

The Christian Religion and the Human Race

by Olin Alfred Curtis

The Christian religion emphasizes the importance of human fellowship and the connection between the individual and the human race, and provides a community of believers where individuals can find companionship and break up loneliness.

Scripture: Ecclesiastes 4:9, John 13:34, Romans 12:4, 1 Corinthians 12:12, Galatians 6:2

Topics: "Christian Community", "Human Nature"

Description

Olin Alfred Curtis preaches about the social nature of man, emphasizing the natural principle of attraction that leads to relationships and the importance of fraternity as a Christian idea. He highlights the individuality emphasized by company, where each person contributes to the racial brotherhood of moral persons, and the significance of personal loneliness and the need for social fellowship. Curtis discusses the Christian method of social life, the racial nexus through the human body, and the Christian aim to save individuals in a way that leads to a racial brotherhood of moral persons.

Transcript

There is such a natural principle of attraction in man toward man that having trod the same tract of land . . . becomes the occasion of contracting acquaintances and familiarities many years after; for anything may serve the purpose. Thus relations merely nominal are sought and invented, not by governors, but by the lowest of the people; which are found sufficient to hold mankind together in little fraternities and copartnerships: weak ties indeed, and what may afford fund enough for ridicule, if they are absurdly considered as the real principles of that union; but they are in truth merely the occasions, as anything may be of anything, upon which our nature carries us on according to its own previous bent and bias; which occasions, therefore, would be nothing at all, were there not this prior disposition and bias of nature. . . . And therefore to have no restraint from, no regard to others in our behavior, is the speculative absurdity of considering ourselves as single and independent, as having nothing in our nature which has respect to our fellow creatures, reduced to action and practice. And this is the same absurdity as to suppose a hand, or any part, to have no natural respect to any other, or to the whole body.

-- Joseph Butler, Sermon upon the Social Nature of Man.

As the conditions of men become equal among a people, individuals seem of less, and society of greater, importance; or, rather, every citizen, being assimilated to all the rest, is lost in the crowd, and nothing stands conspicuous but the great and imposing image of the people at large.

-- Alexis DeTocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ii, 357.

Fraternity is undoubtedly a Christian idea, come into the world with Christ, spread abroad in it by Christian agencies, and belonging to the ideal that hovers perpetually over Christian society.

-- John Rae, *Contemporary Socialism*, p. 219.

This is the fundamental truth out of which comes the regulative law of Jesus about social life. Society does not exist for itself, but for the individual; and man goes into it not to lose, but to find, himself. Nowhere do we find on earth that picture of society reconstructed by the idea of Jesus, society around the throne of God, which shines out upon us from the mysterious promises of the Apocalypse; the glory of which society is to be this -- that while the souls stand in their vast choruses of hundreds of thousands, and all chant the same anthems, and all work together in the same transcendent duties, yet each bears the sacred name written on the flesh of his own forehead, and carries in his hand a white stone on which is written a new name which no man knoweth saving he that receiveth it. It is individuality emphasized by company, and not lost in it, because the atmosphere in which the company is met is the idea of Jesus, which is the Fatherhood of God.

-- Phillips Brooks, *The Influence of Jesus*, the Bohlen Lectures, 1879, pp. 98, 99, 100.

Had our aim been comprehensively anthropological we should, in the first part of the introduction, have studied man not only as an individual moral person, but also as a social person. But our aim was narrowly economic, yes, jealously economic; the single intention being to emphasize man's moral life in such a manner as to show, beyond the possibility of obscuration, the teleological connection which exists between this moral life and the Christian religion. But now that this economic work is done we need to bring into full view the social side of man's nature, for this social fact has very extraordinary consideration in the Christian system. It may be true, as Professor Ritschl has said, that "all religions are social"; but Christianity is peculiarly social -indeed, so thoroughly social that neither its doctrines nor its method nor its spirit can be understood and expressed in the terms of individualism.

The Social Fact

Of all of Emerson's Orphic sayings, the one most arbitrarily untrue is this: "Man is insular and cannot be touched. Every man is an infinitely repellent orb and holds his individual being on that condition." Exactly the opposite is the truth. Every man is planned for human fellowship and can live his normal, his deepest life only in relations of such fellowship. He must give and take. He must divide his spoil with other men. He must rob men of their experiences, their sorrows, their joys, until his soul is like a camp full of captured treasure. Just as the individual needs and craves nature -- the trees, the fields, the sky, the ocean -- so the human person needs and craves men. And the greater the person is in pure humanity the more men it takes to satisfy his inner craving. A man like Charles Sumner, unless enlarged as Sumner was by a generous philanthropy, can get on quite contentedly with a few cultured friends; but Abraham Lincoln had to have all sorts and conditions of men, and thousands of them. Sometimes, in selfishness or by necessity, a man will isolate himself, perhaps will dare to believe that his soul can better ripen, or that his work can better be done, without any human fellowship; but the days become more and more sapless, and finally his whole being springs into violent protest. In 1851 Thomas Arnold (the younger) wrote to his mother as follows: "I think the greatest mistake I have ever made was that of fancying that an honest man was sufficient society to himself, and that the growth and vigor of the intellect was compatible with loneliness. I remember well the first practical check that this feeling received It was at Otago; I had made

up my mind to go on foot a journey of three or four days into the unknown interior. I could get no one to accompany me, and I did not care for anyone. . . . As I struggled back over the mountains, almost sick with hunger, I could not help remarking within myself a longing to get back to the settlement and the haunts of men equal to the desire which I had felt a day or two before to penetrate deep into the silence and solitude of the bush. 'No,' I said to myself, as I leaned on a great boulder at a spot whence the eye commanded a far-stretching plain, on which not the faintest curling smoke told of the presence of man, 'thou wast not made to be alone!' A sort of horror fell upon me, the might of Nature seemed to rise up -- irresistible, all-pervading -- and to press down upon my single life. From the hour that I reached the settlement I became, I think, a wiser man."

Personal Loneliness. One of the most significant things connected with man's inner life is his experience of loneliness. This experience is one of those commonplace matters which we take for granted, just as we take bodily weariness for granted, but which on close examination becomes indicant of a deep cause. Why is a man ever lonely? Some writers have answered the question in this way: A man, like certain animals, has a gregarious instinct; and so when he is separated from men he simply is restless because the gregarious instinct is not satisfied; this restlessness is what we mean by loneliness.

This answer might possibly be adequate to explain our loneliness when we are away from men; but how can it explain our loneliness when we are with men? On a city street, in a throng of people, a man may be as lonely as he would be if alone in the Black Forest. No, the cause of human loneliness is not a gregarious animal instinct, but is rooted in the very nature of personality itself. What a lonely man seeks is not so much the superficial human contact; the touch of a man's hand, the look of his eye, the word of his mouth -- these are but means to an end.

The end is personal companionship. The lonely man wants a reciprocity in personality. He wants to enter the life of another self-conscious being who can understand him and "trade experiences." As a man in trouble said to his faithful dog, "Yes, yes; but you cannot help me, for you do not know anything about it.,, So the need is personal; but now we must go further. Why does a man need this personal reciprocity? I answer: Because the process of personality is a lonely process.

In self-consciousness a man is necessarily flung into isolation. And in this personal isolation there are two experiences: One of these, the first experience, is that joyous sense of freedom which we have termed "the uplift of self- supremacy." This first experience, though, is speedily followed by another which is not joyous, namely, the initial realization of personal isolation. It is in this second experience, when in self-consciousness a man stands out to himself like one slender, separate match burning under the vast expanse of the night-sky, that the lonely soul cries out for men.

Still we are not done. Why does a man, in this mood of personal isolation, feel such a need of fellowship with men? Because one feature of self-consciousness is self-estimate, and when a man comes, with any degree of thoroughness, to place estimate upon self he perceives his own fragmentariness, his own need of supplement. He feels as a self- conscious leaf might feel blowing about away from the tree. And a man feels in this way because his incompleteness is a fact? He is an unfinished item, a splinter of a comprehensive plan.

And it is not merely that he is finite and needs to be filled out by the Infinite God -- that is a larger point to be placed fully in another connection; no, it is that every man is made for other men -- is purposely created jagged so as to fit into other men -- is planned to be a reciprocal factor in a great social organism. And this

great social organism is the human race.

The Human Race

First of all, if it is possible, let us lift our conception of the human race out of that crass and materialistic realism which has ruined so much theology, and vitiated so much philosophy, and colored the theories, nearly all of the theories, of modern science. Realism is of large worth as rhetoric -- as the poetry of impressive speech -- but in fundamental thinking it is nothing but pernicious error. The human race has no solidarity in the realistic sense -- it has no cohesion in entity -- no actual coalescence like that of a body of water where the individual drop is swallowed out of meaning and even out of existence. All the various and sliding forms of realism cannot be noted here; but this does not matter, for realism is so essentially false that there is not one sly form of it which has any reality whatsoever. It must be cleared out of theology root and branch. Mankind is solid simply in the sense that all men belong to one special divine plan where the design is to build a multitude of self-conscious, responsible fragments into one mighty organism socially and unselfishly interlaced. A man is not a racial thing, but a racial person.

Nor am I willing to allow the racial idea to be entangled with monogenism. There are today orthodox champions who seem to think that without Adam and Eve there could be no unity of the race. I do not so understand the matter. That the race originated in one human pair is a view in fitness with the doctrine of racial unity, and a view essential to any fair and wholesome interpretation of the Bible; so much I myself must hold. But the idea of the unity of the race is profounder than monogenism. Indeed, it is not only conceivable that men might make one organic race and yet not come from one pair; but also conceivable that men might come from one pair and yet not make an organic race at all. And the apologetic entanglement of racial unity with monogenism is harmful because it tends to destroy Christian perspective.

The Racial Organism. To understand the method and meaning of the racial organism, there are four points to be considered: 1. The common experience. Inasmuch as all the members of the race are persons, they have in common a personal experience, their entire inner life being interpreted through self-consciousness. Thus it is that men can understand each other, and can act upon that great principle, "Put yourself in his place." 2. The personal service. Add to this common experience personal freedom, and we at once get the possibility of personal service among men.

If I so understand another man that I can really enter his life, and am free, I can enter his life with a purpose to help him, and can turn my appreciation of his situation into actual service. 3. The individual supplement. But, again, men are not only persons, they are also individuals. And as individuals they are unlike. Even if the elements of individuality are the same, the combination of the elements is so different that the result is unlikeness. And so no two men are ever entirely alike.

Nor do they tend to become alike. Under the stress of certain external circumstances, men may take on an unvarying crust of conventional likeness. It is, however, nothing but a protective or imitative mannerism. Once crush the crust, and you will find a man underneath as original as Plato. Even the most commonplace man, if you can only catch him," will turn out to be a fresh wonder of individual peculiarity. Thus it is that no living thing in the universe is so exhaustlessly interesting as a man, just a man.

For sheer tonic, one common man is, to anyone with patience, and especially to anyone with a purpose of service, of more worth than all the artificial excitements in existence. But the value of this individuality in the racial organism lies not mainly in the fact that it is intensely interesting, but rather in the fact that every man can, by means of his own peculiarity, add something to the size of another man's life, and so actually

help to complete that life. That is, we now have the principle of individual supplement or complement.

Most deeply said, every man may become a larger being by the sympathetic capture or social reception of another's peculiar experience. Let us pause for a moment and try to realize what a glorious law of compensation we have here. It is one special operation of that greatest of spiritual laws, he that loseth his life shall find it. Because a man is a free person he can purpose to lose his own interests and ambitions in the service of a fellow man; but when he renders this service, when he enters the life of his fellow, he not only helps him, but also is himself enlarged by all the peculiarity of the man whom he has helped.

Thus by unselfish service one can add to himself man after man until verily he lives the life of the entire race! Is it not, then, very clear that in such a personal interlacing, that in such a tangle of social reciprocity, we have a better basis for a racial organism than is anything which realism has provided? Have we not a complex of members? Is not every member essential to the largest life of every other member? and also essential to the meaning of the total race? 4. The racial plan.

But our racial organism is not yet complete. The common experience and personal service and individual supplement are but features in a racial plan under which humankind gets all its intrinsic significance; under which the race is created, and redeemed, and providentially protected and guided, and made to move on toward a distant goal. Thus there is an end in view, a purpose in the organism, for which every racial feature has been designed, and to which every racial member may lend constant contribution. With this racial plan noted, we have every element necessary to form a racial organism.

Christianity and the Race

The Christian Method. In its method the Christian religion is social. Sight is never lost of the fact that a man is an individual, separate in personality and moral responsibility. And probably, on the whole, the responsible individual person is the more impressively in the forefront of the Christian message. But this responsible person is ever treated as a social person, needing other men for service and development and joy. Sometimes, it is true, the Christian leader has been individualistic, exclusive, ascetic; but in this he has gone far afield from the teaching and practice and spirit of our Lord and his apostles. Other things being normal, the truest Christian is the greatest friend-seeker, but his friendships cannot be merely personal, or merely philanthropic. They must "let one anchor drop into the eternities."

Again, and more definitely, in the Christian church there is the one supreme provision to meet all personal loneliness. A man's social need may overlap his home and all his special friendships, but never can it reach beyond the efficiencies of a real Christian church, organized about the gospel and the two sacraments, dominated by the Holy Spirit, and glorified by the transcendent presence of our Lord. Take one item, the fellowship in Christian experience. How quickly men having that experience can understand each other, and how thoroughly they can commune with each other, and how intensely they can love each other! In such company no man can wander "lonely as a cloud." The personal process goes on -- indeed, it goes on more profoundly than before -- but all its loneliness is broken up by personal fellowship. It is like exploring Mammoth Cave with a company of intimate friends. The caverns and tortuous passages are there as aloof and subterranean as ever, but they are made friendly by the torches and faces and voices of those you love.

The Racial Nexus. One of the most singular turns in the history of opinion is the modern Christian depreciation of man's bodily life, a depreciation which is, I am convinced, an indirect inheritance from heathen philosophy. In extreme and pathetic inanity, this depreciation is manifest in that vagary which has

been deftly named "Christian science"; but none the less unmistakably evident is the depreciation in some of the prevailing forms of belief and sentiment in the Christian church itself. For example, one can hardly find a popular book bearing upon death and the future life, or even attend a funeral service (leaving out the fixed burial service), and be made aware that there are such Christian doctrines as those of the intermediate state and the resurrection of the body. In fact, judging from my own large experience with preachers, they are rapidly coming to reject these doctrines altogether or so to vaporize them that they lose all Christian meaning.

That in the Christian view of man his body is placed under emphasis is so fully apparent as to require no discussion. The emphasis is seen in almost every fundamental doctrine. Our practical concern is with the reason, the rationale of the emphasis. In finding this rationale, we need no metaphysical discussion. Whatever the body may be in its final entity, we now have to do with it merely, as the fixed instrument of man's objective life. Without a body a man could be a person; but without a body a man could not be a social person. The philosophical significance of the body is that it is the machinery of personal expression. By means of his body a person breaks isolation, and goes out, and gets a community. This view, I am well aware, plows under all the forms of spiritism; but they should be plowed under, for in no one of them is there an atom of Christianity. Indeed, the few grains of indisputable fact which they possess are so interpreted and so related as to become positively antichristian.

Further: Man's body is not only social, but also racial in its significance. The human body is the racial nexus. It connects the individual human person with his race. A man is not granted what I may call a generic body -- a body to enable him to have social intercourse with any person and every person who may live somewhere in the outer spaces of the universe of God. No, he is granted the body of a man, a special body which nicely and precisely enables him to get at men. Now, we can see the relation which the body has to the racial organism. It is by means of the human body that the racial organism can be actualized. It is by means of the human body that all those principles of social interlacing -- the common experience, the personal service, and the individual supplement -- can, under the racial plan, be utilized. The strength of this view lies in two things, namely, in the way it fits into Christian doctrine, and in the way it catches the Christian spirit. Let us say, then, this: The Christian religion places extreme emphasis upon man's body because his body was designed of God as the special instrument to secure a racial brotherhood.

The Racial Brotherhood of Moral Persons. Only at the end of the system of doctrine can we fully apprehend the Christian plan concerning man, but we can glimpse the plan now in its connections with our introductory discussions. Man is a moral person, and the Christian religion ever regards this fact as of supreme importance. Not only is the plan so adjusted to every stage of the moral process that it forcefully meets a man wherever he may be in his development as a moral person, but also its perpetual aim is to protect the moral law and to complete man as a creature responsible under that law. Every part of the Christian salvation is ethical through and through. But when we come to method, when we consider how it is that the moral person is rounded out into peace and joy, there comes to view a most wonderful piece of social strategy. The one man, the individual person, is saved, but not alone -- he is saved with others, by means of others, for others, into others -- he is saved in brotherhood. When his own entire life is at last organized about the motive of moral love, this love is not for God alone, but for God and man; and so the individual event bursts its boundaries and becomes a racial event. In a word, the Christian aim is to save separate men in such a way that the final result will be a racial brotherhood of moral persons.

Now and again the question is asked: Is the man created for the race, or is the race a mere method of completing the man? In a full Christian answer neither the man nor the race will be sacrificed. The race is planned to complete the man. In the final racial brotherhood there will be, as Phillips Brooks says, "Individuality emphasized by company." But there will also be company emphasized by individuality. The man is created to exalt the race just as truly as the race is designed to complete the man. The race itself has a teleological meaning and will as an organism finally express in a peculiar manner the glory of God.

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