grid has been used to examine reincarnation as espoused in the Bhagavad-Gita (chapter 2) , as propounded by the well-known Hindu Swamis Vivekananda and Prabhupada (chapter 3) , and in the responses of four Christian theologians (Geddes MacGregor, John Hick, Vishal Mangalwadi and Edmond Robillard) to reincarnation (chapter 4) . There are many individuals within Western society who are attracted to reincarnation. My concern is to evaluate whether the Christian church can incorporate reincarnation in its religious worldview. In chapter 5, I give an evaluation of this question from a Reformed theological perspective.

OPSOMMING

Hierdie verhandeling is 'n missiologiese beoordeling van die uitdagings wat die leerstelling van reïnkarnasie aan die Christelike geloof bied. As gevolg van die verreikende implikasies van reïnkarnasie, gebruik ek 'n analitiese raamwerk om vorm te gee aan die ondersoek. Hierdie raamwerk bestaan uit sewe onderafdelings, naamlik die beskouings oor God, mens, etiek, sonde, verlossing, teodisee en geskiedenis. Hierdie raamwerk word gebruik om die leerstelling van reïnkarnasie te ondersoek soos wat dit aan die orde kom in die Bhagavad-Gita (hoofstuk 2) , in die geskrifte van die twee bekende Swamis Vivekananda en Prabhupada (hoofstuk 3) , en in die reaksies van vier Christenteoloë (Geddes MacGregor, John Hick, Vishal Mangalwadi en Edmond Robillard) op reïnkarnasie (hoofstuk 4). Daar is heelwat mense in die Westerse samelewing wat aangetrokke is tot reïnkarnasie. My vraagstelling is om te evalueer of die Christelike kerk reïnkarnasie in sy godsdienstige wêreldbeeld kan opneem. In hoofstuk 5, gee ek 'n beoordeling van hierdie vraag uit 'n Gereformeerde teologiese gesigspunt.

KEY TERMS

Reincarnation; Resurrection; Bhagavad-Gita; Swami Vivekananda; Swami Prabhupada; Geddes MacGregor; John Hick; Vishal Mangalwadi; Edmond Robillard.

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CHAPTER ONE

1. THE INTEREST AND RELEVANCE OF THIS STUDY

1.1 THE ENIGMA OF DEATH

Death is a central concern of all the religions of the world. People need to know what lies beyond this physical realm. From this there stems deep questions such as: Why am I here? What is the purpose of my life? and many related questions. All these questions prompt one to look beyond the mere physical speculations about life. This speculation about life is paradoxically linked to the great opposite of life, namely death; in fact, there seems to be a unique symbiosis between the two. In metaphysical contemplation, the one cannot do without the other. So if one wants to think realistically about life, one cannot avoid thinking about death. What is even more interesting to people nowadays is that their idea of death influences their present conduct in the here and now. This has important consequences for all.

A Christian's thinking about life and death will differ from a Hindu's on the same topic. Can both be right or does the one invalidate the other? The Hindu's view on the afterlife has a subtle twist to it. They ask: "Why do you want to know what will happen to you after you have died? Find out who you are now, then you will know all." Self-realisation in this life plays an important role for many Hindus and neo-Hindus. For them, self-realisation is the same as God-realisation and this has important consequences for their outlook on life. So there is a need here to direct their minds to the here and now and not to speculative concerns about the future. This seems to be an existential trap, without concern for the future or the betterment of society, except to save oneself (see 4.4). So the

great escape for the Hindu is self-realisation.

Unfortunately, this existential philosophy of life is perceived as tantamount to intellectual suicide by the Western¹ mind, for it negates empirical reality, implying that it is relatively unimportant. Swami Prabhupada (see 3.3) begins his book Coming Back with the words: "If you want to gain real control over your destiny, you must understand reincarnation and how it works. It is that simple" (Prabhupada 1984:ix). Here the Hindu concept of salvation presented in the West highlights one's eternal quest for immortality. Self-realisation is still paramount but only as a means for escaping the terrible wheel of samsara (see 2.6). So, to the West today, reincarnation is presented as a fact and self-realisation as a psychological breakthrough. Hindu philosophy claims to be based on science and many modern-day scientists are quoted to prove this. No wonder many in the West have come to embrace this vast, complex and interesting belief.

Belief in reincarnation has existed for thousands of years, and has the authority that time itself gives to those philosophies and thoughts that survive the test. Reincarnation is not just an Eastern concept, confined to the shores of the mystical East. According to a 1982 Gallup Poll, 23% of all American adults believe in reincarnation to some degree. Worldwide, belief in some form of reincarnation stands at about 50% (Albrecht 1982:9). It is therefore imperative that Christian theologians study Hinduism and all its related doctrines. The words of Aagaard, a Danish missiologist, are instructive in this regard: "I propagate the proposal in Denmark that all pastors and church leaders who do not know what Kundalini is should either be sacked or re-educated.... Those who do not know what Kundalini and chakras are have no contact with reality today (Aagaard

¹ The term "West" in this study refers to the culture, education and worldview emanating primarily from Western Europe and North America.

1982:269). As can be deduced from the above, a study of reincarnation is a must for every Christian theologian.

Reincarnation has been popularised widely in the West today as a result of individuals like Mahatma Gandhi, Swami Vivekananda and Dr. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan and groups like Transcendental Meditation (TM) and the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON). Some of these will be discussed in Chapter Three. On a wider and larger scale, the New Age movement has also popularised belief in reincarnation and karma, for these two issues are of vital importance to "new agers" (Steyn 1990:44). This movement, which seems to defy a coherent systematic theology or belief system, has penetrated all strata of modern day society, the Christian church not excluded. From the above, we can deduce that a large proportion of Western society, including Christians, have been influenced by the doctrine of reincarnation.

Besides the very presentable way in which reincarnation has been offered to the West as a tolerant, easy-to-understand and answers-to-life philosophy, there is the pluralist trend in theology which now preaches a gospel vastly different to the traditional understanding of God and his dealings with humanity. According to the pluralist view, Christians should no longer be so arrogant as to claim that they are the only ones who possess all truth. All religions have facets or aspects of truth in them so that we can all learn from each other and arrive at new and deeper insights as well as a variant form of our belief systems. For this reason alone a study of reincarnation will benefit the Christian concerned. The kingdom of God is much broader than the church and also operates through means other than the church, and in this it is imperative to admit that the empirical church is not to be identified with the kingdom of God (Knitter 1985:222). When studying any other belief system, one's perspective will inevitably change as new insights are gained and appreciated, and in the study of reincarnation a new

perception of God's dealings with humanity will emerge.

1.2 THEOLOGICAL METHOD

Due to the relativistic trend today it has become almost fashionable to hide one's theological position under nebulous and vague terminology. In such an approach, truth can turn into a simple subjectivist position according to which truth for an individual depends on that individual's judgments:

More generally, however, relativism restricts truth to the judgments of communities or societies (however these are defined), so that it may be said that certain things are true for Christians while different truths hold for adherents of another religion (Trigg 1983:297).

Of the numerous theological books that I have studied, many a theologian has portrayed the above-mentioned outlook, for example Hick (1985), Bowker (1991) and MacGregor (1978, 1982). The theological opinions of Christians on Hinduism can be divided into three categories - restrictivism, universalism and inclusivism (Sanders 1992:73). Within these three views, there are various attitudes, ranging from the idea that Hinduism as a religion is damned by God to the other extreme of accepting numerous Hindu concepts as legitimate for salvation.

Those holding the restrictivist view believe that there is nothing that we can learn from other religions. They must be totally usurped by the Christian gospel and culture, even if this is an alien Western culture, which would alienate Eastern converts to Christianity from their culture, friends and family. The restrictivists seem to imply that Western culture is a form of Christianity to which the whole world must adhere.

On the other hand, the universalists decry everything that smacks of intolerance, including the fundamental aspects of Christianity, as a residue of colonial arrogance. They believe

that there is much to learn from other cultures. We must therefore be sensitive to their worldview, learning from them as much as they learn from us. As regards salvation, all belief systems are legitimate and valid. For them it does not matter whether one is a Christian or a Hindu. No one culture can capture the totality of God and therefore each culture or religion is a legitimate pathway to salvation.

Both these extremes can be challenged, since neither gives honest consideration to the basic tenets of both these highly sophisticated teachings on the afterlife, i.e. reincarnation and Christianity.

The position that I have taken in this study is known as the inclusivist approach (see Sanders 1992). Fundamentally, this position states that God is working through all cultures for the salvation of all peoples. As 1 Timothy 4:10 states, "...we have put our hope in the living God, who is the Saviour of all men, especially of those who believe." This statement seems to imply that Jesus is ontologically necessary for salvation but not epistemologically necessary (see Knitter 1985:104-106). St Paul knew that the living God is the Saviour of all people only in and through Christ. Many people believe in God and this raises the question of general revelation - what kind of God is He who gives people enough knowledge of Himself only to damn them? (Hick 1985:201). Scripture does not seem to bear this out. The Holy Spirit is working in all cultures to draw people to God. John 3:8 says "... the Spirit blows where it wills ..." and in this we see that God has established a universal covenant with humankind. The covenant I am referring to here is the Noachian covenant which is universal in scope (Genesis 9). This can also be seen from the portions of the Old Testament where God deals with "pagans" to bring glory to Himself and salvation for them. Two examples could be cited, viz. Naaman, who was healed in the river Jordan and praised Israel's God, and Nebuchadnezzar, who acknowledged Daniel's God as the Lord of Lords. These "pagans"

and all of the Old Testament Jews did not know Christ, yet they were saved in and through Him. All Christians are believers, but not all believers are Christians (Sanders 1992:225).

The Christian church is facing new challenges today and it is in the interests of the church to consider these challenges seriously. Within the modern worldview there has arisen numerous religious points of view which are at variance with Christianity. One such religious view is reincarnation, and it is in the interest of the church from a missiological point of view to take these "foreign" teachings seriously. The notion that mission is only applicable for third world countries, or for people "far" away is outmoded today. The modern day mission is "right here", due to the global village syndrome. Societies are no longer to be viewed as homogeneous groupings but rather as divergent in nature. Therefore it is imperative to inform Christian individuals about the reality of religious pluralism, and in this, to teach in-depth about certain aspects of traditionally foreign religious points of view. As far as I am concerned, one such foreign teaching that needs to be addressed seriously today is reincarnation. My motivation for this is to foster a more authentic Christian witness, as Christian individuals confront teachings such as reincarnation. For example I believe that an adherent of reincarnation would respect a Christian more if he\she had a profound knowledge of another person's points of view, and not only their own. In this regard one is preparing Christians as relevant witnesses for our modern day society.

So when it comes to the Hindu religion, with close examination it is possible to detect elements of God's grace. God is working in all religions and cultures and it is the missiologist's task to seek this out. What one needs is a missiology that is for the world, but one that must also be critical (Lochhead 1966:93). Christians today, as through the ages, acknowledge that their

God is a loving and merciful Father. In this, God will be the first judge of all when we pass from this life into the next, which in itself instils hope for all. I personally believe that the Kingdom of God will be bigger and wider in scope than we have ever imagined. A number of Scriptural passages seem to imply this, viz: Matt 8:10-12; 25:31-46; 19:30; Rev 5:9. The day of judgment may be full of pleasant surprises, when resurrected humanity beholds the grace of God amongst the various peoples praising Him.

1.3 A THEOLOGICAL GRID TO STRUCTURE THIS STUDY.

Many Christian doctrines are involved in a theological study of reincarnation, due to the central role played by reincarnation in the Hindu worldview. To give a consistent structure to the dissertation, I have identified a "grid" of seven doctrinal issues which structures my discussion of reincarnation in chapters 2 to 5. There is a fair amount of "overlap" between these seven issues, but the distinctions between them are helpful in highlighting the different dimensions of the challenge presented to Christian faith by reincarnation. The seven sections of the grid are:

1. God: This section looks at how reincarnation affects one's perception of God. It therefore deals with how God is perceived as being involved and concerned about creation.

2. Anthropology: Reincarnation has a profound bearing on the doctrine of human nature and affects one's perception of this life, its meaning and empirical reality. This section also looks at the body/soul question.

3. Ethics: This section examines how the doctrine of reincarnation affects one's practical application of this belief in life, and of one's responsibility towards others.

4. Hamartiology: This is the doctrine of sin or evil, derived from the Greek word hamartia, used for sin in the New Testament. This section therefore looks at karma and the nature of sin.

5. Soteriology: This section deals with the challenge of

reincarnation to Christian understandings of salvation. It looks at God's communication for the salvation of humanity in relation to the Hindu understanding of salvation as escape from samsara.

6. Theodicy: This is the study of the justification of divine providence by the attempt to reconcile the existence of evil with the goodness and sovereignty of God. This section covers the explanation of suffering, and the reality of evil and hell.

7. History: This final section deals with the underlying concept of time implied in reincarnation, and raises the question of cyclical versus linear understandings of history. Will there be a final consummation or not?

1.4 MY PERSONAL MOTIVATION

Reincarnation seems to many Christians to be an attractive explanation of what takes place when one dies. Due to this, many Christians have now embraced reincarnation as an alternate idea to the traditional Christian view of the afterlife. To many, Christians included, reincarnation is a living hope of a life after this life. I question this belief and present a challenge to Hindus regarding their central doctrine. The challenge is also to many in the Christian community who believe that Hinduism offers a basis for a New World civilisation, appropriate for the twenty-first century. In its quest to do so, Hinduism denies to a large extent the relevance of the Christian witness, particularly the restrictivist Christian stance that "in Christ alone" lies eternal salvation. The question that will inevitably be raised in the Christian mind is whether their faith can prove its ability to meet the deep human needs of people of different cultures and religious backgrounds in spite of all their diversities and to make them feel at home in their new world of faith.

The reason I believe that many find reincarnation an acceptable solution to the question of life and death is the very comfortable thought that a person can have another chance in

another life: Surely one single life is not all there can be? When people see their loved one's slipping into an unknown void they will cling to any doctrine that seems to offer hope of a better return.

When two religions meet, one naturally finds elements that repel but also elements that attract. If attracted, one will try and incorporate this into one's belief system. If its introduction does not entail conflict with other central doctrines, that religion may well be enriched. This is how many Christians feel today. They seem to be saying that you can incorporate reincarnation into the Christian message in order to have a richer, more relevant teaching for the world.

This meeting between Christianity and Hinduism in the West has had positive as well as negative results. It is a vast topic of which this study is only a small part. My central concern has been to study how reincarnation is understood and presented by some Hindu thinkers and how some Christian theologians have responded to this.

1.5 AN OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

In chapter 2 I first of all look at the classical Hindu understanding of reincarnation by analysing the way in which the Bhagavad-Gita portrays it. This is followed by an examination of two of the major figures who popularised reincarnation in the Western world, namely Swami Vivekananda and Swami Prabhupada (chapter 3). I then turn to the major focus of my study, namely Christian responses to reincarnation. In chapter 4 I therefore analyse the views of four theologians from different contexts and theological traditions: John Hick, Geddes MacGregor, Vishal Mangalwadi and Edmond Robillard. In chapter 5 I then finally evaluate these four responses and give my own view on the subject.

CHAPTER TWO

THE UNDERSTANDING OF REINCARNATION IN THE HINDU TRADITION

As has been stated in the introduction, the study of Hinduism is a vast and daunting subject. Although I have narrowed my research down to the concept of reincarnation, this is still a vast subject, as is abundantly clear from the later Hindu scriptures. Within the limited scope of this study, I have decided to analyse the classical Hindu doctrine of reincarnation by concentrating on one well-known Hindu document, the Bhagavad-Gita. This popular scripture is widely published and read by millions today.

The influence of the Bhagavad-Gita has been profound. It is a popular text open to all who would listen and fundamental for all later Hinduism. Vedanta² philosophy recognises it with the Upanisads³ and the Brahmasutras⁴, so that all gurus⁵ who aspired to found schools had to comment on it. The Bhagavad-Gita has shaped (and continues to shape) the mind and attitude of many a Hindu.

² Vedanta: Literally "The end of the Vedas." It refers firstly to a body of literature (the Upanisads) and secondly to the teachings contained in them. Often used in the expression Advaita Vedanta, it refers to the monist interpretation of the Upanisads, according to which Brahman is the only ultimate Reality and the world is perceived as illusion.

³ Upanisads: The philosophical additions to the Vedas consisting of 108 treatises (See footnote 2).

⁴ Brahmasutras: Brief doctrinal treatises explaining the Upanisadic doctrines of Brahman-Atman (God and the Self).

⁵ Guru: A spiritual leader or master.

2.1 INTRODUCTION TO THE BHAGAVAD-GITA

India has two great epics, the Mahabharata and the Ramayana. The Bhagavad-Gita is both a philosophical treatise and an incident in the story of the Mahabharata (Stephen 1993:6). The Mahabharata sums up within its vast bulk every shade and nuance of classical Hinduism, both its orthodox formulations and the outraged protests that these evoked (Zaehner 1962:8).

The Mahabharata, like the Ramayana, is a collection of stories, laws, discourses, myths, legends and fragments of history, all woven together into one main narrative (Stephen 1956:6). In chapters twenty-five to forty-two of the Bhishma Parva of the Mahabharata, one finds the Bhagavad-Gita (Chidbhavananda 1986:4). In these chapters Krishna speaks to his friend Arjuna. This episode is regarded by various authors as the most important, most influential, and most luminous of all the Hindu scriptures and it is called the Bhagavad-Gita or "Song of the Lord": "This marks a turning point in Hinduism, for here for the first time a totally new element in Hindu spirituality makes itself felt - the love of God for man and man for God" (Zaehner 1962:10).

The Bhagavad-Gita is a brief text of seven hundred verses, divided into eighteen chapters in quasi-dialogue form. In the Upanisads the concept of a theistic interpretation of the universe began to appear, but it is only in the Mahabharata, and more particularly in the Bhagavad-Gita, that God slowly disengages himself from the universe of which he is still the material as well as the efficient cause, and confronts humanity as person to person. The Bhagavad-Gita is thus the watershed that separates the pantheistic monism of the Upanisads from the

fervent theism of the later cults⁶ (Zaehner 1966:10).

The Bhagavad-Gita caused a new theology to develop, replacing sacrifice with worship, by the attitude of self-knowledge and introspection and with respect and devotion to a personal Lord who, in the case of the Bhagavad-Gita, is conceived as the Vedic deity, Vishnu, incarnate as Krishna.

2.2 DATING

Scholars have differed very considerably both about the unity of the Bhagavad-Gita and its dating. The Upanisads can be dated as somewhere between 1 000 to 500 BCE. The Bhagavad-Gita fits within this period. It is here that we confront a problem, for Hindu consciousness has generally regarded chronological sequence as relatively unimportant - hence the difficulty in precise dating. Farquhar, Tatvabhushan and Lamotte (see Stephen 1956) are among the scholars who believe the Gita to be a unity and date it in the third or second century BCE. Garbe (in Stephen 1956) holds the view that the Bhagavad-Gita was composed by a philosopher of the Samkhya⁷ school in the second century BCE, but that certain portions were added in order to introduce Vedantic doctrine in the second century CE. S.C.Roy (in Stephen 1956) believes that the original Gita was an Upanisad, belonging possibly to the ninth century BCE. It was purely philosophical and may not even have mentioned Krishna. Later it was worked into the Mahabharata by Vyasa, the first editor who gathered up

⁶ The Vedic literature make up the earliest Hindu Scriptures. It ranges from the Rig Veda, 1400 BCE, to the Upanisads, 500 BCE.

⁷ Samkhya: This Sanskrit word means enumeration. It came to be used for a philosophical school which divides existence into twenty-five categories; twenty-four of these are nature and subject to modification and change. The twenty-fifth is purusha, the primal person (or soul) who is indestructible and not subject to change.

all the floating folklore of India into the great epic. According to this view, the incorporation may have happened somewhere in the sixth century BCE and it was then that the story of Krishna and the Kurukshetra battle were introduced (see below) (Stephen 1956:13). Radhakrishnan believes the Gita to be a unity and dates it a little earlier than the fifth century BCE (Stephen 1956:13).

Vishal Mangalwadi (1977:89) states that most Western scholars and respected Indian scholars (such as Dr Radhakrishnan and Professor D.S. Sharma) date the Bhagavad-Gita around the fifth century BCE, whereas ISKCON claims that it was written 2 500 years before the time of the Buddha, who lived in the sixth century BCE. In Swami Prabhupada's commentary on the Bhagavad-Gita, it is stated in the preface:

Lord Krishna first spoke Bhagavad-Gita to the Sun god some hundreds of millions of years ago. We have to accept this fact and thus understand the historical significance of Bhagavad-Gita, without misinterpretation of the authority of Krishna (Prabhupada 1984a:vi).

Swami Prabhupada's view is important because many individuals in the West read his popularised version of the Bhagavad-Gita. However, this view on the dating of the Bhagavad-Gita is clearly not formulated in terms of a modern or critical approach to history but of a premodern or mythical approach. He does this to make the Bhagavad-Gita appear to be the most ancient and authoritative of the world's scriptures.

As can be appreciated from the above, and to many a Hindu mind, the concept of time does not seem to have any real importance except in proving the authority of its scriptures by appealing to antiquity.

2.3 THE SETTING AND CONTENTS OF THE BHAGAVAD-GITA

The Bhagavad-Gita is set during the great war between the Kauravas⁸ and the Pandavas. King Yudhishtira, the eldest of the Pandava brothers, did everything in his power to prevent the war, but failed. When the opposing parties in battle, the hundred sons of Dhritarastra and the Pandavas stood ready to begin, Arjuna, Yudhishtira's younger brother, the hero of the favoured party, despairs at the thought of having to kill his kinsmen and so lays down his arms. Krishna, his charioteer, friend and advisor, thereupon argues against Arjuna's failure to do his noble duty or dharma. The argument soon becomes elevated into a general discourse on religious and philosophical matters. The text is typical of Hinduism in that it is able to reconcile different viewpoints, however seemingly incompatible, yet emerging with an undeniable character of its own. The Bhagavad-Gita is not a systematic theological treatise and contains many different elements drawn from the Samkhya and Vedanta philosophies.

Religiously its important contribution was the new emphasis it placed on devotion (bhakti), which has since remained a powerful force in Hinduism. Furthermore, the popular theism evidenced elsewhere in the Mahabharata and the transcendentalism of the Upanisads converge and a deity with personal characteristics is identified with the Brahman of the Vedic tradition (Encyclopedia Britannica 1977:937). In its three disciplines the Bhagavad-Gita gives a typology of the three dominant trends of Indian religion, viz. Dharma-based Brahmanism, enlightenment-based asceticism, and devotion-based theism (Krishna 1968:9).

⁸ Kauravas and Pandavas: These two opposing groups were cousins. The Pandavas stood for righteousness and possessed a legitimate claim to the kingdom. The Kauravas were out to usurp the rights of their rivals by foul means. In those circumstances war became inevitable.

Due to its popularity, the Bhagavad-Gita has been dubbed the New Testament of Hindu studies, with the Mahabharata regarded as the Old Testament (Stephen 1956:6), and it has become the small devotional booklet carried by many Hindu believers.

2.4 REINCARNATION ACCORDING TO THE BHAGAVAD-GITA

The Bhagavad-Gita has the doctrine of reincarnation running like a silver thread through the whole of its discourse. The course of action that I have embarked on is to quote the key verses from the Bhagavad-Gita dealing with reincarnation and its related doctrines. Three translations⁹ of the Bhagavad-Gita have been used: (i) that of Swami Prabhupada (1984a); (ii) that of Annie Besant (1896) and that of Swami Chidbhavananda (1986). Unless otherwise indicated, I have used the translation of Prabhupada (1984a).

I have grouped the verses according to the grid of seven theological categories explained in 1.3. This is not intended as a foreign imposition of Christian categories on the Bhagavad-Gita, but merely as a method of ensuring continuity between the different chapters of this study.

2.4.1 GOD

4:6 :- "Although I am unborn and my transcendental body never deteriorates, and although I am the Lord of all living entities I still appear in every millennium in my original transcendental form."

⁹ I have used three translations of the Bhagavad-Gita in order to compare their different interpretations, which sometimes give a different outlook on doctrine and its related subjects. Unless otherwise indicated, I quote from Prabhupada (1984a).

4:9 :- "One who knows the transcendental nature of my appearance and activities does not, upon leaving the body, take his birth again in this material world, but attains my eternal abode, O Arjuna".

7:19 :- "After many births and deaths, he who is actually in knowledge surrenders unto me, knowing me to be the cause of all causes and all that is. Such a great soul is very rare."

8:16 :- "The worlds, beginning with the world of Brahman, they come and go, O Arjuna, but he who cometh unto me O Kaunteyu, he knoweth birth no more" (Besant 1896).

The Bhagavad-Gita therefore perceives God as eternal and as the cause of all causes. The precise status of Lord Krishna is however interpreted in different ways: according to the Hare Krishna Movement he is eternal in his being, whereas the Ramakrishna Movement views him as a deity who is relative under the all pervading Brahman.

2.4.2 ANTHROPOLOGY

2:12 :- "Never was there a time when I did not exist, nor you, nor all these kings, nor in the future shall any of us cease to be."

2:13 :- "As the embodied soul continually passes in this body from boyhood to youth to old age, the soul similarly passes into another body at death. A sober person is not bewildered or grieved by such a change."

2:16 :- "The unreal hath no being, the real never ceaseth to be. The truth about both hath been perceived by the seers of the essence of things" (Besant 1896).

2:17 :- "That which pervades the entire body you should know to be indestructible. No one is able to destroy that imperishable

soul."

2:19 :- "Neither he who thinks the living entity is the slayer nor he who thinks it slain is in knowledge, for the self slays not nor is slain."

2:20 :- "For the soul there is neither birth nor death at any time. He has not come into being, does not come into being, and will not come into being. He is unborn, eternal, ever-existing and primeval. He is not slain when the body is slain."

2:22 :- "As a person puts on new garments, giving up old ones, the soul similarly accepts new material bodies, giving up the old and useless ones."

These verses give a clear indication that the indestructible soul is the all-important aspect of life. This core (the soul) survives the death of the physical body and moves on to another body.

2.4.3 ETHICS

2:11 :- "The Supreme Personality of Godhead said: While speaking learned words, you are mourning for what is not worthy of grief. Those who are wise lament neither for the living nor for the dead."

2:27 :- "One who has taken his birth is sure to die, and after death one is sure to take birth again. Therefore, in the unavoidable discharge of your duty, you should not lament."

2:30 :- "O descendant of Bharata, he who dwells in the body can never be slain. Therefore you need not grieve for any living being."

Ethics as a whole falls under the category dharma and whatever this duty prescribes one is duty bound to fulfill.

2.4.4 HAMARTIOLOGY

9:3 :- "Those who are faithful in this devotional service cannot attain me, O conqueror of enemies. Therefore they return to the path of birth and death in this material world."

14:2 :- "By becoming fixed in this knowledge, one can attain to the transcendental nature like my own. Thus established, one is not born at the time of creation or disturbed at the time of dissolution."

Sin is basically the lack of true knowledge (avidya), resulting in bondage to the samsaric existence of suffering and death. Victory over all aspects of sin and evil is possible only through enlightened knowledge and faith in Lord Krishna. Once this is attained, there are then no further reincarnations.

2.4.5 SOTERIOLOGY

4.5 :- "The Personality of Godhead said: Many, many births both you and I have passed. I can remember all of them, but you cannot, O subduer of the enemy!"

6:41 :- "The unsuccessful yogi, after many, many years of enjoyment on the planets of the pious living entities, is born into a family of righteous people, or into a family of rich aristocracy."

6:42 :- "Or [if unsuccessful after long practice of yoga] he takes his birth in a family of transcendentalists who are surely great in wisdom. Certainly such a birth is rare in this world."

6:43 :- "On taking such a birth, he again revives the divine consciousness of his previous life, and he again tries to make further progress in order to achieve complete success, O son of Kuru."

8:15 :- "After attaining Me, the great souls, who are yogis in devotion, never return to this temporary world which is full of miseries, because they have attained the highest perfection."

Salvation is possible through a process of refining consciousness which can take place in numerous physical bodies until a given individual attains Krishna Consciousness. Once this happens, there is then no more returning to life but an eternal "higher life" within Krishna's abode.

2.4.6. THEODICY

2:27 :- "One who has taken his birth is sure to die, and after death one is sure to take birth again. Therefore, in the unavoidable discharge of your duty, you should not lament."

In this verse Arjuna is instructed to do his duty, and he must fight for the right cause. He does not have to be afraid of killing, for this is his duty¹⁰ and he will be rewarded for it. If however he does not, and goes against the dharma, he will not attain salvation, and be degraded due to his wrong choice. The implications of not doing one's duty results in sin. The root cause of evil in this world is because people have neglected their dharma. Enlightened individuals do the correct things in this life and are going to be rewarded for it.

2.4.7. HISTORY

14:15 :- "When one dies in a mode of passion, he takes birth among those engaged in fruitive activities, when one dies in the mode of ignorance, he takes birth in the animal kingdom" (Prabhupada 1984a:268).

14:15 :- "Having gone to disillusion in motion, he is born among

¹⁰

Arjuna was of the Kshatriya (warrior) caste. So it was his duty (dharma) to fight in this impending battle.

those attached to action. If dissolved in inertia, he is born in the wombs of the senseless" (Besant 1896).

The reason for quoting these two translations under this category is to highlight the perception of a continuing return to samsaric life, which permeates the whole of Hindu thinking. History is thus perceived as cyclical.

From the above headings and subsections, the doctrine of reincarnation and its accompanying doctrines of the immortal soul, karma and dharma can be seen to permeate the Bhagavad-Gita. These religious concepts will be used in the subsequent evaluation and conclusion. The Bhagavad-Gita has a profound influence today on Hindus who base their lives and beliefs upon it. It would seem that any Christian would have to study the Bhagavad-Gita before any meaningful dialogue between Christian and Hindu or any evaluation of the Hindu belief systems could be entered into.

2.5 KARMA AND SAMBARA

Now that we have had a brief look at the various aspects of reincarnation in the Bhagavad-Gita, it is necessary to examine another aspect of reincarnation and the immortal soul, namely the twin doctrines of karma and samsara. These two doctrines are intimately linked and a thorough understanding of both is necessary.

2.5.1 KARMA

Stated in its simplest form, the law of karma is an application of the law of causation which individuals accept as valid in the physical world and apply to the moral realm (Krishna 1968:75). What the ancient Aryan thinkers did was to take this law, which they saw as operative in the physical world around them, and

extend it to the moral realm. The law of cause and effect works with an exactness that is comparable to its workings in the physical world. The term karma may be loosely translated as action (karma comes from the Sanskrit root kri, which means to do or to make) and any action of an individual inevitably produces some results, whether good or bad, depending on the nature of the original act. The life of the individual thus becomes conditioned by its own acts (Krishna 1968:76). The term karma therefore covers cause and effect and is used to include not only physical acts of which the consequences are visible, but also thoughts, feelings, desires, passions and emotions, all of which are also subject to the law that they are bound to produce consequences, either good or bad, depending on their nature. The law of karma is not the dispensation of a divine judge who has nothing better to do than to mete out punishment or reward upon each of our acts. On the contrary, it is conceived as operating absolutely impersonally, as the law of causation does in the physical world (Krishna 1968:78). In the long run, the discords and inequalities of life are due to ourselves and not to any caprice of God. We bear on ourselves, both at the individual and the collective level, the burdens of our past and in that sense, we are our own past (Krishna 1968:78). The wheel of karma is no respecter of persons or of nations and it is only when our awareness penetrates to the heart of this mystery that we are able to begin the ascent to a condition which is free from the coils of karmic bondage. This is what is meant by liberation, spiritualisation or moksha - the freedom from karmic entanglement, while the bondage to karma represents the involvement in the time process which is called samsara (Krishna 1968:78).

As can be deduced from the above, there is no room for chance or accident in this life or one's next lives. What I am now I have made myself, by my own past thoughts and actions, my inner and outer karma. What I am going to be in the future, I can make myself by my own present and future thoughts and deeds.

Consequently, far from annihilating human will, the doctrine of karma really leads to the opposite conclusion, that is, it strengthens and enshrines the human will as the bearer of the prime responsibility for the human condition. The result is that if we wish to alter our condition, we begin where it hurts most - with ourselves. This concept teaches that whatever you sow you shall reap, either in this life or the next. Humanity, in its progress towards perfection, functions within the limits of the law of cause and effect. Ignorance is gradually removed in the cycle of birth and rebirth. The sufferings of humanity are a result of their own actions done in their previous lives (Navaratnam 1963:108). In this we have to carry with ourselves the whole of our past. Karma cannot possibly be fatalistic, for the simple reason that humanity has the complete freedom to shape its future. A Hindu adherent today is in no hurry to finish up all before he/she dies. Each one is a child of eternity. He/she is on an eternal pilgrimage which exceeds the span of life here on earth. The actions which are now done will not be lost, but mould our own future and natures.

The above definition of karma has been seen and explained from the writings of Hindu adherents themselves. This concept seems to explain the inequalities and the complexities of life very meaningfully. For example, if someone is born with an incurable disease or a congenital defect, it is due to his/her previous karma.

2.5.2 SAMSARA

The Sanskrit term samsara basically means "wandering". To the Hindu this wandering is through the cycles of birth to death to rebirth, ad infinitum. Samsara is first described in detail in the Maitri Upanisad (Chapter 1:3,4). From this time onward life itself was deemed to be evil, from which liberation (moksha) was sought (Zaehner 1990:63). In Chapter 11 of the Mahabharata, samsara is described vividly. In the illustration, an individual

falls into a pit. Halfway down he grabs hold of a tree and sits on it. At the bottom of the pit is a huge snake which wants to devour him. At the top of the pit there is a huge elephant which wants to trample him to death. The individual is now stuck in a dilemma. He finds that bees have made a nest in one of the branches of the tree and, as the bees are producing honey, he is well fed and becomes rather complacent sitting in a comfortable position in the tree. However, he notices that there are rats which happen to be eating the roots of the tree. It is only a question of time before the tree collapses. This is an illustration of the dilemma of life. It implies that a soul must go through a series of purgative steps before reaching perfection. The tree represents man's birth and death, the individual who represents the soul must attain moksha (liberation) or else be reincarnated back to the dilemma of the pit. So "the main preoccupation of Hinduism is the search for a sure way of escape from this samsaric world into something which is beyond the passage of time" (Zaehner 1962:67).

Samsara, then, can be seen as the wheel of existence. Death, with its counterpart birth, is a part of samsara. Death is a break as well as a continuity. The individual can never go without death. Rebirth gives ample opportunities for an individual's rectification, growth and gradual evolution (Holck 1974:194).

From the above the importance of understanding these twin concepts of karma and samsara can be seen, for they are intimately linked, and can be understood to mean the same as reincarnation. Reincarnation, which is a Western term (from the Latin "reincarnatio") describes what most Hindus call karma-samsara. After this (all too brief) exposition of the classical Hindu notion of reincarnation, as found in the Bhagavad-Gita, I now move to an analysis of how some recent Hindu scholars have attempted to propagate these teachings to the West.

CHAPTER THREE

THE PRESENTATION OF REINCARNATION TO THE WEST

During the preceding centuries three great ideological forces have shaped the civilisation of Europe: Catholic theology, the Protestant Reformation and the humanistic Enlightenment. From the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries the forces generated at the Reformation dominated the culture of the North European and North American people. During the last hundred years, however, due to internal decay in the Western church and the onslaught of rationalism, Christianity lost its throne to naturalistic humanism or secularism as it is often called in the West (Mangalwadi 1977:5).

Due to rationalistic epistemology, secularism developed a worldview in which humanity was reduced to a bio-chemical, sexual or economic machine by the secular scientists, psychologists, economists and sociologists. Such an ideology which viewed both universe and humanity as mere machines, produced a mechanistic society in the West. Into this climate many of the younger generation are seeking something new - a new worldview, new values, new consciousness and culture (Mangalwadi 1997:6).

Today the West is experiencing a loosening of the traditional Christian view that salvation can be found only in Christ, which has come to be experienced as "the scandal of particularity" - viz. that in Christ, and in no other salvation is found. As a result of the West's spiritually and religiously eclectic mindset, Hinduism has found root in a society that seems to be looking forward to a Utopian religion that embraces all, regardless of religious affiliation.

In addition, the West can be characterised as a pluralistic

society. This is due to the fact that the world is experienced as a "global village" as a result of the ease of modern communication, travel and education. With such intermingling of cultures and ideas as is now possible, the modern intellectual feels free from Western Christianity and strives for self-fulfillment, almost regardless of its religious affiliations. Into these "new" religious searchings have stepped various Hindu teachers propounding their views. These teachers are known as gurus (enlightened individuals). The philosophical, religious and cultural impact of the gurus have already become a worldwide force to be reckoned with. Perceptive observers feel that guruism will become increasingly influential in the decaying Western culture (Mangalwadi 1977:3f): "It seems that in both East and West the popularity of Gurus symbolises two things, firstly a resurgence of the perennial spiritual quest of man and secondly, a struggle for new forms of culture". In the West it can be summed up as a struggle for a counter-culture i.e. a break with the traditional Western Christian worldview. In the light of the above it is imperative to study those influential gurus who have had a deep impact on the West. As I have pointed out, a central feature of Hinduism is the belief in reincarnation. Due to the importance of this belief, I have chosen to study the views of two such gurus, namely, Swami Vivekananda and Swami Prabhupada. Both these gurus have succeeded rather remarkably in popularising the teaching of reincarnation to the West.

3.1 SWAMI VIVEKANANDA

3.1.1 HIS LIFE

Narendranath Datta was born in 1863 in Calcutta. He was an exceptionally intelligent child and found no difficulty with academic study. Later in life he came under the influence and teachings of his spiritual master, Sri Ramakrishna, who was quick to recognise the spiritual talent that he saw in

Narendranath Datta. After his initiation by Sri Ramakrishna, he took the name of Swami Vivekananda.

It would be informative to take a cursory look into the life of Sri Ramakrishna, for he influenced Swami Vivekananda tremendously. He was born in 1896 in Kamarpukur and at the age of seventeen he went to Calcutta to train as a temple priest. It was here that he underwent a spiritual transformation. He was not satisfied with only one system of discipline, and experimented with numerous sects and religions (Sooklal 1990:29). In this quest of his he also practised Islam and Christianity (and had visions of Jesus and Muhammad), for he believed that there was only one Reality behind all religions.

Sri Ramakrishna came to epitomise the neo-Hindu spirit which was to permeate and shape contemporary Hindu thought. His life lacks the wealth of events and striking achievements that are commonly associated with the lives of great personalities. He had no formal education, but was well acquainted with the essentials of Vedantic thought. When he felt that he was ready, i.e. when his religious training was complete, he began to feel the necessity for a mission to the worldly-minded people of India. From 1879 onwards numerous disciples began to gather around him (Sooklal 1990:32). It was during this time that Swami Vivekananda came to see Sri Ramakrishna and asked him many questions. The story of his contact with Sri Ramakrishna during the ensuing four years is the story of his gradual conversion from a critical and cautious observer, who held him to be a "blessed monomaniac," into an absolutely surrendering disciple (Tapasyananda 1992:21). In 1886 Sri Ramakrishna died, making Vivekananda his spiritual heir (Zaehner 1962:166).

Vivekananda managed to gather a small group of Ramakrishna devotees around himself and, from this humble beginning, he formed the nucleus of the Ramakrishna Order which now has representatives throughout the world. He was deeply concerned

about the poor in India and labored for the liberation of his fellowmen and women: "Indeed, Swami Vivekananda's entire life was one prolonged cry for the upliftment of the toiling starving masses" (Sooklal 1990:40). This concern of his stimulated his desire to travel to the West to carry his master's universal message and to obtain in exchange the material resources for feeding the hungry: "His sojourn in the West also helped to broaden his social and political outlook" (Sooklal 1990:41).

In 1893 he sailed for America to attend the World Parliament of Religions¹¹, where he read two papers and made a deep impression. He stayed in America for three years, lecturing and touring. Here for the first time he was able to present Hinduism to the West as a universal faith. He spoke of belonging to the most ancient order of monks, thus emphasising the primacy of the Vedic revelation. He also claimed that the Hindus accept all religions as true (Zaehner 1962:167). He preached these aspects of Hinduism throughout North America. He radically opposed conversion and what he taught in its place was that each religion had to assimilate the spirit of the others and yet preserve its individuality and grow according to its own law of growth (Zaehner 1962:168). These lectures were all well received. During his travels he organised a society in New York for the first time, namely, "The Vedanta Society of New York."

In 1895 he sailed for England, lecturing on the same aspects of Hinduism and these teachings were also well received. In 1897 the Ramakrishna Mission Association was founded with the aim of spreading the truths of Vedanta. Vivekananda was a tireless worker and on the 4th of July 1902, at the age of 39, he died. In his short life he had succeeded in popularising the Vedanta teachings across India and in the West.

¹¹

His speech at the World Parliament can be found in Vivekananda (1976b:968-978).

Sooklal (1990:36) maintains that Vivekananda is undoubtedly one of the most outstanding and influential figures in the recent history of Hinduism: "His influence is so pervasive that it is a difficult and almost impossible task to separately identify and extricate the elements which he contributed to the contemporary understanding of Hinduism".

3.1.2 HIS TEACHINGS ON REINCARNATION

Swami Vivekananda's teachings have been recorded in an eight volume series entitled The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda (Vivekananda 1976a - 1976h). These recordings of his teachings over a period of nine years was due mainly to the energy and devotion of his young English secretary, J.J. Goodwin. Out of the whole series there is one chapter in volume four which is devoted specifically to reincarnation, and what is helpful to this study is that this chapter starts with a quotation from the Bhagavad-Gita: "Both you and I have passed through many births, you know them not, I know them all" (Bhagavad-Gita 4:5). What he has to say about reincarnation in this chapter is fundamental to everything else he says about it in various quotes and paragraphs dispersed throughout the whole series. I therefore begin with a detailed study of this chapter (Vivekananda 1976d:257-271).

3.1.3 COMPARISON BETWEEN BELIEFS OF ARYANS AND OTHER NATIONS

Vivekananda begins his theories on reincarnation by giving a bit of historical background:

Of all the theories that have been held by man about himself, that of a soul entity separate from the body, and immortal, has been the most widespread, and among those that held the belief in such a soul, the majority of the thoughtful had always believed also in its pre-existence (Vivekananda 1976d:258).

It was only when the idea was reached of an entity whose connection with the body was only for a time, and only among those nations who arrived at such a conclusion, that the

unavoidable question arose: Whither? Whence? (Vivekananda 1976d:259). Herein lies the key to a great secret - the fact that no Mlechchha race, whether Egyptian, Assyrian or Babylonian, ever attained to the idea of the soul as a separate entity which can live independently of the body without the help of the Aryans, especially of the Hindus (Vivekananda 1976d:259). According to Vivekananda, the abovementioned empires, with all their learning, could not achieve the higher knowledge of the Hindus. For, according to him, their ideas were grossly materialistic. They perceived the souls of the living, like the ideas of the departed souls, as wandering all over the world and, though they might, they could never get beyond the sepulchre and the crumbling corpse. They could never entirely dissociate the idea of the soul from the corpse. It was the Hindus who provided the higher knowledge or ideas of the soul. To the Hindu, that which left the body was the real person.

The early Hindus perceived their God as an all-merciful, all-pervading Being manifesting himself through various bright, benign and helpful devas¹², the first of the whole human race who addressed their god as father (Vivekananda 1976d:262). To highlight this, Vivekananda quotes various passages from the Hindu scriptures, for example, the Rigveda Samhita:

Place me in that deathless, undecaying world where is the light of heaven and everlasting lustre shines. Make me immortal in that realm where they move even as they list. In the third sphere of inmost heaven, where worlds are full of light, make me immortal in that realm of bliss (Vivekananda 1976d:262-263).

In this we find the difference between the Aryans' ideal and those of the other early empires. To the one, this body and this world are all that are desirable. The other found out that what left the body was the real person and, that, when separated from

¹²

Devas: The Devas are benevolent deities and are the ruling powers of the universe.

the body, it enjoyed a state of bliss higher than it ever enjoyed in the body (Vivekananda 1976d:263). Here the real person is the soul, its real nature being a formless individual, a unit principle¹³. From this concept the Aryans inevitably asked: "Where does the soul originate?". From this question the doctrine of the pre-existence of the soul arose. The Indo-Aryans realised that the real individual is beyond this body and that the individual who is clothed with this body will throw it off when worn out (See Vivekananda 1976d:265). Vivekananda asks if this unit principle is created and then if creation means that something comes out of nothing. For him, the answer is a definite no. The Aryans see this soul as being without birth and without death. It is not a compound or combination, but an individual soul and, as such, it cannot be created or destroyed. It is only travelling through various states (Vivekananda 1976d:265). It is impossible that creation could have an absolute beginning. The word beginning simply means the beginning of a cycle (Vivekananda 1976a:319). Hence there can neither be birth nor death for the soul (Vivekananda 1976a:421). Some might object to this view, stating that memory proves that the pre-existence of the soul is an impossibility. Vivekananda counters: "To prove the validity of this argument, the party who offers it must prove that the whole of the soul of man is bound up in the faculty of memory" (Vivekananda 1976d:269). For example, a person in a coma loses his or her memory. Does that mean he/she is non-existent as well? Vivekananda tries by these examples to counter the empiricist view: "no memory, no previous life." This is a serious intellectual problem to any proponent of reincarnation which has given rise to numerous answers. I come back to them in chapter five.

¹³

Unit principle: The idea that the soul is the supreme life-giving entity and therefore constitutes the principle or main cause for existence. The soul is one unit with myriad existential lives, and it is this principle that is to be ultimately saved. This unit principle is the real individual, all else is illusion.

3.1.4 INTELLECTUAL REASONS FOR BELIEVING IN REINCARNATION

According to Vivekananda the premises from which the inference is drawn of a previous existence and of the place of conscious action, as adduced by the Hindu philosophers, are primarily the following two: (i) the explanation of the inequalities of life; (ii) all reality is a projection of Brahman.

Vivekanda asks firstly how one can explain this world of inequalities. Questions arise when children appear to be born to suffer and that owing to no fault of theirs. Why must this be so? What is the cause? If not the child's, why should it suffer for its parent's actions? (Vivekananda 1976d:269). There is no other way to vindicate the glory and the liberty of the human soul and to reconcile the inequalities and the horrors of this world than by placing the whole burden upon the legitimate cause - our own independent actions or karma (Vivekananda 1976d:270). Everything we do, physical or mental, is karma and leaves its mark on us: "Karma, in its effect on character, is the most tremendous power that man has to deal with" (Vivekananda 1976a:29). "Character is manifested by karma. We are the result of all reincarnations through karma" (Vivekananda 1976h:51). Our experiences cannot be annihilated, our actions karma, though apparently disappearing, remain still unperceived (adrishta) and reappear again in the effect as tendencies (pravrittis). Even little babies come with certain tendencies - fear of death, for example (Vivekananda 1976d:270). Our genesis lies in the past and our personality traits have their cause in the past.

According to the Hindu sages, instinct is the result of a past experience degenerated into instinct and that instinct regenerates into reason again. On this has been built one of the chief arguments for reincarnation in India (Vivekananda 1976a:241): "Man has evolved from the lower species and in each he has accumulated some knowledge. If a man accumulates karma akin to the beastly nature, he will be drawn thereto" (Vivekananda 1976e:316). At another time he wrote: "People in

this country (USA) think it too horrible that man should come up from an animal. Why? What will be the end of these millions of animals? Are they nothing? If we have a soul, so have they" (Vivekananda 1976b:258). According to this doctrine of reincarnation, all are ultimately "saved": "Projected from Brahman it (the soul) passed through all sorts of vegetable and animal forms, and at last it is man and man is the nearest to Brahman" (Vivekananda 1976b:258). "It is the greatest of all lies that we are mere men. We are the god of the universe. In worshipping god we have always been worshipping our own hidden self" (Vivekananda 1976b:279). All of this perceived reality is a projection of Brahman¹⁴, therefore all is divine, and all is going to be ultimately reunited or absorbed back into Brahman. Like a great divine outbreathing and inbreathing, so is life and everything. Reincarnation is the evolution of nature and the manifestation of the God within (Vivekananda 1976e:281).

To give greater focus to this analysis of Vivekananda's views on reincarnation, I now apply the grid (see 1.3) to his thought.

3.1.4.1 GOD

Vivekananda was a advaitin (non-dualist or monist), who sees God as the universal one, the essence and reality of everything: "This philosophy preaches a God who is sum total" (Vivekananda 1976b:141). An advaitin has no antagonisms in religion for they accept all religion as being true, though Vivekananda maintains

¹⁴ Brahman: This term has two connotations in Sanskrit:

1] It refers first to the supreme reality, the ultimate divine, infinite and absolute. The impersonal God behind all reality.

2] Secondly it refers to the highest caste in the classical caste system. The four classes are 1) Brahmans (Priests); 2) Kshatriyas (Warriors and rulers); 3) Vaisyas (The agricultural and commercial group); 4) Sudras (The mass of common people).

that dualists are from the less educated classes (Vivekananda 1976b:141): "But with these dualists, Advaita has no quarrel. The one thinks that God is outside the universe, somewhere in heaven, and the other, that He is his Soul, and that it will be a blasphemy to call Him anything more distant" (Vivekananda 1976b:141).

"There is no word in any language to express this nearness except the word Oneness" (Vivekananda 1976b:141). An advaitin knows that whatever theories or theologies come to the fore regarding God or salvation, because all is one, he/she is in fact working toward the same goal. Behind and beyond is the infinite which people call God, Allah, Jehovah and so on. The advaitin calls it Brahman. The whole world is full of the Lord and humanity must give the world up, the world to which they have been clinging for so long. This world is a false one made through their own subjective creation: "Open your eyes and see that as such it never existed; it was a dream, 'Maya.' What existed was the Lord himself, He is in everything" (Vivekananda 1976b:142). So Vivekananda maintains that the advaita postulates one reality only, that is Brahman; everything else is unreal, manifested and manufactured out of Brahman by the force of maya (illusion). Vivekananda acknowledges that some worship a personal God; however this personal aspect of God is none other than the relative aspect of Brahman. The personal and impersonal are one:

The personal God as we conceive Him is in fact a phenomenon. The impersonal instead of doing away with the personal, the absolute instead of pulling down the relative, only explains it to the full satisfaction of our reason and heart (Sooklal 1990:50).

3.1.4.2 ANTHROPOLOGY

Regarding the individual, Vivekananda (1976b:141) states: "I am the birthless, the deathless, the blissful, the omniscient, the omnipotent, ever glorious soul". In this we see that Vivekananda perceives humanity as being synonymous with God, for He is

everywhere and everything. Brahman can be known in the depths of his being because he is near to each one of us. So it does not matter what you call him, as long as you realise that he exists. Our personal existence is itself relative and will cease to exist once each soul goes back, through realisation, to Brahman.

3.1.4.3 ETHICS

Vivekananda asks "What is dharma?" and explains that it is that which makes individuals seek for happiness in this world and the next. Dharma is established on work and it impels humanity day and night to run after and work for happiness (Vivekananda 1976e:446). In this he states that dharma is service for others regardless of creed or colour. If any individual follows this path, he or she will be accomplishing the greatest dharma. Swami Paramananda (1974) states a very similar truth: In this cycle of life human beings reward and punish themselves, where one earns the right to go to heaven or hell. So, according to many Hindus, it is in this life that one must strive to do good deeds in order to seek enlightenment. The doctrine of sanctification and dharma perceived by Vivekananda are synonymous. He strove to bring about an ethical revival in India by insisting on good deeds as well as by seeking a deeper form of spirituality. His view is similar to the Christian outlook on practical service in this world.

3.1.4.4 HAMARTIOLOGY

According to Vivekananda, the legitimate cause of inequalities and sufferings in this world is the result of any individual's actions. A person's life today is the result of many reincarnations through karma. Karma makes character, and humanity must strive to eradicate all desires and seek enlightenment, which comes when humanity perceives itself as God. All is divine, all is Brahman, for everything is a projection of Brahman. The only person or thing to blame for suffering and misfortune in this life is the individual himself/herself in this or previous lives or states.

3.1.4.5 SOTERIOLOGY

According to Vivekananda, the real person is the soul. It is the soul that seeks liberation from the body and this life. When the soul is liberated it enjoys a higher state of bliss. In the liberated state the "all" is going to be reunited ultimately into Brahman. Like a great out-breathing and in-breathing, so is life and everything. To reach Brahman is humanity's goal:

However Brahman perceived as a personal being is none other than a relative aspect of Brahman, for Brahman is everything. There is neither nature, nor God nor the universe, only that one infinite existence out of which, through name and form all these are manufactured (Vivekananda 1976b:292).

3.1.4.6 THEODICY

His views on theodicy are linked with his views on harmartiology and have been dealt with under that heading. All sufferings are as a direct result of any given individual's actions. To be free from this, one must do one's dharma correctly and seek enlightenment. All perceived evil is as a result of humanity not fulfilling its dharma. Thus chaos and suffering are the result of humanity's failure to fulfill its duty.

3.1.4.7 HISTORY

According to Vivekananda, the world has relative existence. It exists because the absolute Reality beyond time, space and causation exists. In this, the whole universe is a unit, from whatever standpoint one views it. This is advaita philosophy and it influences one's perception of time. Here infinity has become the finite and vice versa.

A.
THE ABSOLUTE
C.
TIME
SPACE
CAUSATION.
B.
THE UNIVERSE

Here is the absolute A and this is the universe B. This absolute has become the universe by coming through time, space and causation (C). Now we at once gather from this that in the absolute there is neither time, space nor causation. The idea of time cannot be there, seeing that there is no mind, no thought. The idea of space cannot be there, seeing that there is no external change. What you call motion and causation cannot exist where there is only one (Vivekananda 1976b:130). Causation is a degeneration of

the absolute into the phenomenal (Vivekananda 1976b:131).

Thus perceived, the whole of empirical reality is a degeneration of spiritual perfection into matter from which humanity must escape, for it is essentially evil. From the above, one can appreciate that Vivekananda's religious worldview is fundamentally based on the doctrine of reincarnation and this therefore influences his whole philosophy and outlook, not only on Indian religions, but on all the others as well, including Christianity and Islam. These were to be the main themes of Vivekananda's preaching wherever he went. As he travelled he elaborated and further refined these basic teachings. His open challenge to the values of Christianity was not without its effect, for he made several devoted English converts and laid the foundations of Neo-Vedantism in America, which later captivated well known personalities such as Aldous Huxley, Gerald Heard and other well known literary figures (Zaehner 1962:169).

Having described how Vivekananda presented reincarnation to the west, I now turn to the views of a later Hindu "missionary," Swami Prabhupada.

3.2 SWAMI PRABHUPADA

3.2.1. HIS LIFE

Srila Prabhupada was born Abhay Charan De on 1 September 1896 in Calcutta. His father was a very religious man and raised his son on Krishna worship. As a young man, Abhay went to college to study law and during this time married Radharani Datta. During his studies he joined the political Independence Movement and it was then that he came under the influence of Mahatma Gandhi. Gandhi always carried a Bhagavad-Gita wherever he went and spoke of being guided by this book above all others. Gandhi called for students to forsake their studies to avoid becoming puppets of

the British. In 1920, after completing his university degree, he refused to accept his capping, registering his protest in accordance with Gandhi's teachings. He never practised as a lawyer. In 1922 he met his spiritual master, Sarasvati Thakura, and from then on began to associate more with him. His spiritual teacher taught that Lord Krishna is the supreme personality of Godhead and that the chanting of his holy name should be stressed above all other religious practices. From 1944 onwards he persevered against many financial upsets in printing a fortnightly newspaper called Back to Godhead. In 1950, due to his growing zeal to preach Krishna Consciousness worldwide, he left his wife and children for good, as he felt that family responsibilities and his preaching were in conflict. This is presumed normal in the traditional Hindu concept of life, for individual life itself is divided into four distinct stages. These four stages or ashramas are: Brahmacharya (student); Grihasthya (householder); Vanaprastha (philosophic recluse); Sannyasa (wandering ascetic) (Krishna 1968:68). Prabhupada found family matters too taxing on his spiritual quests. During that time he also began translating the Bhagavatam¹⁵, which was to comprise sixty volumes when completed. At the age of sixty-nine he had an even stronger urge to go and preach in the West. This came about due a recurring dream he had been experiencing for a number of years. A personal being appeared from Krishna's entourage beckoning him to become an English preacher in order to spread Krishna Consciousness in the West. It was through the publishing, in India, of some of these volumes that he managed to obtain a sponsor in 1965 which enabled him to travel to America. From 1965 to 1970 Swami Prabhupada concentrated mainly on establishing Krishna Consciousness in America (Goswami 1983:203).

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The Bhagavatam or Bhagavata Purana is a voluminous Hindu Scripture which contains stories of the life and times of Krishna. The English translation of this Scripture by Swami Prabhupada comprises 64 volumes.

ISKCON (International Society for Krishna Consciousness) was founded in 1966 and by 1977 it had already founded sixty eight centers worldwide (Mangalwadi 1977:84). Many in the West flocked to these Hare Krishna centers for in them they felt a sense of community and an independence from the "stagnating" Western culture. ISKCON's teachings are based on the Bhagavad-Gita and the Bhagavad-Purana (Mangalwadi 1977:89). Swami Prabhupada was a tireless worker and died at the age of eighty-one on 14 November 1977 in Vrindavana, the birthplace of Krishna. In his life he had produced some eighty volumes and summary studies of India's great spiritual classics (Goswami 1983:xvii). Possibly in this century there has been no-one else who has popularised Hindu teachings so effectively in the Western world as Swami Prabhupada and ISKCON, which he founded.

3.2.2 HIS TEACHINGS ON REINCARNATION

Swami Prabhupada's most popular book on reincarnation has the title Coming Back - The Science of Reincarnation (Prabhupada 1984b). I will be using this book as my main source, for it is herein that his thoughts are most clearly expressed.

3.2.3 REINCARNATION: A "PRECISE SCIENCE".

Prabhupada states that more than one-third of the world's population - 1,5 billion people - accept reincarnation as a fact of life (Prabhupada 1984b:x). Reincarnation is not a belief system or a psychological device for escaping the grim finality of death, but a precise science¹⁶ that explains our past and future lives (Prabhupada 1984b:x). There are many books on the subject and, according to him, they are poorly informed since none of these explain the "fundamental facts:"

For example, does one incarnate instantaneously or slowly, over a long period of time? Can other living beings, like

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The reason Prabhupada uses this type of terminology is probably because it is part of his "evangelising" strategy for scientist/rationalist Westerners.

animals reincarnate into human bodies? Can man appear as an animal? If so, how and why? Do we reincarnate forever or does it end somewhere? Can the soul suffer perpetually in hell or enjoy forever in heaven? Can we control our future incarnations? Can we be born on other planets? Coming Back explains the fundamentals of reincarnation presented in the timeless Vedic text Bhagavad-Gita (Prabhupada 1984b:xi,xvi).

"Consciousness is concrete evidence of the presence of the soul within the body" (Prabhupada 1984:14). In essence the body is the vehicle for the soul, through which it may fulfil its myriad material desires. The soul falsely identifies with the body, which is error. Within one's lifetime a person can observe that the body is constantly changing. The physical body is thus unreal, for it will, in due time, disappear (Prabhupada 1984b:15). Yet despite all the changes of the body, the consciousness (a symptom of the soul within) remains unchanged. Consciousness possesses an innate quality of permanence that enables it to survive the dissolution of the body. Krishna tells Arjuna "for the soul there is neither birth nor death at any time ... he is not slain when the body is slain" (Prabhupada 1984b:15). If the soul is not slain, then where does it come from? The answer given in the Bhagavad-Gita is that the soul enters another body: "One who has taken his birth is sure to die and after death is sure to take birth again. This is reincarnation" (Prabhupada 1984b:15).

3.2.4 REINCARNATION: HUMAN OR ANIMAL?

Prabhupada alleges that, according to the Vedas, there are 8,4 million species of life into which one can be reincarnated and that most souls in a human body have already transmigrated through all 8,4 million species of life. The Vedas remind us that the human form is obtained only after the soul undergoes millions of births in lower species of life (Prabhupada 1984b:64). According to the subtle but precise laws of reincarnation, all living entities must remain for a specific length of time in a particular body before being promoted to a

higher form. When an animal is killed before its time, the soul must return to that same species to complete its engagement in that type of body (Prabhupada 1984:71). The mental situation at the time of death is the basis for the next birth and this is also corroborated in many places in the Bhagavatam. The reason for this is that it is the mind that absorbs everything in physical life. When the mind is used to understand spiritual knowledge and absorbs it, it then has the capacity to receive a higher body. Mental existence transforms into tangible form as soon as there is an opportunity (Bhagavatam 3:26,34, in Prabhupada 1984:93). In a paragraph entitled "Sex change without surgery," Prabhupada gives an example of the mental existence:

A man gets his next life's birth according to what he thinks at the time of death. If someone is too attached to his wife, naturally he thinks of his wife at the time of death and in his next life he takes the body of a woman. Similarly, if a woman thinks of her husband at the time of death she naturally gets the body of a man in her next life. We should always remember, as it is stated in the Bhagavad-Gita, that both the gross and subtle material bodies are dresses, they are the shirt and coat of the living entity. To be either a woman or a man involves only one's bodily dress (Prabhupada 1984b:95).

The human body provides the only "loophole" through which the materially conditioned soul can escape. In order to escape the boundaries of this life and to be elevated to the realms of supreme spirituality, self-realisation is paramount. Self-realisation is the awareness that I am not this body, for the actual self is spiritual. In the state of pure consciousness the soul no longer needs a body.

In regard to the above and having accepted all as fact, Prabhupada states that there is no scientific or scriptural evidence anywhere for the notion "once a human, always a human." This idea is at variance with the principles of reincarnation. The Bhagavad-Gita 14:15 states: "When one dies in the mode of passion, he takes birth among those engaged in fruitive activities, and when one dies in the mode of ignorance he takes

birth in the animal kingdom" (Prabhupada 1984a:486). As can be deduced from the above, after death there is the distinct possibility of a retrogression to the lower species of life. Therefore those who are serious about life should take the mode of goodness and become saturated in Krishna Consciousness in order to be elevated to the higher realms of reality. If one does not take Krishna Consciousness seriously there will be no guarantee that the human being will again attain to human status (Bhagavad-Gita 1984:486). The Vedic literature explains that a human birth is very rare. In other words, most human beings in the material world have assumed non-human form (Prabhupada 1984b:118). Only the self-realised, liberated souls have the power to experience death without anxiety. This is possible because such highly elevated personalities are completely detached from their temporary bodies (Prabhupada 1984b:118). These thus escape to moksha.

3.2.5 TIME LAPSE BETWEEN REINCARNATIONS?

Prabhupada then raises the question: how long does it take from one birth to the next? He maintains that, according to the Vedas, the actual process of reincarnation is that the soul, after leaving a material body at death, enters another womb in some species of life in this or another universe, as directed by the immutable laws of karma. After death, the disembodied soul, unhindered by a physical body, is able to travel at the speed of the mind. Therefore there is a negligible time lapse between leaving one body and entering another (Prabhupada 1984b:114). The laws of karma and reincarnation are so perfectly ordered that when each material body dies, nature has already arranged exactly, according to the soul's cumulative karma, another appropriate material body into which the departed soul will enter and take birth anew (Prabhupada 1984b:115). Thus, according to Prabhupada, there are no substantial time gaps between births.

3.2.6 MEMORY OF PREVIOUS LIVES

Regarding previous lives, many cannot remember. To the rationalist Western-minded person this is a very important consideration. There are two reasons, according to Prabhupada, why this should not be a concern. Firstly, the Bhagavad-Gita 4:5 says: "The personality of Godhead said: Many, many births both you and I have passed. I can remember all of them, but you cannot, O subduer of the enemy." Prabhupada explains:

Here we are informed that Arjuna is unable to recall what happened in his various past births and this is the fundamental difference between a human being and the supreme Lord. It is only the Lord that is capable of never forgetting himself. Krishna remembered acts which were performed by him millions of years before, but Arjuna could not, despite the fact that both are eternal in nature (Prabhupada 1984b:134).

Secondly, the trauma of the womb and the birth. Birth is so excruciating, the Vedas say, that the entire process eradicates any past life memories one may have retained:

Regarding the pregnancy, the foetus lies cramped within the darkness of the womb, suffering as it is severely scorched by the mother's gastric fire, feeling the constant pressure of being contained in the small amnion. This tight constricting pocket forces the child's back to arch constantly like a bow. Further, the child is tormented by hunger and thirst and is bitten again and again all over the body by hungry worms in the abdominal cavity (Prabhupada 1984b:118).

Thus Prabhupada gives these two reasons why no human can ever fully remember previous lives, though some may recall their previous past life, but possibly no more than one. The reason why he devotes some time to the aspect of recalling is to inform the Western Hindu devotee that no matter what Western society may say, the recalling of past lives is for Lord Krishna, therefore they do not have to concern themselves with this. In this explanation of his Prabhupada argues from a pre-modern epistemology which opposes the modern (enlightenment) rationality of "exact science." The irony is that he uses the

rhetoric of modernity ("precise science and facts") to argue for a mythic and authoritarian worldview ("Lord Krishna knows -you need not know"). Thus at one stroke he gets rid of a valid concern which many in the West consider important.

3.2.7 DIMENSIONS OF REINCARNATION

3.2.7.1 GOD

Prabhupada is a qualified monist, believing that the soul and matter are distinct from God, though completely dependent on him. The relationship between God and the world is one of identity in difference, for the one is infinite and the other finite. Prabhupada teaches that God is personal and that the human soul is united to, but not the same as, God. The material world is not an illusion but illusion does come about when people think that this world and all that it stands for is eternal. When the Upanisads say that the Lord is formless, it only means that he does not have a material form like that of humanity (Prabhupada 1984b:91). God is a distinct being who is not to be totally identified with matter. The ultimate reality is a personal God who goes by the name Krishna. He has many incarnations and expansions. He has an impersonal side to him and that is called Brahman (Prabhupada 1984b:91). Krishna has three paramount attributes:

- 1 - realisation of impersonal Brahman is the realisation of Krishna's being.
- 2 - classical yoga's realisation is the realisation of Krishna's knowledge.
- 3 - Krishna is an ocean of bliss where all abide.

Thus Prabhupada acknowledges that God is personal, with an impersonal force emanating from Himself.

3.2.7.2 ANTHROPOLOGY

Self-realisation does not mean merging into God but rather a realising of one's self as part of God. Those who render devotional service to Krishna are like aquatic creatures that live in the ocean and enjoy it forever: "The devotees eternally

live in the ocean of devotional service, and do not care for the 55 rivers" (Mangalwadi 1977:92). Krishna is the supreme ruler because everything belongs to him and everything exists on his energy. Therefore without Krishna's energy nothing can exist, for everything in life is a creation from him.

3.2.7.3 ETHICS

Commenting on the Bhagavad-Gita chapter 18:47, Prabhupada explains that every individual's duty is prescribed. The duties of the Brahmana, Kshatriya, Vaisya and Sudra (the four classical castes) are prescribed according to their particular modes of nature. One should not, however, imitate another's duties: "The occupational duty of a Brahmana is certainly in the mode of goodness, but if a person is not by nature in the mode of goodness, he/she should not imitate the occupational duty of a Brahmana" (Prabhupada 1984a:577). For a Kshatriya there are many abominable things; a Kshatriya has to be violent to kill his enemies and sometimes to tell lies for the sake of diplomacy. In this a Kshatriya is not supposed to give up his/her occupational duties and try and perform the duties of a Brahmana.

Prabhupada gives a modern-day example: in the field of business sometimes a merchant has to lie to make a profit. He/she must not give up their position or occupation to pursue some other job where there might be less lying (Prabhupada 1984a:578). So duty is prescribed by the particular mode of nature one has acquired. Duty is to be performed without attachment or any expectation of result, it must be done because it is one's duty.

3.2.7.4 HAMARTIOLOGY

According to Prabhupada, karma is activity in the material world, which always entangles one in some reaction, whether good or bad. When a material body dies, nature acts according to the soul's accumulated karma and provides another body for the departed soul. Humanity's goal is to escape from this karmic accumulation. The reactions of karma are like dust covering our

pure, original spiritual consciousness. This accumulation can only be removed by the chanting of the Hare Krishna mantra. The power of this mantra can free one from karma. This is laid down throughout the Vedic literature (Prabhupada 1984b:123). In the repeated recitings it is thought that one will become aware that each human is part of the divine all-encompassing Lord and this awareness leads to salvation. Salvation is perceived by Prabhupada to be effected by seeking enlightenment through hours of chanting. Again salvation is up to the individual's diligence and here again there is no personalised prayer to a benevolent or forgiving deity.

3.2.7.5 SOTERIOLOGY

The physical body is the vehicle for the soul. If the soul identifies itself with the body it can never obtain liberation. Most human souls have already transmigrated through eight million four hundred thousand species of lower life, and it only the human body in all this that provides a loophole through which the soul can escape from samsara. In order to achieve this one must obtain self-realisation.

3.2.7.6 THEODICY

A living entity is originally spiritual, pure and free from all natural contaminations. By nature it is not subject to the sins of the material world: "But when he is in contact with the material nature, he acts in sinful ways without hesitation and sometimes even against his will" (Prabhupada 1984b:118). Sinful actions are not, however, impelled by the supersoul within. They arise when a living entity comes into contact with the material creation and perversion sets in. Lust and illusion are the result and souls become entangled in the material world. This is Prabhupada's reason for the existence of suffering in this world. Evil is only applicable here in this life, for it has no place in Brahman. Evil itself is trapped in samsara.

3.2.7.7 HISTORY

Prabhupada maintains that a devotee, after attaining the devotional perfection or Krishna Consciousness, arrives at Krishna's abode and never returns: "Those who progress in KRSNA consciousness on the higher planets are gradually elevated to higher and higher planets, and at the time of universal devastation, are transferred to the eternal spiritual kingdom" (Prabhupada 1984b:295).

I have outlined only the basic fundamentals of Prabhupada's ideas on reincarnation. Both Swami Vivekananda and Swami Prabhupada have popularised this teaching to the West, admitting that there are far deeper and more complex, even contradictory, ideas contained within this vast and fascinating doctrine of reincarnation. I will be coming back to these two Hindu scholars in chapter five to evaluate their ideas and concepts.

CHAPTER FOUR

CHRISTIAN RESPONSES TO REINCARNATION

4.1 INTRODUCTION

When it comes to Christian responses to reincarnation, one finds many and vastly divergent views, some ranging from a total denial of everything that reincarnation represents to an almost total acceptance. Due to the divergence of opinion amongst theologians and missiologists who have studied this teaching, I have decided to concentrate on the views of four representative thinkers: Geddes McGregor, John Hick, Vishal Mangalwadi and Edmond Robillard. McGregor and Hick are representative of the universalist approach within which there is a wide divergence of opinion. McGregor is Emeritus Distinguished Professor of philosophy at the University of Southern California, where he was dean of the School of Religion. He is the author of twenty-five books and has written two on the topic of reincarnation: Reincarnation in Christianity (McGregor 1978) and Reincarnation as a Christian hope (McGregor 1982). Hick is an English philosopher of religion as well as a United Reformed Church minister who was twice indicted for heresy in the United States of America: "He has argued for religious pluralism in which with others he claimed that Christians may believe that salvation need not necessarily be exclusively through Christ" (Bowen 1990:114). Hick has written numerous books, articles and publications on eastern religions including Death and eternal life (Hick 1976).

Vishal Mangalwadi and Edmond Robillard are representative of the restrictivist view. Mangalwadi is Director of the Himalayan Study Centre at Mussoorie, India. He is editor of The Seer and

author of the books The World of Gurus (Mangalwadi 1977) and Truth and Social Reform (Mangalwadi 1982). He has written numerous articles on eastern religions and is a member of TRACI, a Christian community committed to research and writing.

Robillard is a Canadian Dominican priest who has written a book entitled Reincarnation: illusion or reality? (Robillard 1982) which I will be using in this dissertation. I categorise the views of these four theologians on this subject under the headings of the grid defined in 1.3.

As I have pointed out in chapter 1, as a result of current cross-cultural religious encounters many Christians are attracted to the notion of reincarnation. They therefore try to relate this notion to their Christian convictions. The question which arises in this regard is: "Is this relationship free of problems, or does the introduction of the notion of reincarnation into Christianity elicit a fundamental conflict with other Christian convictions?" (Kranenborg 1989:176). In order to answer this question, I now analyse the views of the abovementioned Christian scholars.

4.2 GEDDES MacGREGOR

Geddes MacGregor's underlying question is whether any form of reincarnation is compatible with the fundamental beliefs of orthodox Christianity. According to him there has been a remarkably wide variety of expectations and visions of human destiny and life after death within the Christian community throughout the ages, and all these ideas have affected Christian thinking (MacGregor 1982:7). There was much speculation about the afterlife and the early Christians (BCE 100-300) included in their belief systems ideas which became popularly known in the Middle Ages as purgatory, "limbo" (limbus patrum, limbus infantium) and the intermediate state. Early reincarnationist views were commonplace in the gnostic climate in which

Christianity developed. The intellectual power of Greece was felt throughout the then Roman world and Greece's thinkers, like Plato, Pythagoras and Aristotle all believed and taught a form of metempsychosis¹⁷. An opposing standpoint was put forward by the early Christians who believed that the Second Coming was imminent. Therefore there was no need for a doctrine like reincarnation (MacGregor 1978:95). However, by the time the expectation of the Second Coming had lost its urgency, having dwindled in status from an existential hope to a theological doctrine, a whole array of hellenistic notions about immortality and resurrection had poured into Christian thought (MacGregor 1978:95): "But from early on, and with increasing momentum in the Middle Ages, the doctrine of an intermediate state was developed (later, it came to be called purgatory)" (MacGregor 1978:97). The whole concept of purgatory may be easily interpreted in terms of reincarnation and herein lies the vital connection for MacGregor. He asks if samsara can be perceived as a series of purgative steps. If so, these two concepts are very close in basic thought and practical outworking.

After this broad introduction I now analyse MacGregor's views on reincarnation in greater detail by means of my analytical grid.

4.2.1 GOD

When it comes to the concept of God and God's dealings with humanity, MacGregor believes that the Christian community must open the windows to allow all spiritual truths to purge "out-moded" ideas from the church. Thus a modernised form of reincarnation and the way Hindus perceive God's dealings with humanity could be compatible with Christian soteriology and

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The Latin term reincarnatio and the Greek term metempsychosis have fundamentally the same meaning and can be used interchangeably. The former is more frequently used with reference to Hindu philosophy and the latter with reference to ancient Greek philosophy.

eschatology. For God watches over his creation and sees to it that his purposes are carried out. The Hindu and Christian are in agreement with this and their concepts of how God deals with humanity are compatible. According to MacGregor, the resurrection and a modernised form of reincarnation are compatible, and the Christian community ought to embrace the spiritual truths found in the doctrine of reincarnation.

4.2.2 ANTHROPOLOGY

Regarding personality, those who are of an individualistic frame of mind are likely to find reincarnation an exciting concept, if only because it so conspicuously exalts the individual (MacGregor 1982:30). Reincarnation thus stresses the individual's responsibility beyond all else. Regarding the individual, one comes up against the problem of the relationship between mind (or soul) and body. The notion of the soul as an independent entity capable of existing apart from the body, though finding a body for one reason or another a convenient instrument for the soul's development, is radically alien to all we know of human consciousness, for we never cease to be attached to our bodies and we can never do without them (MacGregor 1982:38). For the Christian, the concept of the resurrection is not the same as the immortality of the soul. Resurrection implies that the whole individual, body and soul, will be redeemed, whereas the immortality-of-the-soul concept limits salvation to the soul: "The resurrection teaching seems to be, that as I grow in grace and am raised by Christ to higher things, the glorified body that is promised me is one that will fit my enhanced state" (MacGregor 1982:40).

MacGregor highlights St. Paul's teaching on the resurrection, especially words in 1 Corinthians 15:35: "each sort of seed gets its own sort of body." MacGregor believes that this notion is compatible with a reincarnational understanding of human destiny. The resurrection is a kind of reincarnation, for humanity is to shed this body and receive a superior one. In

this regard, if one is to regard the body as a mere suit of clothes, one has to recognise that even a suit of clothes must "fit" the person (MacGregor 1982:40): "So of course so long as the body is in any way seen as standing in relation to a 'me,' it must somehow fit me (MacGregor 1982:40). The resurrection teaching is that as one grows in grace to higher things, the glorified body that is promised is one that will fit one's enhanced state:

As we advance, the chemistry of our bodies may become eventually unsuited to our enhanced state of being and we shall move to another kind of embodiment, possibly on another planet; but meantime, not ready for that leap, we may pass through some more incarnations in the present type of body, the sort of body to which we are now accustomed (MacGregor 1982:40).

4.2.3 ETHICS

Geddes MacGregor touches on the aspect of dharma by perceiving samsara as a series of purgative steps. In this he acknowledges that if individuals follow certain ethical and moral laws they are automatically following the way of dharma or duty. The reason why MacGregor says this is that any individual will learn from her past actions and deeds in this life. So long as a person is learning from life, she can achieve salvation or liberation from this life. All this takes place under the universal moral law which is just and fair, for each person will get her just rewards. To put this into biblical language, "what one sows, one will reap" (Galatians 6:7).

4.2.4 HAMARTIOLOGY

MacGregor finds reincarnation a more benevolent way of salvation for it provides an impersonal law applicable to all, regardless of religious affiliation. In this respect he prefers the idea that each person will be his own salvation or damnation. Therefore an individual's responsibility must be stressed above all else. No-one can ever be the cause of the fortune or misfortune of another. The karma which we ourselves have

accumulated in the past is alone the cause of fortune or misfortune. MacGregor would be in total agreement with this statement: "It is necessary therefore that man should bear with one mind his fortune and misfortune which are only fruits of his own actions (Sharma 1990:50).

4.2.5 SOTERIOLOGY

MacGregor reveals the basic notion of his soteriology when he says: "To many of us it seems morally preferable to hope that wrongs will be righted in the long run through the operation of a universal moral law in the universe rather than through a judicial assembly with Jesus Christ sitting on the bench" (MacGregor 1982:27). The implication here is that once an individual dies without correcting some wrong, she could be condemned by a personal judge according to his set standards or rules, whereas with an ongoing process of repeated births there is always the possibility that the individual will come to her senses in time, if not in this life then maybe in the next.

There is also the traditional Christian notion that in the sight of God there is no second chance, which according to MacGregor is alien to everything that the gospel tells us of God's ways of providing opportunities for forgiveness (MacGregor 1982:30). The concept of reincarnation also provides a serious proposal of how the inequalities of life will be sorted out in the course of millions, perhaps trillions, of years (MacGregor 1982:30).

MacGregor therefore thinks that the doctrine of reincarnation is a more benevolent way of salvation, first because it embodies the possibility of a second chance, and secondly because it provides an impersonal moral law applicable to all, regardless of religious affiliations.

MacGregor therefore believes that Christians can accept reincarnation as a valid explanation of how inequalities in this life will ultimately be resolved. The hope is that there are second chances with every life lived. An individual may come

back in another life to rectify wrongs done in previous lives. God is a forgiving and loving father who provides opportunities for forgiveness.

Furthermore, in the theory of reincarnation the "lower creation" is taken seriously, whereas within orthodox Christianity it is usually denied or forgotten. In Christianity the lower creation is generally dismissed as outside the scheme of salvation: "Reverence for life means reverence for all life, since my dog is as much my relative as is Neanderthal man" (MacGregor 1982:83). In the theory of reincarnation "the all" is taken seriously. Therefore all is capable of being saved, as "the all" is a giant mystical link: all is related, all is capable of being absorbed into Brahman. It is arrogance to entertain the idea that only Christians are capable of being saved to the exclusion of everyone and everything else.

4.2.6 THEODICY

MacGregor maintains that human life is the battleground for spiritual and moral improvement. Humanity must strive to do its God-given duty by following spiritual truths that will benefit the whole of humanity. If not, any given individual will be given a second chance (and further chances) in order to correct their evil and selfish ways here on earth. Evil is to be eradicated from the human soul, and God who is the benevolent father will allow his wayward children time to sort themselves out even if it takes more than one lifetime. Reincarnation can be a Christian hope for it highlights God's forgiveness.

This thought clashes with the Christian concept of one life, one judgement, one eternity. To MacGregor, such thinking is absurd, for he finds it difficult to accept that some individual could be condemned to hell forever after living only one life on this planet. He asks if there is no possibility of a second chance:

Within the concept of reincarnation this absurdity recedes

when this life is seen, not as a brief flash in time in which decisions for all eternity are made, but as a chapter in, or slice of, an immeasurably longer evolutionary process, the process of making us what we are meant to be (MacGregor 1978:128).

This is more humane and fits in more with the Christian concept of God as loving and merciful father. It is he who gives us another chance. There is then nothing in faith or in the life of faith that need exclude reincarnation as a way of understanding human destiny (MacGregor 1978:148).

4.2.7 HISTORY

MacGregor maintains that the early Christians believed the second coming was imminent, but as the urgency of this expectation waned, hellenistic notions about immortality became dominant in Christian thought. According to him, history itself has been perceived as relative within the framework of the Christian church, due to "borrowings" from other cultures and religions. The church today can only point to certain general principles or guidelines. It would therefore be legitimate to incorporate other views of time which could help Christian believers to come to a deeper understanding of reality. The initial reaction of many Christians to the notion of reincarnation is to reject it as absurd. However, on closer inspection, the absurdity recedes, "when this life is seen, not as a brief flash in time in which decisions are made for all eternity, but as a chapter, or slice of, an immensely longer evolutionary process, the process of making us what we are meant to be" (MacGregor 1978:128).

After MacGregor propounds these views, he does, however, end off with a subtle warning. Dangers do abound, for not all forms of reincarnation are compatible with an authentic Christian hope and that is why he stresses the necessity of seeing in which form reincarnation can properly be Christianised. Some of the "problems" are the accusations that reincarnation encourages

procrastination and eliminates the Christian teachings of divine grace, the settling of human destiny at death, and a Second Coming which includes a Day of Judgment. MacGregor takes cognisance of the fact that for Christians to accept reincarnation as an authentic hope it would have to be modified in essentials so as to make it compatible with Christianity. This is part of the evolution of religious ideas, which he perceives as legitimate.

4.3 JOHN HICK

In his book entitled Death and Eternal Life (Hick 1985), he looks at the fact of death and the possibility of a life after death, not only in the context of Western, but also Eastern ideas. He discusses Christian, Hindu and Buddhist insights, as well as the contributions of biology, psychology, parapsychology, anthropology and philosophy. Within this book he has three chapters on reincarnation and one on resurrection.

According to him, reincarnation has never been an orthodox Christian belief, but it does not absolutely follow from this that it could never become an orthodox Christian belief. Christianity through the ages has adopted various views which at one time formed no part of the accepted doctrine. Specific reasons that have been advanced as to why Christianity is incompatible with reincarnation are principally four (see Hick 1985:366-373), with points three and four needing elaboration as these are pertinent to the present study:

- 1) it is not taught in the New Testament;
- 2) the Christian importance attached to this present life as the only period of grace;
- 3) the belief in metempsychosis is fundamentally at variance with the Christian doctrine on the resurrection of the body. They are incompatible on the surface but they agree more deeply in their views of humanity as a psycho-physical unity. The two doctrines are thus versions of a common view that humanity lives again as an appropriately embodied being: if he is reincarnated, then he is thereby

resurrected (brought back) to a new embodied form. If he is resurrected, he is thereby reincarnated, i.e. incarnated (enfleshed again). In its insistence upon humanity's psycho-physical nature, the resurrection doctrine agrees with the reincarnation doctrine as against platonic notions of the immortality of a disembodied soul. Thus considered as paraeschatologies¹⁸, reincarnation and the resurrection of the body are superficially different but fundamentally they are in agreement. For the reincarnation doctrine affirms repeated resurrections of a particular kind (Hick, 1985:372).

- 4) It denies the historical uniqueness of Christ. The religions of India have focused on the negative character of human "egoity" and have identified humanity's true good as liberation from it (Hick 1985:450). The egoity of individual consciousness resists the self-realisation of the atman, the universal self. The main Eastern emphasis has been on the transformation of the individual, the purifying of the solitary self in its flight of the alone to the alone (Hick 1985:451).

Let me now describe Hick's views in greater detail by using the analytical grid (see 1.3).

4.3.1 GOD

John Hick has a similar outlook to Geddes MacGregor, for he maintained that Christianity through the centuries adopted various views that at one time formed no part of accepted orthodox doctrine. He also suggests that this life is not the only one, for beyond death a search for spiritual perfection can continue, as the departed individual strives to seek God. This is in total agreement with an evolutionary spiritual journey which might have begun before birth and may continue beyond death. This raises a question regarding God and all that he stands for, viz. is God evolving and embracing all himself, being capable of embracing all religions and revelations, no

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According to Hick he distinguishes between paraeschatologies and eschatologies. Whereas eschatology is the doctrine of the last things, paraeschatology is, by analogy, the doctrine of the next-to-last-things, and thus of the human future between the present life and humanity's ultimate state.

matter from which culture or country, or has he an exclusive self-revelation? If this is so, then God is above and beyond all revelation and past finding out in his essential being. Therefore Christians cannot have an exclusive claim on God.

4.3.2 ANTHROPOLOGY

Hick's anthropology is dominated by the notion of unity: "The prevailing view of man among both contemporary scientists and Western philosophers is that he is an indissoluble psychophysical unity" (Hick 1985:278). Within this view there is no room for the notion of a soul as distinct from the body. St Paul is the chief biblical expositor of the idea of the resurrection of the body. His basic conception, as Hick understands it, is this:

When someone has died, he/she is now extinct. But in fact God, by an act of sovereign power, either, sometimes or always, resurrects or reconstitutes or recreates him/her - not however as the identical physical organism that he/she was before death, but as a 'soma pneumatikon' (spiritual body) embodying the dispositional characteristics and memory traces of the deceased physical organism and inhabiting an environment with which the 'soma pneumatikon' is continuous as our present bodies are continuous with the present world (Hick 1985:279).

To help the modern individual accept this idea, Hick proposes his "replica theory": the idea of the resurrection requires that there be two worlds (separate and in other dimensions) and when an individual dies in our present world, he/she is - either immediately or after a lapse of time - recreated in another world. He or she would then be an exact replica of the deceased person. In other words a divine de-creation happens at one place and a re-creation at another (Hick 1985:292). The reason for postulating full initial bodily similarity between the resurrected and pre-resurrected person is to preserve a personal identity which we are supposing to be wholly bound up with the body (Hick 1985:294).

The main body of Christianity has insisted that this earthly life is the only environment in which the individual can be saved. According to Hick, this is untenable. There must be further time beyond death in which the process of perfecting can continue. Likewise the doctrine of hell is morally intolerable, for this doctrine does not correspond to the innumerable gradations of human good and evil. Justice could never demand the infinite penalty of eternal pain for finite human sins (Hick 1985:201). There is an important insight behind the Christian insistence that the time of grace, in which we can respond to God, is limited by the boundary of death. This gives urgency and meaning to our life in time. In reincarnation, on the other hand, the spiritual urgency of life is more relaxed, for people will come to the truth when they are ready for it, if not in this life, then in another (Hick 1985:456). There is some agreement here, however, for both religions insist that it is only in the incarnate lives on earth that karma can be worked out. The notion of reincarnation covers a range of meanings from a reasonably straightforward factual version to highly metaphysical versions which seem immune to any kind of verification or falsification (Hick 1985:363). It is the soul, lying behind or beneath or above the conscious self that is reincarnated. The link between the ego histories is karma. This karmic history insists on developing the formation of basic character. These are very general spiritual, moral, intellectual and aesthetic dispositional tendencies capable of being expressed in a wide range of ways in the different circumstances of successive human lives (Hick 1985:364).

However, if such general character traits were all that, say, person A had in common with person B, it would be meaningless to describe person B as person A reincarnated, for what they have in common could not be specific enough to constitute them as different phases of the same person. Because of this there is no good reason on the grounds of character similarity to suppose that individuals are a reincarnation of anyone else. So,

according to Hick, those who espouse the doctrine of reincarnation cannot use character traits to prove or disprove their theory, for this leads to a character similarity which is too broad and permissive.

Hick states that one must assume that the picture being built up by the natural sciences of the origin of life is basically correct and is progressively becoming more adequate and accurate as research continues. The slow process of evolution has produced all forms of life. As regards the soul, this also has come through the process of evolution. Hick states: "Inheritance provides the more immediate and individual setting of the soul's life" (Hick 1985:42).

4.3.3 ETHICS

John Hick's view on the moral progress of the individual is not limited to earthly life as we know it. Perfecting of human character can continue in other worlds and dimensions. As regards the perfecting of a human character, there are certain moral and ethical principles to be adhered to. In his view, dharma could be incorporated into the Christian doctrine of sanctification. The question whether sanctification is limited to this life or continues after death is a concern about which theologians in different schools of thought (for example universalist or restrictive) are at variance.

4.3.4 HAMARTIOLOGY

According to Hick, 99.9% of people do not remember their past lives and this has important consequences for the belief in reincarnation (see 3.3.2.4). The only strand left is the psychological profile of personal character as it has evolved and this is the only viable basis for belief in reincarnation. The belief in a beginningless regress of reincarnations may be affirmed but cannot explain the inequalities of our present life (Hick 1985:309). If we postulate a first life, we should then have to hold either that souls were created as identical psychic

units or else as embodying, at least in germ, the differences that have subsequently developed (Hick 1985:309). Thus, if there is a divine Creator he cannot escape in any way from ultimate responsibility for the character of his creation, including the gross inequalities inherent within it (Hick 1985:309). On the other hand, if there is no Creator but only a universal and beginningless process of rebirth, then that process cannot be characterised as either just or good.

John Hick's view that all of humanity may eventually attain to a level of consciousness where all previous lives are remembered is analogous to Christianity's eschatological verification of the reality of God by participating in the finally manifest kingdom of God (Hick 1985:327). The lives which are remembered, according to Hick, would then be linked together in a karmic series in which the circumstances of each new life arises out of the character of the previous members of the series (Hick 1985:327). It is this karmic connection that singles out a particular set of lives as constituting the successive incarnations of the true soul: "We can conceive of an unlimited consciousness in which memories are lodged of all human lives that have ever been lived" (Hick 1985:327). This idea would become a mythological expression of the unity of humanity throughout the ages in the sight of God.

4.3.5 SOTERIOLOGY

Hick maintains that Christianity has traditionally insisted that this earthly life is the only environment in which the individual can be saved. This, according to him, is untenable. There must be a further time beyond death for a continuing of perfection. The doctrine of reincarnation highlights God's patience and concern. This is a more benevolent way to deal with humanity than Christianity's insistence on one life, one death, then forever in heaven or hell.

4.3.6 THEODICY

The main way in which Semitic religions differ from Eastern religions is in the notion that souls are not eternal, and that the inequalities of life are, by implication, accredited to the will of the Creator. To the Eastern mindset this is unacceptable. No justice is apparent in this Western starting point and it seems cruelly unfair. The alternative assumption is that we have all lived before and that the conditions of our present life are a direct consequence of our previous lives. There is no arbitrariness, no randomness, no injustice in the inequalities of our human lot, but only cause and effect, the reaping now of what we have ourselves sown in the past (Hick 1985:301).

Hick maintains that from the earliest time when humanity evolved to a conscious spiritual entity, it is evident that the person-making process is seldom completed before death. Thus if the person-making process is ever to be carried through, it seems that it must continue beyond bodily death. This appears to require a real continuation of human life as a formative process (Hick 1985:273). The only morally acceptable justification for evil and sufferings is if the individuals who have suffered themselves participate in the justifying good and are themselves able to see their own past sufferings as being worthwhile.

4.3.7.HISTORY

Hick concludes his book by stating that the triune conception of God as three-persons-in-one and one-in-three offers an important model for a community, so intimate and harmonious as to constitute a single and corporate person. He applies this trinitarian conception of the one-in-many and many-in-one to the eschatological community of perfected human persons:

There will be many persons, in the sense of many centers of personal relationships, not existing over against one another as separate individuals but rather within one another within the mutual coherence or interpermeation

which has been predicated of the persons of the trinity (Hick 1985:461).

The many persons will no longer be separate in the sense of having boundaries closed to one another. They will on the contrary be wholly open to each other: "There will be a plurality of centers of consciousness and these will not be private but will each include the others in a full mutual sharing constituting the atman, the complex consciousness of humanity" (Hick 1985:461). It seems to be a permissible projection from this to the ultimate fulfillment of the potentialities of the human community: "In the ultimate state, humanity will be harmoniously interrelated so as to form the immensely complex personal unity of humanity, human unity which requires all these different unique contributions" (Hick 1985:462). Our eschatological speculation terminates in the idea of the unity of humankind in a state in which all ego aspects of individual consciousness have been left behind and the relational aspect has developed into a total community which is one-in-many and many-in-one. In this idea of Hick's the whole of humanity will be in a harmonious state comparable to the harmony exercised within the trinity. Heaven is a place for all who love God, no matter by what name he goes.

4.4 VISHAL MANGALWADI

According to Mangalwadi, reincarnation mocks our aspiration for immortality. Two sentiments are often associated with the idea of salvation in India: (i) disgust for the world and (ii) the fear of rebirth. This fear of life and intense desire to escape from rebirth has gone so far as to overshadow all other problems and prospects of the brief spell of human life on earth (Mangalwadi 1990:145). Coupled with this, Hinduism teaches that the majority of souls never attain enlightenment, which is why the cycle continues. And what of those souls who do achieve enlightenment? What do they get? No immortality, but cessation

of existence as an individual soul, which is tantamount to eternal death. Life is bondage, death is salvation (Mangalwadi 1990:146).

According to Mangalwadi, both early Hinduism and Christianity repudiated reincarnation. Within India, the most ancient scriptures, the Vedas, state that departed spirits live in a shadowy world which is comparable to the abode of Hades accepted by the Greeks. The first formulation of reincarnation is found in the Upanisads (600 BCE), in other words, at least half a millennium after the Vedas were composed (Mangalwadi 1990:141). Similarly, Jesus firmly repudiated the view of the disciples that the man was born blind because of sinning prior to his birth (John 9:3). Secondly, Jesus taught about the final judgement where the wicked go to hell and the saints to heaven. Mangalwadi quotes an article in the Encyclopedia Britannica where it states that within the church the belief in reincarnation was held by isolated gnostic sects during the first centuries and by the Manichaeans in the fourth to fifth centuries, but was invariably repudiated by the orthodox theologians (Mangalwadi 1990:142).

Let me now also describe Mangalwadi's views according to the analytical grid.

4.4.1 GOD

Mangalwadi states that, according to Jesus and the Bible, God is an infinite-personal spirit. The word "personal" refers here to what God is in the innate essence of his being. This being so, God has revealed himself to be personal and has entered into communication with his creatures:

So for God to be personal means at least that He is a self-conscious Being who is creative, has a definite moral and aesthetic character, and communicates pro-positionally with other personal beings and enters into relationship with them (Mangalwadi 1977:244).

Two of God's moral attributes are his holiness and his love: "For God to be absolutely holy means that He hates all that is unholy, that He cannot have fellowship with man when he becomes a sinner, and that He judges sin. For God to be love means that He wants to forgive sin and wants to bring a rebellious sinner back to Himself as a beloved child" (Mangalwadi 1977:244). A soul on reaching heaven in Christ will know that he has been forgiven by a personal God and will have personal salvation allocated to him by this God. To cease to exist would make a mockery of God's personalised salvation bought in Christ. Whereas according to the Hindu's concept of ultimate salvation there is a loss of all personality and a final absorption into the all-pervading Brahman.

4.4.2 ANTHROPOLOGY

Reincarnation negates our individual identity and significance. As regards reincarnation, instead of offering immortality it offers eternal death, the extinction of our individuality as our salvation. In India, individuality has been acknowledged as illusionary for there is an underlying reality subsisting beneath all earthly life change. Since empirical reality is subject to the law of karma and rebirth, there is no eternal individual soul. Liberation thus means to be free from this illusionary experience of individuality (Mangalwadi 1990:144).

Furthermore, reincarnation justifies racism and sexism. To many, reincarnation seems to imply the equality of the sexes due to the idea that one can reincarnate either as a male or female. Traditionally, however, the doctrine of karma provided a philosophical justification for the caste system. The logic of reincarnation has been "you are born an untouchable or a woman," which means that these two have been placed on par. This doctrine was formulated to justify inequalities and sufferings, not the equality of all people (Mangalwadi 1990:141).

4.4.3 ETHICS

According to Mangalwadi, the mechanical way in which morality is perceived if one accepts reincarnation, does injustice to the whole system. Reality is not just cause and effect, it is about people who also need love and forgiveness. Therefore duty as perceived by the Hindu system of thought does humanity injustice by allowing the cause-and-effect wheel of existence to continue regardless, without thought of a personalised forgiveness.

Reincarnation thereby diminishes the philosophical foundations of morality. The theory of karma, which lies behind the belief in reincarnation, undercuts the foundations of morality because it views morality as a mechanical cause-and-effect system (Mangalwadi 1990:143). For example, if an individual cheats somebody, she will deservedly in one of her next lives be a victim of the same evil. However, morals are a characteristic of persons rather than machines, and moral laws are laws of persons. This mechanical perspective of karma rules out any possibility of forgiveness.

4.4.4 HAMARTIOLOGY

Mangalwadi is concerned about the idea of interfering with the cosmic law of karma. If someone alleviates another individual's sufferings, he does him a disservice, since the latter would then have to be reborn to complete his term of suffering in a next life. From a Christian point of view this is unacceptable, for Christians are called to be compassionate and caring. Karma also justified the caste system, since it is regarded as better to do a task within one's own caste than to do the task of another. The idea behind this is that every human being is trapped in her own caste and the only way of escape is to be born in a higher caste. These ideas, according to Mangalwadi, have been used to justify inequalities in India. The karmic view of life and the caste system are deterministic. This is at variance with the Christian concept of compassion and the unity of humanity.

According to him, reincarnation precludes responsibility and repentance. If an individual is born into an unfortunate circumstance due to a deed he did in a previous life which he cannot remember, how is it possible to repent or reform himself? How is it possible to take responsibility for something he has not even remembered? For example, if a person is a slave today because of previous karma, how then can the slave's owner be considered unjust? The owner is only fulfilling her tasks in life. In other words, punishment is just and meaningful only when the individual knows the evil for which she is being punished (Mangalwadi 1990:138).

4.4.5 SOTERIOLOGY

Reincarnation also leads to selfish asceticism. This asceticism is a negation of life itself. If individuals want salvation or deliverance from the cycle of repeated births and deaths, they have to come to a state of mind where they act or do their duty without desire for reward. All desires have to be killed and it has to be duty for duty's sake. Asceticism implies detachment from the body, life, relationships and the world. This attitude is called nishkama karma (duty without desire for reward) in the Bhagavad-Gita. In fact, to starve oneself to death has become the ultimate spirituality (Mangalwadi 1990:140). Therefore, far from making people ecologically responsible citizens, reincarnation has all but turned India into a desert by making people detached from the world, utterly self-centered, concerned more for their soul's progress than for the people and the world around them (Mangalwadi 1990:141).

4.4.6 THEODICY

Reincarnation hinders the motive to relieve suffering. If an individual is starving in this life because of some evil in a previous life, we need not bother to interfere. Any effort to alleviate the individual's suffering amounts to interfering with the cosmic justice of the law of karma. It is like breaking into a prison to free a criminal, who has been judiciously awarded

life imprisonment for a gruesome murder (Mangalwadi 1990:139). However, if we succeed in cutting short someone's sufferings, they would have to be reborn to complete their term of suffering. This is the reason why India never developed a tradition of compassionate social service (Mangalwadi 1990:139).

Furthermore, reincarnation trivialises death. The Bhagavad-Gita states that death is like changing clothes; just as one discards worn out clothes, so does a soul discard one body to adopt another. Krishna says to Arjuna that he feels pity where pity has no place, for wise people don't feel any pity for what either dies or lives. In India this belief has justified the practice of widow and leper burning, infant drowning and human sacrifice (Mangalwadi 1990:145).

According to Mangalwadi, reincarnation does not guarantee a memory of a previous life. He asks: "Why don't all souls reincarnate with experiences or memories of previous lives?" If they did, they would know why they have the sufferings and joys of their present life. Such memories would help them evolve faster (Mangalwadi 1990:138).

4.4.7 HISTORY

Mangalwadi maintains that reincarnation is at total variance with Christianity's concept of time. Overarching the entire system is the cycle of Brahman. The inexorable law of eternal renewal, within which the cosmos and humanity are successively born, degenerate and die. In this process a few rare souls dissolve into the inexhaustible plenitude of the divine substratum, while the rest of humanity attains partial enlightenment on the wheel of rebirth until another year of Brahman ends. A cosmic holocaust ensures that the whole process begins again (Mangalwadi 1990:146).

4.5 EDMOND ROBILLARD

Edmond Robillard is interested in the form that the doctrine of reincarnation assumed in India, which, with scarcely any changes, is being promoted by theosophists and members of other esoteric movements within the West today. He takes gnosticism seriously as it has greatly influenced the doctrine of reincarnation and has also been revived in the West through these groups. Gnosticism claims to be able to liberate people from reincarnation. It requires that they believe that they have to be liberated from a cycle of rebirths - so that they will accept gnosticism's means of liberating them (Robillard, 1982:x).

In its essentials, the belief in reincarnation can be stated as follows: after death, the human soul leaves the body and passes into another body which can be either 1) a plant body, 2) an animal body, 3) a human body or 4) an extraterrestrial body. Let me now analyse Robillard's views according to my analytical grid.

4.5.1 GOD

Robillard starts from the fact that Christians believe God to be personal:

This Christian God is such that in no way could I ever identify him with my own self, even though he is closer to me, across both time and space, than I am to myself. This personal God is the Creator of the world as well as of each individual human soul. God has created beings which are distinct and are also free and autonomous (Robillard 1982:50).

Therefore Christians cannot substitute creation for emanation. Once humanity has a perception of a personal God who is loving and wants to bestow his grace towards them, there is the desire for worship, appellation and grace.

4.5.2 ANTHROPOLOGY

In a Christian understanding, the human body and soul are perceived as a unit. The dichotomy as taught by those believing in reincarnation is "too vast" for the Christian who believes that the body and soul were created by God and are in need of salvation. In this sense the Christian concept of salvation is more holistic. Christ's resurrection is proof of this.

Christians are in agreement with reincarnationists when they affirm that the soul is separable from the body. But Christians differ in stating that the soul cannot pass from one body to another, for the soul remains the principle of the body's life and movements (thus ensuring originality). There is a Christian theory that the soul is the substantial form of the human composite of body and soul, and this has become a firm and necessary component of the Christian tradition. Because it is the substantial form of the body for which it was created, the soul can only be tied to that body:

The Judeo-Christian belief is that God created man as a composite being both material and spiritual, who was called to be master of the material universe, exercising over it a dominion that was assigned to him by the Creator. It was not as a punishment but was by free, unmerited love that God created man and confided his mission over the material creation to him; God gave man a suitable nature to accomplish the mission given to him (Robillard 1982:109).

As regards the soul in the Christian tradition, it is believed that God gives parents the secondary power to engender or procreate a body, the indispensable locus of the soul. But it is God himself who directly creates the soul. Thus in Christian conception, divine intervention enters into all human generation. The soul is affected by the body it inhabits, as the body is affected by the soul inhabiting and animating it. This union indelibly marks our personalities and defines our personal I or self. In this God wants to maintain individuals eternally in the role assigned to them, and will reconstitute them both bodily and spiritually to re-establish them as masters of a new

heaven and a new earth (Robillard 1982:112).

Robillard further argues that the oldest Hindu scripture, the Rig Veda, makes no mention of reincarnation. Only later, in the Upanisads that belief in reincarnation comes to the fore. Robillard sees four reasons why early Indian peoples came to believe in such a doctrine:

1) possession - When a spirit takes control of a person, his whole personality is changed. Belief in the capacity of an alien spirit, which is perceived to be alive, to enter another's body may lead to the awareness that one's own spirit may also enter another body after death.

2) resemblance - a child portraying the same personality and character traits as a known deceased person.

3) dreams - in dreams one may take on various bodies, and be found in various situations or eras

4) death - sleep/dreams and death are regarded as very similar. If an individual can awake from sleep, so can those who have died.

4.5.3 ETHICS

The Indian moral code is conceived in terms of what is called dharma. This is based on the fact that laws exist and that one must respect them. When laws are not respected, the result is adharma or disorder. It is the dharma (or nature) of a serpent to bite, as it is of a thief to steal. If the serpent ceased to bite or the thief to steal, the world would return to a primal chaos. The only evil in this conception of things is to go against nature. Robillard has perceived the powerful influence of dharma and its paralysing affect on society as a whole, that is, if it is left alone. However, there are Hindu leaders (like Gandhi and Vivekananda) who have striven to modify this code by appealing to responsibility towards humanity.

The Indian moral code is primarily empirical, since it arose mainly due to observation. Once this code was established,

failure to observe it was equally serious, whether one transgressed it intentionally or accidentally. In this, all transgressions became merely questions of ignorance, rather than any wish or will to transgress it. In Christianity the idea of retribution is not a matter of individuals measuring up to their own standards. It is rather a function of their encounter with God. The question of retribution is not a mere abstract or judicial question; it becomes personal. Sin should be the principal that prods us to moral awareness:

Sin is nothing else than the capacity to abuse the liberty that God has given us. In and through Christ, the evil that exists in the world changes its nature and loses its negative value as expiation, correction and reparation and takes on a positive redemptive value (Robillard, 1982:81).

Henceforth all individuals who unite their sufferings to Christ work alongside him for the redemption of the world.

4.5.4 HAMARTIOLOGY

Robillard believes that karma seeks a too complicated explanation of evil: "In the human heart there is an overwhelming conviction that man was created for happiness and in this he will never accept that a God who is God could simply be indifferent to his afflictions and his sufferings" (Robillard 1982:68). In the Indian context, sin is not seen as first and foremost an offense against God that brings evil in its wake. Evil is seen as a power in a closed system. What is required of God in this situation is to act as a kind of referee to maintain some kind of equilibrium between the powers of good and evil. God is far above it all. He merely sees to it that the world goes on and that nothing upsets this equilibrium.

The Bible depicts God as being deeply concerned about sin. Humanity's sin offends and wounds God personally: God punishes people to correct them, in order to raise them up and restore them to their original perfection. God was so concerned about it that he died in expiation of it. We see here God's total

involvement whereas the Indian solution of evil never amounts to anything but an intellectual philosophical solution (Robillard 1982:70). Christianity is not content merely to teach the truth of evil, it also goes on to affirm that God does not abandon sinners to the consequence of their sin: "Thus it is that Christianity possesses a solution to the problem of evil every bit as logical as the Indian conception - yet ultimately more complete and more satisfying" (Robillard 1982:71).

4.5.5 SOTERIOLOGY

The Upanisads, having undermined the spiritual authority of the Vedas, envisaged one possible exit from the law of karma, namely gnosticism (i.e. liberation through a knowledge of self). All that people need for salvation's sake is correct knowledge, knowledge gained by the experience of the fact of the identity of the self with God. Christians, on the other hand, believe that the resurrection of Christ is the image and prototype of our resurrection and this is the Christian hope:

The point of departure for belief in reincarnation is the postulate of the autonomy of the human soul, and the fact that it is believed possible for it to inhabit different bodies. This postulate held by believers in reincarnation is, like all postulates, a 'first principle', not demonstrated and not demonstrable, whose acceptance is necessary to establish any demonstration (Robillard 1982:99).

4.5.6 THEODICY

When it comes to the existential problem of suffering and evil: "Mainstream Hindu thought, wanted to exonerate God and make humanity alone responsible for the evils that weighed them down. These evils were interpreted as the deserved consequences of sins committed in a previous existence" (Robillard 1982:66).

The early Indian peoples, when they saw all the misfortunes, sadness and evil in the world, came to the conclusion that there cannot be a personal God. Due to this experience they came to

the conclusion that the human self is identical to God. A dilemma arose around the doctrine of God, for what became of the idea of retribution in the absence of a God who is the judge of the living and the dead?

The unhappy condition of humanity was now explained or postulated as having a previous existence. Evil, instead of being ascribed to God, was ascribed to humanity. Reward and punishment became strictly an affair regulated entirely by the law of Karma. Here no priest, no sacrifice, no absolution could thus modify the fatal and irrevocable course of this order of things" (Robillard 1982:39).

Robillard maintains that in the Hindu belief system, transgression of the moral code is due to ignorance, since the individual transgresses his own dharma under his own personal seeking for liberation from the wheel of samsara. In Christianity, retribution is not only a personal thing; it is also an encounter with God. It is not abstract or judicial, but personal. Sin is the capacity to abuse the liberty that God has given us. So when an individual embraces Christ, God is intimately concerned about them and through the Holy Spirit helps the individual overcome the negative values of sin by renewing their minds. In uniting ourselves to Christ's sufferings, we work alongside Him willingly, for in Christ God has identified Himself personally with our plight. This is a far more personal way to deal with suffering. Humanity longs for the Christian system of thought that humankind has been made in the image of God and, this being so, is encouraged to know that God through Jesus Christ is suffering alongside them, in order to encourage, identify and help.

Coupled with the concept of suffering and hell, Robillard discusses the idea of purgatory and "limbo," which seems close to the doctrine of reincarnation. Regarding limbo he says the idea that unbaptised infants who die are eternally damned, seems unjust. The early church fathers (for example Augustine), therefore taught that infants who die go to a natural paradise.

Their souls would contemplate God there through his works, without being able to contemplate him face to face (Robillard 1982:92).

Purgatory, on the other hand, was logically deduced from the teaching of scripture that nothing stained or impure could enter into the presence of God. It was based on the belief "that those who died before achieving the requisite sanctity must in some way be purified before definitely entering the presence of God" (Robillard 1982:92). Traditionally, purgatory has been viewed as a state of ongoing expiation for sin. God's forgiveness of the sinner is infinite and constant, but the sense of justice within the forgiven sinner himself demands some type of reparation (Robillard 1982:92).

These two concepts are held by the Roman Catholic Church and are not representative of Christianity as a whole. To those who believe in reincarnation, purgatory is an outmoded idea which needs the truths of reincarnation, for they perceive the latter to be a better response. Robillard answers this idea by stating that reincarnation is not taught in the Bible. For him this is a decisive argument, since all the ideas on the subject are no more than "conjectures and supposition" (Robillard 1982:93).

Secondly, if reincarnation takes place in the same body, it is not reincarnation, but resurrection. If it takes place in other bodies, this contradicts the doctrine of the resurrection.

Thirdly, if purgation is to take place here on earth, it will be more harmful than helpful in a fallen world such as ours.

Fourthly, humans cannot recall previous existences, so cannot be expected to recognise and correct past faults in this present life. Christianity teaches that "our entire destiny unfolds in the sight of God and in the course of a single existence" (Robillard 1982:94). In this existence, God watches over us and

is there to help.

4.5.7 HISTORY

The finality of hell is difficult for many people to come to terms with, and reincarnation seems to offer so much more hope. The Bible insists that the individual should make the right choices in this life since these can bind for all eternity. The idea that additional time for the soul, furnished by various reincarnations, automatically helps the soul is not necessarily true. The additional time might simply prolong the soul's trial without adding to its chances for salvation:

If it is so difficult to stay on the straight and narrow path for a single week, how will it be any easier to do so through numerous new existences? The history of the world has provided us with little moral progress. What century has perpetrated more violence, cruelty and injustice than ours? Can we argue from our modern experience that reincarnation would really contribute to any progressive amelioration of the human race? (Robillard 1982:88).

A series of reincarnations could be more harmful than helpful to the souls that have to undergo it. A further problem that reincarnationists have to deal with is that most people cannot recall their previous existences. This being so, an individual cannot be expected to recognise and correct faults stemming from previous lives.

Robillard concludes by stating that a belief in reincarnation comforts individuals by teaching personal survival. This belief also establishes a spiritual justice system under the changeless law of karma. But later this law became inhuman and rigid, since it postulated a continual returning back to this earth where moral progress was no in no way facilitated. One's ignorance of the past discouraged reform, and the absence of divine grace pointed only to possible new falls rather than an encouraging to amend one's life:

The principle defect of the system of reincarnation is that

it fails to take into account the true misery of humanity - and the true grandeur of God. We are asked to believe that conversion of man's heart will be easier if only he is granted more time; that what is chiefly lacking for man's salvation is both enough time and sufficient knowledge (Robillard 1982:120).

So Robillard's conclusion is: "What man longs for in his deepest being is not to be reincarnated, but to be delivered ... from this body doomed to death (Rom 7:24)" (Robillard 1982:121).

CHAPTER FIVE

AN EVALUATION OF CHRISTIAN RESPONSES

When it comes to an evaluation of Christian responses to reincarnation, there are many aspects which come to the fore. In evaluating these responses the same analytical grid will be used as in previous chapters. This will be helpful in perceiving differences or similarities on crucial points. As regards my personal evaluation, my standpoint is from within the Reformed Calvinist tradition. Some of the theologians to whom I will be referring as regards value judgments in this study are: Louis Berkhof (1939), G. Vos (1948) and H. Bavinck (1951). When it comes to a personal evaluation I use these theologians as doctrinal points of reference to guide my personal conclusions on this topic.

5.1 GOD

In this section I will not be looking at the whole Christian doctrine of God but only in so far as it relates to the question of reincarnation. According to the Hindu scriptures, starting from the time of the Vedas, there was an emphasis on the belief that there was one divine principle, the supreme reality beyond all else. But it also important to note that this ultimate divine principle was not conceived of as a benevolent super-personality, having a super-natural existence above the clouds in some heavenly region; the concept was not an anthropomorphic one (Krishna 1968:20). The Hindu texts proclaim a conception of God which is not easy to describe or understand:

The ultimate divine is pictured as infinite, absolute, eternal, changeless, without attributes, without qualities beyond name and form and to this conception of a featureless unity is given the name 'Nirguna Brahman' or the Formless Divine" (Krishna 1968:20).

In order to meet this difficulty, however, the Upanisads in their wisdom described Brahman in two ways. First, there is the indeterminate, qualityless, indescribable or nirguna aspect of the absolute. Secondly, the Upanisads also provide a cosmic personal description of God which forms the object of adoration, as a compassionate, merciful and benevolent God. Brahman here is referred to as saguna Brahman, or God with form as opposed to the formless nirguna Brahman. As the Upanisads say: "There are two states of Brahman, formful and formless, changing and unchanging, finite and infinite, existent and beyond existence" (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad - II-III: 1).

However, Hinduism teaches that life is not some blind, mechanical play in which some arbitrary personal deity metes out rewards and exacts punishments in accordance with the good or evil actions of individual humans. There is perceived to be, behind this drama of life, a spiritual evolution, an evolution of consciousness, in a ceaseless unfolding. Life is an evolution by growth and experience, and if there happens to be suffering, then it is for the purpose of growth and not as a judgement imposed by a deity on the stumblings that are inevitable in the process:

This then is the basis of reincarnation, that it is the method by which Brahman or spirit strives to rise to higher forms of material manifestation in which grades of mind and mental power now super-normal to us, would become settled and habitual in us" (Krishna 1968:100).

The soul, regardless of whether one perceives God as personal or impersonal,¹⁹ is caught up in the wheel of samsara. It is only once the soul has purged itself of all karma that it may enter the bliss of moksha.

The Christian church confesses that God is the incomprehensible

¹⁹

See the discussion of the views of Prabhupada and Vivekananda in chapter 3.

One, but also that he can be known and that knowledge of him is an absolute requisite for salvation. Jesus said: "this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you sent" (John 17:3). The church rejoices in the fact that it knows God most fully in and through Jesus Christ, at the same time acknowledging that he, the invisible God, is unbegotten, nameless, eternal and incomprehensible, an unchangeable being (Berkhof 1939:29). Martin Luther speaks repeatedly of God as Deus absconditus (hidden God) in distinction from him as the Deus revelatus (revealed God). To John Calvin, God in the depths of his being is past finding out. True knowledge of God can only be found through special revelation under the illuminating influence of the Holy Spirit. In this humanity has the privilege of being able to obtain a knowledge of God that is perfectly adequate for the realisation of the divine purpose of life. Humanity is reliant on God's self-disclosure through general and special revelation, without which it would be devoid of any realisation of God. For the Christian, the fullest revelation of God came in Jesus Christ and Reformed theology teaches that it is in him that the fullness of salvation can be found.

Reformed theology interprets the Bible as teaching: 1) that God is personal and is known through his attributes; 2) physical life is a reality, separate from his being, through the divine decree of creation; 3) God in his Son redeemed human life to have personal, eternal existence before Him; 4) there will be eternal fellowship between the creatures and God himself. As can be deduced from the above, the Reformed concept of God is fundamentally different from Vivekananda's advaitic view of God.

However, there are some biblical passages which give a hint of advaitic teachings: Acts 17:28 "For in Him we live and move and have our being." From a Reformed perspective this is taken to mean that we as humans live and move in the personalised influence of God under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. St. Paul

also says in 1 Corinthians 15:28 "When he has done this, then the Son himself will be made subject to him who put everything under him, so that God may be all in all." The Reformed interpretation of this is: The Father is supreme in the Trinity; the Son carries out the Father's will (e.g. in creation and redemption); the Spirit is sent by the Father and the Son to vitalise life, communicate God's truth, apply His salvation to people and enable them to obey God's will; so that God may be all in all. The Triune God will be shown to be supreme and sovereign in all things.

Creation for the Christian was never a part of God. House (1990:136) states in his article on the resurrection:

Rather, ultimate fulfillment must be the realization of the perfection in which God originally created it. Paul wrote of this process by which the creation moves toward fulfillment: "For the anxious longing of the creation waits eagerly for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will, but because of Him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God" (House 1990:136).

Reincarnation is therefore an integral part of a cyclical process of assimilation into the One, a notion which is incompatible with the linear process of creation, fall and redemption described in the Bible.

Vivekananda regards those who perceive God as ultimately personal as being dualistic, unenlightened and in need of advaitic teachings. But God's revelation to humanity cannot take place in the abstract; it must take place in relation to his creatures. Religion is a record of God's dealings with the human race, and especially a revelation of redemption which God has prepared for them (Berkhof 1939:181). Vivekananda (1976b:142) has an interesting point when he states:

The dualists all the world over naturally believe in a

Personal God who is purely anthropomorphic, who like a great potentate in this world is pleased with some and displeased with others. Naturally the dualist comes to the conclusion that God has favorites, and he hopes to be one of them. You will find that in almost every religion there is the idea: "We are the favorites of our God and by believing as we do, can you obtain favour." Therefore in the nature of things, dualistic religions are bound to fight and quarrel with each other, and this they have ever been doing.

This is sadly very true today, and Vivekananda has a pertinent point, which all dualist religions should take cognisance of. I personally believe this was one of the main reasons why he considered dualist religions as unenlightened and capable of inflicting the most harm on humanity.

Prabhupada's concept of God is very similar to that of Christianity, for he perceives Krishna as separate from, though intimately linked to, his creation. He wants humanity to have a personal relationship with himself in his heavenly abode, and in this he is the one who can bring about deliverance from reincarnation. However, when it comes to the perception of God in his innate being, the similarity stops. The Reformed position perceives God as a Trinity (Father, Son and Holy Spirit), whereas ISKCON sees Krishna as the supreme Lord of all.

MacGregor perceives the Christian concept of God as being in need of other revelations so as to make the Christian God more acceptable to adherents of other faiths, as well as to sensitive Christians who find the traditional concept of God outmoded or difficult to grasp. My concern with MacGregor's idea is that he allows "all spiritual truth" to illuminate the Christian revelation. In this I believe he is saying that the Bible as God's revelation is still somehow incomplete and that it would be expedient to seek other spiritual truths regarding God and his dealings with humanity. In this idea of MacGregor's one detects his evolutionary premise of reality, which according to him affects every realm of empirical and meta-physical reality.

Hick's reasoning is legitimate if one accepts evolution as affecting spiritual as well as physical life. I do not accept that all life is an ongoing and optimistic evolutionary process, continuing ad infinitum. I believe that there are absolutes in life that may stand out for all eternity. One such absolute is the self-disclosure of God in Jesus Christ: "For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him" (Colossians 1:19). This absolute cannot, from a purely existential point of view, stand up to modern scientific criticism, for the statement is based on faith, as is all religious dogma. There comes a point where any disciple, no matter from which belief, has to admit the important proviso of faith, for where there is no faith, there is no religion. Thus we are confronted with a decision of faith by the Christian community.

According to Mangalwadi, the Hindu idea of the soul's final destination is a cessation of existence, whereas in attaining salvation in the Christian religion the person resurrected has eternal personal fellowship with God and other resurrected individuals. These two views of ultimate salvation tell us a great deal about each religion's view of God. For Christians, their God is personal and has a distinct personality and attributes. He is infinite, and is the supreme absolute around which the whole universe revolves. To advaitic Hindus, Brahman is perceived as an ultimate divine stillness into which all souls are eventually absorbed. Once absorbed, there is a loss of all personality and individuality as each soul becomes one with Brahman. Hence all is Brahman, so that individuality and life as we perceive it is an illusion.

This absorption into Brahman is an advaitic (monist) view, and Prabhupada (as a qualified monist) maintains that souls, on reaching moksha, are like aquatic creatures that live forever in the ocean of devotional service (Mangalwadi 1977:92). Mangalwadi perceives God as personal, and in his dialogue with Hindus he

accentuates the difference between the personal aspect of the Christian God and the impersonal aspect of monistic Hinduism to make his point. I agree with him as regards his criticism of the monists who propound an ultimate merging into the divine and a cessation of personal existence. However, not every Hindu is a monist, and to imply that they all are, is not honest. In fact, it seems from my limited experience of Hinduism that the monists are a small minority of the Hindu community and Mangalwadi's generalisation that all Hindu's are monists therefore weakens his argument.

Robillard views the Hindu concept of God as rather distant, with karma regarded as the salvation for humanity. Salvation from karma-samsara comes from the knowledge that the self is identical with God. Therefore each individual is the perpetrator of her own salvation. According to Robillard this is a lonely path under the iron-clad law of karma. To the Christian, God is personal and concerned about each individual's spiritual progress. When he punishes, he does so in order to discipline and correct. God was so concerned about this that he died in propitiation of it. Hence sufferings and hardships have meaning in the Christian system, for Christ was involved in it himself. According to Robillard, the Christian view of God in Christ is far more personal and loving than the Hindu concept of God, for in the former God has identified with humanity in its totality. The above views of Robillard are mainly applicable to the monist outlook on reality. Just as the advaitins, who believe in an impersonal Brahman, include "personalism" within their framework by postulating an inferior personal God, so ISKCON makes a concession to the impersonalists by including an inferior impersonal aspect of Krishna (Brahman) within its teachings (Mangalwadi 1977:91). So strictly speaking Robillard has over-generalised as regards the different trends within Hinduism and their views on God. ISKCON teaches that on attaining self-realisation one does not merge into God but rather sees oneself as intimately united with God as his loving servant. Here is a

personalised conception of God similar to Christianity.

5.2 ANTHROPOLOGY

The Bible does not provide us with a systematised anthropology, but it does contain a number of principles concerning the nature of humanity. In Genesis 1 one finds an account of the origin of human life. Genesis 1:26,27 would have us take the view that humanity's creation had something unique attached to it (Hammond 1968:69):

- 1) The human soul's origin is to be regarded as an immediate creation of God, of which the time cannot be precisely determined.
- 2) Humanity is to be regarded as the apex of the system of living things.
- 3) The race of humanity is one, that is, derived from a single origin (Acts 17:26).

As regards point number 1 above there needs to be more of an explanation since there is a substantial difference between this concept of the soul and the Hindu idea. Within Christian teachings on the origin of the soul, there is difference of opinion on the question whether each soul is a direct creation of God or whether God decreed to allow parents the power of co-creation. Whatever one's view on this question, it is important to stress that the soul is not eternal in and of itself. Its entire existence is due to God's creation and is dependent on God, as expressed by the verse in Acts 17:28: "For in Him we live and move and have our being." Whereas within the Hindu understanding of the soul, it is part of the all-pervading Brahman as is therefore eternal in its essential being.

Furthermore, the Bible never teaches us that the body is a useless impediment and clog to the soul, which is to be shed at the earliest possible moment (Hammond 1968:70). Humanity is never encouraged to dishonor or maltreat the body. On the contrary, the period of human life in the earthly body is of

considerable importance:

At the judgment-seat, for example, we are to receive rewards, for the deeds "done in the body." The body is obviously regarded as providing the means whereby the moral values inherent in the soul may be given expression (Hammond 1968:70).

Humanity is taught to respect their bodies for the reason that the Christ had been pleased to enter into association with it and that the Holy Spirit is willing to dwell in redeemed Christian lives.

Humanity in the Bible is depicted as enjoying fullness of being with a body: "The body is not merely a temporary abode for the soul regarded as the real man. This is made triumphantly clear by the doctrine of the resurrection of the body. Man is essentially body, just as he is essentially soul or spirit" (Hammond 1968:71). The Christian vision anticipates full personal existence in the kingdom of God, which includes the body: "The notion of a personal relationship to God must continue in some recognizable form or the notion of life after death is meaningless" (Robbins 1991:183). It is also reasonable to expect a certain degree of continuity between this life and the next. The after-life must be sufficiently similar to earthly life to be a meaningful sequel. At least, personal identity must be preserved. In order for this personal existence to have meaning, the soul as well as the body must be redeemed. There is then a duality between God and humanity, and that duality must be maintained. However, that duality is the duality between Creator and creature - not that of spirit and matter as separate and hostile entities incapable of a complete fusion (Shukla 1989:42). Thus in the Christian understanding there is complete harmony between spirit and matter.

Vivekananda maintains that the "real man" is spirit, beyond cause and effect, not bound by time and space. The "apparent man" (i.e. the physical existential individual) is merely the

reflection of the former and is limited by space, time and causation (Vivekananda 1976b:78). Vivekananda maintains that the body is not the real person, for the body as well as the mind are continually changing and are, in fact, only names of series of changeful phenomena, like rivers whose waters are in a constant state of flux, yet presenting the appearance of unbroken streams (Vivekananda 1976b:79). There is then no such thing as individuality except in the Infinite: "The apparent man is merely a struggle to express, to manifest this individuality which is beyond" (Vivekananda 1976b:81).

One can deduce from the above that deeply divergent views are taken by Vivekananda and Christianity regarding the physical human being. Reformed theology takes the whole created human being as unique and capable of salvation. Christians in this life strive to mould their personal individuality on the teachings of their Lord. Personality is not something that is transient, but rather something to be cherished and respected. The reason for this is that each individual person has been redeemed by Christ and in the fullness of the kingdom there is a personalised existence before God for ever (Rev. 20:3,4). Belief in an eternal personalised existence gives hope and meaning to personal life here on earth.

Prabhupada maintains that the body is made of dead matter and that it is like a big machine. Within the body is the life force and as long as this active principle remains within the body, the body responds and appears alive (Prabhupada 1984b:23). He identifies the real self as the active principle, which is Brahman within: "The self-realised person sees all living entities with equal vision, knowing that the active principle, the self, is present not only in human beings, but within the bodies of animals, birds, fish, insects, trees, and plants as well" (Prabhupada 1984b:25). The active principle is the soul, and it is this soul that transmigrates from one body to another at death. Prabhupada states that humanity is soul with a

temporary covering called the body, hence it is the soul that is the important thing, not the body.

This view of Prabhupada's is very similar to that of Vivekananda, but Prabhupada believes that the soul on attaining moksha retains its individual existence as a creature in the presence of Krishna forever. There is a similarity here to the Christian position regarding the salvation of the soul, but that is where the similarity stops. Christians maintain a full bodily resurrection which includes body and soul.

MacGregor's concept of the soul is, as far as I can ascertain, very similar to that of Prabhupada. However, MacGregor wants to maintain the Christian concept of the resurrection, which is a key doctrine in the church. He therefore puts forward the idea of reincarnation with physically adapted bodies, which according to him is not at variance with the key doctrines of the church. This type of thinking would be legitimate if one regards all spiritual revelation as somehow incomplete, and the process of evolution as applicable to all areas of life: "To some God is not so much a being as a dynamic behind evolution, emerging all the time in everything in history and nature. Against this background Christ is seen as a symbol of divine activity in the world rather than as an 'intervention'" (Brown 1968:241). What MacGregor has done is to restate his belief in terms of a vast evolutionary time-scale, and his conception of God is nothing more than a benevolent impersonal force behind reality. It is in this regard that he has deviated from traditional Christian teaching, and one may say that his theology is more Hindu than Christian at the core of his teachings. As far as I am concerned the Bible's teaching on the resurrection is so central that it may not be compromised if one wishes to remain faithful to the Christian gospel. The doctrine of the resurrection presupposes one life, something with which some theologians are uncomfortable, hence the interest in a modified reincarnation/resurrection theory. MacGregor has modified the

traditional understanding of the resurrection by absorbing elements from the doctrine of reincarnation, which presupposes further spiritual development beyond death. It is at this point that MacGregor has made a definite break with traditional Christian teaching that death terminates further development.

Hick employs natural science to describe life, physical as well as spiritual. In this he acknowledges that a soul is not eternal in the essence of its being. There is no such thing as pre-existence in his thought, and this view is the same as that of Reformed Christianity, though arriving at the same conclusion along different epistemological paths. Hick considers the biblical account of the fall as myth, which must be interpreted as such. Reformed theology takes the account of the Genesis Fall as historical for it has important consequences for salvation found in Christ (see 5.1.4.). The Fall is inseparable from God's plan of salvation, for in Christ the curse has been removed.

Hick maintains that the physical body perishes but that God raises up a person who is the same and yet different, because one's life is the life of a new body in a new environment. There is thus genuine personal continuity; but whereas the individual was formerly organically related to this world, it is now organically related to another (Hick 1985:186). Hick acknowledges a bodily resurrection, which is capable of further moral and spiritual development either in a heaven or on some distant planet. This view of Hick's is at variance with the Reformed concept of salvation as a sovereign gift of God's grace, which implies that no perfecting or sanctification after death is necessary. In this respect Hick's theologising is very similar to that of MacGregor explained above.

Mangalwadi states that according to the Bible a human soul does not exist before a child is conceived: "Human life begins at conception" (Mangalwadi 1977:239). Since Adam - the first person - fell into sin, all of his descendants are thereby born with a

fallen nature (Mangalwadi 1977:240). The human body, though subject to decay and death due to original sin, is essentially good and to be enjoyed. It is redeemable and will be saved by the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 15) (Mangalwadi 1990:142): "Our individuality, though finite, is good and eternal. We are meant to live forever as God's children, not lose our individuality by merging into an impersonal universal consciousness (John 3:16)" (Mangalwadi 1990:142).

Mangalwadi is in agreement with Reformed theology that there is no pre-existence of the individual soul. He also believes that the Fall of Adam was an historic event which led to the decline of human spirituality. However, this curse is reversed in Christ for those who accept Him as their Lord and Saviour. In the kingdom of God there is to be an eternal personal existence before God, which from my perspective is the very purpose and meaning of religion. Human persons who have been made in the image of God are uniquely personal, as God is, in the essence of his being.

According to Robillard, God gave humanity parents, as secondary causes, the power to co-create human life. It is the parents who procreate the body, the indispensable locus for the creation of the soul. But it is God himself who directly creates the soul (Robillard 1982:110): "The book of Genesis describes the prototype of God's creation of every human life." In this view of Robillard's one detects his belief in creation, and that souls are not pre-existent. Regarding his view on the resurrection one detects his "simple faith" in what the Bible teaches. Robillard has a high view of what Scripture teaches; a view which in academic circles is largely missing today: "We have neither a rational explanation of, nor a cogent justification for, this doctrine; it is a truth of faith that we derive from the teaching of Jesus (Robillard 1982:97). I believe that Robillard is being honest when he states that his view is based on "a truth of faith," for all religious statements and

doctrines are based on such axiomatic principles.

5.3 ETHICS

Ethics involves duty and dharma may roughly be translated as "the inevitability of what must be done" or "doing what is set before you" (Krishna 1968:10). This dharma should be void of merit and Hindus have taught that it is better to do one's own duty in life than that of another.

According to Hinduism: "God originates and sustains the world and reabsorbs it into himself: this is his karma and his dharma. Humanity who, according to the Bhagavad-Gita, is a particle of God, must imitate him in his activity as well as his eternal rest" (Zaehner 1966:103). In all this, according to Hindu perception, God has a supreme purpose. He has as his ultimate purpose the liberation of all souls who are living in the universe, which is a part of his lower nature: "This is the eternal game that he plays with his creation, but like any game it has its own rules, and the rules of the game are called dharma" (Zaehner 1966:103).

In the Bhagavad-Gita, Arjuna may not understand why he has to be involved in a battle against his cousins, but even though he is loath to participate in such a war, he is not free and has to do this: "However wrong the dharma imposed upon you by your caste and by circumstances may appear to you, you are nonetheless duty-bound to do it, and if you refuse, then fate, that is God's will, will take you by the forelock and make you" (Zaehner 1966:103).

Vivekananda breaks with the traditionally understood determinist concept of dharma by reinterpreting it to promote freedom and equality for all. He maintained that true spiritual experience awakens love for God as well as for humanity. Vivekananda worked

tirelessly to free India from social evils like caste rigidity, untouchability and mass illiteracy, by spreading sacred and secular education (Sooklal 1990:73). According to Vivekananda: "Man is the highest being that exists and this is the greatest world. We can have no conception of God higher than man, so our God is man and man is God (in Sooklal 1990:297). As an end humanity shines in its own divine light and as a means it serves others to find divinity in them and also to make them conscious of their divinity: "First let us be gods, and then help others to be gods. Be and make. Let this be our motto" (in Sooklal 1990:297). Vivekananda's concept of practical ethics is similar to that of Mahatma Gandhi, which shows that the acceptance of reincarnation need not lead to social apathy and spiritual selfishness:

I do not want to be reborn. But if I have to be reborn, I should be born an untouchable, so that I may share their sorrows, sufferings, and affronts levelled at them, in order that I may endeavor to free myself and them from that miserable condition (in Kripalani 1960:72).

Within latter Hinduism there has arisen many a Hindu teacher/swami with a deep concern for alleviating the plight of the destitute of the earth. According to Vivekananda, for example, humanity is his God and humanitarian service his religion. Service to others must therefore be performed as worship, not as philanthropy.

This is very similar to a Christian ethic of helping the poor and despised of the world. The Christian is concerned about the world and this life, since both are gifts of God's grace to humanity. This does not mean that the world is the same as God; it is something distinct from God yet intimately connected to him through the influence of the Holy Spirit. The universe is not the existence-form of God nor the phenomenal appearance of the absolute; and God is not simply the life (or the soul) of the world, but enjoys his eternally complete life "above" the world, in absolute independence of it (Berkhof 1939:134). While

God gave the world an existence distinct from himself, he did not withdraw from it. God is not only the transcendent God, infinitely exalted above his creatures; he is also the immanent God, present in every part of his creation, whose spirit is operative in the world (Ephesians 4:6): "one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all." God is therefore concerned about his creation and also concerned as to how his creatures will treat each other and look after nature, for his glory's sake. God's glory is made manifest when humanity treats this world and all that it stands for, as God does. There is a vast difference between this and Vivekananda's idea that humanity is God and that we need to help and worship humanity so as to achieve salvation. The Reformed position states that creation is separate though dependent on God, and humanity who has been made in his image must portray their God's concern for life.

Prabhupada has a somewhat "static" idea concerning humanity's duty. He perceives this as prescribed according to the caste system. He finds an individual's duty explained in the Bhagavad-Gita 18:47, where it says that Brahmanas should do their duty and Vaisyas theirs, and that the two groups in this example should not copy one another. For the Bhagavad-Gita states in the above verse: "It is better to be engaged in one's own occupation, even though one may perform it imperfectly, than to accept another's occupation and perform it perfectly" (Prabhupada 1984a:307). Duty must therefore be performed according to one's nature or caste, and this must simply be done. But duty incorporates the aspects of emotion and conscience, for all duty done in this life affects a person. Prabhupada teaches, however, that one must forego emotion and conscience and seek duty under the knowledge of God who is above all human feelings and attachments. Thus, provided each does his prescribed duty, all will be well for him. But there would appear to be no objective standard, such as the Judeo-Christian code prescribed by the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20), and this has

repercussions for culture and individual life. For harmonious living, society needs standards which are applicable to all, regardless of creed, colour or social standing.

MacGregor's view on dharma as purgative steps is similar to the Christian doctrine of sanctification. However, the doctrine of dharma is a law applicable to all, where there is no possibility of grace or forgiveness, for each is the maker of her own salvation, without God affecting her progress. MacGregor prefers this law applicable to all, without the personalised grace that only a personal God can give. This concept is static and impersonal and it can lead to a "no-care" attitude.

Hick's view on the moral progress of the individual is not limited to earthly life as we know it (see 4.3.3). However, Reformed theology would insist that it is in this life that one makes decisions for all eternity, since "it is ordained for man to die once and after that face judgement" (Hebrews 9:27). The duty to take decisions responsibly in this life is regarded as critical for salvation and has been a driving force in Christianity's insistence on mission for salvation in Jesus Christ in the here-and-now. In this regard the degree of sanctification in this life plays an important part. Reformed theology states that justification in and through Christ is followed by sanctification. Justification is an act of God according to his grace. This being so, there is no necessity for humanity to keep on coming back for salvation's sake, for if God wants to save He could do it the first time round. He is not a God of procrastination or delay, nor is salvation something which one can earn by toiling for it in one life after another. Each individual human life is sacred before God, as was the "once for all" death of Jesus on the cross. Christ does not have to appear again and again in each millennium in order to authenticate his mission. Likewise, there is only one life for salvation's sake under the influence of the Holy Spirit.

Mangalwadi has perceived an important truth regarding human nature, when he stresses that people seem to need a personalised religion as well as personalised grace and forgiveness, since all have been made in the image of God. Krishna (1968:24) has perceived the problem that humanity has with an Absolute which is impersonal and acknowledges that in all people there is a craving for something that is a little more familiar and intimate:

In order to meet this difficulty, the Upanisads, in their wisdom describe Brahman in two ways. First, there is the indeterminate, qualityless, indescribable or Nirguna aspect of absolute. Second, the Upanisads also provide a cosmic personal description of God which forms the object of adoration for the ordinary worshipper, as a compassionate, merciful and benevolent God (Krishna 1968:24).

Humanity has a need for a personal God, for without it salvation and damnation also take on impersonal characteristics and this becomes difficult to grasp, if not meaningless. This begs the question: "What am I saved from and, what am I saved to?" Humanity needs to know that it is saved from something and that eternal life has a purpose, which has to be personal: "But the personal divine is not 'another' God different from the one eternal or absolute. It is only the ONE REALITY rendered in terms more intelligible to the lay believer, for whom an object of worship, a personal God whom he can adore, is the basis of faith" (Krishna 1968:25). Thus a personal dimension of God plays an important part in the spiritual life of many Hindus.

Robillard states that laws are to be respected, otherwise disorder results. He sees dharmā as a static law affecting every stratum of society. If a thief were to discontinue stealing, he would be affecting the delicate balance of universal cause and effect. Thus perceived, duty, ethics and society are powerless under the iron law of dharmā, from which there seems to be no escape, for to go against dharmā would be futile. As has already been indicated, people appear to need a perceived freedom

regarding ethics and morals. Humanity does not like to be under a rigid law and this would include the law of dharma. Christianity's moral code allows much more freedom and personal choice of action within the scope of certain absolutes such as the Ten Commandments. The Ten Commandments can be likened to the railings on a bridge. While moving across the bridge there is a large amount of freedom, but climbing over the railings is forbidden in the best interests of believers. In similar vein there is a well known Christian saying which highlights freedom under a given absolute: "Love God and do whatever you want".

Robillard has perceived an important aspect when he emphasises the Christian doctrine of grace. God forgives a sinner regardless of what he has done, and this aspect of grace continues through the individual's life until he dies. This grace is at work, regardless of one's culture, spiritual maturity or educational achievements. Each individual, according to her spiritual standing, is under the influence of the Holy Spirit's guiding, where He interacts with all according to their felt needs. In this guiding influence of the Holy Spirit across the world, there will be perceived differences and emphases according to different cultures and worldviews. These differences and emphases will, however, not be "extreme," for all Christians are under the guiding influence of Scripture and the Holy Spirit. Christianity has never taught that any good or a bad deed is forever locked into a judicial code where there is no possibility of grace, for there is the benevolent teaching of forgiveness. Forgiveness implies an open-ended freedom under God's moral law.

5.4 HAMARTIOLOGY

As became clear in the previous chapters, the issues raised for a Christian hamartiology by reincarnation deal with the concept of karma. The law of karma is an application of the law of

causation: every action of an individual produces a result, whether good or bad, and the life of the individual then becomes conditioned by her own acts. This law operates absolutely and is not manipulated by a supreme judge. In the long run the discords and inequalities of life are due to ourselves and not to any caprice of God (Krishna 1968:78). The law is applicable in the personal as well as the corporate realms of life.

Within the Reformed concept of evil and sin and of its dire consequences within human life, this subject is best treated in terms of the sovereignty of God rather than in terms of an understanding of human nature. Regarding the doctrine of divine sovereignty in relation to the origin of evil, there are two approaches, namely supralapsarianism and infralapsarianism. Both these approaches agree that :

- 1) God is not the author of sin.
- 2) Humanity's fall and subsequent punishment is not merely the object of God's foreknowledge but of his decree and foreordination.
- 3) Faith is not the cause of the decree of election, neither sin the cause of the decree of reprobation.

God predestined the fall, and though, as Supreme Ruler, He executes his plan even by means of sin, He nevertheless remains holy and righteous; of their own accord humanity falls and sins: the guilt is theirs alone (Bavinck 1951:385). The hidden will of God will always remain as regards why He purposed the perdition of many and not the salvation of all, nevertheless these reasons, though known to Him, are not known to us: we are not able to say why God willed to make use of this means and not of another (Bavinck 1951:387). The Reformed position admits that within the deep council of God there is a mystery element which finite men and women cannot fathom. I personally do not think that this is an intellectual "cop-out," but rather a reverence for the fact that within the Godhead there is a hidden will. Within the Bible there have been individuals who have admitted the awesome depths of God's decrees, for example Job 24:38-42;

Ps. 145:3; and Romans 9-11.

Vivekananda maintains that all perceived sufferings in this world are due to any given individual's own actions. The only person or thing to blame for evil in this world is oneself. This is the only legitimate cause of suffering. This is a hard teaching, for it implies that the individual has to travel the road to salvation alone under the law of karma, which cannot be changed except by the individual's own deeds, which will affect only the next birth until he reaches enlightenment. In such a view, God can be perceived as being unconcerned and detached from struggling human beings, merely watching the outworkings of karma. This teaching needs the personalised concept of divinity involved in this life, for a God who merely watches can be perceived as unloving and devoid of grace. I believe that Christianity has an important truth to convey to the monists, namely God's loving concern for the world: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life" (John 3:16). Christianity has the most profound concept of personalised salvation for humanity, and this appeals to all, for humanity is personal and needs a God with whom it can identify.

Prabhupada maintains that karma is like dust covering the pure, original spiritual consciousness of human beings. This accumulation can be removed by chanting the Hare Krishna mantra. It is through the chanting of this mantra that one can associate personally with Krishna, because there is no difference between the name and form of Krishna and through constant spiritual association one becomes spiritually self-realised (Mangalwadi 1977:94). This slowly enlightens one and there is a realisation that the individual's true nature and identity is as a servant of Krishna. When one attains this self-realisation and Krishna Consciousness, one is released from samsara. Prabhupada's concept of salvation from karma is far more personal than Vivekananda's. He sees salvation as being realised through hours

of chanting. Salvation is up to the individual's diligence and spiritual searching, which is rather similar to Christianity.

MacGregor does not see karma as implying a fate or a deterministic outlook on life, for each individual is free to act under the law of karma. She is free to pursue her own salvation. This view of MacGregor's would be acceptable in Reformed theology were it not for the teaching that humanity experienced a space-time Fall²⁰ in Adam. The essence of that sin lay in the fact that Adam placed himself in opposition to God, that he refused to subject his will to the will of God. Adam's descendants derive their innate corruption from him by a process of natural generation, and only on the basis of that inherent depravity which they share with him are they also considered guilty (Berkhof 1939:243). The most valuable thing humanity forfeited in the Fall of Adam was free communication with God (Hammond 1968:78). Humanity is not totally free but due to the Fall is more prone to do evil than good. Life is not a neutral battle-field but one in which the forces of evil and good are always interacting. Humanity left to itself without God's forgiveness would create more bad karma than good. Salvation can therefore never be achieved under this system.

Hick finds many points of contact between the doctrine of the Incarnation as espoused by Christianity and various reincarnations suggested by Hinduism. In the ultimate presence of God, it will not matter whether one came along the path of reincarnation or resurrection, for both ideas and doctrines are legitimate, since both teach a personalised existence before a God in an enlightened heaven. Hick maintains that through the process of karma, the path to eternal salvation may indeed take longer (due to various reincarnations) than through personal

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This term is used to emphasise the fact that the Fall of Adam (Genesis 3) was not mythical, but actually occurred in historical time and geographical space.

forgiveness in Christ in one given lifetime (as espoused by the resurrection).

According to Mangalwadi the doctrine of karma seems superficially to explain ultimate reality, but Christians have difficulty accepting this outlook. For example, Mangalwadi asks:

But where does Karma come from? From a previous birth? But where did the previous birth come from? From still previous Karma - ad infinitum! If souls have existed forever due to the influence of Karma then any hope of ultimate salvation, of getting rid of Karma, is purely romantic" (Mangalwadi 1977:221).

According to the Hindu view, people are always trapped in the wheel of samsara for as life has no beginning it also has no end. Therefore there can be no final salvation but only a constant returning to samsara. For the Christian there is a definite beginning and end to life. As God created humanity at a given point in time, so he will also save humanity at a given point in time.

Christians perceive reality to be moving towards the ultimate consummation in Christ at his second coming. History is moving towards a set goal under the personal guidance of God. Reality is perceived to be moving on a linear timescale and is not confined by the cosmic wheel of samsara as in the Hindu perception of time and reality.

Robillard believes that mainstream Hindu thought wanted to exonerate God and make humanity responsible for all evil. Evil is perceived to be applicable in a closed system and in it God acts as little more than a kind of referee to maintain an equilibrium between good and evil. He is far above the fray and is not affected by it at all. This concept leaves no room for forgiveness or grace, for no personal interference is possible in the closed system of karma. Humanity left to itself has to

live according to the laws implicit in karma and samsara. In this no individual may expect help from God. Sin in this world is perceived as balancing good and evil with a distant hope that, one day, equilibrium having been reached, moksha will be realised.

Mark Albrecht has written a book on reincarnation, in which he has a chapter entitled: "Does karma really promote justice?" (Albrecht 1982). Superficially he suggests that one may say yes. However, a hard look at this doctrine reveals serious flaws. The basic problem is twofold: (i) since individual personalities are obliterated after death, the reincarnated soul is really another person who is burdened with someone else's karma, and (ii) there is no guarantee that bad karma would not increase at a greater rate than good karma.

Albrecht illustrates this by using Adolf Hitler as an example. Reincarnationists generally agree that he would have to be reincarnated many times - perhaps through six million lives, which would correspond to the number of his victims, and in each life he would have to suffer agonies similar to those he had inflicted on others. Here is an example of the first problem - let us say he was born in 1947 as a cripple named Edgar Jones, who was born in New York and had no idea that he is really Hitler reincarnated. Justice breaks down at this point, for the truth of the matter is that Hitler can work off his karma and be accordingly punished. But he is gone, since his personality ceased to exist in 1945, and Edgar Jones now bears the massive burden of Hitler's karmic debt. When Edgar dies, another person is born with Hitler's karma and so the process is repeated millions of times. Hitler's sins are therefore multiplied through the further sufferings of millions of future reincarnations.

The second aspect of karmic justice comes into focus with the multiplication of Hitler's deeds. Instead of six million

innocent victims, we now have many more, since the reincarnations of Hitler are all doomed to suffer as horribly as the original victim did: "This is surely madness, a living hell spreading like a contagious disease" (Albrecht 1982:91). This could spread throughout the universe in an eternal nightmare of "spiritual bubonic plague" (Albrecht 1982:90). Hence karma offers neither personal nor cosmic justice. At the personal level, Edgar is victimised. On the cosmic scale, burgeoning evil thoroughly outweighs the good as bad karma self-generates through repeated incarnations. How can the karmic balance of good and evil ever be maintained when one person's evil generates so much further evil? (Albrecht 1982:91).

5.5 SOTERIOLOGY

According to Vivekananda, the path of salvation is release from birth and from the physical body, in order to be ultimately united again with Brahman. Ultimate salvation, according to Vivekananda, is when the soul is again reunited with Brahman, whereas Christianity believes that the body as well as the soul is going to be redeemed. Christianity not only takes account of the spiritual dimensions of life but also the physical, for matter as well as spirit are ultimately going to be saved at the Second Coming of Christ. Christ will return at the end of the world for the purpose of introducing the "future age," and he will do this by inaugurating and completing two events, namely the resurrection of the dead and the final judgment (Mt 13:49-50; John 5:25-29; 1 Thess 4:13-17; Rev 20:11-15) (Berkhof 1939:707). All life is thus capable of being redeemed, not just individual souls: "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away..." (Revelation 21:1).

According to Prabhupada, self-realisation is the realisation that I am not this body; once this has been achieved, liberation

is possible. It is only the human body that provides a loophole through which the soul can escape into moksha. It is in this regard that Prabhupada takes human life seriously, for it only as a human that individual life can seek and obtain salvation. This concept of his is similar to the Reformed position which teaches that it is only in this life that one can seek salvation. There is thus agreement between Prabhupada and Christianity on this point, for regardless of how many times an individual comes back, it is only in and through human life that one can seek salvation.

MacGregor believes that reincarnation as it stands by itself, is not in its entirety at variance with a developed reincarnationist theory, and that this accords with the general principle of evolution, namely that all development is progressive. In order to make reincarnation more acceptable to the Christian, MacGregor states that one must be careful not to base one's judgement on any particular form of reincarnation to the exclusion of other possibilities. The concept of reincarnation is detachable from the various presuppositions which have been accorded to it in the history of ideas: "We ought therefore not to discard what we take to be important spiritual truth merely because it seems violated by attachment to outmoded theories or assumptions" (MacGregor 1982:41). To do so is to end up by renouncing all the merits of reincarnation as a Christian hope, through allowing prejudices to get in the way of our judgement (MacGregor 1982:41).

If God is a forgiving father, however (as MacGregor asserts), then it is possible that he could perfect any individual in one life on earth. It would not be a loving father God who would postpone ultimate salvation in and through forgiveness by making his children to be reborn into a myriad of lives. There is no reason for God to delay His purposes indefinitely; God need not wait, and to suggest that He does implies that He is deliberately "playing" with His creation.

To my mind, Hick's view that this life is not the only one for spiritual maturing can cause individuals to procrastinate regarding their spiritual progress and not take it seriously until they "feel ready for it." In such a view the urgency of the quest for spiritual maturity disappears. Jesus said: "Today is the day of salvation" and in this he projected a certain sense of urgency, because according to him, death terminates an individual's spiritual progress. Thus perceived, the points of view of Hinduism and Christianity differ substantially on the duration and nature of spiritual progress. Brown (1968:291) has an interesting comment with reference to MacGregor and Hick: "None of them grapples particularly with Biblical religion and evangelical belief" (Brown 1968:291). It is two different things to explain an empirical belief and to grapple with the spiritual belief system behind the dogma. I personally believe that MacGregor and Hick have not seriously evaluated evangelical spirituality, but have rather explained it in the light of their own presuppositions.

Regarding the question of hell, it is impossible to determine precisely what will constitute the eternal punishment of those separated from God. According to the Bible hell is said to consist of:

- a) a total absence of the favour of God,
- b) an endless disturbance of life as a result of the complete domination of sin,
- c) positive pains and sufferings in body and soul
- d) subjective punishments like pangs of conscience, anguish, despair, weeping and gnashing of teeth,
Mt. 8:12, 13:50; Mark 9:43,44,47,48; Luke 16:23,28;
Rev.14:10; 21:8 (Berkhof 1939:739).

There will, however, be degrees of punishment in hell and this will be commensurate with the extent to which people sinned against the light which they received. This follows from such passages as Mt. 11:22,24; Luke 12:47,48; 20:17 (Berkhof 1939:736).

From a Biblical point of view, Christianity cannot do without a doctrine of hell, for it is inseparable from God's plan of salvation. God decreed to have a hell for people who wilfully and persistently spurn the grace of God in Jesus Christ, after having tasted God's goodness, but this doctrine has been an intellectual problem for many Christians. There is a conception of God today which highlights his love and forgiveness to the exclusion of his holiness. When this happens the terms of love and forgiveness take on relative connotations. Today there seems to be a lack of concern for holiness, since holiness carries a connotation of separateness. In my opinion God is not a God of sentimental love but of holy love, and this implies an ethical code which excludes. Love and holiness should not be separated, for the two are intimately linked in Biblical theology.

Mangalwadi regards the Hindu perception of salvation as being inordinately selfish. The religion is an inward-looking one which leads to an extreme form of asceticism. In this there is a detachment from the body, life, relationships and the world (Mangalwadi 1990:140). This is indicative of Mangalwadi's conception of Hinduism, with its perceived preoccupation with the soul as the only life principle that really matters. What Hinduism lacks is Christianity's insistence on the immortality of the whole individual being. This may be true of strict monism, however Vivekananda perceived this "evil" and sought to eradicate it from Hindu practice. Within Hinduism there is a strong emphasis on spirituality, however in recent times there has been a concerted effort to eradicate preoccupation with spirituality to the exclusion of all else.

Robillard maintains that the resurrection of Christ is the prototype of our resurrection and ultimate salvation. The soul and the body both receive salvation in and through Christ's imputed righteousness. The soul is not something that is autonomous, as if it could exist entirely by itself. The soul participates in life because God wills it so. The soul would

live no longer from the moment that God no longer willed it to live: "Life does not belong to the soul in and of itself but only to the extent that the soul belongs to God" (Robillard 1982:106). For the Christian, the soul as well as the body belongs to God and one day both are going to participate in eternal life. The only eternal being is God himself, who is separate from all creation. Detected here is a fundamental difference on the state of the soul. Reformed theology (which is at this point in full agreement with the Roman Catholic interpretation of Robillard) insists that the soul exists at a separate entity, and is entirely dependent on the Creator, who willed it into existence. Hinduism perceives the soul as being synonymous with or to Brahman and as having eternal existence, since it is an integral part of the all-pervading Brahman.

I personally believe that there is harmony between the Reformed concept of heaven and some Hindu concepts regarding salvation. In the Christian concept of God, the Godhead is perceived as a communion in love. The reality is that God is love, that there is nothing which corresponds to personal loving communion within the Godhead, and we are called to share in that communion of love (Griffiths 1983:130). So also in the mystical body of Christ which embraces all redeemed humanity, we do not disappear in the Godhead, but we discover a personal relationship of love:

And that is what we are called to experience - this communion of love in the mystical body of Christ which embraces the whole creation. The whole of redeemed humanity is there, and each of us, according to his capacity, is able to go out in love to others and to be embraced in love by others. All creation and all humanity are taken up into this infinite, incomprehensible, inexpressible Being of God, in whom - though we can never understand or comprehend Him - we know that there is this communion of charity, this communion of love (Griffiths 1983:131).

Jesus expressed this marvelously when He prayed: "That they may be one, as Thou, Father in me and I in thee, that they may be

one in us." That is Christian advaita. We are one with one another and one with Christ; we are one in this mystery of the Godhead, and I do not think that we can go beyond that. This would be an example of how to relate the Cosmic Revelation to the Christian Revelation (Griffiths 1983:131). My personal view is that Griffiths has perceived an important truth here. This concept of his should be endorsed by those Christian individuals engaged in dialogue with Hindus.

5.6. THEODICY

In Genesis 1 and 2, one finds the Biblical account of the origin of sin. Sin was the transgression of Adam in paradise, and the sin that he committed brought with it a "permanent pollution" in humanity, due to the solidarity of the human race, for the father of the human race could only pass on a depraved human nature to his offspring. It is primarily in that sense that Adam's sin is the sin of all. That is what St Paul teaches in Romans 5:12: - "through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and so death passed on to all of humanity". Humanity sinned in Adam, our representative head, in such a way as to make them all liable to the punishment of death. It is not sin considered merely as pollution, but sin as guilt that carries punishment with it. God judges all of humanity as being sinful in Adam, just as He judges all believers to be righteous in Christ. This is possible due to the unity of humanity and of the indwelling sin inherited from Adam our representative head. When humanity fell it was therefore their attempt to do without God in every respect. Humanity sought its own ideals of truth, goodness and beauty somewhere beyond God, either directly within themselves or in the universe around them (Van Til 1955:15).

In Christ, God the Father provided the means for salvation, as Adam was unique so is the Christ who has a unique human nature due to the extra-ordinary virgin birth and that he is the

begotten son. Christ became incarnate in order to become "the last Adam," the covenant head of a new race of redeemed humanity, and as a man offered the fullest obedience to the divine claims: Jn.1:14,18; 3:17; Rom.8:3; Gal.4:4,5 (Hammond 1968:97). That is what St Paul meant when he said: "so then as through one trespass the judgment came upon all men to condemnation, even so through one act of righteousness the free gift came unto all men to justification of life. For as through one man's disobedience many became sinners, even so through the obedience of the one shall the many be made righteous" (Romans 5:18,19). In the sin of Adam, humanity lost what could be considered their most valuable talent, their right to free communion with God. A consequence of this loss of open communication with God is that humanity is now prey to the law of sin. Thus humanity with a fallen nature is prone to do evil and as a direct consequence of this suffering always follows in evil's wake.

Vivekananda's views on theodicy are intimately linked with his views on hamartiology. Regarding hell, Vivekananda states that humanity manufactures its own heaven and its own hell. Individuals can make a heaven in hell, for whatever one dreams they can create: "If it is hell, you die and see hell" (Vivekananda 1976h:132). In other words, an individual creates everything according to his mental state and spiritual maturity. In an interview with a Christian missionary, Vivekananda stated that he would easily go to hell, because it can be your heaven, for in truth heaven and hell are relative under the supreme lordship of Brahman (Vivekananda 1976h:132). As can be detected from the above, evil, suffering and hell are relative, as well as goodness, joy and heaven. For all of perceived reality is an integral part of the all-pervading Brahman, hence everything is relative, except Brahman. In this concept of Vivekananda's one perceives how his monistic philosophy pervades all his religious and philosophical ideas.

Prabhupada maintains that sin arises when a living entity comes into contact with the material creation and it is then that perversion sets in. This view of his is at total variance with the Bible's teaching on creation. Genesis 1 states that it was God who created this world out of nothing, according to his divine will. After completing creation, God was pleased with what he had done. He then created man and woman in his image, which is a positive affirmation regarding humanity generally.

Escape from this world, according to Prabhupada, is possible by seeking enlightenment through the chanting of the Hare Krishna mantra. Regarding hell, Prabhupada states that any living entity can go anywhere, either to hell or heaven. There are many heavenly planets as well as many hellish planets and living souls are wondering between these. Some Vaisnavas are even prepared to go to hell to deliver those souls in hell from bondage. These souls can be saved and are not just left there for eternity. Hell is not an absolute final abode, for salvation from hell is possible. The only ultimate, final abode is Krishna. According to Reformed theology, however, hell is final, and it is a fixed abode from which escape is impossible. However, there are degrees of punishment, and some of the extreme pictures portraying hell in certain circles has done an injustice to the abode of those excluded from God's presence.

MacGregor interprets reincarnation as a Christian hope because for him it highlights God's forgiveness. In this he perceives an important Christian doctrine, namely that of God's benevolent grace. However, he negates God's personal holiness and the fact that He personally rewards those who abide by his decrees and punishes those who misuse this one unique human life, whereas reincarnation is an impersonal force balancing good and bad in the cosmos. Grace is not on par with karma, for the Scriptural aspect of grace implies a personal Being. Grace is not something inanimate as karma is. I personally believe that grace and karma are incapable of a symbiotic relationship for the two are vastly

different concepts. As karma is a vital component of reincarnation, and as both are inanimate forces, it would be an injustice to add grace to these two religious concepts, for they are vastly different.

Secondly, Macgregor believes in the process of evolution and the spiritual development of humanity and that this development goes on beyond death. The Bible, on the other hand, teaches that once an individual dies he or she will face the final judgment based on God's decrees and standards (see discussion above in 5.1.6.).

Hick believes there will be an eventual all-justifying fulfillment of the human potential in a perfected life. The ultimate good that will come about, which will justify all pain and suffering, will be the personal growth and perfecting of the spiritual maturation to a state of full humanity, the free awareness and acceptance of the divine love which has brought men and women through so many sorrows to their Father's house (Hick 1985:160). According to Hick, all of humanity is thus capable of being saved, regardless of religious affiliation. The Christian doctrine of hell is untenable to Hick for how, he asks, can a conscious creature undergo physical and mental torture through unending time? This is too disturbing and incompatible with the idea of God as infinite love. The absolute contrast of heaven and hell does not correspond to the innumerable gradations of human good and evil; justice could never demand an infinite penalty of eternal pain for finite human sin. Such unending torment could never serve any positive or reformative purpose, precisely because it never ends and it renders any coherent Christian theodicy impossible, by giving the evils of sin and suffering an eternal lodgement within God's creation (Hick 1985:201). Thus Hick perceives suffering in a moral and ethical way which will have a dynamic outworking in the afterlife, where humanity will be harmoniously interrelated and true unity experienced. In this kingdom of God there will be no place for evil or a hell.

Hick highlights the sufferings in hell as if it is going to be eternal torture on the same scale for everybody. From a Biblical point of view this is untenable. As has been pointed out earlier, there are going to be levels of punishment according to deeds done in the body in the light of general revelation. As to why there is a hell at all, this is a mystery in the divine decree of God and an integral part of his plan of salvation. The Bible teaches that there will be a hell, and this is the place where all those who have rejected the Christ are going. As regards post-death maturing in spiritual realms, the Bible is silent. From a Biblical point of view, death terminates spiritual development, hence the Bible's frequent and urgent call to repentance. This has been one of the main concerns for evangelism through the centuries. Hick's theory regarding post-death maturing is more Hindu than Christian in outlook and foreign to Christian soteriology.

According to Mangalwadi, the doctrine of reincarnation hinders the motivation to relieve suffering. If an individual is starving in this life due to some prior evil in a previous life, we must not help or interfere. Humanity must not interfere with the cosmic justice of the law of karma. This is morally and ethically paralysing. Christians do not believe in a cosmic fate, but are here to follow in the compassionate footsteps of our Lord Jesus Christ. Christians are called to be responsible in the face of suffering and death. The cause of evil and suffering cannot be trapped in a closed system of samsara. This, to Mangalwadi, is too much of a mechanistic outlook, since it denies the aspect of grace and forgiveness.

Mangalwadi's concern is legitimate, but Vivekananda tried hard to eradicate this deterministic outlook from Hinduism. Hinduism traditionally neglected suffering, whereas modern-day Hinduism has made tremendous strides in humanitarian aid. This does not mean, however, that all Hindus have embraced this concern, because the caste system and all that it stands for is still

very much alive in India today.

According to Robillard, Christianity teaches that the soul's destiny is decided at the moment of death. From this time there is no going back on the destiny that is in store for it (Robillard 1982:85). Jesus taught about the finality of hell and heaven in Matthew 25:31-46. Jesus did not die on the cross in order to save humanity from nothing at all; nor did Jesus command individuals to take up their crosses in turn and follow Him only if in the end all roads lead to heaven anyway (Robillard 1982:97). The gospel is also clear in its teaching that there will be no sojourn of humanity in some intermediate realm, from which we might return to this earth. Luke 16:26 states that there is a gulf fixed to stop anyone who wants to cross from death to life. In this perspective the New Testament's frequent exhortations to all are to make the right choices now, since it can bind eternally. St. Paul knows that the imminence of the kingdom is an indication that opportunities to enter eternal life will not be available for ever: "Now is the favorable time; this is the day of salvation" (2 Cor 6:2).

I believe that a Christian has to accept the reality of hell. As Robillard stated, if there was no hell, what did Christ die for? What then did He save us from? The standard by which all will be judged will be the revealed will of God, and this happens once, for as Hebrews 9:27-28 states:

Just as man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people; and He will appear a second time not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for Him.

But this is not the same for all. Some have been privileged above others, and this will add to their responsibility (Matthew 11:21-24; Romans 2:12-16). This does not mean that there will be different conditions of salvation for different classes of people. All those who appear in judgment will depend on whether

they were clothed with the righteousness of Christ. But there will be different degrees of reward in heaven and of punishment in hell. These degrees will be determined by what each human did here on earth (Matthew 11:22,24; Luke 12:47,48; 2 Corinthians 9:6). This makes eternal judgment seem more fair. For example, a worthy woman in the South Seas Islands, yet without knowledge of Christ, cannot suffer the same as Hitler who knew, yet discarded, the teachings of Scripture. Judgment will be based on responsibility, whether one knew the Scriptures or not. I personally feel there is a need to teach people that there are degrees of punishment and of blessings in the life hereafter. This will avoid the "extremes" and "horrors" that some have taught and the negation of hell in Christian circles, for hell is fundamentally separation from the triune God. Though hell is a separation from God it falls within his omnipotence and is rendered subservient to his glory (Bavinck 1951:401).

5.7 HISTORY

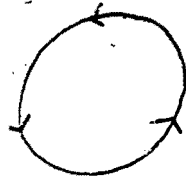
The traditional Judeo-Christian concept of history has been perceived as redemptive. In this concept of history, revelation plays an important part. This revelation is not one exhaustive act, but rather an unfolding in a series of successive acts. So revelation is historically successive because it addresses itself to the generation of humanity coming into existence in the course of history. Revelation can then be perceived as the interpretation of redemption: "These two processes are not entirely co-extensive, for revelation comes to a close at a point where redemption still continues" (Vos 1948:6). Revelation is the word for God making Himself known in historical acts. Therefore history still plays an important role in the Christian concept of time. The Christian God is the God of the future, not only the God of the origin, and he is not the God of the cycle of nature, nor of the eternal return (Bosch 1991:499). In this view, history has been perceived as redemptive on a time scale,

and could be presented as past, present and future.

Within the Reformed Christian concept of time, the future plays a vital part. The future for Christians is never far off in the distance, but always near. The consummation of Christian history is always under the shadow of the Second Coming, which can happen today, in a hundred years or at any time. The practical implications of this is the continual awareness of imminence and readiness. The future itself is seen as dynamic, not some static end-point to work towards. God in His perfect timing will come when His will has accomplished all that He deemed necessary.

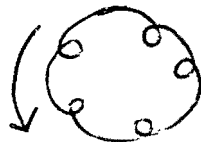
The Hindu concept of time, based on reincarnation, can be perceived as circular or cyclical: "In Hindu cosmology the universe is conceived as a great repetitive cycle of creation, destruction and recreation" (Steyn 1990:61). In similar vein, House (1990:134) says: "History is illusionary; there is only the endless cycle or wheel of life by which life continually dies and is born again." However, there are three ways of looking at the circular concept of time. Diagrammatically, it may look like this:

FIGURE 1.



Time is cyclical. All of life is moving endlessly on a huge circular time scale, and repeats itself for all eternity.

FIGURE 2.



This diagram is similar to 1 above. Time is perceived as a cyclical process, but it also includes smaller circular movements, representing various epochs of development.

FIGURE 3.



Here time is perceived as moving forward to a consummation or goal, but also including elements that are cyclical in nature. This diagram highlights progress far more than the other two.

According to reincarnation, humanity is trapped in circular time, and escape is possible only through enlightenment. According to the three concepts of time, the concept in figure 3 (page 113) is similar to the Christian understanding, for it is linear and incorporates development and a concept of a distant future. Figures 1 and 2 (page 113) are cyclical and this leads to a perception of: "no matter what I do, everything is going to come around again", which can lead to a form of apathy or fatalism. Brahman is the supreme cause of all and determines what will take place. Everything will eventually return to the primordial stillness of his being.

There is however a compromise regarding the two views of history. The Hindu concept of time can be perceived as a wheel, and the Christian concept as a road (Newbiggin 1969:65). As the wheel is on the road moving ever towards some goal, both concepts of time are therefore similar. Regarding the Reformed view there are things that happen in perceived reality which are cyclical in nature, i.e. birth, growth, decay and death as well as the four seasons. Similarly, within the Hindu concept of time there are things that are unique in history like personality, events in history and new discoveries. Both are moving, both are on a unique journey. Therefore history can be perceived as a wheel on the road of life. It is not a question of either-or but of both-and.

Vivekananda perceived the world as relative; it exists only because the absolute reality beyond time, space and causation exists. So, according to Vivekananda, history, time, life, and everything, has relative existence in and under the absolute. Therefore it does not matter how one views history, all are right, all are wrong, all are relative. So the Advaitin sees all

under the shadow of the absolute. Strictly speaking, there is no real concept of time, space and causation, for these concepts taken together add up to maya or illusion. These cannot be independent existences for they only exist due to the Absolute beyond all, and some day these concepts are going to be reabsorbed into Brahman and cease to exist, for all perceived reality is a projection from him. Brahman emanates, sustains and reabsorbs into himself, this is repeated for all the cycles of eternity (Zaehner 1966:104).

According to the Judeo-Christian concept of reality, God created all things, including time. Time itself did not exist before creation as we know it. The significance of this concept is that the world had a beginning. This has a bearing on one's concept of God. God recognises space and time as being objective to himself and is therefore not subject to change in the essence of his being. Creation is an exhibition of who and what God is: "The table that is shaped by the carpenter is not an extension of the essence of the carpenter, but it does show something of the essence of the carpenter" (Schaeffer 1982:174). The God of the covenant is eternally the same and this has consequences for his creatures trapped in time. They know that the God whom they worship now will always be there. This God is not capricious so as to change with each age or event.

A world which is conceived cyclically knows death only as an organic phenomenon:

Where the chain does not break, or more precisely, where the past is ruled by the law of return; the importance of individual death remains limited and so to speak obscured. Only with the transformation of the mythical time-consciousness from its cyclic into its eschatological form appears the perspective of never more, and the separation into the past, present and future (Choron 1963:26).

Not until linear time replaced cyclical time did every event receive the character of uniqueness and of unrepeatability, and

now death is seen as a real threat. Hence the importance of Christian evangelism taking place in the here and now "for the fields are ripe unto harvest".

Prabhupada believes that those who have been enlightened to Krishna Consciousness are elevated to an eternal spiritual kingdom. He believes in a personalised existence at the end of time, where individual souls will have eternal fellowship with Krishna. This Hare-Krishna concept of time and eternity is similar to the Christian concept of time, where Christ's devotees will also have eternal fellowship with him after the Second Coming, which will also result in the destruction of the present universe and the birth of a new one. Prabhupada's concept of time can be seen in FIGURE 3 (page 113), which is rather similar to that of Christianity.

I believe that MacGregor would incorporate Prabhupada's ideas on time as helpful to Christianity, for he believes in a Christianised form of reincarnation. Due to MacGregor's evolutionary approach to religion he would welcome any idea that would make Christianity more contextual and relevant to modern day society. This "borrowing" from other religious ideas is known as syncretism. In this respect I refer again to Kranenborg's definition of syncretism: as "contested religious interpenetration". MacGregor has introduced a religious doctrine unknown to orthodox Christianity, namely that of reincarnation. Reincarnation is a concept which affects every other Christian doctrine, and my problem with reincarnation becoming an orthodox belief in the church, is that every doctrine would have to be reinterpreted in the light of this teaching.

As I have explained in chapter four, Hick maintains that reincarnation could become an orthodox Christian belief. Christianity has adopted various views in the past regarding time and history. So, like MacGregor, he proposes the incorporation of other views regarding time which would be

helpful to the modern Christian. In this way Christianity and Hinduism can influence each other for the better. Whether one sees this life as all-important or whether one perceives an ongoing perfecting beyond death, both express similar outlooks. Both ideas presuppose a linear development. Whether one sees this as a Reformed Christian's concept of past, present and future or as in FIG 3 (page 113), Prabhupada's idea, is immaterial. Both are in need of each other, as both ideas will help believers on the path to salvation.

Mangalwadi maintains that the Bible teaches that humanity is not eternal and infinite in and of itself. A person is a created being and as such has a beginning and under the influence of the Creator will always remain a creature. However, death is abnormal in the sense that it is not part of the original intention of God with creation. From the above one can detect the inherent Judeo-Christian concept of time, namely that creation has a beginning and an end. The concepts of time and history play a pivotal role in the nature of God and in the way ultimate salvation is perceived and pursued. According to my value judgment the Hindu concept of time and history is fundamentally different from the Judeo-Christian concept, and thus incompatible. The New Testament teaching on the final judgment leads to a concept of time which terminates when the saints in Christ go to eternal bliss and the unregenerated to eternal damnation.

Robillard sees no reason why Christianity should opt for the belief in samsara. Practically, coming back into this life would not necessarily be helpful, for most individuals would not be able to recall their past lives. Additional time may just prolong a soul's trial without adding to its chances of salvation. Hence there is no need for accepting samsara. Reincarnation's concern for a continual coming back may have arisen out of a deep-seated need or concern for every individual ultimately to reach salvation. Robillard has argued that this is

not necessarily true. Time reincarnated is not the salvation of humanity; its salvation is by God's grace in and through Jesus Christ. What humanity needs is grace infused here in this time. Therefore, according to Robillard, the Christian concept of linear time (past, present and future), infused with grace, is all that humanity needs.

My personal view is that history or time is linear ("once"), with the all-important proviso of God's grace. When one looks to God's grace first and to history second, the purpose of having only one life makes sense. What is the purpose of coming back again if a given individual was overlooked by God's grace the first time? God is not one for overseeing eternal samsara. If He truly wants to save, He can and will do so the first time round.

5.8 MY PERSONAL EVALUATION

After analysing the theologians concerned, one can detect in all of them a certain "apologetic" at work. These theologians were trying to find a point of entry into the contemporary mind in order that they might be able to present their faiths in terms intelligible to their own age. This is relative to the societies concerned, for society is made up of various sub-cultures, concerns and worldviews. For example, Vivekananda and Hick would appeal to Hindus, New-Age advocates and universalists, whereas Robillard and Mangalwadi to exclusivist and inclusivist Christians. Within each camp "their own" theologians would be regarded as more enlightened and correct. All of them by skilful use of contemporary ideas, science and philosophy have restated their belief in such a way as to win a hearing for it in their own time. Clearly, however, there are dangers inherent in this way of theologising. This peril is threefold. Preoccupation with a set philosophy or idea and the employment of it in the interpretation of the Christian message may easily lead to a distortion of Christian teaching through the over-emphasis of

those elements in it which happen to be specially congenial to the idea concerned (Macquarrie 1973:4). Or again, ideas quite foreign to Christianity may slip into its theology while masquerading under the guise of traditional Christian terminology. At worst, there may be a plain accommodation of the Christian faith to the prevailing idea or philosophical fashion of the age (Macquarrie 1973:4). The concerns of Macquarrie are relevant when one comes to the proposals of MacGregor and Hick. Both have incorporated "popular ideas" (be they philosophy or science) to make the Christian message more acceptable and benevolent to secular society and to advocates of other faiths. In this I personally believe that they have tried to incorporate a foreign idea into Christianity, namely that of reincarnation. Their concerns are legitimate, but will have an impact only on like-minded individuals. The main problem here is that when the "popular ideas" (that are now in fashion) become outmoded, the impact of their message will likewise diminish. From my perspective, both MacGregor and Hick allowed "foreign" ideas to influence the Christian message. As I have stated earlier, both of them have interpolated the Christian message with ideas traditionally foreign to Christianity and are thus seeking to address a more liberal minded person within our modern industrialised society. Their theology is pertinent to a certain sector of humanity who will find their teachings fresh and original.

When one comes to Mangalwadi and Robillard, one perceives a more traditional outlook on theology. From a missiological perspective this is legitimate, for their theology will influence a different sector of society. I personally believe that their theology is more Biblically correct than MacGregor's and Hick's. Throughout this whole dissertation I have adhered to the Reformed position and my biases lie there, and this will obviously have a bearing on my judgments. The mission fields are vast and numerous today and there are many that require specialist insight. So from a missiological point of view,

different theologies and emphases are needed.

When it comes to an evaluation, certain value judgements have to be made and certain perceptions regarding the topic concerned influence one either positively or negatively. In this process one "grows" as new perceptions and concepts come to the fore. A helpful metaphor for understanding the process of evaluation is the idea of two icebergs colliding. As only one tenth of the iceberg is visible, so is another religion or viewpoint. To evaluate effectively one needs to start with the "visible" and deduce from that the shape of the whole iceberg. In this process one must ascertain whether the portion above the water "fits" the portion below: "To do this in a responsible manner (and thus to avoid superficiality), you need to examine the shape of your own theological starting points and assumptions, in other words, the shape of your own iceberg "under water" (Kritzinger 1991:226). In a study such as this one there are many underlying theological assumptions, where the actual confrontation takes place. To compare only the visible elements is superficial and a "true picture" will not be forthcoming. What is needed is an "inner dialogue," in which there is a heart-felt experience and insight into Hinduism (Klostermaier 1968:28). In this study of mine I hope that I have achieved sufficient clarity as regards the visible dimensions as well as the deeper "hidden" theological implications.

The conclusion to all this is that one stands before a choice between the teachings of reincarnation and resurrection. It is an either/or choice: "Even though the teaching of reincarnation has penetrated into the contemporary church to a much greater extent than many wish to believe, just as it did the early church, it can never become a true part of Christian faith and life" (Aagaard 1989:24). The reason for this is that the concept of reincarnation is foreign to Christianity, as I hope to have made clear in this dissertation.

The way in which death is perceived in the two religions is at total variance. Death is abnormal in the sense that it is not part of the original intention of God in creation, and it is sad and degrading: "Death is the outward manifestation of an inward disgrace" (Albrecht 1991:23). Reincarnation, on the other hand, sees death in the light of samsara, of which it is a necessary outflow of the cause of events.

There is also a difference of perception regarding humanity's basic problem. Hinduism states that humanity's basic problem is ignorance - that the human soul is identical with God but that most people have somehow forgotten this. Christianity sees the basic problem as sin. Humanity has rebelled against God and in the process lost God's influence and fellowship in the Holy Spirit and became subject to decay and death (Mangalwadi 1990:147). It is only in Jesus Christ that the image of God has been restored at the religious centre of human nature. Consequently, there now can be no real self-knowledge apart from Jesus Christ. And this Biblical self-knowledge implies that our whole world-and-life-view must be Reformed in a Christo-centric sense (Dooyeweerd 1960:191). Humanity does not need millions of lives to earn salvation, all one needs to do is repent of sins and find forgiveness and reconciliation with God in Christ in a moment. Salvation does not depend on humanity's efforts but on God's grace: "Therefore one life is more than sufficient to find truth and salvation, a salvation which includes the gift of the immortal Spirit of God and eternal life in fellowship with God (Mangalwadi 1990:146).

The resurrection states that humanity is more than just a soul and in this it does not minimise the body. The material universe, being God's creation, is good (Genesis 1), and humanity was taught to look after the physical creation. Sadly, many in traditionally Christian countries have neglected and ignored this important "creational mandate," by onesidedly emphasising the Christian doctrine of humanity's transcendence

of, and rightful mastery over, nature (White 1967:1206). Hinduism with its insistence on the importance of the soul, has traditionally ignored the importance of practical reality, and is (together with Christianity) guilty of gross negligence. However, the worldwide crisis as regards natural resources and the possibility of human extinction has seen a renewed interest in ecological issues, both within Hinduism and Christianity. In this regard Hindus and Christians could get together to discuss this very pertinent topic.

As regards the individual, the concept of resurrection offers hope, for it means that one cannot lose one's personal identity by being reincarnated as another human being or as an animal. Resurrection means that it will be the same person, with the same body (though glorified), which will be raised to life, just as the crucified body of Christ was raised to life. Mangalwadi (1990:147) says:

Resurrection offers hope and meaning, not simply for my life and for my body, but for my world as well. Because man was meant to be the Governor of the earth, his sin subjected his planet also to decay and death. But as he finds forgiveness and salvation, the earth itself will be delivered from its bondage and renewed to become the dwelling place of God (Romans 8:18-22).

Belief in the doctrine of the resurrection means that one need not be ashamed of one's individuality and finiteness. This means that one need not become detached from this world, life and history: "Eternal life is not a negation of what I am, but a fulfillment as a child of God (Mangalwadi 1990:147). The Bible gives clear grounds for the hope of a personal resurrection. Johanson (1969:30) states:

Jesus, in his argument with the Sadducees on this point declares that God is a God of the living as well as the dead - and He names Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Just as the Creator makes a whole man, with no division into higher and lower parts, so Christ creates persons, to whom He gives the pledge of eternal life. The resurrection of the body is

thus a necessary conclusion to our entire Christological anthropology.

The above concerns regarding the resurrection gives humanity hope. Swami Abhedananda (1957), on the other hand, maintains that each human soul is nothing but a centre of thought force, and individuality is illusionary and something to be negated. This belief of the Christian church does not need any other interpolations to make the afterlife more appealing or attractive. If ever a coming together of two religious views such as reincarnation and resurrection needed a change I believe that reincarnation offers no "better" hope, and would need to be challenged by the resurrection teaching.

From a missiological point of view, the Christian religion is profoundly personal and herein lies a important contact point. To teach that God was in Jesus Christ, who came to save humanity from their sins, and wants to personally save personal individual lives, who will have eternal fellowship with this God, is the hope of Christianity. The dynamic possibility of salvation being experienced in the "now" eradicates the unspoken fear of the eternal return, and takes away a certain sense of lethargy that one experiences in the perceived wheel of samsara. Christianity offers the most profound explanation of suffering which could help many Hindus perceive suffering in a new light. The Christ himself suffered and died in our place in order to save, and in this he not only identified with humanity but also suffered the most (John 3:16). The Christ, by taking the sins of humanity upon Himself, has become the supreme sufferer. Nobody or nothing can ever propose a more powerful witness than that of the suffering Savior of the world (Isaiah 52-53). Jesus Christ came to this earth as a perfect human being and left with the scars of sin, those scars to be borne long after this world has disappeared. Suffering is a part of this reality and God in Christ has overcome it. The church has a powerful witness over against reincarnation in the doctrines of the resurrection and

of the person and work of Christ. This hope must be upheld in the face of the lure of reincarnation, in order to continue presenting to the world the unique message of the Christian gospel.

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