Near-Death Experiences and *A Course in Miracles*

Robert Perry, B.A.
*Cranborne, UK*

Greg Mackie, B.A.
*Xalapa, Mexico*

**ABSTRACT:** Near-death experience (NDE) researcher Kenneth Ring and several experiencers themselves have noted several parallels between the philosophy implied by many NDEs and the philosophy conveyed in teachings of the contemporary spiritual path *A Course in Miracles* (the Course), a 1976 book dictated by an inner voice claiming to be Jesus. A link between the two sources is also suggested by an NDE-like experience that the Course’s “scribe” had years before the Course was dictated. In this article, we describe our comparison of the two philosophies under several headings: the nature of God; true human identity; the spiritual realm; the nature of the world; the power of thought, choice, prayer, and healing; and the purpose of life on earth. In each category we found a number of specific parallels, and in some we also found differences or apparent differences.

The two philosophies converge, in our view, on a distinctive synthesis of what we term a “dualistic/learning model”—in which souls travel through time on a divinely orchestrated educational journey aimed at achieving union with God—and a “nondualistic/awakening model”—in which minds awaken from the illusion of separate existence into the reality of undifferentiated oneness. We found in the Course a consistently greater emphasis on the nondualistic/awakening model, yet both NDEs and the Course share a central focus on unconditional love. If future researchers conduct more systematic analyses of the philosophy (or philosophies) expressed in NDEs and confirm our findings of predominant commonalities between the philosophies expressed in NDEs and the Course, we suggest that the commonalities cannot be explained as a product of cultural indoctrination.

**Robert Perry** has a B.A. in psychology and is a teacher of the contemporary spiritual path *A Course in Miracles* and founder of the Circle of Atonement, a *Course in Miracles* teaching center based in Sedona, AZ. **Greg Mackie** has a B.A. in history and is also a teacher of *A Course in Miracles* at the Circle of Atonement. Correspondence regarding this review should be sent to Mr. Perry at email: robert@circleofa.org.
KEY WORDS: near-death experience; A Course in Miracles

In this article, our purpose is to compare the philosophy that many near-death experiences (NDEs) seem to imply with the philosophy conveyed through the teachings of the spiritual text A Course in Miracles ("the Course" or "ACIM"; Foundation for Inner Peace, 2007). As long-time Course teachers who also share an interest in NDEs, our observation is that despite some notable differences, which we document below, there are a number of parallels between these two sets of information. These parallels are especially interesting given the fact that NDEs and A Course in Miracles are essentially independent of each other: The Course was completed in 1972, before NDEs came to public attention in Raymond Moody’s (1975) Life After Life, and since then the Course has not been a significant cultural influence. Thus, it seems unlikely that reports of NDEs influenced the Course or vice versa.

In our view, this similarity carries possible implications for both the Course and NDEs. At the very least, it raises the question of where the similarity comes from. How could A Course in Miracles and many NDEs independently agree on so much about God, humans’ true identities, the spiritual realm, and the purpose of life on earth, especially when these agreements fall outside of prevailing Western cultural expectations?

What Is A Course in Miracles?

A Course in Miracles is a contemporary spiritual path in the form of a book. Structured like an academic course, it consists of three volumes bound together: the Text, which presents the theory; the Workbook, which consists of a year of daily exercises that train students in applying the theory; and the Manual for Teachers, which is designed to assist teachers of this course.

The Course was “scribed” from 1965 to 1972 through a process of “inner dictation”—of a voice that claimed to be Jesus—by Helen Schucman (1909–1981) with the assistance of William Thetford (1923–1988), both of whom were psychologists at the Columbia-Presbyterian Medical Center in New York City. (For more on the Course’s scribing, see Vahle, 2009; Wapnick, 1999; and Skutch, 2004.) The book was originally published in 1975, the same year as Moody’s seminal work on NDEs, Life After Life.
Since its publication, the Course has sold over a million copies. It is generally studied either by students alone or in the context of loosely organized study groups, often with the aid of books written about it. Yet although the Course has experienced brief periods of relative popularity, such as the period following the 1992 publication of Marianne Williamson’s bestselling Course-based book *A Return to Love*, it remains a small phenomenon with little influence on the general public beyond the New Age movement and alternative spiritual circles.

**Links between NDEs and *A Course in Miracles***

As interpreters and teachers of *A Course in Miracles*, we often hear that a particular book or teaching is “just like” the Course. Historically, however, we have been naysayers, pointing out that the similarities are not nearly as great as people seem to think. The similarities, in our view, are often based on popular interpretations of the Course, whereas our own approach has been to set aside conventional wisdom about the Course and try to uncover, through careful study and analysis, what it is really teaching.

However, when we began looking into NDEs, our experience was surprisingly different. Again and again, we found in NDEs specific ideas and overall orientations that we had discovered in the Course and had put forward as corrections of conventional wisdom about the Course. As a result, in our teaching, although we still downplay the parallels between the Course and other teachings, we frequently reference NDEs as dramatic illustrations of particular Course concepts.

To compare the philosophy of *A Course in Miracles* and NDEs obviously requires an understanding of each one by itself. With the Course, exploring and communicating its philosophy has been our life’s work, so we feel on firm ground there. With NDEs, however, it is not so simple. Not only are we newer to this topic, but it is inherently more difficult to get one’s arms around. To date there has been no systematic study of the philosophy of NDEs, and therefore it has not been established that there is a unified philosophy expressed in them. The features that parallel *A Course in Miracles* are so prevalent that they seem to us to be part of a kind of “mainstream” of NDEs, but for the time being that possibility will have to remain a subjective impression that awaits verification.
Previous Discussions of NDEs and A Course in Miracles

An initial link was drawn between NDEs and ACIM by researcher Kenneth Ring in his article “Solving the Riddle of Frightening Near-Death Experiences: Some Testable Hypotheses and a Perspective Based on A Course in Miracles” (1994). In this article, Ring offered a Course-based explanation for distressing NDEs—specifically, for what he called “inverted” NDEs and hellish NDEs (not for “meaningless void” experiences, which he considered not to be true NDEs, but to be reactions to inadequate anesthesia). He pointed out that in the Course’s view, the only thing that is ultimately real is the realm of pure love—what the Course calls “Heaven” (the realm of God) and what, according to him, near-death experiencers (NDErs) call “the Light.” On the other hand, our conventional self-image—what the Course calls the ego—is an illusory construct rooted in fear, a construct the existence of which depends on denying the Light.

This picture of reality leads directly to Ring’s Course-based explanation for distressing NDEs. He posited that if one is strongly identified with one’s ego and its fear of dissolution, such an individual’s emotional state will then tend to generate images consonant with that fear, which will only cause it to strengthen. The person will therefore continue to feel very menaced [by the NDE], as he or she is indeed threatened with extinction—as a separate ego. . . .

According to A Course in Miracles, then, it comes down to this: If you are still clinging to your little island of make-believe, your ego, when you enter into death, you will experience its own fear, perhaps to the point of terror. If you can let go, however . . . you will find yourself one with the Infinite Light of Life (1994, pp. 15–16).

In Ring’s view, then, just as fear of ego dissolution can cause an NDE to “invert” and become distressing, so letting go allows the experience to “convert” back into the much more frequently reported pleasurable NDE.

Whether or not Ring’s view explains distressing NDEs, it is a logical extension of what the Course teaches. Indeed, in the Course there is a reference to a very similar fear reaction when approaching “the light” in meditation:

While you practice in this way, you leave behind everything that you now believe, and all the thoughts that you have made up. Properly speaking, this is the release from hell. Yet perceived through the ego’s eyes, it is loss of identity and a descent into hell.
If you can stand aside from the ego by ever so little, you will have no difficulty in recognizing that its opposition and its fears are meaningless (Foundation for Inner Peace, 2007, Workbook, p. 69).

Here, then, is an explanation for resistance to meditation that is very similar to Ring’s explanation for frightening NDEs: The ego fears the light because the light threatens it with extinction. To the ego, then, the ascent into light is a descent into hell. But if one can let go of the ego and its resistance, which are nothing but meaningless illusions, the experience will convert into the joyful one that is its natural form.

In contrast to Ring’s thesis, the late Kenneth Wapnick, a prominent Course interpreter, emphasized what he considered a theological incompatibility between the Course and NDEs (Wapnick & Wapnick, 1995). In view of the Course’s teaching that the body is not real, Wapnick claimed that it makes no sense to speak of leaving the body and then, once out of the body, finding a peace that was not available in the body. Both leaving the body and finding a peace inaccessible while in the body, he said, would mean that the body is real. “How can one leave one’s body, travel through a tunnel, and greet a great light, if one were never in the body in the first place?” (Wapnick & Wapnick, 1995, p. 40). Therefore, though these experiences may be helpful, they are better understood as being subjectively “projected from the mind onto the body and its world of life, death and near death” (Wapnick & Wapnick, 1995, p. 41). Seeing NDEs as real and as something to seek would compromise the goals of the Course:

Holding up near-death experiences to be idealized and sought for (as was depicted in the popular movie Flatliners) actually serves well the ego’s fundamental strategy of first making the body real, and then turning it into a repulsive thing. This sets up a situation in which people would wish to be free of its prison of darkness, yearning to escape into the non-corporeal light. And all the while, the ego’s thought system of separation, guilt, and specialness nests comfortably in the mind, protected by the belief that there is indeed a body that is real, and one that truly exists in the physical world. (Wapnick & Wapnick, 1995, pp. 41–42)

Although we acknowledge that the Course teaches that the body is unreal, we do not think this teaching means that taking NDEs more or less at face value is somehow at odds with the Course. Wapnick’s interpretation here is an application of his larger interpretive approach, which we believe is highly problematic. This approach holds up the concept of “nonduality”—that only pure, undifferentiated spirit is real—
as a kind of measuring stick for what the Course really teaches. As a result, a number of key elements within the Course itself that appear incompatible with this nonduality are automatically reinterpreted as “metaphors” that are designed to veil the truth from minds that would be threatened by it (Perry, Mackie, & Watson, 2004, pp. 55–89). Our interpretive approach, in contrast, rests on the many statements in the Course itself that emphasize that its language is designed to be clear and unambiguous, that “this is a very practical course, and one that means exactly what it says” (Foundation for Inner Peace, 2007, Text, p. 159), and that it values a minimum of symbolism because “symbolic” means “open to many different interpretations” (A Course in Miracles urtext, 2003, Text, p. 124), which is the opposite of clear.

As a result, in our view Wapnick’s approach ends up labeling as antithetical to the Course ideas that are actually an important part of it and that are presented by it as straightforward teachings. We think something similar happened with Wapnick’s treatment of NDEs. Just as his measuring stick of strict nonduality labeled authentic parts of the Course as incompatible with the Course, so that same measuring stick labeled NDEs as incompatible with the Course, whereas to us they instead seem to be surprisingly compatible with it.

We see this compatibility in a passage about death from a supplement to the Course that Helen Schucman scribed in 1977 (Foundation for Inner Peace, 2007, Song of Prayer), which approvingly mentions the very things that Wapnick objected to: leaving the body and finding peace in a realm outside the body. Speaking of how death is experienced by a truly healed mind, this passage speaks of the body as being “discarded as a choice, as one lays by a garment now outworn” (Foundation for Inner Peace, 2007, Song of Prayer, p. 17). It then goes on to say,

We thank the body, then, for all the service it has given us. But we are thankful, too, the need is done to walk the world of limits, and to reach the Christ in hidden forms and clearly seen at most in lovely flashes. Now we can behold Him without blinders, in the light that we have learned to look upon again.

We call it death, but it is liberty. . . . Now we go in peace to freer air and gentler climate, where it is not hard to see the gifts we gave were saved for us. For Christ is clearer now; His vision more sustained in us; His Voice, the Word of God, more certainly our own. (Foundation for Inner Peace, 2007, Song of Prayer, pp. 17–18)

Here, then, we have found in the Course material itself the very elements that Wapnick objected to in NDEs: leaving the body and go-
ing “in peace to freer air and gentler climate.” Further, the references to the body as a “garment” that can be discarded, to seeing the light “without blinders,” and to seeing clearly that “the gifts we gave [others] were saved for us” seem quite reminiscent of specific elements of the classic NDE (Zingrone & Alvarado, 2009, pp. 18–21). This kind of compatibility between the Course and NDEs sets the stage for what will be repeatedly seen below.

**A Near-Death-Like Experience in the Life of the Course’s Scribe: Helen Schucman’s Subway Experience**

It turns out that the scribe of the Course herself, Helen Schucman, had a near-death-like experience in 1938, one whose ideas and imagery are echoed in the Course itself. It happened in the New York subway. Helen’s subway car was full of noisy people and revolting smells; recounting the experience, she said, “I was finding the whole situation increasingly disgusting, and closed my eyes to shut it out, feeling sick to my stomach” (Wapnick, 1999, p. 47). That was when the experience began:

And then a stunning thing happened. It was very brief. . . . An accurate account of what happened is impossible. As an approximation, however, I can say that it was as though a blinding light blazed up behind my closed eyes and filled my mind entirely. Without opening my eyes, I seemed to be watching a figure of myself as a child, walking directly into the light. The child seemed to know exactly what she was doing. It was as if the situation were completely familiar to her. For a moment she paused and knelt down, touching the shining ground with elbows, wrists, and forehead in what looked like an Eastern gesture of deep reverence. Then she got up, walked to the right side and knelt again, this time resting her head as if leaning against a gigantic knee. The feeling of a great arm reached around her and she disappeared. The light grew even brighter, and I felt the most indescribably intense love streaming from the light to me. It was so powerful that I literally gasped and opened my eyes.

I saw the light an instant longer, during which I loved everyone on the train with that same incredible intensity. Everyone there was unbelievably beautiful and incredibly dear. Then the light faded and the old picture of dirt and ugliness returned. (Wapnick, 1999, pp. 47–48)

Afterward, Helen described the experience to her husband, who dismissed it as inconsequential and suggested that she forget about it.
This she did, and for years did not think about it at all. Years later, she began to scribe the Course, a task that she regarded as her life’s purpose, an assignment given to her by God.

This experience, of course, was not an NDE, because Helen was not near death. However, as the following points illustrate, her experience shares many parallels with what NDErs have experienced (Zingrone & Alvarado, 2009, pp. 18–21):

- Helen mentally exited an unpleasant earthly situation and then experienced a higher realm that she found ineffable, that is, impossible to adequately describe.
- In this realm, she approached a light that she understood to be God.
- This light, though not a human form, was personal and had elements of a human form.
- She drew closer and closer to this light, was embraced by it, and then fully united with it.
- Though she had no conscious memory of such an experience happening before, the experience felt strangely familiar to her.
- Indescribably intense and powerful love streamed from the light to her.
- She experienced a great intensity of emotion.
- Afterward, she briefly saw others through the eyes of this love she had received from God.
- When she later described the experience to someone close to her, he dismissed it, and as a result, she put it out of her mind for years.
- Eventually, though, it resurfaced in the form of a spiritual function (scribing ACIM), a function that she felt was a life purpose given her by God.

The similarities between the features of Helen’s experience and those of many NDE accounts are so great that if Helen’s experience had been accompanied by a medical crisis, it would very likely be classified as an NDE. Here, for instance, is Cynthia Prueitt’s NDE account, which is similar in its specific contents:

The next thing I remember was being introduced into a room that was completely and brilliantly white. There was a man sitting on a chair that resembled a chair-type throne.

Seeing this man with a beard sitting there, I ran up to him and climbed on his knee. He gathered me in his arms and... He just began to comfort me. He gave me such a warm, warm feeling of love and... I’ve never felt anything like it. It was warm, it was love, it was joy—I didn’t want it to end. It was the most thrilling feeling I had ever experienced, before or since. (Lundahl & Widdison, 1997, p. 124)

Helen’s subway experience appeared to be a significant precursor of the Course. Indeed, she states in her autobiography that “[s]everal
times” in the weeks right before the Course began coming through her in the fall of 1965, “I felt something like the subway experience of years before, although with much less intensity” (Schucman, 2009, p. 39). On an inner level, then, Helen’s subway experience and the Course itself seem closely related. Given the likeness of her subway experience to NDEs, the relationship between her subway experience and the Course suggests a close connection between NDEs and the Course. Thus, even though a case cannot be made for NDEs and the Course influencing each other via culture, there may be a kind of NDE influence within A Course in Miracles itself. Interestingly, there is also the possibility of a kind of Course influence within NDEs, as NDErs on occasion report receiving communication and even teaching from Jesus, the ostensible author of the Course.

**NDErs Make the Link**

It is not just researchers like Kenneth Ring and Course teachers like ourselves who have seen a connection between NDEs and A Course in Miracles. NDErs themselves sometimes have made that link. Now that I (Perry) regularly mention NDEs in my Course teaching, when I speak publicly on the Course NDErs in the audience will often speak up, and they clearly see an overlap between their experiences and the Course. However, rather than quote from a wide array of NDErs, we have selected just a few quotes from individuals who have some visibility in the NDE community.

In 1952 Jayne Smith had an NDE during childbirth. In the 60 years since, she has shared her NDE widely, including on The Oprah Winfrey Show and Charlie Rose television programs. She has served on the Board of IANDS and has been a keynote speaker at its annual conference. She currently speaks at Beebe Medical Center in Lewes, Delaware to nurses’ meetings, patient support groups, and the general public. Here is her account of the connection between her NDE and the Course:

Back in 1952 when I had my NDE, I was given what to me were incredible bits and pieces of knowledge. I knew beyond all doubt that everything being given to me was total truth even though I’d never before been exposed to these ideas. You can imagine my excitement and my joy when in 1979 I discovered A Course in Miracles! These magnificent Truths which had changed my worldview completely some 27 years before were in the pages of these three books which comprised A Course in Miracles. I especially remember passages like “I am not a body. I am free” and “Teach only love for that is what you
are” and, of course, dozens and dozens of references to our sinlessness, our oneness with God and our purpose in life being all about love. In fact it’s all about love. Everything! Love is the ground of our being, the absolute bottom line of all there is, and there are passages in ACIM that made my heart practically scream “Yes, yes, yes, yes, I know this. I was told this in my NDE.” My NDE has always been my North Star and there was never anything in the Course that conflicted with what my NDE had taught me. The Course simply expanded my understanding of those Truths. I have never felt so at home in any written work. A Course in Miracles was, is and always will be one of the great blessings in my life. (J. Smith, personal communication, August 26, 2013)

Barbara Harris Whitfield had two NDEs as a result of complications from back surgery in 1976. She has long been active in the field of near-death studies in many ways: as a member of the IANDS Board of Directors and its Executive Board, as a research assistant with psychiatrist Bruce Greyson at the University of Connecticut Medical School, as a teacher at Rutgers University’s Institute for Alcohol and Drug Studies, and as the author of Spiritual Awakenings: Insights of the Near-Death Experience and Other Doorways to Our Soul (1995) and The Natural Soul (2010). Here is her account:

My life review showed me my ego and how to get out of its pain. This Energy (God) that was holding me let me see through Its Eyes and Its Heart, so that I understood that my ego wasn’t me. There was no attempt to denigrate it, but to show over and over that it isn’t real. I understood that the only part of me that is real and will exist long after I die—in fact it is eternal—is my Soul (the part of me that is pure Spirit).

Then when my husband Charlie and I studied the Course together, and when we taught it, to me it was a continuation of what I had learned in my life review. Both NDEs and the Course are what I call “ego busters.” Indeed, the Course has the most sophisticated description of the ego and how to get out of its inherent pain. The Course also had the same perspective as my NDE on what is real and eternal in me. Both, I believe, are leading us to the place where we eventually wake up to the realization that at our core we are unconditional love. Unconditional love is what I experienced in my NDE and what the Course has helped me to fine tune, through taking off my rough edges, so I can continue to grow and be THAT.

One last point: When I came back from my NDEs, I knew that I had been with the most amazing Intelligence ever!!! It was a Wisdom that was far beyond ordinary human capability. And when I read the Course, I feel the same astronomically brilliant Entity—call It whatever you want. Both NDEs and ACIM are from a far more intelligent
perspective than we humans possess. They are so far beyond anything we humans could ever figure out. This Intelligence is big—bigger than my little mind can comprehend, but my heart grasps It with gratitude. (B. H. Whitfield, personal communication, July 10, 2013)

Finally, we know of one case in which the Course was featured within someone’s near-death experience itself. In 2008, physician Rajiv Parti was Chief of Anesthesiology at Heart Hospital in Bakersfield, California. During a surgery for a severe infection following an earlier surgery, he left his body. He soon found himself in a hellish region and realized that he was in this environment because he had led a self-centered and materialistic life. However, after he fervently wished that he could live differently, the NDE turned around. He says he was then led by his deceased father through a tunnel, after which he merged with “the Light Being” and was told by It that he would be given life back, but “ONLY to live it differently.” He was told he would have to “leave anesthesiology and materialism behind,” and become a healer. “The Light Being,” he says, “gave me glimpses of my future: writing books, speaking to audiences, helping many people.” Directly on the heels of these instructions for his new life, his NDE concluded on an enigmatic note:

As I accepted what the Light Being was showing me, some words seemed to flash in the sky above me. They read “A Course In Miracles.” At that time, being born into a Hindu family with my sense of religion and spirituality being dominated by my own Hindu cultural experience, I had no idea what those words meant. [He reiterated this in a talk in Sedona, Arizona, saying, “I remember very vividly I had no idea what they meant.”] I have since discovered this to be a spiritual book popularized by Marianne Williamson in which the themes of love and forgiveness are taught with intelligence and love.

Finally, I became aware, with every fiber of my being, that my earthly life was being given back to me so I could help others who were suffering from chronic pain, addiction and depression.

My next memory is of waking up in the recovery room. (Parti, 2014)

Given that seeing the words “A Course In Miracles” came directly after the instructions to return to life to teach a healing message, Parti has concluded that the ideas in the Course are meant to be the basis of his ministry (R. Parti, personal communication, October 5, 2013). And based jointly on his NDE and on the Course, he now sees his message as summarized in these three words: “Forgive, Love, Heal.” He has since left his anesthesiology practice and immersed himself in the study of the Course. He has also been busy sharing
his NDE, at the 2013 IANDS Conference and with IANDS and other groups around the U.S.

Here is an NDE, then, that contained the familiar theme of the NDEr being told he had a mission to fulfill. In this case, the NDE itself apparently signaled that the philosophical basis for that mission was meant to be *A Course in Miracles*.

**Parallels and Differences Between NDEs and *A Course in Miracles***

In this section, we examine the relationship between the philosophies implied or directly stated in NDEs and in the Course, under several categorical headings. In each category, we will first provide some representative quotes from both sides. Because we have not found in the professional literature a systematic study of the philosophy revealed in NDEs, we have no way of documenting how representative a given NDE quote might be. All we can say at this point is that the quotes we have selected seem to us to be within the range of what many NDErs say—a conclusion that has been supported by reviewers of this article who are experts in the field of near-death studies (J. Holden, personal communication, October 2, 2014; J. Long, personal communication, October 2, 2014; B. Greyson, personal communication, October 7, 2014). NDE accounts will be indicated by the name of the experiencer, and Course passages by the word “Course.”

We will then attempt to capture the parallels we see, in the form of a composite summary, printed in italics. In each such summary, we carefully composed each element to accurately reflect both NDEs and the Course. Space does not permit us to support every detail with quotes, because each sentence in our account of the parallels is based on a number of NDEs and a pattern of Course passages. We hope, however, that the examples we do provide will suggest the overall veracity of our summaries. Finally, where applicable, we will explore noteworthy differences that we see between the two.

**The Nature of God**

**Representative Quotes**

Peggy: I clearly and instantly knew the light was not just a Light but was ALIVE! It had a personality and was intelligence beyond comprehension. . . . I knew
the light was a being. I also knew that the light being was God and was genderless. . . .

I vividly recall the part where the light did what felt like switch on a current of pure, undiluted, concentrated unconditional LOVE. This love I experienced in the light was so powerful it can’t be compared to earthly love, even though earthly love is a much milder version. It’s like knowing that the very best love you feel on earth is diluted to about one part per million of the real thing. (Ring, 2006, pp. 44, 46)

Course: You cannot understand how much your Father loves you, for there is no parallel in your experience of the world to help you understand it. There is nothing on earth with which it can compare, and nothing you have ever felt apart from Him resembles it ever so faintly. (Foundation for Inner Peace, 2007, Text, p. 281)

Beverly Brodsky: Here, I experienced, in ineffable magnificence, communion with the Light Being. Now I was filled with not just all knowledge, but also all love. It was as if the light were poured in and through me. I was God’s object of adoration; and from His/our love I drew life and joy beyond imagining. My being was transformed; my delusions, sins, and guilt were purged without asking; and now I was Love, primal Being, and bliss. And in some sense, I remain there, for Eternity. Such a union cannot be broken. It always was, is, and shall be. (Ring, 2006, p. 299)

Wan I: The peace and comfort felt like being embraced or hugged by a lover, and the calmness felt like the feeling of lying in your lovers embrace after making love to someone special. The safety feeling it gave was almost that soft [sort?] of safe and comfort feeling that we got when we were just a child being embraced and carried around in our parents arms. (I., n.d.)

Course (from a prayer we say to God): And all my sorrows end in Your embrace, which You have promised to Your Son, who thought mistakenly that he had
wandered from the sure protection of Your loving Arms. (Foundation for Inner Peace, 2007, Work-
book, p. 459)

Analisa D: All of a sudden, I was somehow being pulled to-
wards this light, and it was the most indescribable
feeling of peace and love I had ever experienced.
(D., n.d.)

Course: You were eternally fixated on God in your creation,
and the pull of this fixation is so strong that you
will never overcome it. (A Course in Miracles Soci-
ety, 2007, Text, p. 97)

Parallels

The following parallels are based on the idea that “the Light” that
NDErs report can usually be roughly identified as God, even though
it may not fit traditional conceptions of God. Following the practice
of the Course and many NDErs, we will use the traditional “He” to
refer to God, in the understanding that we are merely using a cultural
convention to refer to something that the Course (Mackie, 1993) and
most NDErs indicate is beyond gender. We could just as easily have
used “It,” which seems to us to be the most common pronoun used by
NDErs.

God is not the traditional God. “He” is genderless, bodiless, and
without human ego, and human beings are inherently one with Him.
God is best represented as a vast light, brighter than any light on
earth. However, God is also not an impersonal sea of consciousness. He
is still the creator and clearly has personal characteristics: He speaks,
interacts, thinks, feels, and has intentions. Above all, God is uncondi-
tionally loving, having no angry or punishing side whatsoever. One
can describe God’s love as being like a more intense and encompassing
version of earthly love, yet this love so immeasurably exceeds earthly
love that it’s more accurate to say that no comparison is possible.

As a result, approaching God does not mean coming fearfully be-
fore a God who demands worship and who will judge people for their
transgressions. Rather, it is an experience of leaving behind all fear
and all pain. Individuals feel an irresistible attraction or “pull” that
draws them to Him. God’s presence feels familiar to them, as if they
have been there before. Indeed, it feels like they are coming home after
a long journey in a foreign country. Rather than being judged for their
transgressions, God views their misdeeds as mere learning experiences
in the process of coming home to Him, which do not lessen His love for them in the least. As individuals reach God, they feel enfolded in His embrace, which is not physical, but is like being wrapped in pure love, safety, and security. Ultimately, they merge into complete oneness with Him. In this union, God reveals all knowledge to them, holding back nothing that He knows.

In the process of uniting, individuals may fear the loss of identity, yet this fear is not valid, for they retain the essence of personal identity, and union with God is the supreme happiness, the perfect fulfillment of all desires. As a result, leaving God's presence can be an intensely painful experience, resulting in deep grief, heartache, and homesickness.

**Differences**

The only possible discrepancy we can see between the Course and NDEs on this point is that the Light that is encountered in most NDEs would, in Course terms, have to be understood as God communicating through the Holy Spirit. This distinction is because the Light often speaks to NDErs about their lives, yet in the Course, God as God exists on a purely formless level, and although He is aware of the essence of the human condition on earth, He is not directly aware of the specifics of our lives. He does speak to people about those specifics but only through the Holy Spirit, an extension of God that the Course calls the “Voice for God” or simply “God's Voice.”

This distinction may appear to be a difference with NDEs, yet there are NDEs in which a subtle but important distinction is drawn between the Light and God. For instance, in Pam Reynolds's famous NDE, a spiritual companion told her that “the light is what happens when God breathes” (Broome, 2002). And Jayne Smith said, “I didn’t think the light itself was necessarily God. . . . But I know that that light is a part of God, or a part of what God emits” (Smith, 2008). Such remarks appear quite consistent with the Course.

**True Human Identity**

**Representative Quotes**

D. S. Weiler: It ['the Creator'] saw me as a beautiful, perfect, shining, living being, full of love and peace, filled with joy. I saw myself, but I saw me as it did, a being of golden light and love. I loved being me for the first time I could remember.
I was perfect just as I was. There was nothing I could do that would make me better. I was so loving and beautiful through it’s ‘eyes.’ The self of us is made of love and the love we are shines like a sun there. Me! I was beautiful! It didn’t just tell me that, it showed me. I saw me.

I saw the truth of what I was. I was filled with the joy in the knowledge that I was a loving self and I loved the being who showed me the love in my self. (Weiler, 2007)

Course: “My Self is holy beyond all the thoughts of holiness of which I now conceive. Its shimmering and perfect purity is far more brilliant than is any light that I have ever looked upon. Its love is limitless, with an intensity that holds all things within it, in the calm of quiet certainty. Its strength comes not from burning impulses which move the world, but from the boundless Love of God Himself.” (Foundation for Inner Peace, 2007, Workbook, p. 420)

Course: “I am one Self, united with Creator, at one with every aspect of creation, and limitless in power and in peace.” (Foundation for Inner Peace, 2007, Workbook, p. 167)

Course: “I will awaken from the dream that I am mortal, fallible and full of sin, and know I am the perfect Son of God.” (Foundation for Inner Peace, 2007, Workbook, p. 216)

Course: “Yet nothing he can do can compare even in the slightest with the glorious surprise of remembering Who he is.” (Foundation for Inner Peace, 2007, Manual, p. 62)

Parallels

While with God, human beings discover who they really are. Though they in some sense remain distinctly themselves (as opposed to dissolving into a universal pool), they realize that they are not their body, which is just a temporary garment they wear, a vehicle they use. They also realize they are not their earthly identity, with all its faults and wrongdoings. That is just an illusion, a fiction that they habitually identified with but never really were. They discover that they are some-
thing far greater than they ever suspected, that they are an infinite spirit, a perfect creation of God, with no faults or sins whatsoever. The love of God is the very substance of their being. Their true identity has no boundaries, being one with God and with all else. Yet in some paradoxical sense they are still an “individual.” This discovery of their true self is joyous beyond words, and provides the basis for a total, unconditional self-acceptance, as well as a healthy immunity to the judgments of others.

The Spiritual Realm

Representative Quotes

Lisa: Suddenly I remembered this place. This was my home, the place that was really my home, and I wondered how I could’ve ever forgotten about it. I felt as though after a long, difficult journey in a foreign country I finally had come home, and the being of light who was there before me was the being that knew me better than anyone else in creation. (Lisa, n.d.)

Course: Come home. You have not found your happiness in foreign places and in alien forms that have no meaning to you, though you sought to make them meaningful. This world is not where you belong. You are a stranger here. (Foundation for Inner Peace, 2007, Workbook, p. 384)

Jayne Smith: And the whole time I was in this state, it seemed infinite. It was timeless. I was just an infinite being in perfection. And love and safety and security and knowing that nothing could happen to you and you’re home forever. (Ring, 2006, p. 274)

Course: O my brothers, if you only knew the peace that will envelop you and hold you safe and pure and lovely in the Mind of God, you could but rush to meet Him where His altar is. (Foundation for Inner Peace, 2007, Manual, p. 86)

NDEr: The feeling just became more and more and more ecstatic and glorious and perfect. . . . If you took the one thousand best things that ever happened to you in your life and multiplied by a million, maybe you could get close to this feeling. (Ring, 1999)
Course: Try to remember when there was a time—perhaps a minute, maybe even less—when nothing came to interrupt your peace; when you were certain you were loved and safe. Then try to picture what it would be like to have that moment be extended to the end of time and to eternity. Then let the sense of quiet that you felt be multiplied a hundred times, and then be multiplied another hundred more.

And now you have a hint, not more than just the faintest intimation of the state your mind will rest in when the truth has come. (Foundation for Inner Peace, 2007, Workbook, p. 192)

Ray Kinman: Every Being there was singing this incredibly beautiful music and praising God. (Atwater, 2007, p. 36)

Course: What is Heaven but a song of gratitude and love and praise by everything created to the Source of its creation? (Foundation for Inner Peace, 2007, Text, p. 548)

Parallels

The spiritual realm—being, in fact, humans’ natural environment—is vastly more suited to human beings than is the earthly realm. The essence of the spiritual realm, along with everything in it, is love. In this realm, people exist in a natural state of deep peace, joy, and love. Their happiness there can be likened to their happiest moment on earth multiplied thousands or millions of times. In this realm, they are not subject to the vicissitudes of a physical body nor the limitations of space. They are also not subject to the linear process of time. Rather, there is only the eternal now, in which everything happens at once. Their minds are immensely expanded, being able to encompass far more than they can while bounded by a brain. This realm is pervaded by music of unearthly and transcendent beauty, sometimes described as collective praise of God.

Relationships in the spiritual realm are also not subject to the same limitations as they are on earth. People experience a profound sense of intimate connection with others, along with a sense of having known and loved them forever. There are no strangers; relationships are with a constellation far greater than the few that are known on earth. Com-
munication with others is direct, mind-to-mind, and thus free of the distance and misunderstandings of physical communication. There are angels there. Jesus is a key figure there as well, and the sense of relationship with him is also close, familiar, and natural.

The spiritual realm is human beings’ real home, the place from which they come and to which they will return. It is thus familiar to them; they remember being there. Compared to it, life in a physical body on earth is stifling and unnatural, like being in a prison.

Differences

A possible difference between NDE and Course conceptions of the spiritual realm is that in the Course, Heaven is absolutely formless, and anything outside that formlessness is an illusion. Therefore, a nonphysical NDE landscape of beautiful flora and radiant human forms would be a dream—a collective dream that is clearly closer to reality, but still a dream. That, indeed, is how the Course would categorize the afterlife realm that we saw described earlier with the words “freer air and gentler climate.” Although many NDErs perceive earthly life to have been a dream (as we will shortly discuss further), it is not clear to us that they identify any nonphysical realm that still contains form as also being a dream. If not, that would be a significant difference.

The Nature of the World

Representative quotes

Peggy: The light showed me that the world is an illusion. All I remember about this is looking down [at what she took to be the earth] . . . and thinking, “My God, it’s not real, it’s not real!” It was like all material things were just ‘props’ for our souls. (Ring, 2006, p. 45)

Course: The world you see is an illusion of a world. (Foundation for Inner Peace, 2007, Manual, p. 85)

Course: There is no world! This is the central thought the course attempts to teach. (Foundation for Inner Peace, 2007, Workbook, p. 243)

Anita Moorjani: It felt like the whole world was just a culmination of the thoughts and beliefs of the collective. That is, the culmination of everyone’s thoughts and beliefs. It felt like nothing was actually real, but we made it real with our beliefs. (Moorjani, 2006)
External conditions are produced by the thoughts of many, not all of whom are pure in heart as yet. *(A Course in Miracles urtext, 2003, Text, p. 47)*

During Ingrid’s NDE, her guardian angel told her that everything that happened to her was part of the testing program of earth and that in a very real sense, earth is a schoolhouse where people have to pass certain tests before they can advance to the next grade. *(Lundahl & Widdison, 1997, p. 60)*

The Holy Spirit, the reinterpreter of what the ego made, sees the world as a teaching device for bringing you home. *(Foundation for Inner Peace, 2007, Text, p. 80)*

I do remember this: There was a reason for everything that happened, no matter how awful it appeared in the physical realm. . . . Indeed, it appears that all that happens is for a purpose, and that purpose is already known to our eternal self. *(Ring, 2006, p. 298)*

What could you not accept, if you but knew that everything that happens, all events, past, present and to come, are gently planned by One Whose only purpose is your good? *(Foundation for Inner Peace, 2007, Workbook, p. 255)*

All things are lessons God would have me learn. *(Foundation for Inner Peace, 2007, Workbook, p. 367)*

*Parallels*

*The physical world is an illusion. What happens on earth, therefore, does not really happen. The “sins” people commit do not defile their real identity. The hurtful things done to them do not really damage them nor compromise their real relationship with those who do them. Death here is also an illusion; there is no death. The world itself, including all events within it, is a manifestation of mass consciousness, a malleable projection of subjective beliefs.*

*Paradoxically, the world is also a divinely orchestrated classroom set up by God (ACIM: through the Holy Spirit). It is not a real place but rather is a theater carefully constructed to facilitate learning. There*
is, thus, an absolutely perfect plan behind every detail of it, aimed at leading human beings to an ultimate goal in which their learning is complete and they transcend all suffering. Hence, everything in this world happens for a reason; there are no accidents. The future is a script already written, including the specific people to be met—yet individuals can affect their inner experience and outer journey through their own free choice.

Differences

Although there are striking parallels between ACIM and NDEs on the subject of the world, it is here that we also see the greatest differences. The Course’s main emphasis is on the physical universe as a projection of a primordial insanity, the manifestation of an unnecessary separation from God before time and space appeared. Thus, even though the Course teaches that, once separated minds made the world, the Holy Spirit in some sense remade it (“There is another Maker of the world” [Foundation for Inner Peace, 2007, Text, p. 524]) so that it became a classroom for learning, the Course is also quite emphatic that God as God did not create the world:

> God made it not. Of this you can be sure. What can He know of the ephemeral, the sinful and the guilty, the afraid, the suffering and lonely, and the mind that lives within a body that must die? You but accuse Him of insanity, to think He made a world where such things seem to have reality. He is not mad. Yet only madness makes a world like this. (Foundation for Inner Peace, 2007, Workbook, p. 282)

This is a clearly different emphasis than is expressed in NDEs. Many NDEs, for instance, feature “an extraordinary voyage through the universe” (Beverly Brodsky in Ring, 2006, p. 298), treated as God’s glorious creation, in which the details of its workings are revealed to the NDEr. It is impossible to imagine something like that voyage in the Course, which displays no interest in the physical cosmos, physical laws, or physical science. Its interest, in contrast, is in the deeper reaches of the mind, and indeed it does display an interest in psychological science. If there were an analogous voyage in the Course, therefore, one would expect it to be through inner space, one that revealed the levels and dynamics of the mind, something the Course deals with at length. And just as the cosmic emphasis in NDEs is not mirrored in the Course, so the Course’s focus on the depth and intricacies of the mind seems largely absent from NDEs.
The Power of Thought, Choice, Prayer, and Healing

Representative Quotes

Course: The mind is very powerful, and never loses its creative force. It never sleeps. Every instant it is creating. . . . There are no idle thoughts. All thinking produces form at some level. (Foundation for Inner Peace, 2007, Text, p. 31)

Linda Redford: The truth was very loud. I was responsible for every decision, every action, and every consequence to myself and others. When I had harmed another, I wounded my own soul. (Atwater, 2007, pp. 412–413)

Course: I am responsible for what I see. I choose the feelings I experience, and I decide upon the goal I would achieve. And everything that seems to happen to me I ask for, and receive as I have asked. (Foundation for Inner Peace, 2007, Text, p. 448)

Anita Moorjani: I was made to understand that, as tests had been taken for my organ functions (and the results were not out yet), that if I chose life, the results would show that my organs were functioning normally. If I chose death, the results would show organ failure as the cause of death, due to cancer. I was able to change the outcome of the tests with my choice! [The tests ended up showing no organ failure and a body completely free of cancer.] (Long, 2010, p. 184)

Course: The patient could merely rise up without their aid [the aid of medicines] and say, “I have no use for this.” There is no form of sickness that would not be cured at once. (Foundation for Inner Peace, 2007, Manual, p. 18)

Course: Miracles enable you to heal the sick and raise the dead because you made sickness and death yourself, and can therefore abolish both. (Foundation for Inner Peace, 2007, Text, p. 4)
Parallels

*Thoughts and beliefs have tremendous power and importance. Thoughts are deeds. They are never insignificant or without effect. Human beings are always fully responsible, not only for their behavior but also for their thoughts. Their power of choice is operating all the time. The freedom to choose their way forward is a God-given right that nothing can take from them.*

*Through the thoughts and beliefs people choose, they create their life circumstances and states of physical health. A mind dominated by fear produces illness. However, this same power of mind can be used positively. A change of mind from fear to love can lead to truly miraculous healing—of both the mind and the body. When the state of mind that produced an illness goes, the illness can vanish without medical explanation.*

*A loving mind can also heal others. For this reason, prayer has great power. The real source of healing is God’s unconditional love, and a mind that has tapped into this love can channel it to others with healing effect.*

Differences

A possible difference in this category is that, although both ACIM and NDEs teach that humans choose their circumstances and states of health, their emphasis seems different. The main emphasis in the Course is that humans choose painful events and physical illness for insane reasons. Thus, the Course includes statements such as “Sickness is a defense against the truth” (Foundation for Inner Peace, 2007, Workbook, p. 257), and “Sickness is anger taken out upon the body” (Foundation for Inner Peace, 2007, Text, p. 603). The main emphasis in NDEs, however, seems to be that humans choose negative circumstances and states of health in order to learn spiritual lessons from them.

This difference is probably only one of emphasis, however. In some NDEs—Anita Moorjani’s being a prominent example—sickness is viewed as a manifestation of negative mental states, which sounds similar to the Course’s view that sickness is chosen for insane reasons. For its part, the Course presents a view that sounds similar to the NDE view that negative circumstances are spiritual lessons: it teaches that earthly trials “are but lessons that you failed to learn presented once again” (Foundation for Inner Peace, 2007, Text, p. 666)—lessons
that are “presented” by the Holy Spirit but that individuals apparently agreed to. In material not included in the published Course, the author of the Course talked about mental retardation as a lesson “agreed on beforehand,” saying, “The lesson involves not only the individual himself, but also his parents, siblings, and all of those who come in close relations with him” (A Course in Miracles urtext, 2003, Text, p. 68). Thus, even though NDEs and ACIM have a different emphasis, the main emphasis in each one is clearly echoed in the other.

The Purpose of Life on Earth

Representative Quotes

Anonymous:  [speaking of life review] Believe me, what I had counted in life as unimportant was my salvation and what I thought was important was nil. (Ring, 2006, p. 156)

Course:  On this side, everything you see is grossly distorted and completely out of perspective. What is little and insignificant is magnified, and what is strong and powerful cut down to littleness. (Foundation for Inner Peace, 2007, Text, p. 346)

Course:  Your faith is placed in the most trivial and insane symbols; pills, money, “protective” clothing, influence, prestige, being liked, knowing the “right” people, and an endless list of forms of nothingness that you endow with magical powers. (Foundation for Inner Peace, 2007, Workbook, p. 79)

Hank:  I realized that there are things that every person is sent to earth to realize and to learn. . . . To discover that the most important thing is human relationships and love and not materialistic things. (Lundahl & Widdison, 1997, p. 70)

Course:  I . . . thought to save what I desired for myself alone. And as I looked upon the treasure that I thought I had, I found an empty place where nothing ever was or is or will be. . . . Yet he whom I forgive will give me gifts beyond the worth of anything on earth. (Foundation for Inner Peace, 2007, Workbook, p. 475)

Anonymous:  [a prisoner, speaking of life review] And the only pictures on it were the pictures of people I had
injured. . . . But the most terrifying thing about it was that every pang of suffering I had caused others was now felt by me. (Ring, 2006, p. 160)

Minette Crow: What we do for or against another, we do to ourselves. (Ring, 2006, p. 162)

Course: *All that I do I do unto myself. If I attack, I suffer. But if I forgive [others], salvation will be given me.* (Foundation for Inner Peace, 2007, Workbook, p. 395)

Anonymous: [speaking of the life review] It’s the little things—maybe a hurt child you helped or just to stop and say hello to a shut-in. Those are the things that are most important. (Ring, 2006, p. 156)

Course: Perhaps the seeming strangers in the elevator will smile to one another; perhaps the adult will not scold the child for bumping into him; perhaps the students will become friends. Even at the level of the most casual encounter, it is possible for two people to lose sight of separate interests, if only for a moment. That moment will be enough. Salvation has come. (Foundation for Inner Peace, 2007, Manual, p. 7)

Mary Jo Rapini: And he [God] said, “Let me ask you one thing—have you ever loved another the way you’ve been loved here?” And I said, “No, it’s impossible. I’m a human.” And then he just held me and said, “You can do better.” (Inbar, 2010)

George Ritchie: “*What have you done with your life to show Me?*” . . . The question, like everything else proceeding from Him [Jesus], had to do with love. How much have you loved with your life? Have you loved others as I am loving you? Totally? Unconditionally? (Ritchie, 2007, p. 64)

Course: You cannot enter into real relationships with any of God’s Sons unless you love them all and equally. Love is not special. . . . You can love only as God loves. Seek not to love unlike Him, for there is no love apart from His. (Foundation for Inner Peace, 2007, Text, p. 265)

Peggy: One thing I [learned] was that we are ALL here to do an “assignment of love”. . . . Our “assignment” is
programmed in at birth and it is the very thing or things we love most. (Ring, 2006, p. 47)

Course: To each He [the Holy Spirit] gives a special function in salvation he alone can fill; a part for only him. (Foundation for Inner Peace, 2007, Text, p. 530)

Course: I have a special place to fill; a role for me alone. Salvation [of the world] waits until I take this part as what I choose to do. (Foundation for Inner Peace, 2007, Workbook, p. 459)

Parallels

Human beings’ priorities on earth are typically backward. The things they regard as important tend to be trivial, whereas the things they consider trivial are often the most important. Their usual priorities of material success, wealth, possessions, status, power, etc., are misguided. They need to release their attachment to these false goals. What really matters is their relationships with others, including their most seemingly insignificant interactions. Life is ultimately not about competition but cooperation. What matters most is not how people differ but what they have in common.

The key question in life is: “Am I being hurtful or loving toward others?” Human beings’ actions, and even their thoughts, have a significant effect on others, and, indeed, on a far wider array of others than they ever imagined. Having a hurtful effect on others through lack of love is the key mistake that they can make here. There is a universal law of love, an intensification of the Golden Rule, whereby whatever people do to others they literally do to themselves. Therefore, hurtfulness toward others takes a tremendous psychological toll on people. It leads to deep feelings of guilt and unworthiness. These feelings are ultimately invalid, for human beings cannot tarnish the purity and worth that God placed in them. As a result, their mistakes are ultimately inconsequential and need not cause guilt. But those mistakes do need to be corrected—that’s what human beings are in earthly existence for. In physical existence, people are like children, in that it’s expected they will make mistakes and vital that they learn from them.

People are on earth to learn to love others with the same unconditional love with which God loves them. This learning will enable them to accept and love themselves, and will make their minds a perfect mirror of God’s so that they can remain in His presence. Their inter-
actions on earth are carefully designed opportunities for giving love. Their difficulties are pre-planned lessons for learning how to love. For this reason, forgiveness is a core value, because forgiveness is the transition to love—the letting go of judgment and resentment in favor of unconditional love. The basis of forgiveness is the fact that in everyone there is a divine worth that remains undamaged, regardless of what that person has done.

Love is ultimately an internal matter of thought and feeling, but it is crucial that it is expressed outwardly, in helpfulness and service to others. Expressions of love (this is the main meaning of “miracle” in ACIM), even in the smallest of interactions, are the most important aspect of a person’s life on earth.

Due to the supreme importance of being helpful, each person is given a “mission” (NDE and ACIM) or “special function” (ACIM) to carry out on earth. This is a way in which individuals can use their particular gifts and talents to be of service to humanity. It is their unique gift of love to the world. Their life purpose is tailor-made for them by the divine plan. Thus, rather than it being something that individuals devise themselves, it is something they discover.

Ultimately, human beings can live their lives on earth as a reflection of the spiritual realm. They can live out of the awareness that only love is real and that fear is an artificial emotion. They typically do not realize just how much they live in fear. Yet rather than experiencing themselves as being at the mercy of external circumstances, they can live free of care, worry, and fear—even fear of death. While their feet are on the ground, their minds can be in Heaven.

Discussion

As the preceding material indicates, the similarities between the philosophies expressed in NDEs and in A Course in Miracles are quite striking. There is a long list of shared themes, and these themes come together to produce a coherent whole. Whereas the overlap of the two sets of information is far from complete—the Course especially contains a multitude of ideas that have no analog in NDEs—they clearly converge on themes that are central for both of them. There are differences as well, and in the case of the origin and nature of the world, those differences might well rise to the level of genuine incompatibility, although it is difficult to say. For the most part, however, we can imagine the differences coming down to just different slants on the same realities.
The similarities are all the more significant when one realizes that the overall philosophy that they agree on is quite distinctive. We conceptualize this philosophy as the synthesis of two seemingly incompatible models, which we term the “dualistic/learning model” and the “nondualistic/awakening model.”

By using the term “dualistic” here, we do not mean a dualistic ontology of mind and body. Rather, we refer to a dualistic view of reality itself as composed of the physical world and a nonphysical Heaven, with the physical world being treated, at least in practice, as real. This view also includes a dualism of souls and God, so that souls are treated as distinct and/or apart from God. The “dualistic/learning model,” then, is one in which souls travel through time and space on an educational journey. Throughout this journey, God’s plan is at work behind the scenes, guiding souls, orchestrating their lessons, arranging their encounters, and sending them on missions for the good of the whole. The goal is for these souls to advance in their learning until they reach a state of perfection, at which point they unite with God.

The “nondualistic/awakening” model is quite different. Here, reality consists not of duality but only of oneness. The only thing that is real is a transcendent realm of limitless, undifferentiated spirit. The true identity of human beings is one with and even identical to this limitless oneness. The physical world is only an illusion, a fiction—otherwise, reality would be two—and the separate identities that individuals show up as in this world are likewise illusions. Their task, therefore, is not one of literal growth or change, for their nature is changeless. Rather, their task is to awaken from the dream of separate existence to what they “always already” are. In truth, there is no journey, for they are already That.

These two models do not sit easily together, but they are fused in both NDEs and ACIM, so that, in both, learning and growth are really a process of awakening to what human beings already are, and the world in which they do this learning is really just an illusory classroom. What allows for this fusion is an overwhelming focus on unconditional love: a God of love, human beings’ nature as love, lessons of love, and a mission of love. Given that love is inherently relational, identifying love as the essence of nondualistic reality—as both the Course and NDEs do—automatically opens the door to the dualistic/learning model with its thoroughly relational character. In both the Course and NDEs, then, unconditional love is the central pole that unites a dualistic/learning model with a nondualistic/awakening model. The Course clearly has a stronger emphasis on the nondualistic/
awakening model than NDEs have, a difference that ties together all the differences we explored above, but this difference in emphasis does not necessarily spell incompatibility. Indeed, the early parts of the Course’s dictation—corresponding to the first several chapters in its Text—have a noticeably more dualistic flavor, which slowly changes to a more nondualistic quality as the Course progresses. Yet the Course’s author described this difference not as conflict but merely as an “ascent upward in thought” due to an increased willingness on the part of the scribe (Wapnick, 2009, p. 294).

This love-based fusion of dualism and nondualism is distinctive enough that one has to wonder where it comes from. How did ACIM and NDEs acquire this same distinctive orientation? That is the question these similarities naturally raise.

The answer given by the Course and by NDEs, of course, is that both are actually tapping into the truth, or some approximation or expression of the truth. This, of course, cannot simply be assumed to be the case, yet neither should the prospect be dismissed out of hand. Even the mere possibility that these two sources are revealing the truth about reality and the purpose of life should cause one to sit up, take note, and think carefully.

What are the other possibilities? NDEs and the Course could be tapping into some preprogrammed scenario in the brain. Perhaps the brain comes equipped by evolution with various philosophies that are lying in storage, and NDEs and ACIM happen to trigger this particular philosophy (meaning, the love-based fusion of dualism and nondualism). Or perhaps nonphysical realities actually exist, and if one taps into a particular plane or region, this is the philosophy that happens to come out—of that region, but not of others. Or, in a similar vein, maybe this philosophy exists as a kind of archetype in the collective unconscious, which the Course and NDEs just happen to activate.

One thing that can be said with confidence, however, is that the Course and NDEs are not acquiring this philosophy from collective expectations in the culture. Neither the dualistic/learning model nor the nondualistic/awakening model is a particularly powerful force in our culture, and their synthesis is rarer still. The dominant influences in contemporary culture, both Western and Eastern, are scientific materialism and traditional religion—in the U.S., Christianity in particular. Christianity, of course, does include beliefs in God and a beatific afterlife, yet its principal model could be called an “obedience model.” Although a growing number of voices within modern Christianity are proposing a more unconditionally loving model, the obedience model
is still prevalent. In this model, the proper response to God is obedience to His laws, whether that obedience is conceived as being on the level of behavior, belief, or both. Obedience is then rewarded (eternally), whereas disobedience is punished (again, eternally). This obedience model can hold sway even where divine grace is emphasized. As scholar of Christianity Marcus Borg (1994) pointed out, faith in God’s grace “became the new requirement,” without which “one risked the peril of eternal punishment” (p. 79).

Interestingly, this obedience model does crop up in isolated NDEs: ones that include typical NDE features but set them within a more traditional religious framework. One example is that of Alexa, a devoted Christian who, as her body was failing, prayed, “Oh Jesus, I hope you’re everything I’ve been worshipping all these years!” (Hartung, n.d.). Like Ring’s “inverted” NDEs, the form of her NDE was absolutely typical, but not the content. Here, however, the content was not fear but rather Evangelical Christianity. Rather than encountering a God of unconditional love, Alexa approached a God that was too holy to look at (“such was His brightness, that I could not look directly at Him” [Hartung, n.d.]) and was primarily meant to be worshipped. Her life review was witnessed by both Jesus and Satan, with Satan loudly accusing her and cruelly enjoying her transgressions, in the hopes that she would be given over to him for punishment. She was saved only when a huge voice boomed out, “IS SHE COVERED BY THE BLOOD OF THE LAMB? YES!!!” (Hartung, n.d.).

The conformity of this NDE to the traditional obedience model is instantly recognizable. Yet just as recognizable is its contrast with the more typical NDE. If all NDEs were like Alexa’s, we would naturally be tempted to see their philosophy as an expression of cultural expectation. Yet the majority of NDEs seem to contain a thoroughly different perspective on reality, which again raises the question: Where does their philosophy really come from?

As we said at the beginning, we believe that more systematic work needs to be done in specifying the philosophy (or philosophies) expressed in NDEs. Yet to the extent that the one we have outlined here holds up as reasonably representative of the majority of NDEs, then some important benefits potentially result. For students of A Course in Miracles, NDEs could serve as dramatic illustrations of key teachings in the Course. For the field of near-death studies, parallels with the Course may serve to throw the NDE philosophy into sharp relief, highlighting its distinctiveness. If this distinctiveness turns out to be sufficient to support the idea that this philosophy is not a mere pro-
jection of cultural indoctrination, it might add another plank in the case for NDEs. If further investigation shows that to be the case, then NDEs and *A Course in Miracles* might lend validation to each other, thus together helping to point humanity in the direction of truth.

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