

The Christian Religion and the Moral Person

by Olin Alfred Curtis

The Christian religion is based on the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, which emphasizes moral love and the empowerment of the Holy Spirit to enable man to be a profounder person.

Scripture: John 14:6, Romans 5:8, Galatians 5:22, Ephesians 2:8, 1 John 4:19

Topics: "Moral Responsibility", "Holy Spirit"

Description

Olin Alfred Curtis preaches about the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, emphasizing that Christianity is not just about Jesus as an isolated figure in history but about the grand historical context in which He stands at the center. The sermon delves into the deep connection between the Christian religion and the moral person, highlighting the essential role of the Holy Spirit as the dynamic force of Christianity, empowering individuals to experience profound moral responsibility, dissatisfaction with inadequacies, conviction of sin, repentance, faith, and moral love for the Savior.

Transcript

Die Offenbarung Gottes in Jesus Christus, auf welcher die christliche Religion beruht, ist also nicht so zu verstehn, als handelte es sich um ihn als eine isolirte Erscheinung in der Geschichte. Es handelt sich vielmehr um den grossen geschichtlichen Zusammenhang, in dessen Mittelpunkt er steht.

-- Julius Kaftan, Dogmatik, s. 39.

If Christianity is found to be matched to human nature as no other system can pretend to be, and as cannot be accounted for by any wisdom of which man of himself is capable, then we are justified in referring it to God as its author. In the proportion in which this fitness of Christianity to the constitution, the cravings, the distress, of the soul, to man's highest and holiest aspirations, becomes a matter of living experience, the force of the argument will be appreciated. It will be understood in the degree in which it is felt. -- George Park Fisher, The Grounds of Theistic and Christian Belief, revised edition of 1902, p.89.

When two religions say the same thing, it is not always the same thing.

-- F. Max Müller, Preface to collected works.

But the true originality of a system of moral teaching depends not so much upon the elements of which it is composed as upon the manner in which they are fused into a symmetrical whole, upon the proportionate Value that is attached to different qualities, or, to state the same thing by a single word, upon the type of

character that is formed. Now, it is quite certain that the Christian type differs, not only in degree, but in kind, from the pagan one.

-- W. E. H. Lecky, *Rationalism in Europe*, i, 313, 314, revised Appleton edition.

Before taking up those discussions which, in our plan, are definitely to lead up to the system of doctrine, we should note and emphasize the profound connection between the two parts of the Introduction. Let us, therefore, relate the Christian religion to man, the moral person.

The Work of the Holy Spirit

This is not a fitting place in which fully to consider the work of the Holy Spirit; but something needs to be said, because the Holy Spirit is the real dynamic of the Christian religion. Surely there are historic facts and mental conceptions which the Holy Spirit utilizes, but these facts and conceptions are but useful pivots of power and not the power itself. The power itself is the energizing will of the Holy Spirit. Without him, the Christian religion would be, at the most, but an empty intention to rescue men. The rationalists, some of the extreme ones, are wont to say that we need more truth, that truth will lift men out of all their failure. We do need truth, more and more of it; but under all that need is the paramount need of a vitalized moral personality.

The Holy Spirit and Personality. First of all, in this new and extraordinary Christian dispensation, the Holy Spirit affects personality itself. The Christian religion is most intensely personal. As some one has said, "The Christian message has a personal pronoun at each end of it -it is, 'I say unto You!'" But the full fact is finer yet -- that personal You is so empowered by the Holy Spirit as to be quite another person in possibilities. "Arouse man," Schelling once said, "to the consciousness of what he is, and he will soon learn to be what he ought." This is about half true, true in its appreciation of the worth of full self-consciousness, false in its lack of appreciation of the significance of personal freedom. You cannot make any man right by intensifying his self-consciousness. But it is true, and momentously true, that no man can have a profound moral life until he has a profound personal life. And the Holy Spirit does give to man a profounder personal life. He invigorates self-grasp, clarifies self-estimate, and enables a person to remain longer in self-conscious experience. Many a man before the Spirit awakened him was constantly dropping down into the individual, was constantly at the mercy of the automatic overrush. He was, in fact, a person only by right of classification, for hardly for a moment could he stay in personal vision. His self-consciousness was like the moon on a night when the whole sky is tossing with clouds. Now and again, for an instant, there is a flying gleam of gold, and then it is all lost in the overrush of clouds.

The Holy Spirit and the Conscience. In the closest psychological relation with this vitalization of personality is the greater influence of the Holy Spirit upon conscience. I myself believe that all the features of conscience are not a natural outcome of the personal process -although they do give teleological eventuation and significance to that process -- but rather the immediate work of the Holy Spirit. Conscience is God's living relation to man, mediated by the Holy Spirit. In any case, though, it can hardly be practically questioned that conscience is quickened under the Christian dispensation. Moral distinction is probably not changed; but moral obligation, and especially moral settlement, are affected by what may be called the Christian exertion of the Holy Spirit. Perhaps I had better briefly give my full view: The Holy Spirit does something for every man; but he will do more for the moral person who, in any time, or in any place, makes his best personal response to the initiative moral pressure; and he will do still more for men in any situation where the Christian message is declared; and he will do 'still more for men where the

Christian message is declared in a situation which is quick with the faith and love and sacrifice belonging to actual Christian experience.

The Christian Religion and Moral Love

The most unwholesome thing in the teaching of the mediating theology is its unqualified assertion that the dominating feature of Christianity is the love of God for man. Here is a statement of the type to which I refer: "The possession in Christ of the supreme revelation of God's love and purpose constitutes the distinctive mark of Christianity." In a general way, this statement is the truth, and might be adequate in certain parts of a popular sermon; but once placed and emphasized in theology it becomes as harmful as poison. In the person and work of Christ there is no manifestation of a divine love which is nothing more than a personal interest, nothing more than a going out of the heart toward men. There is love, infinite love, manifest, but it is moral love. It is love in, though, and because of, perfect righteousness. Man is loved as a moral person capable of moral response. He is loved for moral ends. His only joyous outcome is moral, moral, moral. The Christian religion begins, continues, and culminates in moral concern.

The Indirect Preparations. I have spoken of the significance which nature has for the individual; and I have also indicated the educational value of man's conception of nature over against his conception of the supernatural; but now there is more to be said. Nature, by the very fact of her failure to show moral concern, makes it impossible for the moral person to stay in nature. The individual, the animal, could stay in nature forever; but the moral person must find another world. "He must fly the awful vacuum." Thus, nature tends to create an urgency in man's need of another revelation of God, which shall fully manifest moral love.

This is also the point of view, I think, from which we may see the true Christian interpretation of the heathen religions. With certain exceptions, or at least with certain hesitations in decision, I cannot regard these religions as mere combinations of superstition. Doubtless there is in them much superstition, but to the superstition are joined many elements which are truly religious. Considered psychologically, and not historically, and not practically, they are like some of the debased forms of the Christian religion itself, say like the Roman Catholic. But, as far as I know, there is not in any one of these heathen religions a conception of divine love as moral. Speaking of the beliefs of men living under the ethnic religions, Professor Seeley has said, "They have believed in gods that were beautiful, powerful, immortal, happy, but not benevolent." As he uses the word benevolent, he means a disposition to help men, to secure their wellbeing; and this disposition must have a moral origin. And yet I prefer to say that the gods of the ethnic religions have no righteous concern for men. If they show any interest in men it does not spring from moral concern, and does not amount to a righteous passion. And, when I study these religions in a comprehensive spirit, with a purpose to relate all things, under the providence of God, to the Christian faith, it becomes evident that they, like nature, are an indirect preparation for the ultimate manifestation of God's moral love toward men. Here, again, the moral person gets an urgency; he cannot rest, he must find another world.

The Direct Preparation. Of far greater importance, though, than these indirect preparations, in nature and in the heathen religions, is the direct preparation in the history of the Jewish people. Even with the large place the Old Testament has come to hold in Christian scholarship, how few there are who realize its fundamental importance to the Christian religion! For example, think of a man so alert and open-minded as is Professor Adolf Harnack saying this: "Jesus Christ's teaching will at once bring us by steps which, if few, will be great, to a height where its connection with Judaism is seen to be only a loose one." Could any

utterance made by responsible Christian scholarship be more careless, more superficial, more deeply untrue? One would suppose that even an ordinary examination of our Lord's own attitude toward the Old Testament would lead to a conviction that his teaching had close connection with the dispensation which he came to fulfill. The ethical bottom of the gospel of Jesus Christ comes almost entire from the Old Testament; and the daring emphasis upon grace is made wholesomely expedient by that long, unflinching, tremendous moral imperative in the history from Abraham to Amos. In truth, those very severities which we now pronounce unchristian were for an ethical and preparatory end, for they tended to shut out Jehovah's people from all the insidious fascination of the deadly immorality about them. How can any student of comparative religion fail to realize that the mighty ethical momentum of Christianity comes from the life of the Old Testament? That moral law, given in such definiteness and yet in such forceful grandeur that it penetrates all our civilization; that poetry in the psalms which always burns, and sometimes blazes, with the enthusiasm of righteousness; and those towering prophets of moral insistence who stand out like a range of mountains in a fiat world -what, I ask, could Christianity be or become or accomplish without that direct preparation? A loose connection! Why, the connection is so close that it is more than external, more than historical, it is an historical connection made spiritual in an organic plan, it is a connection through which the Holy Spirit today brings Christian things to pass. There is, probably, not a typical Christian conversion in which the Old Testament is not effectively involved; nor a typical Christian experience which is not by the Old Testament nourished and balanced and enlarged.

The New Conception of God. In connection with this direct preparation for the revelation of moral love, there arises a new conception of God, a conception far beyond anything possible in bare theism. God is regarded as a person, holy, in action, for the moral rescue of his people. The God evident in the Old Testament is not an "Eternal Somewhat," but an Eternal Someone, with personal plan and self-conscious volition. The contention of Matthew Arnold at this point is really not worthy of serious notice. And, further, this personal God is holy. Later we will try to find out just what is meant by holiness; but, in any possible interpretation, holiness can be relied upon to protect every moral interest. Again, this holy God is conceived of as in action. He is in earnest even unto the actual deed. It has been said that the God of the Old Testament is no other than the God of deism. But the God of deism is an infinite idler. "He sits forever doing nothing in the sky-parlor of the universe." On the contrary, the Lord God of Israel is ever intensely concerned with events and ever strenuously doing deeds. Again, in the center of all this interest and activity, we find the first note of a divine redemption. God is active, God is in earnest, to rescue his people unto righteousness. And when this redemptional idea is augmented by the Messianic idea there is a very direct and a very complete preparation for the comprehensive plan of redemption as unfolded in the New Testament.

The Christian Object of Faith. However much we may make of this revelation in the Old Testament, it cannot provide the true Christian object of faith. The Messiah himself, as a Redeemer to appear on somewhere in the years, is not able to meet man's entire need and to complete the religious process. Nor is Jesus Christ as man, or as an exalted creature, the Christian object of faith. Nor is Jesus Christ as God, or as God-man, the Christian object of faith. If we pause with only the person, we shall altogether fail to catch the potent Christian peculiarity. The new object, the Christian object of faith, is Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son of God, as the actual Redeemer. The conception is two-ply: First, there is the person who is God incarnate in man, who is therefore both human and divine. On the one side Christ is so truly man that he is our own Brother, we own his; never can he get beyond us, never can he escape our humanity. And precisely because he is our own we have no dread of him. Even in our sins he can get at us. Thus, the terribleness of the naked supernatural, and the isolation of the God of bare theism, and the ethical rigidity

of Jehovah, are taken away. And yet, on the other side, Christ is so absolutely God to us that he is our finality in power, in authority, and even in moral ideal. All the moral concern there is we find in him. Beyond him there is no demand whatsoever. It is the wonder of wonders, but the moral law now looks toward us in friendship, without dropping an iota of moral requisition. Second, this divine-human person is our actual Redeemer. He is not out there in the realm of expectation -- he is here! The only Son of God has actually come and has actually completed his redemptional work. By his death he has literally made full atonement for the sins of all mankind. The Christian object of faith, then, is Jesus Christ, God and man in one person, with the finished work of redemption in his victorious hand. The person and the atonement must be woven into one assertion -- "Jesus Christ, and him crucified." Thus, in the Christian religion, we obtain the perfect revelation of moral love.

The Response of the Moral Person. Probably no two men ever reach the Christian experience by the same combination of features; and yet we can, I think, discover the main features which are combined in any typical case. They are these: 1. A profounder sense of moral responsibility. This is the psychological start and is entirely the work of the Holy Spirit. When he empowers personality, the man is lifted out of the automatic slavery and there is a keener sense of personal freedom.

But the result is not, as we might at first suppose, a feeling of self-sufficiency. For the man's moral nature is vitalized at the same time, and so the keener sense of freedom is over against a severer moral demand; and the total result is a profounder sense of moral responsibility. 2. A greater dissatisfaction with all the inadequacies. In this profounder moral mood not only nature and morality, but all religious bearings and endeavors, if less than Christian, seem to the moral person as empty and useless. 3.

A conviction of sin. Grant this moral person, empowered by the Holy Spirit, and restless under all he has found and all he has done, the new and severely ethical conception of God; allow him a swift vision of the awful holiness of God, a holiness which searches like lightning and never condones any wrong thing; show him how intensely angry God is over unrighteousness, how he personally takes it to heart, and grieves over it, and actively uses all the resources of the Godhead to destroy it -- let the man once see God, and the result is a torturing sense of sin.

It is much more than a feeling that conscience has been violated; it is a feeling that in our wrong we are against God, that we are in willful antagonism with the Holy One himself. 4. Christian repentance. This, too, is very much deeper than that initial repentance which we found to be possible as a passage out of morality. It is thus deeper for two reasons: In the first instance, because it begins in the conviction of sin, and so gets a tremendous moral momentum. In the second instance, because it is a response to the revelation of moral love in our Lord's person and death. 5.

Christian faith. This is like and yet unlike that moral faith which we found to be possible in the religious process. The likeness lies in the fact that the Christian faith is also a bearing of trust; and in the further fact that the trust is moral in its nature. The unlikeness lies in the fact that the Christian faith keeps a hatred of all sin, in a peculiar ethical poignancy which originates in Christian repentance; and in the further fact that the heart-interest belonging to any kind of faith has now become a positive personal love with a definite object.

No man, in sorrow over his sin, can trust Jesus Christ without beginning to love him. 6. Moral love. This Christian love for the Saviour, however, demands separate and most emphatic treatment. There are four points which should be carefully noted: The first point is psychological. The love is inherent in faith itself;

is, indeed, but a personal accentuation of the heart-thrust of faith. You would almost say that Christian love is moral faith made perfect. In any case, Christian love means the largest appreciation of man's heart-life.

Thus Christianity keeps insisting that the greatest thing in a man is not his head, but his heart. The second point is ethical. This Christian love is moral love. Not only does it express the consummate endeavor of the moral person over against his ideal; but also it will, when once perfected, when once fully enthroned, organize a man, make him one harmonious being, a satisfied and passionate lover of righteousness. In all the universe there is nothing more absolutely moral than the perfect love of a Christian man for his Saviour.

The third point is religious. By means of this Christian love the whole religious process is lifted out of stoppage. The last point is Christian. This moral love which enables the moral person to move on in his religious life is purely a Christian thing. For it there have been various kinds of preparations, to it there have been various kinds of contributions; but the one thing which has actually rendered it possible is God's revelation of his own moral love for man in the person and death of his only Son, Jesus Christ our Redeemer.

The Essential Nature of Christianity

We are now ready, I think, to gather into compact statement the essential peculiarity of the Christian religion. The most striking book about Christianity which has been published in recent years is Professor Harnack's *Das Wesen des Christentums*, really a series of sixteen public lectures delivered in Berlin University during the winter semester of 1899-1900. Nothing could more fully indicate the theological drift of our day than the fact that this book has received, in almost all quarters, an unstinted meed of praise. "At last a true prophet has appeared, and we have a voice of authority." To me, however, the book is not so remarkable for what there is in it as for what is left out of it. You can, in these lectures, readily recognize Christianity; and yet, after all, it is not Christianity, at least it is not fundamental Christianity, which you recognize. It is as if a very skillful artist had painted the contour of the body of a man so perfectly as to make recognition instant and indubitable, but had left out the man's face altogether, never once suggested by so much as a stroke that the man had any face.

What, then, is Christianity? Not in its accidents, not in its passing historical forms, not in its special applications to definite tasks and problems, however important they may be; but in its intrinsic nature, in its basal **Wesen** -- when the Christian religion is laid bare to its ultimate peculiarities, what are they? The true answer, I believe, springs quickly from our discussion. They are three:

1. A Peculiarity in Revelation. God has revealed his moral hatred of sin and his moral love of man in the incarnate person and atoning death of his only Son, Jesus Christ our Saviour.
2. A Peculiarity in Response. The Christian response to this revelation is in a profound repentance which culminates in faith in Christ as a personal Saviour, a faith that is quickened by moral love.
3. A Peculiarity in Life. The Christian religion is a life of moral love. The whole being of the Christian man is organized about the central motive of love. First of all, and through all, and under all, he loves his Redeemer and his God; then he loves all men, not as a philanthropist loves all men, but as Christ loves all men, seeking their moral salvation, and their (everlasting rejoicing in the kingdom of God. The Christian man has much work to do, many tasks to meet, and many problems to solve; but in all work and tasks and

problems his perpetual purpose is to express his moral love for God and man. This peculiarity of life, together with the peculiarity in response, together with the peculiarity in revelation, is the one convincing Christian apologetics. The true religion is that one which fits into man's nature and completes his life.

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