

## Needed: The Right Integration between the Individual and the Whole

Farley Jones  
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*Photo date and location unknown*

One of the characteristics of our age and culture is individualism. It is both a source and orientation of our civilization. Rising out of the synthesis of our Greek and Hebrew spiritual cultural heritage, it has become one of the shibboleths of our century. It is encouraged by our economic system, which advances personal profit as the motive for activity. It is also supported by our political system which fosters individual self-determination and freedom. From many different directions, the validity, worth and sanctity of the individual is exalted.

As many people have noted, however, individualism has currently gotten out of balance. It has become excessive. "Doing your own thing" has replaced an appropriate concern for and relationship to the larger whole -- whether it be one's family, neighborhood, nation or world. Consequently, a problem arises: The larger whole ceases to function. The family crumbles, the city deteriorates, the nation and world become houses turned against themselves. Tragically, the suffering from these larger losses is visited back upon the individual.

From whence stems this excessive individualism? And in what way could a proper balance between the individual and the whole be restored? Although our knowledge is incomplete, possible answers to these questions may be found in the spiritual sources of our culture -- particularly in the way in which the early Christian Church integrated the Hebrew and Greek cultures of 200 years ago. Let us look at the individual and the whole in these original cultures and then examine the subsequent Christian synthesis.

### **The Hebrew Approach**

In pre-Christian Israel, the individual existed not so much as an individual as a member of a community. The reason is that the life of the religious Jew was founded in his understanding of God's work in history and that work was concentrated not so much on him individually as it was on the Israelites as a people, as a nation. We find this orientation reflected in Exodus 19:6, for example, where God's creative goal is described as "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." Similarly, Deuteronomy 7:6 and 14:21 describe the Israelites as "a people holy to the Lord." These phrases reflect what was clear in the Hebrew consciousness -- The "nation" and the "people" as a whole were the primary focus of God's activity.

Consequently, the Jew's relationship to God existed through his membership in that larger whole. As Bernhard Anderson writes in his study of the Old Testament:

... "[The] contrast between the individual and the community is completely alien to Israel's covenant faith, according to which the individual is related to God as a member of a community.... It is only as a member of the community that the individual shares in the promises

and obligations of the covenant.... The individual praises God with the worshipping community."

Despite this identification of the individual with the community, there is also in Hebrew thought a clear recognition of the individual as such. Indeed, a significant portion of their sacred scriptures is devoted to guiding the individual to happiness and blessedness. This concern is particularly manifest in Hebrew Wisdom Literature. Such books as Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Job and some of Psalms purpose to share insights which will wisely direct the individual's life journey. Basically, their theme is that God blesses those who are righteous. As the psalmist writes:

Blessed is the man... [whose] delight is in the law of the Lord.... In all that he does, he prospers.

Showing a similar concern for the individual, the author of Proverbs, urges wisdom and righteousness on his "son," and says:

My son do not forget my teaching but let your heart keep my commandments; for length of days and years of life and abundant welfare will they give you.

Indeed, the whole of Proverbs consists of guidance for the individual. It is for his sake that it and the other Wisdom books are included in the Hebrew Canon.

In Hebrew thought, then, the whole is clearly primary and the individual is subordinate. Nevertheless, the individual has a relationship with God through his membership in the community and is recognized as having his own path to tread. It is probably fair to say that there is not inherent conflict between the individual and the whole. The benefit of one incurs the benefit of the other. The righteousness of the individual determines the righteousness of the nation. And as a member of the nation, the individual shares in the promises of the covenant.

### **The Greek Approach**

In Greece, the situation is complex and multi-faceted. On one level the Greeks held conceptions very similar to those of the Hebrews: on another level, they think very differently. Cumulatively, however, whereas the emphasis in Israel's communalism, the emphasis in Greece is individualism.

The primary impetus for this, of course, is Greek philosophy. There the individual comes into his own. From the Socratic doctrine "Know Thyself" to the Stoic teaching that each person contains a part of the universal "Logos," the individual is elevated to a new position of worth and dignity. Along with this, there is a tendency to emphasize his independence and see him as "a complete entity in himself." As John Randall has written, "The ideal of freedom from surrounding life became the aim of all the Schools, 'self-sufficiency,' *autarkeia*. The Epicureans called it 'tranquility,' the Stoic 'integrity,' the Skeptics 'indifference.' The Platonic faith and mysticisms had their own names, primarily 'ecstasy.'... Above all, there is now expressed an emphasis on the worth of the individual in himself." Despite this emphasis on the individual, the Greeks are also conscious of the whole, of the State. Plato and Aristotle devoted a major part of their writings to it. Indeed, according to Father Frederick Copleston, "Greek life was essentially a communal life lived out in the City-State and unthinkable apart from the City, so that it would not occur to any genuine Greek that a man could be a perfectly good man if he stood entirely apart from the State since it is only in and through Society that the good life becomes possible for man."

This sounds familiar to the Hebrew conception, but fundamentally it is not. For the Hebrew concept, the nation was called into being by a transcendent God and exists to serve Him. There is a divine purpose for the Israelite nation and this will be realized through the unfoldment of history. Thus, ontological and historical transcendence underlie the existence of Israel.

Such transcendence is absent from the Greek concept of the State. The City-State may be primary, but rather than serving God its central purpose is to meet the needs of men. As Socrates says in the Republic referring to the City-State, "its real creator... will be our needs." This approach is reflected in Copleston's assertion (above) that the City-State existed as the source of the individual's "good life." Thus, even the Greek concept of the state promotes the elevation of the individual.

But Hellenic culture is multifaceted. There are other ways of thinking too. The Stoics, for example, stressed the divine nature and worth of each man, but also stressed that he is only a part of a larger whole -- the body of mankind. In discussing what is "natural," the Stoic Epictetus writes:

"For example, for a foot to be according to nature is to be clean; but if you consider it as a foot, a member of the body, and not as isolated it will be its duty both to walk in mud and to tread on thorns.... We have to form a similar conception about ourselves. What are you? A man. If you regard yourself as isolated, it is 'according to nature' to live until old age... but if you regard yourself as a man, a part of a certain whole, it is your duty, on account of that whole, sometimes to be ill.... For what is a man? A member of a city... "

Despite this theme, and despite the fact that most Greeks would assert there was no conflict between the individual and the whole, in practice the Greeks display an excessive individualism. Randall discusses at

length the "widespread individualism" while Copleston writes, "... individualism was rife, showing itself both in the internecine wars between states and in the factions within the cities themselves, e.g. in attempts on the part of an individual to establish himself as Tyrant."

In sum, the Greek culture contrasts sharply with that of the Hebrews. While the situation is complex, there is a tendency in most Greek thought to see things in terms of the newly-dignified individual. It is within him that Universal Reason or the divine "Logos" resides. He is directly linked with the Universal. In Hebrew thought, on the other hand, community or the nation is primary. It is the linking-pin between God and the individual. The individual, while having his own path, comes ultimately to God through that community for which God has a transcendent and divine purpose.

## **Christianity**

In the early Christian Church, the two cultures meet and clash. Addressing this problem, the Apostle Paul formulates his radical doctrine of the body of Christ as a way of reconciling and fulfilling the Hebrew and Hellenic ideas in a higher creative synthesis. It is essentially this formulation which stands as Christianity's answer to the problems of the individual and the whole.

Paul was a Jew and for him the pre-eminent reality is the whole. In his view, however, the whole is more than a collection of persons whom God has summoned to an historical and transcendent purpose. Rather, the whole, the Church, is the actual body of Christ, existing mystically. Deriving his concept from the stoic image of the body of mankind (see Epictetus, above) and Jesus' Last Supper pronouncement "This is my body," Paul argues that, with Christ as the head (Col. 1: 18), all have been "baptized into one body" (I Cor. 12:13) and, therefore, "You are the body of Christ and individually members of it" (I Cor. 12:27). For Paul this is no figure of speech. The church actually is the body of Christ. Christ's being, therefore, flows to the individual as he is a member of his body, the Church. As Gardner has written:

"The individual believer does not participate in Christ primarily as an individual but rather, first of all, as a member of the church. The church is the body of Christ because as a whole it participates in his Person: Christ dwells in it as his body, and it in turn receives life from him."

At the same time, as a member of Christ's body, the individual receives the personal presence and care of a loving God. In Acts 17: 27-29, Paul compares his belief in God's nearness to that of the Stoics: "Yet he is not far from each of us for 'In him we live and move and have our being;' as even some of your poets have said, 'For we are indeed his offspring.' Being then God's offspring..."

And in Philippians, Paul affirms the intimacy of God's presence:

"Therefore, my beloved... work out your own salvation with fear and trembling: for God is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure (Phil 2:12-13).

Here, the immanent "Logos" of stoicism is re-conceived as the indwelling presence of a loving God. Paul thus not only implicitly embraces the Greek concept, but based on the Christian revelation he brings it to a higher and infinitely richer level.

Clearly, for Paul, God is personally present to each individual. Still, the vehicle for the flowing of the Presence is the body of Christ, the Church. In Colossians 2:19, Paul refers to Christ as:

"The Head from whom the whole body... grows with a growth that is from God."

Thus, it is through this larger whole that the individual receives the completion of his personal relationship. Both the Jews and the Greeks are right: but only partly right. Their particular conceptions are synthesized and fulfilled in the Christian revelation of God's love through Christ.

## **Conclusion**

Formulating a conceptual reconciliation of Greek and Hebrew thought was the first task of the early Church. Putting it into practice was the second. Two thousand years later one acknowledges a brilliant success in the first task but questions the success of the second.

One suspects Paul's approach clashed quite strongly with the individualistic consciousness of the Greeks and Hellenized Jews. Under the influence of Greek rationalism, many were already matured in the practice of thinking for themselves. They would tend to interpret a new teaching through the prisms of their own substantial individuality. Their valued cultural and intellectual inheritance would not be likely to be easily subordinated.

Perhaps because of this individualistic habit of mind, the proper integration between the individual and the whole was never quite achieved in Western Christianity. Under the influence of Greek individualism the relationship with God came gradually to be seen not holistically -- from the whole to the individual -- but atomistically -- in terms of the individual.

Inadvertent support for this view is given by Edwin Hatch. Writing in the 19th century, probably before the harmful aspects of excessive individualism had become apparent, he details a split between the individual and the whole:

"... to Greece, more than to any other factor, was due the place and earliest conception of that sublime individualism which centered all a man's efforts on the development of his spiritual life, and withdrew him from his fellowman in order to bring him near to God."

Of course, it is true that at times the individual must withdraw. The task is to do it rightly, maintaining a proper integration with the whole. This apparently was not adequately done in the early Hellenic Christian Church. If the central dimension of God's relationship to man through community was seminally lost under the influence of Greek individualism, then this would at least partially explain the origin of the excessive individualism of our 20th century Western civilization. For civilization arises from the Greek-Hebrew mix.

On the other hand, this may not be a total explanation. Particularly if one accepts a teleological view of history, the rise of Greek individualism must have, or should have had, its appropriate place. From the viewpoint of Divine Principle one may argue that the problem was not so much with Greek individualism as the fact that the structure of the early Church was not comprehensive enough to embrace it.

This idea may be elaborated by comparing the Hebrew nation with the early Christian Church. The entity of which the Hebrew was a part was a nation, with its social, political and economic structures penetrated by a religious dimension. Jewish law was simultaneously both civil and religious. The individual lived within a comprehensive religious totality.

Jesus would have probably liked to have such a base from which to work. If he had been allowed to develop his work to the point of uniting the religions, political, economic and social structures into one entity, an actual nation under his guidance, then God's presence could have flowed through him to every aspect of the new nation's life. The body of Christ would not have been just mystical but physical. The framework for integrating all varieties of individuality would have been much broader.

On such a foundation, a more elaborate, comprehensive and authoritative structure could have manifested in other nations. Indeed, if Jesus' work continued to develop, the Roman Empire and Hellenistic culture could have come under his dominion. In this context, Greek individuality might have found its proper framework and balance.

The solution for the excessive individualism and consequent crumbling of our 20th century culture is apparent. Going beyond our individual relationships with God, we must recover in substantial ways on the family, national and world levels the reality of His presence in community.