



STATEMENT DC-715

BOOK REVIEW

A SUMMARY CRITIQUE: A Return to Love

by Marianne Williamson

Marianne Williamson's rise to fame has appeared to be meteoric. Most people first heard of her last October when she officiated at the wedding ceremony for Elizabeth Taylor and Larry Fortensky. Her career was further catapulted when Oprah Winfrey interviewed her on February 4 and announced that she was so moved by Williamson's book, *A Return to Love*, that she bought a thousand copies to give to her friends and others. Since then the book has sold over 700,000 copies and has been a *New York Times* best seller.

As I read *A Return to Love*, I could understand why people are attracted to it. It's upbeat, optimistic, and nonjudgmental. But I found myself asking, Where is a foundation sufficient for this love to which she calls us to return? Consider the foundation she attempts to lay in this quote, which cites *A Course in Miracles* — a channeled metaphysical work on which Williamson bases much of her thought:

If you go deeply enough into [your mind and my mind], we have the *same mind*. The concept of a divine, or "Christ" mind, is the idea that, at our core, we are not just identical, but actually the same being. "There is only one begotten Son" doesn't mean that someone else was it, and we're not. It means we're all it....

Christ refers to the common thread of divine love that is the core and essence of every human mind....

The love in one of us is the love in all of us. There's actually no place where God stops and you start, and no place where you stop and I start. Love is energy, an infinite continuum....

A Course in Miracles likens us to sunbeams thinking we're separate from the sun, or waves thinking we're separate from the ocean. Just as a sunbeam can't separate itself from the sun, and a wave can't separate itself from the ocean, we can't separate ourselves from one another. We are all part of a vast sea of love, one indivisible divine mind (28-29).

What has Williamson done here? First, she has removed all ontological separation, all distinction of being, between individuals and between us and God. Our ultimate reality — the core of who we are — is an undivided mind or essence. We're not just similar or identical in our essential nature, she says, we're the *same stuff*.

Second, she calls this essential core *love*, which she characterizes as an "energy" and a "vast sea." Through such modifiers Williamson characterizes God's love as being expansive, all-inclusive, and unconditional. The problem, though, is that love is not something that can be appropriately ascribed to an "energy," a "vast sea," or to anything impersonal. Love is inherently *interpersonal*; it's something that happens *between persons*.

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This mixing of the personal with the impersonal is typical of what Williamson does in *A Return to Love*. She tries to incorporate the most appealing of two views of God: the unconditional inclusiveness of an impersonal oneness and the love and caring of a personal God. On the one hand, she talks about God as if we can have a personal relationship with Him. She prays to Him, uses personal pronouns to refer to Him, talks about God as one who cares (45), says He has a will (157), and says that He guides our thoughts and feelings (99). On the other hand, she says that we cannot be separated from God because God is like the sun — an impersonal energy source — from which we (like sunbeams) cannot be separated (29).

Any such attempt to reconcile a personal view of God with an impersonal view inevitably fails — first, because either the personal or the impersonal must take precedence, and, second, because the two views have mutually exclusive characteristics. An impersonal force, for example, cannot, by definition, exhibit personal characteristics such as love, empathy, volition, moral sensitivities, and the ability to have an interpersonal relationship.

But then neither can a personal God exhibit the unconditional "acceptance" that an impersonal force does. Why not? Because when relating to a personal God there are moral issues involved, just as moral issues are involved in any interpersonal relationship. Such moral issues include honesty, respect, and submission. When one person in a relationship is dishonest with the other, then the relationship will be strained and, unless the two are reconciled, may eventually be broken. The point is that, if God is personal, then my relating to Him has *conditions* and the possibility of being separated from Him is real. That would not be true if God were an impersonal oneness.

Nevertheless, without considering the contradictions, Williamson attempts to mix the impersonal with the personal. The result is that inconsistencies appear between her beliefs and their application to real-life situations.

One of the criteria for testing whether a belief system is true is its viability. Is it livable? If a belief system is true, then we should be able to live with it in a way that is consistent with those beliefs. By looking at Williamson's teaching on forgiveness, I will illustrate that Williamson is not able to apply her belief system consistently to the everyday world with which we are all familiar. Williamson writes:

Traditionally, we think of forgiveness as something we are to do when we see guilt in someone. In the Course, however, we're taught that it's our function to remember that there *is* no guilt in anyone, because only love is real. It is our function to see through the illusion of guilt, to the innocence that lies beyond....We are asked to extend our perception beyond the errors that our physical perceptions reveal to us — what someone did, what someone said — to their holiness within them that only our heart reveals. Actually, then, there is nothing to forgive. The traditional notion of forgiveness — what *A Course in Miracles* calls "forgiveness-to-destroy" — is then an act of judgment. It is the arrogance of someone who sees themselves as better than someone else (61).

For those who have not been initiated into the belief system of the Course, it's difficult to decipher what Williamson is saying here. One must realize that she, like the Course, divides reality in two: the *real* and the *illusory*. That which is real is the realm of God. This is the realm of the undivided oneness of Being where no separation exists.

Then there is the illusory realm, which is our everyday world. According to Williamson, this world is no more real than a dream or a hallucination. Nevertheless, it *seems* real because we are so closely identified with our separatistic egos and physical bodies.

Williamson describes the real and illusory realms in the following way:

According to *A Course in Miracles*, this separation from God first happened millions of years ago. But the important revelation, the crux of the Course, is that in reality it never actually happened at all....

A Course in Miracles says that only love is real....When we think with love, we are literally co-creating with God. And when we're not thinking with love — since only love is real — then we're actually not thinking at

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all. We're hallucinating. And that's what this world is: a mass hallucination, where fear seems more real than love. Fear is an illusion. Our craziness, paranoia, anxiety and trauma are literally all *imagined*. That is not to say they don't exist for us as human beings, and need to be brought to light in order to be released. But they do not replace the love within us. They are literally a bad dream (20-21).

In light of the two realities — one real, the other illusory — Williamson reasons that we should approach situations in this illusory realm from the perspective that only love is real, that we have never been separated from God, and that we are sinless and perfect in our true selves. It's from that perspective that she redefines forgiveness to mean a *change in perception* so that we don't see the person as being guilty but as innocent.

But an inconsistency appears when Williamson applies this concept to the real-life situation of rape: "Does that mean we're to forgive a rapist, tell him we know he just had a bad day and send him home? Of course not. We're to ask for a miracle. A miracle here would be a shift from perceiving prisons as houses of punishment to perceiving them as houses of rehabilitation" (86).

To Williamson's statement, Should we "tell him we know he just had a bad day and send him home? Of course not," I must reply, Why not? Would not an *immediate* change to perceiving the rapist as innocent be the true "miracle"? But Williamson doesn't push for that. Instead, she says the miracle would be to change our perception from seeing prisons as "houses of punishment" to "houses of rehabilitation." She's side-stepping the issue: according to her own definition of forgiveness, the real issue is not how we should see *prisons* but how we should see *persons*.

Moreover, by saying that a rapist should be rehabilitated, Williamson has unintentionally introduced a moral judgment. She apparently figures that by saying a rapist should be rehabilitated rather than punished, she has avoided judging the rapist as morally wrong, and has thereby not projected guilt onto that person. But the concept of rehabilitation contains a moral judgment. After all, if not being a rapist is no better morally than being one, then why bother rehabilitating the rapist?

Williamson's inability to apply her concept of forgiveness to the situation of rape in a way consistent with her beliefs reveals the failure of her belief system to be livable, and it should make people beware that something is askew. That which is askew is Williamson's view that there are two distinct realms — the real and the illusory. According to such a view, our *moral* status in the illusory realm is based on a real realm that is *amoral* in nature. In other words, Williamson asserts our innocence and sinlessness — *both moral terms* — on the basis of our being extended from an undivided oneness that is *without moral attributes*.

Such an inherent contradiction reveals itself in Williamson's terminology. For when she says that we are in our true nature "holy" (61) and "perfect" (28), the question naturally rises: holy and perfect compared to what? If such a statement is to make sense, there must be an objective moral standard. Williamson's impersonal oneness in the realm of the truly real cannot provide such a standard.

Only if God is morally and absolutely holy can there be a sufficient foundation for such a moral standard — and thus for judging rape to be an activity that needs to be rehabilitated. Moreover, only if God is *personal* can He be morally holy, for holiness cannot be an attribute of an undifferentiated oneness. If God is holy, though, then there is bad news — and that is that *our sin separates us from God*.

Williamson concludes her book with these words: "The endless chain of communication between loved and lover, between God and man, is the most beautiful song, the sweetest poem. It is the highest art and the most passionate love" (259). Such words raise images of a God who cares for us and of the possibility of being in a love relationship with Him. But the foundation for such a love relationship is simply not to be found in Williamson's belief system.

Williamson calls for "a return to love," but if God is an impersonal oneness, then that to which we will return is not an unconditional love relationship with God, but an unconditional *absorption* of the individual into an undifferentiated oneness. Such a state sounds a lot more like eternal death than eternal life.

Only if God is personal is it possible to have a love relationship with Him. While there is bad news in God being personal (i.e., our sin separates us from Him), the good news is that God is able to love us and that He has done so by giving us "his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16).

What, on the other hand, has the God of the Course done for us? Williamson writes, the Course "is a lot of things, but it's *not* easy" (116, emphasis in original).

— *Reviewed by Dean C. Halverson*