

Religion

by Olin Alfred Curtis

The sermon explores the nature of religion, the supernatural, and the origin of man's sense of the supernatural, concluding that true religion is a personal bearing of faith toward the supernatural, rooted in the moral life.

Scripture: Psalm 111:10, Proverbs 3:5, Matthew 22:37, Romans 8:16, Romans 12:1, 1 Corinthians 13:13, Ephesians 3:17, James 1:27, 1 John 4:18

Topics: "Moral Faith", "True Religion"

Description

Olin Alfred Curtis delves into the essence of religion, highlighting the belief in an unseen order and the pursuit of harmoniously adjusting ourselves to it. He explores the origin of religion, emphasizing the presence of the Infinite within man even before conscious awareness. Curtis discusses the consciousness of a Being or Principle above both inner and outer lives, leading to reverence and awe as the essence of religion. He examines the religious process in man, distinguishing between superstition, morality, and bare religion, ultimately pointing towards the religion of the moral person characterized by moral faith and repentance.

Transcript

Were one asked to characterize the life of religion in the broadest and most general terms possible, one might say that it consists of the belief that there is an unseen order, and that our supreme good lies in harmoniously adjusting ourselves thereto.

-- William James, Gifford Lectures, p. 53.

The origin of religion consists in the fact that man has the Infinite within him, even before he is himself conscious of it. . . . Whatever name we give it -- instinct, or an innate, original, and unconscious form of thought, or form of conception -- it is the specifically human element in man, the idea which dominates him. He gives it precedence over the finite. . . . Even primitive man, as soon as he comes to apprehend the finite, regards it as perplexing and unnatural.

-- P. Tiele, Elements of the Science of Religion, ed. 1899, Criticism of Max Müller, ii, 228-233.

There is necessarily present in us, in virtue of the very fact that our inner and our outer lives stand in constant relation to each other, the consciousness of a Being or Principle which is above both and revealed in both. . . . A human consciousness cannot exist without some dawning of reverence -- of an

awe and aspiration which is as different from fear as it is from presumption, from slavish submission as it is from tyrannical self-assertion. And it is this reverence, this sense of a subjection which elevates us; of an obedience that makes us free, this consciousness of a Power which curbs and humiliates us, but at the same time draws us up to itself, which is the essence of religion and the source of man's higher life.

-- Edward Caird, *The Evolution of Religion*, ed. 1899, i, 79, 80.

I have never seen a satisfactory definition of religion. The idea is too complex for a brief logical statement. . . . The past year or two I have given my class two or three statements, partly introductory, partly in the nature of a summation. ... In different text connections they are as follows In its highest sense, religion is the normal personal bearing of men in and toward God, the ground of all finite existence. In a wider sense, it includes all actual or historic endeavors after such a bearing, however far short of the ideal they may come. . . . A personal bearing over against the divine, true in its intellectual presupposition, genuine in its ethical presupposition, complete and symmetrical in its forms of expression, is entitled to the name of absolutely normal religion. In the perfect love of the perfect God is found the flower and perfection of such religion. It presupposes a true knowledge, a right impulse, and issues in a well -- balanced expression toward God and man. Should you desire to quote any or all of these statements, I should prefer that you would not call them my definition, as that would imply that I believe it possible to frame a satisfactory, logical definition of the term.

-- W. F. Warren, from a letter dated Boston, January 26, 1903.

The conclusions in our discussion of religion have been reached under a general method which may be indicated in a few words. Three questions I have asked, in the following order: 1. What are the intrinsically significant things in man's life, individual, personal, and moral? 2. Taking it for granted that the Christian faith is the highest manifestation of religion, how can we philosophically relate that faith to the full life of man? And, 3. Having thus secured a Christian-anthropological standpoint, how can we explain all known religious data from that standpoint? No claim is made that this method is suitable for a science of religion but surely it is the only method feasible for an introduction to systematic theology.

The Supernatural. Before we try to analyze religion, though, we need to come somewhat closer to this tempest-tossed term, supernatural. What is the supernatural as man understands it? I answer: The infinite mystery beyond the organism of nature. This answer, however, but leads to another question, What is nature as man understands that? John Stuart Mill says: "Nature means the sum of all phenomena, together with the causes which produce them; including not only all that happens, but all that is capable of happening; the unused capabilities of .causes being as much a part of the idea of nature as those which take effect." This definition does not at all express the conception of the average man. Men do not regard nature as including all that happens and all that is capable of happening. The conception is much more limited. Nature includes only what happens within the range of common individual seizure. Men call a thing natural when it appeals only to their individual apprehension, or when it appeals to any part of the man that falls short of moral personality. Thus it is that the range of nature is not the same to all men. The men are different and so the appeal is different. And thus it is that as men change, the contents of their natural world may change also. A man may say, Why, that is natural, but it did not seem so before." In other words, the idea of nature is a relative and not an absolute truth. For their development, men need to be dualistic; they need two worlds; although, as a matter of ultimate fact, the two worlds make one organism and not two. And yet, as we shall see later, men are not deceived. A relative truth is not an untruth; it is truth in circumscription. A man on the deck of a steamship sees the ocean in circumscription, but he does

see the ocean and not a mirage. "Reality strikes him full in the face." If we bear in mind this relative significance, this educational value of the idea of nature, we can see that it is not important that there should be precise agreement as to what things are natural. But it is important that every man, in all his development, should keep the idea of nature as a background over against which he can sanely and distinctly realize his higher world -- the supernatural.

In analyzing the idea of the supernatural as conceived by the ordinary man, we find in it several elements: 1. The supernatural is beyond nature. The thought here is not that it is further away, but rather that it is less seizable, less subject to common apprehension, more transcendent. 2. Involved in this transcendence is the full notion of mystery. And this notion of mystery is very peculiar. It is not at all the notion of a puzzle, that now baffles us, but some day may be guessed out, or worked out. No man ever expects to solve the mystery of the supernatural. He may apprehend it a little better, but never can he master its depths, never can he comprehend it. In fact, this sense of mystery is probably nothing other than a special mood of man's inherent sense of finitude. He feels that he is "a speck in the center of the Immensities." 3. Involved in this sense of mystery, or at least starting in it, is the notion of the infinite. Out beyond nature there is not only a mystery, but a boundless mystery. The supernatural is without limits. In other words, the common man has the practical beginning of that tremendous conception which the philosopher protects and partly expresses by the term absolute. To some men, this infinite is an infinite person. To a few men, it is an infinite law or order. And it would seem as if instances had been found where the conception is so vague that it should be called merely the notion of a presence. But to the majority, in all the history of mankind, the infinite has been an infinite power. The infinite mystery out beyond nature has, in the end, its own way, can do all things -- is almighty. To cover fairly, though, the entire range of human experience, we may say that to man the supernatural is the infinite mystery beyond the total system of nature; and nature includes all those things which can be seized or apprehended by the individual without the help of moral personality. Some question there may be as to my right to use, in this connection, the term system, or the term organism. But I have such a right; for the common idea of nature is that of a realm, or kingdom, and never that of unrelated confusion. The average man has no philosophical conception of an organism, but he has a practical view which, if fully analyzed, clearly amounts to the same thing. Indeed, every fundamental notion of the common man has a truly philosophical root. All men are philosophers, whether they recognize the fact or not.

The Origin of Man's Sense of the Supernatural. There now arises the question which I deem the most crucial in the discussion of religion, namely, How does this sense of the supernatural originate in man? or what enables man to fling out beyond nature a supernatural world? The answer lies truly in our view of what the supernatural means to man; but let us draw out the infoldment. And it may be helpful to note with more emphasis the peculiar conception we have of man, a conception underlying many of our discussions and cropping out again and again. A man is an individual creature lifted out of animal automatism only in those moods which are personal or moral. A man is first of all an individual and has the automatic experience of an individual. There are moments, hours, even days, when his life rises no higher than that of a most wonderful animal. Again, a man is a person, able to treat his individuality self-consciously, with uncoerced volition. Now he is above the automaton, and yet there is no moral quality necessarily in his experience. Not every instant of self-consciousness must be an instant of moral distinction and demand. There may be in certain degenerate men, or in certain abnormal situations, or in certain fragmentary moods, a quasi personal experience which is no higher. And again, a man may live the full life of a moral person, not only conscious of self, but also conscious of self under moral requirement.

These distinctions in mind, then, we affirm that man's sense of the supernatural originates only in the experience of the moral person. As an individual animal alone, he would have no more sense of the supernatural than there is in a zebra. Neither am I willing to grant the claim of Edward Caird, that "there is necessarily present in us, in virtue of the very fact that our inner and our outer lives stand in constant relation to each other, the consciousness of a Being, or Principle, which is above both and revealed in both." If I catch his meaning, it is that in the bare experience of personality itself we bind the subject and the object, the inner and the outer world together by means of our sense of an overarching infinite. But I do not so understand man's personal experience. In the experience of bare personality, the person is entirely occupied with himself. Nor do I think that a man is able to spring this arch of the infinite even when he compares his personal experience with his individual experience. The more I study men, the more thoroughly I am convinced that the human sense of the supernatural is created by a movement in the moral life; and had man no conscience, he never would have such a sense at all. My own view may be stated in this manner: In man's conception of the supernatural world there are really two things: First, there is an intuitive moral center. This lies in conscience. When, in conscience, a man first feels the ultimate authority of the moral overmaster he gets his first idea of the supernatural. To the man the overmaster is beyond nature, is a transcendent mystery, is infinite -- is the supernatural. Second, there is an arbitrary augment. Because a man is a person he can treat this moral center with originality. Never could he obtain the Idea of the supernatural in any mood less than the ethical; but he can keep it when once he has it, and he can apply it, in any mood whatsoever. In this manner he comes to regard all sorts of things, even non-moral things, if mysterious, as supernatural, and projects a great realm beyond the laws of nature.

Before we take our next step, I wish to call your attention especially to the extreme valuation which I have placed upon man's sense of the supernatural by centering it in the moral life. Auguste Comte, and many who do not accept positivism as a philosophy, look upon this sense of the supernatural as a crudity temporary in human development; but I look upon it as the loftiest and most abiding feature of man's spiritual constitution. Imperfect and abnormal expressions of this sense will pass away, precisely as imperfect and morbid expressions of moral distinction itself will pass away. All crass superstition will disappear. Dante will not forever plan to use "the mystic number nine." Samuel Johnson will not forever be anxious "to go out or in at a door or passage by a certain number of steps from a certain point." But man's sense of the infinite mystery will not pass away as long as he has a moral nature at all. He will, as he develops, exchange mysteries, that is all. In truth, man's appreciation of the wonder of the supernatural is to be counted as his supreme dignity; it is this which, as a being made in the divine image, he "brings trailing from afar"; and it is this which, when all its implications are worked out, renders possible his full and final fellowship with God.

The Religious Process in Man

Superstition. When in any stage of life, or in any passing mood of his inner experience, a man separates the moral center of his supernatural world from the outlying augment of mystery his bearing is one of superstition. He feels sheer mystery and is afraid of it. In the folklore of Brittany we are told that when a fisherman is drowned the gulls fly crying and beat their wings against the casements of his house. Here we have an instance of mere superstition. If we study this and like instances we discover three things a sense of mystery, a fear of mystery, and a lack of all moral quality. This lack, however, is entirely unlike the deficiency in an animal, for at any moment it may change and express moral concern. Again and again has a man's feeling begun in superstitious dread and ended in the torture of conscience.

Morality -- Is It Religion? Often it is said that J. H. Fichte taught that morality and religion are one and the same thing; but I do not so understand Fichte. In his Ethik he says: "Religion is conscious morality, a morality which in virtue of that consciousness is mindful of its origin in God." Probably Fichte means as much here as Kant meant in defining religion as "the recognition *[Erkenntnis]* of all our duties as divine commandments." If he did mean as much as Kant meant, then his conception of religion is beyond anything possible within the scheme of mere morals. But, in any case, I must regard morality as a much lower experience than that of religion. Both superstition and morality are, I grant, in the religious process, but neither of them reaches a point in the process beyond fear. And surely it is not economy to squander the noble term religion upon any sort of slavery.

Bare Religion. The principle of economy, though, is not my only reason, nor, indeed, my main reason, for lifting religion into a range beyond morality. The main reason pertains to my chosen method of studying the subject. Under this method chosen I study Christianity itself, to discover the fundamental religious characteristic, and find that characteristic to be not' fear, but faith. I therefore hold that the first thing in the religious process worthy to be termed religion is a personal bearing of faith toward the supernatural. Man naturally fears the supernatural wherever he finds it but because he is a free person he can a greater thing than to create the arbitrary augment, he can master his fear by a venture of trust. This personal venture we call faith. With such faith a man no longer dreads the supernatural, he reverences it. And so fear is turned into awe, and the act of true worship becomes possible. If now we note, in the religious process, the lowest situation where there can be this venture of faith; we shall find the lowest kind of religion. At once we perceive that this lowest situation is at the point of the augment. Separate the augment from the moral center, and there is the supernatural as sheer mystery. Toward this supernatural as sheer mystery there is possible to man not only the bearing of fear, or superstition, but also the venture of faith. This is religion, but inasmuch as it is without moral quality, I term it bare religion.

Of this bare religion there are many instances, not only in heathen lands, but even in Christendom. Be sure to understand me fully here. I mean that there are men who maintain a brave bearing of confidence toward the awful mystery surrounding them, and yet their confidence has resulted from a purely personal venture, and not from a profoundly moral struggle. The self-decisions of such men never burn with serious moral intention; and their whole bearing toward the supernatural is, justly speaking, nonmoral. Having in mind Emerson's famous address before the divinity school at Cambridge, Professor William James said: "Now it would be too absurd to say that the inner experiences that underlie such expressions of faith, and impel the writer to their utterance, are quite unworthy to be called religious experiences." Surely that would be too absurd! Readily I grant that Emerson's experience was religious, but what I fail to discover in his experience is a Christian element, or even any vitalizing ethical element. He had large courage, large trust, and achieved a kind of content, precisely the kind Littré achieved; but to call Emerson's placidity moral peace would be to leave no worthy term for religious experiences more noble and more profound. Take Emerson's Threnody (almost the greatest lament in the English language), which reaches its climax of personal faith in these sublime words:

"Revere the Maker; fetch thine eye

Up to his style, and manners of the sky."

Study this poem from the beginning to the climax, and you will find in it not one touch of Christian faith, and not one touch of that moral atmosphere so evident in, say, Sartor Resartus. The Threnody is religious, yes, extremely religious, but it expresses only the personal daring, the venture into confidence of bare

religion. And, in this connection, I need to say one more thing: A religious faith which is not steeped in moral passion is an exceedingly fragmentary and an exceedingly dangerous thing. It would hardly be an exaggeration to say that such faith has done more injury to men than any style of mental aberration. Inherently, in the deep nature of health, in the working out the full plan of human life: no man has a right to any content which was not born in moral concern. To be easily religious, to be religious without earnest moral intention, is as much out of plan as it would be for an eagle to fly with only one wing. If the eagle can do it at all he may reach a higher crag; but he was not made to fly with only one wing, and in such a crippled state he never can fly high enough and long enough to find his true home among the mountains. Religion is intended to help a man to reach the loftiest moral life.

The Religion of the Moral Person. Already, in our study of morality, we have glimpsed the fact, but our conclusions there we now need to place in larger relations. What does a person do to get an experience which is both moral and religious? -- that is our question. He first treats the supernatural, his entire vision of it, from the standpoint of right and wrong. To him, that infinite mystery, whatever else it may be, is ethical. It "makes for righteousness." Then, the moral person treats himself from the same standpoint, right and wrong. And this leads to self-blame and ethical sorrow over himself. The man's mood here is not defensive -- is not discriminating -- he does not know and does not try to find out to what precise degree he is at fault. He makes no excuse before men and no plea in the inner court. He simply feels that he has failed and that he himself is to blame and that he is profoundly sorry. This ethical sorrow is the first glimmer of repentance. Let us call it initial repentance. Such repentance makes a complete cleavage between bare religion and the religion of the moral person, just as it makes a complete cleavage between the most noble morality and the religion of the moral person. We are wont to associate repentance with the Christian faith alone; but before a man can have moral faith of any kind he must repent. Again, in the third place, the person ventures out into a moral faith toward the supernatural. For two reasons the faith is moral, namely, because it is made with full emphasis upon the center of the supernatural, and because it is made in the spirit of repentance. I doubt not that there is in this faith, just as there is in the faith of bare religion, a large appreciation of personality. Indeed, I do not see how any faith can be possible without an intense appreciation of personality. For to have faith one must perceive the intrinsic worth of a personal bearing over against any amount of external performance. But, and this is the heart of the matter, the loyal moral person is all the time, even in his faith, testing himself under an ethical standard, and so his valuation of himself never misses an ethical tone. It is not what he means that is important, but what he means under his moral ideal. Therefore, when Professor Seth affirms that a religious approach is possible "only in a person, in a relatively independent or self-centered being," I quickly allow it; but must add, that such an approach, to have large significance in the religious process, must be made with moral faith. The route to a worthy religious experience is only by way of the moral law.

We can now clearly see that in the religion of the moral person faith can never be antinomian. Certainly he does make substitution for conduct. He does substitute spirit for letter, a personal attitude for external deed. To his own soul he dares to say, "What I want to do, what I love, is of more worth than what I can accomplish now, here, under my ideal of duty." Note this, though, he makes this substitution in his passion of concern for the moral law; and so, as a matter of daily fact, his new moral faith keeps him striving as never before, to get his inner purpose out into faultless conduct. The merely moral man cannot live, even before men, a life so stringent in noble service as is rendered possible to a person by moral faith.

The Enrichment. Even this religion of the moral person, this religion of moral faith, is not, however, "a finished product." It is capable of vast enrichment by means of love. Psychologically considered, this love

exists when personal faith turns into awe. There can be, indeed, no faith without a lift of the heart, and no awe without a certain eagerness toward the object of it. But practically considered, this affectional movement in faith and awe do not amount to love. Nor is the affection involved in moral faith worthy to be, in and of itself, termed love. The word love should be economically, sacredly kept for that definite feeling which the religious man may have toward God as a Person in reciprocal response. The possibility of love involves the possibility of full reciprocity. You cannot love a mere thing.

The Consummation. But love itself is not the final word in a complete discussion of the religious process. Love is certainly the ultimate religious motive, but motive is only one, the central, element in the ultimate religious experience. Thus far we have intentionally placed the most tremendous emphasis upon personality, and more especially upon moral personality. The individual we have cast out into insignificance. Now we must bring him back! Religion is intended to satisfy not merely the moral person, but the individual as well. It must, to realize its plan, gather up into perfect satisfaction the total man with all his longings, even those which are the most subtle and vague. The individual man, deeper than any self-consciousness, has an instinctive craving for God. As the person feels authority, so the individual feels need. If you have ever watched a half-frozen animal, wandering about, not knowing what he was after; but restless until he found the fire, you have at hand an analogy for an individual's automatic craving after God. The moral person wants God, but he wants to have an active relation to him, he wants to know him, to obey him, to serve him. But the individual wants to have a passive relation to God, to be nothing in him, to rest in him forever. This individual side of religion is seen not only in every form of pantheism, but also in every form of mysticism. And the Bible itself, in some of the Psalms, in Saint John's gospel, and in Saint Paul's epistles, has many a trace of mysticism. Outside of the Bible, we could find the mystical temper not only in the writings of those men known as "the mystics," but also in the writings of some of the most famous teachers of the Christian faith. Furthermore, even in this age of externality and sensible performance, some of the finest poetry is either charged with mysticism or at least alive to the large significance of the mystical spirit in the deepest religious life. One striking passage I will give, from Johannes Agricola in Meditation:

"For I intend to get to God,

For 'tis to God I speed so fast,

For in God's breast, my own abode,

Those shoals of dazzling glory passed,

I lay my spirit down at last."

In the consummation of religion the two sides, the personal and the individual, the assertive and the quiescent, must equally find place, and must be entirely harmonious in their coincidence. How, though, can there be a joining and blending of such antipodal features? The question can, I believe, be fully answered. After the individual life is thoroughly personalized the probational struggle is over, and the person's condition of motivity has become such that he can and does yield his whole being to God. This final and absolute yielding is the culmination of a long series of personal decisions, and is itself a self-conscious act, a veritable self-commitment. The response to this final and absolute self-commitment is an intruding, an enswathement of the man by the divine life, so that every fiber of his being is penetrated and vitalized. For the first time in his existence the entire man lives. He is in organic adjustment to the Infinite. He thinks God's thoughts, he feels God's emotions, he wills God's volitions -- in finite

measure, he lives God's life. And yet the man as a person is not overwhelmed. He grasps himself, knows himself in every peculiarity, and fills out ceaselessly every inherent indication of the plan of his own being. In all the eternities he will never cease to be his own personal self, will never come to be precisely like any other creature in the universe. In individuality the man is conjoined with God; in personality he is separate in self-consciousness, and yet also conscious of his union with God. As a mote floats in the sunbeam, so this bit of manhood quietly rests in God; but he rests there as a person who has deliberately chosen his everlasting home. True it is that he will remain, that "he shall go no more out"; yes, true it is that he must remain; but he must remain, not because he is established by coercion, but because he himself has freely exhausted every motive to go, and nourished every motive to stay. And even his present establishment in rest is personal and not automatic, for ceaselessly it throbs with the supreme joy of self-consciously choosing to live forever in God. In this manner, the two antipodal features of man's nature find at last their harmonious coincidence. Absolute personal unification with the Infinite God -- this is the consummation of religion.

Analytical Summary

I. The Supernatural

The fundamental thing which renders religion possible to man as a person is his intuitive sense of the infinite mystery beyond nature, or his intuitive sense of the supernatural.

This intuitive sense of the supernatural is moral in its origin. When a man first glimpses moral concern in its otherness, its supremacy, and its boundlessness, that is to him the supernatural.

Then the man himself arbitrarily enlarges his supernatural world until it includes many things having no moral quality and no moral relation.

Thus there are in the average man's conception of the supernatural two things which should never be confused: (1) The moral center, where the mystery is a voice in moral demand. (2) The arbitrary augment, where the mystery is nothing but mystery -- a vague other world without moral distinction and urgency.

II. Bearings Toward The Supernatural

Whenever a man is in a nonmoral mood his bearing is one of spontaneous fear toward the arbitrary augment of sheer mystery. As this fear has in it no moral quality, never yields any pressure toward duty, we place the bearing low in classification and call it Superstition.

Whenever, on the other hand, the man is in a moral mood, his bearing is one of spontaneous fear toward the moral center, or toward the total mystery with his emphasis upon the moral center. His fear now is vibrant with moral quality, yields constant pressure toward duty, and so we place the bearing higher in classification and call it morality.

But it is possible for a man to overcome fear by venture, to bear toward the supernatural in personal faith. This venture of faith, this "personal leap into confidence," is so intrinsically unlike fear, so much loftier than fear, so much more fruitful than fear, that we place the bearing still higher in classification and call it religion. Not only so, but to term it religion also fits into our analysis of Christianity itself.

III. Religion

Definition

Religion is a personal bearing of faith toward the supernatural.

Analysis

Religion is a personal bearing. Religion is possible only to a person, for it involves self-conscious decision.

A personal bearing of faith. The personal bearing must be one of trust.

A personal bearing of faith toward the supernatural. It is man's sense of the supernatural which renders religion possible to him as a person. Sometimes a high mood of aesthetic sensitiveness is regarded as religious, but it is not religious unless the man deem beauty itself supernatural.

Kinds of Religion

The religion of mere faith, or bare religion. This is but a personal venture of confidence toward the supernatural conceived as sheer mystery.

The religion of moral faith, or the religion of the moral person. This is a personal venture of confidence toward the Supernatural conceived as centering in moral concern. The moral faith is consequent upon repentance.

The religion of love. This is the religion of moral faith enriched by love toward the supernatural now conceived as a responsive person.

The ultimate religion. This is the religion of love consummated by absolute personal unification with God.

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