Dictionary of Gnosis 
& Western Esotericism

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Reincarnation II: Renaissance – present

Traditional beliefs in reincarnation in Europe probably came to an end after the fall of Rome. At the end of the Middle Ages → Gemistos Plethon (1355-1452) revived the idea of metempsychosis, and the same idea had been developed independently by the → Cathars, possibly through their debate about Christian purgatory. Notions of reincarnation in the Kabbalah (Book of Bahir, c.1200) also appear to have emerged independently, although there was some limited contact between Mediterranean Jewry and post-antiquity Gnostic groups. There is no evidence for the transmission of manichaean ideas often discussed in this context [→ Manichaism]. However, there has been a continuous debate in kabbalistic Judaism from the 13th century up until the present regarding the “Gilgal”. The end of reincarnation beliefs in antiquity and their medieval thematisation has hardly been investigated yet.

In the Renaissance the educated classes became familiar with reincarnation beliefs as a result of their engagement with Platonic and Neoplatonic texts [→ Neoplatonism]. However, metempsychosis was usually regarded as a marginal aspect of philosophy or interpreted as an allegory (e.g. reincarnation in animals as a metaphor for bestial behaviour in → Ficino). Nevertheless, a few Renaissance philosophers embraced ideas of reincarnation, but these can be traced no earlier than the second half of the 16th century (no prosopographic survey to date). Most likely inspired by ancient philosophers, notably Pythagoras, → Giordano Bruno conceived of metempsychosis as a complement to his conception of an infinite universe, but his notion of reincarnation remained practically unknown. Isaac Luria (1534-1572) popularised the Gilgal in the Kabbalah, thereby assimilating the Jewish experience of exile following the expulsion from Spain. Through reincarnation the scattered tribes of Israel in the diaspora were supposed to prepare the way for Tikun, the messianic restitution of world history. → Guillaume Postel was the first identifiable theologian and philosopher in the 16th century to integrate metempsychosis into Christian theology, probably stimulated by kabbalistic authors. As in Bruno’s case, cosmology provided the frame for an anthropology of reincarnation in Postel. The significance of Christian kabbalists [→ Jewish Influences III] for the discussion of reincarnation’s beliefs has only just begun to attract scholarly attention.

In the 17th century ideas of reincarnation generated a widespread debate in learned circles. For example, metempsychosis was an image of the path of the soul towards its resemblance to God for John Donne (1572-1631), but Cyrano de Bergerac (1619-1655) saw it as an actual path to perfection. An important intermediary may have been → Francis Mercurius van Helmont, who, as a Christian kabbalist, included especially Lurianic ideas in his work Two Hundred Queries ... Concerning the Doctrine of the Revolution of Humane Souls and Its Conformity to the Truths of Christianity (1684). He discussed his ideas of “revolution” with → Henry More and Anne Conway (1631-1679) or with Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646-1716), who again exchanged views on the subject with Elizabeth Charlotte of Orleans (1652-1722), the sister-in-law of King Louis XIV of France. By the end of the 17th century there had developed in several Germanic languages a special idea of metempsychosis, beyond that of the ancient terms in use: Seeleuawandung (transmigration of souls; German) or Zielsverhauung (Dutch). This may mark the beginning of an independent discourse.

These philosophical and anthropological issues in the early modern period characterised the debate about reincarnation in Europe over the ensuing centuries. The central question was whether the monistic anthropology of Christianity, which recognised no disembodied soul, was compatible with the dualistic human image of reincarnation beliefs. Almost all theologians denied the possibility of separating body and soul, and regarded the belief in the Resurrection as contradictory to the notion of multiple incarnations. Van Helmont made a significant contribution to the debate with his term “revolution”, signifying a multiple resurrection of the same body, whereby an incomplete
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life could be perfected in further stages without
the separation of body and soul. From a soteri-
ological perspective, this construct probably offered
an alternative to the Calvinistic doctrine of pre-
destination. The irreconcilability of Christian anthropo-
ological assumptions with reincarnation beliefs
severely restricted their spread up to the end of the
19th century.

Eschatology played a further part in this partic-
ular history of Western ideas. The numerous
cosmologies of the 16th century jeopardised the
notion of a collective divine Judgment at the end
of time. Individual justice and the salvation of
man after death received new formulations. This
individualisation of eschatology in Christian theol-
ogy also became a central consideration in ideas
about reincarnation. Likewise, reincarnation was
supposed to guarantee the perfection of man,
whereby human autonomy was emphasised to
the detriment of divine redemption. Furthermore,
reincarnation was linked from the end of the
17th century with the idea of the development of
humankind and from the 18th century it became an
alternative religious belief qualifying the doctrine
of evolution. An important example of this recep-
tion is Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729-1781),
whose Erziehung des Menschengegeschlechts (1780)
made Seelenwanderung an instrument of divine
instruction, leading human beings to perfection.

With this adjustment in the 17th and 18th cen-
turies, reincarnation ideas acquired their specific
European coloration. No longer viewed as a
penance, as in antiquity, in Giordano Bruno or
in Asian beliefs, reincarnation was now seen as
an opportunity, and this reinterpretation carried
important implications for its human subject. Per-
fection was now the goal and not extinction, as
with Buddha and Bruno.

The historical derivation of reincarnation beliefs
ran a separate course from its philosophical sub-
stantiation. Partly they were regarded as a compon-
ent of philosophia perennis, which → tradition,
especially since the end of the 18th century (e.g.
in the high grades of the → Illuminati) was
postulated in opposition to the mainstream. Its
revival through reference to ancient authors seems
to have been a rare occurrence, as in the case of
Frans Hemsterhuis (1721-1790), but there is no
further reference to Kabbalah except for Jewish
kabbalists in the 18th century. → Johann Wolfgang
von Goethe (1749-1832) offers an example of the
pragmatic use of reincarnation to deal with issues
of contingency. Against a Spinozist background he
explained "incomprehensible" love affairs in his
biography with reference to the transmigration
of souls. Analogical thinking provided important
proof or at least plausible evidence. The Swiss
naturalist Charles Bonnet (1720-1793) introduced
the idea of palingenesis (first published in 1769)
which Lessing transformed into the transmigration
of souls. Bonnet's "stages", which man ascends
upon a "chain" of planetary worlds, becomes for
Lessing the transmigration of souls on earth. In
these debates rebirth had only a limited esoteric
meaning. Although all discussants were aware that
it lay outside the mainstream of theological and
philosophical tradition, it was openly discussed
in educated circles. Only at the end of the 18th
century did reincarnation become a secret tradi-
tion, especially in masonic circles.

Far into the 19th century, the idea of reincar-
nation was the exclusive preserve of an educated
elite in a predominantly Protestant milieu. There is
no evidence whatsoever of it entering popular
beliefs. Its eventual widespread popularisation is
closely linked with the history of → spiritualism,
which movement split into factions which either
accepted or rejected reincarnation following
the publication of → Allan Kardec's "Livre des Esprits"
(1857). In the second edition (1859), Kardec
presented a catechism of more than 1000 questions
and answers, with reincarnation serving as the
basis of a universal philosophy. Kardec regarded
himself as a Christian theologian; his coining of
the word "reincarnation" as an analogue of
"incarnation", may even identify him as its orgi-
nator. By the end of the 20th century, the generic
term "reincarnation" had displaced all other
synonyms (metempsychosis, rebirth, Seelenwan-
derung, transmigration, Wiedergeburt) in
current usage.

The → Theosophical Society popularised its
usage significantly. The founding generation,
among whom → Helena Petrovna Blavatsky and
→ Henry Steel Olcott played the major role, came
from the spiritualist camp and replaced its
empiricism with an esoteric history of religion.
Reincarnation also became a component of the
occult history of mankind in this context. When
Blavatsky and Olcott moved to India in 1879,
Blavatsky accepted reincarnation, most likely
through her contact with Buddhist ideas; in her
earlier work Isis Unveiled (1877), she had actually
rejected metempsychosis. Blavatsky asserted that
her idea of reincarnation derived from an ancient
secret wisdom of Tibetan origin. However, its focus
on the human subject and involvement with an
evolutionary history indicates its provenance in
European thought. The significance of Theosophy
for the spread of reincarnation ideas cannot be
overestimated, as important promoters of esoteric thought such as Rudolf Steiner also took their idea of reincarnation from this source. Theosophy also introduced the notion of karma to signify a moral system for the consequences of one's actions leading to a good or bad rebirth. At the end of the 19th century, karma began to supersede the Christian ideas of judgment and retribution, thereby creating a certain distance from Christian terminology in theology and religious studies. Contemporary experiments to find empirical proof of reincarnation, which began in the 19th century in response to scientific methodology, are the long-term results of spiritualist and Theosophical attempts to objectivize reincarnation. No empirical studies of reincarnation have as yet been discovered before the end of the 18th century.

After the turn of the last century reincarnation became a widespread idea among the European middle and upper classes. The astronomer Camille Flammarion (1842-1925), the writer August Strindberg (1849-1912) or the founder of the Ford motor empire Henry Ford (1863-1947) are representative examples. Reincarnation was generally linked to ideas of progress and focused on the individual. Only in exceptional cases was reincarnation marked by a more Buddhist relativisation of self-realisation, as for example in Arthur Schopenhauer (1778-1860) or his follower Richard Wagner (1813-1883) or, at the beginning of the 20th century, among European Buddhists who read Oriental texts in the original languages or in reliable translations.

In the 20th century, the number of societies propagating reincarnation rocketed, among them the Anthroposophical Society [- Anthroposophy], the Lectorium Rosicrucianum and - Scientology. After the mid-20th century there was also a massive diffusion of reincarnation ideas outside institutional associations, for example in the New Age Movement and in the growing market for esoteric literature. Statistical surveys suggest that some 10-30% of the population of Europe and North America now believe in reincarnation. The validity of such surveys is often uncertain, depending on whether it is a question of actual belief in reincarnation or whether it is only considered probable or comforting. The numbers expressing agreement with reincarnation do appear to have remained constant at this percentage. Today reincarnation is not an isolated notion but linked to all other kinds of worldview. The 20th century has introduced only one innovation. Since the end of the 1950s, reincarnation therapy (e.g. past life regression) has developed as a branch of esoteric psychology and as a significant economic factor in reincarnation beliefs.

Reincarnation has not become a powerful social force in European culture. One reason may be the lack of social relevance. Collective and political expressions of reincarnation beliefs, as in the Hindu caste system or the Tulku genealogies of Tibetan Buddhism, have not developed in Europe. Attempts to relate reincarnation to society and politics, like that of Charles Fourier (1768-1830) at the beginning of the 19th century, remained stillborn. There has also emerged a massive critique of reincarnation in response to its growth since the early modern period. For example, there were in the 18th century many alternative theories of palingenesis or ideas of a "planetary round", as in Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803) or in Pierre Simon Ballanche (1776-1847), which sought to link the idea of progress with mainstream European traditions, without invoking reincarnation or positing the separation of body and soul. Meanwhile, there are secular critiques of reincarnation. For instance, it has been banned in Germany if linked to a justification of Nazism and the statement that the extermination of the Jews was their deserved karmic destiny. One and a half thousand years of Christianity in Europe have ultimately marginalised the idea of reincarnation. Even its establishment as a minority world-view since the early modern period occurred within the context of Christianity or its secular residues such as the autonomy of the subject, the linear conception of history or the idea of evolution. This syncretism has produced a particular modern European form of reincarnation belief, which differs notably from its manifestations in antiquity and the Orient.


HELMUT ZANDER

Rétif (or Restif) de la Bretonne, Nicolas-Edme, * 23.10.1734 Sacy, † 3.12.1806 Paris

Born in a small village in Burgundy, Rétif, known as "de la Bretonne" (the name of his family farm), was the son of a well-to-do peasant, whose idealized portrait he painted in *La Vie de mon père* (My Father's Life, 1778). Raised by two Jansenist brothers, he received a very strict religious education; however, he learned to read and write very late, and remained self-taught all his life. At age 16, he was apprenticed to a printer at Auxerre, then became a journeyman typographer at Dijon, Auxerre, and Paris. Beginning in 1767, he frequented the Bohemian literary underworld of Paris and published several novels, such as *La Famille verteuse* (The Virtuous Family, 1767) and *Le Pied de Fanchette* (Fanchette's Foot, 1769); also various projects for reform, called *Idées singulières* (peculiar ideas), for example *Le Pornographe* (The Pornographer, 1769), *La Mimographe* (The Mimographe, 1770) and *Les Gynographe* (The Gynographe, 1777), in which he purported to reform prostitution, theater, and the education of women respectively. In *L'Andrographe* (The Androgapher, 1782) and *Le Thesimographe* (The Thesimographer, 1789), he appeared to be a precursor of socialism and communism, while in the utopian novel *La Découverte australe par un homme volant* (The Discovery of Austral Lands by a Flying Man, 1781) he showed himself a partisan of evolution.

Rétif became famous in 1775 with the publication of *Paysan perverti* (Perverted Peasant), an episodical novel that became an immense success, as did the series of *Contemporaires* (Contemporaries), a collection of illustrated short stories in 42 volumes. Near the end of the old régime, between 1780 and 1789, Rétif de la Bretonne was a celebrated writer, a friend of Beaumarchais and Sébastien Mercier, sought out by the aristocrats and welcomed in the salons of Grimod de la Reynière and Fanny de Beauharnais. A fascinated witness of the French Revolution, which he described in *Les Nuits de Paris* (The Nights of Paris), he was ruined by the collapse of the assignat currency and fell into poverty; but continued writing and publishing stories, plays, and above all his monumental autobiography, *Monsieur Nicolas ou le Coeur humain dévoilé* (Mr. Nicolas, or the Human Heart Revealed, 1797). Between 1798 and 1800, thanks to the patronage of Mme. de Beauharnais, he obtained a position at the ministry of police and finished several manuscripts, for the most part unpublished: *L'Anti-Justine* (The Anti-Justine, 1798), *Les Posthumes* (The Posthumous Letters, 1802), *L'Enclos et les Oiseaux* (The Enclosure and the Birds), *Les Mille et une métamorphoses* (The Thousand and One Metamorphoses), and *Les Reves*. In these last works, Rétif fully regained his inspiration: he gave free rein to his imagination and his fantasies, alternating between the erotic and the fantastic.

After his death, he left behind an immense and varied body of work: more than forty titles and two hundred volumes. In these works, Rétif appears as an admirer of Voltaire and a disciple of Rousseau, committed to the Enlightenment and a partisan of the Revolution. But one also notices in certain works, like the *Philosophie de Monsieur Nicolas* (Philosophy of Mr. Nicolas, 1796) or *Les Posthumes*, a zone of darkness and mystery, a secret philosophy, which might be explained by his affiliation with Freemasonry or by his adhesion to the doctrine of the Illuminés (Illuminism). Up to now, no lodge's record attesting to Rétif's membership in a masonic order has ever been found in the archives; however, his life and works show indisputable links to masonry.

Rétif kept up close and steady connections with numerous masons, mostly belonging to the *Neuf Soeurs* (Nine Sisters) Lodge, including Calhava, Cordier, Cubières, Fontanes, François de Neufchâtel, Lalande, Lepelletier de Morfontaine, Lézay-Marnésia, Mercier, and Nougaret. The designs of Rétif's reform projects, such as *Le Pornographe* (1769) or *L'Andrographe* (1782), are based on the same model as the statutes of masonic associations. The same fundamental principles are there: an insistence on secrecy, justification of work, praise of equality and fraternity, and morals of reciprocity and solidarity. There is no denying the authentic masonic values in Rétif's works.

In his writings, there is also a predilection for coded language, in particular a frequent use of masonic vocabulary with terms such as: respectable, venerable, illustrious, immortal, enlightened, fraternity, humanity, zeal, and regeneration. He often reverses letters or syllables when transcribing proper names, resulting in a profusion