

Christian Certainty

by Olin Alfred Curtis

Christian certainty is a personal and moral process that involves self-knowledge, moral concern, personal belief, and social confirmation.

Scripture: Proverbs 3:5, John 14:6, Romans 10:17, Hebrews 11:1, 1 Peter 3:15

Topics: "Christian Faith", "Moral Certainty"

Description

Olin Alfred Curtis preaches about the journey of Reason and Conscience to meet the King, emphasizing the importance of moral certainty and the innermost basis of life found in acknowledging moral good and demands. He delves into the significance of Christian certainty, highlighting the synthesis of self-knowledge, moral concern, personal belief, and social confirmation in forming a strong foundation for faith. Curtis discusses the sufficiency of Christian certainty in guiding individuals towards a deeper understanding of truth, reality, and the Christian experience, ultimately leading to a stable and communal faith.

Transcript

So, then, Reason rode fast on the straight highway, as Conscience showed him, till they came to the King.

-- Langland, Vision of Piers the Plowman.

Le coeur a son ordre; l'esprit a le sien, qui est par principes et démonstrations; le coeur en a un autre. On ne prouve pas qu'on doit être aimé en exposant par ordre les causes de l'amour: cela seroit ridicule.

-- Pensées de Pascal, xxv, liv.

It is of slight importance for the person of the observer, whether this physical object which I see before me is in truth just as I see it, or other than I see it. But the whole constancy and strength and worth of the personality depends upon the question whether this moral good which I acknowledge as reality, or this moral demand which I experience as real, has an actual existence or not; the personality cannot free itself therefrom without the innermost basis and the supreme aim of its life being lost. . . . Whether the sensuous objects, upon which the moral action shows itself, or upon which the moral idea appears, are that which they seem or something else, does not touch the truth of the moral relation in which I stand to them and they to me, does not prejudice the reality of the moral facts which by them become manifest for me; nay, it

may happen in the reverse way -and this (as we shall afterward see) is the case with Christian certainty -- that precisely the abiding moral certainty forms the basis for the certainty as to the reality of historic, thus external and in the first place sensuously perceptible, facts. But this is yet only the one side, which the moral certainty presents to the observation. Along with it stands the other, that that certainty by no means bears the character of universality and necessity in the measure and in the manner which belong, for example, to the mathematical certainty.

-- Fr. H. R. Frank, *The System of Christian Certainty*, pp. 104, 105.

Umgekehrt darf der Konsensus der gläubigen Gemeinde seiner eigenen Gewissheit die stärkste Stütze sein. Wie nur innerhalb der Gemeinde der Glaube des einzelnen entsteht, so ist das übereinstimmende Zeugnis der Gemeinde dem Christen fortgehende Bürgerschaft für die Realität und Normalität seiner Erfahrung.

-- L. Ihmels, *Die christliche Wahrheitsgewissheit*, u. s. w., s. 286.

Knowledge and Belief

Economically to reach the heart of the matter, we will begin with the most simple forms of knowledge. A teacher in a primary school, holding up four apples, two in each hand, asks, "What are these?" A child answers, "Apples." "How many in each hand?" "Two." "How many in both hands?" "Four." "Why four?" "Because two and two make four." In these answers the child touches the two great realms of which man may have some knowledge, namely, the realm of reality and the realm of truth. The realm of reality comprises the entire range of being, or everything which actually is. The realm of truth is more limited, lying within the realm of reality, and comprising the entire system of rational principle. To be real, a thing must exist, and exist according to its nature. This expression, "according to its nature," however, is merely a protective redundancy, for a thing can exist only in accordance with its nature. A picture of an apple, for example, is a real picture, for it has the nature of a picture; but it is not a real apple, for it has not the nature of an apple. Likewise, a remembrance of an apple, or a dream of an apple, is a real remembrance, or a real dream, but not a real apple.

To be true, a thing must express rational principle. That two and two make four does express rational principle, and for that one reason it is true. If you wish to inquire how the child gets this rational principle, I will say that it is parcel in the fundamental make-up of the child. He finds it insistent there just as he finds moral distinction insistent there. And so he takes it for granted as a finality. If it be urged that the principle is a resultant of experience, we need not object to the point, provided that the experience be regarded as necessary and not accidental, that is, as an experience which is intrinsic in the normal unfolding of the child's life. If yet further you wish to inquire why this, or any rational principle is a finality, I will say that the reason is in God himself. He thinks rationally; rational principle is inherent in his holy organism. And we, made in his image, affirm constitutionally some of the divine finalities after him. Thus any rational principle is both universal and eternal. Two and two make four, precisely four, here, now, anywhere, forever. Mr. Mill's world where two and two may make five is not a possibility in sane supposition. Or, as one has cleverly said, "If there is a world where two and two make five, the inhabitants do not mean by two what we mean by two, or they do not mean by five what we mean by five."

Unyielding we should also be concerning the child's relation to reality. Probably to many it will seem to be overweening, but I hold that he has knowledge of a real apple just as certainly as he has knowledge that two and two make four. Impressively we are told that the child's apple is a mere phenomenal apple, and

the reality is hiding in behind like a timid sprite. But this sprite, this lurking "thing in itself," we do not need. It explains nothing. It is a dreamer's luxury. And it cannot itself be consistently explained. And so it becomes a perplexity and a growing burden in philosophy. Why not, then, in the name of sensible economy, away with it? Inasmuch as, sooner or later, we must regard the phenomenon as objective, as a point beyond us where the work is done, let us fix the reality at that point and in that point. Let us say that the very core of the thing comes out in its attributes. Let us allow no idler in behind the action. In other words, I hold that the activity of a thing is never to be separated from the thing itself. Every phenomenon is a reality -manifested. 'he child's apple is the real apple.

Constantly we are reminded that our senses are imperfect, and therefore our seizure of an object must be imperfect. Certainly this is a fact, but it does not weaken our contention. The claim is that we know reality and not that we know all reality. When a blind man, for instance, touches a hot piece of iron, he does not get all the reality, but he does most surely get some of it. Even in the case of the child, it is not necessary to affirm that he knows an apple totally. The entire apple-reality may greatly overpoise what the apple is to him. Nevertheless what the apple is to him is reality and not fantasy. Nor does the further fact that there is a subjective function, that the child adds to the external object, that he "treats" the apple, weaken our contention. The apple is made on purpose to be so treated, it is a part of a system of reality; and, out of the system, unrelated to the subjective side of the system, it has no significance whatever. Alone, it would be as meaningless as one blade of a pair of shears.

The question as to the method of connection between the subjective function and the objective item is one which has called out some of the most interesting and some of the most curious speculation in philosophy. As far as I am able to see, there is only one way adequately to conceive of the connection, and that is in the terms of what I will dare to call a Christian monism, such as is suggested by Saint Paul when he says, "For in Him we live, and move, and have our being." If we can first avoid all pantheism, by affirming both the personality of God and the personality of man, and then avoid all deism, by affirming the divine immanence, looking at all objective things as mere "causal points" where God is and where God works in relation to mind, we can obtain one system in which all the forces and connections are by and in God himself. The only serious objection to this view is a practical one. Our average man, whom we aim to help, constantly "thinks in pictures," and it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to make the monistic view lend itself wholesomely to that superficial style of thinking. "What! do you mean to tell me that these dangerous things and these obnoxious things and these comical things are all activities of the living God?"

Personal Belief. The realm of reality is vaster than the range of coercive objects, and the realm of truth comprises many rational realities which cannot be demonstrated. As one has said, "God thinks beyond geometry and wills existence beyond our cornfields." It is even doubtful to me whether in our final, eternal life all that is true or real to God will be coercive to us. In any case, there can be no question as to our condition now. In this life there are many things, necessary to our highest good, which must be seized by belief if they are seized at all.

The main peculiarity of belief, as contrasted with knowledge, is that it always involves personal decision. Some of the higher forms of knowledge are personal to the extent. that they are interlaced with self-consciousness, but they are never direct resultants of self-decision. Indeed, the worth of knowledge lies largely in the fact that it comes by coercion. You cannot, whatever may be your character, stand out against a demonstrable truth. If you try to resist the multiplication table you will be given shelter in an asylum. Belief, on the contrary, is very largely a personal creation. Whether you will have any belief or not depends, in the last issue, upon yourself, upon how much you care for your ideals, upon how much you

are willing to venture in the name of a finer manhood. And so in belief there is a daring, a militant spirit, a resolute purpose to fling one's whole being beyond the dusty commonplace of the surface experience. As James Russell Lowell says:

"Experience is a dumb, dead thing,

The victory is in believing."

It is, therefore, belief and not knowledge which indicates a man's personal character -- yes, and helps to form his personal character as well. Consequently, in a man's development, in his movement toward perfect manhood, belief is of the greater concern. The most momentous thing (at least in this period of probation) is not one's hold upon axiomatic truth and coercive reality, but one's bearing toward his ideal. Not truth in the mind; but, as Leasing said, the love of truth, truth in the heart, what a man is ready to do or to suffer in behalf of truth -- it is this personal attitude which is the one extremely significant matter. Even if a belief at last turns out to be untrue, in part or altogether, it may not be an entire waste, provided it expresses the longing and striving of a person after a lofty life.

At this turn of our discussion, however, we need to be most discriminating. Belief is never an arbitrary vagary. Belief is never at all like presumption. It does not even look like presumption. In presumption a man is willful, egotistic, self-sufficient. "He is not loath to fool with facts." Presumption is enormously selfish, wanting things for self at any cost. "Even in prayer, it is only his crop which must catch the miracle." In belief, veritable belief, on the contrary, a man is a humble and reverent servant of all reality. Toward men he may be as commanding as Martin Luther, but toward a fact he is as docile as a child. He says, "If that is so, then I will yield my point." Often, indeed, belief is but knowledge idealized. It is thus in friendship and in patriotism. And even in religion, belief (now called faith) begins in real self-knowledge and then springs toward the sky to live an ampler life.

With all this firmly said and iterated, still we should never lose sight of the limitation to which all belief is necessarily subject. For the very reason that belief is so largely a matter of self-decision, it lacks that power of swift and universal conquest which knowledge has. With any rational chance, my knowledge can gain dominion anywhere, for its truth can be exactly demonstrated. But belief cannot make use of demonstration. The best it can furnish is a probable argument of persuasive appeal; and before such an argument men are always likely to hesitate. "Ah!" they say, "who knows how much caprice may be snugly concealed in this belief?" That is, my belief must, among men, pay the tribute of my personal freedom. I cannot be free without some expense. I cannot be free and yet expect men to treat me as if I were a thoroughly reliable automaton. Nor does the individual personal character afford an unfailing proof of the verity of a man's belief. Who, taking only one case, would be convinced by Count Tolstoy's nobility of character, of the truth of any one belief in his most astonishing collection? "But think of his long self-sacrifice." Certainly, but his self-sacrifice shows his sincerity, that is all. Almost every sort of error beneath the sun has been sincerely held. And sometimes, for reasons which can be discovered, a most erratic and a most dangerous religious leader has the most noble character in an abnormal situation. But, remember, we are now considering the character of the isolated person. Once add, in a large enough measure, the element of social confirmation, and the evidential import is entirely changed. When we find a definite and adequate moral character, typically evinced in an abiding community, we possess, in such a character, forcible evidence for the truth of the belief which lies fundamental in the life of that community. But even this evidence, however forcible, does not amount to a compelling demonstration.

The Rationale of Christian Certainty

Having made this preliminary study of knowledge and belief, we are prepared to consider the philosophy of Christian certainty. We will deal with its intention, its method, and its sufficiency.

The Intention. The Christian intention is not, as many seem to think, to make provision for knowledge. Everyone, though, will surely understand that the term knowledge is used here not in the loose manner of popular speech, but in the narrow sense of our own previous discussion. Precisely speaking, we know a truth, or a reality, only when it carries us simply as rational beings beyond all possibility of same dispute. As a rationalist once stated the point, we know a thing when it is "so clear and distinct that it cannot be doubted." And he means when it cannot be doubted by any rational mind. In this narrow, philosophical use of the term, Christian truths and facts are not and cannot be known by men. Christianity is not an exact science, aiming to force assent by an irrefragable mathematical process. There is not one Christian doctrine, not one Christian event, not one Christian reality, securely beyond the possibility of some man's personal rejection. Not only so, but this possibility of personal rejection is the key to the entire worth of the Christian religion. Were men coerced into a knowledge of God and Christ and all the mighty matters of redemption, personality would be overwhelmed and there could be no personal repentance, no personal faith, no personal peace, no personal loyalty -- no personal service. No, no, the Christian intention is not to make provision for knowledge, not in any fashion to compel the mind -- not even to satisfy the mind as an isolated fragment, as a mere instrument of rationality. The Christian plan is to meet the whole man with his mind, his personality, and his conscience. More closely yet, the Christian intention is to take a moral person who dares, under the stress of his moral needs, and with his ideal beckoning in the distance, to believe in Jesus Christ and his atonement for sin -- to take, I say, this venturing Christian and satisfy him -- make him certain, in every crevice of his manhood, that whatever of person or event or doctrine is vitally coherent with his experience is grounded in reality or vibrant with truth.

The Method. In the process of Christian certainty there are four important features, as follows: 1. The feature of self-knowledge. This is the basal start. In self-grasp a man obtains the necessary fixed point; and in full self-consciousness he obtains the realization of his Christian experience. Often this self-knowledge is called knowledge, and sometimes it is called personal belief; but, in a searching discussion, neither name is entirely satisfactory. The knowledge is of self, and differs from ordinary knowledge in two respects: first, in that it is possible only in the high, self-conscious mood; and, second, in that it cannot be transferred by means of demonstration.

Your Christian experience may be very rich and very profound, but you cannot, to another man, make it resistlessly cogent that you have such an experience. The reality is not an object for universal knowledge, but merely an object of self-knowledge. And, again, self-knowledge also differs from personal belief; for, inasmuch as the knowledge of self is a result of coercion and not a result of self-decision, it is not fully personal. It pertains to the personal process, but it does not reach to the end of that process. 2.

The feature of moral concern. The certainty is ethical through and through. And here I mean much more than that the steps leading up to a Christian experience are thoroughly moral. I mean this: A central reason why the Christian man is sure of this or that is its fitness with his moral ideal. No Christian, for example, accepts the fact of the Incarnation on bare rational grounds. As an isolated event in history, I doubt whether anyone could, in these scientific days, believe that God had actually become man.

It is so out of range with rational expectation! It is so in violence with the practical modern temper! How easy, how supremely sane, it is for the *Zeitgeist,* in all his robust health, to fling the miracle aside as "one of those infantile myths"! But to a man with a profound Christian experience the Incarnation is not an isolated event in history. It is a related event in moral history. It is "an ethical deed of God." It is a necessary part of a far-reaching moral plan to save man.

The miracle, stupendous as it is, is, for the Christian believer, lifted into complete rationality by means of its ethical significance. In truth, not only is he able to accept the entire doctrine of the Incarnation, but also he craves it as a starving man craves bread. 3. The feature of personal belief. With all this start in self-knowledge and all this influence of the moral ideal, there is still a personal venture, an actual self-decision involved in all Christian certainty.

The process (up to this point) by which the certainty is obtained is this: The man knows himself; gathers the deep richness of his Christian experience into self-conscious realization; instantly perceives that a certain fact or doctrine is in living conjunction with his inner experience (as a man once said, "I myself need the virgin birth almost as much as I needed pardon"); as instantly perceives that this fact or doctrine fits into his moral ideal; and then makes the venture, yields his whole being in personal belief.

This venture is not rationalistic, but it is rational; for surely a man has the right to take some risk to satisfy the demands of his personal and moral life. 4. The feature of social confirmation. Robert Browning once wrote to a friend, "I want you to give my conviction a clinch." The two words, conviction and clinch, suggest the philosophy of certainty in belief. First, there is a personal element, the person himself gets a conviction; then there is a social element, the personal conviction is clinched, or confirmed, by other men.

You believe in your country, in her history, in her constitution, in her institutions, in her people, in her significance among the nations. Your belief amounts to such a conviction that you could gladly die to express it; and yet every other patriot makes you a little more certain that your country is worth dying for.

In the Christian faith this principle of social confirmation has its finest and largest application. A Christian is not a hermit. He is not alone either in his experience or in the expression of his experience. He has a community, he lives in a testing and supplementing and confirming community. In every crisis of his life, in every new turn of public opinion, in every phase of self-knowledge, in every look at his moral ideal, before and during and after every self-decision, he is bounded by a brotherhood. And this brotherhood is singularly adapted to the needs of the Christian man. It is made up of moral persons, all trying to complete their life in truth and reality; all these moral persons have had the initial moral and Christian experiences; all have now the same profound relation to Jesus Christ and his death for their salvation; and still all these redeemed moral persons come together with countless differences in individuality, in mental training, in position and occupation, in influence over men, and in present religious attainment. Thus, this brotherhood has mighty resources in social service and confirmation. It is too much to say that this confirmation is coercive, turning conviction into knowledge; but it is not too much to say that it gives to personal assurance such ratification that the Christian consciousness is full of certainty.

The Sufficiency. As the personal process is gathered up and continued by the moral process, so the moral process itself is gathered up and continued and completed by the Christian process. Thus the Christian process is one of synthesis and culmination. It is from the standpoint of this synthetic, culminating process that Christian certainty has sufficiency. It makes sufficient contribution to that Christian process. The certainty is, in the first place, sufficient for the ongoing of the process.

At any point, a man can have confidence enough to move on. Whatever of fact or doctrine he needs for moral progress, he can be sure about. And so, inertia is never a necessity in the life of the moral person. Right here I must take exception to a view often implied, and sometimes deliberately taught, namely, that one can begin the Christian life, or go on to the richer kinds of religious experience, by making experiment under doubt. As though a man should say to himself, "I am not at all sure about this thing, but it's worth trying; and if nothing comes of it I will be as well off as I was before."

In a recent book this view of Christianity, taken by hazard, is even given apologetic significance: "I conclude, therefore, that the true source of religious confidence is not primarily the objective Christian evidences, but the Christian experience obtained through a voluntary trust in the gospel when doubt is possible, or, what is substantially the same thing, by acting in a state of some uncertainty as if the religion were known to be true. In other words, Christianity is offered to the human race, not as a mere contribution to religious knowledge, but chiefly as a body of directions for a moral crisis, and is therefore to be used like everything else of the same class, that is, it is to be proved by making trial of it."

These words touch reality in several places, but, taken together, they are extremely misleading. Not one genuine movement toward Christianity, or within the Christian life, can be made "by acting in a state of some uncertainty as if the religion were known to be true." To act in such a way is to pretend, and such pretension would violate the ideal of any moral loyalist. It is precisely this sort of teaching which lends support to the superficial evangelist, and fills our churches with powerless imitations of the Christian experience.

Think of a man trying to become a Christian, or trying to reach a higher plane of Christian life, by means of a false personal attitude, and an attitude which any true moralist would despise! "But did you yourself not insist upon taking some risk, upon personal venture?" Yes, but the personal venture which I insist upon originates in regard for reality and is in the name of the moral ideal and not against it. The personal venture which I insist upon is not a dubious experiment not an arbitrary and desperate leap at a passing possibility.

A Christian is not like -- a real Christian is not like a restless and reckless adventurer, who gambles with opportunity, who sails for an unknown shore in a spirit of hazard, thinking, "There may be gold there!" Rather is the real Christian like an immigrant who has shown both confidence and courage. In the land where he was born he experienced poverty and tyranny. He learned of another country where there was work and liberty and appreciation of simple manhood. He made the venture, crossed the sea, built a new home, and obtained a new citizenship. And now, in his ample life and perpetual intercourse with his neighbors, he is more and more certain that in his confident venture he has made no mistake.

The certainty is, in the second place, sufficient for the completion of the process. The Christian life, as you will readily remember, is to eventuate in a social organism, in a racial brotherhood. In this organism neither the significance of the moral person nor the significance of the entangled community is to be lost. The one man stands out as personally emphatic as though there were no other man in existence; and yet the community has a peculiar and an everlasting importance as a community. With this plan for a double outcome in mind, notice the nicety with which the Christian certainty makes contribution to the outcome. On the one side, the man, as an individual, moral, responsible person, is exalted by his free venture under his ideal. His certainty has come to him by a method most intensely personal. Not for an instant has his own independence, his own volitional freedom, been overwhelmed. As he stands there now, satisfied in every fiber of his manhood, he is more of a person, less of an automaton, than ever before. His personal

mood has more vitality, more endurance; he can stay longer in self-consciousness. But, on the other hand, this satisfied man has a larger and more wonderful interlacing with his brethren, for his certainty has come to full bloom only in a social soil, and his certainty is complete only in their organic confidence. He is sure with the strength of their total satisfaction. His self-consciousness is filled by the entire community-assurance of truth and fact. Thus, even the final mental life of the Christian man is to be a life in fellowship. Not one opinion will he have which is not, while fully his own, a part of the Christian consensus of opinion. An ultimate Christian doctrine, therefore, is more than a personal belief -- it is the belief of the social organism of redeemed moral persons. It satisfies, not the mind in isolation, but the whole man; not one man alone, but a vast number of men; not merely a vast number of men, but all these men, with individual difference, and personal likeness, and one common relation to Jesus Christ and his death for their sins, coming together in a perfect reciprocity of thought and feeling and service. Herein lies the philosophy of the stability of the Christian faith.

Essential Points in Definition

Knowledge -- When a man is made certain by coercion of any truth or reality, such certainty is knowledge. An unfailing mark of knowledge is its capability of irresistible and universal transfer from mind to mind.

Belief -- When a man makes a Venture under an ideal of any kind his confidence in the truth or reality of the object of his venture is personal belief. Unlike knowledge, belief is incapable of any irresistible transfer from mind to mind.

Christian Certainty -- This is a peculiar sort of belief. It is a personal belief, socially reinforced, under a moral ideal. A full definition may be given thus: Christian certainty is that personal, moral assurance which a Christian man, in organic relation with the Christian brotherhood, more and more profoundly has, first and most vitally of the reality of his spiritual life in Christ, and then of the reality or truth of the objects and events and doctrines bound up with that life in Christ.

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