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# **The Concept of *Karma* in Hinduism and Christianity: An Appraisal**

***Alamu, Akiti Glory\****

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The concept of *Karma* in Hinduism and Christianity is logically attractive and intellectually compelling but controversial in nature. Critically, *Karma* in Hinduism and Christianity convincingly showcases this belief that it is real in these religions. However, Christian scholars diametrically oppose the concept of *Karma* as it is tied to reincarnation. This paper however argues that scriptural texts affirm this Karmic belief in Hinduism and Christianity. *Karma*, as it is tied to reincarnation is not a pagan concept rather it speaks of the love and justice of God. Therefore, the paper concludes that interpretation is open to everyone who exegetically studies the scriptures. "For he who knows one knows none," hence the comparison. This fundamental problem of limiting human understanding to the texts of the scriptures has veiled human knowledge in several respects since revelation is progressive.

## **Introduction**

Virtually, all the world's living religions teach and preach morality to humankind. However, there are various approaches to this concept. In all religions, good or moral conduct is one of the prerequisites to win God's love and salvation. In

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Hinduism for instance, it is believed that salvation can be attained through the way of knowledge, works and devotion to God - all these are embedded in the law of *Karma*. This law of *Karma* is tied to reincarnation occasioning many rebirths in order to right the wrong and subsequently attain *Moksha* - salvation and be united with God - Brahman. While in Christianity, salvation is linear as it is appointed to 'man' to die once and judgement follows. Thus, this linear way of salvation in Christianity does not give room to many rebirths or to make life cyclical. As a matter of fact, this linear-life or one-life experiment negates the copious biblical passages pointing to the law of *Karma* and reincarnation. It is against this background therefore, that the paper will explore this problem in both religions.

### Hinduism

Religion has played an intricate and fundamental role in shaping the history of Southern Asia. When we examine almost any aspect of life or social activity in South Asia, we discover that religion is actively involved in all respects. India, otherwise known as *Bharat* is a republic in the southern Asia where Hinduism evolved. Thus, India is the seventh largest and the second most populous country in the world with a population of over a billion.<sup>1</sup> It is a sub-continent than a country, and its regional diversities are reflected in the mosaic of its myriad races, languages and religions, even in the differing dress, manners, culture and thought; and in its wide disparities in education and illiteracy, poverty and wealth. Interestingly therefore, India got her independence in 1947 from Britain with the help of Mahatma Gandhi, the apostle of *Ahimsa* - Non-violence.

Thus, India, from where Hinduism evolved is a very religious country. India, with her gamut of religions is a "Secular" state, in which case, the state does not identify with any of the several religions in the country as enshrined in her constitution. The members of each religion are free to practice and propagate their faith uninterruptedly. It is instructive to assert that India houses Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism, Sikhism, Islam, Christianity and other belief-systems. Sufficient to say that Hinduism commands the loyalty of about 13 percent of the world population.<sup>2</sup>

Tiwari,<sup>3</sup> Sen,<sup>4</sup> and Umejesi<sup>5</sup> collaboratively assert that Hinduism is perhaps the oldest of all the living religions. They add that it has neither any definite date of its origin nor has it any definite founder associated with it. It is called *Sanatana*

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*dharma*, a religion coming down to people through eternity.<sup>6</sup> However, Mc Dowell and Don Stewart posit that Hinduism is the second oldest world's living religions.<sup>7</sup> The duo, however, write from the perspective of Christianity and as such they are biased as to the oldest of all the living religions. Nevertheless, Hinduism is one of the world's oldest religions.<sup>8</sup>

Hinduism is the name given to the highly multifarious religious tradition that has evolved and confined to India in 3000 BCE, and is today represented by the beliefs and practices of 900 million Hindus, of whom the majority live in India where they constitute 80 percent of the population of the Indian society.<sup>9</sup> About 20 million Hindus live outside India.<sup>10</sup> Hinduism is a set of religious beliefs and practices that evolved in the Indian sub-continent and largely marked by the caste system. Hinduism thus has creedal, social, and ideological frameworks that have been greatly known and religiously followed. However, Hinduism is different from what it represents in the western conception.

Hinduism thus goes beyond the western concept of animal veneration, division according to caste and bathing in the river Ganges. In fact, Hinduism is totally different from the western understanding of it and subsequently goes beyond the linear interpretation of the concept. Han-Joachim Schoeps describes Hinduism as both Hellenism and Judaism. To him, Hellenism denotes a way of life while Judaism denotes a national religion.<sup>11</sup> Schoeps refers to Hinduism as the faith and the way of life since ancient times, which dominated the thinking and feelings of Indians.<sup>12</sup> However, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, an Indian scholar who has spent and devoted much of his life to a quasi-apologetic interpretation of his country's religion and culture to the Anglo-Saxon world painstakingly posited that Hinduism is a way of life rather than a national religion. Apparently, Hinduism as a way of life is further described not only as a religion per se, but also obedience to a God-given revelation and the worship of God in consonance with the content of that revelation.<sup>13</sup> Hinduism does not deny the existence of God but rather affirms His existence, but it is free from dogmatic affirmation concerning His nature. It is not anchored to the existence or non-existence of God or on whether there is one God or many.<sup>14</sup>

Thus, diversity is the nucleus of understanding the religious life of the Hindus, since Hinduism is not a unity, like African Religion. It is also a religion with many "no's". No founder, no definite creed, no priestly hierarchy, no single universally

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accepted scripture, no single moral code or theological system, no clearly defined way of salvation and no single concept of god central to it, no conversion, and no missionary enterprise.<sup>15</sup> Worthy of note is the fact that Hinduism is known as the encyclopaedia of religions in Asian countries. This is because it is the oldest and most complex of all the world religions. Its loose term describes a host of religions and sects that have developed and flourished over the millennium under the aegis of the complex ancient Hindu mythology.<sup>16</sup>

Hinduism involves the most various forms and theories of religious life that include rituals, animal cult, sanctity of the cow (sacred cow), polytheism, pantheism, henotheism, monism and monotheism. All these facts exist side by side within the framework of Hinduism. Hinduism as a religion is a polytheistic monotheism. This means that Hinduism is not a polytheistic religion even though, it has 330 million gods. According to Parthasarathy, Hinduism speaks of one God, but the various gods and goddesses of the Hindu pantheon are mere representatives or vicegerents of the powers and functions of the one Supreme God in the manifested world.<sup>17</sup> Supporting this view, J.B. Noss writes:

It is not one religion, but rather a family of religions... Hinduism is fluid and changing... Hinduism is the whole complex of beliefs and institutions that have appeared from the time when their ancient scriptures, the vedas, were composed until now... Hindus have an extraordinary wide selection of beliefs and practices to choose from: they can be pantheists, polytheists, monotheists, agnostics, or even atheists.<sup>18</sup>

It is interesting to note that arising from the various views and complexities of Hinduism, it has been defined as:

a complex body of social, cultural and religious beliefs and practices evolved and largely confined to the Indian sub-continent and marked by a caste system, an outlook tending to view all forms and theories of aspects of one eternal being and truth, a belief in Ahimsa, Karma, Dharma, Samsara, and Moksha, and the practice of the way of works, the way of knowledge, or the way of devotion as a means of release from the rounds of births and rebirths.<sup>19</sup>

The comprehensiveness of this definition has brought out at a glance, all the contours of Hinduism. Hinduism can equally be referred to as Vedaism or *Vedic* religion. *Vedaism* is the mixture of the Indic and Aryan religions. Hinduism

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had its roots in 3000 BCE in the wave of migration that brought the pale-skinned Aryan people down from the north western and south eastern Europe into the Indus valley, now located mainly in Pakistan and India. From there, they spread rapidly into the Ganges river and across India.<sup>20</sup> The word "Hindu" is originally derived from the name of the river Sindhu (the modern Indus) near which the Indo-Aryans founded their earliest settlements sometimes about the middle of the second millennium before Christ.<sup>21</sup> Thus, the Indic and Aryan religious beliefs as a result of the nomadic Aryans (noble in Sanskrit) who conquered the Dravidians, the Aboriginal inhabitants of the Indus valley approximately 1,500 BCE, the religions of the two races got blended into one.<sup>22</sup> Hinduism is therefore by origin the religion of the Indo-Aryans. Hinduism is confined largely to the Indian Peninsula, as the religion is basically ethnic and not as proselytizing and universalizing as Buddhism, Christianity and Islam. However, one can see Hindus in Europe, America, Africa but generally, Indians carry their religion wherever they go.<sup>23</sup>

Apparently, the thought of any religion is difficult, yet in the case of Hinduism it is impossible either. It is the essence of Hinduism that there are many different ways of looking at a single object, none of which will give the whole view, but each is entirely valid in its own right. In this regard, John Bowker has this to say:

A statue may be viewed from many angles. Each aspect helps to convey what the statue is like, but no single aspect is able to comprehend the statue as a whole, still less does the act of viewing it from one particular angle or another constitute the statue itself.<sup>24</sup>

Succinctly speaking, Hinduism, as a gamut of many religious beliefs and practices has many approaches to its teachings and beliefs, but the Hindus see sameness in all of them. Hindus truly believe that in every religion there is the kernel of truth, sameness in doctrines. However, they vary considerably since they are the applications of the truth to the human situation. Radhakrishana posits that rites, ceremonies, systems and dogmas lead beyond themselves to a region of utter clarity and so have only relative truth. Every work, every concept is a pointer pointing beyond itself. The sign should not be mistaken for the thing signified. The signpost thus is not the destination,<sup>25</sup> hence God or gods are not central to this complex of beliefs. Essentially, the effect of Vedic religion on south-Asian culture cannot be ignored as a result of its mutual tolerance, which the Hindus see as a path to wisdom rather than confrontation. A good



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understanding of south Asian culture requires some knowledge of the religious history of the region. Thus, Hinduism has much room for personal decision-making and actually has no concrete definite set of beliefs. Its spiritual options are open to anyone.

In sum, Hinduism is a religious tradition that embraces a wide variety of religious positions, integrating both small local cults that may be known to major sects like *Vaishnavism*, (the preserver), *Shaivism* (the destroyer), and *Shaktism* that have millions of adherents, rich mythologies, temples, iconographies and theologies, each of which could be considered a religion in its own right. Another fundamental metaphysical presupposition is that of *Brahman*, the Impersonal Absolute Creator, or world soul which underlies the phenomenal diversity of the universe and with which the individual soul (*Atman*) is united in some form of relationship when salvation is obtained.<sup>26</sup> These religious flavours in Hinduism make it a complex unit as viewed from various strands. R.C. Zaehner saw in it not just a philosophy, but both philosophy and religion. Therefore, it will not be out of place to tersely conclude in the light of the above that Hinduism is a philosophical religion or a religious philosophy.<sup>27</sup> Finally, Hinduism is not history, but the history of a tradition that explains its vast range, richness, diversity, and demonstrates the family relationships that hold its various components. That Hinduism is a single religious universe is affirmed wherever a Hindu accepts a fellow Hindu as someone with beliefs and practices that vary substantially from his or her own, and it is this self-identity, rather than a communality of doctrine and practice, that gives Hinduism the cohesion and coalescence of a great world's living religion, as it claims its profound place in the comity of major world religions.

### The Law of *Karma* in Hinduism

*Karma* is a concept common in Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism and Sikhism, specially based on the Vedas and early Upanishads, which explains deed, action, cause and effect that is inherent in existence within the bounds of time, space and change. In simple language, *Karma* means action, or combination of actions, the inexorable law of justice, law of nemesis and causality. Broadly speaking, Law of *Karma* is the belief in moral order.<sup>28</sup>

This doctrine of *Karma* holds that every action and consequence by a small being or group of beings produces effects. These effects which could be good,

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bad, or neutral, determine the future of the being that performed the action. Karmic actions, therefore, are the heart of the multi-life theory, just as physical and chemical actions are the basic causes of the multi-forms of water.<sup>29</sup>

*Karma* is the physical manifestation of the law of balance and harmony, as it applies to the results of decisions reached and attitudes held by beings capable of free will and choice. *Karma*, which has been traced back to the early Upanishads, around 1500 BCE is not fate; humans are believed to act with freewill, thereby creating their own destinies. According to the Vedas, if an individual sows goodness he or she is bound to reap goodness; if one sows evil, he or she will reap evil. *Karma* refers therefore to the totality of humankind's actions and their corresponding reactions in present and past lives, all of which determine the future. However, much *Karma* does not have an immediate effect; some accumulate and return expectedly in an individual's later lives. The conquest of *Karma* is believed to lie in intelligent action and dispassionate reaction.<sup>30</sup>

Hugh Chisholm asserts that every act of every individual has not only a moral value producing merit or demerit, but also an inherent power which works out its fitting reward or punishment.<sup>31</sup> To the Hindu, this does not make heaven or hell unnecessary. Though, these two exist in many forms more or less grotesque, the soul passes to one of them after death and there receives its due. However, that existence too is marked by desire and action, and is therefore productive of good and evil, and the soul is thus still entangled in the meshes of *Karma* it must again assume an earthly garb and continues the strife. No wonder, *Karma* and *Samsara* (Round of births) are immutably inseparable. Also important is, if the good suffer evil they are expiating for the evil in their previous existence. Likewise the wicked that enjoy prosperity are still enjoying the fruit of accumulated earlier good deeds.<sup>32</sup> Life therefore is a process without beginning and end. Hinduism recognizes existence as cyclical. Salvation here becomes practical since Hinduism recognizes deliverance from the power of *Karma*, and each of the philosophic systems has its own method of obtaining it.

*Karma*, in its major conception, is the physical, mental and supramental system of neutral rebound that is deeply rooted in the very being that one experiences. *Karma*, for these reasons, naturally is tied to reincarnation since actions and deeds in previous existence will affect one's current situation. Thus, humanity and individuals alike experience good fortune and tragedies for their

action. Apparently, the concept of an immanent "God" figure is unnecessary with the idea of *Karma*. "It is vital to note that *Karma* is not an instrument of a god, or a single God, but it is rather physical and spiritual physics of being."<sup>33</sup> As the law of motion governs inanimate objects, the law of *Karma* governs the motion and happenings of life, animate and inanimate, conscious and unconscious in the cosmic realm.

The consciousness of *Karma* is embedded in the psyche of the ancient Indian, for whom Hinduism originated as a result of a pressure of a practical need due to the process of evil in life.<sup>34</sup> Thus, evil is moral and physical. Suffice it to say that the individual is a product of many lives in the past, the condition of mind being ignorant as the result of the former minds, which were inherited by the individual from his former self. This seems to make liberation from this circle necessary and perhaps, difficult. It is thus clear that these evils as presented in the Hindu scripture are *Samsara*-round of rebirths, *Karma*-action and deeds, *Kama*-desires, *Ahamkara*-egoism, *Avidya*-ignorance. This is the connection among these evils whereby one begets the other or one results as a consequence of the other.<sup>35</sup>

In *Bhagavad-Gita*, rebirth is a consequence of our *Karma*; our actions from our desires; our desires originated from egoism, egoism obtains as a result of ignorance of the true essence of reality.<sup>36</sup> In fact, it is due to ignorance (*Avidya*) that one fails to realize that the world is an illusion *Maya* in the opinion of Shankara, or *Lila* – game of god as held among the Vaishnavites.<sup>37</sup> This is the hallmark of *Karma*.

Since the time of the *Upanishads*, it was established that the human is thrown into the ocean of phenomenal world of time, change, space and causation, which fluctuates between creation and dissolution. The human is equally fettered to the disguising phenomenon of *Samsara*. He is unable to get out of this *Samsara* until he attains to the Absolute- the Release (*Moksha*).<sup>38</sup> Human beings are said to be spurred into actions by the desire of their fruits. This is well spelt out in the *Mahabharata*.

The tree of desire in the heart is born of men in confusion; ignorance is its root; wrath and pride are its trunks; its vigour of growth comes from acts done in past lives.<sup>39</sup>

From a philosophical point of view, *Karma* is a moral agent or moral banking system that allocates a credit and debit of good and bad. In order to attain supreme consciousness; to escape from the wheel of life, death and rebirth and the knot of *Karma*, one must altogether transcend *Karma*. This method of transcendence is differently dealt with in many streams of Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism and Sikhism as well as other faiths and philosophical systems. Interestingly, the angle from which salvation is sought is the positive aspect of the law of *Karma*. This is manifested in humankind showing the state of liberation, which means to be with *Brahman*, and *Brahman* is pure being, consciousness, bliss, and the one who has attained salvation (*Moksha*) can see the eternal in the temporal, and temporal as grounded in the eternal and participating in it.<sup>40</sup>

### **Background to Christianity**

It has been observed that of all the Semitic religions, Christianity has proved to be the most influential, all-pervading, co-extensive and has dominated a large population of the world, especially the western world.<sup>41</sup> Recent studies have shown that Christianity is estimated to have 2 billion adherents.<sup>42</sup> Thus, Christianity arose in Palestine among the Jews, where Jesus lived and died. Meanwhile, Jesus, the founder of Christianity was born about 4 BCE.<sup>43</sup> It is within the framework of the Jewish world-view that the teachings of Jesus were delivered. The disciples of Jesus also received the teachings as Jewish people. At the time of Christ's birth, Romans had already taken over the rule of Palestine.<sup>44</sup>

Christianity has been described as a way of life and an essentially monotheistic religion. However, the idea of Trinity found in it sometimes raises doubt as to whether or not it is actually and strictly monotheistic. Although the followers have claimed that theirs is a monotheistic religion which has directly and undoubtedly evolved from the revelations and insights of Jesus Christ. It can hardly be disputed that Christianity owes much for its origin to Judaism.<sup>45</sup>

As earlier observed, Jesus himself was a Jew and he never thought of floating a new religion, while he was preaching his own religious views. He was thus only trying to correct the misconceptions, superstitions, rituals, representations and ceremonies that clustered Judaism. Jesus wanted to play the role of a reformer, however it is in the exigency of time that his teachings which sometimes varied significantly from the traditional Jewish beliefs and practices, gave birth to a new religion of which he was begun to be treated as the founder and prophet.<sup>46</sup>

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Of a truth, Jesus himself reiterated that he had come not to abolish the Law (the old faith) but to fulfil the Law and the Prophets. In essence, as a result of his Jewish background, he respected the Decalogue (Ten Commandments) of Moses and subsequently sustained and thus re-emphasized them in the light of his own understanding of God as Love - *agape*. The implications of the Law and their fulfilment were repeatedly emphasised by Jesus to his disciples. Jesus focused his attention on those who were eager to be tutored by him.<sup>47</sup>

This itinerant adventure prepared the way for the Christian church. Tiwari argues that Christianity can well be regarded as an extension of Judaism in a more elevated direction.<sup>48</sup> This is borne out by the realisation that love must be extended to God and fellow beings. The latter is based on the golden rule.

It is worthy to note that Jesus is treated differently in Christianity. This is so, since it accepted a type of messianic position to restore the Jewish faith in God in its true essence. The Old Testament of the scripture is as much as a sacred text for the Christians as for the Jews.<sup>49</sup> Only Christians have the New Testament integrating especially the *kerygma* or *logia* of Jesus. This made the people to describe him as the true image of God, son of God, messiah, saviour, and representative. At times, Jesus is referred to as word, *logos* becoming flesh. He is regarded as God-man. He forms the second person of the Christian Trinity. Often, "he is also taken as the incarnation of God to give people the true divine message. His teachings, therefore, are regarded as the true divine message imparted to men."<sup>50</sup>

It is affirmed that Christianity originated in the teachings of Jesus which presently constitute the body of Christian beliefs and practices, not in its entirety the gift of Jesus alone. There have been other saints, mystics and thinkers who have added much to the teachings of Jesus. At least, the impact of St. Paul who immediately followed Jesus cannot be relegated. In the words of many it is Paul, and not Jesus, who should be regarded as the real founder of Christianity.<sup>51</sup>

Be that as it may, Jesus had a sufficient magnetic personality to gather new disciples and other followers. He inspired them not only by his teaching, but also by his character and what his present friends said about him. Despite not having a public address system, he is often described as attracting crowds of several thousands<sup>52</sup> and penetrating and soul-inspiring words whole-heartedly accepted by those who listened to him for days on end.



In summary, the historicity of Jesus, of his basic teaching and the impact he made on his contemporaries, and of his death, no doubt transformed his little band of dejected and dispirited followers into a company of witnesses whom no persecution could silence, and who turned the world upside down.<sup>53</sup> In fact, they testified that what happened was that the crucified Jesus had been raised from the dead and had appeared to them and many other witnesses. Likewise, Paul espoused this factual statement. To this end, Christianity, without fuss, originated in the teachings of Jesus, it took definite shape as a religion at the effort of Paul. St. Paul not only spread the teachings of Jesus with full sense of devotion and honesty, but also added impetuous ideas from his own side. We must not fail to acknowledge the fact that the teachings and activities of Jesus till date, Christian saints who followed and still follow Jesus made and as well make Christianity what really it is today by adding much from their own by way of interpretation, explanation and emphasis.

### **Christian View on *Karma***

In Christianity, the concept of *Karma* or the law of retribution though controversial is crucial to this study. The law of retribution depicts that "...whatsoever a man sows he will reap" (Gal 6:7 KJV). *Karma* is a system of retributive justice that perpetuates rebirth and determines the form and setting of each succeeding incarnation. Sooner or later, people experience for themselves precisely the joys and sorrows they create for others.<sup>54</sup> Thus, the implication in the early Christianity may have advocated its own kind of *Karma* which suggests that the idea is not restricted to eastern mysticism. These various interpretations lead many to adopt a historical view of *Karma* in Christianity because such a notion is not entirely correct.

*Karma* in terms of actions or destiny, and the "the law of sowing and reaping" as a concept is also implied in biblical passages:

"An eye for an eye"

"The fathers have eaten sour grapes and their children's teeth are set on edge" (Jer 31:29 KJV)

"And the sins of the father shall be visited upon their children till fourth generation"

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"And as Jesus passed by, he saw a man which was blind from his birth. And his disciples asked him, saying, master, who did sin, this man, or his parents, that he was born blind? Jesus answered, neither hath this man sinned, nor his parents: but that the works of God should be made manifest in him" (John 9:1-3KJV)

"Be not deceived, God is not mocked for whatever a man soweth, that shall he also reap" (Gal 6:7 KJV)

Perhaps, the above quotations from both the Old and New Testaments of the Christian scriptures indicate that not only do the passages imply the ready acceptability of the idea of reincarnation, but also the context that also depicts their acceptance of *Karma*.

From the above, the Old Testament's "an eye for an eye" notion, is even more specific in balancing a soul's moral accounts with retribution for past debts. This view is certainly quite more practical and down-to-earth. The approach of "an eye for an eye" assumes that for any misdeed for which *Karma* would be incurred, there would be a quite rewarding deed available in the future.<sup>55</sup> However, this may not appeal to the rationalists, yet it appeals to the regularity theorists.<sup>56</sup> Ewing has stated clearly that in the principle of causation, it is not empirically justifiable that what has succeeded a certain kind of event regularly in the past is likely to do so in the future, but the regular sequence at any rate makes the minimum concessions to the rationalists. 'Regularity theory' depicts that the cause of a particular phenomenon is the effect of everything that is experienced and transpired. Ewing goes further to say that the cause is *toto genere* different from giving a reason; it does not in the least help to explain why the effect happened, it only tells us what preceded the effects. More so, this conceptual form of karmic justice is the potential for self-perpetuating problem. Thus, past life regressions have tended to portray *Karma* with a more ruthless balancing of justice of "an eye for an eye" being more likely in the earlier of a soul's evolution.<sup>57</sup> It is interesting to note that the past life-process considers *Karma* as a development of the self, wherein the intent is to further the evolution of the soul. In this case, the belief is that certain experiences are necessarily encountered over and over again in order to learn the essential but difficult lesson of existence. How often the same lessons are repeated is determined by how well subsequent experiences are handled.<sup>58</sup>

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In another development, the concept of "the fathers eating sour grapes and their children teeth are set on edge" and "the visitation of the sins of the fathers upon their children till fourth generations" are pointers to the fact that reincarnation that is embedded in *Karma* finds expression and speaks volumes here. Here, it is obvious that these Bible passages affirm the concept of *Karma* in that they make life probationary thereby making amends in a successive reincarnation. This is a clear indication of a belief that one's lot in this life must be paid for and this life is dependent upon a soul's degree of evolution.

The Old Testament's "an eye for an eye" notion is relatively glaring in its intent as is the New Testament's "he that leadeth into captivity shall go into captivity; he that killeth with the sword must be killed with the sword" (Revelations 13:10 KJV). Not only that, the view of the man born blind as being punished by the blindness for sins committed in an earlier life before he was reincarnated can be viewed equally. Accordingly, these views suggest that they are equivalent to *Karma*, whereby sins in one incarnation are atoned for in a later one. These, to some extent, were current and acceptable during the time of Christ.<sup>59</sup> In line with the above, Dopamu argues that John the Baptist was Elijah incarnate who consumed people by fire and in his reincarnation, he was beheaded in order to pay for his previous deed.<sup>60</sup> The implication of this is the fact that every deed must be accounted for either here and now or in the future life.

Some Ionian and patristic scholars had also supported the above view. Plato, supported by Ducasse stated that lives are probationary, in which a righteous life improves and an unrighteous life deteriorates the progress of the soul. Plato apparently also believed that the human soul could move from man to beast and back as part of a soul's improvement or deterioration.<sup>61</sup>

In the ancient Egyptian text, *The instruction of Ptahhotep* (dating back to 2600 BCE), we discovered that such concepts as "your actions become your judgements".<sup>62</sup> This is in consonance with the idea of *Karma* thus paying the debt of one's action. This serves as soul's moral accounts with retribution for past debts.

Subsequent understandings of the Christian Gnostics and the Hebrew *Kabbalas*, however involved a simpler and perhaps more sophisticated form of



compensation. Instead of condemning a murderer to die in similar manner, the person's soul is allowed to make amends and balance the books in some other way - perhaps by caring for the dying or maimed in a future life.<sup>63</sup> In this order, it is clear that the Christian Gnostics and the Hebrew *Kabbalas* had integrated some significant modifications to the Christian view of *Karma*. However, *The Instruction of Ptahhotep* captures the essence of *Karma* in the Christian exegetical view. No wonder, Paul the apostle who was said to have supervised the death of deacon Stephen and his lot was also beheaded in the persecution that greeted the early church during the reign of Emperor Nero in CE64.

Modern writers, influenced as such by theosophy ridicule the doctrine of hell, and prove that it would be most irrational of God to condemn a human to perpetual hell fire on a single experiment called life.<sup>64</sup> Christie-Murray asserts that:

Reincarnation is the only system that shows God as just and loving; it is the only 'theory' that successfully explains the conviction of every believer that God is absolutely just and loving...without reincarnation, there would be no basis to speak of justice and love in God's relationship with man.<sup>65</sup>

Christie-Murray and Lampe argue, following the medieval emanation's thinker, John Scotus that any soul lost to hell on the basis of one experiment of Christian judgement after death would diminish God. Again, they argue logically and impressively that giving a human many opportunities through many reincarnations to perfect himself and thus fit himself for reabsorption into the God head is most credible and plausible. Now since God cannot suffer any setback or diminution, it therefore follows that no soul will be lost when everything comes to be considered.<sup>66</sup>

To this end, the above serve as nuggets and facts, not necessarily circumscribed by hereditary and environment, but as a true picture of *Karma* in Christian exegetical interpretation of the scriptures vis-à-vis Christian writers. Hence, the idea of recycling souls until every single one is perfected and made fit to return to God offers a better way out and as well speak of the love and justice of God.

### **Karma in Hinduism and Christianity Compared**

On the subject of God, both beliefs agree on the concept of the Ultimate Reality. In Hinduism, the Supreme Being is Undefinable and Impersonal Brahman. Christianity, on the other hand teaches that there is a Supreme Being who is the Infinite Personal Creator.

In Hinduism, there is the possession of scriptures such as the Vedas, Upanishads, Bhagavad-Gita and others. Christianity on the other hand, possesses the Bible that contains both the Old and the New Testament. The various scriptures talk about the doctrine of *Karma*.

Both religions talk about salvation though the approach differs. Salvation in Hinduism can be attained in one of the three general ways: the way of knowledge, the way of works and the way of the devotion. Whereas in Christianity, salvation is from a potentially eternal separation from God and cannot be obtained by any number of good deeds, but rather is given freely by God to all who will receive it.<sup>67</sup>

In Hinduism, there is no sin against a holy God. Acts of wrong doing are not done against any God but are mainly a result of ignorance. These evils can be overcome by following faithfully the principles of one's caste and way of salvation. On the contrary, Christianity sees sin as a real act of rebellion against a perfect, sinless and holy God.<sup>68</sup>

In Christianity, there are the beliefs in forgiveness which make Christianity flexible and open to repentance here and now. Hinduism does not recognise forgiveness in the first place in its belief. Hence, the soul comes back to be purified as many rebirths as possible. On the concept of grace for both beliefs, it is asserted in Christianity that by "grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God..." (Ephesians 2:8). In the words of *Katha Upanishads* in Hinduism "by the help of his grace alone can man gain the saving of knowledge and be liberated" (*Katha Upanishads* 2:20). Also in (*Bhagavad-Gita* 18:57-58) it is enjoined thus:

Commit every action to me, consecrate entirely to me with the yoga of intelligence and of will, keen with the heart and conscience always united to me. If you stay united to me every moment with your heart and your conscience, then with my grace (prasada), you overcome all obstacles.

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So, both beliefs and their scriptures assign a place of recognition to grace in the attainment of final salvation. Umejesi obviously supports this view when he said that "man can attain eternal bliss not by his own efforts but purely by the help or election of God."<sup>69</sup>

In Hinduism, it is a strong belief as regards rebirth and the human can reincarnate as a human being, ghost, beasts even as a stone in a bid to purify oneself in order to be liberated from the wheel of reincarnation to be united with the Brahman. On the contrary, Christianity vehemently opposes reincarnation and strongly promotes the concept of judgement after death (Heb 9:27). In which case, Hinduism believes that life is cyclical and Christianity believes that life is linear or one-way. But we cannot discard the orthodox Christian texts that explain *Karma* as embedded in reincarnation. However, Christianity believes in the immortality of the soul and therefore it believes in a life after death also. The final day of judgement, heaven and hell according to one's deeds on earth is the pivot of Christian eschatology, and there is no room for rebirth. By contrast, Hinduism, though believes in immortality of the soul and has a loose concept in heaven and hell-dweller, sees life as cyclical as not being confined to one life experiment.

### An Appraisal

The above analysis on the concept of *Karma* in Hinduism and Christianity is logically very attractive and compelling. Unfortunately, some Old Testament scholars, eminent rabbis, philosophers and fathers of the church in the western hemisphere have completely rejected reincarnation as encapsulated in *Karma*. They argue that the doctrine of reincarnation is a pagan concept and devilish, coupled with the issue of human logic versus the word of God. They conclude that orthodox Christianity does not teach reincarnation as an official and openly recognised doctrine.<sup>70</sup> Corroborating the above argument, Stephen Lampe in his work, has painstakingly taken the trouble to scrutinise a number of scriptural texts which have been thought by some writers to suggest reincarnation. He then writes an instructive conclusion thus:

The Old Testament...contains a number of views of man's destiny after death, but rebirth is not among them...considering the prevalence of the belief from the earliest times throughout the world, and the size of the Old Testament corpus of writings, such neglect amounts to a rejection.<sup>71</sup>

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It can be deduced from the above that Lampe rejects the doctrine of rebirth, which is tied to *Karma*. However, he cannot reject or denounce the fact that Jer. 31:29 and the visitation of the sins of the fathers upon the sons till fourth generations, affirm *Karma*.

The New Testament scholars also examine the corpus of writings and their proof-texts usually adduced to reincarnation. It was agreed that only John 9:2 deserves serious attention. "The disciples asked Jesus: Teacher, whose sin caused him to be born blind? Was it his own or his parents' sin?" Jesus replied by saying that it happened for the son of man to be glorified. This reply has insulated the real substance from the question asked. One notes that the disciples were well informed of the doctrine of reincarnation as thought by the Jews or the eminent rabbis, and thus asked their master the question. Also, the sheer neglect of Jesus to answer the question informs the fact that he did not consider reincarnation worthwhile in Christian context. However, "reincarnationists argue that Jesus, in his reply, did not expressly reject the reincarnation preassumption in the question of the disciples... By not expressly rejecting or correcting or rebuking what would have been a false belief in his disciples, Jesus is thought to have acceded to the doctrine."<sup>72</sup>

Not only that, it is taught in the scripture that "it is appointed unto men to die once and after that the judgement" (Heb. 9:27 KJV). This again portrays the fact that the doctrine of *Karma* as it is tied to reincarnation is inconsistent with this part of the Christian scriptures. In other words, this doctrine that supports eternal hell cannot be reconciled with reincarnation in Hinduism where you have many rebirths till the soul is purified and united with Brahman - the Ultimate Reality. Nevertheless, the theosophists have debunked the Christian claim that judgement follows death. As observed earlier they berate the doctrine of hell and posit that a loving and just God cannot condemn a human to perpetual hell-fire on a single experiment called life. They logically concluded that giving the human many opportunities through many rebirths to right the wrong and perfect himself and thus fit himself for reabsorption into Godhead would seem to offer a better solution.<sup>73</sup>

In Vedic Hinduism, no room is given to forgiveness as a leeway for salvation. In Christianity, this doctrine is diametrically opposed to it. For instance, the doctrines of vicarious atonement and forgiveness of sins are rightly accepted

generally by Jesus and his disciples.<sup>74</sup> Thus, forgiveness and grace negate *Karma* and they make *Karma* mutable or abrogated. Since forgiveness and grace abrogate the immutability of *Karma*, it therefore means that Christianity does not support the doctrine, which is a fallacy and it contradicts the biblical verses that support this claim.

In Christianity, the born-again experience taught by Jesus to Nicodemus in John 3:3-6 points to a spiritual rebirth that would not need reincarnation. Jesus emphasized persuasively spiritual rebirth whereas, in Hinduism, this born-again rebirth is physical that accounts for many rebirths. But, the Karmists would insist that spiritual re-birth means that the individual has accepted God's grace in Jesus Christ; and this grace of God in turn suspends or abrogates *Karma*.<sup>75</sup> This appears to be another way of insinuating reincarnationism into Christian doctrine. Etuk argues that if *Karma* is an immutable law, then it means that nothing, not even God's grace, can change it. If on the other hand, God's grace can abrogate or dissolve *Karma*, then the Law of *Karma* is not immutable any longer; and the compelling necessity behind repeated reincarnations is abrogated.<sup>76</sup>

Having critically evaluated *Karma* in Hinduism and Christianity, we discover that both the religions convincingly showcase the belief in *Karma*. Nevertheless, Christian scholars seem to dissociate Christian teachings on *Karma* as tied to reincarnation from Christian beliefs. Thus, having subjected the doctrine of *Karma* in Christianity to serious scrutiny, it is obvious that the scriptural texts that affirm this karmic belief cannot be reviewed or abrogated. Its various modifications and interpretations are the products of human logic and theologians. Thus, the error in human thinking is that he/she believes that knowledge is linear and one-way, "for he who knows one knows none." Since the scriptures are the light, manual and guide of believers as well as their faith, they should be understood intellectually. This shows that the way of knowledge does not seem appealing to the masses, but rather to an intellectual few who are willing to go through it. The argument is that the scriptures cannot be discarded in the light of our selfish and myopic belief or view. Both the Old and New Testament quotations above affirm the doctrine of *Karma* in Christianity. Whether this negates God's plan of salvation for humankind or is seen as anti-Christian teaching is a product of hermeneutics, hermeneutics and exegesis because every religion teaches salvation, which is the ultimate goal of *Karma*. To reincarnate, is to speak of the attribute of eternal



of God as loving and just. But since, God is loving and just, there is enough room for amendments so as to fulfil God's plan in the here and now, and in the world to come. For Jesus Christ has not come to abolish the law but to fulfil it. Reincarnation is thus not a pagan concept. Rather it speaks of the love and justice of God. Therefore, it would be an overemphasis to condemn and term reincarnation as an arch-enemy of God's plan for human salvation.

### Conclusion

Our excursion so far has revealed the concept of *Karma* in Hinduism and Christianity. The study also has critically evaluated the place of *Karma* in Christianity. Thus, it has been argued overtime by Old and New Testament scholars that *Karma* as tied to reincarnation diametrically opposes and contradicts the essential Christian teachings at every turn. Etuk particularly concludes that "reincarnation, therefore, cannot be the doctrine of God; but rather that of the arch-enemy of God, the devil and meant to lead man away from God's plan of salvation for mankind."<sup>77</sup> To this end, the study has revealed that it is an overemphasis, short-sightedness and parochialism that amount some individuals to think that reincarnation is a pagan concept. Reincarnation speaks of salvation, love and justice of God, because God does not cherish losing a soul to hell fire as a result of first life experiment.

Finally, the doctrine of *Karma* is synonymous with Hinduism and Christianity. *Karma* is not only evident in Christianity, but is alluded to as copious scriptural texts speak of it. However, Christianity accepts *Karma* as detached from reincarnation. But *Karma* cannot be detached from reincarnation. The latter enables the former to function well. Therefore, they are immutably inseparable. To this end, interpretation is open to every one who exegetically studies the scriptures. Interestingly, scriptural texts are bases for Hindu and Christian doctrines of *Karma*, which this paper has emphasized. "For he who knows one knows none." This fundamental problem of limiting human understanding to the texts of the scriptures has veiled human knowledge in several respects as revelation is progressive.

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<sup>77</sup> Watch Tower, August 22, 1997, p. 9.

<sup>78</sup> *Mankind's Search for God* (New York: Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society, 1990), p. 98.

<sup>79</sup> K.N. Tiwari, *Comparative Religion* (Delhi: Narendra Parakash Jain, 1980), p. 8.

<sup>80</sup> K.M. Sen, *Hinduism* (London: Gannon Publications, 1963), pp. 14-15.

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- <sup>1</sup> I.O. Umejesi, "Lecture Note on Hinduism," Ambrose Alli University, Ekpoma, 1996.
- <sup>2</sup> K.N. Tiwari, p. 8.
- <sup>3</sup> McDowell and Don Stewart, *Understanding Non-Christian Religions* (San Bernardino: Here's Life Publisher Inc, 1982), p. 14.
- <sup>4</sup> *Electronic Microsoft Encarta*, 2008.
- <sup>5</sup> J.R Hinnells (ed.), *A New Dictionary of Religions* (Cambridge: Bookwell Publisher Inc, 1995), p. 211.
- <sup>6</sup> *Electronic Microsoft Encarta*, 2008.
- <sup>7</sup> Hans-Joachim S. *The Religions of Mankind* (New York: Anchor Books Inc, 1968), p. 158.
- <sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>9</sup> Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, *The Hindu View of Life* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1927), p. 59.
- <sup>10</sup> I.O Umejesi, "Lecture Note on Hinduism".
- <sup>11</sup> *Electronic Microsoft Encarta*, 2008.
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>13</sup> *Mankind's Search for God*, p. 98.
- <sup>14</sup> J.B. Noss, *Man's Religions* (New York: Macmillan Company 1969), p. 88
- <sup>15</sup> *Webster's Third New International Dictionary* (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica Publisher, 1981), p. 564.
- <sup>16</sup> *Mankind's Search for God*, p. 99.
- <sup>17</sup> I.O Umejesi, "Lecture Note on Hinduism."
- <sup>18</sup> I.O Umejesi, "Major Reformers of Hinduism," Ambrose Alli University, Ekpoma, 1998, p. 3.
- <sup>19</sup> *Mankind's Search for God*, p. 193.
- <sup>20</sup> J. Bowker, *Problems of Suffering in Religions of the World* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1970), p. 193.
- <sup>21</sup> Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, p. 164.
- <sup>22</sup> J.R Hinnells, p. 212.
- <sup>23</sup> R.C Zaehner, *Hinduism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 15.
- <sup>24</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Karma>
- <sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>27</sup> H. Chisholm (ed.) *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 11<sup>th</sup> ed (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), p. 910.
- <sup>28</sup> P. Ade Dopamu, *Esu: The Invisible Foe of Man* (Ijebu-Ode: Shebiotimo Publications, 2000), p. 125.
- <sup>29</sup> Hans-Joachim S., p. 163.
- <sup>30</sup> "The Nazarene Way of Essential Studies," Available in <http://www.theNazareneWaytoEssentialStudies.com>, p. 6.
- <sup>31</sup> I.O Umejesi, "Salvation in Hinduism as the Ultimate Goal of the Hindu: A Textual Enquiry," *EPHA: Ekpoma Journal of Religious Studies*, Vol 2, No.1, (June 1998), p. 103.

- <sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>37</sup> *The Bhagavad Gita*, 9:27 and 11:55.
- <sup>38</sup> I.O. Umejesi "Salvation in Hinduism" p. 103.
- <sup>39</sup> *Katha Upanishad*, 4:4.6.
- <sup>40</sup> *Mahabharata*, 12:255. 1ff.
- <sup>41</sup> K.N. Tiwari, p. 130.
- <sup>42</sup> This observation was made by the Vice Chancellor, University of Ilorin in his (chairman) opening speech during the 29<sup>th</sup> annual conference of the Nigerian Association of the Study of Religion (NASR) held in the same institution on 3<sup>rd</sup> September, 2008.
- <sup>43</sup> Edward Bailey, *Belief* (London: BT Batsford Ltd, 1974), p. 37.
- <sup>44</sup> G.E.M. Ogotu, "The Religious and Cultural Background of Early Christianity" in J.N.K. Mugambi, *A Comparative Study of Religions* (Nairobi: Nairobi University Press, 1990), p. 189.
- <sup>45</sup> K.N. Tiwari, p. 130.
- <sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>47</sup> Edward Bailey, pp. 38-39.
- <sup>48</sup> K.N. Tiwari, p. 131.
- <sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>52</sup> Edward Bailey, p. 39.
- <sup>53</sup> J. Mc Dowell and Don Stewart, p. 191.
- <sup>54</sup> Dan Sewell Ward, "Karma" [http://www. Halexandria.org/dward430.htm](http://www.Halexandria.org/dward430.htm)
- <sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>56</sup> A.C. Ewing, *The Fundamental Questions of Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 160
- <sup>57</sup> Dan Sewell Ward.
- <sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>60</sup> Ade P. Dopamu made this statement during a departmental seminar for the post-graduate students held on 17<sup>th</sup> July, 2008 at the University of Ilorin, Ilorin.
- <sup>61</sup> Joseph Omoregbe, *Comparative Philosophy, East and West* (Lagos: JERP, 2004), p. 20.
- <sup>62</sup> Dan Sewell Ward.
- <sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>64</sup> Udo Etuk, *Religion and Cultural Identity* (Ibadan: Hope Publications, 2002), p. 118.
- <sup>65</sup> D. Christe-Murray, *Reincarnation: Ancient Beliefs and Modern Evidence* (London: David & Charles, 1981), p. 109.
- <sup>66</sup> Udo Etuk, p. 118.
- <sup>67</sup> J Mc Dowell and D. Stewart, p. 31.



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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> I O. Umejesi, "Salvation in Hinduism as the Ultimate Goal...", p. 106.

<sup>20</sup> Udo Etuk, p. 119.

<sup>21</sup> In Stephen Lampe, *The Christian and Reincarnation* (UK: The Millennium Press, 1990), pp. 37-38.

<sup>22</sup> Udo Etuk, p. 119.

<sup>23</sup> D. Christe-Murray, p. 118.

<sup>24</sup> Udo Etuk, p. 120.

<sup>25</sup> Stephen Lampe, p. 168.

<sup>26</sup> Udo Etuk, p. 122.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 126.