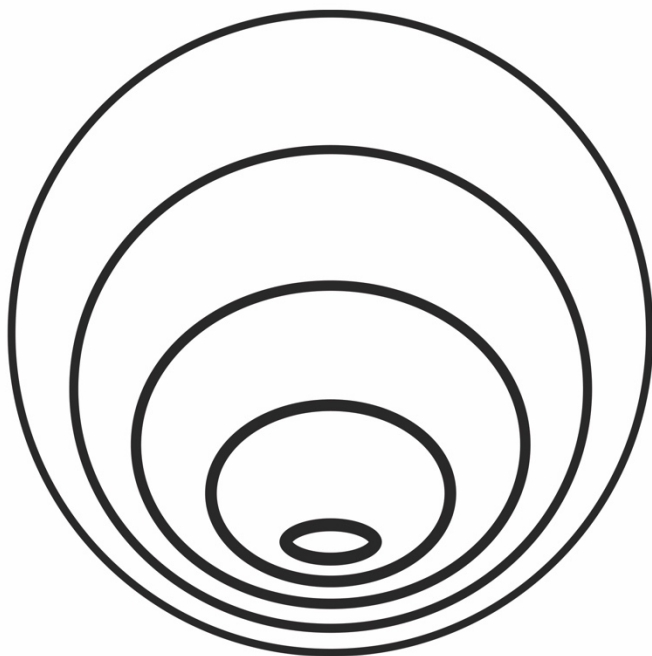


Original Sin Is A Lie

Bob Peck

How Spirituality Defies Dogma
and Reveals Our True Self



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Original Sin Is A Lie: How Spirituality Defies Dogma and Reveals Our True Self

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First printing edition 2022.

originalsinisalie.com

ISBN-13: 979-8-218-06583-6

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Part Six:

The Love of Our Creator is Inescapable

**Original sin is a lie,
because when we reduce
our ego perceptions of the world
around us,
boundaries between nature,
other beings,
and previously unknown parts of
ourselves melt away...**

**Leaving a blinding sense of
connective Love and Unity
underneath it all.**

CHAPTER 18

Piercing the Illusory Veil

Experience Rather Than Theology

“God wills no one suffer.

He does not will anyone to suffer for a wrong decision, including you.

That is why He has given you the means for undoing it.”

—A Course in Miracles, T.8.III.7:5-7

After graduating from the University of Texas with my shiny new Religious Studies bachelors, I realized I needed to catch up with Richard. Our family had lost touch with our shaman friend. My dad still had his number, but the last time I saw him was at my high school graduation party. It's so fun to see him at a big gathering... you'll be walking through a crowd of people and see him in the corner advising the most needful person... the aunt who got a divorce, the friend whose mother just passed... Richard is always on the clock.

We reconnected on the phone and met up for dinner. I excitedly told him about my college studies and increasing embrace of the 'perennial philosophy'. I had become 'initiated' into Kriya Yoga and was now meditating daily. He asked me throughout the evening if I wanted to begin the spiritual path. As I vocally affirmed for the third time in our conversation (somewhat unknown by me and intentional by him), I cemented my spiritual-door-opening status.

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Richard said that if I really wanted to begin the spiritual path in earnest—while there are many ways to God, one of the clearest, most uncorrupted teachings on earth at this time is a book called *A Course in Miracles*. He received confirmation from his guides that it is comparable to Christ’s original instruction to his apostles, alongside the Buddha, Moses, Shankara, and other authentic sages and saints throughout history. The advantage is that it was published in 1976.¹ It has yet to become watered-down. Much of the older faith teachings have become victim to centuries of dogmatic, doctrinal, and sectarian issues—not entirely, but they have been diluted in a way. Humanity hasn’t tried to manipulate *A Course’s* undeniable power yet. We’ll corrupt it in a few centuries too, but for now it’s a highly useful tool in the process of spiritual self-actualization.

A Course in Miracles (often stylized as *ACIM*) is a 1333-page book containing a self-study curriculum of spiritual transformation. There’s a “Text”, a “Workbook” of 365 daily lessons, and a “Manual for Teachers”, structured not unlike academic material.

“The curriculum the Course proposes is carefully conceived and is explained, step by step, at both the theoretical and practical levels. It emphasizes application rather than theory, and experience rather than theology. It specifically states that ‘a universal theology is impossible, but a universal experience is not only possible but necessary.’ (C-In.2:5) Although Christian in statement, the Course deals with universal spiritual themes. It emphasizes that it is but one version of the universal curriculum. There are many others, this one differing from them only in form. They all lead to God in the end.”²

It was received by an “inner voice” in the mind of a research psychologist named Helen Schucman. In the 1960s, Schucman was an atheist-leaning researcher at the Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons in New York City.³ She was working directly under Dr. Bill Thetford, a former graduate student of the world-famous psychologist Carl Rogers.⁴

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Bill & Helen's research center was a challenging environment. It was a university, a hospital, and a predoctoral training program with divided authorities... a complex bureaucratic maze of confrontational power struggles and reputational politics.⁵ After the two could no longer stand the difficulty, Bill said to her:

"There must be another way."

To his surprise, Helen agreed completely. She said:

"I agree. And I'll help you find it."

This now-famous decision for human betterment brought about a series of symbolic dreams and even waking images that came to Helen, totally foreign to her background and personality. She writes:

"Although I had grown more accustomed to the unexpected by that time, I was still very surprised when I wrote, "This is a course in miracles." That was my introduction to the Voice. It made no sound, but seemed to be giving me a kind of rapid, inner dictation which I took down in a shorthand notebook. The writing was never automatic. It could be interrupted at any time and later picked up again. It made me very uncomfortable, but it never seriously occurred to me to stop. It seemed to be a special assignment I had somehow, somewhere agreed to complete. It represented a truly collaborative venture between Bill and myself, and much of its significance, I am sure, lies in that. I would take down what the Voice "said" and read it to him the next day, and he typed it from my dictation." ⁶

There's no church, no institution, no leader, no scheme to get your money. There is a publisher, because we're in contemporary civilization. It's simply a book that helps us remember Who We Truly Are. As stated in the intro, its purpose, and ours, is to "remove the blocks to the awareness of love's presence" (T-In.1:7).

Whenever I learn about a new philosophy, I like to read about what its critics think. Unsurprisingly, extremist fanatical Christians have referred to *A Course* as demonic scripture.⁷ That's never scared

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me because those are the same close-minded folks who think yoga is of the devil, remember? They aren't crazy about gay people either. A lot of beautiful things are disliked by those thoroughly confused human beings. Peace to them.

To my great satisfaction, some critics of *A Course* have referred to it as "Hindu Christianity". Bill Thetford himself called it the "Christian Vedanta".⁸ The Christian association is because the 'inner voice' intuited by Schucman claims to be the enduring spirit of a liberated Jesus. While much of the *Course* is dedicated to piercing the illusory ego mind, occasionally Jesus will clarify a lesson from the Bible that has been misunderstood for millennia.⁹

The resurrection, for example, is reinterpreted not as a message of a sacrificial clearing away of sin, but as a symbol of reawakening, and an ability shared by all of God's children. It's a striking parallel to the title of Yogananda's voluminous Bible commentary, *The Second Coming of Christ: The Resurrection of the Christ Within You*. From *A Course's Manual for Teachers*:

"Very simply, the resurrection is the overcoming or surmounting of death. It is a reawakening or a rebirth; a change of mind about the meaning of the world. It is the acceptance of the Holy Spirit's interpretation of the world's purpose; the acceptance of the Atonement for oneself. It is the end of dreams of misery, and the glad awareness of the Holy Spirit's final dream. It is the recognition of the gifts of God. It is the dream in which the body functions perfectly, having no function except communication. It is the lesson in which learning ends, for it is consummated and surpassed with this. It is the invitation to God to take His final step. It is the relinquishment of all other purposes, all other interests, all other wishes and all other concerns. It is the single desire of the Son for the Father."

—ACIM, M-28.1:1-10

So within ACIM, Christian terminology is used ("the Holy Spirit", "God", "sin") but these terms are presented within a nondualist theology. It closely resembles Advaita Vedanta,

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Shankara's 'the-world-is-an-illusion' branch of Hinduism. This close proximity to "the jewel of Indian philosophy" only furthered fascination and gratitude:

"Simply do this: Be still, and lay aside all thoughts of what you are and what God is; all concepts you have learned about the world; all images you hold about yourself. Empty your mind of everything it thinks is either true or false, or good or bad, of every thought it judges worthy, and all the ideas of which it is ashamed.

Hold onto nothing. Do not bring with you one thought the past has taught, nor one belief you ever learned before from anything."

—ACIM, W-189.7:1-4

"Stillness is the aim of the seeker. Even a single effort to still at least a single thought, even for a moment, goes a long way to reach the state of inactivity. Your duty is to be: and not to be this or that.

'I AM that I AM' sums up the whole truth.

The method is summed up in 'Be still'.

What does 'stillness' mean? It means "destroy yourself". Because any form or shape is the cause of trouble. Give up that notion that 'I am so and so.'"

—Ramana Maharshi

"Nothing real can be threatened. Nothing unreal exists. Herein lies the peace of God."

—ACIM, T-in.2:2-4

"The impermanent has no reality; reality lies in the eternal. Those who have seen the boundary between these two have attained the end of all knowledge."

—Krishna, Bhagavad Gita 2.16

"The real does not die, the unreal never lived."

—Nisargadatta Maharaj

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“Hold no one prisoner. Release instead of bind, for thus are you made free.

...You are not free to give up freedom, but only to deny it.

...As long as a single ‘slave’ remains to walk the earth, your release is not complete.”

—ACIM, W-192.9:1-2; T-10.IV.5:1; T-1.VII.3:13

“A dreamer dreams that all the other characters in his dream must wake up before he can.”

—Ramana Maharshi

We are at a fascinating place in history with this material because it is so young.

Now that the original co-scribes, editor, and publisher (Dr. Helen Schucman, Dr. Bill Thetford, Dr. Ken Wapnick, and Dr. Judith Skutch-Whitson) have died (Wapnick passed in 2013, a psychologist & extraordinary philosopher in his own right; psychologist & spiritual pioneer Skutch-Whitson passed in 2021—while writing this book), there are only a few ACIM teachers who knew Helen & Bill personally. Rev. Jon Mundy is one such author. Jon comes from a Methodist background, a mystically minded preacher for decades until fully embracing his role as a *Course* teacher in the early 90s. What Jon articulates so beautifully is that the *Course’s* core content resonates with every mystical tradition throughout history:

“What the Course says is not new. How could the eternal be new? Mystics, masters, saints, and sages from all over the world and throughout the ages have talked about that which goes beyond perception. We find “themes,” “songs,” and “representations of the Course in the world’s oldest philosophies—the Advaita Vedanta philosophy of Hinduism, Buddhism, Gnosticism, Christian Mysticism, Sufism, German Idealism, American Transcendentalism, The New Thought Movement, Unity, Religious Science, Christian Science, and many more thousands of forms.”¹⁰

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The primary message of *A Course*, and all the above systems, is that God is not some distant entity. She lives within us completely and is fully knowable once we begin to “wake up”.

So why is ACIM different than these centuries-old faith traditions? The format itself is different because of its directness. Every sentence is another addition to the curriculum of mind training. There are parallels to Buddhism in that way—they’re both more of a practical psychology than a religion.

And like Christ’s original teaching, this 20th century teaching is also a radical philosophy.

“Temptation has one lesson it would teach, in all its forms, wherever it occurs.

It would persuade the holy Son of God he is a body, born in what must die, unable to escape its frailty, and bound by what it orders him to feel. It sets the limits on what he can do; its power is the only strength he has; his grasp cannot exceed its tiny reach.

Would you be this, if Christ appeared to you in all His glory, asking you but this:

‘Choose once again if you would take your place among the saviors of the world, or would remain in hell, and hold your brothers there.’

For He has come, and He is asking this.”

—ACIM, T-31.VIII.1:1-6

The *Course* says that our current perception (the ego’s) is upside down and backwards. In order to get free, we have to undo the way we see the world, and the way we see ourselves.

As you might begin to appreciate, the writing of the *Course* itself is incredibly beautiful. The verses are given in iambic pentameter, also called Shakespearean blank verse.¹¹ It’s poetry. You can flip to any page and feel the truth of its message in your core. In that sense it’s like no other book I’ve ever read in my life.

But most importantly, all of these external details don’t

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actually matter.

They are mere trivialities of form. The path that it lays before us is experiential. Even if it's the voice of Jesus or not, let the material into your heart and watch it expand for yourself. The evangelicals think that they can persuade people with their words... and while their efforts can be in earnest, true knowledge only comes through experience. And so I do the same. May we all find the peace within.

"Teach only love, for that is what you are."

—ACIM, T-6.I.13:2

"You have no idea of the tremendous release and deep peace that comes from meeting yourself and your brother totally without judgment."

—ACIM, T-3.VI.3:1

"The holiest of all the spots on earth is where an ancient hatred has become a present love."

—ACIM, T.26.IX.6:1

"This Is A Table."

"This place is a dream.

Only a sleeper considers it real.

Then death comes like dawn, and you wake up laughing at what you thought was your grief."

—Jalaluddin Rumi

Towards the end of a lovely family dinner, after hours of wine, funny stories and entertaining yet trivial small-talk; my aunt, dad and I snuck off. We passed around our dessert: a hurried bowl of cannabis, the great unifier of counterculture-era boomers and tree-hugging millennials. Predictably, the discussion took a significant turn from surface to substance. Bob III and I had a passionate discussion about many of our standard topics of conversation...

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that night we were gabbing about yet another mystic parallel... how this line from Meister Eckhart sounds like Zhuangzi or something equally transcendental.

After patiently listening to our seemingly endless dialogue, my beloved aunt thoughtfully jumped in.

She said that as a fellow spiritual person she understands and appreciates the vast majority of what we're talking about: the value in being inclusive to others, the underlying parallels across major faiths, the positive effects of meditation, etc.

"I get all that..."

What I struggle with is 'the illusion'," she said.

She knocked on the table and declared, *"This is a table. ...Isn't it?"*

Dad smiled at me and I smiled at them, realizing that it was now preposterously on me to attempt to explain in a few sentences the metaphysics behind nonduality. Fortunately in that moment, my expectations of my own capacity to explain away what is nearly unexplainable, were quite low.

Nonduality means "not two": that everything we see, hear, smell, taste, and touch is merely another appearance of the One. While Shankara and modern masters like Sri Ramana and Nisargadatta helped to articulate this elusive philosophy, it ultimately stems from the *Vedas*. Although nonduality, or "not-two-ness", does appear across many traditions, from Zen Buddhism to even the Gospels:

"The light of the body is the eye: if therefore thine eye be single, thy whole body shall be full of light."

—Jesus, Gospel of Matthew, 6:22 KJV

Because of its ancient progeny, it's important to understand that the Vedic definition of "real" differs a bit from the English translation. Within Indian philosophy, "Real" does not mean "perceptible to the senses", but rather:

- Permanence

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- Unchangeability
- Self-luminosity

So the question contemplated by Advaitists (Indian nondualists) and mystics the world over really is: “Is this perceived world permanent, unchangeable and self-luminous?”

According to the sage of Arunachala, Sri Ramana Maharshi, that answer is a definitive “no”. The names and forms appear in Brahman (God), the underlying substratum of all material phenomena. So it’s not necessarily that this world is “unreal” but rather, that, as David Godman summarizes Sri Ramana:

“The world is known and directly experienced to be a mere appearance in the underlying Brahman, it can be accepted as real, since it is no longer perceived as a separate entity. If one knows oneself to be Brahman, one knows that the world is real because it is indistinguishable from one’s own Self. However, if one merely perceives external names and forms, without experiencing that substratum, those forms have to be dismissed as unreal since they do not meet the strict definition of reality.”¹²

Bhagavan Ramana himself further contextualizes this nuance:

“Shankara was criticized for his views on maya without understanding him. He said that (1) Brahman is real, (2) The universe is unreal, and (3) Brahman is the universe. He did not stop at the second, because the third explains the other two. It signifies that the universe is real if perceived as the Self, and unreal if perceived apart from the Self. Hence maya and reality are one and the same.”¹³

The Buddhists have some interesting conceptual overlap with Advaita. Unlike the Hindus, they’re typically indifferent to the presence of God, but they similarly don’t give the world of form much solidity either.

Their sense of the “illusion”, or maya, is based on our tendency to misperceive time. Buddhism considers this world transitory, because it is always in motion—which intersects with recent findings in cognitive neuroscience.¹⁴ (Our neural processes are

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fluctuating as much as the cosmos.)

A Buddhist monk might respond to my aunt in the following way:

This is a table, as we're looking at it tonight.

But if you step back far enough, it was a tree before that, and a seed even earlier.

Someday it will be scraps in a wood pile.

It could be burned for a fire, and then it will be ash.

This world is constantly changing forms so don't be fooled by what it seems to be at this moment.

One unfortunate aspect of nondual talk is that it can be perceived as being dismissive or cold to the problems affecting this world. This is a common misconception I hear often: "If it's all illusory then why should we bother doing anything? There are people suffering the world over who need help, and we need to help them!"

Damn right we do. Illusion or otherwise.

That "uncle of the counterculture" Ram Dass spent his life harmonizing Eastern spiritual philosophies with passionate social action.¹⁵ He talked about how accessing a place of Oneness can generate empathy and radical compassion to address suffering. His humanitarian work took him to helping cure blindness in Nepal, supporting refugees in Guatemala, and teaching prisoners meditation in San Quentin.

"I was in Guatemala and one of the women, widows whose husbands had been murdered before their eyes, one of these women said to me through a translator, 'Thank you so much for leaving your home and family to come and help us.'

And I said 'I didn't. You're my home and family.' Who's leaving what?

And I felt that, the truth of that at that moment.

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Because she was defining it as though she was Them, but I didn't see her as Them, she was Us." ¹⁶

—Ram Dass

All of this would've been a better explanation for my dear auntie. But what I said that night was that while acknowledging its conceptual difficulties, the best analogy for the world as we know it, is a dream.

When you're really in a dream, it feels like you're really in that environment.

I waited tables in college and after you work a few double-shifts in a row, when your mind is thoroughly consumed by the job, it's common to have a "wait-mare". They are dreams where you are the only waiter in the restaurant: it's a packed house with every table trying to get your attention, livid customers are yelling at you, some are walking out cursing the whole establishment. You write down orders furiously but you can't read them back (because it's a dream) but you try to anyway. Then you go to the computer to put in all the orders that you can't read. Their collective anger rises to a crescendo, waking you up... opening your eyes, exhausted, from working all throughout your dream. Then you head into work for the morning shift.

"The world, like a dream full of attachments and aversions, seems real until the awakening."

—Adi Shankara

Most dreams are frustrating because you want to get to a certain place, or tell a certain person something, and you can't. You are captivated by its dream figures, you are bound by its imaginary rules.

Then you wake up. And realize.

Well, according to the mystics you woke up back into another dream. This table is just an image in this one.

Flipping Desire Is All It Takes

"Wrath springs only from thwarted desires. I do not expect anything from others, so their actions cannot be in opposition to wishes of mine. I would not use you for my own ends; I am happy only in your own true happiness."

¹⁷

—Sri Yukteswar Giri

What do we really want?

Do we want the next worldly thing, or do we want to get free of worldly things?

What the spiritual traditions suggest is that you might not see the futility of worldly phenomena quite yet, but ultimately you will. As long as our desire points outward, we will be in pain, if not now then soon. The Buddha was clear: 'Desire (in Pali: *taṇhā*) is suffering.' *Taṇhā* means thirst, or craving, based in ignorance; and for the Buddha there are three major categories¹⁸ to undo:

- *Kama taṇha*: sense desires — the most far-reaching and familiar to all of us; any pleasure of sensual comfort as well as our thoughts and beliefs
- *Bhava taṇha*: existential desires — the struggle of becoming something beyond what we currently perceive ourselves to be; the pain of ambitious striving
- *Vibhava taṇha*: nonexistence desires — the wanting of a situation or attitude to end so badly that we prefer our own annihilation; a needful release often associated with unbearable suffering, shame or humiliation

I haven't transcended any of the three, really. They're all fundamentally relatable to the human experience. It's a process of undoing. But I do know that the first step is unquestionably the noticing of these phenomenal desires. From Jungian psychoanalysis to the self-inquiry of jnana yoga, we have to 'see' the tendencies of the mind before we can do anything about them. The observational power of the mind is the first opening to peace.

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And the secondary step is to then flip our wanting, from the outer to the inner. From the carnal to the divine. Ramakrishna tells us:

*“So long as these passions are directed towards the world and its objects, they behave like enemies. But when they are directed towards God, they become the best friends of man, for then they lead him unto God. The lust for the things of the world must be changed into the hankering for God: the anger that man feels in relation to his fellow man should be turned towards God for not revealing Himself to him. One should deal with all the passions in the same manner. These passions cannot be eradicated but can be educated.”*¹⁹

According to these luminaries, we can pull a judo move on ourselves. We can transmute the fires engulfed in the physical towards the Transcendent. There’s a helpful image attributed to Yogananda, Ramakrishna, and so many Eastern masters that it even gets credited to Zen Buddhism:

A student asks the master, “How can I see God?”

(Or in Zen, it’s ‘become liberated’.)

The master says, “A man is being held under the water, and he is struggling to break free.

The man wants air more than anything.

When you want God as much as a drowning man wants air, He will reveal Himself to you.”

Or liberation. Or ego dissolution, or atonement, or the kingdom of heaven, or transcendence from the Many into the One. The ancient scriptures agree that our external desires are obstacles.

“The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.”

—Psalm 23

Krishna tells us in the *Gita* (6.23-27):

“When the mind of the yogi is in peace, focused on the Self within, and beyond all restless desires, then he experiences Unity. His mind becomes still, like the flame

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of a lamp sheltered from the winds. When the mind rests in the prayerful stillness of yoga, by the grace of the One, he knows the One, and attains fulfillment... The yogi whose heart is still, whose passions are dissolved, and who is pure of sin, experiences this supreme bliss and knows his oneness with Brahman."

Even Augustine of Hippo, our friend from the beginning of this book due to his invention of our original sinfulness, understood this transformation:

"How sweet all at once it was for me to be rid of those fruitless joys which I had once feared to lose! You drove them from me, you who are the true, the sovereign joy. You drove them from me and took their place, you who are sweeter than all pleasure, though not to flesh and blood, you who outshine all light, yet are hidden deeper than any secret in our hearts."

— Augustine, *Confessions*

A Course in Miracles explains this process as simply having "a little willingness" to let the Holy Spirit remove all fear and hatred. (T-18.V.2:5) The Holy Spirit is fairly enigmatic within the Christian religion, but the Third of the Trinity is defined specifically by ACIM as a "Bridge": "God's Answer to the separation", and the "Communication Link between God and His separated Sons".²⁰

Ultimately, reconfiguring our desire is the key (T-20.VIII.2-5):

"Truth is restored to you through your desire, as it was lost to you through your desire for something else. Open the holy place that you closed off by valuing the "something else," and what was never lost will quietly return. It has been saved for you. Vision would not be necessary had judgment not been made. Desire now its whole undoing, and it is done for you."

Or don't. Desire 'something else' over and over again and stay in hell.

