

## REINCARNATION OR CONTINUOUS MANIFESTATION?

To discuss the topic of Reincarnation is uncommon in Christian theology, especially since neither Protestant nor recent Catholic theology show much interest in eschatology. Yet it is a stirring issue, of the greatest importance to any human individual. This is a sufficient reason to take it seriously, even more so in view of the growing number of psychological, thanatological and parapsychological publications on the subject. Theology cannot escape the challenge and refuse to discuss the issue, on the mere assumption that the Bible excludes reincarnation. Apart from the fact that the idea of reincarnation has been constantly present in Western tradition though admittedly in marginal currents, outside the Church, it now enjoys more and more support from (former) Christians, so that, at least for pastoral reasons, an analysis of the issues calls for urgent attention.

Christian theological polemic, in most of the cases, is totally inadequate because usually, it fails to distinguish between different ideas of reincarnation and to analyze the philosophical and logical problems carefully enough to cast light on the subject. One of the few notable exceptions in English language is the study by John Hick<sup>1</sup> whereas the recently published studies in German still lack sufficient care, fairness and differentiation.<sup>2</sup>

The topic of reincarnation is absolutely central in our encounter with the Asian cultures. In India, all the indigenous traditions, Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism and Sikhism, as well as the originally foreign Zoroastrianism, believe in reincarnation,

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1. J. Hick, *Death and Eternal Life*, London: Collins, 1976, pp. 297 ff.

2. H. Torwesten, *Sind wir nur einmal auf Erden? Die Idee der Reinkarnation angesichts des Auferstehungsglaubens*, Freiburg: Herder, 1983; A. Köberle, *Das geheimnisvolle Reich der Seele*, Freiburg: Herder, 1984.

even if the conceptual support depends on theories which may be at variance if not in contradiction with each other. I do not want here to make a phenomenological description of the different Indian and, even less, European views. I would rather like to focus on the theory of the Advaita Vedānta and expose it to the light of a non-dualistic theology of the Christian Trinity. Finally I would like to suggest a solution which, according to my opinion, is totally compatible with the basic Christian world view.

### I. Christian attitude towards Reincarnation

Christian theology has raised more or less four objections against the doctrine of reincarnation<sup>3</sup>

1. It is not biblical.
2. It overlooks the importance of *this* life for the right decision concerning faith or unbelief.
3. It contradicts the biblical teaching of resurrection of the body.
4. It cannot be reconciled with the uniqueness of the Christ event.

Let us analyze the arguments one by one :

1. It is true that the biblical Scriptures do not teach reincarnation; also it has *never* been the orthodox and generally accepted teaching of the church. Contradictory statements have their roots in a wrong interpretation of Origen.<sup>4</sup> Yet, this argument does not necessarily say that the theory could not *become* genuine Christian teaching if it could be proved right that it does not contradict the biblical revelation, and indeed if it could be shown that it might offer a more appropriate explanation of Jesus' gospel. There are other Christian teachings which are explicit neither in the Bible nor in the earliest tradition of the church. Theology after all is nothing else than the process of explication of the implicate, thus allowing for creativity, i.e. for new insights in interpreting the revelation in a given context. The rejection of reincarnation by the early church was directed

3. Hick, *op. cit.*, pp. 366ff.

4. Hick, *op. cit.*, pp. 393.

against a *specific* doctrine of reincarnation. It would be hermeneutically wrong to neglect this connection and transpose this historically justified rejection, without further analysis, to *all* the theories of reincarnation, including the one which is offered in Advaita Vedānta.

2. It is also objected that the theory of reincarnation minimises the meaning of this life for *decision*-making in spiritual matters. This is an interpolating argument which has to be proved. Actually it is based on an unjustified generalization. Even recent studies (A. Köberle)<sup>5</sup> assume that India holds a basically pessimistic attitude and that the cycle of rebirth (*samsāra*) weighs upon Indian life as an unbearable burden. This is wrong and does not become true by countless repetitions. Similarly the statement that the Indian doctrines of *Karman* and reincarnation would be responsible for the material and social misery in contemporary India only tries to turn the attention away from the fact that European colonial attitudes have been and are the root for socio-political suffering in South Asia, as it has recently been shown again by an excellent economico-cultural study.<sup>6</sup> The doctrines of rebirth do not necessarily lead to lethargy, but rather express the polarity of necessity and freedom in order to *arouse* human responsibility for the fate of the individual as well as of the whole. Decision for the good, in whichever way it may be understood, is therefore possible but it has to be lived out in the sphere of freedom provided by *this* life.

3. The Christian doctrine of the resurrection of the body is rather vague and subject to change according to our understanding of 'matter'. As we will show later, the Indian concept of reincarnation depends on the insight that matter and spirit are

5. Köberle, *op.cit.*, pp. 90ff. Rather, happiness and suffering in life have a relative value and cannot give final joy. *Kāma* (enjoyment), *artha* (duty) and *mokṣa* (liberation) form a gradual-scale of values.

6. I. Y. Wendt, *Japanische Dynamik und indische Stagnation? Eine Antwort auf theoretische Entwicklungsmodelle*, Darmstadt: Wiss. Buchgesellschaft, 1978, pp. 144 ff.

a continuum, and the “intermediate states” (some kind of psychic energy fields) are of utmost importance. This does by no means contradict basic Christian ideas, but can deepen their understanding considerably.

4. The term “uniqueness of the saving action of Christ” requires careful interpretation.<sup>7</sup> In the context of today wider horizons and especially in view of the holistic paradigm emerging in sciences and in our world view, this term has to be situated in a much wider frame – wider both qualitatively and quantitatively - than the restricted little world we are used to, a world relatively conditioned as the historical product of a Judeo-Greek encounter. We have shown elsewhere<sup>8</sup> that the model of the Trinity is essentially *inclusive*, and this has consequences for the Christ event. We need not go again through the arguments; we shall simply posit this inclusiveness which includes all levels of possible and real temporality. To put it simply, this means that the saving action of Christ cannot be limited necessarily to *one* temporarily determined human life, but that it can comprehend the whole cycle of rebirth (*samsāra*). It is no theological argument but only a certain habit of our thinking that prevents us from drawing this conclusion, at least within the range of a probability statement.

I would like to argue that there are two reasons for which theology ought to resume the discussion on reincarnation precisely at this point in history – not to mention the third one, i.e. the interreligious dialogue and the emerging Asian Christian theology.

1. The problem of theodicee gives it a new urgency in view of the possibility that the so-called “Christian civilization” may destroy itself in a nuclear holocaust. We live in quite a different

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7. M.v. Brück “Advaita and Trinity”, in *Indian Theological Studies* XX (1983), pp. 37ff.; “Scope and Dimension of Christ’s Saving Activity” in *Indian Theological Studies* XXI (1984), pp. 98–121.

8. Cf. note 7.

context than for instance Leibniz. There is suffering and inequality and they cannot be explained by guilt theories nor rationalized by political and analytic theories. But also India knows at least since Gautama the Buddha that the doctrine of *karma* does not try to explain away inequality and exploitation, but makes the problem transparent.

Popular ideas in Hinduism and in Buddhism (as well as in Christianity) have always been misused as narcotics for the suffering masses by directing their attention towards a better Beyond or a more convenient rebirth so that they may not revolt against oppression. Yet, this is no argument against the theory of rebirth as such. It just sharpens minds and hearts against the ideological misuse which has always threatened the various eschatologies and continues to distort them. Whether the idea of reincarnation is really consistent in its attempt to give an answer to the problems of inequality and injustice, is an other question which we will discuss later. Here also one is well advised to distinguish between different theories.

2. *Karman* and ideas of rebirth are first of all an expression of the greatest interconnectedness of all reality. This interrelationship in the universe appears more and more as the result of research in natural sciences. The two theories of relativity, quantum physics, the post-Darwinian models of evolution, psychosomatic medicine, parapsychological studies, biofeedback and, last but not least, the experience with yoga and different meditation practices support this view. It is, therefore, quite natural that ideas of *Karman* and reincarnation have increasing success all over the world. Publications are countless and certain books run editions of millions of copies<sup>9</sup>. This is, by no means, proof that they are right, but it does reflect the need to link up this interrelationship with the individual human destiny. Contrary to John Hick's prediction in 1976 that finally even the Eastern doctrines of reincarnation have to give way to Darwin, it is obvious that Darwinism has lost a lot of ground and is being

9. F. Capra, *The Tao of Physics*; see also the books by Elisabeth Kübler Ross, etc.

succeeded by more holistic models of evolution which seem to be more compatible with the belief in rebirth.<sup>10</sup>

## II. Karman

The theory of *Karman* underlies all different Asian Views on reincarnation. We cannot go into details here but may just say that *karman* is the basic belief of Asian cultures and is more widespread than any other view. Already in the Rg-veda, the later *karman*-doctrine is prepared by the notion of the cosmic order (*ṛta*). *Karman* is not a later invention which would be part of a sudden pessimistic turn in the paradigm of Indian cultures.<sup>11</sup> We do not deny that there has been an essential change at the time of the Buddha and of the Upanisads. But the term *pessimism* is highly inappropriate. I would like to suggest rather to speak of a beginning *phase of introspection*.

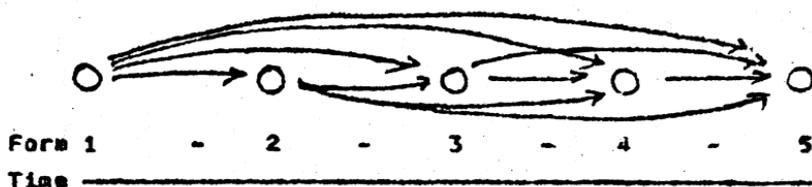
In the earlier texts, *karman* means first of all the holy action, especially sacrifice, which determines and sustains the status of the world. In the Upanisads we find that *Karman* signifies the cosmic law of the conservation of energy, including the one used in the physico-psycho-mental activity of man. Man, accordingly, by his activity does not create only individual structures of character, through the habits, which determine him increasingly. He creates also forms which change the universal interconnectedness. This is the basic insight of *karman* : human activity has ontological significance. What you think, you *become* ; as you do, you form yourself and this has consequences for the Whole.<sup>12</sup> In meditation this is really experienced. The total interrelatedness of reality is the basic pattern. *Karman*, therefore, is the law of order which has been formed by "frozen events", i.e. habits, patterns shaped by past processes, so that the present

10. R. Sheldrake, *A New Science of Life. The Hypothesis of Formative Causation*, Los Angeles: Tarcher, 1981; A.P. Smith, "Mutiny of the Beagle," in *Revision VII/I* (Cambridge, Mass.), Spring 1984, pp.18ff.

11. This has to be said against Köberle, *op.cit.*, p.90.

12. *Bṛhadāraṇya Upaniṣad* IV, IV,5.

forms are influencing all future ones. This holds true for all level of reality. Hence, even the laws of nature can be understood as karmic habits. The repetition of an action or of a certain form intensifies the tendency and transforms it into a relatively coherent and stable system, as we can observe in human behaviour. This is certainly to be found at the level of moral reality and it is a well established probability in the physical and biological realms as well ; in fact, it is the basic feature of Rupert Sheldrake's famous view on morphogenetic fields.<sup>13</sup> Sheldrake illustrates it this way :



*Karman* as formative principle determines the individual, but it has transindividual consequences. It expresses the historicity of man and refers simultaneously to the transhistorical meaning of history because karmic connections transcend the individual, the species and finally all form – until *karman* is dissolved in *mokṣa* which is precisely the state beyond *nāma-rupa*, i. e. transcendent formlessness. In the Upaniṣads there is no doubt that *karman* has consequences for the structure of personality : As you sow, so shall you reap.<sup>14</sup> According to

13. Sheldrake, *op.cit.* pp. 92ff., pp. 170ff.; cf. D. Bohm, *Wholeness and Implicate Order*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981, pp. 210ff.

14. "The doer of the acts... he is the enjoyer." (*Svetāśvatara Upaniṣad* II, 6); cf. R. Panikkar, "The Law of Karman and The Historical Dimension of Man," in *Myth, Faith and Hermeneutics*, New York: Paulist Press 9179, p. 367.

Vedantic teaching, the *ātman* is not at all influenced and affected by these processes.

To pursue our comparative argument in relation to European traditions, we can distinguish three basic positions in anthropology :<sup>15</sup>

1. The essence of man is transtemporal (the *ātman* in India).
2. Man has a beginning in time but no end (Greece and mainline Christianity).
3. Man is limited by time, i. e. has a beginning and an end (modern secular view).

India feels that the second choice does not make sense logically. The argument against it runs on similar lines as the one used by Immanuel Kant concerning the logical inconsistency of the assumption of a created world in view of the notion of eternity. The theory of *karman* links up the first and third position in such a way, that the *implicit* reality of the *ātman* is stated as subject, whereas the appearance of *jīva* (individuality) is limited in temporal as well as in logical terms. The relation between *ātman* and *jīva* is being interpreted differently in different Vedantic system, but it is nevertheless generally understood that *ātman* is never submitted to the change of the karmic order.

What follows is that the *karman* theory does by no means express a law of absolute necessity, but acknowledges a *relative* necessity in the order of temporal structures. To overcome these structures in the realm of freedom (*ātman*, *mokṣa*) is not only a possibility but the goal of life. *Karman* is only one of the poles in the bipolarity of *karman* and *mokṣa*, and *mokṣa* is the higher order which actually has absolute reality, whereas *karman* is only relative reality. The *karman* theory is therefore, at least

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15. Panikkar, *op. cit.*, p. 370.

in its Vedantic form, anything else than fatalism, as I have shown at some length elsewhere.<sup>16</sup>

*Karman* as the ontological principle of formation of habits creates stable structures which express the total interdependence of all particular aspects of reality. R. Panikkar lists seven aspects of *karman* which can serve here as a summary:<sup>17</sup>

1. *Karman* as expression of cosmic interdependency avoids an individualistic world view because karmic communion opens up the "ontological monads" (individuals).
2. *Karman* expresses the limitation of human freedom and therefore determines the field for freedom.
3. *Karman* liberates from the illusion of personal property. In karmic connections nothing is exclusively mine but always related also to others.
4. *Karman* provides an intelligible basis for solidarity among all beings, since all processes and activities have universal meaning and repercussion. Each individual being shares in the destiny of the whole universe. Each being, therefore has universal responsibility.
5. *Karman* does not so much deal with the *nature* of evil and does not try to explain it away but tries to show trans-individual connections and *modes of functioning* of evil.
6. *Karman* signifies the mutability of the world and therefore its historicity and contingency.
7. *Karman* marks the distinction between Absolute and Relative or God and World. God is the Lord of *karman* and as such the only trans-karmic reality, i. e. the Absolute.

16. M.V. Bruce, "Die Vedantische Erfahrung des Einen als Basis für Prinzipien der Ethik," in *Zeitschrift für Missionswissenschaft und Religionswissenschaft* 67 (1983), Aachen, pp. 163–190.

17. R. Panikkar, "*Rtatattva*. A Preface to a Hindu—Christian Theology," in *Jeevadhara* 49 (Jan/Feb 1979), pp. 39f.

It is obvious that the karmic connection cannot end in physical death, because death is just one moment in the karmic process. This statement is self-evident, because *karman* is the physico-psychic continuum of reality. Physical death is a change *within* the karmic whole and therefore, not its end. Since *karman* is the very idea of temporality, the end of *karman* cannot be temporal. This end can be found only in the transtemporal spiritual reality, God, the Absolute, the realm of freedom, or of grace etc. *All* these terms are used here and there in the different classical Indian texts in order to point to that which is *not karman*.

### III. Reincarnation

We shall now briefly describe the popular theory of reincarnation in order to elucidate better, by contrast, the Vedantic theory (which is similar to the Buddhist one though not identical).<sup>18</sup>

#### 1. Popular Theory

Only in few cases is the theory of reincarnation supported by direct evidence. It is much more a faith which, however, appears to be the only reasonable explanation for certain observable phenomena. Generally rebirth is taken for granted so that its basic assumptions are not often exposed to doubt. Only in encountering Islam and Christianity was a kind of apologetics developed.<sup>19</sup>

Essentially there are four arguments which are believed to support the theory of reincarnation :

a. Reincarnation is taught in the *śruti* (Holy revealed scriptures).

18. For a detailed exposition of the different doctrines on reincarnation in India see A.L. Herman, *The Problem of Evil and Indian Thought*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1976, pp. 143-230.

19. Hick, *op.cit.*, pp. 297 f.

- b. Reincarnation gives a meaningful explanation for the inequality among human beings.
- c. It corresponds to the testimony of the enlightened ones who, because of their more intense perception and mind control, can remember past existences.
- d. Since the whole reality is to be conceived as unity, there must be interdependency not only in the micro- and macroscopical levels, but also in the moral realm. Since the moral order is obviously not in harmony if we remain within the perspective of a single life, rebirth is required in order to restore the balance.

Now these arguments call for a few comments.

a. Concerning the *first* argument it must be said that the Vedas teach a cosmic order (*ṛta*) which is somewhat similar to *karman*, but they make no explicit mention of reincarnation. Only in later writings, which, nevertheless, belong also to *śruti* (*Vedānta*)— is the theory of reincarnation explicit. No need to go into particular texts here. The origin of the ideas is not clear. Since ideas of reincarnation can be found also in other cultures as in Africa, Polynesia and among the Eskimoes, it seems to be a universal human phenomenon with the notable exception of Israel and of some other cultures. In India, it is perhaps Jainism which gives the earliest testimony, because it is older than Buddhism and the Vedantic literature. Since the *śruti* is revealed and thus enjoys highest authority, this argument alone is sufficient for any pious Hindu.

b. One certainly knows that guilt and necessary compensation for misdeeds cannot be accounted for rationally, because all the interdependencies are much too complicated. (Thus, the argument that Gandhiji cannot be a holy man because he has been assassinated and that therefore he must have committed a similar crime in the previous life, does not make much sense.) There is individual *karman*, the collective *karman* of a people, a karmic destiny which stretches over generations, etc. All of

them interact with each other. The web of *karman* is so complex that the *karmic ecology* transcends our mental capability. Since there are obvious unjust inequalities they would have to be attributed to the creator, presupposing that one believes in an omnipotent God. Therefore, the theory of reincarnation is also a theodicee, and we will analyse later whether the argument is really sufficient.

c. One cannot deny that gifted media, or people who can experience more intensified states of consciousness due to Yoga and meditation, speak suddenly in different languages and can recapitulate events of the past which have no causal connection with the present. They seem to remember "past lives". In India such events are reported much more often than in Europe most probably because they are taken seriously in the culture. But parapsychological research in Europe and America has collected enough material which requires a scientific explanation.<sup>20</sup>

Yet other explanations might be offered which would not be less strange to rational thinking. It could be supposed for instance that especially gifted and trained persons could dive into some kind of collective memory pool or into the "deep sea of the unconscious" which – unlike C.G. Jung's collective unconscious – does not consist primarily of archetypical symbols but of conscious experiences of the past. We need not examine at this stage whether this explanation would be more rational than rebirth.

d. The fourth argument presupposes a cosmic harmony that would extend also to the moral realm. It makes sense as a presupposition of practical reason (in Kant's sense), but logically it can neither be proved nor refuted. For why should the moral order be consistent in itself? If it were meant as a theological argument it would require further differentiation. For even *samsāra* is not the Whole. The Whole appears only

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20. Köberle, *op.cit.*, pp. 108ff.

when *samsāra* is dissolved either due to exhaustion of *karman* and/or due to the grace of God (this way in many places of the Gita and all *bhakti*).

The problem with this last argument resembles that which was raised in connection with the second one, as acknowledged by Hick.<sup>21</sup> For inequality in this life is explained as by the past one, this again by the former life, and so on *ad infinitum*. *Karman*, therefore, deals with the innerworldly net of guilt and retribution but cannot explain the final source of suffering and inequality. If we accept the argument of Vedānta against Christianity that it is illogical to assume a created but everlasting soul having a beginning but no end, it is equally problematic to assume a *karman* that has no beginning yet has an end. Therefore, this form of a doctrine of rebirth can hardly offer a satisfactory solution to the problem of theodicee.

In details and even in basic assumptions, the different theories of reincarnation, differ considerably from each other. It seems to be proper to speak about a *myth of rebirth* which finds expression and reflection in different theories.<sup>22</sup> The popular theory believes in a soul which transmigrates from body to body. But what exactly is this "soul"? And wherein lies the continuity?

Whatever they understand to be the soul, it must be some self which is bearer of character and memory, i. e. conscious, if the whole argument of moral retaliation is to make sense. Otherwise it could not have a kathartic function. The continuity would have to be found either in physical resemblance or in similar psychic dispositions or in a continuous memory. Nobody claims that there is physical resemblance. Psychic dispositions are usually so general that they cannot account for individual continuity. And the continuity of memory is, in most cases, i. e. in all ordinary people, precisely not maintained. Hence, the moral aspect of the argument for rebirth is not sound,

21. J. Hick, *Philosophy of Religion*, New Delhi: Prentice-Hall of India, 1981 pp.107ff.

22. Panikkar, *The Law of Karman*, *op.cit.*, pp. 305f.

because if I do not know the guilt of a past life, I cannot work it out in order to overcome it finally by *insight* (*jñāna*). Atone-ment would be a merely mechanical event, a view that may satisfy some interpreters, but fails to carry conviction in the total context of the Vedantic tradition. Continuity of memory would make *karman* intelligible with regard to the moral argu-ment. But it is given only where the karmic circle has come already to an end, for the enlightened one, the *jīvanmukta*.

One could argue that there might be a "soul-monad" which contains all former existences implicitly and accounts for some continuity in this and later lives by *partial* "explication,"<sup>23</sup> This "explication" i. e. the *jñānin*'s realization of a higher consciousness, has to bear now the whole proof for continuity between incarnation A and reincarnation A1. Yet, what the *jñānin* realizes is precisely that the individual soul (*jīva*) is unreal because *ātman* alone is real, i. e. it is not subject to *samsāra*. Since the cycle of rebirth is on the *pāramārthika* level unreal, it is difficult to argue that the *jñānin* could give proof for the continui-ty of this cycle. This soul which transmigrates does not have any *trans-samsāric* reality, after all. How then can the soul gain such an intensity of consciousness that it can look into its past lives? Where would be the centre for memory which transcends death if not in the *ātman*? But then the *ātman* would be modified by *jīva*, a supposition that is emphatically denied by the advaita Vedantin. Hence, we get the contradiction that the popular theory has to take refuge in the *jñānin* who denies the reality of an individual transmigrating soul<sup>24</sup> and holds a very different theory which we shall shortly proceed to explain.

Whether man is reborn only as man or can descend into the realm of animals or even plants or ascend to the realm of celestial beings (*deva*) is disputed in different traditions. It is a

23. We use "explication" in David Bohm's sense of "unfolding of an implicate order which is underlying the explicate reality." Cf. D. Bohm *Wholeness and Implicate Order, op.cit.*

24. Hick, *Death and Eternal Life, op.cit.*, pp. 305f.

secondary problem for the principle of rebirth and, therefore, we do not have to discuss it here.

The conclusion is that the popular theory cannot sufficiently explain the individual identity which transcends death unless we are ready to assume a myriad of self-existing individual souls which are not necessarily self-conscious. But this precisely contradicts the whole Vedantic heritage, especially the concept of *ātman*.

However, the common Christian argument that *karman* excludes the reality of grace is wrong. The whole Indian history of religion convinces us of the opposite. Of course, emphasis is sometimes more on the human effort to turn towards God, sometimes more on God's saving grace alone. It is not different in Christian history. The Bhagavad Gītā, I think, holds a rather balanced view and very typical for Indian understanding, is a famous quotation from the scriptures of the Sikhs: "*Karman* determines how you are born, but by grace the door towards salvation is opened."<sup>25</sup>

## 2. *The Vedantic Theory*

Much more important and interesting than the contradictory popular theory is the Vedantic concept of reincarnation, particularly in our present cross-cultural discussion.

Śaṅkara himself has formulated the theory with unsurpassable precision: "In reality nobody else than the Lord transmigrates - *satyam neśvarād anyah saṁsāri*."<sup>26</sup> This contradicts directly the idea that a countless number of individual souls transmigrate in the cycle of rebirth (*saṁsāra*). It is the Lord *īśvara*) i. e. the personal God as an appearance of the Absolute, who being manifestation and causing manifestation, subjects himself continuously and on different levels of manifestation to *saṁsāra*. Given the Vedantic principle of the unity of reality, there could be no other solution. In reality (*satyam*), i. e.

25. Japji 4; quoted by Panikkar *op.cit.*, note 3.

26. Śaṅkara's *Brahma-sūtra-bhāṣya* I, I, 5.

*pāramārthika*, there is nothing else than *brahman* which qualifies itself under the influence of *māyā* and hence appears *saguṇa* as *īśvara*. This *īśvara* manifests himself in all terms of reality. The individual soul is nothing else than one of the manifestations of *īśvara*. In itself it does not have any being (*svabhāva*) and therefore cannot be subject to *samsāra*. The very core of *avidyā* is precisely this illusion of an independent existence. It is not individual souls that are reborn, but the same God who manifests or 'gives birth' to himself in the continuous process of appearance and disappearance of reality.<sup>27</sup>

This interpretation of Sankara is justified only when we take into account and understand the basic difference between the two modes or states of knowing: the absolute standpoint (*pāramārthika*) and the relative standpoint (*vyāvahārika*). For *vyāvahārika* everything seems to be a plurality of forms and events, and therefore it makes sense to speak about a cycle of births. Yet in *pāramārthika*, or the absolute mode of knowing which is attained by a unique and transrational experience and is in reality (*satyam*) the only true view, this plurality is perceived as an illusion. Whether our interpretation of Sankara here is right depends of the basic question of Advaita epistemology: what is the relationship between the two standpoints? We are wrong if one can know or speak this way or that way without regard to the other view. But I would rather suggest that the insight into the ultimate unity of reality, once made, changes also our ordinary mode of knowing. This means that in consonance with *advaitā*, we cannot speak of rebirth of "individual souls". I suggest that Sankara is to be interpreted in this way lest the *jñāna marga* (the liberation and ultimate knowledge, *mokṣa*, to be attained by intellectual meditation) become meaningless.

The continuity from one existence to the next is maintained by the subtle body (*sūkṣama-śarīra*), a point on which we cannot expatiate now. Since body and mind form a continuum of

27. Cf. A.K. Coomaraswamy, "On the One and Only Transmigrant," in *Selected Papers*, Vol. II, Bollingen Series LXXXIX, (Princeton University Press) 1977, pp 66ff.; also Hick, *op.cit.*, pp. 311ff.; Panikkar, *op.cit.*

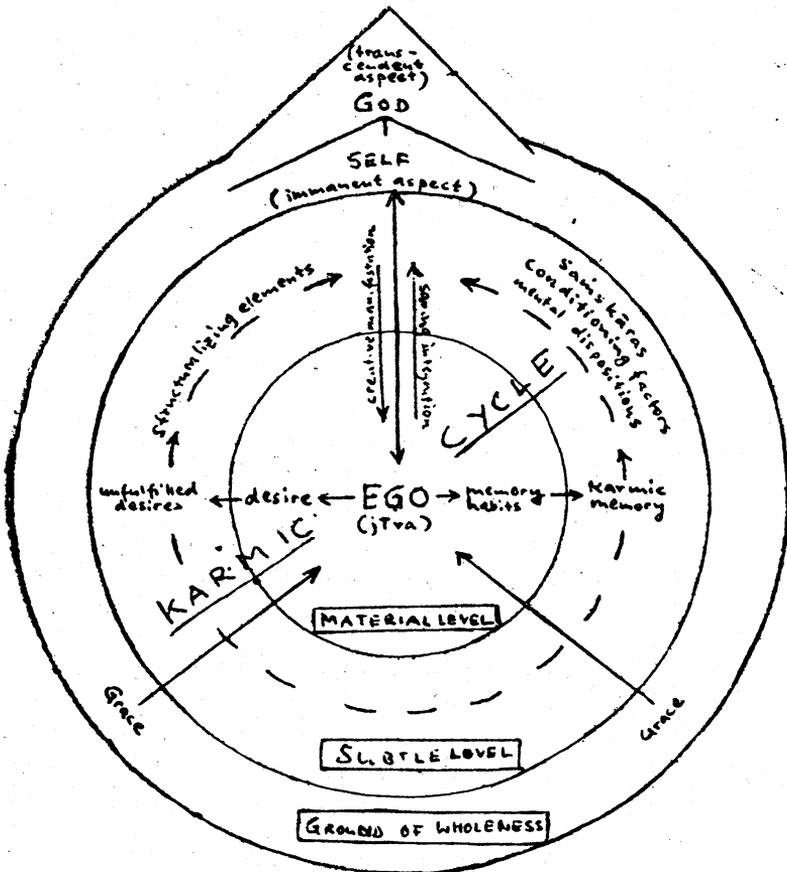
different subtlety, it is futile to ask whether this subtle body is material or mental. It is an intermediate state which is characterized by a certain density of the mental plane, which is less subtle on the material level. Most of all the subtle body contains all the psychic forces: the cognitive intellect (*buddhi*), the will connected with the discriminating faculty (*manas*), the five elements of perception, the five forces of action and the five subtle life energies. In short, it contains and “embodies” the moral, aesthetic, intellectual and subtle-psychic (*prāṇa*) dispositions of man,<sup>28</sup> which are partly inherited and partly acquired. Each activity with regard to one of these elements causes an imprint into the subtle matrix. If the impression is repeated, dispositions and habits are formed which express themselves in a feedback reaction in the thought, will and behaviour of man. These imprints are called *saṃskāras*: they do not perish with the end of the physical manifestation (death) but continue on their own plane according to the principle of conservation of *īśvara*. Hence, the karmic structure has a relative continuity because of the *saṃskāras* in the subtle body. The *saṃskāras* cause a *tendency* to shape new forms (“reincarnation”) according to their own pattern. They create mental dispositions which influence future manifestations (the new individual).

Memory (individual as well as collective) here also is not stored in the brain. It is some kind of subtle field which does usually require the brain for its ordinary expression, but may continue without it on subtle levels of reality and function in a different mode: it creates tendencies which form new structures. By meditation and *jñāna*, it is possible to get an experience of these subtle levels of reality. Who has gone through them and as it were, united with the consciousness of God, has looked at the whole, “remembers” the whole karmic field. He recognizes past forms, i.e. the entire spacio-temporal reality is present in one single moment. It is not a matter of remembering former

28. Hick, *op.cit.*, p. 315

individual existences, but of *becoming aware of the universal collective interconnectedness*. Karmic interdependency is known fully only when transcended. Only the *jivanmukta* sees and knows the whole, because he knows with the consciousness of the Absolute.

We shall try to elucidate the Vedantic theory by means of this simplified model:



**Explanation :**

*The absolute ground of wholeness (brahman, ātman) manifests itself while not being affected by the manifestation. This manifestation caused by māyā (whose subject finally is also the One as māyin) creates levels of reality which differ through their subtlety or capability for interdependency. The jīva is determined by tendencies which have been imprinted on it by passing through the subtle levels. They are called saṁskāras. The jīva continues to make further experiences and the sum of its activities (active and passive impressions) is imprinted again in an altered individual memory manifested in habits etc., which is stored in the collective memory. Most of all it is the unfulfilled desires which form certain potentials in the subtle realm. Next to other mental dispositions they become determining factors for the new creative manifestation of the Divine. The individual, therefore, is not only formed according to some eternal divine idea (in Plato's sense), but organised according to its own dynamism which depends also on the structure and form of past individuals.*

The Gītā uses an impressive example:<sup>29</sup> "When the Lord takes up a body and when he leaves it, he takes these (the sense- and mind- impressions) and goes even as the wind carries perfumes from their places". The perfume is the subtle Karman-formed essence of the individual which God puts again into the material realm by means of subsequent manifestation. The Gītā adds: "Thinking of whatever state (of being) he at the end gives up his body, to that being does he attain"<sup>30</sup> The one who thinks of God goes to God. Who has worldly desires sets up such mental dispositions that, according to the law of interdependency, they have to embody themselves and be worked out in material realms. Of course, it is not just the last thought before death which matters, but the sum total of the reality of this man which is present at every moment and particularly at

29. *Bhagavad Gītā* XV, 8.

30. *Bhagavad Gītā* VIII, 6.

the very last one. Who surrenders himself to God, even at the last moment, extinguishes the other dispositions; he will partake in the saving oneness with God. The realization of the Absolute which fulfills the spirit, the love of God, the faith in the power of the One extinguish all *samskāras*, but only if these attitudes are really authentic. This is the end of *samsāra*, the saving integration into the Absolute Ground.

It is important to note that this “return” – in Christian terminology the conversion (*metanoia*) due to grace - is always possible, because it is indeed the only Real. Grace penetrates through all subtle levels into the material forms, because it originates in the Absolute Ground. Yet, it is only in human existence that there is freedom for decision, and this is why it is so special and precious as a starting point from the karmic into the absolute of divine order. Therefore, there is not much speculation about intermediate states, hell, etc., in Advaita Vedānta, for human existence alone bears the promise for the leap into the Infinite or salvation. Even the one who is “reborn” as a celestial being (*deva*) has to return to the human realm for the sake of the freedom for discrimination (*viveka*), decision and finally *jñāna*. If there is no desire for the material, no corresponding mental dispositions are formed and, hence, no new connection with material structures will happen.

This is the somewhat simplified Vedantic doctrine of “reincarnation”. It is totally different from a view which holds that there are individual souls jumping around from one body to the other. What could this doctrine mean in the context of our cross-cultural and inter-disciplinary discussion?

1. Advaita Vedanta holds a holistic view. Reality is one and different levels of reality are distinguished through more or less subtlety, i.e. through interaction with forms on the same and on other levels. The highest subtlety is equivalent to the most intense interaction and interdependence.

2. God is the reality. He is implicate in all his manifestations and yet, as the ultimate ground of being, totally

transcendent. He is explicated in all the individuals and their karmic cycle which does not end with death, since the subtle body is not subject to the laws of the material level. Karmic dispositions are formative energies which create relatively stable substructures (individuals). Finally it is God himself who comes and goes when we are born or die.<sup>31</sup> For the transtemporal view, human individuality is an illusion.<sup>32</sup>

3. Relative becoming is continuous death and rebirth on the basis of creative impulses which radiate from the absolute Ground into all levels of reality. Since the subtle level is conceived of as a relatively consistent substructure, physical death is nothing else than a transition within this cycle of life, i.e. it is one aspect in the process of becoming. Only when the material realm is taken separately does death appear to be the end of becoming.

4. The end of *samsāra*, liberation (*mokṣa*), is the irreversible breakthrough of the Spiritual into the Material, some kind of "rebirth in the Spirit" in which consciousness becomes fully integrated into the *ātman*. Whether this means that the Material is transformed (*bhedābheda*-school) or seen as an illusion (strict *advaita*-school) remains a moot point in Vedantic circle.

This leads us to the criticism of the Vedantic position. I would like to suggest that the problem of individuality and of the destiny of the material realm is by no means secondary. It is actually essential for the consistency of the Vedantic view as such. For if there are no individualities, there are also no karmic connections. If there are no karmic connections, there is no real manifestation of the Absolute and therefore no real life which overcomes *samsāra* and merges into the Eternal. If there

31. Coomaraswamy, *op.cit.*, p.82.

32. This does not hold true only for Buddhism: in Advaita Vedanta, it is also no "substance" which is reborn (*Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* III,2) Not life, but the fire of life will go on, i.e. an energy of more subtle order. The *ātman* is different altogether. Cf. Coomaraswamy, *op.cit.*, p. 76

is no incarnation there cannot be reincarnation either, not even when the *īśvara* is recognized to be the only *samsārīn*.

The Advaitin will probably argue that the whole karmic cycle is illusion, since only *ātman/brahman* is real.. But then—and this is the Vedantin's conclusion—the whole subtle net of karmic interconnectedness is nothing. What follows is that the nature of evil is even less understandable than before, and the whole effort was in vain. Further, it is difficult to declare that everything except *ātman/brahman* is an illusion and to assume at the same time that the karmic cycle does not have a beginning. What is beginningless transcends the law of time and cannot be overcome by temporal karmic processes. Would not moreover this extenuation of the karmic cycle suppress the condition for the functioning of *mokṣa*? And further, would we not introduce a transtemporal karmic realm which would exist apart from the Absolute? This would lead either to dualism or absurdity.

If there is no personal centre which is relatively consistent and a relative wholeness in relation to the Whole (God), there cannot be a *jnāna* which transcends the karmic structures. It is true that, if the unity of reality is to be preserved, the dispositions which have undergone the process of material involvement should not have absolute meaning. But they must have meaning in the Absolute; in other terms, the Spiritual must transform the Material, not destroy it.

Hence, even the Vedantic theory of reincarnation seems to have its own inherent contradictions, which should not surprise us in the case of such a topic! Yet, the Vedanta claims to offer a logically coherent argument.

But then, how can we explain the undeniable phenomenon of "memory" concerning former and transindividual existences?

John Hick suggests that this memory and other paranormal events could be explained without reincarnation if we accept a "mental husk" surviving this physical body for a little time during which it can be experienced by a medium. The fact that this mental constellation is already in decay explains that those memories are usually fragmented. "With such a theory the idea

of reincarnation becomes in effect a matter of degree. There is no rebirth of the fully living personality. But there is a kind of reincarnation of parts or aspects of the personality, such attenuated reincarnation being equally compatible with the extinction of the personality as a whole or with its continued life in some other sphere, leaving behind only a mental 'husk' which becomes entangled in the mind of a living child with whom it has perhaps some kind of affinity and through whom its remaining quantum of psychic energy is discharged. This would seem, at any rate in the present state of the scientific investigation of spontaneous 'memories' of former lives, to be one more possible non-or semi-reincarnationist explanation of them."<sup>33</sup>

One should note that this theory presupposes also a relatively stable level of psychic reality which is only partially conditioned by physical manifestation though not identical with the spiritual realm. This suggestion of John Hick could explain the paranormal phenomena which are also mentioned by Köberle.<sup>34</sup> However, the difficulty of this theory is that it cannot explain why the "mental husk" should exist longer than the body and how it gains stability and coherence. Further, the idea of a fragmented transindividual memory is vague. There could be psychic selective mechanisms which function in analogy with the ordinary process of forgetting. It is certain that the cultural environment plays a crucial part in this regard, because it establishes a paradigm for experience and thus controls the attention, the willingness to express certain experiences.

#### IV. An Hypothesis

We shall now try to suggest a model which takes problems into account, could be worthy of discussion from a theological point of view and might help in our dialogue with theories in

33. Hick, *op.cit.*, p. 378.

34. Köberle, *op.cit.*, pp. 107ff. Cf. especially the study by Ian Stevenson *Twenty Cases Suggestive of Reincarnation*, New York: American Society for Psychical Research, 1966.

physics (David Bohm's dynamism of explicate and implicate order) as well as with Sheldrake's biological hypothesis of morphogenetic fields, which, as immaterial realities, are responsible for formative processes transcending space, time and also biological death, – an idea similar to that of *karman*.<sup>35</sup> There is no need to stress the hypothetical character of the reflections we submit here.

### *Continuous Manifestation*

Starting from the Vedantic theory and the criticism we made of it and on the basis of a non-dualistic interpretation of the Christian symbol of the Trinity worked out elsewhere,<sup>36</sup> I would like to make the following suggestion.

Already in the context of the Vedantic theory, it is not correct to speak about "rebirth" or "transmigration of souls". Still less valid are those terms when applied to the interpretation we propose and which could be characterized as *continuous manifestation*. It connects (a) the teaching of the *creatio continua* with (b) the non dualistic basic attitude and (c) the relative independence of a subtle psychic level of reality. We herewith refer to the biblical distinction between physical, psychic and spiritual levels in man, a three tier anthropology sacrificed during the last few centuries on the altar of a matter-spirit dualism. The psychic level is relatively independent and must not be reduced to material processes nor confused with the spiritual level. If one does not take this into account one is

35. Cf. note 10 and the book by David Bohm (note 13). Here is not the place to discuss these models in detail Cf. M. v. Brück, "The Emerging Holistic Paradigm in the Light of Buddhist Sunyata and the Christian Trinity," in *Proceedings of the Conference on Paradigm Shifts: Buddhism and Christianity*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii, January 1984.

36. M. v. Brück, "Advaita and Trinity," *art. cit.*; "Trinitarian Theology; Hegelian Vis-a-vis Advaita," in *Journal of Dharma* VIII (1983), pp. 283 ff.; "Sunyata in Madhyamika Philosophy and the Christian Concept of God" in *Jeevadhara* Nov. 1983, pp. 385ff.

prone to misinterpret phenomena such as clairvoyance and telepathy as well as certain phenomena occurring during meditation. Similarly, there would be the risk of believing that a person who has psychic powers is a realized spiritual master, whereas in reality he might be spiritually immature and very much egocentred. Confusion on this point might have disastrous consequences!

We think it appropriate to deal with this problem in the framework of Christian theology, because the interrelatedness and interdependency of the whole reality corresponds directly with the Christian message of the absolute love of God. The New Testament invites also to give up the *psyche* for the sake of spirit (*pneuma*) (Lk 14: 26; Hebr 4:12). Further, if God is love and if injustice is contradictory to his will, there *must* be a possibility of a purification which transcends death. Otherwise the majority of people would be condemned and this would have to be attributed either to the will or to the powerlessness of God, in both cases a contradiction to his love. If however, grace is supposed to work in such a way as to become effective in eradicating evil *without* a purifying process, then love and justice in God clash in a way which would again be alien to the Bible. Therefore, most of the Christian traditions have taught a further sanctification afterdeath, be it in the form of a purgatory<sup>37</sup> or in other intermediate states between death and eternity, i.e. in some realm of subtle energetic fields (*sūksna śarīra*) of the psychic level.<sup>38</sup> Protestantism has largely denied these assumptions without offering a better solution however..

Basically it would be sufficient to assume that a person after death is purified in such a subtle field of reality, for instance in such a way that the one who has done an evil action against somebody has to reexperience it from the side of the aggrieved party, thus overcoming karmic tendencies in living them out. It would be sufficient to fulfill the law of justice and a new link

37. Hick, *op.cit.*, pp., 383f.

38. Koberle, *op.cit.*, p.111.

between the *samskāras* and physical forms would no longer be necessary. Genuine repentance and forgiveness would not clash with justice either.

But, in consonance with the unity of reality, I do not think it makes sense to separate the intermediate state (however it is imagined to be) from the other levels of reality or to assume influence only in one direction. The interconnectedness between the material and psychic realms allows or even requires a reciprocal effect in both ways. If this is so, it is consequent to assume that each level, while producing its own stable structures of interrelationship, cannot escape interaction with all the other levels. If coherence is required, there is a high probability that mental dispositions which correspond to material structural events are "worked out" precisely on the level they are concerned with, i.e. in this case, the material level. Every level is real, in being actualized by the form of the higher level which is more subtle. In our case, a mental-psychic tendency informs the matter-structure. For instance, the mental disposition of "greed for sensual pleasure" will be worked out karmically in the realm it refers to, i.e. in the material realm of the senses. Should one succeed to sublimate the unfulfilled desire psychically or to transform it spiritually, the disposition will be integrated into the respective higher level. If it is only a psychic sublimation it will turn into some kind of "egocentric desire to show off", which may be experienced and overcome in a collective-psychic frame of reference. In the case of spiritual transformation, it will become "love for God" which is the very expression of participation in the divine and thus has already transcended *karman*.

This argument may not be sufficient proof that mental dispositions are retroactively linked up with material (physical) processes. At least, it establishes a certain probability, admittedly difficult to rate.

The *samskāras* here are self-accumulating dynamic and formative elements or general tendencies to organize reality, i.e. they are changeable formative structures. They are formative and create reality—in the Aristotelian sense which distinguishes between

*potentia* and *actus* (form). This does not explain the ontological ground for the *samskāras* or the reason for the occurrence of the first one. We could say that the energetic potentiality of reality “condenses” to different degrees and thus creates substructures or sublevels (levels of manifestation) which again interact with each other and establish what we call reality.

Differing to a certain extent from the Vedantic theory, the proposed concept of continuous manifestation adds the following points of view :

1. In accordance with the Christian understanding of incarnation of which the consequence is the idea of the resurrection of the body, the physical level must not be excluded from the interdependency of all levels of reality. The end of *karman* would be the transformation of *all* levels by the Spirit, because all dispositions which resist integration into the whole or God are overcome. This Christian notion of the transfiguration of matter leads to the further suggestion that the process of purification after death does not belong to some kind of dematerialized realm, but takes place in, with and under the material manifestations of the divine creative power. This is a strong theological argument to support our view that a new materialization of psychic forces, unfulfilled desires, etc, is possible.

2. For some theories of reincarnation, the non-human forms of rebirth form a sphere of a mechanical retaliation of *Karman* which cannot be influenced,<sup>39</sup> because *brahmavidyā* is necessary for liberation and can be acquired only by a human being. This is different in Christian eschatology. Here, the experience of God is not necessary for salvation, because God’s grace can work on all levels of reality; it is present and actual under any circumstances. Hence, purification does not take place only in the human realm.

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39. Buddhist iconography in Mahayana mitigates the hardship of this law by showing the Buddha preaching also in hell.

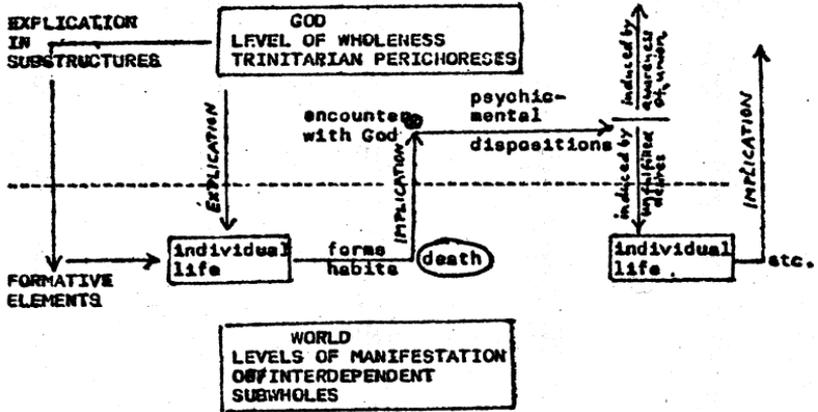
3. The person is not dissolved in mental dispositions, and it is difficult to claim that it is totally untouched by its own history. Rather, each person might be formed in the continuum of material-psychic-spiritual processes, and this formation has a transtemporal significance. For the Christian, therefore, the karmic conditioning is not meaningless, but it is a part of the unfolding, of the "explication", of the Absolute, i.e. of the divine creative power. The continuity and coherence of a self-conscious personal centre seems to be needed if the karmic continuity in the *saṃskāras* is to make sense. Mere mental-psychic tendencies are far too general and undetermined to establish and maintain the ontological and mental order. The personal centre has to be able to integrate memories and imprints, if the whole cycle is to have any meaning. The person is the very centre of this integration. The person *is* this centre of the processes of awareness not just a quantitative accumulation of *saṃskāras* in a "mental husk".<sup>40</sup>

Experiences and imprints which cannot be integrated form as it were some kind of "wall" around the person which causes bondage and "rejection by God" after physical death. In other terms, what is not integrated causes the reversal into lower realms of reality because of the vibrational similarity: similar entities react with similar ones. In any case, an integral human person is the presupposition for the coherence of the subtle.

Is the person after death and the possible reinjection of its unfulfilled potentials into the material realm still the same person? It is not the same insofar as it has gone through a process of transformation which has changed physical and psychic characteristics very much. It is the same insofar as there is continuity in the spiritual ground and *sub specie Dei*.

We can summarize what has been suggested here as a holistic theory of continuous manifestation in the following way:

40. This has to be said against Hick, *op. cit.*, p.363.



( The multiplicity of sublevels is neglected. )

### Explanation:

Reality is a wholeness differentiated in itself. The Ground of Wholeness is God who manifests Himself on different levels of manifestations which constitute relative subwholes interacting with each other. Since this process implies creativity because new combinations and substructures are all the time created, we can call it creation.<sup>41</sup> It is most important to understand that the wholistic substructures (e.g. the individual) are relatively stable, but only on account of and due to Ground of Wholeness. If the substructures are charged with psychically unfulfilled desires, there will occur a new "crystallization" in the material level, because it is the next lower sub-structure. If the substructures are charged with God-consciousness or awareness of the Whole, they undergo a transformation and remain in communion with God right at the point of encounter with

41. Cf. my interpretation of creativity in "Sunyata in Madhyamika Philosophy" *art. cit.*

*him. Around the person a karmic field is formed which has an essential meaning for the person because its basic structures are being imprinted into the transtemporal level of the person. The temporal dimension is inherent in the person which however, reaches beyond it. Therefore it would be proper to call it transpersonal person. In the event of death the person encounters God. It is being rejected if its karmic field resists the power of God permanently. It is then injected again into the lower realms in order to complete the process of maturing. The newly embodied being, therefore, is certainly a different individuality which however, is determined by the psychic-mental karmic field of memory of that former and still the same person. Since the person is a net of relationships, its coherence does not clash with the assumption of a multitude of individualities related to it. "Reincarnation" would mean a lack of receptivity for the creative power of the Spirit which works to elevate the person to God.*

Still another interpretation is possible. In physical death, the person would be separated from its karmic field. Whereas the person merges into a more or less intimate relation with God according to its degree of maturity, the karmic field alone would have a structuralizing function for basically different individuals. It would be their "collective *karman*". The respective "degree of maturity" then would be final. Different persons would participate in God to an irrevocably different degree.

I prefer the first interpretation given here. Both interpretations can be understood as being implicit in the biblical message. The first one gives more emphasis to the aspect of justice and retribution, the second one to the unconditioned love yet without eliminating "justice" which accounts for the final difference. Both interpretations do not necessarily exclude each other, because one could argue that a person gets purified *either* by a kind of purgatory *or* by being linked up again to the material level, and this independently of the psychic field of the *samskāras* which in *both* cases would have a formative influence

on the material processes. In both cases the different persons would be differentiated in God because their history is essential to them. Yet they are *one* in him. It is a oneness in differentiation, a concept similar to the one applying to the Trinity.<sup>42</sup> The multiplicity in the final state would be a net of differentiated personal continua of Spirit whose spiritual quality is the same (they all participate in God), though quantitatively they do not lose their identity.

In our model, there is no direct "jumping" of a soul-monad from one body to the next one. Continuity is established through the oneness in the Ground of Wholeness or God who continuously unfolds the multiplicity of individuals. God does not change, but he *is* the movement of this ex- and im-plication which is symbolized in the Trinitarian *perichōrēsis* (the dance). God "experienced himself" due to the experiences he undergoes in the process of manifestation and incarnation (second person of the Trinity). The whole reality is an ex-plication of this second person of Trinity, i.e. it is part in the cosmic dance. This also seems to be Eckhart's idea when he says: "God tastes himself in all things."<sup>43</sup> He is in everything and yet transcendent, is divided into the individualities of reality and yet remains the One, as the Bhagavad Gītā says.<sup>44</sup> He changes and does not change. The individualities are integrated in him and are not. In fact, He is beyond these differentiations, and this beyondness—unity is what we call the transpersonal reality or non-duality concerning identity and non-identity.

The trans-spacial and trans-temporal Beyondness is the Absolute, God, the Ground of Wholeness. It is perfect inter-relatedness in which all conditioned elements, experiences and individualities mutually penetrate each other, a total *per-sonare*, a vibrational penetration. This has been called in Christian tradition the mystical body of Christ, as Augustine puts it: *et*

42. Cf. note 36.

43. Quoted by Coomaraswamy, *op.cit.* p. 70, note 16.

44. Bhagavad Gita XIII, 16: *Ca avibhaktam cashhitam vibhaktam iva bhutesu* ("undivided and yet as it were divided in all beings.")

*erit unus Christus amans seipsum* – there will be one Christ loving himself.<sup>45</sup>

An important point for Christian interpretation is that the individual life does have meaning because it becomes finally one with God. It does not lose self-consciousness in this oneness but gains it in fulness. God does not change. Creation does not make him richer. But the continuous manifestation fulfills his essence. It is his self-explication.

*Madras*

*M. Von Brück*

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45. Augustine, *Ep. ad Parthos*, P.L. 35, col. 2055.