

# Rav Lichtenstein and Secular Studies in Practice, Part 1: Analyses of Rav Lichtenstein's Doctorate, *Henry More: The Rational Theology of a Cambridge Platonist*

Class 8

Thought of Rav Aharon Lichtenstein

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## Shalom Carmy, "Music of the Left Hand: Personal Notes on the Place of Liberal Arts Education in the Teachings of R. Aharon Lichtenstein," *Tradition* 47:4, 223-239

Going back to the beginning, of course, is R. Lichtenstein's dissertation on the 17th century savant Henry More, his only extended essay in English studies. Because this work shows him engaged in, and contributing actively, to Western culture, and because of the book's relative inaccessibility, it is worth reviewing its argument and implications for Jewish thought in general as well as its model of religious liberal arts study in particular...

*Henry More: The Rational Theology of a Cambridge Platonist* began as a doctorate under the sponsorship of Douglas Bush at Harvard, of whom R. Lichtenstein has always spoken with admiration. More was a significant intellectual figure in his time – he merits attention in the history of 17th century science and philosophy and religious speculation. R. Lichtenstein is attracted to More's personality: "he is thoroughly dominated by that quality which he probably prized above all others—the quality of sincerity;" this quality also guarantees that his religious struggles are real. Yet More made little or no contribution to what is ordinarily regarded as literature...

The book opens with a survey of More's life and work. The next chapters concentrate on the "major problem" that interests R. Lichtenstein. It is about the place of intellect in religious life, a timeless question, but one especially pertinent to a Jew preoccupied with the study of Torah...

The first chapter revolves around the idea of "deiformity": the ability of the human being to become like God, to attain "a pure goodness directed by pure reason"...

It is an optimistic outlook: deiformity, asserted one-sidedly, lacks a sense of radical evil in human nature, and is liable to dissolve the gap between God and man and the inherent difference between revelation and the truth discovered by unaided human reason.

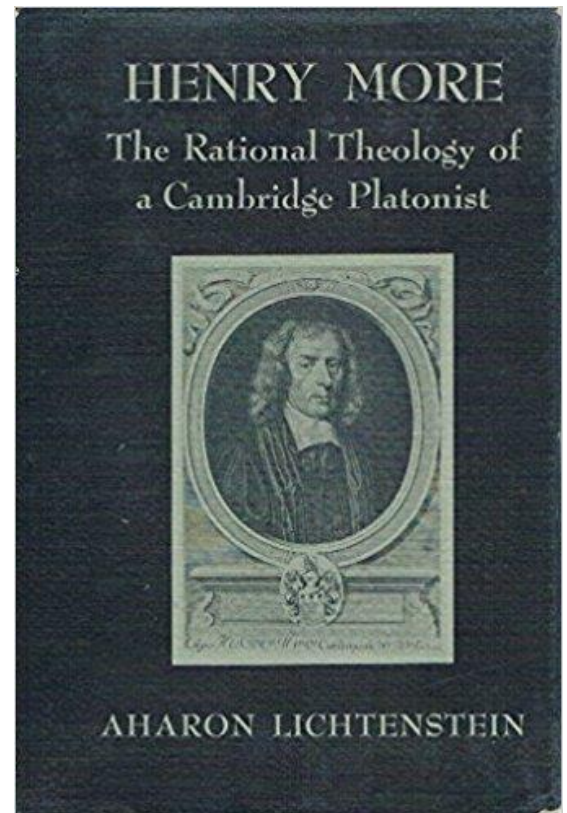
As he traces the ways in which the tension between the deiform elevation of man, including the intellect, and the de-emphasis of strenuous intellectual activity in the name of morality and religious egalitarianism, the number of passages articulating R.

Lichtenstein's judgment increases. Consider the following:

Where idolatry itself is denounced as immoral rather than as sinful, it would appear evident that religion proper is conceived as an essentially moral relationship. To this extent, the unique character of religion as a distinct, purely *sui generis* entity is denied. (164)...

It may be rejoined that the Platonists' once-born mold—their weakened sense of sin, their failure to appreciate the "numinous"—is simply the obverse side of their undoubtedly laudable emphasis upon deiformity. And this is unquestionably true. But we must recognize that it is the result of a one-sided emphasis. (Ibid.)

In emphasizing social conduct we move, in short, from the proper ends of religion towards the logical goals of a secular morality—from the worship of God to the service of man, and from the realm of inner vision to the world of outer action... (201)



For the quest for virtue must involve the whole man, the intellect included. Disregard this, and the result is disproportion; and disproportion, as the Greeks knew, brings first chaos and then desiccation. Thirdly...the isolation of morality as a self-contained unit may occur not only in our experience but in our thinking; it may affect not only our conduct, but our conception of morality proper. (204)...

But there is a deeper point here. The Modern Orthodoxy with which he is willing to be identified (and unlike the Rav he has, at times, accepted the label), is not about adapting Orthodoxy to modernity, or about finding a formula that enables one to “live in two worlds.” To the contrary, “the quest for virtue must involve the whole man”—the intellect included, social responsibility included...

R. Lichtenstein surveys several solutions to the “democratic problem.” “Stated briefly, [the problem] is simply this: Religion must be accessible to all; some definitive intellectual content must enter into religion; and yet the great majority of men cannot or will not reason profoundly about religious or metaphysical questions” (107). The solution he finds most satisfactory is described as “Judaism,” which has required not only service of the heart and hand, but also of the intellect. Torah study is a universal obligation; none may forego the attempt. “Decision, Jewish tradition has of course reserved for competent authority; if there is no royal road to knowledge, neither is there a demotic. But the *peregrinatio* is the duty and destiny of all” (109). The ideal of *talmud Torah* was not available to the 17th century Platonists. The pressure to make religious fulfillment possible for everyone was urgent for many reasons...

The prevalent attitude views reason not as a participant in religious life but as an umpire: “it does not play the game, but rather sets up the rules and then referees” (209).<sup>16</sup> The goal is social conduct, marked by “especially lavish praise for toleration,” largely on pragmatic grounds, disdain for dogma as unnecessary and socially divisive. Against this, R. Lichtenstein’s view of the rational theology worth pursuing is “something else entirely.” It applies to a theology for which “thinking is a genuine religious experience,” and incorporates the search for knowledge, “whether as an end or as a means—as a facet of the religious realm proper” (210)...

In *Henry More* R. Lichtenstein is exploring a noble idea—the place of intellect in the life of religious devotion. He finds More a sympathetic, inspiring figure, despite his limitations and deficiencies. Yet, although he treats More and Cambridge Platonism with the vigorous and probing solemnity befitting a noble human attempt to get at religiously momentous truth, the goal of his inquiry is not to be persuaded by what is noble in it. To the contrary, it is to enlighten us with the story of a noble failure and to analyze, as accurately as possible, its causes and consequences, with an eye to their ongoing lessons. If one compares *Henry More* and the early essay on general studies with “Torah and General Culture” and the interviews in *Mevakshei Panekha*, it seems to me that in the earlier writing the study of culture is more oriented to the critique of culture and the analysis of ideas, with less emphasis on the sheer glory of the Arnoldian “best that has been thought and said,” whereas more recent statements have appreciated and cherished the best in culture, even while continuing to devote attention to the possible negative consequences of engagement in culture...

It seems to me that R. Lichtenstein’s general culture, subordinate as it is to the pursuit of Torah and the life of mitzvot, nevertheless exhibits a greater degree of interaction than Milton’s image implies.

### **David Landes, “The Rational Theology of Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein” (unpublished lecture)**

Although the book is indeed about the thought of Henry More, it is fair to say that it is even more about the thought of Rav Aharon Lichtenstein. The study of More provided a platform for the very young Rav Lichtenstein to present a fairly complete statement of his own religious philosophy....

Above all, More insists upon the depth and sincerity of religious worship, upon the harmonious integration of all human faculties in the dedicated service of God. (xi)

One can understand how a young talmid chacham, in the very Christian environment of Harvard in the fifties, studying a literature that is saturated with Christianity, would be attuned to principal distinctive difference between Orthodox Judaism and Christianity: the emphasis on talmud torah, on the use the mind as the primary means of serving God... In this book, Rav Lichtenstein makes the argument that intellection, study, the question for knowledge, comprise an essential element of religious life...

At the end of the day, however, Rav Lichtenstein is disappointed with More...

Here he emphasizes rather the opposition – actual or potential – between man’s intellectual and moral natures... in a word, we shall find More displaying, on this side of him, a distinctly anti-intellectual bias (97)...

What explains the trend to simplify religion? The motivation, according to Rav Lichtenstein, is democratic in nature, the desire that religion be accessible to everyone...

Rav Lichtenstein provides a mini-survey of the various approaches that have been taken to resolve this problem... The final approach he mentions is that of Judaism. This is the only place in the book where he explicitly addresses Judaism. As described by Rav Lichtenstein, in Judaism God must be served with the head as with the hands and the heart. Intellection is an integral aspect of the religious experience of every individual... Study is a universal daily duty, and it need not be pragmatic, as the intellectual question for God is its own justification...

Rav Lichtenstein maintains that More had an inadequate grasp of the absolute chasm between the character of God and man. From Rav Lichtenstein’s point of view, More’s God is too accessible, understandable, and friendly... it would seem that a similar pitfall besets certain forms of Chassidus, especially in some of its contemporary manifestations, where great emphasis is placed on the godly essence of the human soul, and God is spoken of in very familiar human terms...

Rav Lichtenstein is arguing here that morality is subsumed by religion. All human actions, and moral action is no different, must be performed for the sake of God alone. For Rav Lichtenstein, everything is for God, including morality...

Rav Lichtenstein criticizes More and the theologians of the 18<sup>th</sup> century who followed in his wake for considering conduct, specifically moral conduct, as not only a form of religion but its very content. They ignored the inner worship, the intellectual and emotional response to the experience of God, out of which action must derive...

According to Rav Lichtenstein, a n excessive focus on social concerns and issues distorts the purpose of religion, which is the individual’s worship of God, not the service of society... Religion is all encompassing. There cannot be an independent source of authority, such as morality...

Rav Lichtenstein sets out his own very different view [from that of Henry More, following John Tulloch] of what “rational theology” means...

On my view, the term “rational theology” ought to mean something else entirely. It should apply to a theology which recognized the exercise of man’s intellectual faculties as an integral and indispensable aspect of his religious life; which sees the attempt to understand God and His will as an essential phase of human activity; which looks upon study and intellectual endeavor as fundamental virtues; which, finally, incorporates the search for knowledge – whether as an end or as a means – as a facet of the religious realm proper... (209-210)

When I read Rav Lichtenstein’s book... I was overwhelmed by the realization that Rav Lichtenstein took his religious philosophy that he developed when he was 24 years old and proceeded to live his entire life by it. a life without simple solutions, a life with constant maximum effort, and a life lived continuously and consciously in the presence of God.