

WORLD CULTURE:
The Need for Roots
Reflections on the Moral Thought of Simone Weil

Simone Weil thought that culture arises out of the moral impulses of a collectivity. She would agree with the Stoic philosopher Epictetus that the human being “has no quality more sovereign than moral choice.” What are generally called the rights of human beings Weil considered as the expression of our obligations to each other. Human obligations are like laws of human nature. When human beings fulfill their moral obligations their culture is in good order, and their collective efforts will produce works of beauty. Every human being is a unique, autonomous moral agent and the culture of every collectivity is also unique. What unifies humanity under whatever form is the desire for what is good.

In 1943 Simone Weil wrote a treatise that she proposed would lead to the spiritual and cultural regeneration of France after WWII. She also considered her work, posthumously published under the title *The Need For Roots*, as a “declaration of duties towards mankind.” So, although France constituted a unique and precious culture that required recognition and preservation, France, as every true culture in the World, was merely a manifestation of universal human nature. For Weil all human beings are bound together by their desire for the good, by their longing for and expectation that they will receive and find what is good. This desire, or eros, can take many forms, but the desire for what is good is ultimately a desire for what is eternally and unconditionally good.

Many may be familiar with the Dalai Lama of Tibet and his repeated expression that all people desire happiness. We could also remind ourselves of Gandhi’s exultation of the power of the love for truth. So there are different ways of expressing the essence of the desire that binds all human beings together in common kinship, and they are all interrelated, for we consider happiness to be good, and we desire not just what appears to be good, but what is truly good. As we grow in experience and wisdom we find that our good is bound to the good of our friends, family and community. Our understanding of what is good, like all knowledge and understanding, can continually expand. The Institute of World Culture reminds us of Ralph Waldo Emerson’s observation that:

“The life of man is a self-evolving circle, which, from a ring imperceptibly small, rushes on all sides outward to new and larger circles, and that without end.”

Emerson recognized that the expressions of our soul-thought have a tendency to solidify and hem in life. In response to this recognition he says:

“But the heart refuses to be imprisoned; in its first and narrowest pulses, it already tends outward with a vast force, and to immense and innumerable expansions.”

Simone Weil makes recognition of our common humanity the basis for the fundamental obligation that we have to every person just because they are human. Every human being deserves our respect simply because they are human. Every human being has an expectation of what is good, so we have an obligation to respect that expectation in so far as it is possible for us to do so. Simone Weil does not try to prove that we have this fundamental obligation to each other. She merely makes the observation about our common desire for what is good and points to what she considers the "common consent accorded by the universal conscience." (Roots, p. 5.) She asserts that everyone recognizes this obligation when they are not dominated by self-interest or passion. In support of her assertion, we can draw attention to what is known as the Golden Rule. The Christian formulation of the Golden Rule states that:

"All things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them." The essence of the Golden Rule finds expression in all the religious traditions of the world.

In some ways it seems obvious that the consideration of what is good is critical to a consideration of world culture, since it leads to a consideration of how we should treat each other and what, indeed, are our obligations to each other. We are daily faced with the evil of the world, with its violence and cruelty and pettiness. It is very easy to forget that goodness actually permeates and sustains humanity. Through one of his characters, Alexander McCall Smith gives an apt description of what it is like to be blessed with a sudden recollection of the goodness of the world:

"It is a state of mind in which the good of the world is illuminated, is understood. It is as if one is vouchsafed a vision of some sort . . . a vision of love, of agape, of the essential value of each and every living thing."

One can imagine enumerable ways in which one could cultivate a sense of, and concern for, goodness. For Simone Weil the only means we have for expressing and creating goodness is by respecting, and attempting to fulfill, the needs of our fellow human beings. As an archetype of human need Weil offers the example of food. Food is a fundamental need without which life and creativity are not possible. It is almost universally recognized that we have an obligation to eradicate hunger and starvation. The number one Millennium Development Goal of the U.N. summit in 2000 was: "To eradicate extreme poverty and hunger." The recognition of the need to eradicate hunger is a concrete expression of what could be called the operation of universal conscience.

Simone Weil points to what she calls "needs of the soul." The needs of the soul are just as vital and necessary to human beings as physical needs and, therefore, we have an obligation to meet the needs of the soul as well as those of the body. She enumerates the needs of the human soul in antithetical pairs. For example, she lists

Liberty and Obedience, Equality and Hierarchy, Honour and Punishment, Security and Risk, Private and Collective Property as needs that should be considered together.

The primary need of the soul, however, is for order, and order encompasses all other needs. The order to which Simone Weil refers is quite different from any monolithic order of a nation state, or of an ill-conceived world order. Order, for Weil, is akin to the beautiful order and symmetry we discover in the natural world:

“We have very day before us the example of a universe in which an infinite number of independent mechanical actions concur so as to produce an order that, in the midst of variations, remains fixed. Furthermore, we love the beauty of the world, because we sense behind it the presence of something akin to that wisdom we should like to possess to slake our thirst for good.

In a minor degree, really beautiful works of art are examples of ensembles in which independent factors concur, in a manner impossible to understand, so as to form a unique thing of beauty.” (Roots, p. 10.)

“The contemplation of veritable works of art, and much more still that of the beauty of the world, and again much more that of the unrealized good to which we aspire, can sustain us in our efforts to think continually about that human order which should be the subject uppermost in our minds.” (Roots, p. 11)

Human beings form collectives, that is, cooperative enterprises, communities and nations, to meet their need for order and to fulfill the other necessities of human life. Out of the efforts of these collectives come the cultural achievements that are the valued assets of humanity. We can talk about the attributes of a community, the virtues of a village, or the national character, but for Weil the essential nature of a collective, or what we are calling a culture, is unique and undefinable. She asserts that:

“The food which a collectivity supplies for the souls of those who form part of it has no equivalent in the entire universe.” (Roots, p.8)

A vital collectivity, a true culture, is that invaluable agency that preserves the spiritual treasures and achievement of the past and passes them on to future generations. This is particularly true of whatever genius is bred in that unique culture.

In this conception collectives arise out of human need and are therefore necessary to human life. Just as every location on the Earth is unique, so the collectives give rise to cultures that are unique. Each culture makes a unique contribution to humanity.

“A human being has roots by virtue of his real, active and natural participation in the life of a community which preserves in living shape certain particular treasures of the past and certain particular expectations for the future. This participation is a natural one, in the sense that it is automatically brought about by place, conditions of birth,

profession and social surrounding. Every human being needs to have multiple roots. It is necessary for him to draw well-nigh the whole of his moral, intellectual and spiritual life by way of the environment of which he forms a natural part.” (Roots, p. 41.)

To be rooted in a cultural community need not imply insular isolation or parochial attitudes. Outside influences and cultural exchanges are important factors in the vitality and growth of a unique cultural community. Uniqueness is not opposed to universality. Every authentic artist makes a unique contribution in the context of the universal creative efforts of humanity.

“Reciprocal exchanges by which different sorts of environment exert influence on one another are no less vital than to be rooted in natural surroundings. But a given environment should not receive an outside influence as something additional to itself, but as a stimulant intensifying its own particular way of life. It should draw nourishment from outside contributions only after having digested them, and the human beings who compose it should receive such contributions only from its hands. When a really talented painter walks into a picture gallery, his own originality is thereby confirmed. The same thing should apply to various communities throughout the world and the different social environments.” (Roots, p. 41.)

The distinction between digestion and assimilation versus homogenization is critical in a consideration of world culture. The homogenization of cultures into a single “world culture” seems analogous to the proliferation of strip malls. Is a strip mall aesthetically pleasing or culturally fulfilling? Upon reflection one cannot help thinking we could do better than that. And one can understand why indigenous cultures, in particular, strive to maintain their cultural identity. Yet there remains the need for reciprocal exchanges between cultures for the welfare and vitality of each. This can also be true of religions. Many religious practitioners have found that their understanding of their own religion is enhanced by learning about other religious disciplines. For Weil much of the antagonism among religions would abate if the teaching of each were presented, not dogmatically, but in their simplest form, so as to reveal a sublime beauty that actually nourishes and ennobles the human being.

“Religious thought is genuine whenever it is universal in its appeal.” (Roots, p. 89)

“If such a solution were applied, religion would cease by degrees, it is to be hoped, being something one takes sides about for or against, in the same way as one takes sides in politics.” (Roots, p. 89)

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Seminar on “What is World Culture”