

A Course In Miracles

By Rick Branch

Founders: Helen Schucman and William Thetford

Founding Date: 1965

Official Publication: While there are no official publications, *The Holy Encounter* is one of the major publications promoting the philosophy of *A Course In Miracles*.

Organization Structure: There are hundreds of small study groups scattered across the country, each organized on an informal basis, for the express purpose of studying the Course.

Unique Terms: While the Course has no truly unique terms, it defines common Christian terms in a unique way. Be aware of this fact when speaking to or listening to those who are followers of the Course.

HISTORY

In October 1965, Helen Schucman, an associate professor of medical psychology at Columbia University in New York, began receiving channeled messages from a speaker who would later identify himself as Jesus Christ.¹ For the next ten years the voice is said to have dictated “in an inaudible voice” the three volume, 1,188 page, 500,000 word book known as *A Course In Miracles*.²

One of Schucman’s colleagues was Dr. William Thetford, a clinical psychologist at Columbia University. While he never heard the voice, he was instrumental in the publication of the Course. Raised in the Christian Science church, Thetford believed the Course was a representation of the “original teachings of Jesus.”³

In 1972, Schucman and Thetford met Dr. Kenneth Wapnick of the Foundation for Inner Peace. The Copyright for the Course was turned over to Wapnick and his organization in 1975. This action is followed in September of the same year with the publication of the first edition of *A Course In Miracles*.⁴ Schucman died in February 1981 and Thetford in 1988.

Though the leaders had died, the Course was experiencing phenomenal growth. By the end of 1986 there were 630 study groups. That number grew to 848 in 1987 and to 1,059 groups by 1988. By the end of 1990, the Course had study groups in 48 states with a total of 1,250 groups meeting.⁵ There are also more than 700,000 sets of *A Course in Miracles* as of 1991.⁶

The Course began to receive national attention when Marianne Williamson was featured in Time magazine. Called “the Mother Teresa for the ‘90’s” by some of her supporters, Williamson is one of the best known promoters of the Course.⁷ In 1992, Williamson published *A Return to Love: Reflections on the Principles of A Course In Miracles* which “occupied the number one position on the Publishers Weekly non-fiction best-sellers list for eleven weeks!”⁸ Williamson has also been featured on the

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Oprah Winfrey Show, which received more pro viewer mail than any other show for 1992, and with Barbara Walters on the ABC television news show 20/20.⁹ Other well known New Age celebrities that have become associated with the Course would include Dr. Gerald Jampolsky, M.D. and composer Steven Halpern.¹⁰

DOCTRINE

One of the stated purposes of the Course is to teach it's "reinterpretations of traditional Christian principles such as sin, suffering, forgiveness, Atonement, and the meaning of the Crucifixion."¹¹

Jesus and Man: Normally, when explaining the theology of a group, these two categories [Jesus and Man] would be discussed separately. However, in this particular organization, to differentiate between the two seems to be unjustified.

According to the Course, Jesus is merely "an elder brother entitled to respect for his greater experience." The Jesus of the Course explains, "There is nothing about me that you cannot attain. This leaves me in a state which is only potential in you. I bridge the distance as an elder brother to you on the one hand, and as a Son of God on the other."¹²

Similar to many other New Age teachings, the Course makes a distinction between Jesus the man, who is like all other men, and the Christ idea, which all men possess and must eventually demonstrate. The Course explains this idea when it states,

There is no need for help to enter Heaven for you have never left. But there is need for help beyond yourself as you are circumscribed by false beliefs of your Identity, which God alone established in reality.

Helpers are given you in many forms. Their names are legion, but we will not go beyond the names the course itself employs. The name of Jesus is the name of one who was a man but saw the face of Christ in all his brothers and remembered God. So he became identified with Christ, a man no longer, but at one with God. The man was an illusion, for he seemed to be a separate being, walking by himself, within a body that appeared to hold his self from Self, as all illusions do.

Jesus remains a Savior because he saw the false without accepting it as true. And Christ needed his form that He might appear to men and save them from their own illusion. Jesus became what all of you must be.¹³

Thus, according to the Course, Jesus the man was used by the Christ to demonstrate the illusion of the world. In actuality, man is still in heaven. It is simply the illusion of sin and death that have caused false senses of reality. However, when man gains his Christ consciousness as Jesus did, then according to the Course, man will also discover the illusion of sin.

Reality Manipulation: As the Course explains, Man has not left Heaven. Man is still in the presence of God, but has created this illusionary World from "...false perceptions. It is born of error, and it has not left its source."¹⁴ Because Man believes he is separated from God, through his own ego and mistaken beliefs, Man has created the reality in which he now finds himself.

The effect of the ego's belief in separation, which is its cause; the thought of separation given form; the world, being the expression of the belief in time and space, was not created by God.... The World of separation reinforces the ego's belief in sin

and guilt, perpetuating the seeming existence of this world.¹⁵

Given the presupposition that Man is the creator of his own illusionary world is of no help to the average person. For, as is explained by one of the Course's introductory booklets, "Once an individual has been caught in the world of perception he is caught in a dream. He cannot escape without help, because everything his senses show him merely witnesses to the reality of the dream."¹⁶

Thus, if the world is an illusion or dream-state, then by necessity, everything that the physical body does in this make-believe world must also be an illusion. This would necessarily include the false concepts of sin and death. As Volume 2 of the Course demands, "...sin is not real, and all that you believe must come from sin will never happen, for it has no cause."¹⁷ A similar claim is made on death's behalf. "Death is the central dream from which all illusions stem."¹⁸

Thus the world, sin, death and everything is an illusion created by the ego of man, who unfortunately believes in the mistaken idea that he is not currently in heaven and is separated from God. If this is so, how is man to awaken from his "dream-state"?

Atonement of Jesus: Kenneth Wapnick, of the Foundation for Inner Peace, explains,

If we now attempt to follow the Holy Spirit's thinking, and we want to prove that the world is not real and that the sin of separation never happened, all that is needed is to prove that sin has no effect.

If we could prove that the cause had no effect then the cause can no longer exist. If something is not a cause it is not real, because everything that is real must be a cause and thus have an effect. If we remove the effect we are also eliminating the cause.

Now, if the greatest effect of sin in this world is death, demonstrating that death is an illusion simultaneously demonstrates that there is no sin. This also says that the separation never occurred. We therefore need someone to show us that there is no death. By undoing death that person will also undo sin and will simultaneously show us that there is no separation; the separation never occurred and the only reality, the only true Cause, is God. That person was Jesus. And his mission was to show that there is no death.

The gospels speak of Jesus as the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. The way that he took away the sins of the world was to show that they had no effect. Through his overcoming of death he took away all sins. However, this is not the way that the churches have understood it, or that it has been taught. So one important reason that the Course has come at this time, in this way, is to correct this error. What Jesus did was to live in this world - the world of suffering, sin, and death - show that it had no effect on him.¹⁹

BIBLICAL RESPONSE

Though the Course explains Man's ego created the world, the Bible disagrees (Genesis 1:1, John 1:1-3, Colossians 1:16).

Though the Course teaches Man is still in heaven with God, Jesus said He was going to prepare a place for Man. Hence man is obviously not already in heaven (John 14:1-3).

While the Course denies the reality of death, the Bible teaches that every person will die (Hebrews 9:27).

The Course claims Jesus' body was an illusion. The Bible, however, stresses the physical reality of Jesus' human body (John 1:14, 1 John 4:1-3).

Sin is an illusion according to the Course, but the Bible warns of sin's reality and consequences (Romans 3:23, 1 John 1:7-10).

According to the Course, Jesus is not the only Savior. The Bible presents Jesus as the unique and only Savior of the world (John 14:6, Acts 4:10-12, Acts 16:29-31).

RECOMMENDED READING

New Age Spirituality; A Christian Perspective, by James Walker. A cassette tape and manual produced by Watchman Fellowship that provides a general overview of the New Age. While it does not discuss A Course in Miracles directly, it provides a helpful introduction to some of its underlying doctrines and philosophies.

Unmasking the New Age, by Douglas Groothuis. This book does not specifically address the Course but it does provide a balanced survey of many of the New Age doctrines and practices which are incorporated in it. 192 pages with index.

Confronting the New Age, by Douglas Groothuis. In his sequel, Groothuis mentions the Course as an example of New Age error. This book is most helpful because of its practical advice and sound suggestions for reaching out to those who are in the New Age Movement. 230 pages with index.

A Crash Course on the New Age Movement, by Elliot Miller. Here is a well-written volume explaining the New Age Movement's effect on Western culture and Christianity. The Course is mentioned by way of example but the book's value is in its balanced critique of the New Age Movement as a whole. 260 pages including indexes.

Notes

- ¹ A Talk Given on 'A Course In Miracles', Kenneth Wapnick, May 9, 1981, 10.
- ² *Psychology Today*, September 1980, 75.
- ³ *The Holy Encounter*, Sept./Oct. 1990, 5.
- ⁴ *Ibid*, 7.
- ⁵ *The Holy Encounter*, Nov./Dec. 1990, 1.
- ⁶ *Vanity Fair*, June 1991, 131.
- ⁷ *Time*, 29 July 1991, 60.
- ⁸ *The Holy Encounter*, July/Aug. 1992, 2.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, July/Aug. 1992, p. 2; July/Aug. 1993, 9.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid*, March/April 1993, 3.
- ¹¹ *Foundation for A Course In Miracles*, "Forgiveness," 4.
- ¹² *A Course In Miracles*, Vol. 1, 5.
- ¹³ *A Course In Miracles*, Vol. 1, 5.
- ¹⁴ *Foundation for A Course In Miracles*, "Forgiveness," 4.
- ¹⁵ Glossary-Index For *A Course In Miracles*, 168.
- ¹⁶ *A Course In Miracles: What Is It?*, 7.
- ¹⁷ *A Course In Miracles*, Vol. 2, 179.
- ¹⁸ *A Course In Miracles*, Vol. 3, 63.
- ¹⁹ A Talk Given On A Course In Miracles, 65.



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