WHAT DOES CULTURAL INTEGRATION MEAN?

by

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DISCUSSION PAPER

on

Richard L. Rubenstein's

RELIGION AND CULTURAL SYNTHESIS

Henry David Thoreau, the nineteenth-century American naturalist and philosopher, spent his life trying to help people appreciate the continuity of existence. On one occasion he presented his position in a lecture entitled "Life without Principle." "As the time is short," he began, "I will leave out all the flattery, and retain all the criticism." Then off he went to "consider the way in which we spend our lives." If one borrows some of Richard Rubenstein's language to sum it up, Thoreau's talk argued that we spend our lives too much in the incessant business of "dichotomizing systems of gaps."

In my role as discussant, I shall follow Thoreau's lead and be critical. But I cannot be as terse, because Professor Rubenstein has been my dear friend for many years now. He continues in fundamental ways to be my teacher as well. For me, the essay he prepared for us tonight is like everything else he writes: The analysis is provocative, the argumentation bold, the findings keen. Even where gaps exist in his account, they rouse us to reflect with him further, a welcome prospect because of the new insights he always shares when questioned sincerely.

As I turn to my critical task, please note the title for this discussion paper: "What Does Cultural Integration Mean?" Professor Rubenstein, I believe, uses "cultural integration" and "cultural synthesis" as closely related if not synonimous terms. In any case, my title question arises because of an ambiguous and therefore problematic claim whose presence at the heart of his paper is like seasoning in the soup--it flavors the entire pot, but in this case not in a way that makes the dish more appealing.

Appearing near the bottom of page 22, the passage in

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question reads as follows:

> . . . There are conditions under which religion can serve as a force for cultural integration. To the extent that a religious tradition is able to accept the givenness, integrity, and authenticity of all domains of culture, including other religious traditions, it can be such a force.

Professor Rubenstein's paper rightly points out the dangers of religion that is dogmatically intolerant. The passage I have quoted, however, seems to urge something more, something much more puzzling, than a retreat from authoritarian exclusivism to mutual religious appreciation.

Briefly, my gut-level confusion about the quoted proposition is this: Why would anything that we either know or can imagine as religion want to do such a thing, namely, "accept the givenness, integrity, and authenticity of <u>all</u> domains of culture" (my emphasis)? For if such religion did exist, consider what it would be called upon to accept--not only the harmony of nature but surplus people; not only a conference on cultural synthesis but terrorism; not only all our reasons for thanksgiving but also Max Weber's awesomely prophetic truth that in the modern world the ultimate means for politics is violence. The point--nobody ever drove it home more persuasively than Richard Rubenstein when he wrote that "the Holocaust bears witness to <u>the advance of civilization</u>"--is that modernity's destructiveness, attended as it is by the disenchanting precision of calculation and specialization, is part and parcel, however ironically, of the

"givenness, integrity, and authenticity" of culture's domains.

If religion's culturally integrating potential moves us "to accept the givenness, integrity, and authenticity of all domains of culture," then one may be tempted to ask: Who needs such religion? To what extent and on what terms should we want cultural integration? Professor Rubenstein's essay testifies that versions of those questions are widespread presently in much of the world's religious life. No doubt they are widespread for reasons that he helps us understand, namely, that cultural integration may result in what many people regard as legitimation of ways that are simply undeserving of such recognition. If that reaction is erroneous, however, the themes and variations in my title question rightly insist all the more on clarification: What does cultural integration mean? What will it integrate, and what, if anything, will it expunge? Specifically where religion is concerned, what benefits does cultural integration confer? Can those benefits be seen as beneficial to those whose religion is not much interested in cultural integration? If not, then how much hope is there that religion can serve as a force for cultural integration?

That cluster of issues makes me hasten to add my conviction that Professor Rubenstein is not, as he so aptly puts it, one of those modern specialists who insists "on the value-neutral wertfrei character of of their domains of competence." The implication of his paper, if not its overt claim, is that today's world needs more of religion as a force for cultural integration than the West at least has realized for centuries. I do not disagree, but I do need some further help before I can be sure.

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We should hear more about the nature of the religiously inspired cultural integration that Professor Rubenstein desires. What would it be like, especially insofar as it is to emphasize the acceptance of "the givenness, integrity, and authenticity of all domains of culture"? To obtain not "the plain meaning of scripture" but of Professor Rubenstein's text, what would be the most salient differences between such a culturally integrated world and the one we inhabit right now?

The crux of these matters, I believe, hinges on whether Professor Rubenstein chose well when he stated that religion can be culturally integrating just to the extent that it accepts so much. Certainly religion usually does entail a vision of the unity of all being. Such a vision, moreover, often does entail acceptance in some senses. One of those senses may even involve the conviction that in unity all things are well. But as Professor Rubenstein's paper points out--the view can include Eastern traditions as well as those of the West--religion also discriminate between what is fitting, what is right, what is true.

Although periodically religion can and does get beyond narrow sectarian versions where such discriminations are concerned, one can still argue that all religion retains a fundamentally exclusive aspect and rightly so. It possesses that aspect just because religion does not simply accept what is given--at least it does not until what is given is understood on a level that is much more than given or until the meaning of "acceptance" has been transmuted through philosophical insight,

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religious training, and spiritual discipline. The results of those processes, it must be added, may leave some differences behind only to give new ones birth.

Here another illustrative problem arrives, one involving Professor Rubenstein's perceptive interpretation of Hegel. Grand though Hegel's synthesis remains, Professor Rubenstein notes that "it did not take long for the Hegelian reconciliation to fall apart." Feuerbach, Kierkegaard, Marx, Nietzsche, and others did not find Hegel's philosophical integration completely credible, which is to say that Hegel was not entirely successful in making One out of the Many. Professor Rubenstein contends that his present paper is not the place to discuss the attack mounted against Hegel by his younger philosophical brothers. Fair enough, but it is pertinent to dwell here longer than his paper does.

Look rationally at the world, asserted Hegel, and the world will look back rationally, too. That promise, he added, meant that his philosophical synthesis was essentially a theodicy, a demonstration that "what eternal wisdom intended it has actually accomplished." Rebels found these aspects of Hegel's thought less than acceptable because his philosophy accepted too much. Hegel, of course, could claim that his system anticipated and could handle such rebellion, but the critics were unswayed: Hegel's philosophical reach had exceeded his grasp in claiming that "what is rational is actual and what is actual is rational." Within the microcosm of this philosophical dispute, cultural synthesis seems to have been stymied practically if not theoretically. So the example of Hegel and his critics leaves us

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to ask again: Just what does cultural synthesis mean in a world where people sense--rightly or wrongly--that such movement might entail losing far more than they would gain because the integrity and authenticity of their particularity would be compromised?

Professor Rubenstein announced his thesis in the paper's first paragraph, namely, "that systems of continuity are far more likely to foster cultural integration than systems of gaps." Frankly, the case for that thesis remains incomplete. The paper mainly explores how certain Western traditions have, in fact, been and fostered "systems of gaps." That religious "systems of continuity" are indeed far more likely to foster cultural integration is a proposition stated here more than defended.

To make his case, Professor Rubenstein must deal with a very practical objection. Functionally, all religions are "systems of gaps" at some fundamental level.   Their insights are not identical; neither are their practices.   One reason is that religions themselves are culturally different.   However unintended, religion's consequence may be irreducibly to differentiate and divide reality even as Being also remains in some sense one.   To think that there is some higher religious synthesis that can and will fully integrate the diverse forms of human awareness and culture may be a possibility, and yet the experience of finite men and women inclines otherwise.   Granted, there have been historic religious developments that proved more-or-less culturally integrative.   They may occur again. In this world, however, "both/and" and "either/or" never stop conflicting. Ironically, then, the most profound statement in

Professor Rubenstein's paper may be his passing observation that "only a God can overturn the gods for the masses."

Richard Rubenstein is correct: Neither secularization nor religious pluralism are likely to give us cultural synthesis. Nonetheless that is where the world appears to be, and I suppose it shall remain there so long as it exists. Where that conclusion leaves us is unclear. Perhaps, as Thoreau's "Life Without Principle" put it, "the spirit of sect and bigotry has planted its hoof amid the stars." Perhaps we are in the iron cage that Max Weber saw humanity creating for itself. Or perhaps, more optimistically, we are only left with questions—reducible to "What does cultural integration mean?"—that Richard Rubenstein's thoughtful responses can help us resolve.