The Enigma of Simon Weil

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THE ENIGMA OF SIMONE WEIL

A SPECIAL exemplar of sanctity for our time—the Outsider as Saint in an age of alienation, our kind of saint.” “A life closely akin to that of the great Christian mystics; a witness consecrated by death, an agony linked with the Cross of Christ.” “A giant, she lived the Incarnation and the Crucifixion—God’s servant.” So write an American, a Frenchwoman, an Englishman; a Jew, two Christians. And theirs are only a few of the many ecstatic comments on a life which has stirred believers, unbelievers, and not-yet-believers alike. The German Catholic writer Reinhold Schneider goes even further than most of Simone Weil’s admirers when he calls her “one of the few genuine promises that have come to us out of the darkest years, a Christian in a sense that can hardly yet be grasped, a challenge to believers and unbelievers. . . . Her life is the Christian answer pure and simple.”

The merest glance at her writings proves Simone Weil’s sense of kinship with men of any faith and none, particularly with the alienated, those whose faith the world has stolen. She considered her vocation that of a link “at the intersection of Christianity and everything that is not Christianity.” No less do her words seem to confirm her closeness to Christ and the Church. Only a year before her death, she declared that she adhered entirely and lovingly to the mysteries of the Christian faith; that although outside the Church, or “more exactly, on the threshold,” as she corrected herself, she felt she was really within it. “I belong to Christ,” she wrote, “only a little before hands as His cap, and to the spear of Marseilles, she can be a Blessed Sacrament. Of her urge “to see her, Christ was one thing while the thought tore her heart was a fig tree.” As she thought to take Christ for hand and brush a look at Christ, she said in one of her sermons, “a warm and provocative suffering. More than anything else.”

HER LIFE

Like these her words of one imitating the Christ of the age of alienation, of one imitating the Christ of the age of suffering. More than anything else.

2. As quoted in a brochure, Simone Weil, by her German publishers, Kösel, Munich.
3. Waiting for God, p. 76. Wherever an English translation of Simone Weil’s books exists, it only is referred to, even when I do not follow its translation but have essayed my own.

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it. "I belong to Christ; at least I like to think so," she said then; and only a little before, she had seen herself as delivered "into Christ's hands as His captive." So ardently was she drawn to the Eucharist and to the speaking stillness of Catholic churches that, while in Marseilles, she called her heart "transported, forever, I hope, into the Blessed Sacrament exposed on the altar"; later, in London, she spoke of her urge "to seek nourishment in the spectacle of the Mass." To her, Christ was our hunger, our great need: "If we had chlorophyll, we should feed on light as trees do. Christ is this light." The thought of God's anger brought her no fear, only aroused love, she confessed, while the thought of His favor and mercy made her tremble. But what tore her heart was the feeling that in the eyes of Christ she was a barren fig tree. As she thought of her wretchedness, she resolved all the more to take Christ for her model. When a true artist looks at his model, she said in one of the last entries in her journal, he gives it all his attention and becomes one with it, so that, almost without his knowing, hand and brush re-do what the eye sees. This is the way we ought to look at Christ, she wrote, for to think of Him thus would make evil disappear, not immediately, but little by little. And she added: "To this end one must think Christ as God and man." 

**HER LIFE**

Like these her words, Simone Weil's life seems to bear out the picture of one imitating the Christ stripped of garment and sightliness, indeed the Christ of the agony. Born of Jewish parents in Paris in 1909, into a warm and prosperous home, she was yet drawn to the secret of suffering. More than that, her soul was stamped with grief and pain and

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7. Perrin and Thibon, *op. cit.*, p. 44.
pursued by a sense of failure. Once as a child, already eager for burdens, she sat down in the snow and would not go on because her older brother, and not she, had been given the heaviest baggage to carry. Again, in 1914, at the beginning of the war, when she was five, she was told that the soldiers at the front had to go without sugar. For the first time a sense of human hardship entered her comfortable and protected world, and at once she decided that she would deny herself what others were denied. Only a little later, she refused to wear socks because the children of workers had none to wear. It must have been these memories which made her say in an autobiographical letter: "From my earliest childhood I have always had the Christian idea of love for one's neighbor." 12 As she was haunted by the misery of others, so she was haunted by physical pain. When about twenty, she began to suffer from severe headaches, which never entirely left her. So severe did they become at times that everything seemed a nightmare, that once she wandered if she "had not died and fallen into hell without noticing it." 13

At the age of fourteen, Simone Weil was overcome by a dread of futility; beside her brother, a mathematical genius, she felt mediocre and without talent. What brought her near despair was the notion that she was not only feeble and stupid but barred from the transcendent realm of truth "to which only the truly great have access." Rather than live without that truth, she wanted to die. But after months of inner darkness, she became convinced that anyone, even one untalented, can break through to the kingdom of truth, if only he has the earnest desire and gives himself to it with the concentration truth deserves. Invisibly, then, he becomes a genius too. 14

Still, the sense of inferiority seems never to have left her, in spite of her obvious intellectual gifts and her academic success, in spite of the protests and praise of her friends. And never did she forget the casual remark of one of her mother's visitors, which, when she was but a child, had sharpened her inner conflict. "One is genius itself," the visitor had said, gesturing toward the brother; "the other beauty." 15 But since she did not look for charm or beauty in herself, rather for an all-penetrating mind, she was bitterly unhappy; and here may lie the

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root of her effort to do away with whatever in her physical appearance might be appealing or even gracious, so that, many years later, her friends could speak of the strange sight she made. Her typical costume was an oversized brown beret, a shapeless cape, and large floppy shoes; there was little grace in her movements or in her monotonous, fiercely persistent voice. Not that she was ugly, Gustave Thibon remarks, but she was "prematurely bent and old-looking through asceticism and illness, and her magnificent eyes alone triumphed in this shipwreck of beauty." 16 The kingdom of truth must have appeared to her as the domain of men; therefore, perhaps, her attempt to wipe out all charm, indeed every trace of womanliness. Not only did she shun outward affection—a kiss, an embrace, seemed disgusting to her—she rejected all warmth and consolation. "I feel," she wrote, "that it is necessary and ordained that I should be alone, a stranger and an exile in relation to every human circle without exception." 17

Despite her lasting fear of mediocrity, Simone Weil did exceptionally well in her studies: she entered the Lycée Duruy at sixteen, and, after a brilliant examination, attained her agrégation de philosophie from the Ecole Normale Supérieure at the early age of twenty-two. That same year, in 1931, she was appointed to her first teaching position, at the lycée in Le Puy. But she was not content to be a professor. Those were the years of a world-wide depression, and her compassion for the weak and poor made her take up the cause of the workers. When the unemployed marched on the Prefecture, she marched with them. She limited her spending to the meager earnings of the lowest paid domestic servant; anything over she gave either to syndicalist causes or, with the greatest discretion, to a few individuals in need. Often, too, she left her books to sing with the workers or to share in their sports. All of this caused her difficulties with the school administration of Le Puy. One of her supervisors threatened to report her and have her license revoked, to which she is said to have replied: "Sir, I have always considered revocation as the normal crowning of my career." 18 This may be only legendary; in any case, far from being taken seriously, her radicalism was, in the mind of the authorities, no more than that of a young and harmless girl.

17. Waiting for God, p. 54.
Hungry for martyrdom, however, and for a greater share in the lot of the workers, she asked for a leave of absence and went to Paris, where, among other jobs, she operated some sort of drilling machine in the Renault plant. To suffer all the hardships of the industrial laborer, she rented a room in the workers' quarter and lived entirely on her meager wages. Sometimes hungry, often exhausted and rejected, exposed to the tyranny of the assembly line, she could not stand the strain, contracted pleurisy, and had to abandon her attempt. Looking back on what she had seen in the factories and thinking of the millions whose fate was like that of her fellow workers there, she wrote later that "men struck down by affliction are at the foot of the Cross." 19

And of herself she said:

After my year in the factory ... I was, as it were, in pieces, soul and body. That contact with affliction had killed my youth. . . . I had known quite well that there was a great deal of affliction in the world, I was obsessed with the idea, but I had not had prolonged and first-hand experience of it. As I worked in the factory, indistinguishable to all eyes, including my own, from the anonymous mass, the affliction of others entered into my flesh and my soul. Nothing separated me from it, for I had really forgotten my past and I looked forward to no future, finding it difficult to imagine the possibility of surviving all the fatigue. What I went through there marked me in so lasting a manner that still today when any human being, whoever he may be and in whatever circumstances, speaks to me without brutality, I cannot help having the impression that there must be a mistake and that unfortunately the mistake will in all probability disappear. There I received forever 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. 20

That her strength had not measured up to life as a factory worker could not stifle her desire to help others and obliterate herself. It was the time of the Civil War in Spain, so, after a short convalescence, she went to aid the Loyalists, though she abhorred violence. Her venture was short-lived, however: a victim of her own clumsiness, she scalded her feet with boiling oil. The medical care given her was so poor that, as had happened before, her parents came to her rescue, taking her home to recover from her injuries.

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The Enigma of Simone Weil

In pieces, soul and body. ... I had known this in the world, I was banished and first-hand existable to all eyes, there was no future, finding the fatigue. What I had known ... that still today she is in whatever circumstance having the impression that the mark of a slave, but on the foreheads I always regarded myself as a factory worker to ... to suffer by itself, heaped up in a corner. "In the unheard-of beauty of the chant and the words," she found "a pure and perfect joy," which, as she herself said, gave her a grasp of the possibility of loving God in the midst of affliction. Hearing again and again words like "Christ was made obedient, obedient unto death, even to the death of the cross," she felt them become part of her: "The thought of the Passion of Christ entered into my being once and for all."

Also at Solesmes was a young English Catholic, whose angelic radiance after Communion gave her the first inkling, as she put it in her "Spiritual Autobiography," of the supernatural power of the sacraments. He introduced her to the English metaphysical poets of the seventeenth century, which led her to the discovery of George Herbert's poem:

21. Fiedler (in "Simone Weil: Prophet out of Israel," Commentary, XI, 1, Jan. 1951, pp. 36-39) has drawn attention to the recurrent pattern of bathos in Simone Weil's life. Whether in Le Puy, in the factories, in Spain, or later in London, what starts out as an unlimited desire, an undertaking of heroic dimension, founders; some incongruous circumstance or accident brings it to frustration. Might not this pattern of incompleteness and anticlimax offer an insight into the workings of her soul?
Love bade me welcome: yet my soul drew back,  
Guiltie of dust and sinne.  
But quick-ey'd Love, observing me grow slack  
From my first entrance in,  
Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning,  
If I lack'd anything.

"A guest," I answer'd, "worthy to be here":  
Love said, "You shall be be."  
"I the unkinde, ungrateful? Ab my deare,  
I cannot look on thee."  
Love took my hand, and smiling did reply,  
"Who made the eyes but I?"

"Truth Lord, but I have mar'd them: let my shame  
Go where it doth deserve."  
"And know you not," sayes Love, "who bore the blame?"  
"My deare, then I will serve."  
"You must sit down," sayes Love, "and taste my meat":  
So I did sit and eat.

Simone Weil learned the poem by heart and, conquering the tormenting pain in her head, made herself say it over and over. It was during one of these recitations, she confided, that "Christ Himself came down and took possession of me." She emphasized that her experience was not the result of any reading of the mystics—she had done none. Nor were sense or imagination involved; there was no vision or dialogue, only the certainty of Christ's nearness. Never before had she surmised the possibility of a real contact between a human being and God, but at that moment she felt in the midst of her suffering "the presence of a love, like that which one can read in the smile of a beloved face." 23

23. Ibid., pp. 67-69. For more than three years following this encounter with Christ, Simone Weil did not pray, that is, turn to God with words thought or spoken, fearing, as she wrote, "the power of suggestion that is in prayer." But in the summer of 1941 she learned the Our Father in Greek, reciting it afterward every morning and often during the day in the vineyard where she was working at that time. If her mind wandered, she would begin again as often as necessary till she could say it "with absolutely pure attention." Even the very first words sometimes transported her thought to a space outside the senses, to an infinity of silence. At times, also, during this prayer, and at other moments too, she felt Christ present, but His presence was then "infinitely more real, more piercing, more clear, more full of love, than that first time when He took possession of me" (ibid., pp. 70-72).

But her suffering, she stayed in Paris a when it was made Marseilles. There she to the needs of friendship, the more was as unnotic her other friends, at an animal instinct to an extreme desire to protective wall she herself the fruit she

Her conversations to the question of her vocation to stay am unbelievers"; on the to be uncommitted, a for instance making the sacrament without that she would not be a single inward move command from God to obey—she thought it possible she some pulse to ask for bapt that Simone Weil ever

24. Ibid., pp. 101, 92 25. Ibid., pp. 204-26. In his Introduction, "It was at Father Perr" (p. 15). These words de manner; rather that, in were, the truth of the m
But her suffering was not to end. Wishing no life away from danger, she stayed in Paris after the outbreak of the second World War; only when it was made an open city did she move with her parents to Marseilles. There she met Père Perrin, a Dominican, blind but keen-eyed to the needs of others. She was grateful for his true and rare friendship, the more since she thought that for others she hardly existed, was as unnoticed by them as "the color of dead leaves"; that all her other friends, at one time or another, had hurt her, giving in to an animal instinct to wound the already wounded. But ever beset by the fear of being influenced by, or dependent on, anyone; filled with an extreme desire to guard what she called her "autonomy" —the protective wall she had built around her wounded self—she denied herself the fruit of that friendship.

Her conversations with Père Perrin inevitably turned her thoughts to the question of her baptism. However, in the opinion that it was her vocation to stay among "the immense and unfortunate multitude of unbelievers"; on the strange assumption that this vocation required her to be uncommitted, "indifferent to all ideas without exception, including for instance materialism and atheism"; in a horror of receiving the sacrament without absolute purity of intention, a purity so absolute that she would not be running the risk of "even a single instant or a single inward movement of regret"; and in the absence of an express command from God, imposing His will on hers and thus compelling her to act—she decided not to be baptized, at least not then. She thought it possible that God might show His will at the moment of her death, or that some day she might "suddenly feel an irresistible impulse to ask for baptism" and run to ask for it. It is more than doubtful that Simone Weil ever understood baptism as a sacrament of mercy, a wonder of forgiveness, for she added to the other reasons that kept her...

24. Ibid., pp. 101, 92.
25. Ibid., pp. 204-205.
26. In his Introduction to Waiting for God, Fiedler has this astonishing remark: "It was at Father Perrin's request that Simone Weil 'experimentally' took communion" (pp. 27-28). In a letter to me, Père Perrin has expressly denied ever having made such a suggestion to Simone Weil; nor could he have done so, for to a Catholic, "experimenting" with a sacrament is unthinkable. Presumably Fiedler misread Père Perrin's Introduction to Attente de Dieu (Paris: La Colombe, 1950), in which he writes: "Elle savourait [le mystère eucharistique] expérimentalement" (p. 15). These words do not mean that she received Communion in an experimental manner; rather that, in the opinion of Père Perrin, her soul tasted, experienced, as it were, the truth of the mystery.
from the font her "unworthiness" and "inadequacy," her "serious and even shameful faults" in her relations with others. Still, for the few remaining years of her life, the question of whether she should be baptized seems never to have left her; it was no rare thing for her to seek out other priests with whom to discuss it.

No longer able to teach, because of the anti-Jewish laws of the Vichy government, she wished, when she arrived in Marseilles, to work as a farmhand. Père Perrin introduced her to Gustave Thibon, a Catholic writer who lives among the vineyards of the Rhone valley. There she worked for some time, first in the fields, then in the vineyards—labors much too strenuous for her frail body; and yet she refused all comforts, without realizing that her austerities often caused trouble or pain for others. Thibon, who admires her and speaks of her with true affection, cannot help noting that there was "at the very heart of her self-stripping a terrible self-will, the inflexible desire that this stripping should be her own work and should be accomplished in her own way." Again he writes: "Though utterly and entirely detached from her tastes and needs, she was not detached from her detachment. . . . Her ego was, as it were, a word which she may perhaps have succeeded in effacing, but which was still underlined."

Having returned to Marseilles for the winter, she sailed the next spring for Casablanca en route to New York. There was anguish in her heart at leaving so many, friends and strangers, behind in peril. But at last, in the hope of joining the Resistance movement, she consented to accompany her parents. "It seems to me as if something were telling me to go," she wrote, and added: "I hope that this abandoning myself to it . . . will finally bring me to the haven, . . . the Cross."

27. Waiting for God, pp. 48, 85, 56, 47, 74-75, 50, 46.
28. Her Letter to a Priest, for instance (trans. A. Wills; New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1954) is one long inquiry as to whether one who held opinions like hers, which she said, "form a barrier between me and the Church" (p. 9), could be baptized. (This Letter was written while Simone Weil was still in New York and was addressed to the late priest-artist Père Marie-Alain Couturier, O.P., who was then living in the United States. Shortly afterward she left for England, and so it remained unanswered.) Though her thoughts often returned to the question of baptism, her understanding of it always remained defective. At about the same time that she wrote her Letter to a Priest, she called baptism "solely the desire for the new birth." This desire is not without efficacy, she wrote, but added—and thus revealed anew one of her deep-seated difficulties—that "it ought not to imply submission to a social organization" (La Connaissance sur naturelle, p. 183).
In New York, her compassion went out to the Negroes of Harlem; every Sunday she went to a Baptist church there in order to be an "exile" among the "exiles." Still she was unhappy, "at the very edge of despair," because the affliction spread over the earth obsessed and crushed her. "I can free myself from this obsession only if I myself have a large share of danger and suffering," she wrote to London. And again: "I beseech you to get me to London, do not leave me here pinning in sorrow"; "I implore you, if you can, to obtain for me the amount of sufferings and dangers needed to save me from being worn out by grief in sterility." 81

London, where she arrived in November 1942, brought her a grave disappointment. Yearning to sacrifice herself either in saving the lives of others or in sabotaging the work of her country's invader, she asked to be sent into occupied France on some arduous assignment. Though she begged and begged, she was refused, because her Jewish features would have imperilled any such venture. Instead, the Free French authorities asked her—more, perhaps, with the intention of keeping her busy than of using her ideas—to write a study on the possibilities of bringing about the regeneration of France. 82 This kept her at her desk long into the evenings, and often her chair or the office floor served her for a bed. She would eat no more than the people of France had, and so gave many of her ration coupons to the poor. Often she would abandon her intellectual pursuits and spend hours with her landlady's backward child, telling him stories and giving him some of the joys of childhood. "I have never yet been able truly to resign myself to the fact that all human beings other than myself are not completely preserved from every possibility of affliction," 83 she had once written to Thibon.

Worn out, finally, by her many privations and by tuberculosis, she had to be taken to a hospital; but any special comforts or privileges ordered for her there caused her only distress. Too wasted to respond to treatment, she longed for the country, where she died on August 24, 1943. She died, the doctors said, mainly from "voluntary starvation, as

32. After the war, her study was published as L'Enracinement, in English The Need for Roots (trans. by Arthur Wills; New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1952). But most of Simone Weil's writing was not done with publication in mind. Thus her "books" are mainly collections, made after her death, of letters, essays, journals, and so on.
33. Quoted by Thibon in his Introduction to Gravity and Grace, p. 10.
she felt that any food she took would be denying her countrymen.”

But she was not unappreciative: the last entry in her diary, which speaks of education and the importance of “to know,” ends abruptly with the solitary word “Nurses.” Was this a last sign of her gratitude?

HER THOUGHT

So ended the life of one who wished to suffer with all the sufferers of earth, who indeed begged them, as one begs a blessing, to let her partake of the bread of their affliction. Was she not, then, “profoundly Christian, without being baptized”? No doubt, “she touched those deeps of distress and anguish that cannot be reached without encountering the Face in which are written all the pains of men.” Still, for all her desire to suffer, even to suffer like Christ, Simone Weil was not a Christian. This is not a statement that I make lightly. But if one looks not at one or the other isolated sentence of hers but at the whole range of her thought, no other conclusion is possible.

GOD, GRAVITY, AND GRACE

"Thy kingdom come," Simone Weil prayed, but explained it to mean: "May thy creation disappear absolutely, beginning with me and with everything with which I have ties, whatever they may be." Thus she turned into its opposite what the prophets had hoped for and what Jesus proclaimed as near and coming ever nearer: that the wings of God’s love will be spread over all, that death shall be no more, nor mourning, nor crying, nor pain (Apoc 21:4), because all things will be transfigured in a heaven and an earth altogether new. Why could she not hold this hope? Why was hope, that glorious mark of the Old and New Testaments, alien to her? Why did she make indifference and nonfulfillment a fetish?

Whatever the answer, the fact is that Simone Weil declared “distance” (one of her key words) to be God’s manner toward us. He is “absent” from His world, she said, and His power here below is “an infinitely poor little thing.” “On God’s part creation is not an act of

34. Tomlin, op. cit., p. 35.
37. La Connaissance surnaturelle, p. 333.
38. Ibid., p. 262.
countrymen." 34 In her diary, which ends abruptly her gratitude?

stressed the sufferers of longing, to let her profoundly touched those without en­t men." 36 Still, Simone Weil was unlikely. But if one took at the whole

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self-expansion but of restraint and renunciation. God and all His creatures are less than God alone. God accepted this diminution. He emptied a part of His being from Himself," 38 she wrote. But this is not the God of Scripture, who is overflowing generosity, ever spending Himself, never spent; who in creating shares without either gain or loss; who shares because He is goodness. He is goodness, and it is the way of the good to spread itself, but it is its mystery that in spreading itself it is not thinned, it does not suffer the least diminution. No doubt, the God of Israel is a hidden God (Is 45:15), but to Isaiah and to the Christian, "hidden" does not mean what it meant to Simone Weil: that "necessity is God’s veil," that, in other words, "God has committed all phenomena without exception to the mechanism of the world." 40 Far from being absent, He is with us; every page of Old and New Testa­ ments tells His presence, help, and mighty acts. "Behind me and before, you hem me in and rest your hand upon me" (Ps 138:5): so the Psalmist. And Moses, taking leave of his people, tells them that the eternal God is a dwelling place, their home and refuge, and that "un­ derneath are the everlasting arms" (Deut 33:27). The God who is in heaven, in inaccessible light, but is nonetheless with His people as their strength—this is the God of revelation: the God of Israel, the God of Christians. But Simone Weil made her own image of God.

God, as she pictured Him, had surrendered the universe to the rule of blind force, a surrender she called His "impartiality," His "indiffer­ ence," and, strange though it may seem, His "caress." 41 The world thus became for her the domain of pesanteur, gravity, down-drag, one in which all things were forever falling. There were, however, rare rays of light which illumined our darkness: grace, in which she saw the one exception to the pull of dead weight. But for a Christian grace raises man’s humanity above itself, makes him grow toward God, indeed live in Him, whereas to her it seems to have been the power from above which makes man desire what she called decretion:

I must withdraw so that God may make contact with the beings whom chance places in my path and whom He loves. It is tactless for me to be there. It is as though I were placed between two lovers or two friends. . . .

41. Ibid.; La Connaissance surnaturelle, p. 92.
If only I knew how to disappear, there would be a perfect union of love between God and the earth I tread, the sea I hear. . . .

*And death, robbing my eyes of their light,*

*Restores to the day they sullied all its purity.*

May I disappear in order that those things that I see may become perfect in their beauty from the very fact that they are no longer things that I see. . . .

When I am in any place, I disturb the silence of heaven and earth by my breathing and the beating of my heart. . . . To me [the created world] cannot tell its secret, which is too high. If I go, then the Creator and the creation will exchange their secrets.42

There are a thousand reasons—or is there only one, sin?—for a man who thinks he is alone to feel defeated and to look on himself as a stain on the universe. Yet for Simone Weil it was not sin that sullied the universe but her very existence. What a contrast to Genesis and Gospel, which show man as God's favorite, unbelievably loved! While the redeemed man knows himself to be the cantor of creation, leading the chorus of all the irrational creatures and turning their mute obedience into song,43 Simone Weil can think of herself only as an interloper, as a discord in the harmony of created things.

This is not all. For her, God and man inevitably miss each other, except in some "fourth dimension." There is no need to enter into a discussion of her "fourth dimension"; whatever it may have symbolized for her, her view cannot be reconciled with the Christian faith, for such is the darkness;for the earth weeps grace God never gives to man, for the love and it fails, it is impossible. Christ's passion. But according to Simone Weil, God is still in the suffering, the salvation, the kind are exchanged. For her, if the place of the suffering, the place in a different world, is nailed to other, if she is not saved, if she is the same.

To this reading of the fixedness of immortality, of God-made man, she adds, else does not. "To persuade Him to crucify Him, not to crucify Him pleasant that it is done?" Though we read them: "I, if I be crucified for you, (Jn 12:32)," God-slay, and crucify it all, it more as it is equivocal. For we may be, we may not, and the thing we died that it is but from the the thing.

42. *Gravity and Grace,* pp. 88–89.
43. This Christian knowledge has a profound interpreter in the Dominican mystic Henry Suso. "I place before my inward eyes myself with all that I am—my body, soul, and all my powers—and I gather round me all the creatures which God ever created in heaven, on earth, and in all the elements, each one severally with its name, whether birds of the air, beasts of the forests, fishes of the water, leaves and grass of the earth, or the innumerable sand of the sea, and to these I add all the little specks of dust which glance in the sunbeams, with all the little drops of water which ever fell or are falling from dew, snow, or rain, and I wish that each of these had a sweetly sounding stringed instrument, fashioned from my heart's inmost blood, striking on which they might each send up to our dear and gentle God a new and lofty strain of praise for ever and ever. And then the loving arms of my soul stretch out and extend themselves toward the innumerable multitude of all creatures, and my intention is, just as a free and blithesome leader of a choir stirs up the singers of his company, even so to turn them all to good account by inciting them to sing joyously, and to offer up their hearts to God. 'Sursum corda.'" (The Life of Blessed Henry Suso by Himself, trans. by T. F. Knox, Orat., London: Methuen, 1913, pp. 32–33).
such is the good news: No other frame, no other continuum, is needed for the encounter of God and man; it happens in the here-and-now. In grace God moves toward man and draws him close, saying to Israel and to man, for whom Israel stands, that He loves him with an everlasting love and reaches out to him in pity (Jer 31:3). If their meeting fails, it is because of man's resistance to the divine invitation, so that Christ's parables are one long lament over man's "I cannot come." But according to Simone Weil, the meeting is bound to fail because God is still and man refuses to be impassive. In what I consider one of the saddest entries in her American diary, she wrote: "God and mankind are like a pair of lovers who have made a mistake about the place of their rendezvous. Each one is there before the hour, but each in a different place, and they wait, wait, wait. He is upright, unmoving, nailed to the spot for all time. She is distracted and impatient. Woe to her if she has enough and goes away! For the two points they are at are the same point in the fourth dimension." 44 To this she added: "The crucifixion of Christ is the image of the fixedness of God." But the crucifixion is nothing of the kind; no image of immobility, it is rather the sign of His utter concern for man. When God-made-man goes after man, even to the point of suffering, what else does it mean if not that He "runs" after him so that He may persuade him to come His way? So little does the Church think of the Crucified as "fixed," still, and unmoving, that in her liturgy she makes Him plead: "What more should I have done for thee that I have not done? O my people, wherein have I grieved thee? Answer me." Though the nails fasten Jesus' arms to the wood, the arms are open. "I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all things to myself" (Jn 12:32), He said, and again: "The thief comes only to steal, and slay, and destroy [the sheep]. I came that they may have life, and have it more abundantly" (Jn 10:10). The words are clear, there is nothing equivocal about them. Christ came and preached, lived and died, that we may live: such is His own message, such the witness of the apostles, of His teaching. In Simone Weil's eyes, however, He died that we may learn to die; He suffered to redeem us not from sin, but from existence. "To love truth means to endure the void and consequently to accept death," she wrote. "Truth is on the side of death." 45

44. La Connaissance surnaturelle, p. 92; see Waiting for God, pp. 135-136.
45. Gravity and Grace, p. 56.
Even if the few quotations I have given so far were all I knew of Simone Weil, I should have no doubt that what has often been called her "message" is not part of the Christian message. Though I respect her deep anguish, I have to say this plainly, for no human hands may tamper with Christ's testament, not even the hands of one who suffered much. But lest it be felt that I have moved too quickly and have dealt with her thought and spirituality in a summary fashion, I should like to discuss more fully her relationship to Christ, her interpretation of His divinity, of His crucifixion and resurrection, her views on creation and the meaning of man, and, finally, on Israel.

CHRIST, ONE OR MANY?

From the very beginning, when, at the sight of the procession in the Portuguese fishing village, she sensed that Christ was the answer to human misery, Simone Weil had a distorted view of the gospel. Christianity was to her "pre-eminently the religion of slaves." Slaves, in her language, are men struck down by "affliction"—that blind necessity, that anonymous suffering which deprives its victims of their personality, turns them into things, freezes them with a metallic coldness, and puts them at the greatest possible distance from God. But to her, as we have seen, the chains were not to be broken nor the distance bridged nor the void filled; on the contrary, the very void was glorified. Christianity, which is nearness to God and not distance, is thus inverted. One has only to remember what St. Paul wrote to the Romans and the Galatians: that before they came to believe they were slaves to sin, to lust and lawlessness, slaves to the gods who are not, to the blind "elements of the world"; but that now, as men of faith, they are sons, known by God, loved with an infinite love (Rom 6:6, 19; Gal 4:3, 8). Freed from the dominion of cold fate and of their own vagaries by Christ, they have been given a new life; separation and distance ended, they have entered into an organic relationship with God, a true communion. In this St. Paul echoed Christ Himself: "No longer do I call you servants... I have called you friends" (Jn 15:15).

46. The American reader who wishes to compare this conclusion with the findings of others has two significant studies within easy reach: Georges Frenaud, O.S.B., "Simone Weil's Religious Thought in the Light of Catholic Theology," Theological Studies, XIV, 3 (Sept. 1953), pp. 349-376; and Gerda Blumenthal, "Simone Weil's Way of the Cross," Thought, XXVII, 105 (Summer 1952), pp. 225-234.

47. Ibid., pp. 124-125.

48. Ibid., p. 69.

49. Ibid., p. 70; Le Priest, p. 27. This is how, in Plato," she quotes a
Now, if one remembers that it is Christ who determines what Christianity is, then Simone Weil's view of it as "the religion of slaves" is not a slight exaggeration of a truth but a very basic misconception which was to vitiate her whole religious thought.

Again, after her inner encounter with Christ during a recitation of Herbert's "Love bade me welcome," when she felt He had descended to take possession of her—what was her response? "I still half refused, not my love but my intelligence." She wrote "intelligence"; what she unknowingly referred to, however, was a world-outlook rooted in emotions: that drift of the soul and bent of temperament which in all men is the last to yield to Christ because it so resists unmasking. But she thought her wrestling with her soul to be a wrestling with God "out of pure regard for truth," and went on to say: "Christ likes us to prefer truth to Him because, before being Christ, He is truth. If one turns aside from Him to go toward the truth, one will not go far before falling into His arms." This sounds subtle and courageous, but it contradicts "pure regard for truth," for Christ never so much as hinted that He "liked" such a preference; rather did He say: "I am the Way, and the Truth, and the Life. No one comes to the Father but through me" (Jn 14:6). In Him, in His word and work, is disclosed what God is like and what God wills for and of men; and therefore He demands an unconditional "yes," a total commitment, which Simone Weil's formula seeks to evade.

Proof that she evaded Christ's full embrace is that, in fact, she never did "fall into His arms." In spite of her reiterated "one must think Christ as God and man," she went, driven by a strange restlessness, from Him to Greek philosophy and poetry, to Egyptian myths and the Hindu scriptures, ever looking for Him elsewhere. When Saul saw the glory of Christ, he asked: "What shall I do, Lord?" (Ac 22:10), and had himself led straight to the city to be baptized. But when Simone Weil had encountered Christ, she wandered far and wandered wide. She "came to feel that Plato was a mystic," indeed "the father of Western mysticism," almost an evangelist, who knew and taught the Christian mysteries of the Trinity, the Incarnation, and the Passion, the wonders of mediation, of grace, and of salvation through love. She saw

48. Ibid., p. 69.
49. Ibid., p. 70; La Source grecque (Paris: Gallimard, 1953), p. 70; Letter to a Priest, p. 27. This is how Simone Weil turned Plato into a mystic. In her essay "God in Plato," she quotes a few lines from the sixth book of the Republic, which in
the *Iliad* "bathed in Christian light." 50 But this was only a first step; shortly afterward she was to declare that "the gospel is the last marvelous expression of the Greek genius, as the *Iliad* is the first," of that Greek spirit which enjoins—this is still Simone Weil speaking—the seeking of "the kingdom and justice of our heavenly Father" to the exclusion of all other goods and which lays bare human suffering in a being at once divine and human. 51

In her strange wandering, Simone Weil also "came to feel . . . that Dionysus and Osiris are in a certain sense Christ Himself," and only a little later she rejoiced that the words of the *Bhagavad-Gita*, so "marvelous," so "Christian in sound," were "put into the mouth of an incarnation of God." 52 The full meaning of these words from her Jowett's translation read: "I would not have you ignorant that, in the present evil state of governments, whatever is saved and comes to good is saved by the power of God, as we may truly say." Paul Shorey's translation for the Loeb Classical Library is: "And you may be sure that, if anything is saved and turns out well in the present condition of society and government, in saying that the providence of God preserves it you will not be speaking ill." Simone Weil's rendering is very different: "It is impossible to affirm more categorically that grace is the one source of salvation, that salvation comes from God and not from man" (*La Source grecque*, pp. 78-79). But of religious salvation, of grace and predestination, there is nothing in Plato's text. What he speaks of is simply this: Only by God's power can a philosopher be preserved from the corrupting pressure of public opinion.


51. "The Iliad, or, The Poem of Force," *The Wind and the Rain*, VI, 4 (Spring 1950), p. 245. According to Simone Weil, the true subject of the *Iliad* is force, which turns man into a thing, indeed into a corpse. No one can escape its dominion, for even he who seems spared has its threat constantly hanging over him. To know the bitterness of this human lot, to know this pitiless necessity, and yet not to seek pity, not to resort to illusion and exaltation: this, in her opinion, is the miracle of the *Iliad* and its Christian light—a light, she tells us, the Christian martyrs lacked, because they died rejoicing. Whatever may be the merits of her interpretation from a literary point of view, the joyless resignation, the *a mor fati*, she finds in the *Iliad* is the very opposite of Christian resignation. And yet a Christian reading of Homer is not foreign to the patristic tradition. For many ancient writers, the *Odyssey*’s "mast with the yard across it" recalled the wood of the cross, to which the Christian must be bound by the cords of the spirit as Odysseus was lashed to the mast with ropes. "Let us flee from the old way as from the Sirens," Clement of Alexandria cried out. "It strangles man, turns him away from truth, snatches him from life . . . Let us flee from the island of wickedness, heaped with bones and corpses, where pleasure, a pretty harlot, sings . . . Pass by pleasure, sail past the song . . . Bound to the wood of the cross, thou shalt live, free of corruption" (*Exhortation to the Greeks*, xii, PG 8:237-240). Cf. Hugo Rahner, S.J., "Heiliger Homer," in his masterly *Griechische Mythen in christlicher Deutung* (Zurich: Rhein-Verlag, 1945).

52. *Waiting for God*, p. 70.
The Enigma of Simone Weil

"An incarnation of God"—this is not the high, awesome, and chaste wonder that is Jesus; here the mystery is flattened down to the promiscuity of the pagan myths. Some have thought that Simone Weil's view of Jesus as one of several incarnations may have derived from her overwhelming compassion with the forgotten, neglected, or downtrodden peoples of the earth. Marie-Magdeleine Davy, so often a victim of her unbounded admiration for Simone Weil, has even placed her in the neighborhood of St. Bridget of Sweden, who had Christ declare that instead of sluggish Christians, given to vanity, pride, and lust, He would choose for Himself the poor, that is, the despised pagans, and say to them: "Enter, and rest in the arms of my love."

Doubtless, Simone Weil had compassion with those outside the Church—though one is never sure whether her compassion was not, at least in part, the result of her rebelliousness against the Church and against all that is—but she did not wish to invite those who do not know Christ to come to Him; on the contrary, she had a horror of any missionary effort, she called it "bad" and said she would "never give even so much as a dime" toward it. No, in her errors about Christ, Simone Weil was not the victim of too much compassion, rather, I fear, of an unfree heart. There is a kind of defective love which, afraid of total giving, prefers the general to the concrete, mankind to the neighbor, the many to the few. The" as only a first step; the Gospel is the last mar­

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53. Unfortunately, the English translation of Attente de Dieu is at fault when it translates the French original, une incarnation de Dieu, by "the Incarnation of God."

54. Letter to a Priest, p. 19.

55. Davy, Introduction au message de Simone Weil, p. 148; St. Bridget, Revela­

56. Letter to a Priest, pp. 30-34.

57. This preference of Simone Weil's appears in many ways. A striking example is this passage from her diary: "God alone is the unity of the universal and the particular. God is a universal person. Someone who is all." This is but little removed from plain pantheism, and it is of one piece with it when she adds: "One does not
one, and which seems to have made Simone Weil more nearly at ease with a heavenly of "mediatory gods," remote, mythical, without "localization in time and space," \(^58\) than with the one Christ, the Only-Begotten of the Father, born in Bethlehem when Herod was king of Judaea and Augustus emperor of Rome.

It was not that Simone Weil discovered in the yearnings of all men an intimation of the Answer, in their writings an echo of the Word. She was not like one who, with eye filled with the image of her only beloved, ear filled with his voice, hears and sees his onliness everywhere. This would have been the marvel of a flowering heart. But, as all her human relationships without exception show, her heart was injured and shrunken at its roots; and so injured, she "could" not abide with Christ, the One, beside whom there is no other. Fearful of engaging herself without reserve, always torn—she once wrote: "At present I have the impression that I am lying, whatever I do, whether it be by remaining outside the Church or by entering it" \(^59\)—she seemed compelled to "multiply" the Incarnation and to see in the various religious traditions but "different reflections of the same truth, and perhaps equally precious." \(^60\)

In her flight into "universality," Simone Weil was not satisfied with Christ as He is, as the apostles saw Him and as the Church believes in Him. While in the United States, she drew up a list of twenty-seven "images of Christ," among which figure Odin, Adonis and Orestes, Antigone and Snow White; \(^61\) and without batting an eyelash, she offers to us the thought that "Baal and Astarte"—who represent nature worship at its grossest, against whose lewd and sensual rites Scripture cried out as an abomination—"were perhaps representations of Christ and the Virgin." \(^62\) In all seriousness she maintained as probable that love humanity; one loves this or that man. This is not a legitimate love; to love mankind is alone legitimate" (La Connaissance surnaturelle, p. 251). Needless to say that here she completely contradicts the biblical command which gives us the neighbor to love, not mankind. She also makes clearer now what she meant when she said: "From my earliest childhood I have always had the Christian idea of love for one's neighbor." It was not the Christian idea: for her to love was to love impersonally, impartially, anonymously, "equally," as sun and rain do (see, for instance, Waiting for God, pp. 97-98).

\(^{58}\) Letter to a Priest, pp. 25, 20.
\(^{59}\) Letter to a Priest, p. 34.
\(^{60}\) La Connaissance surnaturelle, pp. 290-291.
\(^{61}\) Letter to a Priest, p. 15.
The Enigma of Simone Weil

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Dead," she wrote, "at least three thousand years old, and doubtless very
much older, is filled with evangelic charity," and then went on to quote
from these protestations of guiltlessness: "Lord of Truth, I bring thee
the truth . . . I have destroyed evil for thee . . . I have killed no
man. I have made no man weep. I have let no man suffer hunger. I
have never been the cause of a master's doing harm to his slave. I have
never made any man afraid. I have never adopted a haughty tone. I
have never turned a deaf ear to just and true words." But what she
presents to us as a sign of the presence of the evangelical spirit in
Egypt long before Jesus preached in Israel is in fact its very opposite.
It is a magic formula with which a man hoped to force his way into
the Underworld. An unabashed insistence on one's own purity and per-
fec tion, it is devoid of humility, it knows nothing of sin, it shows no
repentance, it begs no forgiveness. Why was Simone Weil oblivious
of all this? Why did she not see the true character of this spell? How
could she describe it as "words as sublime even as those of the Gos-
pel"? Was it because she wished to "prove" one of her preconcep-
tions? In any case, her very next words are: "The Hebrews, who for
four centuries were in contact with Egyptian civilization, refused to
adopt this sweet spirit. They wanted power." 66

This want of care, this recklessness, with which Simone Weil treated
texts is particularly embarrassing in her willful use of the words and

many of the names of Greek deities, such as Apollo, Eros, and
Proserpine, were "in reality various names for designating one single
divine Person, namely the Word." 63

These and similar ideas were not the fruit of scholarship, not the
inescapable result of hard scientific work, for their scientific basis is
more than weak, it is nil; and there are many indications that Simone
Weil knew this. Yet, in spite of her honesty and almost brutal candor
in other areas of her life, she seriously maintained these ideas out of
what must have been an inner compulsion. I can see no other explana-
tion for the way she dealt with ancient texts and turned them in favor
of the bias she shared with Marcion, that the pure Christian faith has
its roots anywhere but in Israel and that it owes nothing to the Old
Testament. To give only one example: "The Egyptian Book of the
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63. Ibid., p. 20.
64. Ibid., p. 13.
65. Waiting for God, p. 144.
acts of Christ, as when she writes: "Christ began His public life by changing the water into wine. He ended by transforming the wine into blood. He thus marked His affinity to Dionysus." 67 A fountain, a swamp—both are water, but one is living and clean while the other is foul and dead. No more can we equate the wine of Christ and the wine of Dionysus, and to make Christ the author of the equation is the height of arbitrariness. Further, from the fact that some of Christ's sayings (for instance, "As the Father has sent me, I also send you") have a structural similarity to the algebraical expression of the proportional mean (as \( a \) is to \( b \), so \( b \) is to \( c \)), she leaped to the conclusion that this similarity was intentional. Christ recognized Himself not only as the Suffering Servant of whom Isaiah speaks or as the fulfillment of the bronze serpent in the desert, but "in the same way in the proportional mean of Greek geometry, which thus becomes the most resplendent of the prophecies." 68 Even if her premise were true—which, of course, it is not—there would be no ground for a conclusion that here is the "most resplendent" of the prophecies; she just wanted it to be so. It was her constant temptation to turn Jesus, the Seed of Abraham and Son of David, into the heir of Hellas. Instead of gathering all things under the headship of Christ, instead of redeeming the spirit of antiquity by His spirit, as a Christian wishes to do, she tried to "redeem" Christ in the eyes of antiquity. Or, in the words of Charles Moeller: "Instead of illuminating Greece by Christ, sought for His own sake, she illuminated Christ by Greece." 69

Traditional Christianity, she tells us, cannot explain St. Paul's Christ, "the firstborn of every creature," "the reconciliation of all things" (Col 1:15, 20); only Phercydes, Pythagoras, and Plato could do so. Thus she called Christ "the unity extending across all things," "the harmony," "the Soul of the world." 70 And by this she did not wish to say that the ultimate Meaning grooped for by the pre-Socratic philosopher, by Pythagoras, and by Plato, is real and true in Christ; rather that St.

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67. Ibid., p. 21.
68. Ibid., p. 24.
70. La Connaissance surnaturelle, p. 200. Figuratively speaking, Christ might well be called "the Soul of the world." But this can hardly be what Simone Weil had in mind, for later in her American diary there is this entry: "Even the notion of Micro-cosmos implies the Incarnation. A human being who has for soul the Soul of the world" (ibid., p. 263). Not a single thread ties this to the Christian faith.
Paul only restated what they saw and knew. Why was she ever trying to withdraw from the clear and common belief of the Church into things obscure and "untold," into esoteric teachings of the past, if not to withdraw from her self? In the midst of the often so fantastic entries in her journal is a meditation which, terribly overstated though it is, is most moving as it tells her desire to be a tool of truth: "The soul that is outside of justice—outside of faith—lies. To say 'I' is to lie. Lord, I am nothing but error. Error is nothing but nothingness. Lord, that my whole soul may know this, and all the parts of my soul, and even my body. That my soul may be to my body and to God only what this pen is to my hand and to the paper—an intermediary." 71 So she prayed, sincerely I am sure, and yet shunned all safeguards against error. To be that pure instrument, what better—indeed what other—way would there have been for her than to submit to the Church as voice and bond of truth? But a magisterium teaching with authority, a social body in which wisdom has a home—this irritated her. 72 She wanted to go it alone, to live in a self-imposed exile which allowed her to keep company with the dim and distant figures of mythology.

CHRIST CRUCIFIED AND RISEN

To say that she had a predilection for the dim and distant is not to say that Christ was unreal to Simone Weil; Christ fastened to the cross was fearfully and lovingly real, and yet the Christ she looked up to was not the real Christ. At Solesmes, where she heard Jeremiah's Lamentations, she was moved by the word of Charles de Halle, "Christ is the image of all things—Plato could do so. He explains St. Paul's words of Charles de Halle: "The society of those who love Christ," she once said, "is not really a society, it is a friendship." And when she spoke of friendship, the qualities she most insisted on were distance and the absence of any pleasure in, or even desire for, oneness of mind. She had a deep horror of the "collective," of social pressure, of public opinion, and once called the devil "the father of prestige." But one wonders whether her repugnance was pure in its inner origin, since time and again she confused the collective and the truly social, pressure and authority, and placed the general consent of the faithful on a par with public opinion. "One must not be an 'I,' much less a 'we,'" 73 is one of her mottoes. "Cultivate the feeling of being at home in exile. To be rooted in no-place." (La Connaissance surnaturelle, pp. 200, 274; Waiting for God, pp. 200–209; Gravity and Grace, p. 86.)
tions and the suffering of Christ sung, "the thought of the Passion," she tells us, "entered into my being once and for all," the Passion, in which Love submits, suffers, not by constraint but by consent. The real proof that Christianity is divine, she wrote, is in the cry, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" It "is the perfect beauty of the accounts of the Passion" that is the thing miraculous, the thing that "compels me to believe. . . . The cross is enough for me." She calls the cross a balance and a lever, a going down, necessary for a rising up: "Heaven's descending upon earth raises earth to heaven." It is the balance on which God outweighed the entire universe; on which a body, frail and light, but God, lifted up the whole world. Archimedes' "Give me a point to stand on and I will move the world" is answered by the Crucified. The cross is the fulcrum, "there can be no other. It has to be at the intersection of the world and that which is not the world. The cross is this intersection."

It is impossible to quote the many passages that show Simone Weil's awareness of the Passion; often and vividly she expressed what her inner being realized, that here is the heart of the Christian faith, here the Christian way. But all the time her realization was awry, for she tried to sever the Passion from the mystery of the Resurrection, with which it is one, for it is Christ's dying and rising which are our salvation. "If the Gospel omitted all mention of Christ's resurrection," she wrote, "faith would be easier for me." Hers were not the objections of those who think that science forbids them to accept the Easter mystery; her difficulties were within herself—but that is not to say they were more valid. During His Passion, she declared, Christ was stripped of every appearance of justice, so that even His friends were no longer fully aware that He was perfectly just. And she went on to ask: How else could they have slept while He suffered? How could they have fled? How could they have denied Him? But "after the resurrection," she continued, "the infamous character of His execution was effaced by the glory; and today, after twenty centuries of adoration, the debasement

73. Waiting for God, p. 68.
75. Gravity and Grace, p. 139.
76. Letter to a Priest, p. 55.
77. Gravity and Grace, p. 145.
78. Ibid., p. 146; see also Letter to a Priest, p. 72; and Waiting for God, p. 136.
79. Letter to a Priest, p. 55.
which is the very essence of the Passion is hardly felt by us any more. All we remember is the suffering, and that only vaguely, for sufferings imagined always lack 'down-drag.' We no longer picture Christ to ourselves as dying the death of a common criminal. Even St. Paul wrote: 'If Jesus Christ is not risen, vain is our faith' (1 Cor 15:17), and yet the agony on the cross is something more divine than the resurrection: it is the point where the divinity of Christ is concentrated. But today the glorious Christ conceals from us that He was made 'a curse' (Gal 3:13).

This much is clear: Simone Weil did not doubt that Christ had risen, but His resurrection was not to her liking, warring as it did against her concept of God and the world, and the idea she had thus formed for herself of the Passion. She had little regard, almost disdain, for anything that was not suffering, which she called "man's superiority over God." To her, pain, and nothing else, was purity, that is, pain in the extreme, the death agony; hence she felt that once Christ was accepted, not only as the Victim but also as the King of glory, His image was distorted; that only before He was thus accepted, only when helpless, tormented, and deserted had He been for His followers "an absolutely pure being." "Christ's healing the sick, raising the dead" she saw as "the humble, human, almost low part of His mission," while, in a complete misuse of the word, she named "supernatural" "the sweat of blood, the unsatisfied longing for human consolation, the supplication that He might be spared, the sense of being abandoned by God." Her American notebooks begin beautifully: "The resurrection is Christ's pardon to those who killed Him." But a few lines later she adds: "The joy of Easter is not that which follows sorrow, not freedom

80. Intuitions pré-chretiennes, p. 84. Simone Weil may be right that there are many Christians who would like the glory without the cross, many also who today shed tears for the Crucified and yet would have been unmoved had they really seen Him (La Connaissance surnaturelle, p. 288). But this does not in the least change the fact that the pain of Christ and His triumph are inseparably one. It is not on Easter Sunday but on Good Friday that the Church sings: "We adore thy cross, O Lord, and we praise and glorify thy holy resurrection, for behold, by the wood of the cross, joy came into the whole world." Hence it is misleading to say, as some admirers of Simone Weil have done, that though she failed to understand the glorious half of the Christian message, she had a profound grasp of the sorrowful. There is no halving of the gospel.

82. The Need for Roots, p. 220.
83. Gravity and Grace, p. 139.
after chains, fill after hunger, reunion after separation. It is the joy which hovers over sorrow and fulfills it." 84 She is obviously wrong: the Easter alleluia is the song of freedom, it does hymn the breaking of the chains, the conquest over dust and death. The resurrection is victory, is triumph; sin will cease and the good endure. But Simone Weil had become so infatuated with the idea of unrelieved suffering and self-effacement as the very meaning of our life that the resurrection, as the unfolding of Christ's power, the manifestation of His Lordship and oneness with the Father, put her at a loss.

"The infinite which is in man is at the mercy of a little piece of iron; such is the human condition." When a dagger is touched to a man's throat, everything in him is reduced to that point, his life is delivered to cold metal, and God seems far away.85 Simone Weil saw this, man's fragile state, with great clarity. But she looked at it so often and so long that she saw little else, that she became almost blind to the rest of man's condition and abhorred the thought of consolation. "There must be no consolation," she wrote; and again: "To explain suffering is to console it; therefore it must not be explained." 86 If we go without consolation, the bliss of nonconsolation will be ours. We must seek no relief, no recompense, no reward. We must not sweeten what is bitter by belief in immortality or belief in the providential ordering of events. We must dismiss such comforts, we must reduce ourselves to nothing, to absolute poverty.

84. La Connaissance surnaturelle, p. 13.
86. Ibid., pp. 57, 165. Harsh though it may seem, I cannot resist the thought that for all her many attempts to share the hardships of others and to be poor with the poorest, Simone Weil lacked real pity for man. Not did she understand God's tenderness toward him, whom He made "frail" and in need of consolation. She wanted the Cross, and the Cross alone, never the kingdom, to be preached to the afflicted (La Connaissance surnaturelle, p. 265). Again she wrote: "We must not weep, so that we may not be comforted" (Gravity and Grace, p. 60). Struck by the fact that her counsel contradicts the beatitude, "Blessed are they who mourn, for they shall be comforted" (Mt 5:5), Thibon tries to soften it by saying, in an editorial note, that here she "is only condemning the tears wrung from us by the loss of temporal goods—tears which man sheds over himself." Be that as it may, when Jesus saw a widow lamenting the loss of her only son, He thought well of her tears—man's vernacular—He had compassion on her and gave her back her son (Lk 7:12–15). Simone Weil called this "human," and she was right; but in calling it "almost low," she showed that she had not grasped the marvel of Christ's humanity. That in Him appeared God's philantropia, God's love for man, a creature made of flesh and blood, and not of light, confused her. And as she did not understand the Incarnation, so she did not understand the Church, who pleads our weakness and in her liturgy does not cease to pray to the God of Israel to redeem us from our troubles (Ps 24:22).
The Enigma of Simone Weil

It is the joy of the Lord our God, to prepare for Himself a people, who are the joy of His people. It is wrong to think that the breaking of a heart is not the breaking of a soul. But Simone Weil believed suffering to be necessary, but the resurrection is the end. But in breaking the heart, we must kill ourselves by killing in spirit all that we love and every desire that it might last. This is what she called detachment. But it is not Christian detachment. "One must uproot oneself," she wrote, "cut the tree and make of it a cross and then carry it every day." But this is not the Christian cross.

Having come to Christ's crucifixion with the thought—or should I say the idol?—of unrelieved suffering, Simone Weil saw in it little else than the "absolute stripping of all sensible help, even of the love of God in so far as it can be felt"; more, she called it the "supreme tearing apart," the "infinite distance between God and God." Fitting the Lord's suffering to her own interpretation, she narrowed it almost to the piercing cry, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" in which, she said, "Christ accuses His Father of having abandoned Him." This is how she saw it: Rent by affliction, our souls continually plead "Why?," seeking a purpose, a design, which is not; but if they do not cease to love, if they cherish this emptiness, then they truly sing. Likewise, or rather, incomparably so, "the cry of Christ and the silence of the Father make together the supreme harmony, of which all music is but an imitation." All our cries of anguish vanishing "into the void," all our appeals "eternally without response," extol God's glory, but none so fully as Jesus' unheard plea on the cross; it is "the perfect praise of God's glory." Need I counter that Simone Weil's understanding of Christ's cry is not Christian? For to the Christian, suffering is not without purpose and his pleas do not strike against dead walls. They are heard, he knows, because Christ's cry was answered in the resurrection. It was answered even before. But I must not move too quickly, for what mystery could be more tormenting than that He who hung on the cross

88. Simone Weil has often been likened to St. John of the Cross. Though there is at times a similarity of language, there is no kinship of spirit. Detachment, for St. John the way, was for Simone Weil a goal.
89. *Gravity and Grace*, p. 86.
91. *Intuitions pré-chrétiennes*, p. 103.
93. *La Connaissance surnaturelle*, p. 86.
had said: "I and the Father are one," and now begged: "Why hast thou forsaken me?" To see the face of Love covered with spit, sweat, tears, and blood is to shudder; to know His soul at once flooded with bliss and engulfed in grief is to be dumbfounded. Yet so it is: like a peak bathed by the sun while the foot of the mountain is in shadow, His soul's summit lived in glory while that part of His soul directly concerned with His living among men and with His body was enveloped in darkness. Not simply darkness, but our darkness. His was not the agony of one fearful for his own salvation but the agony of the Saviour of the world. Weighted down though He was by His seeing the sins and ills of all, His sorrow was lightened and lighted by His knowledge that He was enduring it for us. This and nothing else is the meaning of St. Paul's words Simone Weil quoted so often, that He, the Sinless, was made sin, made "a curse": not that He was accursed Himself but that He bore the curse of our wickedness; taking upon Himself our bitter lot, identifying Himself with our anguished state, He set us free. But Simone Weil wrote: "The Cross is hell accepted. Suffering is a passing toward the nothingness on high or that below." 94 No, Jesus was not abandoned to the despair and nothingness which is hell; when given over by His Father to the cruelty of His persecutors, He was given over to the demands of His own love—a love so far from withdrawal that even in the midst of pain He promised paradise to the penitent thief, and to His mother the world.

The cry of Golgotha was piercing. Simone Weil was right but more so than she thought: wrung from the lips of the Innocent, it pierced the heavens. She was right: it was the question of all sufferers which the great Sufferer made His own; and yet it was, at the same time, the answer He gave to His foes, indeed His authentication for ages to come. For the cry was the beginning of a long psalm every Israelite was wont to pray, a psalm which begins in grief and ends as a song of hope; a vision which describes the bitter and yet triumphant trials of the Messiah—something Simone Weil completely overlooked. Could there be the slightest doubt, then, that when Jesus uttered its first words, the whole twenty-first psalm and its total meaning were before His mind? Here are some of its pleas and prophecies:

I am a worm, not a man;
the scorn of men, despised by the people. . . .

94. Ibid., p. 64.
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I am like water poured out;
all my bones are racked. . .
They have pierced my hands and my feet. . .
they divide my garments among them. . .
But you, O Lord, be not far from me;
O my help, hasten to aid me. . .
I will proclaim your name to my brethren. . .
All the ends of the earth
shall remember and turn to the Lord;
All the families of the nations
shall bow down before Him.
For dominion is the Lord's,
and He rules the nations.

When Christ, then, cried out His distress with a loud voice, He solemnly proclaimed that He suffered in virtue of messianic mercy, and that risen, He would lead the nations and bring them under the kingship of Yahweh. O Wisdom which, to confound the would-be-wise, used a cry of anguish to claim victory! 96

CREATION AND MAN'S EXISTENCE

"My God, why hast thou forsaken me?" This moment is the incomprehensible perfection of love, the love that passes all understanding." 97 If we ask Simone Weil why it bespeaks such love and praise, she answers us: "Because there cannot be two more separated than are the Father and the Son at the moment in which the Son uttered the

95. The translation of this verse follows the Septuagint. Today's Hebrew text being unintelligible, many reconstructions have been suggested, for instance: "They have bound my hands and my feet," or: "My hands and my feet are wasted away." For a discussion see Edward J. Kissane, The Book of Psalms (Dublin: Browne and Nolan, 1953), I, 100-101.

96. For a profound meditation on Christ's cry, see Charles Journet's "La quatrième parole du Christ en Croix" (Nova et Vetera, XXVII, 1, Jan.-March 1952, pp. 47-69), to which these two paragraphs owe much. Fiedler, in his article on Simone Weil in Commentary, writes: "There is scarcely a Christian church that dares remind its faithful that the final words of Jesus were words of despair, 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me!'" (p. 41). Quite apart from the fact that the Catholic Church does not hesitate to remind her faithful of this cry—it is part of her liturgy—the cry is not "the final words of Jesus." To suppress "It is consummated" (Jn 19:30) and "Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit" (Lk 23:46) is to distort the meaning of the cry and to give to the reader unfamiliar with the Passion an entirely false impression, though even such a reader ought to realize that the cry was not uttered in despair. For is it likely that any man in despair would turn to heaven and say the loving words "My God, my God"?

97. Intuitions pré-chrétiennes, p. 131.
eternal cry: 'My God, why hast thou forsaken me?'” 98 In order to understand her answer, we must look again at her philosophy of creation. Here are some excerpts from her American diary:

Even before the Passion, already in the act of creation, God empties Himself of His divinity, humbles Himself, takes the form of a slave.

For God, creation did not consist of extending Himself but of withdrawing Himself. . . . The creation, the Passion, the Eucharist—always the same movement of retreat. This movement is love.

God's great crime against us is having created us; it is that we exist. Our great crime against God is our existence. When we forgive God our existence, our existence is forgiven by God.

The Passion is the punishment for the creation. The creation is a trap where the devil catches God. God falls into it through love. . . . Faith is believing that God is love and nothing else. This is not yet the right expression. Faith is believing that reality is love and nothing else. As a child, in jest, hides himself from his mother behind a chair, so God amuses Himself by separating God from creation. We are this jest of God.

Our sin is the will to be, and our punishment is the belief that we are. The expiation is the will to be no longer; and salvation for us consists in seeing that we are not. Adam made us believe that we are; Christ showed us that we are not. To make us understand that we are not-being, God made Himself not-being.

The prodigal son demands of his father the share that falls to him, and then squanders it in loose living. . . . This share is free will. . . . "Give me my share," this is original sin. Give me free will, the choice of good and evil. This gift of free will, what is it if not creation itself? What from the viewpoint of God is creation, is sin from the viewpoint of the creature.

In what sense has Christ atoned for mankind? To atone is to restore what one has taken unjustly. Mankind stole free will, the choice of good and evil. Christ gave it back in learning obedience. Birth is a participation in the theft of Adam. Death is a participation in the restitution of Christ. But this participation does not save unless it is consented to. Salvation is consenting to die.

My existence is a lessening of God's glory. God gives it to me that I may desire to lose it.99

98. Ibid.
99. La Connaissance surnaturelle, pp. 14, 26, 225-226, 222, 175, 167-168, 169,
In order to understand the enigma of creation, God empties Himself of the role of a slave. But, of withdrawing from creation—always with God, we exist. To give God our entire attention is a trap.

Faith is the right expression of that we are. It is not something that God amuses at. As a child, God amuses God. The whole of the Old and New Testaments cries out against her many confusions. She tries to reconcile the irreconcilable, Moses and Man, and so makes the Lord, the All-Ruler, to whom

and 132. In defense of Simone Weil's "We are not-being," some writers invoke St. Catherine of Siena's "I am she who is not, and thou art He who is." But this comparison is no more substantial than that with St. John of the Cross. The double-edged knowledge of God and self (Bl. Angela of Foligno's "double abyss") was indeed a recurrent theme with St. Catherine. "Thou art life, eternal God, and I am death. Thou art light and I am darkness. Thou art infinite and I am finite," she prayed, a lover's way of saying that her being is from Him and that whatever goodness and wisdom there is in her is from Him. This is not my interpretation, for here is another of her prayers: "In thy nature, eternal God, I perceive my own nature. And what is my nature? My nature is fire." What a world of difference, too, between Simone Weil's and her vision of creation! "Eternal Father, how came it to pass that thou didst create us?" St. Catherine asked. "The fire [of thy love] compelled thee . . . thou didst not look upon the offense we would cause thee . . . . Thou didst remain in charity, for thou art nothing but the fire of charity, thou art mad with love of thy creation." (From various Letters and Prayers of St. Catherine, as quoted by Johannes Jorgensen, Saint Catherine of Siena, trans. by Ingeborg Lund, New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1944, pp. 302, 375, 369, and 341.)

100. One of the first to point out the gnostic element in Simone Weil was Père Robert Rouquette, S.J., in his "Mystère de Simone Weil," Etudes, LXXXIV, 268 (Jan–March 1951), pp. 86-106. Marcel Moré, in "La Pensée religieuse de Simone Weil," Dieu Vivant, No. 17 (1950), pp. 35-68, has shown certain parallels between Simone Weil and the Cathari, but in trying to present her as a conscious and willful heretic, he has, I fear, overstated his case. However wrong her thought, her sincerity, I think, cannot be doubted.

101. Lest any reader think that I am imputing intentions to Simone Weil that were not her own, I quote from her Letter to a Priest, in which she writes: "There is not, as far as I can see, any real difference—save in the forms of expression—between the Manichaean and Christian conceptions concerning the relationship between good and evil" (p. 41). To speak only of their basic tenet: According to the
glory and honor and power because He has created all things (Apoc 4:8, 11), a victim of the devil. Again, not only does she identify man's existence and man's sin, she misinterprets the gift of freedom as if it were essentially its abuse. Blinded to the fact that freedom is the very life and the idiom of a thinking being who cleaves to the good, she cannot see that what makes man God's likeness is his response-ability, that he is answerable for his life because he is spoken to by God and given the awesome power to answer. Her confusion goes further still, for she does not see how absurd it is to call freedom man's theft, which is the same as saying that he was free before he was free, that he is before he is. Nor does she seem to feel the enormity of speaking in one breath of God's love and of His crime in having created man. Thus all is discarded, God's dignity and man's, and all, it seems, for the sake of the void, which looks so much like the pagan nightmare of primeval chaos. Why? One cannot help wonder, Why?

But one is not astonished that, having started on this road, Simone Weil followed it with relentless logic. And yet one shudders to read a prayer of hers, in which she equates her own idea of "decreation" with the following of Christ, and so asks for an utter stripping, not of selfishness but of her very existence. "Say to God," she wrote in her American diary:

Father, in the name of Christ, grant me this.

That it be beyond my power to make any movement of my body, even the merest attempt at movement, correspond to any act of my will, as if I were a complete paralytic. That I be incapable of receiving the slightest sensation, like one who is completely blind and deaf and deprived of his other three senses. That it be beyond my power to forge the least link between two thoughts, however simple, as if I were one of those complete idiots who not only cannot count or read but who have never learned to speak. That I be insensible to any kind of pain or joy and incapable of any love for any being, for anything, even for myself, as if I were an old man, completely doddered.

Father, in the name of Christ, really grant me all this.

...
rigidity, in uninterrupted conformity with thy will. That my hearing, my vision, my taste, my smell, my touch, receive the perfect and exact imprint of thy creation. That this intelligence of mine be fully lucid and link up all ideas in perfect conformity with thy truth. That my sensibility experience every shade of pain and joy in the greatest possible intensity and in all their purity. That my love be an utterly devouring flame of loving God for the sake of God. That then all this be torn out of me, be devoured by God, be transformed into the substance of Christ, and be given as food to the wretched who lack all nourishment for body and soul. And that I myself be paralyzed, blind, deaf, idiotic, and doddering.

Father, work this transformation now, in the name of Christ. And though I ask it with an imperfect faith, give heed to my petition as if it were uttered with perfect faith.

Father, since thou art the Good and I am the mediocre, wrest from me this body and this soul to make them things that are all thine. And let there remain of me, even through eternity, only this wresting itself, or nothing.

One could ask this, she went on to say, only in spite of oneself. But if, in spite of oneself, it is asked with entire and unreserved consent, indeed with violence, then the soul enters into its nuptial night with God, for, she said, "marriage is a rape consented to." And the result of this union is "to make of the personhood of a man a simple go-between for his flesh and God." 102 Here, of course, the bridal imagery so dear to the author of the Song of Songs, to the prophets, to St. Paul, and to Christ Himself, is perverted, for it is not the way of God's love (nor is

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102. La Connaissance surnaturelle, pp. 204-205; see also Davy, The Mysticism of Simone Weil, pp. 53-54. The idea of personhood seems to have frightened Simone Weil. All through her writings there are passages which refer to God as personal and impersonal. Some have thought that when she said "impersonal" she really meant "suprapersonal," for God is indeed everything He is superabundantly. It is difficult, however, to attach such an interpretation to the following sentence: "The Father in heaven, who abandons His Son and keeps silent; the Christ abandoned, nailed in silence—two impersonal Divinities which are reflected each in the other and make only one God" (La Connaissance surnaturelle, p. 78). In any case, she leaves no room for doubt that human personhood must go, and calls not our personhood but its renunciation the image of God in us (ibid., p. 37). "The great obstacle," she wrote, "to the loss of personhood" (which loss she called "the goal") "is the feeling of guilt." The practice of virtue, she added, is for the sake of ridding oneself of this feeling and so attaining this "goal"—not for the sake of coming closer to the word which God speaks at the birth of each man, that is, of becoming more a person, but for the sake of becoming less (ibid., p. 165). Further: What is sacred in man is the impersonal aspect in a human being, hence the concept of human rights is specious ("Beyond Personalism," Cross Currents, II, 3, Spring 1952, pp. 59-76).
it the way of man's) to violate and to trample underfoot man's being, rather to lift it up and make it new.

What Simone Weil asked in her prayer is something that can never be asked in the name of Christ. The road she walks in it is not His road, which leads to transfiguration and not to nothingness. But she held unfeignedly that the man striving for perfection must become a corpse, as it were, in order to be the abode of the Divine, for only inert matter—"more beautiful than the most beautiful of human beings"—responds, she said, to God's justice. This thought is bound up with her conception that the human soul consists of two parts: one created, mind and will, which, in creating, God abandoned, since it is not Himself; the other uncreated, which, being Himself, He retains under His care and which for Simone Weil is supernatural love, or "the Life, the Light, the Word . . . the presence of God's only Son here below." Those in whom He is thus present are "not adopted sons of God," she declared with great emphasis, "but true sons. Yet the Son is unique," she went on in her speculation, and "it is therefore He who enters these souls. But in that case even the greatest saints will not see the kingdom of heaven. For almost all have done or said things which, it seems, Christ would not have said or done." She continued with what for one who has had even a glimpse of Christ is unbelievable despair: "After all, there is perhaps only one man saved in a generation. For the others, those who are not positively lost, one must imagine something equivalent to the notions of purgatory, reincarnation, etc." 

Here and elsewhere Simone Weil's thought varies and is not always consistent on small points; still, as a whole, her philosophy is altogether consistent, and it is—I cannot see how one can draw any other conclusion—as far removed as can be from the teaching of the Church, indeed from any outlook which, by even the most strenuous stretching of the term, can be called Christian. When she said that she adhered completely to the mysteries of the Christian faith, this profession is emptied of meaning by her having added that her adherence was of love and not of affirmation, and that the dogmas of the Church are owed "respectful attention, not adherence." Likewise her saying that her heart had been forever transported into the Blessed Sacrament—

103. La Connaissance surnaturelle, p. 260.
104. Ibid., p. 49.
105. Ibid., pp. 182-183.
106. Perrin and Thibon, op. cit., p. 53; Letter to a Priest, pp. 57, 60.
convincing when read by itself—does not have the meaning a Catholic would attach to it, since Simone Weil thought that for the Greeks the Eleusinian mysteries, for the Hindus yoga breathing, for Druids and certain Californian Indians lightning, were also more or less sacraments, even the equivalent of the Eucharist. Few things reveal more subtly that her thought, at least, was nowhere near the threshold of the Church than her turning the eucharistic mystery upside down. She liked to say that "at the center of the Catholic religion a little formless matter is found, a little piece of bread." The truth is exactly the opposite: Christ is the center. In the sacramental order, the world of the spirit is not reduced to matter; on the contrary, matter is raised to become the server of grace; it is freed as it were from down-drag, made the bearer of the Spirit, and in the Sacrament of the Altar it is the merest veil for the Christ of glory. No sacrament of decreation, the Eucharist is the hallowing of man and of all creation.

ISRAEL

Having all along misconstrued the mysteries of faith, Simone Weil had to misunderstand, even rebel against, the God-given mission of the ancient Israel. "The Jews, that little bunch of uprooted men, have caused the uprooting of the whole round globe," she wrote. Christianity, through its link with Israel's past, was thus for her a thing without roots, roots, that is, in the life of the nations. Colonial conquest, capitalism, Marxism, even anti-Semitism, every uprooting movement, she made follow on the spiritual invasion of the world by this handful of "fugitive slaves." Again she wrote: "Israel. The whole of it, starting from Abraham and including him, is foul and atrocious, as if by design (except for some prophets). As if to tell as clearly as can be: Watch out! Here is evil!" Her vocabulary here is borrowed from the crudest anti-Semitism, from the vilifications of those who make the Jews a whipping boy for their own sins. But in Simone Weil they were the merest logic. How could she help hating the intimate of the one God,

107. Letter to a Priest, p. 16; La Connaissance surnaturelle, pp. 313, 146.
108. Waiting for God, p. 199.
109. La Pesanteur et la grace (Paris: Librairie Plon, 1948), pp. 192, 189; see also Gravity and Grace, p. 219. Gravity and Grace, the English translation of La Pesanteur et la grace, omits a whole chapter, entitled "Israel," containing this and many similar passages. No doubt, the publishers wished to spare the sensibilities of their readers, and not least those of Simone Weil's admirers. But does not such an omission misrepresent Simone Weil's thought?
who allows no other gods beside Him? Though often sinning, stiff-necked, and unfaithful, Israel was yet chosen to be His champion, and so, by this its role in the economy of salvation, rejects everything she stands for and stands for everything she rejects.

Having made her own image of God, a silent, absent God, Simone Weil could not hear the God of Israel, the God who speaks and who says:

> Can a woman forget her suckling babe,  
> be without compassion for the child of her womb?  
> Even there may forget,  
> yet I will not forget you.

(Is 49:15)

He is the people's and the world's Ruler, Shepherd, Bridegroom, whose prophets knew they served a Sovereign, loving and therefore jealous. They loathed compromise, the carrying of water on both shoulders; they denounced idolatrous wanderings to hilltops and groves. And as they were compassionate, they were severe, threatening punishment, invoking God's fire on those who whored after new and false gods, Elijah even slaying the four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal. All this galled Simone Weil. "The curse of Israel weighs on Christianity. Atrocities, the Inquisition, the extermination of heretics and unbelievers—this is Israel," she cried out. It is true, the Church is the heir of prophetic anger, indeed the only one to keep it alive, though for her the slaying of the wicked is not and can never be the answer to evil, nor was it the ultimate answer for the prophets; even Elijah realized that God was not in the fire or the storm but in the gentle whisper of air. For the Church the Cross is the final word, but love and forgiveness are perverted unless they are seen as the love and forgiveness of the God who is stern because holy.

The true God is Simone Weil's stumbling block and not the Jews, not those Christians who have forgotten forbearance toward unbelievers, who have thought to solve evil by the sword and not the Cross. "Christianity has become totalitarian, conquering, exterminating, because it has not developed the notion of God's absence and nonaction here below. It has attached itself to Yahweh as much as to Christ," she wrote, and heaped abuse on the God of Israel as a "carnal God, a "tribal God," she did not treat "the gods," that the centuries-old Yahweh," or at least herself a "fugitive of the advent and cosmic visions."

For all her rational patience as to misery,"114 Tellico, the Catholic, Israel's God is his "tribal God," she did not treat "all sins," that the centuries-old Yahweh," or at least herself a "fugitive of the advent and cosmic visions."

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"To talk of 'G"
a “tribal God,” a “heavy God.” 112 Deaf to the blasphemy she uttered, she did not tremble to say that “Yahweh, Allah, Hitler, are earthly gods,” that the devil “who offered to Christ to accomplish for Him the centuries-old promises to the Messiah was none other than Yahweh,” or at least “an aspect of Yahweh.” 118 Only because she was herself a “fugitive,” utterly homeless, could she equate the prophecies of the advent and the temptations in the desert, could she mistake the cosmic visions of the Old Testament for worldliness and materialism.

For all her repeated “waiting, waiting,” Simone Weil lacked essential patience and reverence for time: time to her was not a gift but misery. 114 Tellingly she demanded: “We must get rid of our superstition of chronology in order to find eternity.” 115 The God who does not disdain time, who enters it as it were that man may meet Him, overturned her concept of life, and therefore she rejected the marvel of a progressive revelation, in which God made Himself known to His people step by step, leading it to that mount which is Christ. 116 She could not see that Israel’s swinging back and forth between splendor and slavery, between virtue and sin, holy zeal and idolatry, that the dramatic interplay between grace and freedom, was part of a divine plan. In fact she sneered at God’s bringing up Israel as one does a son: “To talk of ‘God the educator’ in connection with this people is a bad joke . . . a shocking lie which has vitiated our civilization at its

112. Ibid., pp. 189-190; Gravity and Grace, p. 219.
113. Gravity and Grace, p. 129; La Connaissance surnaturelle, pp. 273, 46. For a Catholic, Israel’s divine election is not a matter of opinion but of faith, and the God of Israel is his God. It is astonishing, therefore, or rather distressing, to see how lightly many of Simone Weil’s friends and critics have treated her outbursts against the Jews. Gustave Thibon simply calls her “the daughter of the people marked with the sign of contradiction . . . and her passionate anti-Semitism is the most striking evidence of her descent” (Perrin and Thibon, op. cit., p. 119). Gabriel Marcel sees her as “non-conformist . . . very far from sparing her co-religionists” (“Simone Weil,” The Month, II, 1, July 1949, p. 12). Walter Warnach speaks of “the fanaticism of a renegade who rages against her own origin” (“Simone Weil: Das Geheimnis einer Berufung,” Wort und Wahrheit, VIII, 10, Oct. 1953, p. 749). All this evades the issue, where it does not distort it. T. S. Eliot, who recognizes clearly that Simone Weil “falls into something very like the Marcionite heresy,” can yet say that she “castigated Israel with all the severity of a Hebrew prophet” (in his Preface to The Need for Roots, p. viii). There was nothing of the Hebrew prophet in Simone Weil, for his severity is of love, but not so hers. The critic who has dealt most fully and most admirably with Simone Weil’s stand toward Israel is Charles Moeller in “Simone Weil devant l’Eglise et l’Ancien Testament,” Cahiers Sioniens, VI, 2 (June 1952), pp. 104-131.
114. La Connaissance surnaturelle, p. 92.
115. Letter to a Priest, p. 48.
base." 117 Nothing easier than to be shocked at the many crimes the Bible records, for in contrast to pagan historians, the sacred writers did not idolize their people; with a candor that transcends the natural tendency to conceal, they laid bare its faults and the weaknesses of its great figures. Nothing easier, but nothing more revealing, for the Bible tests every man: if he looks at Israel's many failures and does not see in them his own, he has not undergone the change of heart Christ demands, his self still reigns where God ought to reign. In the same light must be judged Simone Weil's pronouncement: "A people chosen for blindness, chosen to be the executioners of Christ." 118 Whoever sees the Crucified and then points at the Jews instead of striking his own breast is far from His spirit. Indeed, if a man should dare to deny his own part in Christ's death, he is in danger of denying himself his part in His redemption.

Without doubt, Simone Weil's chief accusation against Israel is that its whole life was worship of the Great Beast, service of the collective, to her the only real idolatry; what made it accursed in her eyes was that "never till the Exile," so she thought, did its God "speak to the soul of man." 119 This, of course, is patently untrue. Did He not speak to Abraham, to Moses, to Samuel, and to many others; and when He gave the Law, saying "Thou shalt," was the "thou" not every member as well as the whole people? Stripped of their vituperation, her remarks point to a truth she saw and did not see, a truth the Church lives by: that salvation is social. It is not as isolated individuals, not as shards or splinters, that men are saved, but as members of God's people or at least as linked to it by faith and love. For how could there be salvation without the bond of charity? This, and not the Great Beast, is the significance of "Israel," and this the Church has inherited, so much so that Père de Lubac can say that though her membership comes overwhelmingly from the nations, the very idea of the Church comes from the Jews. 120 Thus during the Easter Vigil, before she blesses the waters...

117. La Pesanteur et la grace, pp. 189-190.
118. Ibid., p. 192.
119. Ibid., p. 189; Gravity and Grace, pp. 219, 216.
120. Henri de Lubac, S.J., Catholicism, trans. by L. C. Sheppard (New York: Longmans, Green, 1950), p. 23. For a Jewish answer to Simone Weil's accusation against Israel, see Martin Buber, "The Silent Question," in his At the Turning (New York: Farrar, Straus and Young, 1952), pp. 29-44. Strangely enough, Buber seems to blame her antagonism toward the Jews on "a conventional conception of Judaism created by Christianity" (p. 40). But surely he knows that the Church has always considered the Marcionite divorce of the Old and New Testaments one of her...
of baptism, the Church prays: "Grant that the world in its fullness pass
over to the sonship of Abraham and the dignity of Israel." To which
Simone Weil replies: "Christianity ought to be purged of the heritage
of Israel." 121

It was not as men that she hated the Jews, but as symbols. The Old
Testament stood in her way like the mighty trunk of an oak, which
she could not bend, while the New, its crown, with branches supple
and leaves tender, seemed to yield to her manipulations. 122 Thus she
could at times think herself close to the Church, but can any question
remain that the sum of her philosophy is altogether outside the Chris­
tian orbit? It is even a betrayal of her own best insights, of, for ex­
ample, this inimitable sentence: "God loves not as I love but as an
emerald is green. He is 'I love.'" 123

ENIGMA

STATING the enigma does not solve it, does not explain the origin of
this strange philosophy of negation. Many have shown its historical
antecedents, but no reference, however valid, to Plato or Pythagoras,
to the Manichaeans or the Cathari, accounts for Simone Weil’s gnosti­
cism, for "gnosticism projects into myth one’s inner experience." 124 It is
always the turning into metaphysics of an emotional conflict, of a
drama that engulfs a man’s whole being; in it a man mistakes the mold
of his heart for the mold of the universe.

What then is the inner source of Simone Weil’s thought? How does

121. La Connaissance surnaturelle, p. 173.
122. Simone Weil’s attempt to make certain parts of the Old Testament fit her
frame of mind shows once more that she could not free herself from her fetters.
Nothing good must be said about the Jews; therefore she fancied that the book of
Job, which she liked, must have been the translation and secularization by a Jew of
a non-Jewish tale of a savior-god. Also Isaiah must be in part non-Jewish (La
Connaissance surnaturelle, p. 218). To climax this, she asked whether the story of
Noah’s drunkenness and nakedness—another sign of biblical candor—was not a
distortion of history by the Hebrews "as Semites and murderers of the Canaanites"
(Letter to a Priest, p. 41).
123. La Connaissance surnaturelle, p. 77.
124. G. Quispel, Gnosis als Weltreligion (1951), p. 17; as quoted by Claude
it come that a woman so profoundly drawn to the Lord yet remained so far from Him? Why did she not accept the entire Christ? Why did she try to impoverish His messianic ministry by limiting it almost to the Passion, and why did she reduce the Passion to hardly more than the cry, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me"? Why did she wish, at least at times, that Christ had not risen, that He were without His Church, that He were without link to the Israel from which He sprang? Why did she wish to remain at the intersection of Christianity and non-Christianity, all alone? Again, why did she conceive of God as withdrawn from, and powerless in, His creation? Why did the world seem to her to be ruled by necessity and down-drag? Why did she long to be reduced to a little pile of inert matter, even to nothingness, and think humility the consent to the horror of such reduction? Why did she prefer the impersonal to the personal, afflication to God's comfort, death to life? Why did she proclaim decreation as the goal?

I should hesitate to answer these questions and to probe into the secrets of her soul had Simone Weil herself not told us, almost in so many words, how determining an experience the spiritual crisis was that she went through at the age of fourteen. As she discovered the mathematical genius of her brother, she felt dwarfed and excluded from the kingdom of truth; she thought herself unworthy to exist. Her brother's exceptional gifts threw her, as she tells us, "into one of those bottomless desairs of adolescence." There were months of "inward darkness," of deep anguish, which no one can imagine who has not lived through it. "Seriously" she "thought of dying." This temptation to suicide she repressed, but did she ever fully conquer it? What saved her from it was the idea that it was still possible for her, in spite of her "mediocrity," to become a genius if only she concentrated perpetually on, and gave her undivided attention to, truth.

Little by little, then, she developed a philosophy that was certainly uncommon and had sparks of genius; but it retained all the darkness of its birth. Into it went the unworthiness, the dwarfdom and reduction she had imagined. She had felt deserted and alone; now she wanted to be and considered it a virtue. The social seemed evil, the Great Beast. Absence, distance, withdrawal—all guises for her despair—became the structure of death; nothing could be submerging a mutilated and enslaved. He turns himself too her past; could hardly ways of killing to judge her were and her will. Only as she des Authors one can realize it, longspun she though, all "Spiritual confessions the sin of death. The move from are many; of day. Sim she was vi still is little or ," she was vis of this clim between her is still some

125. La Connaissance sur natturelle, p. 48.
126. Waiting for God, p. 64.
The Lord yet remained tire Christ? Why did limiting it almost to hardly more than taken me'? Why did risen, that He were to the Israel from at the intersection of why did she con­
1, His creation? Why structure of the universe. She had been tormented by the allurement of death; now she could die slowly and heroically. Hence her desire to be submerged in the mechanism and anonymity of factory life, to be mutilated and branded by the iron of misery, to bear the mark of a slave. Hence her passion for manual labor: "Through work man turns himself into matter," she wrote. "Work is like a death." Hence too her passion for "absolute solitude," for "unconsoled affliction." She could hardly have been more candid than when she remarked: "Two ways of killing ourselves: suicide or detachment." It would be rash to judge her, for no one can know how strong all those early impulses were and how they may have hindered her vision and imprisoned her will. Only a hard man could withhold from her his compassion. But as she deserves compassion, she deserves our honesty too. And in honesty one cannot but see and say that, though she may never have fully realized it, her philosophy was a holding on to the pain of her youth, a longspan suicide. What disturbed her early life, what bent her thought, also injured her spirituality; and she spelled it out in her "Spiritual Autobiography" when she closed it with the strangest of all confessions: "Every time I think of the crucifixion of Christ I commit the sin of envy." Envy and death; worse, to envy Christ His death—what could reveal more clearly and more depressingly her still unredeemed heart?

In this her anguished heart was her philosophy born. True, she is not the only one in our day to have fallen under the unnatural spell of death. The poets who hail the void, the philosophers who make man move from nothingness to nothingness, are not few and their followers are many; and among them, all that is night is preferred to the light of day. Simone Weil certainly knew this mental atmosphere, but there is little or no evidence that it was the origin of her philosophy. In fact, she was violently opposed to some of the men who were the authors of this climate. But in spite of all the many and important differences between her and them, in spite of her many exceptional qualities, she is still somehow one with them. For so much is hope "the very stuff of
which our soul is made" (Gabriel Marcel), so much is despair a betrayal of man's freedom, that who abandons the first and woos the second must pay a penalty: Simone Weil, who sought to flee time, produced only a philosophy that is dated.

A dark fabric woven of subtle despair—such is Simone Weil's thought. And yet for all her shielding herself against love, for all her resistance to happiness, indeed to the joy of Christ, she could not help longing. While still in Marseilles she wrote a parable of her life, which has been called the parable of "love wedded to affliction" and which forms the Prologue to her New York and London diaries:

He entered my room and said: "Wretched one, who understands nothing, who knows nothing. Come with me and I shall teach you things you do not dream of." I followed him. He took me to a church. . . . He led me up to the altar and said to me: "Kneel down." I said to him: "I have not been baptized." He said: "Fall on your knees with love before this place, as before the abode of truth." I obeyed. He made me leave and go off to an attic from which, through the open window, one saw the whole town spread out. . . . He bade me sit down. We were alone. He spoke. Occasionally someone entered, joined the conversation, then left. . . . Sometimes he would fall silent, taking bread from a cupboard, which we shared. This bread truly had the taste of bread. Never again have I tasted anything like it. He would pour for me and pour for himself wine which had the taste of the sun and of the earth upon which that city was built.

But one day he—the man of this parable is none other than Christ—made her leave, though she fell on her knees, held him, and begged him not to drive her out. She wandered about the city, never knowing where the attic was and never seeking it, for she felt that it had all been a mistake, that her place was almost anywhere but there. Thus sorrow seems to be the parable's last word, but in the end hope breaks in:

I cannot help at times repeating to myself, with fear and remorse, a little of what he told me. How do I know whether I remember it exactly? He is not here to tell me. I know well that he does not love me. How could he love me? And yet, deep within me, something, a point of my soul, cannot resist thinking, though I tremble with fear, that perhaps, in spite of everything, he loves me. 131

131. La Connaissance surnaturelle, pp. 9-10.