

"A COURSE IN MIRACLES"?

This Thinksheet only indirectly gets at the question its title poses. It's an open letter to a bright Episcopal widow who's been importuning me to have another look at the CIM literature--convinced, by the values she's derived from a 7-year CIM group she's been in, that I've not had a serious enough look. (Reminds me of a Mormon bishop who asked me, after a Mormon worship, whether I'd read the Mormon additions to the Bible--& upon finding I had, said "You weren't serious enough in your reading, or you'd be a Mormon.") The good lady will forgive me for wanting you, my readers, in on the reading of my letter to her.

Dear _____,

1 In my presence almost $\frac{1}{2}$ c. ago, D.T.Niles, a famous ecumenical Christian from India, said something he became famous for: "Evangelism is one beggar telling another where to find bread." The bread he meant was the Eucharist of orthodox Christian doctrine, but it's often come to my mind with also a wider meaning: I'm loath to badmouth any food anybody has found soul-nourishing (though as a canonical Christian I steadily recommend the Christian ecumenical cuisine of the Great Tradition, viz the Bible & the ancient creeds). More than loath to badmouth: I thank God for all that nourishes the human spirit, else I'd not have been asked to teach the world's religions in the U. of Hawaii....This § is a YES to your having been fed by the CIM, though it's not my cup of tea.

2 Your second letter informs me of your age-17 conversion experience, since which you've never doubted God's love for you in Christ & his commissioning of you to be a servant of the Lord. Precisely my own experience, which all else since has been seen in the light of. You look at the CIM in the light of your conversion to Jesus, so you see the CIM language-&-literature as **closer to** the Great Tradition than you would if you hadn't had that conversion experience. Here's an irony: the same conversion experience, + my being a scholar-specialist in the Great Tradition, has me seeing the CIM language-&-literature as **farther from** the Great Tradition. This letter is an attempt to tell you why.

3 We orthodox Christians have always viewed the OT in the light of the gospel, the Christ Event: that's what makes the OT "old" & the NT "new." On the same pattern, **gnostics** have always viewed the entire Bible in the light of the special "knowledge" ($\gamma\nu\omega\sigma\iota\varsigma$ *gnosis*), a superior knowing, which they claim.

INSTANCE: You sent me a copy of a letter an Episcopal priest addressed to you. He's a CIM gnostic & admits "there is a widespread discontinuity between conventional orthodoxy and the thought system articulated in the Course....I know a number of Anglican clergy, in the United States and elsewhere, who are working with the Course and being influenced by the Course teachings in their preaching, teaching and pastoral approach." And he's proud that Anglicanism, because of its emphasis on reason (!), "is better equipped to accommodate the Course teachings than denominations that do not commend such an approach to truth."

Now comes the gnostic arrogance (my boldface on "higher"): "I use scripture in a somewhat different way than do many preachers. In fact, since I regard the Course as representing a **higher** level of Truth than do the canonical scriptures, I tend to make the latter conform to the former, rather than the other way around. This of course marks a radical departure from conventional Christian preaching, though I don't advertise the fact!"

4 Note that where you see convergence between Christianity & the Course, that vicar sees divergence. Note his words: "different," "higher," "make the latter [the Bible] conform to the former [the Course]," "a radical departure," "widespread discontinuity." My experience of Christianity & of the Course finds me in complete agreement with him as to the wide difference: my difference from him is that I choose Christianity instead of the Course, which he's slipped into his ministry as a replacement for Christianity though its actually a new religion. (I'm well acquainted with the phenomenon: national leaders in my own denomination, the United Church of Christ, have slipped a new religion, radical feminism, into the denominational literature such as THE NEW CENTURY HYMNAL.)

5 But the Course seems a new religion competing with Christianity only in the eyes

of those who don't recognize it as an old religion which competed with Christianity & Judaism for more than 3 cs. (roughly, AD/CE 100-400).^{*} Of the literature of that ancient **Gnosticism**, the Gospel of Thomas is most readily available to you. Note how close in tone it is to the CIM literature. (Most of our knowledge of that religion was indirect till, in 1945-46, some 50 Gnostic texts, buried in the 4th c. near Nag Hammadi, Egypt, were discovered--among them the Gospel of Thomas.)

6 The early Christians rightly understood Gnosticism as a **alternative** to Christianity. We can sense its competing presence even in the earlier layers of the NT (eg, 1Cor.15 & Col.). In the latest layer, the Pastoral Letters (on which I wrote a commentary), Gosticism is nailed as "the falsely-called knowledge [gnosis]" (1Tim.6.20), & Christians are admonished to avoid this rival faith (1Tim.4.1-16, 6.3-5; 2Tim.2.14ff, 4.1-5; Tit.3.9). The Bible has much to say about ground-level "wisdom" & much to say against underground "knowledge" claiming to hold the high ground.

7 Gnosticism/CIM uses the biblical language not to tell the biblical story of election-rejection-redemption (Jewish & Christian) but as a convenient **backdrop** for telling a quite other story which is better told in the language & religion of Buddhism. It's a short step from Christianity into Jungianism (a religious philosophy you know well), & from that an even shorter step into Zen. (Your first letter mentions your attending the "ordination of a friend as a Zen Buddhist priest." Indeed.)

Another metaphor: the Course is the dog wagging the tail (Christianity): a dog can make out well after its tail is clipped. (Your priest friend violates his vows in reading the Bible in light of the Course "rather than the other way around.")

8 Your CIM group was 1/3rd Jewish, the rest Christian (including 2 Catholics). I congratulate you for this: "I enjoyed bringing the words of NT Jesus into the readings." The readings do include "the Son of God" (gnostic universal sense), & Jesus indeed can be imported if one is so inclined. But Jesus, who is central to Christianity, is **optional** to the CIM.

9 And I agree: "Reading physics and understanding the incredible complexity of creation makes it so much easier to understand miracles" & (you add) prayer. But Jn. Polkinghorne's "ordered disorder" of quantum & chaos-theory makes no advance on Arthur Compton's random/directive theory ('20 Nobel Prize in Physics) I studied with him in '41 (& which he, as an orthodox Christian, elaborated that year in THE FREEDOM OF THE WILL). As for those two post-Holocaust Germans, Tillich & Heidegger, whom you quote as saying "Our myth of God is dead--we are awaiting a new myth," the myth that God is dead has subsequently died. As a Christian, I see no need for what you call "a new theological myth." Nor did Compton (who headed physics at the U. of Chicago & oversaw there the first nuclear reaction), since whom no essential advance has been made in physics as it bears on the humanities (& thus on religion)....Note the double amnesia: (1) The old Gnosticism was forgotten, so the CIM's neognosticism seems new; (2) The old physics of Compton (& others) was forgotten, so its present parallels seem new. (NOTE: I'm not saying no advances have been made in physics *as physics*. I can go like "Wow!" about some of it.)

10 The CIM has a deep **antagonism**^{to} Christianity. Eg, you quote "Jesus says, 'Teach not that I died. Teach that I live in you'." NO CROSS, which for Christians is the central historical datum. "Whom God created limitless is free" (Lesson 280). NO SIN ("Your Father yearns to have you recognize your sinlessness [11.7.3].") Contrast Flannery O'Connor (3.10.56 letter to Eileen Hall in A HABIT OF BEING, ed. Sally Fitzgerald [F,S&G/79]): "Part of the mystery of existence is sin. When we think about the Crucifixion, we miss the point of it if we don't think about sin." "Death is but an illusion, not a fact." NO DEATH, but Hindu maya teaching (Manual p52: "Nothing he [God] did not create is real."). "We are of God's essence, an extension of his Being and his beloved Son": NO TRANSCENDENCE of God over his creation.

11 In his "Pentecost" sermon, your vicar friend **reduces** (1) the Holy Spirit to the "connection" overcoming our separation from "our Source," & (2) Easter to a "demonstration" of a truth we otherwise know, viz, "that life is continuous....resurrection would still be a fact of life even if Jesus had never lived at all." NO RESURRECTION as God's historical-cosmic act of new creation....Grace & peace, *William*