

AKSUM

THYATEIRA

A Festschrift

For

Archbishop Methodios
of Thyateira and Great Britain

General Editor

DR. GEORGE DION. DRAGAS

1985

THYATEIRA HOUSE

London W. 2

A Festschrift

In Honour of Archbishop METHODIOS of Thyateira and Great Britain, (1985).

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AN EXAMINATION OF THE SPIRITUAL ODYSSEY OF A MODERN MYSTIC

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The world of Simone Weil, French philosopher, classical scholar, teacher, author, Marxist activist and mystic, is a maze of paradoxical and mutually-contradictory ideas which are a challenge to both reason and faith. In the centre of this enigmatic world is the solitary figure of Simone Weil embarked upon a journey which will eventually lead her to the "Gateway of God." It is our intention to examine the life and thought of this amazing person.

Simone Weil's ideas are expressed in personal letters, essays, notebooks, aphorisms, and articles on politics, sociology and religion. Most of her writings were published posthumously some of which are now available in English translation. Our study will focus on Weil's mystical and religious ideas.

Before examining Weil's religious ideas as they relate to her mysticism, a brief biographical sketch of Simone Weil will put her views and life in their proper context.

Simone Weil was born in Paris in 1909 into a middle class Jewish home. Her parents did not practice their Jewish religion and Simone and her brother André were brought up in a completely agnostic environment. Simone was a precocious and delicate child, eccentric, inflexible and very subjective. These traits became more pronounced in her adolescent and mature years. She studied philosophy under La Senne and Alain (Auguste Chartier). She showed little interest in history courses at school which may account for lack of a sense of history in her mature years. In 1928 Simone entered the Ecole Normale Supérieure, and in 1931 she was granted the "agrégé de philosophie" which qualified her to teach philosophy. She taught in a number of schools and it was during that period that she became interested in Marxism and in left-wing groups. Her concern for the plight of the French workers involved her with Trade Unions. Simone worked for some brief periods in factories and in vineyards as a manual laborer in order to identify herself with the hardships of the French workers. During this period she gave

away most of her earnings to what she considered as the 'needy people', who took full advantage of her unsolicited generosity. She contributed to radical periodicals among them *La Revolution Proletariene*.

When Civil War broke out in Spain, Simone joined the Red Brigade to fight against the Franko forces. After a brief period she returned to France disillusioned with the futility of war and the senseless slaughter of young men and women. She became a convinced pacifist and devoted her energies in the cause of peace and in the hope that the workers will play an important role in solving the many problems facing Europe.

Simone Weil's life and thought are marked by paradoxes and contradictions which gave rise to misinterpretations and misunderstanding of her views. She was labeled an atheist, Marxist, heretic, eclectic, syncretist, Christian Hellenist, mystic and saint. These labels point to the complex personality of Simone Weil and also delineate the various paths of her tortuous spiritual Journey towards union with God.

Simone Weil pursued the truth through various ideologies and came to the conclusion that they were leading to a cul-de-sac which made her reconsider her options. Unlike her contemporaries Jean Paul Sartre and Albert Camus who saw the answer to the dilemma of modern man in the *hic et nunc* with 'no exit', and in the absurdity of life, Simone Weil found the answer in human affliction where there is no consolation for the afflicted. She saw in Christ's derelict cry from the Cross, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" as the perfect example of affliction. Hence, affliction became her central theme from which she deduced the idea of the absence of God and His abandonment of the world to blind, mechanical Necessity.

In 1937 Simone Weil went to Italy where she visited a number of museums as well as the 12th-century Romanesque chapel of Santa Maria degli Angeli where she claims to have had a mystical expe-

rience of Christ 'who took possession of me' which both overwhelmed and surprised her since she was not looking for such an experience. It was in a small Portuguese village that Simone watched the wives of local fishermen carrying candles and singing ancient hymns during a procession of the patronal festival when

the conviction was suddenly borne in upon me that Christianity is pre-eminently the religion of slaves, that slaves cannot help belonging to it, and I among them.¹

In 1938 Simone spent ten days at Solesmes, from Palm Sunday to Easter Tuesday where she attended the liturgical services and was greatly impressed by the Gregorian chant. It was there that 'the thought of the Passion of Christ entered into my being once and for all'. She met there a young English Catholic who observed Simone's interest in the services who introduced her to the English metaphysical poets of the 17th century. George Herbert's poem "Love" had a profound effect on her which led her to state that "in this sudden possession of me by Christ, neither my senses nor my imagination had any part. I only felt in the midst of my suffering the presence of a love, like that which one can read in the smile of a beloved face."²

Simone Weil's mystical experience did not result in a 'conversion' like that of St. Paul on the road to Damascus, but was in a certain sense a logical destination of her spiritual odyssey. Weil never sought any mystical experience as a way out of a blind alley in which she found herself. She states that Christ came upon her without looking for him, which so overwhelmed her that she half refused to accept it. She insists that she had never read any mystical works because she had never felt any need for them. She admits however that "one can never wrestle enough with God if one does so out of pure regard for the truth. Christ likes us to prefer truth to him because, before being Christ, he is truth. If one turns aside from him to go towards the truth, one will not go far before falling into his arms."³

It was during 1940-42 that Simone Weil met Father M. Perrin, a Dominican monk, and Gustave Thibon, a lay philosopher and theologian, who played an important role in the last years of her brief life. It was during this period that Simone began to read Indian philosophy which was rather of a superficial nature compared with her profound interest in Greek philosophy and culture.

Gustave Thibon gives his impression of Simone Weil in the following statement:

A limpid mysticism emanated from her...never have I felt the word *supernatural* to be more charged with reality than when in contact with her. Such mysticism had nothing in common with those religious speculations divorced from any personal commitment which all too frequently is the only testimony of intellectuals who apply themselves to the things of God.⁴

Weil herself felt that a true mystical experience can only come from a descent of the supernatural and that her experience was her salvation. She even suggests that mystical experience is possible for anyone "waiting for God in patience", but she could not make it a general rule. Because of this personal experience of Christ's presence, Weil felt that she belonged to Christ and that there was no need for her to enter the Church by accepting the Sacrament of Baptism. We shall deal with this particular problem when we examine her critique of the Church.

In her "Spiritual Autobiography" Simone Weil tells Father Perrin that "As I reached adolescence I saw the problem of God as a problem of which the data could not be obtained here below, and I decided that the only way of being sure not to reach a wrong conclusion... was to leave it alone. So I left it alone."⁵

Simone Weil's syncretism which affected her theological views has many sources. Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Manicheism, Gnosticism, and above all Greek philosophy and culture. She could argue without any regard for historical truth that there had been other incarnations of the Word besides that of Jesus, such as Melchisedek, Osiris, Krishna, and others. When one invokes in purity of heart Osiris, Krishna, or any other incarnation of the divine Word, the Son of God will send the Holy Spirit. She further states that Christ is only a kind of symbol to the second power and that God must be conceived as being impersonal.

The following definition may help to show that Weil's mysticism falls outside the Judeo-Christian tradition even though her mystical experience was that of Christ.

A mystic is a man who has been favored with an immediate, and to him, real experience of the divine, of ultimate reality, or who at least strives to attain such experience. His experience may be the result of long and often elaborate preparations. From a historical point of view, the mystical quest for the divine takes place almost exclusively within the prescribed tradition.⁶

1. Simone Weil, *Waiting for God*, tr. by Emma Craufurd, Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd. London, 1952, p. 20.
2. *Ibid.* pp. 21, 22.
3. *Ibid.* p. 22.

4. Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd. London, 1952, pp. viii-ix.
5. *Waiting for God*, p. 16
6. Gershom G. Scholem, *On the Kaballah and its Symbolism*, tr. by Ralph Manheim, Schocken Books, New York, 1965, p. 5.

The author of the above citation points out that mysticism generally finds expression in either a conservative or revolutionary form. If his mystical experience falls within his tradition it generally tends to confirm the religious authority which is a revolutionary form of mysticism. Simone Weil's mysticism does not seem to fit into the above definition of a mystic. As an agnostic Weil's tradition is in the Hellenic rather than the Judeo-Christian tradition. Moreover, Simone Weil never strove to attain any mystical experience which is evident from the following statement: "All these mystical phenomena are absolutely beyond me. I do not understand them. I speak of them at random. And I am not even capable of telling myself sincerely that I speak of them at random."⁷ She neither sought mystical experience nor did she have any rational explanation for her experience.

Simone Petrement tried to find an explanation for Weil's mystical experience in terms of her physical and mental state at the time of her 'illumination,' since Weil suffered from severe migraines most of her adult life. Petrement ruled out such a simple explanation because she knew that Weil was too much on guard against this kind of temptation. Had Weil been a believer when she had the mystical experience it may have been easier to offer some explanation, but even then one cannot offer a rational explanation for a subjective experience which cannot be verified rationally. Petrement accepted Weil's mystical experience as genuine because of her integrity and purity of spirit.

In a letter to Father Perrin dated 26 May, 1942, Casablanca, Weil writes:

I assure you that when speaking of my childhood and youth I used the words vocation, obedience, spirit of poverty... love of one's neighbour... I am giving them the exact signification they have for me. Yet I was brought up by my parents and my brother in a complete agnosticism, and I never made the slightest effort to depart from it. In spite of that, ever since my birth... not one of my faults, not one of my imperfections really had any excuse of ignorance.⁸

Let us now examine the salient themes in Weil's mysticism.

I. Affliction and the Absence of God.

Simone Weil's point of departure is Christ's derelict cry from the Cross, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsake me?" which she sees as the perfect example of affliction without consolation and the total abandonment of Christ by the Father and the aban-

donment of the Creation to blind, mechanical Necessity. The Cross or Christ's Passion is for Simone Weil the *terminus a quo* and *terminus ad quem* to the exclusion of the Resurrection, the Ascension, and Pentecost. While the Cross is at the centre of the Christian faith, it takes on its full meaning in relation to the Incarnation and the Resurrection. Weil claims that there have been many incarnations in the past in other religious traditions, hence, the Incarnation of Jesus was for her one of many incarnations and not *sui generis*. She argued that the Resurrection is an offence to intelligence as well as an embarrassment. But a rejection of the Resurrection is to deny the very foundation of the Christian faith. For "if Christ is not raised your faith is in vain." (I Cor. 15: 17). Weil focuses all her attention on the Passion where Jesus is totally abandoned by the Father. She has little to say about Jesus' public ministry, his teaching and the miracles which she does not accept because they are contrary to science. Her inordinate preoccupation with affliction keeps her gaze on the crucified Jesus without seeing Him as the Risen Lord. The Cross thus becomes an abstraction without any reference to its redemptive significance.

There is a distinction between affliction (*le malheur*) and ordinary suffering (*la souffrance*).

Affliction is an uprooting of life, a more or less attenuated equivalent of death, made irresistibly present to the soul by the attack or immediate apprehension of physical pain... Affliction is something specific and impossible to compare with anything else... Affliction constrained Christ to explore that he might be spared, to seek consolation from man, to believe, he was forsaken by the Father.⁹

In ordinary suffering one still looks for some consolation, whereas affliction is a sort of pulverization of the soul by a blind mechanism reducing man to a thing. Weil points out that Christ died like a common criminal which is ridiculous but affliction is ridiculous.

It should be pointed out that Simone Weil was more concerned with the "Why?" of Christ's affliction rather than with affliction *per se*. She was not so much concerned with the cause of affliction as with its purpose or finality. However, she was aware of the fact that in a world where blind, mechanical Necessity rules there is no purpose or finality. Hence, when the soul in affliction cries out for a purpose it touches what Weil calls the 'void' (*le vide*), and in this 'void' the soul experiences the absence of God from God. This void is what Saint John of the Cross calls 'the dark night of the soul'. Weil does not offer any rational explanation for affliction except to say that it is a profound mystery. She contends that Christianity

7. *Gravity and Grace*, p. xxxiv.

8. *Waiting for God*, p. 41, 42.

9. *Ibid.* pp. 64-65.

does not seek a supernatural remedy against affliction but a supernatural use of it.

Weil maintains that God's silence to the "Why?" of affliction makes Him seem absent for a time like the absence of a dead person. The afflicted person feels that there is nothing left to love. Weil insists that man must want to love in affliction, for if he persists in not wanting to love God, God's absence becomes final for him. In affliction man is subject to blind, mechanical Necessity, except the supernatural part of the soul by which she means God, for only God can continue to love God. Everything that was created was created through love and for love. It is "this infinite distance between God and God, this supreme tearing apart, this agony beyond all others, this marvel of love, which is the Crucifixion".¹⁰ Weil states that a person in extreme affliction actually participates in the Cross of Christ. Her deep yearning for personal participation in Christ's Passion and to become at one with Him is expressed in the following statement in one of her Notebooks: "Every time that I think of Christ's Passion, I commit the sin of envy."¹¹ If this were not possible she would at least like to be with the good thief whom she regarded as the best character in the Gospel. This is a latent and perhaps unconscious hubris bordering on the blasphemous.

The idea of the absence of God is not original with Simone Weil. We find this view in St. John of the Cross whom Weil greatly admired. According to St. John of the Cross God's absence from the world which is also his presence has meaning only for the believer. This entails three factors, God, God's absence, and the believer. If we considered the first two factors alone, it would be a contradiction to speak of God being absent and out of reach, but if the believer is taken into account, we can then speak of God being both absent and present (*Deus absconditus* and *Deus revelatus*). To look at God's absence is to look at God Himself, for God is present to man as his creator and as the object of his love. God is man's silence, and mysticism is possible because of God's silence. Weil's notion of 'waiting for God in patience' is what St. John of the Cross meant by man's silence or his passivity.

The notion of God's absence is also found in Cabalistic literature. Leslie A. Fiedler draws our attention to this when he states:

Man's absolute exile from God, the non-presence and non-intervention of the *deus absconditus*, upon which Simone Weil so uncompromisingly insisted, can be found in the terrible dogmas of Lurianic Cabalism, and in that astonishing metaphor of the Zohar: the figure of *tsimtsum* or the withdrawal of God on himself, which

conceives of our being as possible only in the interstices of the universe where God has willed his own non-being.¹²

Simone Weil's idea of God's absence is bound up with her morbid preoccupation with affliction which she sees in the Cross. Hence, the Crucifixion implies for her that God Himself suffers extreme evil, and that both the innocent and the guilty suffer equally at the hand of Necessity, which in her view, is the very essence of God's justice. Simone Weil had great difficulty in dealing with the problem of evil as well as that of human freedom vis-à-vis blind Necessity. She tries to get around these difficulties by introducing the notion of Providence, which we will discuss in the next section.

II. Creation and the Absence of God.

According to Simone Weil, Creation is God's withdrawal from the world in order that man may love Him freely. Creation is a screen which stands between God and man and prevents the soul from receiving grace, and man can never experience God's grace without completely detaching himself from the values and things of this world which have become surrogates for God. Complete union with God is possible only by decreating ourselves, by which Weil means annihilation of the self. "Once we have understood we are nothing, the object of all our efforts is to become nothing... In so far as I become nothing, God loves himself through me".¹³ Weil insists that the only thing we can offer to God is to destroy the self. To lose the 'I' does not mean that one does not have egoism, but it is an egoism without the 'I'.

Simone Weil was so obsessed by the desire to be in union with God that she drove herself to inward annihilation. To justify her nihilism Weil puts forth the strange notion that God has given man a fictitious image which gives him the illusion that he has the power to control things in this world. This seems to imply that God deliberately deceived man so that he may give up being 'something' by consenting to being 'nothing' and to know that he is 'nothing.' At the same time Weil can say that man's self is "on the side of God, it is in God, it is God. To be proud is to forget that one is God."¹⁴ Weil further states that "God created me as a non-being which has the appearance of existing, in order that through love I should renounce its apparent existence and be annihilated by the plenitude of being."¹⁵ The idea of 'decreation' which in Weil's view implies annihilation of the self, it would follow that the self does not exist in its own right apart from God who

10. *The Simone Weil Reader*, edit. by George A. Panichas, David McKay Co. New York, 1977 p. 435.

11. Simone Weil, *Notebooks II*, Plon, Paris, 1953, p. 156.

12. Leslie A. Fiedler, "Simone Weil, Prophet out of Israel, Saint of the Absurd", *Commentary*, January 1951, p. 46.

13. *Gravity and Grace*, p. 30.

14. *Waiting for God*, p. 68.

15. *Ibid.* p. 130.

exists in the 'imaginary' self. Miklos Vitö rightly points out that Weil's concept of the self suppresses any centre of individual existence. For "a basic continuity must remain in the decreed man and his previous non-decreed personality, since he owes his second birth exclusively to the efforts made during his non-decreed life and to the consent whose faculty was always with him."¹⁶ Weil's view of the self was influenced by Manicheistic and Gnostic dualism. She completely ignored the Biblical view of man as a being in his own right related to God in whose image he was created.

Weil argues that in abandoning Creation to the power of blind Necessity makes it possible for Him to be present in the supernatural part of the soul, i.e. God in the soul. This also means that evil destroys the Good. Weil tried to get around the problem of evil by resorting to her favourite dialectical method. On the one hand evil is necessarily in conformity with the will of God in so far as existence means an abandonment to blind Necessity. On the other hand, evil is not in conformity to the will of God, since existence is not absolutely divorced from the Good (God).

Simone Weil had also great difficulties in dealing with the problem of freedom versus necessity. She tries to get around the problem by suggesting that what seems to us to be pure necessity is in fact pure obedience. "Men can never escape from obedience to God. A creature cannot but obey. The only choice given to men... is to desire obedience or not to desire it. If a man does not desire it, he obeys nevertheless... inasmuch as he is a thing subject to mechanical necessity. If he desires it, he is still subject to mechanical necessity, but a new necessity is added to it, a necessity constituted by the laws belonging to supernatural things."¹⁷ Unfortunately, this argument does not solve anything, it merely confuses the issue, for necessity is the opposite of freedom. Weil's rigid determinism leaves no room for man's freedom. The Biblical view of man is that he has the freedom to choose, often at his own peril, but he has that choice. The Biblical man is always asked to make choice. "Behold, I set before you life or death, blessing and cursing: therefore choose life, that both thou and thy seed may live."¹⁸

III. Implicit Love of God,

Weil's mystical experience of Christ's personal presence led her to assume that she was already a Christian and that there was therefore no need to enter the Church by accepting the Sacrament of Baptism. In her correspondence with Father Perrin she seeks to convince him that there is such a thing as implicit

Christianity, thereby justifying her own position of Baptism. She tells Perrin that "the implicit love of God can only have three immediate objects, the only three things here below in which God is really though secretly present. There are religious ceremonies, the beauty of the world and our neighbour. Accordingly there are three loves."¹⁹ To these she adds friendship which is distinct from the love of our neighbour; we cannot love our neighbour in the ordinary sense of the word. To truly love our neighbour is tantamount to self-annihilation, i.e., it is a voluntary bondage by giving ourselves as food for others and thus become others. In loving our neighbour we love him in all his pains and miseries, which is in effect the Stoic *amor fati* rather than the New Testament *agape*. Weil contends that it is God who loves the neighbour in us without our knowing it, which in her scheme of things, means that only God can love God. Both the self and the neighbour are in the final analysis swallowed up by God who is impersonal.

The love of one's neighbour according to Weil, is inseparable from justice, and true justice can only exist between two equally strong persons. When one is weak he necessarily submits to the power of the strong, which is no longer justice but power. But "He who treats as equals those who are far below him in strength, really makes them a gift of the quality of human beings, of which fate had deprived them. As far as is possible for a creature, he reproduces the original generosity of the Creator with regard to them."²⁰ This is only possible when one denies himself as Christ emptied himself and thus offered himself in ransom for the other person. In loving our neighbour we imitate divine love. In loving one's neighbour we undergo a kenosis similar to that of Christ's kenosis.

Religious ceremonies are another form of implicit love of God. Weil regarded the Sacraments as having a specific value in so far as they entail a certain mysterious contact with God, but they are at the same time of purely human value as symbols. These symbols may help bring about the presence of God to people of a high level of spirituality. Weil felt that she was below such spiritual level, hence, could not participate in the Sacraments. The Sacraments are intended for sinners saved by grace and are not restricted to the perfect ones.

Another form of implicit love of God is love of the beauty of the world, which, Weil complains, is not found in Christianity. This is another of her unfounded statements. While these forms are laudable virtues, they do not prove that there is such a thing as implicit Christianity. One does not necessarily have to be a Christian to appreciate certain symbols or to love one's fellow, or to appreciate the beauty of the world. Weil's arguments for implicit Christianity are unconvincing.

16. Miklos Vitö, *La métaphysique religieuse de Simone Weil*, Paris, J. Vrin, 1971, p. 20.

17. *Waiting for God*, pp. 72-73.

18. Deuteronomy, 30:19.

19. *Waiting for God*, p. 81.

20. *Ibid.* p. 86.

IV. Weil's Critique of the Church.

In the many discussions and correspondence with both Father Perrin and Gustave Thibon Simone Weil gave a number of reasons for refusing the Sacrament of Baptism and for not joining the Church. In a letter to Father Perrin she gave the following reasons for not joining the Church (by the Church she had in mind the Roman Catholic Church): 1) That the Church is Catholic *de jure* but not *de facto*, because the Church ignored other religious traditions and is therefore not truly Catholic. 2) That the Church is too bound up with the Old Testament and is therefore too Jewish to be truly Christian and Catholic. 3) That the two words *anathema sit* were an affront to intelligence and to human freedom. For "The special function of intelligence requires total liberty, implying the right to deny everything, and allowing of no domination."²¹ 4) That the Church as an institution is the seat of power and the domination of its members by the abuse of power. 5) God does not want her to join the Church at this time, but when it is His will that she should join she will do it immediately. When Simone told her brother of her conditions for joining the Church he replied that she would probably find similar reasons for not accepting Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, etc., with which she agreed except to say that Christianity was probably more suitable for white Europeans than the other religions. Here she showed her ignorance of the essence of Christianity and its universal message of salvation to all nations.

Simone Weil raised a number of questions in a letter to a French priest in New York apropos Christianity and the Church in which she points out that Christ, the Trinity and the Virgin are found in Greek mythology as well as in other religious traditions. To justify her dubious claims, Weil adopts the questionable method of archetypes which yields for her Christ in every ancient deity. For example, she sees Baal and Astarte as representations of Christ and of the Virgin, the Eleusinian Mysteries and that of Osiris as sacraments having the same virtue as that of Christ's Passion. She argues that there were previous incarnations of Jesus, such as Osiris in Egypt and Krishna in India. This would make the Incarnation a re-incarnation rather than a unique and irrepeatable event in history. She further argues that "the Scriptures themselves contain the most clear proof that long before the time of Christ there was a revelation superior to that of Israel... If we take a moment in history anterior to Christ and sufficiently remote from Him—for example, five centuries before His time—and we set aside what follows afterwards at that moment Israel has less of a share in God and in divine truth than several of the surrounding peoples (India, Egypt,

Greece and China)"²². Weil shows a total disregard of historical facts by confusing facts with external similarities.

Weil makes a number of claims which have no basis in history, such as the claim that the pre-Christian civilizations were Christian in essence, and that Prometheus is the story of Christ projected into the eternal, and that Dionysus, Apollo, Artemis, Eros as well as other Greek deities are different names for the Word. She further argues that any person praying with a pure heart, regardless whether he prays to Osiris, Dionysus, Krishna, Buddha, Tao, the Son of God will answer his prayers and will not ask him to forsake his own religion. Weil failed to recognize that the foundation of Hinduism is non-historical, whereas the Judeo-Christian tradition has history as the primary area for God's revelation. It is difficult to reconcile the above views with the statement she made to Father Perrin that she accepts the Trinity, the Incarnation and even the Eucharist, but adding that 'the geometry of the Greeks and the Christian faith sprang from the same source'. Upon a closer examination of Weil's other statements we find that she confuses Trinity with triads and Incarnation with epiphany and even re-incarnation. Weil failed to see the difference between Christian mysticism and the mysticism of India, Greece, China, etc. Her peculiar syncretism blinded her to see and appreciate the true nature of the Christian faith.

Simone Weil saw parallels and analogies in ancient religions and applied them to Christianity. For example, she saw in Christ's words 'I am the true vine' the Dionysiac cult of the fruit of the vine. Watkins rightly points out that the one is Palestinian where the vine symbolizes the Chosen People, while the other is Greek, symbolizing immortality through the notion of drunkenness. She also compares the Crucifixion of Christ with the crucifixion of the world-soul in the Timaeus. Weil completely misunderstood the Johannine use of *logos* and *pneuma* and erroneously implied relationship between Christianity and Greek Stoicism. She failed to see that the Johannine *logos* is the Hebrew *dabar* as the creative word of what is spoken is not the Stoic 'reason'. The New Testament *pneuma* corresponds to the Hebrew 'ruach' which conveys the image of God in a strong gale, whereas the Greek idea of *pneuma* conveys the figure of incorporeity. Here again we see how Weil was trying to turn Christian terminology into Greek ideas.

Simone Weil's real reason for refusing to join the Church is her deep antipathy to the Old Testament and the religion of ancient Israel which accounts for her virulent antisemitism. Some critics attribute it to her bias against Hebrew thought which she regarded to be inferior to Greek thought. We know that Weil had a great many prejudices. Her *bettes noires* were

21. *Ibid.* p. 29.

22. Simone Weil, *Letter to a Priest*, tr. by A.F. Wills, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1953. London, p. 12.

the Jews, Ancient Rome, the Roman Catholic Church (with which she had a love-hate relationship), St. Thomas Aquinas who in her view was barely a Christian, Aristotle who was a kind of Greek Jew and Jacques Maritain who was 'system-bound.' Consider the following statement about Israel:

Israel, beginning with Abraham, is filthy and monstrous. A people chosen for blindness, chosen to be the executioners of Christ... The curse of Israel weighs heavily on Christianity. The atrocities, the Inquisition, the liquidation of heretics and infidels, this was Israel. Capitalism is Israel. Totalitarianism, especially among the worst enemies of Israel, is Israel.²³

Again,

Rome and Israel introduced into Christianity, mixed with the spirit of Christ, the spirit of the Beast. Israel, which slew Christ, is the very form of the Church as St. Augustine conceived it... It is the beast who says 'anathema sit'.²⁴

Leslie Fiedler states that

In her opposition to Hitler she would never admit the presence of any identification with the Jews; quite the contrary, she accused Hitler of always fighting the battle of Israel, seeking only to revive under another name and for his own benefits the God of Israel, earthly, cruel, and exclusive. Sometimes, indeed, she insisted that Jehovah and Hitler were Gods in the same sense and on the same plane.²⁵

One would have to conclude from the above preposterous statement that Israel was responsible for the Holocaust, Hitler being Israel's instrument.

Some sympathetic critics tried to gloss over Weil's antisemitism by claiming that it was just a passing mood. We wish to differ. Weil's antisemitism was deeply rooted in her psyche which influenced her views on the Old Testament, Christianity and the Church. It prevented her from understanding the importance of the continuity between the Old and the New Testament. Weil's view of the Old Testament is essentially the old Marcionite heresy which viewed the Old Testament God as a God of wrath while the New Testament God was a God of love. Weil could not countenance the massacres and atrocities committed by Israel and condoned by Jehovah. These arguments are of course not original with Simone Weil. She chose to ignore the historical fact that Jesus was the promised Messiah to Israel 'of whom Moses and the prophets

spoke'. Jesus stated quite clearly that he did not come to destroy the law (the Torah) but to fulfill it. The Church from her very beginning recognized the inseparable continuity between the Old and the New Testament and did not hesitate to call herself "the New Israel". Saint Paul called the Christians "the Israel of God". The disciples and the apostles were Jews, and Saint Paul was proud to call himself "A Hebrew of the Hebrews." The fact is that there would not have been a New Testament nor the Church without the Old Testament. Weil completely ignored the historical fact that the New Testament was the fulfillment of the hopes and promises given in the Old Testament. Weil's strong bias for Greek culture blinded her to appreciate the importance of the Old Testament and the role of Israel's religion which found fruition in the Christian Church. Weil would have preferred for Jesus to have been born a Greek, an Egyptian or any other nationality except a Jew. She therefore insists that

The Gospels are the last and most marvelous expression of Greek genius, as the *Iliad* is its first expression. The spirit of Greece made itself felt here not only by the fact of commanding to seek to the exclusion of every other good 'the kingdom of God and his righteousness' but also by its revelation of human misery, and by revealing the misery in the person of a divine being who is at the same time human... This sense of human misery gives these accounts of the Passion that accent of simplicity which is the stamp of Greek genius.²⁶

One finds it very difficult to understand Weil's total disregard of historical data and to be so illogical in her arguments bearing in mind her excellent education, an *agrégées de philosophie!* The only answer to her illogicality and irrationality is to be found in her syncretism which consists of mutually incompatible ideas, such as Hinduism, Taoism, Buddhism, Manicheism, Marcionism, Gnosticism and Platonism.

In a letter to Maurice Schuman, a French Jew who became a Christian, Simone well states that "I adhere totally to the mysteries of the Christian faith, with the only kind of adherence which seem to me appropriate for mysteries. This adherence is love, not affirmation.

Certainly I belong to Christ, or so I hope and believe. But I am kept outside the Church by philosophical difficulties which I fear are irreducible. They do not concern the mysteries themselves but the accretions of definition with which the Church has seen fit to clothe them in the course of centuries; and above all the use in this connexion of the words *anathema sit*.²⁷

23. Simone Weil, *Notebooks II*, 1953, p. 156.

24. Simone Weil, *First and Last Letters*, p. 120.

25. Leslie A. Fiedler, *Simone Weil, Prophet out of Israel*. p. 44.

26. *Simone Weil Reader*, p. 180.

27. Simone Weil, *Seventy Letters*, tr. & arranged by Richard Rees, Oxford University Press, 1965, p. 155.

It is difficult to reconcile her assertion that she belongs to Christ with the reason she gives for being outside the Church, the reason being the insurmountable philosophical difficulties which prevent her from accepting 'the accretions of definition' imposed by the Church. This of course is not the only reason for not entering the Church. Her syncretism and her antipathy to the Old Testament are the real obstacles which stand between the Church and herself. How would she separate Christ from the Church which is the Body of Christ, Christ being its Head? Thibon once pointed out to her that the conditions she made for entering the Church were more rigid than the dogmas of the Church which she rejected.

In a letter to Déodat Roché Simone Weil states that "The influence of the Old Testament and of the Roman Empire whose tradition was continued by the Papacy are to my mind the two essential sources of the corruption of Christianity."²⁸

If we were to take Weil's dogmatic conditions seriously we would have to say that the whole history of the Church would require re-writing. In this connection it is interesting to mention that while Simone refused the Sacrament of Baptism for herself she had no scruples in urging her brother André who was not a believer to baptize his baby daughter. Her paradoxes and inner contradictions tell us something about her complex personality. Gustave Thibon never missed to see the inner contradictions in her behaviour as well as in her writings.

This soul, who wanted to be flexible to every movement of the divine will, could not bear the course of events or the kindness of her friends changing by one inch the position of the stakes with which her own will had marked her path of immolation... And the way she mounted guard around her void still paid witness to a terrible preoccupation with herself...her ego, as it were, was like a word that she may perhaps have succeeded in obliterating, but that was still underlined.²⁹

While she courted affliction to the extent that she literally starved herself to death, she often failed to see the suffering she caused to people who loved her most, especially her parents. Simone Weil was once expatiating on her favourite themes in her usual dogmatic manner that one of her friends told her, "It is lucky for all of us that you are not God." In point of fact that is what her spiritual odyssey was all about—to be in complete union with God.

28. *Ibid.* p. 130.

29. J.M. Perrin and G. Thibon, *Simone Weil as we Knew her*, tr. by Emma Craufurd, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, p. 119.

Conclusion

We are now ready to summarise the salient features of Simone Weil's mysticism and the theological implications of her views.

Simone Weil's preoccupation with the problem of affliction which is exemplified in the derelict cry from the Cross led her to deduce the idea of the absence of God and His non-intervention in the world at the exclusion of the Resurrection, the Ascension and the Pentecost experience. In fact she does not speak too much of Jesus' public ministry, His teaching, the miracles and the purpose of the Incarnation and the Crucifixion. The Cross, apart from its relation to the Incarnation and the Resurrection, is thus an abstraction taken out of its Biblical and historical context.

Simone Weil's attack on the Old Testament which found expression in a virulent and irrational anti-semitism blinded her to the historical and theological relationship with the New Testament. Her attack on the Church was often based on distortions and complete disregard of historical facts which led her to confuse these distortions with reality. When these things were pointed out to her she simply chose to ignore them because they did not fit into her scheme of things. Both Father Perrin and Gustave Thibon who knew her intimately point to the dualism inherent in her personality, which accounts for the many paradoxes, contradictions and exaggerations. Perrin illustrates the complexity of Weil's personality when he writes:

Simone proclaims her belief in the Christian faith, the reality of the mysteries and the supernatural life which she draws at its very source in the Church; but at the same time she does not wish to submit her intelligence to any authority—even truth, condemning error and indicating the necessary conditions for approaching the fount of grace.³⁰

Simone Weil lacked objectivity because she tended to objectify her subjective experience. In rejecting the central doctrines of the Church which she regarded as 'accretions' imposed by the Church, she constructed her own system of mutually-contradictory and incompatible views peculiar to her kind of syncretism. Simone admitted to Father Perrin that she lacked in knowledge of the Christian texts. "I must give you the impression of a Luciferian pride in speaking thus of a great many matters which are too high for me and about which I have no right to understand anything."³¹ Simone's emphasis on 'detachment' led to the paradoxical position that she never succeeded to detach herself from her 'detachment'.

30. *Ibid.* p. 52.

31. *Waiting of God*, p. 32.

Simone Weil's desire for self-perfection prevented her from giving Christ His rightful place as Redeemer. Father Perrin puts his finger on the cause of her inner conflict when he states:

Another characteristic which we cannot pass over in silence was Simone's attempt to achieve impersonality by making herself more and more obedient to God. This was one of the ideas which dominated her spiritual personality and there is not a doubt but that it was one of the deepest causes of her inner conflicts. She made an ideal of passivity or depersonalization, and took matter as a perfect example.³²

She told Father Perrin that she wanted to remain outside the Church in order to witness to the Christian faith among non-believers. Perrin's reply was, "You want to attract others to Christianity without becoming a Christian yourself, so you want to be like the bell which calls people to the Church but does not enter into it."³³

Simone Weil's paradoxes which permeate her whole being led her to say and do things which are both baffling and distressing. For example, in her love of neighbour she tended to overlook the real needs and desires of others. "She was passionate in her very scorn for the passions; she was still searching for a sign in her refusal of all signs."³⁴ Simone refused to yield to anything which did not happen to meet with her own criteria, and pursued affliction with a zeal that some people pursue comfort and pleasure. Her humility contained a latent hubris of which she may not have been aware. "To be distinguished for evil and *nothing*... is still to put oneself forward, it is still a form of pride. In so far as she despises herself Simone Weil forgets to forget herself. Her humility is still partly inspired by a negative preoccupation with self."³⁵

The religious and philosophic dualism peculiar to Weil's personality is aptly stated by Thibon: "Dualism is the reef on which navigators who are in too great a hurry to reach the absolute are likely to run aground."³⁶ Weil's search for the Absolute is characterized by Thibon as the "Vertigo of the Absolute". "Vertigo is caused by the attraction of an abyss and, when this abyss is another name for God, it is good to experience such an attraction. That is where the greatness of Simone Weil lies. The first effect of vertigo is loss of balance: Simone Weil, dazed by the absolute, staggers and has difficulty in finding her way in the relative. And that is where her weakness lies".³⁷

Other inner contradictions may be cited to indicate how difficult it is to evaluate Weil's personality as well as her ideas. For example, Weil sought to

exalt God but deprecated His creation which was subject to Necessity. Dostoevskii's Ivan Karamazov displayed the same paradox when he admitted the existence of God, but refused to accept His world because there was too much suffering in the world. Another of her paradoxes is to be seen in the following statement: "the world in so far as it is devoid of God himself, while Necessity in so far as it is absolutely different or other than the Good, is the Good itself". If this were taken as an ontological statement it would imply that a world empty of God would be evil which would in turn identify evil with God, which is absurd. Thibon suggests that what Weil had in mind was a mystical way of telling pilgrims to the Gateway of God, to leave behind all idols including labels for God in order to achieve their goal. Despite her inner dualism which led her to say and do many paradoxical things, many of her admirers regarded her as a modern saint. Weil herself expressed the view that "the specific value of the Christian is saintliness". Her asceticism is another expression of her inner conflict which eventually led to her premature death in 1943 which was described by the coroner as suicide through self-starvation - the medical term for this is *anorexia nervosa*.

We do not question Weil's mystical experience which undoubtedly was genuine. What we question is the method she chose to express this experience in terms of a syncretism which cannot by any stretch of the imagination be termed as Christian mysticism. We do not question Simone Weil's honesty, integrity and purity of spirit and her thirst for the Absolute; we must disagree with her theological views which are in conflict with the Biblical teaching about revelation of God in the Incarnation of Jesus of Nazareth, the Resurrection, the Ascension, the Pentecost experience and the divine foundation of the Church as the Body of Christ and the Fellowship of believers. We wish to close with the following statement by Gustave Thibon:

All that we know of Simone Weil - and especially that memory of light and charity which she has left for ever in the souls of those who knew her - at all intimately - makes us guess that she belongs to that Church of the Saints, whose life is hid in God. Simone Weil loved the soul of the Church passionately; she fed upon it, she drew from it her highest reasons for living; the only mistake was to forget that this soul trailed after it a body with all its weaknesses and demands.³⁸

Her tragedy was that while 'she loved the soul of the Church passionately' her intellectual and philosophical scruples led her to reject the Church's claim that *extra ecclesiam nulla salus est* and to be affronted by the Church's *anathema sit* intended against heretics and infidels.

32. Perrin And Thibon, p. 79.

33. *Ibid.* p. 81.

34. *Ibid.* p. 119.

35. *Ibid.* p. 138.

36. *Ibid.* p. 146.

37. *Ibid.* p. 142.

38. *Ibid.* p. 170.