

Reincarnation: the Evidence

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Reincarnation has become as American as apple pie, the Super Bowl, and the American conviction that anybody can grow up to be president. In the 1980s, several Gallup Polls established that about a quarter of Americans believe in reincarnation. In early 2001, one of the main e-commerce booksellers listed 649 books for the keyword “reincarnation,” and another listed 836. The widespread interest in reincarnation is a result — to a large extent indirectly to be sure — of its promulgation by the Theosophical Society.

A book on “alternative” or “new” religious movements in this country (Philip Jenkins, *Mystics and Messiahs*, Oxford University Press, 2000) pointed out the disproportionate effect our small organization has had on general thought: “Though the U.S. Census in 1926 found fewer than seven thousand declared Theosophists in the entire nation, that movement had already succeeded in making its views a familiar component of religious thought” (p. 10). “We might for instance observe the spread of ideas of reincarnation and karma, together with associated traditions like meditation and yoga. In the early twentieth century, all of these were associated with Theosophy ... [but now] the theories have entered the religious mainstream (p. 230).

Reincarnation is not an article of faith, but a theory. It is (as *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* defines “theory”) a “principle ... offered to explain phenomena.” For most people who believe in reincarnation, the phenomena it explains are chiefly subjective — their own experiences or observations. It is an idea that “makes sense.” However, although objective facts as evidence for reincarnation are not abundant, they do exist. A number of books provide just such evidence. Among them two by Ian Stevenson are