

Karma...In the Bible?

June 2008

When people read some of the Proverbs of the Old Testament, they gather that this principle is considered Karma, part of the doctrine of reincarnation. Whether or not these people prescribe a pluralistic view that every religion contains a kernel of real truth and all religions basically say the same thing or not, they suspect that such proverbs and principles found in the Vedas (Hindu sacred writings) and the Bible actually stem from a common belief in Karma.

So we've got to ask the question. Is Karma in the Bible or not? At first blush, it may seem that Karma is indeed found in the Bible when one reads proverbs that speak of how the righteous (those who do good) will be blessed and the wicked (those who do evil) will be cursed. If we were to read this as a general forever truth that "if you do good good will happen to you and if you do bad bad will happen to you," then we might consider it to be Karma. But I'm not so sure that Hindu gurus would be so happy with this definition of Karma.

So what is Karma in its own religious context? First, I want to talk about something called "Popular Piety." Each religion has certain principles or beliefs that may be simplified for easier explanation. For instance, if I said, "It's all about Jesus. Jesus is all there is. Everything else isn't important in the Bible," then I would probably receive nasty emails, to say the least. While the Bible is all about Jesus and focuses on His life from Old Testament to New, there are other principles to be gained

from Scripture as well. In one sense, the Bible is all about Jesus. But in another sense, Scripture explains God's plan of redemption to save humanity. Jesus is that plan!

The advantage of popular piety is that it helps to quickly point out a truth or a principle of a religion. This makes it easier to explain and accept. On the other hand, popular piety, in itself, may lead to misunderstandings when someone thinks that one statement explains everything. This has also happened to Karma. Karma, in its religious context, is not concerned with moral judgments. The phrase, "If you do good you will be rewarded in a good way and if you do bad you will be punished" is just a popular way of expressing Karma.

Karma is actually connected intimately to the doctrine of Reincarnation, the belief that life is circular, not linear. For instance, we commonly understand life to be linear. You are born, you grow up, you have a job, and at some point you die. Your life follows a linear format in time and an event is a point on that line. But reincarnation works off of a circular format. There are seasons of life (like Summer, Autumn, Winter, and Spring). Reincarnation would say that you have more lives than a cat and you will be reborn after death into another life.

Karma is the vehicle that decides if your next life is a step up or down. The point of Hinduism is to reach the heightened state of Brahman, the universal consciousness of all

humans together. Karma is the mode of getting to Brahman. If your Karma (deeds) is good, then you will hopefully (notice it's not guaranteed) be reborn into a better life. After being in the lower class in this life, you might be in a middle class situation in your next life. But if your Karma is more bad than good, you might be a plant or a bug in the next life. The point of Karma is to be good so you don't get demoted on the cyclic chain of reincarnation.

Karma lacks any moral judgment. It is essentially "works salvation." You get to Brahman by doing good. We're talking majority percentage here. Your good deeds can be 51% and bad 49% and you might move up on the life totem pole half a notch. But the proverbs of the Bible and the principle of sowing and reaping is based on a moral principle! It is a general principle of observation that this is how life works. All of the proverbs are written to capture principles of how to act in situations in life. I am not saying that proverbs never present objective truth. They were designed and written to help us in certain contexts of life.

The point of all the "do good to be rewarded with good" principles is that when we choose to live by God's rules, we will be rewarded because we are living within His boundaries. When we step outside of the boundaries, it's like using a wrench to pound a nail. When we live outside of God's established principles, it's like sticking your arm over the boat into the water with sharks swimming around you.

Every one of those statements in Proverbs show the wisdom gained by observation throughout human history. Wisdom is to follow God's prescribed principles so that life will be long, healthy, and satisfying. Karma is concerned with

gearing up for the next life. It is a system of punishment, not a principle for living a more enjoyable life. When you read statements in the proverbs concerning the wicked and the righteous, they are written to encourage you to choose the righteous path. They are written with a moral goal in mind by the author. The entire book of Proverbs is written to young men to give them wisdom so that life will be wonderful and they will make less mistakes than their father or their ancestors before them.

Karma and the sowing/reaping principle of the Bible are not the same. Karma condemns for the next life, making this life a chore and a pain. Can you imagine having to keep track of all the good and bad things you did in your life? The Proverbs provide wisdom to avoid condemnation. They are meant to save us from troubles we can avoid. So go out and do good not because you're worried about the next life but because you love God and you will come much closer to the righteous life God desires for you.