
Views On Reincarnation In Western And Eastern Cultures

Reincarnation is the rebirth of a soul in a different body. Across the world reincarnation is a prevalent topic. Even in different cultures, a reoccurring theme that is seen is the idea of reincarnation. However, while it's true that reincarnation pops up in many different cultures and societies, there are many differing beliefs and views on the topic. Since the idea of reincarnation changes throughout different cultures, the belief about when the concept of reincarnation began is still debated. One source says that the concept of reincarnation dates back to 600 BCE (Irwin, 2017), while another believes it began in 800 BCE. Just like anything else in our lives, one thing that is viewed a certain way in one culture, may be viewed in a vastly different light in another. The same can be said about reincarnation. The word reincarnation in Latin literally translates as "to take on flesh again". While some might still have reservations towards whether the subject is viable, reincarnation is still a very important topic to a lot of people throughout different cultures. It can be a comfort for people in grieving; a branch of security for religions and an exciting concept for curious minds. Since it's so widespread and a key part in so many cultures, a notable question to ask is, how views on reincarnation differ between western and eastern cultures.

While in western culture, reincarnation as a belief is less common than in eastern culture, there are still many different views and opinions on the topic. The indigenous people of North America have a much deeper culture that goes back further than when Europeans began colonizing in the 15th century. Their culture is rooted in many spiritual beliefs that still carry on into today's world. While beliefs change between tribes, there are three main perspectives on reincarnation that cross over between tribes. The first being the idea that reincarnation is provisional. "This provisional aspect is crucial because it clearly expresses the belief that only some individuals return to live additional human lives." The second belief is that "reincarnation is an open choice as is staying in the afterlife world, or a Village of the Dead." The third view that is shared between most Native American tribes is that reincarnation can be a "culturally constructed process of naming which predetermines the social location of the returning individual." Judaism started in the east with the beginning of the bible but today is still a very big part of our value system and beliefs here in the United States. The idea that the soul is eternal has always been a belief in Judaism; however, it is also believed that "Reincarnation is not an essential tenet of traditional Judaism." Instead of literal reincarnation the religion focuses more on the idea of the soul moving on past the physical world to be with God instead of coming back to the natural world in another body per say. Christianity spawned from Judaism and today I would call it modern or westernized Judaism. The difference between being Jewish and being Christian is the belief in Jesus Christ. The belief that Jesus Christ is our savior and came down as God in the form of a man is the biggest part of the religion. It's what Christianity revolves around, and

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some branches of Christianity would call this reincarnation, while others would not. "The Roman faction rejected pre-existence and reincarnation and believed Jesus was God become man. The Jerusalem faction knew Jesus as a man who achieved the human-divine at one-ment, which is the goal of everyone to escape reincarnation cycle of birth and death and have eternal life." This shows that while some believed that Jesus was simply God in the form of a man and that reincarnation doesn't exist, others believed that Jesus was a man but gave humans the opportunity to escape the cycle of reincarnation and to have eternal life with God in heaven. Overall, there are many different sub-cultures throughout western culture, and the beliefs about reincarnation change between those frequently. Nevertheless, almost all of the cultures believe in some type of reincarnation and the idea that the soul lives on for a purpose.

Like everything else, reincarnation beliefs and views have changed over time. Immigration has and will always be one of the biggest effects on a culture. The integration of different beliefs and lifestyles will always influence and change the way people think and the way people see things. One thing that is common today is the frequency of eastern culture moving into western culture. Along with this comes a variety of clashing attitudes and values. While this can be a rough transition for everyone involved, it can also be an eye-opening experience for those willing to listen and learn. Since reincarnation is a much more prevalent idea in eastern culture, with immigration comes an increase of belief in reincarnation in western culture. A big change the world has experienced pretty recently is the rise of the internet and all the exposure that comes along with it. A misconception that a lot of people have is that because things are exposed more and talked about more that this means that they're actually happening more often. In reality, there could be no increase in a situation or concept in the world, but because of the internet it makes it seem like there is. I believe that this is the same for the idea of reincarnation. Just because more people believe in it doesn't mean it's real or happening more often.

Reincarnation is definitely a large part of both eastern and western cultures. Despite the distinct differences among these views on the concept, there are still similar beliefs that cross over between western and eastern culture. One similarity is that when it comes to the idea of reincarnation, both eastern and western cultures believe that our souls are separate from our bodies and that there are both good and bad souls. For example, in Judaism which is classified as western culture, "they say that all souls are incorruptible, but that the souls of good men only are removed into other bodies, - but that the souls of bad men are subject to eternal punishment". Similarly, in eastern culture, "Gnostics believed that the material body was evil, and that they would be better off if they could eventually avoid having their 'good' souls reincarnated in 'evil' bodies". From this, it shows that both of these cultures believe in soul separation from the body and that reincarnation can be based on whether your soul is "good" or "bad". Another similarity between the two cultures beliefs on reincarnation is that they both believe there is further development of the soul beyond the natural world. For instance, in eastern culture, in Sikhism they "believe that the Soul has to transmigrate from one body to

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another as part of an evolution process of the Soul. The evolution of the soul will eventually result in a union with God upon proper purification of the spirit.” Also, as a part of western culture, in Christianity it is believed that “reincarnation focus on ‘working’ or ‘learning’ through various lifetimes to achieve some sort of higher understanding or state of ‘goodness’ before salvation is granted or acquired” (New World Encyclopedia, 2019). In both of these religions that are a part of either western or eastern culture, the parallel is that reincarnation serves a purpose so that in some form or another your soul lives on to be with God. The last connection between the two cultures opinions on reincarnation is that both believe that reincarnation can serve a negative or positive purpose. For example, as a part of eastern culture: “Gnostics believed that the material body was evil, and that they would be better off if they could eventually avoid having their ‘good’ souls reincarnated in ‘evil’ bodies”. This can be seen as a negative side of reincarnation since it can be used as a punishment. At the same time, in Sikhism it is believed that, “If we perform good deeds and actions and remember the creator, we attain a better life while, if we carry out evil actions and sinful deeds, we will be incarnated in ‘lower’ life forms.” This can be seen a positive because it urges and promotes people to live better lives. In western culture, we can also see negative and positive sides to reincarnation. In Christianity it’s believed that, “reincarnation focus on ‘working’ or ‘learning’ through various lifetimes to achieve some sort of higher understanding or state of ‘goodness’ before salvation is granted or acquired” (New World Encyclopedia, 2019). This can be both positive and negative because yes, it encourages good deeds but also it can apply too much pressure on individuals to reach higher standards which can become unhealthy.

Along with many other things, there are several distinctions between western and eastern culture’s beliefs about reincarnation. One difference is that most of the time in eastern cultures, reincarnation is based off of the idea of karma. In Buddhism, it says that “If you want a ‘favorable rebirth as a human being... simply to live a virtuous life is seen as sufficient.” This shows that based on how good you live your life; your reincarnation will coincide with your actions. Whereas in western culture, such as Christianity, a big idea that is a part of reincarnation is “The theory of one life, one death, one judgement, and one afterlife as promoted by Christian Missionaries, Catholic Priests, and Protestant ministers, made reincarnation a liminal theme among mainstream Christians.” This shows that the reincarnation of your life is not actually in your control. Another difference between the two cultural beliefs about reincarnation is that mostly eastern cultures believe in reincarnation whereas western cultures don’t. An example in eastern culture is from Islam: “I died as mineral and became a plant, I died as plant and rose to animal, I died as animal and I was man.” This shows that they believe that reincarnation can pass through the barrier of species. However, in western culture in Christianity, “The bible never mentions the word reincarnation, although it contains passages in the New testament that could be interpreted to allude to reincarnation. In Matthew, Jesus says that John the Baptist is the prophet Elijah who had lived centuries before, and he does not seem to be speaking metaphorically”. Since this is the only mention of literal reincarnation in

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the bible this shows that it only applies to humans.

Overall, reincarnation is discussed truly around the world, whether it be about how people don't believe in it, or about how people live their lives based on it. There's a full spectrum of beliefs about it, but the point is that it's a topic that a lot of people consider and examine. In most western cultures, it's not as prevalent of a topic as it is in eastern cultures. However, the difference between the beliefs on reincarnation between Christianity and Native American beliefs is drastic. It goes from in Christianity barely talking about it to in Native American culture playing a big role in their cycle of life and death. In eastern cultures the topic of reincarnation is much more frequently believed in. Growing up in eastern regions, you are taught right away that reincarnation is just a part of your religion that you must believe in it with no questions about it. It's harder for us in the western region to believe in reincarnation because our technology and science is more advanced and the vast majority of us were not born into a religion that revolves around reincarnation. All in all, the practices and opinions of reincarnation that you hold will vary based on your beliefs and the area and culture that you were born into.

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