

Correspondence

REINCARNATION

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Sir,

SPEAKING as one who acknowledges his own indebtedness to Guénon in the past, I can also admit to some sympathy for those who complain, as did the two letter-writers in the Summer number of *Tomorrow*, of the habitually hectoring tone Guénon adopted in regard to people whose views he disapproved of, for whatever reason. In mitigation, it can be said that his frontal attack on all the most cherished illusions of our modern Western civilization called for special qualities, in the man, such as rarely go with delicately adjusted expression; the vocation of an *Athanasius contra mundum* is often accompanied, humanely speaking, by a tendency to over-simplification in the field of applications, even when principles are clearly envisaged. It is of course matter for regret that Guénon's strictures soon took on the form of recurrent *clichés* lending themselves to easy parody—the penalty of a lack of sense of beauty, which in Guénon marked his weakest side.

To pass to the question of "reincarnation" itself: this is an unhappy word, too often used, because it almost inevitably will evoke the picture of a human birth in our own familiar world. What neither Guénon nor his critics have brought out with sufficient clearness is that *samsara*, transmigration, the existential round of birth and death as presented by Hinduism and Buddhism (where it constitutes a basic doctrine) is before all else *indefinite*; whatever forms popular imagination may graft on this idea, it is contrary to its real meaning for us to try and define the particular form which "rebirth" will take for such and such a being—the traditional classification of beings in heavens, hells, human or animal realms etc., is evidently schematic and symbolical and does not violate the above condition in any misleading way. Only one other thing need be laid down about *samsara* (and here Guénon was right), namely that the illimitable character of All-Possibility excludes repetition; no being or thing can retrace the existence of another in the sense of a real identity, be it even for a moment; the uniqueness of creation applies down to the smallest characteristics or components of the beings concerned.

In his letter Mr. Calmeyer struck a most relevant note when he said that the vital question here is "who is he or she?", or in other words, "what is self?" The Vedantic doctrine of *atma*, universal selfhood, and the seemingly opposed Buddhist doctrine of *anatma*, universal non-selfhood, provide an answer to this question from two complementary angles. If the Semitic theologies, for their part, do not include the notion of *samsara* (except perhaps in a very indirect sense, through the Christian teachings about Purgatory), there is nevertheless a meeting point between the Semitic idea of a "soul" and its salvation and the Indian idea of "human birth hard to obtain" (within the process of transmigration) discernible in the fact that Deliverance or Buddhahood can only be attained as from a given birth: even though a Buddha "remembers all his past lives," his Enlightenment is not definable in terms of samsaric experience at any remove; it is a unique and eternal event, to us paradoxical and inexpressible. If we speak of it as if this were the final link in a chain of succession, this is because our own present situation leaves us no choice—so long as "a Way" (across *samsara*) still exists for us, with wayfarers to tread it, our

thinking and language must needs reflect our own condition; hence the value of symbolical modes of expression which, at least to some extent, escape the limitations of individual thought.

It is noteworthy that Guénon, when writing about the Hindu doctrines, alluded very little to *samsara* as such; he wished rather to emphasize the principal simultaneity of that which, from the standpoint of ordinary experience, appears as successive: the "guénonian" presentation of the *Multiple States of the Being* is a static version of the same truth which *samsara* traditionally expresses in dynamic mode. Guénon's scheme of the *degrees* of reality is illuminating provided it be not turned into a system to the detriment of the essential indefinitude of *samsara* and its contents. It would seem, however, that Guénon, despite warnings offered to others, somewhat systematised his own views on the subject; whence his statement that, among Hindus, their frequent references to rebirth in human form are consciously intended to be read in a symbolical sense only, and that it is Western misunderstanding, notably on the part of Theosophists, that is exclusively responsible for current reincarnationist phraseology. Having had much to do with both Brahmins and Lamas in their own countries I can only say that as a statement of fact the above mentioned view does not hold water.

While I feel sure that all are agreed in rejecting the possibility of *repetition* in the arising and existence of beings, as spelling metaphysical nonsense, the possibility of another (but different) human birth is not formally ruled out by the Orientals; for them, this possibility goes in with the rest of *samsara* and they neither try to limit it in positive or negative terms. One can perhaps best express the traditional view by saying that human birth is a rare and correspondingly precious opportunity, determined like everything else in an indefinite Round of Existence by antecedent *karma*. Popular simplifications apart, this is the doctrine one meets in Asia.

Lastly, to take two lesser points of detail in Mr. Calmeyer's letter: he mentions some recent books, with names of Indian writers quoted there, as evidence that Guénon was wrong in ascribing the "reincarnational" idea to Western authorship only: though this point has already been touched on, I should like to add that persons, Oriental by race, who have come strongly under modernist European influences cannot fairly be cited as spokesmen for the Eastern traditions; intellectually they are hybrids. Of the ones mentioned by Mr. Calmeyer some evidently come under that heading, of whom Swami Vivekananda was a typical example—a remarkable personality in his way, but a prey to all sorts of sentimental confusions plainly traceable to a Westernised education and its consequences; Sri Chaitanya, on the other hand, was a saint of unimpeachably traditional authority, whose teachings have not to be criticised, but "situated" which is a very different thing.

The other point in the letter calling for comment concerns "the unequivocal references" to reincarnation allegedly to be found in the Bible: having looked up all the passages listed by the author of the letter I can only say that none of them read to me as referring to the idea under discussion, even remotely.

MARCO PALLIS.
London, 23.12.66.

(Original editorial inclusions that followed the essay:)

Whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things.

Philippians, iv, 8