

REINCARNATION IN AMERICA: AN ESOTERIC HISTORY, by Lee Irwin. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2017. Pp. xxvi + 446. \$130.00 (hardcover). ISBN 978-1-4985-407-7.

Lee Irwin is Professor of Religious Studies at the College of Charleston in South Carolina. He counts among his interests Native American spirituality, Western esotericism, Eastern religions, transpersonal theory, and parapsychological research. He has authored or edited numerous articles and books on these topics. In the work under review, he tackles beliefs in and about reincarnation in America (i. e., the United States). He notes that there are three major avenues of influence on American ideas about reincarnation—those stemming from Amerindian cultures, those imported in religious and occult traditions, and those derived from “direct participatory knowledge [i.e., past-life memory] taken as evidential basis for such belief” (p. xv). He states that his project is “an attempt to understand more fully the American context for reincarnation as a viable postmortem theory for many people.” It is not “an attempt to argue for any absolute conviction but rather to explore the value that such a theory has for others in the American context” (p. xvi). Nevertheless, in his concluding chapters he addresses the question of how reincarnation might operate, a subject to which I will return.

Reincarnation in America consists of an Introduction and twenty chapters organized into three parts. The six chapters of Part I, Pre-American Theories of Reincarnation, deal with Amerindian, Greek, Roman, Neoplatonic, Medieval Christian, Kabbalistic, and Christian esoteric ideas about rebirth. Irwin justifies this wide-ranging survey as a necessary background for understanding the reincarnation theories that were brought to America from the 16th century onwards. Oddly, he does not similarly contextualize the Native American traditions he considers. Amerindian reincarnation beliefs do not stand alone in the world but are related to an animistic system of global currency, as Sir Edward Burnett Tylor recognized as early as the 1870s (Tylor, 1877, vol. 2, pp. 2-5). Equally oddly, Irwin attributes Amerindian reincarnation beliefs to observations of “the cyclical nature of the seasons and the regenerative power of nature” (p. xvi), rather than to past-life memory and other signs, despite the evidence for the latter provided in Mills and Slobodin’s (1994) *Amerindian Rebirth*, which he cites later on.

Part II, American Reincarnation, treats reincarnation beliefs in the earlier (pre-contemporary) American scene. Chapters are devoted to American Transcendentalism; African traditions and the Afro-Caribbean synthesis; Spiritualism, Theosophy, and occult systems such as Freemasonry and Rosicrucianism; Buddhism and other Asian religious influences; and, once again, Christian esoteric theories. These chapters are powerful testimony to the pervasiveness and diversity of reincarnation beliefs in America, from the colonial period onward. Ironically, as Irwin points out, native beliefs were absent from this American mixing bowl. Immigrants brought their traditions with them and were oblivious to similar ideas found among the indigenous peoples in the land they occupied.

Part III is entitled Post-American Reincarnation. Irwin explains that the concept of “post-American” reincarnation “points toward both the international global context of postmortem rebirth theories that are irreducible to any form of strict nationalism and the overall impact of science as another form of

transnational language and conception" (p. 291). During this period, the contemporary period, "global media" and "constant information exchange," as well as case studies conducted in the field and narratives from age regressions under hypnosis, inform American thinking about reincarnation. In addition to spontaneous case studies and regression narratives, the seven chapters address the pronouncements of channelers on reincarnation, the contribution of out-of-body and near-death experiences to the evidence for postmortem survival, and the implications of certain versions of quantum physics theory for the mind/body problem.

This third section of the book is less successful than the earlier sections. The material treated here is more extensive and complex than that dealt with before, and there are significant omissions and distortions of emphasis. In discussing Ian Stevenson's reincarnation theory (pp. 320-324), Irwin overlooks his concept of the psychophore, a sort of subtle or astral body he believed responsible for transferring memory and physical form one life to another (Stevenson, 1997, vol. 2, pp. 2083-2092; Stevenson, 2001, pp. 234, 251). The notion that the psychophore acts as a "template" for the new physical body obliged Stevenson to begin reincarnation with conception. He was uncertain what to do with cases whose intermissions were under nine months in length and was inclined to consider them possession rather than reincarnation. Irwin cites Jim B. Tucker's (2005) book, *Life Before Life*, but is apparently unaware of Tucker's (2013) *Return to Life*, which includes several American spontaneous cases of past-life memory and develops a novel theory of reincarnation as tantamount to the continuation of a dream. Irwin gives extended attention to regressions under hypnosis, which he treats as on equal evidentiary standing with spontaneous memories, but fails to appreciate the full impact of regressions on American popular (New Age) ideas about reincarnation. He singles out the speculations of Amit Goswami (pp. 381-384) and Eric Weiss (pp. 384-387) for special attention, but neither has had as much influence as regression therapists Michael Newton and Brian Weiss on popular thinking.

In his last two chapters, Irwin explores, tentatively, how the reincarnation process might work. He does so by bringing together the various "theories" of reincarnation represented in America and looking for common denominators in them, as if there is truth to be found in their intersection. Spontaneous case investigations are granted no special privilege. Irwin offers no justification for this procedure, attempts no review of the findings from research with spontaneous cases, and has no discussion of the ways in which these findings differ from common religious and New Age assumptions about reincarnation. This produces, among other things, an unquestioning acceptance of traditional ideas of karma, for which Stevenson found little support in his spontaneous cases research (Stevenson, 2001, pp. 251-153).

Reincarnation in America is at its best as an inventory of writings about reincarnation in the New World. Irwin demonstrates unequivocally that reincarnation ideas have never been absent from the American scene, although they have had no place in mainstream religious teachings. No one previously has brought this material together on anything like this scale and those with questions about reincarnation in American esoteric thought finally have somewhere to go for answers. Unfortunately, Irwin's achievement is badly undercut by referencing practices that provide uneven aid to the scholar who wishes to follow up and learn more. The basic referencing method is a Chicago social science format that places full references in chapter endnotes, with successive references to the same work given in short form, so that the reader has to hunt back through the notes (sometimes into earlier chapters) to locate a desired reference. A Bibliography at the end of the book repeats many citations, but far from all. Some

references are given in short form only, without complete information in either the chapter endnotes or the Bibliography, rendering them opaque to the reader unfamiliar with them. There is an editorial sloppiness here that one would not expect from Rowman & Littlefield, especially in a book that carries a \$130 pricetag.

References

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