

# 5 ISSUE 4: CHRISTIANITY IS OPPRESSIVE

---

## ALAN'S STORY

*I came across the “Course” in the pop psychology aisle of my local bookstore. There is no doubt that it has shaped my spiritual life over the past few years. I browsed through the book, liked it, and soon was reading it almost non-stop. There was something that truly harmonized. Perhaps it offered an alternative approach to spirituality from the traditional Christianity that had been “crammed down my throat” during childhood. It certainly appealed to me intellectually, and as a lay student of psychology I found that it had a familiar ring in that arena as well.*

*I do not engage in “authenticity debates” about the Course, or about the Bible, for that matter. I find that if you want them to, they can complement one another. They can also, of course, mutually exclude, depending on one’s predetermined intent.*

### TOPICS

*New Age View of Christianity*

*Ethics and the New Age Worldview*

*Christianity and Biblical Ethics*

## DESCRIBING YOUR WORLDVIEW . . .

### WHAT ARE YOUR BELIEFS CONCERNING ETHICS?

In conjunction with Lesson 5, consider the following questions which will help you to identify and describe your beliefs concerning ethics, another of the five components of a well-rounded worldview. Use your notebook to write your impressions in answer to each of these questions, and explain your answers.

1. Are people accountable for their actions? If so, to whom are they accountable?
2. What is the basis upon which one determines whether a certain act is morally right or wrong?
3. Is morality a cultural factor? a universal value?
4. Are moral values objective? subjective?

## NEW AGE VIEW OF CHRISTIANITY

We mentioned in Lesson 1 that the New Age worldview draws from many belief systems for its ideological framework. Most people who have this worldview are of the opinion that all spiritual paths contribute to one's spiritual awareness and lead to the same goal of enlightenment, perfection, and union with the divine Essence (God). The one exception they make is Christianity. Why do they consider Christianity so "dangerous"? Here are some of the reasons they give:

*Christianity seeks to control.* Some people reject Christianity because they claim that it is oppressive and seeks to control how one lives. Its ethical system is restrictive and requires people to be accountable to a personal God for their thoughts and actions.

*Christianity claims to possess absolute truth and to be exclusive.* Those with a New Age worldview reject Christianity's claims of absolute truth and exclusivity. These claims are unacceptable to New Agers who believe truth is relative and that Jesus Christ, while a good example of what a human being can be, was merely a man like all other men. Christians are criticized because they maintain that their religion is the

only one that leads to God. For those who believe there are many viable pathways to God, this is the ultimate arrogance.

*The Christian Bible is untrustworthy.* The accusation is often made that the church has altered some Bible passages to suit its own purposes, making the Bible untrustworthy. In her book *Out on a Limb*, Shirley MacLaine reports on a conversation with a “spirit entity” named John who spoke to her through a channeler named Kevin. John claimed:

Much of what exists in your Bible today has been reinterpreted . . . by the Church. It was to the advantage of the Church to ‘protect the people’ from the real truth [about] the process of each soul’s progression [by means of reincarnation] through the ages. . . . [S]uch a truth would make the power and the authority of the Church unnecessary. Each person, that is, each entity, becomes responsible to itself for its conduct. It does not need a church.<sup>27</sup>

The claim is also made that at the Second Council of Constantinople—also called the Council of Nicea—the Council voted to strike the teaching of reincarnation from the Bible in order to solidify the church’s control. This is a false claim which we shall discuss later in this lesson.

Despite these claims, however, many New Age books quote from the Bible when it suits the authors’ purposes, and biblical terminology has been adapted by a number of New Age leaders and authors. This terminology, however, is used to teach a variety of concepts contrary to biblical teaching.

An example of misuse of Scriptural terminology is the use of the word *atonement*. Hebrews 2:17, speaking of Jesus Christ, says: “He had to be made like his brothers in every way, in order that he might . . . make atonement for the sins of the people.” The word *atonement* here and in other New Testament passages speaks of Jesus’ sacrificial, substitutionary death on the cross to pay the penalty of sin for all people. It includes the appeasement of the wrath of God against sin and provides for the reconciliation of God with those who accept Christ’s sacrifice on their behalf and who make Him the Lord of their lives. For New Agers, however, the word *at-one-ment*, as they write it, speaks of being at one with the original creation (pantheism). It has nothing to do with Christ’s sacrifice for sin, but describes what New Agers perceive to be the end result of one’s own efforts at enlightenment or self-realization.

Many New Agers in the Western world are of the “baby boomer” generation and have had a background of Christian teaching in their childhood. Some of these, like Alan in our introductory story, rejected “traditional Christianity” because it had been “crammed down their throats” when they were young. Like Alan, they are left with a spiritual void in their lives which they are trying desperately to fill. As a result, they are turning to various New Age “channeled” doctrines in a search for truth that will satisfy their spiritual longing and still leave them free to control their own lives and destiny. They are not willing to be accountable to anyone but themselves for the choices they make.

Does this describe your experience? Have early encounters with traditional Christianity caused you to feel Christianity is dangerous, intrusive, restrictive, misleading, or too exclusive? Are you seeking spiritual enlightenment in some other form because you have been disappointed with Christians or Christian organizations? Do you find Christianity to be oppressive, as New Agers claim? If this is your opinion, please consider carefully what we have to say in the remainder of this lesson.

## ALAN’S STORY CONTINUES

*The “Course” claims to be “dictated,” which I guess is just an alternative way to say “channeled.” I am not comfortable with that. On the other hand, that seems to be a similar phenomenon as is claimed with the Bible. I just leave all that alone and respond to the Course in ways that seem natural, which almost always involves a change in the way I see something. I believe these are changes for the better, and they are cumulative. The Course would say they are just changes in awareness, as we come closer and closer to Reality . . . Reality being that we already exist in a state of utter perfection, and to the extent that we do not perceive this, we suffer from illusions. By the way, I have not been and am not now into “new age.” I gave up on groups because they seem to draw a lot of mixed-up people.*

## ETHICS AND THE NEW AGE WORLDVIEW

Let's start this section with the premise that human beings make value judgments every day. If we see an artist's painting, we might judge it a beautifully crafted work of art or a piece of junk. This is an *aesthetic* value judgment. We hear a news report on the radio and determine that someone's actions are good or bad, right or wrong. If someone voluntarily commits a crime, we judge that person as being bad or wrong. These are *moral* value judgments.

*Morality*, as we define it, is *right conduct*. By *right* we mean the conduct meets a standard by which it is measured. *Ethics* is the study of values in human conduct.

Titus, Smith, and Nolan, in their textbook *Living Issues in Philosophy*, identify three levels of moral development which we have summarized as follows:<sup>28</sup>

*Level 1: Preconventional.* The bases of moral decisions are avoidance of punishment and satisfaction of one's own needs. The conclusion is that *behavior is morally right if it brings satisfaction to oneself.*

*Level 2: Conventional.* The bases of moral decisions are customary societal norms, social harmony, and approval of others. The conclusion is that *behavior is morally right if there is loyalty to others and respect for law and order.*

*Level 3: Postconventional.* The bases of moral decisions are internalized personal principles and valid universal principles. The conclusion here is that *behavior is morally right if it is based on carefully-selected, highly-principled moral values that are chosen independently.*

You can see from this brief description that there is a broad difference between views of right and wrong among these three levels. Which one best describes your own level? These three levels are related to three very different approaches to morality, which are:

1. *Relativism:* Subjective, no fixed values, no universal standards
2. *Situation ethics:* A flexible application of absolute standards based on what is deemed "best" for a given situation
3. *Absolutism:* A reliance on some absolute authority

Admittedly, it is difficult to evaluate the nature of New Age ethics when the claim is made by New Agers that there is no such thing as sin

or evil—rather, there is only ignorance. While some New Agers might blame their actions on their karma, those same persons would object (and probably react in some way) to a negative action against them by someone else. No husband would say, “I can’t judge or condemn the thief who robbed me and raped my wife, because he is unenlightened about his higher self and is acting out of ignorance. He will pay for his ignorance in his next life. His action against us is what we deserve because of things we did in our previous life.”

According to the New Age worldview held by reincarnationists, people are accountable for their actions only with respect to how those actions will affect their karma. In other words, they are accountable only to themselves. The only punishment they will receive (outside the realm of law and order in their society) is through continuous cycles of rebirth until they achieve inner perfection and are united with the eternal One.

The New Age worldview, then, seems to be that morality is a cultural factor imposed by such institutions as the Christian church in order to control members of the church. Thus, moral values are subjective, not objective.

## CHRISTIANITY AND BIBLICAL ETHICS

Devout Christians believe that one can determine whether conduct is *right* or *wrong* and that standards exist by which one can evaluate an action as *moral* or *immoral*. Christian ethical standards are based on 1) obedience to God’s will as revealed in both the Old and New Testaments, 2) a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, and 3) adherence to the teachings of Jesus given in the New Testament. Donald E. Baldwin further clarifies this:

The ethical monotheism of the Old Testament (particularly that of prophets, such as Amos and Jeremiah) is very close to the teaching of Jesus, as we would expect, since Jesus was nurtured in this Old Testament teaching. The view of both the Old Testament and of Jesus is that ethics and religion are inseparable. It is quite contradictory for a believer to have true religion and not live an ethical life. [Believers do not] look upon Jesus as merely a good example that they should follow. This is a very inadequate understanding of the role of Jesus in relationship to believers. He is our Lord and Savior, and He indwells us by the Holy Spirit to help us live out the will of God in the world.<sup>29</sup>

On reading Alan's story earlier in this lesson, one gets the impression that the Christianity of his childhood did not provide for him a belief system compelling enough to captivate his heart and soul. This raises the question, why do so many people abandon their early Christian teaching and look elsewhere for spiritual fulfillment? And if Christianity is all it claims to be, why is it that so many people who call themselves "Christians" fail to live up to its standards in ethical conduct?

One answer to these difficult questions is that some of these people have grown up in an *experience-oriented* church and lack a solid doctrinal foundation. All of the emphasis of the church is on having a *spiritual experience*. In contrast, people in some churches have received a *doctrinal foundation* but lack the personal, spiritual experience of a relationship with Jesus Christ. The emphasis of the church is on doctrine. The doctrines these people have heard are not relevant to their daily lives because simply knowing the doctrines does not affect the whole person. True believers have both the *experience* of knowing Jesus Christ as their personal Savior and a solid, biblical, *doctrinal foundation* or belief system, and this gives direction to their lives. Their faith includes intellectual understanding of and assent to the body of evidence for Christianity and the joyful experience of a personal relationship with God through His Son, Jesus Christ. Such a faith inspires one to voluntary obedience to God's will as revealed in His Word, the Bible. It teaches one how to resist the temptation to sin and how to live a morally pure life; it gives one the desire and enablement to do so; and it prepares one for a life of eternal joy and satisfaction in the presence of Almighty God.

Now let's look again at the claims made against Christianity by people who have a New Age worldview.

The first claim we mentioned is that *Christianity seeks to control*. Such a view is understandable, because God does require a high standard of ethical behavior of those who have given their lives to Him. However, subjection to His will is a voluntary choice, because His ethical standard is based on love. Jesus answered the question, "Which is the greatest commandment in the Law?" (Matthew 22:36), with these words:

"'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments'" (Matthew 22:37-40).

God did not give the Ten Commandments because He wanted to restrict people's enjoyment of life; rather, obedience to these commandments provides for our highest good, which is unhampered communion with Him and with one another. Such communion, based on love, is our greatest blessing in this life and our hope for eternity.

The second claim we will consider is that *Christianity claims to possess absolute truth and to be exclusive*. It is said to be exclusive because it claims there is only one way to God, and that is through Jesus Christ. It claims that truth is found in Jesus Christ alone.

We talked about this claim in Lesson 2. Both of these claims are in fact true, and are summed up in these words of Jesus: "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6).

People who have had a personal experience of salvation by faith in Jesus Christ, and who have seen their hopeless lives dramatically changed because of the new life He gives, realize He is the only way to abundant life. They want to share this good news with everyone they meet so all might have everlasting life. It is like a fireman trying to rescue people from a burning building. He calls to them, "Come this way. This is the only way to get out of the building alive." But some go in other directions, doubting his words. Imagine his frustration and sadness when they refuse to listen to him and are doomed. In the same way, when believers plead that Jesus Christ, God's Son, is the only way to the Father, they are not being arrogant. They long to rescue those going in the wrong direction.

The third claim is that *the Christian Bible is untrustworthy*. Biblical scholars would flatly refute this claim. Extensive research has been carried out and comparisons made between the oldest biblical manuscripts and more recent ones. The Dead Sea Scrolls, ancient manuscripts discovered during the twentieth century in caves near the Dead Sea, confirm the exceptional accuracy of the contemporary translations of the biblical manuscripts. Many archeological findings over the years also confirm the Bible's accuracy, as do a large number of fulfilled Bible prophecies. No other documents from antiquity have provided greater evidence of authenticity than the ancient biblical texts. We do not have space here to cite the many evidences, but we can say with assurance that the Christian Bible is absolutely trustworthy and reliable. Woodworth emphasizes the Bible's miraculous unity of themes:

Although written by about forty authors over a period of sixteen hundred years, the books of the Bible present one overriding theme: *God's redemption of man through the sacrifice of His Son, Jesus Christ*. In the Scriptures there is but one doctrinal system, one moral standard, one plan of salvation, and one divine plan of the ages. The books, instead of conflicting with one another and confusing the theme, serve to fill out and complete each other in a harmonious way. A marvelous series of unfolding revelations move along a dramatic course that reaches its breathtaking climax in the final triumph over Satan. Books of the Bible as different as Leviticus and John produce but one story, one theme, one work. The four Gospels give us details about the life of Christ, and each of them sheds light on a different aspect of His character and ministry. Yet together they are a unified whole.<sup>30</sup>

Finally, in response to the false claim of some that the teaching of reincarnation was removed from the Bible at the Council of Nicea, those who make this claim have either misunderstood or reinterpreted what actually happened. Groothuis explains:

What actually happened was that either in 543 or in 553, fifteen anathemas (condemnations) were adopted against Origin [an early church father], none of which refers to reincarnation. Yet one of them reads, "If anyone asserts the fabulous pre-existence of souls . . . let him be anathema." New Age writers take this to mean a rejection of a strong current of reincarnation in the early church. This is just not so. The anathema only concerned Origin's teaching that human spirits predated their existence in human bodies. Origin did not hold to reincarnation, but simply spiritual pre-existence.<sup>31</sup>

In defending false claims against Christians, it is not our purpose to propose that no immoral act in history has been done in the name of Christianity. Christians are not infallible, but Christianity is the pure gospel of Jesus Christ. People and human institutions who call themselves "Christian" are sometimes guilty of very wrong (sinful or evil) actions, but Jesus Christ, from whom we get the name *Christian*, is the sinless Son of God. He alone is our standard of holiness. As we pattern our lives after His perfect example, we receive spiritual power to resist temptation and make moral choices pleasing to Him.

Christianity has also dramatically changed the world in countless *positive* ways during the two thousand years since the birth of Christ. For example, the message of the gospel has inspired many of the world's great masterpieces in music, art, literature, and architecture. All over the world, Christian missionaries have made a difference in people's lives through medical and other social services and the education of children. The gospel message they have preached has brought hope to the hopeless and elevated the social status of women. The result is that people who have been transformed by the gospel and who now live by Christian ethical standards reveal the amazing love of Jesus Christ to the world and are a blessing to their community.

The Psalmist describes the moral character a Christian should have:

Lord, who may dwell in your sanctuary?

Who may live on your holy hill?

He whose walk is blameless

and who does what is righteous,

who speaks the truth from his heart

and has no slander on his tongue,

who does his neighbor no wrong

and casts no slur on his fellow man,

who despises a vile man

but honors those who fear the Lord,

who keeps his oath

even when it hurts,

who lends his money without usury

and does not accept a bribe against the innocent.

He who does these things

will never be shaken.

—Psalm 15