

Reincarnation or eternal life? A reassessment of the dilemma from a cultural studies perspective and by resorting to the plurality of Christian eschatologies

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The present study starts from the discovery that reincarnationist ideas have spread massively throughout European and Western thought in general, in a framework where the belief in one life was defining. However, the quandary between the two afterlife interpretations in contemporary Western culture is distinct from similar conflicts in other times or places because post-Christian critique of the Christian tradition shapes how reincarnation theory is understood in the West today. Therefore, the present study shifts the debate from the realm of scientific and philosophical arguments to that of human needs and their cultural overtones. Contemporary reincarnationist theories circulating in the West are re-read through the grid of cultural criticism aimed at the shortcomings of one's own tradition. As a next step, it is shown that only one of the forms that have developed within the Western tradition is the target of this criticism. The plurality of Christian eschatologies is yet unknown to most contemporary Westerners. This article is a plea for knowledge and contextualisation, which are prerequisites for navigating the ideational universe.

Contribution: This article addresses the dilemma between reincarnation and one-life theories as perceived by the contemporary Western mind and deciphers it in the light of human needs and contextual cultural criticism, while also pointing to the internal plurality of the Christian tradition that remains largely unknown to those involved in the debate.

Keywords: reincarnation; one life; eternal life; heaven and hell; epectasy; afterlife; deed and reward; divine justice; new spirituality; religious individualisation.

Introduction

One of the most burning issues of religious existence is that of the afterlife. People are deeply concerned about the idea of continuing life after death, while the connection between the moral balance of existence on earth and postmortem realities is a secondary, yet related area of interest. The longing for immortality and the dread of annihilation are merged with the need for justice and compensation for less favourable situations in life.

The afterlife models conveyed today can be classified into three categories. One conception is that humans live only one life on earth, which is followed either by a joyful or a tormented eternity, depending on how they lived in this world. Another model that suggests life continues after death presumes that every being returns to this world repeatedly, taking on various animal, human or even divine forms, thus living a succession of lifetimes determined by their own moral baggage, always destined to progress towards an ideal located beyond the usual accessibility. In most versions, this happens until the respective being succeeds in the great leap of leaving the circuit of reincarnations and returning to the absolute. These two models are complemented by a third, which holds that all existence ends once death occurs, a model quite common today, but which will not be treated here, because it is mainly the perspective of non-religious and non-spiritual people, who are not the focus of this study.

Metempsychosis, metensomatosis, rebirth, transmigration of souls or reincarnation – all these terms convey different nuances but refer to the same fundamental reality. They express the belief that

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every living being goes through a succession of lives interrupted by intermediate stages. To keep things simple, the term *reincarnation* shall be used in this study to describe the aforementioned reality, regardless of the nuances that may particularise its concrete understanding. It was chosen because it is the term used by contemporary Westerners to refer to the possibility of living a succession of lives. It should be understood as a broad category that encompasses all ways of conceptualising the successive returns to life in this world.

This study deals with aspects of the dilemma between reincarnation and eternal life, as it is currently addressed, both in the dominantly post-Christian society, by people searching freely for spirituality and meaning and in the theological discourse.

This research is driven by the conviction that both theological systems and free reflection serve humans in search of truth and meaning for their life and that they deserve scientific attention as triggers of convictions and behaviours. As the expanding belief in reincarnation challenges the old, traditional view in Christian and post-Christian societies, many people are wondering what they might take for granted and what the landmarks of their existence are. The debates around reincarnation or one life can be found everywhere: in books, in seminaries and workshops, but also on the streets and even in church yards after the service. As the previously mentioned situation has been recorded in Romania, a country with a strong Orthodox Christian profile and a rate of identification with the Christian faith of over 99% (see Institutul Național de Statistică 2013; Pew Research Center 2012), it becomes obvious that the presence of the dilemma in the European mind, as well as the way it is carried out, deserves scientific attention. People's faith, even churchgoers' faith, is highly individualised. This reality is grossly underestimated both by religious actors and by decision makers today.

Until now, there has been no comprehensive history of the European reincarnationist thinking, its sources and evolution, comparable to Lee Irwin's books and studies on reincarnation in America (Irwin 2017a, b). The purpose of this study cannot be to fill such a gap. It is much more modest: it tries to capture a glimpse of the present-day debates as they occur in society, to look for the motives of the different positions and to highlight the richness and diversity of answers. It will rely both on the theological reflection, which is searching for the theologically sustainable truth in accordance with the foundations of the respective religion and on the perspectives of cultural studies, which look on various subjects as simple expressions of human needs and as a result of human interactions at individual and collective levels.

Of course, the analysis does not seek to solve the dilemma. Instead, it seeks to provide useful insights for all those interested in locating the variants of reincarnation and one-life theories on a map configured on the one hand by human needs and their cultural expressions and on the other by the

available theological options. Its aim is to raise awareness about the plurality of perspectives and provide new material to those engaged in interfaith dialogue or exchange, whether on a theoretical or practical level. Last but not least, it is intended for representatives of traditional, established religions as an impetus to deepen dialogue with the new religious movements as well, whose presence in Christian and post-Christian societies is not to be neglected.

The focus will be on recent developments in Europe and North America. While the American reincarnationist thinking has more roots than the European one, there is a strong resemblance between the European modern history of reincarnation and the American one (Irwin 2017a, b). Besides that, the same reincarnationist literature circulates in both spaces and has a formative influence on the minds of the readers.

The insights into these Western dynamics may be relevant for other parts of the world, too. Further research is needed to investigate whether similar developments can also be found in other parts of the world where Christianity has become dominant during the last centuries. Moreover, in the age of globalisation and rapid circulation of ideas, such dynamics on one side of the Earth may trigger unexpected developments on the other. The new attitudes towards the reincarnation theory that have emerged in traditional reincarnationist parts of the world deserve to be analysed in the context of global idea exchange, considering the changes in Western mind.

The two models and their traditional location in time and space

The perspective of the joyful eternal life is specific to monotheistic religions. It has dominated European and Western thought in general for the last two millennia, as well as the Middle East and all territories ruled by Islam. The perspective of reincarnation is specific to Oriental, South Asian and East Asian thought, especially to most Hinduist traditions, to Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism. Here it appears as a necessity for the fulfilment of the soteriological programme, determined by *karma* and its effects that must be consumed and by the necessity of working out personal salvation. Of course, there are exceptions to this dichotomy because reincarnationist concepts can be found in Jewish Kabbalah, Christian esotericism and some strains of Islamic mysticism, but it/they cannot be proven in the Vedic religion and some varieties of Chinese Mahayana Buddhism (Antes 2007:69).

Moreover, the reincarnation theory is not exclusively of Oriental extraction. European thought is not confronted with it for the first time now, in the age of globalisation and the heightened circulation of ideas; rather, it has encountered it since Greek antiquity. It is believed to be found in Orphism and Pythagoreanism (Smith 2014:5) as well as in some philosophical constructs. Plato is the one who makes the clearest statements in this regard. They are congruent with an

ontology in which the essential world alienates from itself, then moves back to itself, needing a succession of lifetimes until the soul manages to make the great leap of recognising the equivalence between the individual and the universal reality. The theory of the pre-existence of the soul consequently leads to the possibility of its successive incarnations in states of ever higher qualitative transparency, until it becomes compatible with the absolute entity (Bienkowski 2020:44f, for a discussion see also: Burley 2014:969, 2016:229).

Such conceptions have not imposed themselves definitively on the European spirit. Aristotle strongly opposed this soteriological formula in terms of philosophical reflection and concrete religious existence (Bienkowski 2020:46f). The Platonic idea was then rejected by the Fathers of the Christian Church, for whom the immortality of the soul is because of the communion with God and divine grace and not as a result of its inherent being, that is, the soul has no immortality in itself. There are a plethora of patristic voices speaking against the theory of transmigration of the souls (see Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies* 2:33:1–2 [AD 189]; Tertullian *Apology* 48 [AD 197]; Origen *Commentary on John* 6:7 [AD 229]; id, *Commentary on Matthew* 10:20, 11:17, 13:1 [AD 248]; id, *Contra Celsum* 1:32 [AD 248]; Lactantius *Epitome of the Divine Institutes* 36 [AD 317]; Ambrose of Milan, *Belief in the Resurrection* 65–66, 127 [AD 380]; John Chrysostom, *Homilies on John* 2:3, 6 [AD 391]; Basil the Great, *The Six Days' Work* 8:2 [AD 393]). In this way, the perspective of the blissful or tormented eternity remained clearly dominant in the European world over the centuries, while the other possibility was largely unknown, except in select heterodox circles (Irwin 2017a).

Contemporary reincarnationists also draw on certain patristic sources, into which reincarnationist thinking is being projected (see e.g. MacGregor 1978:58; MacLaine 1983:234f). Specifically referenced in this regard is Origen, who affirmed the pre-existence of souls, but clearly denied transmigration (see the given references). However, the fact that he draws on the Platonic worldview, in which the minds and spirits are contemplating the divine fall into materiality and need to find their way back, is understood by them as including the idea of a succession of lifetimes, idea which is not explicitly present in Origen's construct. As Irwin (2017a) stated:

Origen's concept of preexistent soul marks the beginning of a long history of contestation within Christian theologies that rejected orthodox after-life theories of heaven and hell in Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and Protestant teachings in favor of a theory of rebirth. Even though Origen's theory of the preexistent soul was pronounced anathema by the Fifth Ecumenical Council (553 CE), diverse Christian groups have continued to teach reincarnation into the present day. (p. 56)

Furthermore, Origen's reflections on the distinction between *spirit* and *soul*, especially between 'the spirit and the power of Elijah' and Elijah's soul, of which Origen clearly states that does not reincarnate (Origen *Commentary on John* 6:7 [AD 229]; id, *Commentary on Matthew* 10:20) [AD 248]), leads them to conclude that 'while soul remains as the true source

of human identity, incapable of another physical life, a subtle spiritual aspect of that identity is capable of reincarnation' (Irwin 2017a). Such statements of Origen are not clear enough to sustain reincarnationist thinking, on the contrary, this seems to be rather a form of possession than of reincarnation. To use the term reincarnation in this way is to broaden its meaning too much, to make it useless as an analytical category.

With or without Origen as a patristic reference, today, the reincarnation theory is once again appealing to many Europeans, who are surprisingly discovering it in modern esoteric currents, many of which are Oriental-inspired. Especially since the colonial period, the idea of reincarnation has experienced a surge in popularity among Westerners, as they moved away from traditional Christian thought. Certain sectors of Western culture, more precisely certain subcultures, were eager to embrace reincarnationist thinking, which had been rediscovered in Ancient European doctrines, in Gnostic and esoteric writings and taken over from the Orient.

The dilemma in the contemporary Western mind

In Europe and in the Western world, the debate around the topic of reincarnation has become personally and socially relevant. People discuss whether they live once or several times, and a lot of popular literature pleading for the idea of reincarnation is being published. It would be impossible to make a relevant selection from the tens of thousands of titles. Moreover, reincarnation appears in films, songs and even in comics. There are experts that make recommendations and establish lists of 'great reads' (Johnson 2022; Proffitt n.d.; TNN 2018; Tomlinson 2019), 'best movies' (Pangilinan 2022), 'great songs' (Wright 2022) or 'best reincarnation manga' (Mukhiya n.d.). Under such assault of information, most people are undecided or feel they do not have sufficient reasons to give credit to either one of the two views.

Of course, the idea of reincarnation as it exists in the contemporary Western mind and adjacent cultural productions differs from its Antique European and Oriental versions, in terms of both the why and the how. Why reincarnation occurs and how it looks like are the two questions to which contemporary Westerners usually give totally divergent answers than Oriental religions. This dissimilarity will be discussed next.

Secularised Christians and post-Christians are usually not concerned with the Platonic or Oriental doctrine of salvation. For them, reincarnation is not a necessary aspect of a soteriological process, which could not be carried out during one lifetime. To the extent that they departed from Christianity, they are not concerned with the Christian doctrine of salvation either. If they love life and perceive it in bright colours, their wish to come back on Earth again and again to have new experiences and to enjoy the good sides of life makes them dream about endless joyful reincarnations. Even Oriental

authors sometimes adjust their writings on reincarnation to this paradigm (see Thondup 2006). In other cases, Westerners have taken up this idea to deal with the anguish caused by death in a secularised world. Reincarnation appears as a solution to not feeling so threatened by death and annihilation (Klemp 2015; Martin 2019). Some suffer after the loss of a beloved one, be it a human or a pet, and find solace in thinking that their soul will return somewhere (see e.g. Atwater 2011; Greenburg & Davis 1996; Proffitt 2017). Others are attracted to the esoteric aspects, to the idea of knowledge that was hidden from them and that they may now access (Goldberg 2016; Knapp 1986; Prophet & Prophet 2010). In most of these situations, the why of the reincarnation is valued positively: reincarnation is a good, desirable thing, as it provides continuation of life and of the joys that come with it.

In Hindu religion, good deeds only lead to reincarnation into a better caste, in which people have a relatively higher chance of salvation. Reincarnation is seen in the Orient as a difficult path to salvation; the Orientals want to escape the reincarnation circuit. This soteriological solution of reincarnations is seen by members of the respective religions as a necessary evil. For a Hindu, the religious ideal is not reincarnation, but enlightenment. Reincarnation is a painful tool. In Buddhism, Samsara, the cycle of reincarnation is seen as *dukkha*, as pain and suffering, in other words, as a true catastrophe.

Moreover, Western reincarnation is typically conceived as a clear upward path. The expectation is that from one life to the next, one comes to have more qualities, a better position in life and, generally speaking, better chances of living a fulfilled life (see e.g. Prophet & Spadaro 1999). New lives are given to people not as a punishment, but as a chance for them to learn compassion, love and generosity (see e.g. Van Praagh 2010). Usually, Westerners do not consider that they might come back on a lower level, as a consequence of the way they lived during their actual life. If there are aspects that go wrong or that they are unable to manage properly, they do not blame themselves; instead, they place the blame on *karma*, which is responsible for the circumstances of this life, and they expect that during the next life, they will be granted better conditions and will be able to live a better life. If they encounter suffering and pain in this life, they are eager to explain it by recourse to previous lives: there is earlier *karma* which needs to bear fruits and it does so now; therefore, this life offers opportunity for healing, and the next lives will be exempt from suffering. There is a lot of literature on healing from traumas, which are located in past lives (see e.g. Cohen 2008; Flaherty 2013; Tomlinson 2005; Weiss 1988; Woolger 2010). To summarise, things are interpreted optimistically, so that the question of how reincarnation looks like receives a positive answer.

In Oriental conception, reincarnation can lead either upwards or downwards, even to the level of an animal. It means continuation of suffering and a prolonged path towards the cessation of all sorrows through illumination, identification with Brahman or by reaching Nirvana. The two perspectives

on reincarnation are so different, that it is natural to wonder to what extent they are reasonable and how can they be linked with the question of the truth.

Arguments for or against reincarnation?

From a scientific point of view, no evidence can be given for or against the idea of reincarnation. All the so-called evidence of previous lives is based on individual and unverifiable experiences. Cognition scholars warn that 'the New Age milieu provides particularly clear opportunities to assess the evidence through cognitive mechanisms such as congruence bias' (Hammer 2014:223). For its part, the existence of only one life also cannot be scientifically proven. Thus, from a scientific point of view, both variants are simple postulates, premises that one accepts or not through faith, respectively through meta-scientific adherence to an explanatory model of life.

For both Eastern and Western reincarnationists, the doctrine of reincarnation has some sort of evidence. There are testimonies of people who claim to remember past lives (see Hardo 2009; Semkiw 2018; Street 1973). Through certain meditation and interiorisation techniques, one can come to understand certain areas of their psyche, from the realm of the subconscious. Techniques such as those contained in the Raja-Yoga programme (Eliade 1958:85f), as well as some Buddhist meditation forms (Analayo 2018) and some regression techniques used by psychotherapists, such as hypnosis (Newton 1994; Weiss 1988), lead to the discovery of some hidden remnants of the subconscious. In some way, such findings seem to relate to one another, so as to raise the conviction that they had been experienced in previous lives (see more in: Eliade 1958:85f). Some contemporary Westerners also recall emotions or plastic images that sometimes give them the feeling of *déjà vu*, to which the conviction is added that they have been experienced or seen in an earlier life. Others argue that existing physical defects are carried over from earlier lives through a series of reincarnations (Stevenson 1997). In the case of physical defects, even for the most fervent reincarnationists it is highly questionable whether a hand cut off in a past life would result in a deformed hand in the present one. In such instances, the arguments in favour of reincarnation become far too material.

On their part, the interiorisation techniques undoubtedly reveal contents present in the subconscious. At the same time, the *déjà vu* experiences may also be ways of direct and spontaneous connections to deep layers of the psyche. However, the rest seems to be interpretation. Explaining such findings as originating from an earlier life is only one of the several possible interpretations for the occurrence of unexpected contents inside the human mind. The existence of such mental contents can be rationally explained by naturalistic principles (Spanos, cited by Hammer 2014:223). Those unsatisfied by naturalistic explanations can resort to a variety of other hypotheses, too. As there is no space for their complete analysis here, I shall only briefly mention two of them, which have been very influential.

One is that of Carl Gustav Jung, who speaks of a collective unconscious (see Jung 1966:64–79, 127–138). That is, every human experience throughout history is stored in the collective unconscious, and occasionally, through the use of techniques or in dreams or visions, information or images that the individual has not personally had in this life or in any previous ones, but which someone else has, come to the surface. They can come up to any person who has the ability to carry and to express this part of the general human experience. Such psychical contents are organised around universal archetypes, which are reaching the conscious via individual complexes, built upon the dynamics of symbols (Jacobi 1959).

Another explanation is given by Dr. Kenneth McAll, who links the hidden aspects of the subconscious to the experience of previous generations or of a related person who has passed away. He believes that many patients who suffer from physical ailments, hear ‘voices’, are haunted by disturbing images or report dramatic events before birth are victims of ancestral control (McAll 1982). This explanation is very close to that of possession, which, whether it be demonic or ancestral, has a long history in the world of religions.

In short, there is no consensus on the origin of such contents coming from the deeper levels of the human psyche. There are several theories that try to explain them. However, none of them pass scientific scrutiny.

Adopting the cultural turn

The dilemma between reincarnation and one life cannot therefore be solved on the level of scientific demonstration or philosophical argumentation. Psychologically gained insights remain subjective, be they obtained with the help of techniques. ‘Cognitive science of religion suggests that the success of theological ideas partly depends on how they satisfy our cognitive biases’ (Launonen 2022:195). Analysing the subject as a human concern and a reality that bears the imprint of the cultural space where it appears and of its interferences with other cultural constructs yields more fruit. By shifting the dilemma from the philosophical and scientific point of view to that of anthropology and culture, by taking an anthropological, cultural turn, a series of new perspectives open up, not to solve the dilemma in a definitive and compelling way, but to better understand the attractiveness of the two conceptions, their weaknesses and what causes them to be adopted by a large number of people at times.

Reincarnation theory as critique to eternal damnation

The reincarnationist model of the post-Christian culture differs massively from the Oriental and Ancient Greek models and is an expression of the needs of secularised ex-Christians, who no longer find the one life-theory satisfactory, nor the perspective of eternal bliss or eternal damnation credible. Therefore, they reach out towards Europe’s own alternative views, but more towards the Orient. To a great

extent, present-day Western reincarnation is an idea borrowed from the Orient, but from an idealised Orient or from the Orient as mirrored by the Western image. In other words, it is an interpretive takeover, as in all situations of religious interferences, a takeover that modifies the characteristics of the adopted item, adjusting it to the needs of the receiver.

The Western turnover reflects the content of Western criticism of one’s own system of thinking and not the truth about reincarnation. It reflects what the post-Christian Westerner finds reprehensible about his or her own religious system.

In the Western mind, the prospect of eternal damnation is hard to reconcile with the image of the loving God and hard to bear for present-day human sensitivity (Russell [1927] 1957). ‘The erosion of belief in hell is the natural outcome of modernization. So is the popularity of less extreme views of afterlife punishment among Christians’ (Launonen 2022:204). Even among practicing Christians, a universalist view (see *The Evangelical Universalist Forum* n.d.), according to which everybody will be saved, starts to gain terrain, as is a conditionalist view (see *Rethinking Hell* n.d.), which states that life is eternal only in heaven, while those deserving hell will be annihilated (Launonen 2022).

Moreover, hell is perceived by many secularised Christians as an instrument that was once used for manipulation and oppression (see Cunningham 2019). Especially the detailed, scary, fierce images of hell, which had a great impact on the psyche of the masses, have been rejected as an instrument of mass oppression used by the clergy since the Enlightenment (Almond 1994; Sylte 2009).

The challenges of understanding hell are obvious for theologians, too. Traditional theologians solve them by defining hell in such a way that the idea of damnation from outside is circumvented and hell appears as a natural, self-sustaining consequence of persistent human choices. This happens in theological treatises (Stăniloae 1997:175–184), in popular literature (Bălțat 1993) and within the larger culture: Dostoevsky’s Father Zossima, who is said to have been inspired from Staretz Amvrosy of the Optina Monastery (Dunlop 1972), defines hell as ‘the suffering of being unable to love’ (Dostoevsky [1879] 2021:557). For some of the more free-thinking theologians, the theory of apokatastasis has resurfaced as a topic of interest. They try to find support for it in patristic writings or in theological reflection (Hart 2019; Ramelli 2013). Others perceive the idea of hell as functionalistic, merely with a didactic value, which implies that they do not regard it as an unwavering dogma (Henning 2014). These examples show that even theologians struggle with the traditional Christian eschatologies (the teaching about the realities after death).

As the belief in eternal damnation waned, eternal bliss also started to lose credibility. Karl Marx was one of its most influential critics (Marx 1844). The void opened by the loss of

faith in eternal bliss makes space for the need to find a suitable solution for two important human desires: justice and continuation of life. Reincarnation theory seemed to satisfy both needs perfectly, as it allows for long-term justice to be carried out and ensures a fair proportionality between deed and reward (see Antes 2007). There are Westerners who regard it to be the theory that best reflects divine justice. Bourbeau (2017) stated:

A belief is good only if you are willing to change it when you discover a better one. For example, I believe in the reincarnation theory and the fact that we live several lives on Earth. However, if another theory came along that would help me feel even more that only divine justice exists, I'd be ready to subscribe to it. (pp. 87–88)

This small fragment reveals not only that reincarnation theory best accommodates modern demands for justice but also places the individual and his or her needs and feelings at the centre of the conception of how afterlife must look like. It is exactly what the anthropological turn suggests: beliefs and attitudes can be explained starting with man. Last but not least, the fragment is interesting as it speaks about 'divine justice', which suggests a remnant theistic view.

As for the second human need, the continuation of life, reincarnation theory opens up a perspective that secularised Christians and post-Christians can conceive, one that is not overly abstract and contains all the elements that constitute life for them. In this sense, the shift towards reincarnation is an indicator of the immanentisation of the eschatological representation. It can be regarded as a form of type three secularisation (Taylor 2007), which implies locating the conditions for a fulfilled life entirely within this world, with no reference to anything 'beyond human life' (Taylor 2007:15).

Scholarly approaches combining reincarnationist and Christian thinking

While most Westerners would give up Christian beliefs to embrace the reincarnationist view, certain philosophers, religious scholars and theologians argue that the reincarnationist theory should be incorporated into the Christian dogma. This is sometimes done to solve the issue of disparity between deed and reward and to regard a succession of lives as a corrective mechanism (Di Muzio 2013). Others argue that salvation in Christ and a succession of lives are not incompatible:

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. (Von Brück 1985:237)

With his distinction between eschatologies and pareschatologies and his reflections on the state immediately after death, John Hick has greatly aided the endeavour to combine reincarnationist and Christian thinking (Hick 1994:416):

Because Hick believes that life is a continuous soul-making process and that most of us have not completed that process at death, he hypothesizes that our earthly life may be 'the first of a series of limited phases of existence, each bounded by its own death' (DEL, 408). (Cramer n.d.)

This is to be followed by an eschaton that 'will include all of humanity in a perfected state of unity with each other and with the Transcendent Reality' (Cramer n.d.). Of course, for the majority of scholars, such mixtures depart too much from the traditional Christian view and its premises (see e.g. Valea 2021).

The plurality of Christian eschatologies: St. Gregory of Nyssa's model

It has become evident that there are many different perspectives on reincarnation and each individualised religious practitioner or theoretician will choose his or own position based on his or her perceived needs. Religious individualisation is a keyword for understanding the present-day religious situation. What is usually neglected is the fact that individualisation does not happen against the background of a single, clear and established theology. There are several Christian theologies today and there have been even more in older times. Each of the traditional forms of Christianity, whether Orthodox, Catholic or Protestant, has produced several models of understanding the afterlife. Of course, most present-day models are open, stating that we cannot know precisely how eternity will look like and they can only offer certain clues derived from the Bible or past theological reflection (see e.g. Müller 1995:516–17).

While there are many Christian paradigms, the background model against which the post-Christian critique is directed is the one of the most well-known to Christian believers and to the rest of the world, who have been missionised by Western church representatives. It is the scholastic model elaborated by Thomas Aquinas. This model portrays eternal life as having attained perfection and being in front of God, contemplating God's glory, in a static, essentialised state, because all movement, which is considered as a mark of incompleteness, has ceased (see Müller 1995:550–53; Thomas Aquinas 1259–1265:IV, 79–97). It is difficult to envisage eternity in this way and one wonders whether it is desirable for active humans who enjoy being in motion. With the rise of modernity, eternal static bliss came to be perceived as boring and even slightly inconceivable, as mankind turned to themselves, to their rationality and their feelings, as the ultimate source of their convictions.

However, the Christian eschatologies explained here is just one form of Christian eschatologies. It relies on a certain theology, that is dogma about God, and on the related doctrine of creation, its possibilities and its role. The Aristotelian view, according to which divinity is perfection, and this perfection is statically understood, with movement

being a sign of lack of fullness, was very important for Thomas Aquinas and for Western scholastic theology in general, which also conceived God as static perfection. Creation is motion here, in this life, but after death, it will also enjoy eternal joy, which is understood as static fullness and is the eternal effect of the way life was lived on this earth (Müller 1995).

While this has been the dominant theology and subsequent dominant eschatologies in Western thinking for centuries, in the Early Church, several eschatological constructs were elaborated, which pointed to the diversity of aspects understood as central by the respective Fathers. There is not enough space in this article to conduct their thorough analysis. Therefore, only one shall be introduced, in order to exemplify the diversity and the difference, and to highlight the consequences that derive from having a distinct background. It is the epectatic view of St. Gregory of Nyssa, which enjoys a wide reception today within Orthodox Christian thinking owing to the neo-patristic theology that dominates present-day Orthodox theological reflection (see Coman 2020).

St. Gregory of Nyssa's model also rests upon a certain theology and anthropology. This theology is itself central to Eastern Christian understanding, especially in its Neo-patristic articulation. It implies a dynamic conception of God and all creation. The Trinity is not understood statically but is characterised by a perpetual dynamism between the three divine persons. Each divine person constantly and actively gives His whole being to the others and receives from the others Their whole being. Creation, in turn, is in a constant dynamism and change and so will be the eschaton (Stăniloae 1996:199–220).

As a result, Orthodox theology does not preach a cessation of human effort at the moment of transition to eternal life, but a continuation of it, only in other parameters than those of earthly life. St. Gregory of Nyssa coined the concept of *epectasis* or *epectasy*, which means a permanent growth, a continuous movement of the human soul towards a fuller communion with God, not only here but also after death (Gregory of Nyssa, 380). *Deification* or *Theosis*, as understood in the Orthodox theology based on Athanasius of Alexandria (Athanasius of Alexandria, 319), is not a static reality, but an endless dynamic process. Therefore, apud Gregory of Nyssa, the afterlife, the eternal life in communion with Christ, means the opportunity given to humans to grow infinitely in the experience of God (see Ene D-Vasilescu 2021; Petcu 2017). In other words, they continue to develop all the positive qualities that they had been able to cultivate in themselves during this life, such as the ability to love, to forgive, to be generous, to trust etc. If they persisted in greed, sorrow or anger and these traits became a second nature to them, these are the seeds that will grow in the afterlife and cause them eternal torment. Everything that they have been able to develop will grow indefinitely and bring them either joy or torment. Therefore, in the eschaton, humans do not experience the perpetuated static effect of their good or bad

deeds, but they continue to develop according to the dynamism that they have imprinted in themselves during their life on earth. This implies a permanent tension, a permanent longing and movement (Petcu 2017; Stăniloae 1997:298). The eternal life is neither perfection, nor static fullness. According to Orthodox thinking, the epectatic perspective 'drives away monotony and despair' and 'maintains a continuous joyfulness' (Stăniloae 1997:298).

Orthodox theologians state, in agreement with St. Basil the Great, that all humans who will enter full communion with God in the afterlife will be honoured with peace, but beyond that, there will be differences depending on what each one has done on earth (Chițescu, Todoran & Petreună 2005:285; Todoran & Zăgrean 1980:354). In this way, the definitive character of human deeds and of the qualities that humans have developed is accepted. In addition, the role of Christ, the Saviour, Who has assumed all the negative aspects of humanity and is able to heal anyone who desires it and opens up completely to Him. Opening themselves to Christ, individuals can be relieved of their negative psychological burden, while the good deeds and the positive characteristics gained by each individual stay with them and actively shape their living beyond (see Pătru 2004).

While Eastern Christianity welcomed the idea of an endless growth in eschaton, the Western Christianity followed the idea of a static happiness, of a fullness which, once realised, remained eternally equal to itself. This Christianity, spread as a cultural form, serves as background for the modern Western critique of the one-life-perspective. The Orthodox view, however, is neither about an eternal effect nor about an effect that can be consumed at a given moment, but about a dynamic triggered by the way the person lived on earth, a dynamic sustained by God's grace and by the consistently new effects of the endless active human openness to Christ and of communion with him.

In relation to this model, most aspects of the Western critique of the Christian view are pointless. Such is the question on the disproportionality between deed and reward because there is no reward, there is only a movement that continues from its own momentum. Such is the issue with eternity being monotonous. Therefore, a deeper knowledge of both Christianity and its theologies, as well as of human needs in relation to cultural constructs, would be helpful for all those wondering what the afterlife might look like.

Conclusion

The aim of this short study has been to gain new insights into the dilemma between the two models of the afterlife. This was accomplished by looking at them from the perspective of human needs and by introducing the plurality of both reincarnationist models and Christian theologies.

The study found that adherence to certain viewpoints is driven mainly by personal needs and concerns and has to do with time-specific sensitivities and mindsets. It has also

exposed current theories as forms of critique against long-held conceptions, which no longer satisfy people's expectations. To this end, it has pointed to the contextuality and even the contingency of every human theory, even if it deals with penultimate and ultimate realities.

The plurality of reincarnationist conceptions and Christian theologies have both been illustrated. Theological constructs themselves stress upon one aspect or the other, aiming to express the fullness of divinity, while acknowledging the limitations of human capacity and expression. It has been shown that they bear different theoretical consequences and that the topic cannot be reduced to the well-known aspects, such as the proportionality of reward in reincarnation or the eradication of any imperfection in the eternal life.

An increased awareness of the plurality inside any religion and the contingency of all human endeavours is both a desiderate and a field of work for scholars of religious studies. Such awareness and such knowledge would also be helpful for all people seeking to find answers to life's ultimate questions.

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Author's contributions

A.P. is the sole author of this research article.

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