

# Revelation

by Olin Alfred Curtis

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*The sermon explores the inadequacy of nature in providing moral guidance and the necessity of a personal, moral God for a fulfilling religious experience.*

**Scripture:** Psalm 19:1, John 3:16, Romans 1:20, 1 Corinthians 13:13, 1 John 4:8

**Topics:** "Moral Theology", "Divine Love"

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## Description

Olin Alfred Curtis delves into the complex relationship between nature and morality, exploring the deep connection between the individual and the cosmos. He discusses the challenges faced when trying to reconcile the moral ideals within us with the seemingly indifferent and sometimes cruel aspects of nature. Curtis highlights the need for a revelation of divine love that is inherently moral to ignite true religious growth and love for God, emphasizing the importance of ethical love in completing the religious experience.

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## Transcript

And I have felt  
A presence that disturbs me with the joy  
Of elevated thoughts: a sense sublime  
Of something far more deeply interfused,  
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,  
And the round ocean and the living air,  
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man:  
A motion and a spirit, that impels  
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,  
And rolls through all things. Therefore am I still  
A lover of the meadows and the woods

And mountains; and all that we behold

From this green earth.

-- William Wordsworth, Tintern Abbey, July 13, 1798 -

Men can as well subsist in a vacuum, or on a mere metallic earth, attended by no vegetable or animal products, as they can stay content with mere cause and effect, and the endless cycle of nature. They may drive themselves into it, for the moment, by their speculations; but the desert is too dry, and the air too thin -- they cannot stay.

-- Horace Bushnell, Nature and the Supernatural, p.

Let us go still farther; nature is immoral, thoroughly immoral, I may say immoral to such a degree that everything moral is in a sense, and especially in its origin, in its first principle, only a reaction against the lessons or counsels that nature gives us. . . . There is no Vice of which nature does not give us the example, nor any virtue from which she does not dissuade us. This is the empire of brute force and Unchained instincts -- neither moderation nor shame, neither pity nor compassion, neither charity nor justice -- all Species are armed against one another, \*in mutua funera\*; all passions aroused, every individual ready to oppose every other. This is the spectacle that nature offers us.

-- Ferdinand BrunetiÃre, Art and Morality.

That this personal will is benevolent, and is shown to be so by the facts of the universe, which evince a providential care for men and other animals -- this is just one of those plausibilities which passed muster before scientific method was understood; but modern science rejects it as unproved.

-- Sir John Robert Seeley, Natural Religion, p. 11.

The Cosmos and the Individual. To understand the attitude toward the natural world of a man like Wordsworth, to appreciate his "fellowship with the fields," we only need to remember that he was the deputy of the individual as surely as Browning was the deputy of the person, the moral person. But is this attitude of Wordsworth legitimate and useful and wholesome? Certainly it is. At times man needs such a deputy, some one who can give utterance to all the cravings of his individuality. As an individual, a man is a part, and a very important part, of the natural universe. The cosmos becomes complete only in him. And so man is sensitive to even the most hidden currents in the cosmic life. Indeed, there is, I sometimes think, a secret cosmic force, not yet caught by science, perhaps never to be caught by science, which binds together every created thing, and makes us all from men to rocks into one vast mystic organism. And as a factor, a responsive atom, in this mystic organism, every man, not only the poet, but even the most ordinary man, has a cosmic life, cosmic impressions, cosmic moods, which are nonpersonal, and sometimes even contra-personal. As a ranchman expressed it: "Often when I camp here it has made me want to become the ground, become the water, become the trees, mix with the whole thing; not know myself from it; never unmix again." Keep this cosmic life of the individual in mind, and we can explain the fact that when men are exhausted with work, or baffled by temptation, or overwhelmed in sorrow, they turn with a pathetic eagerness toward nature. Men may come and go, friendships may wear to shreds, all the personal conditions of life may change; but our great cosmic mother is out there yet with all her land and sea and sky. She will not fail us. She will not misunderstand us. She will not become weary of our importunate sorrow. She will swell our lament into volume with her wildest winds. "Nature never did betray

the heart that loved her." Yes, there are times when a man needs a mountain much more than he needs a person. And if you insist upon calling this impersonal, mystical help from nature a revelation, your usage is improvident; and yet I have no unyielding objection to it, if we can only agree to limit the meaning and worth of the revelation.

The Cosmos and the Christian. Another thing is necessary in clearing the way for the point at issue: we must eliminate the Christian interpretation of the cosmos; for, in any searching discussion of natural revelation, that interpretation is of no significance whatever. Already the Christian has had supernaturally given to him the full divine message. Ever does he have in mind the facts and doctrines and principles of the Christian faith; ever does he have in heart a positive, a triumphant manifestation of grace; and with such realities and vitalities in him, surely it is no wonder that to him the heavens "declare the glory of God."

The Point at Issue. Let us, then, see precisely what our real question is. It is not whether the cosmos affords theistic indication. That question we have answered affirmatively. Nor is our question whether nature does not grant an uplift of solace to the individual in his cosmic moods and needs. That question we also answer affirmatively. Nor is our question whether nature does not express to the Christian believer much of the majesty and wisdom and purpose of God. That question is not pertinent and should be entirely eliminated. The point at issue is definitely this: whether there is in the cosmos, for the moral person, such a revelation as is necessary to enable him to move on in the religious process of his life.

A Frank Word Concerning Nature. A most striking passage in the most forceful plea ever made for the adequacy of nature is this: "The creation speaketh a universal language. . . . It cannot be counterfeited; it cannot be lost; it cannot be altered; it cannot be suppressed. It does not depend upon the will of man whether it shall be published or not; it publishes itself from one end of the earth to the other. It preaches to all nations and all worlds; and this Word of God reveals to man all that it is necessary for him to know." This passage from *The Age of Reason* I quote to show how completely the assurance of deism has passed away. In point, compare these words of Thomas Paine with the last published words of Herbert Spencer. The fact is that the more men know about nature, and the more they rely upon nature, the more agnostic and hopeless they become. For one thing, men need to be told a few plain things about themselves, about their origin, about their spiritual condition, and about their destiny. And in nature there is no perspicuous anthropology. Even the few natural hints are so dubious that they must be treated by religious faith and coaxed into meaning.

This dubiousness in anthropology, though, is not nature's main flaw, by any means. Her main flaw is that she nowhere manifests righteousness. Of course, if with many of the rationalists we regard the human conscience as natural we can find a moral imperative in nature. To me, however, man's moral life is supernatural. But were we willing to pass over this difference of view the practical question would remain, namely, Can a man discover in the external world any supplement, or even any indorsement, of his own moral concern? To this practical question I must, without hesitation, answer, No. I do not go as far as Ferdinand BrunetiÃ"re goes when he declares that "nature is immoral, thoroughly immoral." I am not altogether satisfied with that bitter indictment in which John Stuart Mill says that "nearly all the things which men are hanged or imprisoned for doing to one another are nature's everyday performances." I simply hold that nature is nonmoral, that she pays no tribute to righteousness, that from her works alone no person could ever learn that the Creator has any ethical interest. Sometimes we are told, I know, that immorality is overtaken and punished under natural law; but the opinion is very superficial. Strictly considered, the punishment falls, not upon the immorality, but upon the incautious manner of it. In discrete ways moral principle is constantly violated, and yet the transgressor escapes as far as any cosmic law is

concerned. Nature ever says, "Thou shalt not bungle." But she never says, "Thou shalt not do wrong."

I was intending to stop here, but I cannot; I must go farther and almost agree with Mill and BrunetiÃ"re. There is no equity in nature. She knows nothing of what is meant by that noble English phrase, "Give him fair play." She will herself cripple a man with all sorts of weaknesses and then crush him because he is weak. Not only so, but sometimes these weaknesses are a result, under natural law, of the action of some other man for whom the cripple is in no degree responsible. That is, nature is so indifferent to equity that she strikes the wrong man. Once study heredity in connection with the doctrine of the survival of the fittest, and there comes to view a mass of irresponsible suffering and failure which antagonizes every human idea of equity, and even moves us to moral indignation by its pitiless cruelty. But we are urged to expand our horizon and take a larger look at life. A certain journalist has written these words to stimulate joy: "There is great consolation in realizing that even though we go to the wall it is by a great and impersonal law, and just as surely as we do go something better survives by our overthrow." To this I instantly answer that to make inequity impersonal does not turn it into equity; and if we go to the wall unjustly, nothing better can survive by our overthrow. There can be no progress, no universal gain, by any procedure which is intrinsically unfair. The only goal, yea, the only cosmic goal, worth reaching must be expressive, absolutely expressive, of moral concern. There is no more expanded horizon; there is no larger look at life. We will be intolerant of any evolutionary scheme which tries to substitute increase of potency and perfection in adjustment for perfection in ethical quality. If we try to explain the mystery of existence at all, let us begin by refusing to explain it in any way which violates our intuitive sense of justice and debases our moral manhood.

A Perilous Crisis. This inequity of nature, or this nonmoral attitude of nature (if you prefer the more moderate contention) leads to a crisis of very great peril; and the crisis is precipitated logically in this manner: To obtain a belief in the supernatural Person we make use of our moral personality on the one side and of the theistic indications of the cosmos on the other side; but the instant we have these two sides in juxtaposition there stands out a pronounced contradiction. Our whole sense of the supernatural, our whole moral constitution, demands a God who is absolutely righteous, and yet we are unable to discover even one trace of righteous intention in the very cosmos which we believe he himself has made. And so, after all our long effort to be thoroughly true to our inner being, we are suddenly flung into a pit of confusion. -- It is perilous. And when I call the situation perilous I am not merely noting the dire logical outcome, I am not using the language of theoretical fright, but the language of actual human experience. With many men this crisis is the precise point where they have lost their theism, their religious faith, and even their former confidence in the reliability of their own moral intuitions. Indeed, there is probably no strain so severe upon a sensitive soul trying to live a profound life as that strain which he experiences in trying to harmonize his moral ideal with the brutal facts of the universe. More than six tenths of all aggressive pessimism, like that of Schopenhauer, and a smaller fraction of that dumb despair which has been called "the ache of modernism," have originated, I believe, in the awful shock of the realization that the holy of holies in man's nature is not only not indorsed, but is even positively violated from pinnacle to crevice by the natural methods of the cosmos.

The Religious Process in Stoppage. This apparent inequity of nature results, further, in a total stoppage of the religious movement in man's life. Let us see how this blocking comes about. Before studying religion we examined, you will remember, the moral process taken alone; and we concluded that it had no possible outcome in personal peace; and this simply, or mainly, because the moral man had no organizing motive of ethical love. Thus, even in morality, we discovered a basic need of love.

Then, taking up our task in larger relations, we passed into the more comprehensive religious process; and there, in the religious process, we at last came to a personal bearing of faith toward the supernatural which was so charged with ethical quality that we named it the religion of moral faith. But even this, although truly the religion of the moral person, we found to be an unfinished thing -- an ineffectual fragment straining toward the ultimate religious experience. And here again the lack, the one thing essential to progress, was the motive of love.

The religion of moral faith must be enriched by love. Emphasize, then, this point: that man, to organize his entire life as a moral, personal individual, and to advance in religious experience, must have something more than ethical intention and personal trust -- he must have ethical love, he must actually love the supernatural as the moral infinite. How, then, is such a love rendered possible? First of all, there needs to be a change in man's conceptions. His supernatural, his moral Infinite, must drop its vagueness and become to him a real supernatural Person.

And in our examination of the theistic argument we saw how this important change might fully and legitimately take place; we saw how man, by being deeply true to himself as a person and a religious person, could, in his effort to explain the problem of the cosmos, obtain a belief in the existence of a personal God. Right here, though, we enter, I say, a situation which is both perilous in its staring contradiction and a total stoppage of the religious process. Why is it such a stoppage?

Because it is a situation absolutely uncreative of love in man for God. Why so? Because there is on God's part no revelation of an ethical love for man. It is a waste of time to argue with the extra-optimist whether in the cosmos there are not evidences of divine love as a barely personal interest in man and consequent care for man -- say, some such interest and care as an artist or an author has for his creations -- for were there the largest amount of such love, it would not have even the slightest worth for the religious movement.

The important matter is not the existence of interest and care, but the kind of interest and care which exist. They must be moral. The interest must kindle in the very heart of righteousness. and then burst out like leaping flame into a real care to secure the moral welfare of man. Allow me to tear the situation open. Man is trying to complete his life by reaching a perfect religious experience. To move on toward that consummation, man must love God. To love God, God must be to a man a Person.

To love this supernatural Person, man must be convinced that he, man, is loved; yes, the Person must show such unquestionable interest in man as to overcome all the inherent fear of the supernatural. But this is not enough. And just here theologian after theologian has gone astray. This revelation of divine love must itself be moral. The love must not flinch away from supreme moral concern. Man is a moral person, and he cannot love a God who is less than a moral person, and the God indicated by the inequity of nature is less than a moral person. Therefore man's entire moral and religious movement is in total stoppage -unless, in some extraordinary way, there shall come help.

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