

DISCUSSION OF THE PROGRESS OF HISTORY, APOCALYPTICISM, REBIRTH, AND THE IMMORTALITY OF THE SOUL IN HINDUISM, BUDDHISM, AND JUDAISM

Presentations:

N. S. S. RAMAN: Reincarnation and Personal Immortality:
The Circle and the End of History in
Hinduism

KOGAKU ARIFUKU: The Immortality of the Soul and the
Problem of Life and Death in Buddhism

MOSHE IDEL: On Apocalypticism in Judaism

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Summary: FRIEDRICH HERMANNI

1. Is it possible, according to the Buddhist faith, for human beings to save themselves and, if so, how many accomplish this?

People can save themselves only on their own, by their own power. We can, to be sure, presuppose a God; but what is this God and where does he live? If we regard him as a power, where does this power originate? Salvation in the sense of nirvana exists only in the midst of life and death. Buddha or God exists only in our power. In Buddhism, one must hold two perspectives in view. Becoming a Buddha is one of them. This is the final objective, the ideal, towards which one strives. The other is that the human being is a finite, imperfect being; therefore he must work hard to attain this objective. One can at every moment of his actions experience nirvana, contentedness, and still remain a finite being. (ARIFUKU)

There is no single Buddhist doctrine. In many of the Buddha's texts the non-existence of the soul is maintained; but other texts assume different rebirths of the Buddha, and thus a continued existence of the soul. Dogen's Zen Buddhist theory assumes as its starting point that the soul dies with the body; all other Indian schools, on the contrary, believe in the transmigration of the soul. People want to know what will happen to them after death. In popular Hinduism there

are ceremonies in which one calls the soul of a dead person back to life through a medium. Many Hindus believe in this. (RAMAN)

In a certain sense all of our speakers are correct; but in what sense? RAMAN brings the half-Kantian, half-Hindu theory of John Hick into play, by assuming that all cultures in some way participate in an unknown total truth. All religions, cultures, and philosophies asymptotically approach something that one can call reality. Each culture experiences this reality differently. By virtue of their fantasy, Buddhists believe that their form of salvation is salvation *simpliciter*. The same is true of other religions. Two vectors stimulate people's fantasy. The first gives them the impression of fullness and lets them imagine a world of abundance, which they can attain subjectively. Whether they can also do so objectively remains an open question. The other vector is that of scepticism. For the sceptic, reality remains outside our grasp. Thus, each of us creates for himself in some way a particular reality and thus opens for himself the possibility of striving for this as a kind of perfection. For many people, the idea of God facilitates the feeling of perfection; for others – such as Buddhists – precisely the idea of the non-existence of God communicates the feeling of salvation. (IDEL)

Christianity's concern was to maintain, in contrast to Greek antiquity and Judaism, a strong concept of salvation for itself, namely the hope in bodily resurrection after death. Is that only an idea specific to Christianity, which has nothing to do with the other religions, or does this idea of bodily resurrection also exist in other religions, for instance in Buddhism that is not influenced by Dogen's theory? (KOSLOWSKI)

Buddhism cannot believe in a bodily resurrection; it can say nothing about it. Dogen, to be sure, introduces the idea of karma in three times, but it is questionable whether he means by it a resurrection of the physical body. This idea, like all ideas of resurrection, rebirth, apocalypse, karma, etc., is only a myth, which was fabricated for moral reasons, so that people would act rightly in the present. We can say nothing about a future life in the hereafter. We only know that our actions have causes, as well as effects that bind us. Therefore, according to Zen Buddhism, we should concentrate everything we do on the present moment. The idea of transmigration does not play a role here. It cannot prove it. (ARIFUKU)

2. How do the different religions understand salvation? Does eternity exist within time or is it timeless? How especially does Christianity understand eternal life?

In Christianity there are two ways of experiencing God, which are related to different ways of experiencing time. God meets us in time as a personal being amongst other beings. In addition, there is the mystical experience of God as the

One that exists outside space and time and is One and All (cf. Meister Eckhart). (ALBRECHT)

Hinduism has developed different understandings of the nature of salvation or self-realization (*mokṣa* or *nirvana*), depending upon the theological school. In many forms of Vaishnavism, in which the element of theism predominates, *mokṣa* is seen as the perfect identification of the soul with God. In other cases, one characterizes the relationship between God and the soul with the image of lord and servant. According to this view, the soul can never become God. The question of creation does not play a role here. God creates the world and souls. They migrate from body to body, without remembering their earlier lives, since memory takes place only within a body. Many Indian philosophers consider the soul to be atomistic, others regard it as a spirit. Buddhism includes sects that believe in the complete destruction of the soul at death, as well as others that deny this and advocate the idea of the transmigration of the soul. (RAMAN)

Buddhism, according to Dogen, has two perspectives of time. The first assumes the absolute separation of before and after as its starting point. This perspective sees time as an eternal now, a simultaneity with everyone who is holy or inspired (all Buddhas) and permits free action at every moment. The other perspective is that of the causal time continuum. We live in history and have historical relationships. But this perspective restricts our freedom; therefore we need both. (ARIFUKU)

Since time is created by God, according to the Christian understanding, God can also eliminate it. Therefore, according to Christianity, "eternity" cannot mean eternal duration in time. But there are actually two distinct conceptions of salvation in Christianity. There is the more spiritual-mystical conception, which is closer to the Asian religions. In it the finiteness of the soul ceases with the entry in God into the infinite, the individual into the universal. The other conception, advocated by the churches, denies such a mingling of Creator and creation and, consequently, emphasizes that human corporality and individuality remains preserved with salvation. Therefore, it is closer to Islam and Judaism. (KOSLOWSKI)

3. What roles does the idea of bodily resurrection play in Judaism and Islam?

Considered historically, we find nothing in the Hebrew Bible by way of bodily resurrection. This idea came later and influenced above all the rabbinic literature, but was never undisputed. Many Jews understand bodily resurrection symbolically as an image of spiritual resurrection. The possibility bodily resurrection can be understood both statically (by the assumption of infinite time) and medically (by artificial conservation of human life). That has, of course, nothing to do with religion. Religion brought this idea of resurrection into play in order

to improve life in this world. The promise of a better future has a moralizing function. (IDEL)

The isomorphic conception of the uniformity of the human body and the divine body is extremely important in biblical Judaism. It influenced the Western biblical-Christian tradition and was developed in the rabbinic literature. Besides that, however, there was also the dualistic idea, coming from Greek philosophy, of the separation of the body, which was considered to be of lesser value, from the soul or intellect, which was regarded as more valuable. From that a particular spirituality, which also influenced Christianity and Islam, was developed. Perfection meant the liberation of the spirit in identification or unity with the divine spirit. Both ideas of salvation, the monistic and the dualistic, exist within Judaism, and it has also experienced the collision of the two. One can understand this with the image of the pyramid in my paper (pp. 60-61 of this volume) understood as a clash between the first elite (the established church) and the second elite (the mystical-spiritual religious understanding). (IDEL)

Islam understands resurrection differently than Christianity does: we will not be resurrected with our present bodies. Paradise already exists in this life. Life in the hereafter is only the mirror of what we have done in this life. There are in the Qur'an verses that can be interpreted in the sense of bodily resurrection, but this interpretation is disputed. Many Muslims believe only in a spiritual resurrection. Sufis picture it as drops of water (human beings) that must disperse in the ocean (God) in order to become one with him. Like Hinduism and Buddhism, Islam also has diverse schools of religious thought; it is not a monolithic complex. (comment from the audience)

4. Apocalypticism in Judaism

In response to a question from the audience, IDEL sketched the philosophical background of apocalypticism once again: Apocalypticism is essentially a collective experience, which follows forms of causality that break through regular causality in order to introduce a higher form of causality according to apocalyptic belief, for instance, that of the immediate presence of the divine, that of the destruction of evil, that of a new form of knowledge, etc.

IDEL replied to a question about the apocalyptic understanding of time: In many medieval texts, time in this world was considered to be short. In order to intensify the experience of existence, "low" time had to be broken through for the sake of "higher" time. Not the origin of apocalypticism itself, but its reception, took place under the influence of particular historical events.

IDEL commented on the distinction between messianic and non-messianic forms of apocalypticism that apocalypticism is fundamentally concentrated on a particular person. In rare cases, however, there arises a form of apocalypticism

whose theme is primarily that of a future destruction that does not involve a divine or human protagonist. Instead, a potential already existing in reality is realized from an inner order of reality.

5. Rebirth in Buddhism and Hinduism

We can say nothing about rebirth. This idea is a myth that should motivate us to let the evil person within us die and the good person within us be resurrected in every moment of our lives. (ARIFUKU)

Popular Hinduism believe in the transmigration of the soul from one body to another, where the good deeds in the life of a person lead in the following life to ascent to a (socially) higher rank, and bad deeds to descent to a lower rank. Even a Brahman can descend to a lower cast. Considered philosophically, in the sense of the *Bhagavad-Gita* for instance, one should nevertheless act disinterestedly, i.e. desire the good for its own sake and not in view of some future reward. The ultimate goal of the human person is union with the deity. (RAMAN)

6. Materialism and Idealism in Buddhism

ARIFUKU replied to a question about Buddhism's intermediate position between materialism and idealism and the contradictions arising from it: Zen Buddhism has both idealistic and materialistic elements, but cannot be described as either idealistic or materialistic (or nihilistic). When someone dies physically, not everything is destroyed. To be sure, this person will not be reborn; but something of him remains, from which transformation, the new, then emerges. All elements of the old are needed for the origin of the new. Buddha is also present in nature, in plants, bodies of water, the air, etc. This is the idealistic aspect of Buddhism.

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