Simone Weil: Patron Saint of Outsiders

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> I owe you the truth, at the risk of shocking you, and it gives me the greatest pain to shock you. I love Christ, and the Catholic faith as much as it is possible for so miserably inadequate a creature to love them. I love the saints through their writings and what is told of their lives—apart from some whom it is impossible for me to love fully or to consider as saints. I love the six or seven Catholics of genuine spirituality whom chance has led me to meet in the course of my life. I love the Catholic liturgy, hymns, architecture, rites and ceremonies. But I have not the slightest love for the Church in the strict sense of the word, apart from its relation to all these things that I do love.. .All that I can say is that if such a love constitutes a condition of my spiritual progress which I am unaware of, or if it is part of my vocation, I desire that it may some day be granted to me.[1]

Simone Weil (1909–1943) spent the last six years of her life considering whether it was God's will that she be baptised into the Church. In her many discussions with priests, she sought to translate her mystical experiences of Christ, who had come down to take possession of her, into an acceptance of the Church as Christ's Body on earth. It is widely believed that she died without the sacrament of baptism, the Church being an obstacle to her faith in Christ, and not a refuge for that faith. The nature of her spiritual pilgrimage has earned Weil the title 'patron Saint of outsiders'. There is a danger here, however, that Simone Weil is understood as first having occupied a coherent intellectual stance against Christianity, and that secondly she maintained this stance until the end. I do not believe either of these to be the case.

Simone Weil was a French philosopher with a Jewish background. She began her intellectual life as a critic of Marxism, at the extreme left of anarchist politics. After working in a factory for a year during 1934 and 1935, a major change occurred in her life, and she became interested in religion. Moving from Marseilles in 1942, to New York and then to London, she met with various Catholic priests, to discuss her difficulties with the faith, and the possibility of baptism. While working for the resistance in London, she was taken ill and found to have leukaemia. During her illness she refused to eat more than the bare minimum of

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food—an act of solidarity with her occupied homeland. She died in August 1943, and was buried in the Catholic part of the cemetery in Ashford, Kent. The authorities considered her death to be suicide: 'The accused did kill and slay herself by refusing to eat whilst the balance of her mind was disturbed.'[2] Nevertheless, the person of Christ, and the question of baptism remained objects of her contemplation until the end.

For the first 29 years of her life, Weil considered herself to be an agnostic:

> As soon as I reached adolescence, I saw the problem of God as a problem the data of which could not be obtained here below, and I decided that the only way of being sure not to reach a wrong solution, which seemed to me the greatest evil, was to leave it alone.[3]

It was after spending a year working in industry that religious faith opened itself as a possibility for Weil. Her work during the year 1934–5 reduced her to extreme exhaustion and suffering:

> There I received the mark of a slave, like the branding of the red hot iron the Romans put on the foreheads of their most despised slaves. Since then I have always regarded myself as a slave.[4]

It was in this state of mental and emotional 'slavery that Simone was taken on a cruise by her parents. It was while she was in Portugal that she claimed to have had her first encounter with Christianity which 'really mattered'. Whilst walking in a 'very wretched' fishing village, she heard singing of the most ancient 'heartrending sadness'. In her own state of slavery, of having been broken by suffering, she encountered for the first time an overwhelming sense of Christian truth:

> There 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 others.[5]

Weil's second significant experience of Christianity was in 1937. She had travelled alone to Assisi. There in the chapel of Santa Maria degli Angeli, where St. Francis often used to pray, she was for the first time in her life brought to her knees; sensing the sudden presence of a Being both personal, yet at the same time transcendently greater than herself. A year later, in Solesmes, she experienced her most profound intuition of Christ's presence. The headaches from which she always suffered were at their most intense, and 'each sound hurt like a blow'. In the midst of this pain, she concentrated all her attention on the beauty of the monastic chant, and in this state experienced some kind of enlightenment:

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> It goes without saying that in the course of these services the thought of the Passion of Christ entered into my being once and for all.[6]

It was also while she was in Solesmes that she met a young English Catholic. She was greatly moved by the angelic radiance with which he seemed to be clothed after receiving communion. He introduced her to the poetry of George Herbert, especially his poem 'Love'. She learned by heart, and would murmur it to herself repeatedly, focusing all her attention onto it, despite the excruciating pain of her headaches. It was during one of these recitations that she experienced Christ, having come down:

> to take possession of me.. .Moreover, 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 on a beloved face.[7]

It was two years before these 'mystical experiences' translated into an objective encounter with the teaching of the Catholic Church. During her time in Marseilles, she began to have discussions with Fr Joseph-Marie Perrin OP about what she would have to believe in order to be baptised. He felt that when he met her, she was very far from baptism. This was not because of the nature of her intellectual objections, but certain tendencies in her which, he believed, held her back from the Church. It was her own previous sense of Christ, having come to her in her affliction, that was the gauge for all their discussions:

> Simone Weil was gifted with a sense of affliction and redemption, a sense which she never ceased to deepen by loving meditation. In everything else she seems to have been in a state of evolution—I might even say of oscillation.[8]

Through her more recent religious experiences, the person of Christ had become the central focus of her religious reflection. Christ for Weil was primarily not the person of the Church's teaching, but the ground of her experience of God. The Gospels and the sacraments were the prime sources for her meditation on him, but at the same time she considered him to be present as the second person of the Trinity to all religious faiths and philosophies, finding him for example in the Baghavad Gita, in the Iliad, and in Plato. In her discussions with the monk Vidal in Marseilles, during which she discussed baptism, she was held back by her belief that there were other 'incarnations' of Christ. She declared that even after her baptism she would continue to teach and write that Krishna,

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Melchizedek, and Osiris amongst others were true instances of the Word of God made flesh. She stated that 'if Christ had been incarnated in India, they would have worshipped him.'[9] This attitude seems to have been based not simply on an appreciation of other religious traditions, but upon a fear of excluding other peoples, separated from the Church by time or space, from the fullness of God's love in Christ.

Although guided by this inclusive desire, Weil's approach to other traditions remained circumscribed by her own prejudices. Her rejection of the Judaism of the Old Testament was absolute and remained one of the more constant factors in her difficulties with the Christian faith. Dangerously approaching the heresy of Marcion, she saw the God of the Old Testament as a tribal God, obsessed with power and domination. In contrast, the God of the New Testament suffered powerlessness for a love which transcended national and racial boundaries. She could not bring herself to accept the Old Testament as sacred scripture; any truth she found in it came, she believed, from Hellenistic influence.[10] Thomas Nevin, in his biography of Weil,'[11] dismisses her as having an 'anima naturaliter judaica', her religious writings being little more than a denial of her semitic origins. Weil's rejection of Old Testament Judaism is very severe, although it must be stressed that it sprang from her own historical prejudices as much as from any psychological foundations.

Weil's knowledge of the various religious traditions to which she was attracted appears to have been severely limited. Her approach to history was somewhat inventive, to say the least. She makes wide assertions about the Cathars, the Greeks, and the Roman Empire, which do not seem to be at all grounded on objective historical fact. For example, to enhance her denunciation of the Roman Empire, she attempts to make out a case for the depth of Druid culture. Our meagre knowledge of this extinct society could not have provided adequate justification for her assertions.

> Weil begins with an insight; but the logic of her emotions can lead her to make generalisations so large as to be meaningless.[12]

Her historical prejudices were also manifest in her consideration of Catholicism. She saw the Papacy as a 'Roman corruption' of christianity, a permanent subversion of the true Hellenistic spirit of the Gospels.

> When she invented a history of Catholicism, she forgot that Rome is not the capital of Christianity because of Caesar and Augustus, but because it was there that Peter and Paul bore witness with their blood.[13]

Weil's historical writings contain flashes of insight and of true

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genius. At the same time, her writings are guided and structured by her own prejudices. She spoke of the need to appropriate truth through genuine receptive attention of selfless openness to reality. She spoke of this method of contemplation at length, yet at the same time the knowledge of Christianity which she 'attended to' remained severely limited. She read the gospels and a few other religious texts avidly, but her other reading was sporadic and selective. Her restless intellect never really settled long enough to acquire a solid knowledge of the doctrines she opposed, and her subjective prejudices always seemed to have the upper hand in her consideration of the Church.

> Simone was still lacking in knowledge of Catholicism, of the Christian texts and sources, of the thought of the Church and even of Catholic realities. This accounts for many lacunae in her intuitions, many unfounded reproaches and perhaps an insufficient effort to be completely objective.[14]

Despite her limited appropriation of dogma, Weil never considered becoming a Protestant. The true Church for her was the Church of the Sacraments. Yet while accepting the Church as the reality in which the Mass is offered, she rejected the authority and the structural organisation which is always a necessary part of the life of the Church on earth.

> I am kept outside the Church by difficulties of a philosophical order which I fear are insurmountable. They do not concern the mysteries themselves but the specifications with which the Church has thought good to surround them in the course of centuries, and, above all, the use in this connection of the words anathema sit.[15]

Weil consistently avoided association with all the collective forms of social organisation which she encountered, seeing them as an oppression of individual conscience. The Church to which she was attracted, although 'mystical', was in no real sense a body.

> The image of the Mystical body of Christ is very attractive. But I consider the importance given to this image today as one of the most serious signs of our degeneration. For our true dignity is not to be parts of a body, even though it be that of Christ.[16]

Weil thought her vocation might be to remain outside the Church as a social body, to remain in solidarity with those of other religions and those of no religion at all. She presented her refusal of baptism in this light on many occasions. Far more often however, she saw this vocation as inextricably linked to her sense of unworthiness. Weil spoke of this

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'unworthiness' to receive baptism repeatedly:

> One might think that there are souls who are irremediably ineligible for the service of God on account of the inadequacy of their nature. I among them.[17]

Suffering for Weil revealed the depth of depravity contained in the self; it is only by knowing that one is disgusting, that one may truly begin to love the Creator. Her writings on affliction are among the most beautiful instances of her poetic genius and religious insight. Yet her intense desire to love God in the midst of affliction erected a barrier between her and the Church in the fullness of its historical and doctrinal nature.

> We must also mention among the special problems of Simone Weil her unyielding resolution not to allow her attention to rest on any dogmas which might interfere with her will to achieve purity or hinder her effort to go to God through unconsoled affliction.[18]

Yet this vocation may not have been absolute. There is a little discussed possibility that Weil was actually baptised before her death. While she was dying, her encounter with the Church continued, through the visits of the chaplain of the Free French Forces, the Abbé de Naurois. His visits did not seem to bear much fruit. Weil said of one of their meetings: 'I said to him I want to receive baptism but I want to do it only under certain conditions. I don't admit that unbaptised infants are excluded from Paradise, and it is necessary that my attitude in that be not in contradiction with Catholic dogma.' The Abbe responded, 'That will never do. You are a proud one![19]

According to the testimony of Weil's friend, Simone Dietz, she herself baptised Weil around this time. It was after one of the 'fruitless' visits by the French priest, that Dietz said to Weil, 'And now, are you ready to accept baptism?' To which Weil replied, 'with much warmth "Yes."'. Dietz took water from the tap, and baptised her using the trinitarian formula. There is little reason to believe that Dietz was lying when she revealed this incident in 1965.[20] Rather, debate has arisen over how Weil saw the incident. There is not space to consider this debate here; suffice it to say that Dietz's account is strong enough to throw doubt on the usual story of Weil's unbaptised death.

Is a baptism, *in extremis*, beyond the bounds of possibility? We have grown used to seeing Weil's theology as a coherent articulation of separation; as being a voice of reproach from the margins of Christian theology. Weil's religious position, however, contained very little

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coherence or consistency, was always in flux, and was grounded in personal experiences and prejudices which lacked solid historical or other research.

Her list of objections to Christianity varied greatly; sometimes it contained 35 difficulties, at other times 15, and at other times only one. To Perrin, her difficulties were presented as manifold and disparate; with Vidal, all her objections were related to the status of other faiths; and then she only brought forward one objection to the faith when Naurois offered her baptism, the salvation of unbaptised infants. She did not have a coherent position with which to approach the Catholic faith; she did have an incoherent nexus of prejudice, cemented by her genius, which continually held her back from embracing the faith in its fullness.

Weil had not sought a belief in Christ; it had been thrust upon her through the depth of her own suffering. The entirety of Simone Weil's encounter with Catholicism must be judged in the light of this personal apprehension of Christ, who had come down to take possession of her. Weil's love and desire for Christ grew more intense in the years before her death; but her understanding of the Church and its teachings remained incomplete. It is possible that she saw the Church in the same way she had once seen Christianity: as 'a problem the data of which could not be obtained here below'. The possibility of her baptism raises the question of whether her difficulties with the Church were resolved at the last, by an experience of Christ's Body on earth, as personal and as profound as her experience of Christ had been.

1 Weil, Simone, *Waiting on God* (NY, 1976), p.49–50.
2 The coroner's report into her death.
3 Weil, Simone, *Waiting on God* (NY, 1976), p.62.
4 ibid., p.67.
5 ibid.
6 ibid.,p.68.
7 ibid., 68–9.
8 Perrin and Thibon, *Simone Weil As We Knew Her* (London, 1953), p.35.
9 Petrement, Simone, *Simone Weil* (NY, 1976), p.456.
10 ibid., p. 456.
11 Nevin, Thomas, *Simone Weil: Portrait of a Self Exiled Jew* (Chapel Hill, 1991).
12 Elliot, T.S, prologue to *The Need for Roots* p.x.
13 Perrin, J.M., op. cit., p.47.
14 ibid., p.73.
15 ibid., p.53.
16 *Waiting on God*, p.80.
17 *Connaissance surnaturelle*, p.380. Quoted in Cabaud.
18 Perrin,J.M., op.cit., p.78.
19 Allen, D. and Springsted, E., *Spirit Nature and Community*, (NY, 1994), Chapter one, 'The baptism of Simone Weil,' p.S.
20 She claims that she had not mentioned it earlier, due to a request by Weil's mother that she remain silent until both she and Weil's father were dead.

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