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CONTROVERSY

Of Karma and Football

England's top soccer coach is kicked out of a

LENN HODDLE DIDN'T FORESEE HIS belief in karma and reincarnation dealing him a personal blow. But hints came last May when this most gifted English soccer player (and later coach) in recent years said in a radio interview: "I think we make mistakes when we are down here, and our spirit has to come back and learn. Why are some people born with terrible physical deformities while other families may be physically perfect?"

Storms hit a year later on February 1, the day after he told The Time's Matt Dickinson in a sports interview that he believes in reincarnation: "You have to come back to learn and face some of the things you have done, good and bad. You and I have been physically given two hands and two legs and half-decent brains. Some people have not been born like that for a reason. The karma is working from another lifetime. I have nothing to hide about that. It is not only people with disabilities. What you sow, you have to reap." After the interview, Dickinson quoted Hoddle, 42, in an article and added a twist: "It's Glenn Hoddle's controversial belief that the disabled, and others, are being punished for sins in a former life.... It's likely to ignite an inferno of an argument." And did it ever, chronicled in a flurry

of articles in The Times and BBC News Online.

Hoddle's comments, misconstrued as a slur on disabled people, evoked a barrage of media and political criticism. Even Prime Minister Tony Blair said if Hoddle had been correctly quoted it would be difficult for him to remain England's manager. Margaret Hodge, Minister for the Disabled, asked Hoddle to step down, saying, "There are over six million disabled people in Britain, and to suggest it's their fault, or they have a lesser contribution to society, is insulting."

Reverend Joel Edwards of England's Evangelical Alliance stressed that reincarnation isn't a Christian doctrine. "Confused amalgamations of spirituality are becoming the norm," he said. "His statement is indicative of the pick-and-mix attitude to religion and deep search for spirituality so prevalent in society." Hoddle tried to set the record straight, telling the Mirror, "The Times did not misquote me, but did misinterpret me. We had a wider conversation about this subject, and the point I wanted to make was that there has to be some reason why some people suffer in the world and others do not." But days later, under intense pressure, the Football Association fired Hoddle. Some weren't happy. Patrick Barclay, respected football writer for the Sunday Telegraph, wrote: "There's been an awful coalition of the media's worst elements and supposedly the leading elements of the government." Faith healer Eileen Drewery, Hoddle's spiritual mentor, accused the media of a "witch-hunt" and twisting Hoddle's comments.

While most UK newspaper editors denounced Hoddle, foreign papers found the uproar faintly ridiculous. The Times of India's

London correspondent, L.K. Sharma, told BBC, "Hoddle's views are fairly mainstream in India and certainly would not have been cause for his sacking. Reincarnation was a common belief in the Christian Church for the first 500 years, until the then pope acted against it."

The Hindustan Time's London correspondent, Vijay Dutt, said: "I'm surprised at the furor created here. People in India often ask, 'What did a person do in a previous life to suffer so much in this one?'" In New Delhi, Maharajah Features Editor K.R. Padmanabhan suggested that India offer Hoddle the job of training its soccer squad. He said it would only be fit and proper because "Karma and reincarnation are cardinal beliefs for Hindus, and it's unfair that Hoddle should lose his job for professing faith in it."

In Italy, Rome's La Repubblica, below the headline, "Sacked Because of Karma," suggested Hoddle may be the first man of the modern age to lose his job for his religious convictions. This was surprising, it said, in the heart of Europe, which prides itself on religious tolerance. Turin's La Stampa wrote that freedom of speech is an inalienable right and suggested "Voltaire would've been terrified and disgusted in the face of the symbolic guillotine inflicted upon Hoddle."

The situation has shocked UK Hindus. Hoddle's attackers judge reincarnation to be false--even though that doctrine is held by half the world, and a goodly number of prominent Englishmen as well. Hindus in politically sensitive jobs must now ponder whether they will get fired for similarly expressing a belief in karma and reincarnation. As for Hoddle, he reportedly plans to

sue The Times for libel.

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