

SIMONE WEIL'S SOTERIOLOGY IN RELATION TO HER DOCTRINE OF
CREATION: A RESPONSE TO THE QUESTION "WHERE IS GOD?" IN A
SUFFERING WORLD

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Abstract

The writings of Simone Weil have profoundly shaped my own thinking; however, her soteriology is unorthodox (some would say heterodox) and raises many questions. In this paper, I critically evaluate her soteriology in relation to her doctrine of creation, viewed as a response to the question “where is God?” in a suffering world.

Employing light as a metaphor for the Holy Spirit, she explores how the supernatural illuminates the contradictions of human existence and, through beauty, attention, and affliction, brings us into an existential contact with God in this world. The fact of our existence is what separates us from God, and we must consent to the death of our false selves, so that God’s unconditional love may pass through us uninterrupted to the world. With her concept of decreation, Weil ultimately turns these insights negatively upon herself, but I argue that they should be understood as metaphors describing the “new creation” and our union with God through Christ. I conclude by exploring the implications of her thought for creation’s consummation and the individual in eternity, before considering her own lack of assurance revealed in the “Marseille Prologue.”

Declaration

The work is original and has not been submitted previously
in support of any qualification or course.

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to Liz Partridge (1957–2019), who started this journey with me and was unable to reach the end, but without whose support and constant encouragement it would never have been completed.

While the faults of this work are my own, I would also like to thank Dr Lucy Peppiatt, my dissertation supervisor at WTC, for her patience, challenging questions, and above all her refusal to allow me settle for anything less than my best.

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Chapter I: Introduction

For some, the French philosopher and religious thinker Simone Weil (1909–1943) is a suspiciously “heterodox” figure whose thought should be approached with caution. However, for others, her spirituality and insights have continued to be influential since her death.¹ Both the Popes (John XXIII and Paul VI), who were instrumental in establishing the reforms arising from Vatican II, read her writings appreciatively in the period preceding the Council. It is possible to see her influence on its ecumenical emphasis and the recognition of shared values with other faiths.² Indeed, Pope Paul VI acknowledges her as a significant intellectual influence (the others being Pascal and Bernanos).³

Weil's writings have profoundly influenced my own thinking, both in terms of faith and my understanding of the world. Discovering the anthology of her writings published as *Waiting for God* was a significant catalyst in my coming to faith.⁴ I found her unflinching honesty and personal testimony of direct spiritual encounter compelling when searching for authenticity in my own life. Her example, and the lucidity of her writings, encouraged me to keep looking and, nearly eighty years after her death, she continues to speak to our increasingly post-Christian culture, although in other ways, she is an old soul whose inspiration comes from a close observation of the world and a reading of the great spiritual classics and mystics of the past.

The younger Weil is sometimes portrayed as communist (the “Red Virgin”).⁵ However, it is more accurate to describe her as a syndicalist-anarchist, active within the trade union movement.⁶ Peter Winch highlights Weil's “individualism,” which is

¹ Lissa McCullough, *The Religious Philosophy of Simone Weil: An Introduction* (London: I.B Tauris, 2014), 8.

² Jane Khin Zaw, “The Spirit Blows Where It Chooses. Simone Weil, the Church and Vatican II,” *The Way* 56.2 (2017): 89–110.

³ David McLellan, *Simone Weil. Utopian Pessimist* (London: Macmillan Press, 1989), 268.

⁴ Simone Weil, *Waiting for God*, trans. Emma Craufurd (New York: HarperCollins, 2009).

⁵ Sylvie Weil, *At Home with André and Simone Weil*, trans. Benjamin Ivry (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2010), 111; Robert Zaretsky, *The Subversive Simone Weil: A Life in Five Ideas* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2021), 6.

⁶ Palle Yourgrau, *Simone Weil* (London: Reaktion Books, 2011), 45; Zaretsky, *The Subversive Simone Weil*, 17.

deeply rooted in her philosophic outlook.⁷ It is impossible to divorce Weil's character from her thought. They are inextricably linked, and this can lead her to extremes (for example, in her negative relationship to food).⁸ She could be both stubborn and compassionate, there were no half measures with her. However, her single-mindedness enabled her to see connections and follow them to their logical conclusions. Occasionally blinkered, she was always brutally honest, particularly concerning herself.

Her analysis of affliction and the cross is profound; however, her soteriology is highly unorthodox, shaped by her complex character, independent thought, and personal experience of God. She views creation as the result of a withdrawal within God and posits a rending between an impersonal, powerful God who is in heaven and a powerless God who is love.⁹ This raises many questions for an orthodox understanding of the Trinity and how God is active in the world.

Thesis question

This paper is a critical evaluation of Simone Weil's soteriology in relation to her doctrine of creation, viewed as a response to the question "where is God?" in a suffering world. Her distinctive theology is shaped by personal experience and the reality of suffering, and that is the lens through which I approach her thought. Her focus is on how we meet with God in *this* world, and although she deals with systematic ideas and categories, the danger is that by concentrating on how she diverges from orthodoxy and reading her purely from that perspective, we also reject her insights into God and the human condition, which in my view would be a loss. I will point out some of her more heterodox ideas and argue that these still have merit, while acknowledging her blind spots, occasional ambiguities (especially when drawing on the notebooks), and strength of challenges to her thought from Classical Christianity.

⁷ Peter Winch, *Simone Weil: The Just Balance*, Modern European Philosophy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 50.

⁸ See Yourgrau, *Simone Weil*, 105–16.

⁹ Simone Weil, "The Love of God and Affliction," in *Waiting for God*, trans. Emma Craufurd (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2009), 72.

Literature review

Primary literature

Weil's writings cover a wide range of subjects, including social, political, philosophical and, in her final phase, religious themes. My focus is on the latter. Beyond a small circle, she was not widely known in her lifetime, and her most significant works were published posthumously from essays, letters, and notebooks, many of which were left with friends following her exile from France during the Second World War. These were compiled and edited as *Gravity and Grace* (1947) and *Waiting for God* (1950) and were soon translated into English.¹⁰ Of equal importance for understanding her thought are the numerous notebooks, which she continued to work on until the end of her life.¹¹ Since they were not intended for publication, they provide an invaluable, though sometimes fragmentary, insight into her thought processes, spiritual development, and the sources that shaped her.

Secondary literature

While the secondary literature on Weil is extensive, it embraces a range of divergent and often subjective interpretations. Where possible, I shall allow Weil to speak for herself; however, Miklos Vetö, *The Religious Metaphysics of Simone Weil*, is essential reading for understanding her theological thought, as is Marie Caubaud Meaney, *Simone Weil's Apologetic Use of Literature*.¹² A more critical interpretation, which emphasises Weil's philosophical thinking in relation to modernity and corrects superficial readings, is Lissa McCullough, *The Religious Philosophy of Simone Weil*.¹³ The most comprehensive and reliable biography, despite its age, is that of her

¹⁰ Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, trans. Emma Crawford and Mario von der Ruhr (London: Routledge, 2002); Weil, *Waiting for God*.

¹¹ Simone Weil, *The Notebooks of Simone Weil*, trans. Arthur Wills, vol. 1 (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1956); Simone Weil, *The Notebooks of Simone Weil*, trans. Arthur Wills, vol. 2 (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1956); Simone Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, trans. Richard Rees, Simone Weil: Selected Works (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1970).

¹² Miklos Vetö, *The Religious Metaphysics of Simone Weil*, trans. Joan Dargan (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1994); Marie Caubaud Meaney, *Simone Weil's Apologetic Use of Literature: Her Christological Interpretation of Ancient Greek Texts*, Oxford Modern Languages and Literature Monographs (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

¹³ McCullough, *The Religious Philosophy of Simone Weil*.

school friend Simone Pétrement, who offers valuable insights and had access to many who knew Weil personally.¹⁴

In addition to Weil and her interpreters, my principal conversation partners will be Thomas Weinandy, representing a traditional view on impassibility, and early Church Fathers such as Cyril of Alexandria (particularly his *Commentary on John*).¹⁵ Weil's Christological speculations find parallels in modern kenotic theologies of the suffering God, for example Jürgen Moltmann.¹⁶ For a more recent discussion in support of classical theism, I recommend Ian McFarland, *From Nothing: A Theology of Creation* (2014) and *The Word Made Flesh* (2019).¹⁷

Note: The quotations in *Gravity and Grace* are taken from Weil's notebooks; however, the renderings can vary because of different translators. When quoting from it I record both references since, while the former is more readily available, viewing the original in context minimises any bias resulting from Gustave Thibon's selection and editing. I also highlight when alternative English translations clarify Weil's original meaning. A limitation of this study is that it is restricted to works published in English or translated from the original language. However, this broader literature may be referenced within them.

Unorthodox Christian

Her early Catholic critics, while acknowledging the evidence of divine grace in Weil's life, accused her of serious errors "in fundamental matters of faith," and expressed

¹⁴ Simone Pétrement, *Simone Weil, A Life*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (Oxford, UK: Mowbrays, 1976). This is a partial translation of the original French edition, *La Vie de Simone Weil* (Librairie Arthème Fayard, 1973, 1978) which appeared in two volumes.

¹⁵ Thomas G. Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?* (Notre Dame: IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000); Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary on the Gospel According to S. John*, trans. P. E. Pusey, vol. 1 (London: James Parker & Co.; Rivingtons, 1874); Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary on the Gospel According to S. John*, trans. Thomas Randall, vol. 2 (London: Walter Smith, 1885).

¹⁶ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology*, trans. R. A. Wilson and John Bowden (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993); Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom: The Doctrine of God*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993).

¹⁷ Ian A. McFarland, *From Nothing: A Theology of Creation*, First edition. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014); Ian A. McFarland, *The Word Made Flesh: A Theology of the Incarnation*, First edition. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2019).

concern that Weil, who was herself a secular Jew, had “desemited” the gospel.¹⁸ Others went further, referring to “her narrow, wilful and ignorant reading of Judaism,” and saying that “Simone Weil hates the Bible.”¹⁹ Weil’s portrayal, of the Greek “miracle,” largely ignores the dark underbelly of slavery and oppression existing within that society, but her presentation of Israel and the Old Testament is even more blinkered.²⁰ It is possible, however, to misrepresent her view. In the Summer of 1938, she read the Hebrew Bible for the first time and was horrified by what she found there, particularly the presentation in the Jewish scriptures of a God who appears to sanction violence and genocide. The issue was not that such things happened back then but that they were attributed to God in sacred texts.²¹ She found it impossible to accept that God, as portrayed in the pre-exilic scriptures, could also be the Father of Jesus in the gospels.²²

Weil’s critique of ancient Judaism is two-fold. That they were “motivated by a will to power,” and that they rejected the incarnation. She argued they had remade God in their own image and saw in Israel’s claims to exclusivity, a form of national idolatry.²³ While not to excuse her, Weil’s comments about Israel succumbing to an idolatry of “race” and “nation” as “the ‘chosen people,’” take on a different light when viewed from within the rise of Fascism, rather than retrospectively after the Holocaust.²⁴

¹⁸ Georges Frénaud, “Simone Weil’s Religious Thought in the Light of Catholic Theology,” *Theological Studies* 14.3 (1953): 354; “Héllénisme, Judaïsme, Christianisme” in Perrin, ed., *Réponses aux questions de Simone Weil*, Aubier, 1964, 17–39, 25 cited in Vivienne Blackburn, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Simone Weil: A Study in Christian Responsiveness*, Religions and Discourse 24 (Bern: Peter Lang, 2004), 119–120.

¹⁹ Emmanuel Levinas, “Simone Weil against the Bible,” in *Difficult Freedom* (London: Athlone Press, 1990), 133; David Tracey, “Simone Weil: The Impossible,” in *The Christian Platonism of Simone Weil*, ed. E. Jane Doering and Eric O. Springstead (Notre Dame: IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004), 231; The original English translation of *Gravity and Grace* omitted the controversial chapter on Israel. See A. Rebecca Rozelle-Stone and Lucian Stone, *Simone Weil and Theology* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2013), 55.

²⁰ Lissa McCullough, “Plenary Panel: Lissa McCullough ‘The Political Import of Simone Weil’s Religious Turn’” (presented at the Weil/ Arendt 2021 Online Conference, Zoom Presentation, 2021).

²¹ Pétrement, *Simone Weil, A Life*, 345–46.

²² Simone Weil, *Letter to a Priest*, trans. Arthur Wills, Second edn. (London: Routledge, 2004), 5.

²³ Rozelle-Stone and Stone, *Simone Weil and Theology*, 55.

²⁴ Weil, *Letter to a Priest*, 6.

Weinandy suggests that Moltmann has a tendency to mythologise the suffering of the historical Jesus, thereby removing him from the Jewish cultural context.²⁵ A similar criticism can be levelled against Weil. Rebecca Stone notes that the “pinnacle of Weil’s religious philosophy is incarnationism.” Religions that reject this possibility (such as Judaism and Islam) are therefore farther away from the divine revelation than those that acknowledge it (e.g., Hinduism and the Greeks).²⁶ Weil argues, with characteristic disregard for historicity, that it was from the surrounding nations (e.g., Egypt, Greece, and Chaldea) that Israel learned “the most essential truth” that “God is good before being powerful.” Prior to the exile, Israel’s God was Jehovah, the “God of hosts,” to which Emmanuel Levinas responds, “Only Greek, Chaldean, Egyptian and Hindu writings contain an unsullied generosity. Jews possess only a God for armies—how horrible!”²⁷

Weil also questioned the Catholic church’s claim that the acceptance of dogma is a precondition of faith and its right as a “social... organism” to proclaim that “there was no salvation outside itself” and to “anathematise those who rejected its authority.”²⁸ Her insistence on intellectual liberty and conscience, as opposed to any external authority, feels very contemporary, but the counter is that such personal revelations are subjective and led by experience. There are no longer any absolutes to live by.

Weil’s method

From an early age, Weil was less concerned with facts than meaning. In this, she followed her mentor, at the Lycée Henri IV, Alain. From him, she learned to study the primary text closely, without reference to commentaries or the secondary literature.²⁹ What she sought, as far as possible, was direct contact with the original author. As a result, while often novel, the presentation of her ideas rarely becomes dated. However, at the elite École Normale Supérieure, another of her teachers described

²⁵ Weinandy, *Does God Suffer*, 172–73.

²⁶ Rozelle-Stone and Stone, *Simone Weil and Theology*, 56–57.

²⁷ Weil, *Letter to a Priest*, 4–5; Levinas, “Simone Weil against the Bible,” 135.

²⁸ J. M. Perrin and G Thibon, *Simone Weil as We Knew Her*, trans. Emma Craufurd (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1953), 158–59; cf. Weil, *Letter to a Priest*, 27; See also Frénaud, “Simone Weil’s Religious Thought in the Light of Catholic Theology,” 355–356.

²⁹ Cabaud Meaney, *Simone Weil’s Apologetic Use of Literature*, 14.

her as “an intelligent young girl who evidently feels she is *above* history.”³⁰ Palle Yourgrau gives the example of a youthful essay on Alexander the Great, in which she creates a figure far removed from historical reality but powerfully anticipating many of her later ideas.³¹ A similar tendency can be seen in her handling of the historical Jesus who, in her retelling, is more Greek than Jewish. In her essay on Homer’s *Iliad*, she comments that “the Gospels are the last and most marvellous expression of Greek genius; as the *Iliad* is its first expression.”³² Weil’s Christological interpretation of Plato, Greek myth, and human suffering, while idiosyncratic is revealing. It was her belief that Greek civilisation represented “a search for bridges to relate human misery with the divine perfection... They invented (?) the idea of mediation.”³³ However, as noted above, she found the Hebrew bible (with the exception of Job and parts of Isaiah) as the source from which Christianity sprang to be problematic, whereas Plato and the best of the Greeks seemed to her closer to the New Testament inspiration.

Cabaud Meaney notes that Weil does not abandon non-Christian myth but chooses to reinterpret it “from a Christian perspective.” She finds in such texts an “epiphany of Christ” preceding the physical incarnation and “rather than reducing reality to the empirical data gathered through sense perception, she sees the sacred in the form of the Logos present everywhere.”³⁴ Writing about Weil’s use of classical texts, she comments, “her anachronistic and Christological readings are shocking to those who wish to analyse texts with a critical-historical approach.” In her hands, the doomed Antigone becomes a “Christ figure” and Electra recognising Orestes, “symbolises for her a mystical encounter between the soul and God.”³⁵

³⁰ Yourgrau, *Simone Weil*, 37.

³¹ Yourgrau, *Simone Weil*, 35–37.

³² Simone Weil, “The *Iliad* or The Poem of Force,” in *Simone Weil: An Anthology*, ed. Sian Miles (Penguin Modern Classics, 2005), 52.

³³ Simone Weil, *On Science, Necessity, and the Love of God*, ed. and trans. Richard Rees (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), 90. The “question” mark is original.

³⁴ Cabaud Meaney, *Simone Weil’s Apologetic Use of Literature*, 18; cf. Weil, *Letter to a Priest*, 45.

³⁵ Cabaud Meaney, *Simone Weil’s Apologetic Use of Literature*, 1.

The title *Waiting for God*, chosen for the collection of her writings by Father Joseph-Marie Perrin, reflects a key concept in Weil.³⁶ The French word *attente* involves both “waiting” and “expectation.”³⁷ Weil’s approach toward a difficult problem or question was to consider it “with the utmost attention until it clarified itself.”³⁸ Her view was that “prayer consists of attention. It is the orientation of all the attention of which the soul is capable toward God.”³⁹ This became her “Method for understanding images, symbols, etc. Not to try to interpret them, but to look at them till the light suddenly dawns.”⁴⁰ It was better she believed to leave a question unresolved than to accept a superficial or wrong answer. “We do not obtain the most precious gifts by going in search of them but by waiting for them. Man cannot discover them by his own powers, and if he sets out to seek for them he will find in their place counterfeits of which he will be unable to discern the falsity.”⁴¹

My methodology

A recurring theme in 20th Century theology is the suffering God. In part, this was a response to the trauma of two world wars and a reaction to the Holocaust (e.g., Moltmann’s *The Crucified God*), but it also found expression within Liberation theology.⁴² God, in Jesus, is shown to be intimately involved with, and experiencing, the pain of the world. It is not without its critics, however, and as Rowan Williams notes, “Since Bonhoeffer’s terse comment that, ‘only a suffering God can help,’ modern Christology has struggled repeatedly to find ways of expressing the unqualified nature of divine solidarity in suffering.”⁴³ Weil attempts to respond to this

³⁶ Weil, *Waiting for God*.

³⁷ See Martin Andic, “One Moment of Pure Attention Is Worth All the Works in the World,” *Cahiers Simone Weil* 21.4 (1988): 347–68. The English title *Waiting on God* was later changed to *Waiting for God* to reflect this distinction; Also Blackburn, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Simone Weil*, 52.

³⁸ Cabaud Meaney, *Simone Weil’s Apologetic Use of Literature*, 31.

³⁹ Simone Weil, “Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God,” in *Waiting for God*, trans. Emma Craufurd (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2009), 57.

⁴⁰ Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 120; Weil, *Notebooks*, 2:334.

⁴¹ Weil, “Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies,” 62.

⁴² Moltmann, *The Crucified God*; See also Alexander Nava, *The Mystical and Prophetic Thought of Simone Weil and Gustavo Gutiérrez: Reflections on the Mystery and Hiddenness of God* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2001).

⁴³ Wesley Hill, “The New ‘New Orthodoxy’: Only the Impassible God Can Help,” *First Things*, 15 January 2015, <<http://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2015/01/the-new-new-orthodoxy>> (01

apparent contradiction. Despite the interpretative challenges associated with her thought, it is possible to discern a consistent core around which her ideas coalesce. Weil's view of salvation is closely linked to her Christological understanding of creation and personal experience of affliction. Vetö notes that existence “leads her to establish a division within divinity between a mighty and impersonal God and a powerless God who is love. For Weil, this division appears as a rending within God, and she tries to describe its cure.” He acknowledges this to be “one of the most audacious soteriological theories in history.”⁴⁴

Weil's heterodox conception of creation as withdrawal and the absence of God, conflicts sharply with an orthodox understanding of the Trinity, divine omnipotence, and impassibility. I shall begin by exploring Weil's understanding of creation and affliction within it, and how she argues that our separation from God is overcome through Christ and the cross, before turning to critique by contrasting her thought with the classical Christian theism found in Nicaea and Chalcedon. Weil's Christological interpretation of Plato, Greek myth, and tragedy is illuminating and argues for the possibility of God's self-revelation outside of the church and bible; however, this raises questions regarding the authority of scripture as the primary source of revelation and the soteriological value of other faiths.

With this foundation in place, I turn to Weil's understanding of the role that beauty and affliction play in revealing God to us, when often he seems hidden. We can only experience God in this world and just as creation necessitates an abdication, so Weil argues, our reunion requires that we consent to a similar decreation. Ultimately, she turns this metaphor negatively upon herself, but I argue that it is descriptive of a “new creation” and the individual's participation in the unconditional love of God for a suffering world. My starting point, therefore, is Weil's understanding of creation as absence, viewed as a response to the problem of theodicy, in which she questions how a loving and all-powerful God can create a universe in which suffering, and evil are the inevitable result.

September 2020) provides a counter view; Rowan Williams, *Christ: The Heart of Creation* (London: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2019), 162; Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. Christian Gremmels et al., trans. Isabel Best et al., Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works 8 (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010), 479. Letter 16 July 1944.

⁴⁴ Vetö, *The Religious Metaphysics of Simone Weil*, 157.

Chapter II: Creation's Freedom

Theodicy

Weil begins with theodicy, an unflinching acceptance of the existence of evil and suffering in the world; like others before her, she asks how can a loving and all-powerful God allow the suffering of the innocent?⁴⁵ One event (among many possible examples), which brought this question into sharp focus and helped to shape the direction of the Eighteenth-Century Enlightenment, was the Lisbon Earthquake in 1755, where, on All Saints Day, the faithful were celebrating mass in the cathedrals of Lisbon, and a devastating earthquake brought the buildings falling upon their heads. Others, who sought safety on the shoreline, were overwhelmed by the tidal wave following the earthquake. It is estimated that up to sixty thousand people may have died on that day.⁴⁶ Where was God? Why did he not intervene? Any response that does not address such concerns honestly is, in my view, inadequate. The existence of suffering and evil in the world must be faced, and this inevitably raises questions for us about the nature and character of God.

Weil's personal experience of God, and the deepened understanding of the cross that accompanied it, led her to the inescapable conclusion that love was at the heart of the universe. She describes, in the letter known as her *Spiritual Autobiography*, how in Easter, 1938 at the Abbey of Solesmes, while suffering from an intense headache, as she was reciting George Herbert's poem *Love*, "Christ himself came down and took possession of me." She notes, "I only felt in the midst of my suffering the presence of a love, like that which one can read in the smile on a beloved face." It was then that "the thought of the passion of Christ entered into my being once and for all."⁴⁷ To another friend, she writes, "I felt... a presence more personal, more

⁴⁵ McFarland refers to what is known as the Epicurean trilemma which makes a similar point, see McFarland, *From Nothing*, 112.

⁴⁶ See José O. A. Marques, "The Paths of Providence: Voltaire and Rousseau on the Lisbon Earthquake," *Cadernos de História e Filosofia Da Ciência, Série 3* 15.1 (2005): 33–57.

⁴⁷ Simone Weil, "Letter IV: Spiritual Autobiography," in *Waiting for God*, trans. Emma Craufurd (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2009), 25–27.

certain, and more real than that of a human being.”⁴⁸ Weil’s religious experiences were life changing. They were also intensely private and personal. She only confided these intimate encounters in letters to Joë Bousquet and Father Perrin (in some detail) and, apart from possibly the Marseille “Prologue,” to which I shall return, they are not referred to in her notebooks.⁴⁹

How then does Weil respond to the paradox of God’s love and the overwhelming reality of suffering experienced within creation? Her answer, which owes a debt to Plato and Spinoza, is both radical and deceptively simple.⁵⁰ To create, God must withdraw, consenting to be powerless and not intervene in creation’s functioning. She records in her notebook, “God could only create by hiding himself. Otherwise there would be nothing but himself.”⁵¹

Creation as withdrawal

In Weil’s conception, God is a perfect unity and self-contained; there is no “nothing” out of which God can create, only himself. However, she notes, “in creating God renounces being all. He abandons a bit of being to what is other than Himself. Creation is renunciation by love.”⁵² Weil maintains that in creating, God voluntarily chooses to limit divine power and freedom.⁵³ Omnipotence includes the ability to “self-limit.”⁵⁴ She writes, “God has created, that is, not that He has produced something outside Himself, but that He has withdrawn Himself, permitting a part of

⁴⁸ Simone Weil, *Seventy Letters: Personal and Intellectual Windows on a Thinker*, trans. Richard Rees, Simone Weil: Selected Works (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2015), 140. Letter to Joë Bousquet, Marseille, 12 May 1942.

⁴⁹ Perrin and Thibon, *Simone Weil as We Knew Her*, 86; Cabaud Meaney, *Simone Weil’s Apologetic Use of Literature*, 179.

⁵⁰ See Emmanuel Gabellieri, “Reconstructing Platonism: The Trinitarian Metaxology,” in *The Christian Platonism of Simone Weil*, ed. E. Jane Doering and Eric O. Springstead, trans. Céline Bally and Chris Callahan (Notre Dame: IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004), 141–42.

⁵¹ Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 38; Weil, *Notebooks*, 1:230.

⁵² Simone Weil, *Intimations of Christianity Among the Ancient Greeks*, trans. Elisabeth Chase Geissbuhler (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1957), 183; These texts were written in Marseille 1941–42 for Father Perrin. See Gabellieri, “Reconstructing Platonism,” 134, note 2.

⁵³ McCullough, *The Religious Philosophy of Simone Weil*, 86.

⁵⁴ C. Stephen Evans, “Kenotic Christology and the Nature of God,” in *Exploring Kenotic Christianity. The Self-Emptying of God*, ed. C. Stephen Evans (Vancouver, BC: Regent College Publishing, 2006), 212–14.

being to be other than God.”⁵⁵ God must withdraw to create a space in which we can exist.

She recognises the inherent contradiction in this, “that God, who is infinite, who is all, to whom nothing is lacking, should do something that is outside himself, that is not himself, while at the same time proceeding from himself.”⁵⁶ Weil uses the analogy of a “rending” to describe this, noting that “God and all his creatures are less than God alone. God accepted this diminution. He emptied a part of his being from himself.”⁵⁷ Absence, therefore is the form God's love takes toward us in the world. It is the price of our existence, and God “consents” to it.⁵⁸ As a consequence there exists an infinite distance separating creation from God, which only God can bridge.

We have to cross—and God has to do so in the first place to come to us, for it is he who comes first—the infinite thickness of time and space. Love is here, if anything greater. It is as great as the distance which has to be crossed. In order that it may be the greatest possible love, the distance must be the greatest possible distance. That is why in this world evil can go right to the extreme limit beyond which the very possibility of good would altogether disappear.⁵⁹

Necessity and providence

In place of God, we are ruled by the natural, impersonal laws governing the universe, which take no account of our existence or individuality. Weil calls this Necessity and defines it as “the obedience of matter to God.”⁶⁰

Relentless necessity, wretchedness, distress, the crushing burden of poverty and of labour which wears us out, cruelty, torture, violent death, constraint, disease – all these constitute divine love. It is God who in love withdraws from us so that we can love him. For if we were exposed to the direct radiance of his love, without the protection of space, of time and of nature, we should be evaporated like water in the sun... Necessity is the screen set between God and us so that we can be...⁶¹

⁵⁵ Weil, *Intimations of Christianity Among the Ancient Greeks*, 193.

⁵⁶ Weil, *Notebooks*, 2:386.

⁵⁷ Simone Weil, “Forms of the Implicit Love of God,” in *Waiting for God*, trans. Emma Craufurd (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2009), 89.

⁵⁸ Weil, *Notebooks*, 2:402; Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, 296.

⁵⁹ Weil, *Notebooks*, 2:428–29.

⁶⁰ Weil, *Intimations of Christianity Among the Ancient Greeks*, 186.

⁶¹ Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 32–33; Weil, *Notebooks*, 2:401–2.

We must learn to love the world as it is, because that is how God, in love, chooses it to be. She writes, "I must not love my suffering because it is useful, but because it *is*. Necessity is the veil of God."⁶² This is not to say that God ordains suffering. Weil observes, "Everything that occurs, without any distinction, is permitted, that is to say consented to, by God. But this consent is an abdication. So it is not the exercise of a kingly power... God's will is to abdicate in favour of necessity."⁶³

For Weil, "Divine Providence is not a disturbing influence, an anomaly in the ordering of the world; it is itself the order of the world; or rather it is the regulating principle of the universe."⁶⁴ Human beings (and to a lesser extent, creation) are autonomous creatures who are free to choose but limited in the choices they can make. Vetö notes that Weil resists any suggestion of the "direct intervention of the prime cause [God] in the functioning of secondary causes." He comments, "Necessity is but the face of God turned toward the universe," adding that, "Necessity is the limit that God imposes on chaos."⁶⁵ Weil argues that, from our perspective, "This impotence makes him [God] an impersonal Person. He loves, not as I love, but as an emerald is green. He is 'I love.'"⁶⁶ Grace is the only exception to this. God's love for the world is unconditional, he "sends affliction to the wicked and the good without distinction, as he does rain and sunshine.... He only enters into contact with the individual human being as such by means of purely spiritual grace which responds to the gaze turned toward him... No event whatsoever is a favour on the part of God; grace alone."⁶⁷

Free will and evil

Creation and necessity together are divine metaphors that speak to us of God's love. "The order of the world is providential. It teaches us only about God... The world is God's language to us." Weil recognises that "Love consents to all things and commands only those who are willing to obey. Love is abdication. God is

⁶² Weil, *Notebooks*, 1:266. Italics original; See also Weil, *Notebooks*, 2:452.

⁶³ Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, 296; Vetö, *The Religious Metaphysics of Simone Weil*, 15.

⁶⁴ Simone Weil, *The Need for Roots: Preludes to a Declaration of Duties towards Mankind*, trans. Arthur Wills (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), 272.

⁶⁵ Vetö, *The Religious Metaphysics of Simone Weil*, 15.

⁶⁶ Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, 129.

⁶⁷ Weil, *Notebooks*, 1:272; cf. Weil, *Notebooks*, 1:221.

abdication.”⁶⁸ The paradox, therefore, is that evil “is the form which God’s mercy takes in this world.”⁶⁹ She writes, “Is not this gift of free will creation itself? What is creation from the point of view of God is sin from the point of view of the creature.”⁷⁰

In Weil’s retelling of the Genesis story there is no fall from an original perfection or innocence.⁷¹ “The whole of humanity has sinned... by possessing its own will. It has been created with a will of its own and the vocation to renounce it... To have created [man] in a state of holiness would have been equivalent to not creating him at all.”⁷² Evil therefore, is the result of our individual choices and the blind operation of the universe’s physical laws.

God does not send sufferings and woes as ordeals; he lets Necessity distribute them in accordance with its own proper mechanism ... The occasional contacts resulting from inspiration between his creatures and Him are less miraculous than is his everlasting absence, and constitute a less marvellous proof of his love.⁷³

Weil comments, “...the universe is beautiful, even including evil, which, as part of the order of the world, has a sort of terrible beauty. We feel it.”⁷⁴ Our present reality is that “The universe both manifests and hides God” from us.⁷⁵ Creation, which is “good broken up into pieces and scattered throughout evil,” while other than God, remains inherently sacred.⁷⁶

Mediation

Weil asks, “Why is creation a good, seeing that it is inseparably bound up with evil? In what sense is it a good thing that I exist, and not God alone.”⁷⁷ If God is sovereign

⁶⁸ Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, 300, cf. 324; Weil, *Intimations of Christianity Among the Ancient Greeks*, 184.

⁶⁹ Weil, *Notebooks*, 2:495.

⁷⁰ Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, 211. See also 140–141.

⁷¹ Weil, *Notebooks*, 1:268, cf. 309.

⁷² Weil, *Notebooks*, 2:268.

⁷³ Weil, *Notebooks*, 2:403.

⁷⁴ Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, 329.

⁷⁵ Weil, *Notebooks*, 1:149; See also Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, 161.

⁷⁶ Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 69; Weil, *Notebooks*, 2:414.

⁷⁷ Weil, *Notebooks*, 1:191.

and omnipotent, then why does he create a universe in which suffering is inevitable? Was this the arbitrary act of a capricious God or is there some meaning to it?⁷⁸ She describes this as a form of “madness” and an “excess of divine love,” adding that “no folly on man's part could echo that of God.”⁷⁹ We are separated from God and unable to find our way back. “We are incapable of progressing vertically. We cannot take one step towards the heavens” therefore, “God crosses the universe and comes to us.”⁸⁰

God created by love, for love... God created beings capable of love from all possible distances. God personally crossed the maximum distance, the infinite distance, because no other could do it. This infinite distance between God and God—the supreme tearing, agony... is the crucifixion. Nothing could be further from God than the One who was made a curse.⁸¹

She notes that “God is mediation, and all mediation is God.”⁸² She does not develop this idea, but elsewhere comments that “The Trinity implies the incarnation—and *consequently* the Creation.”⁸³ She came to appreciate that it is only “as one thinks of God as Love [that] one senses that marvel of love by which the Father and Son are united both in the eternal unity of the one God and also across the separating distance of space and time and the Cross God is joy, and creation is affliction; but it is an affliction radiant with the light of joy.”⁸⁴

Christ is the bridge (Greek *metaxu*) between the Good and the Necessary, of which all other forms (such as beauty and affliction) are mere reflections. Weil imagines “two prisoners, in neighbouring cells, who communicate by means of taps on the wall. The wall is what separates them, but it is also what enables them to communicate. It is the same with us and God. Every separation represents a bond

⁷⁸ See the discussion in McFarland, *From Nothing*, 42.

⁷⁹ Weil, *Intimations of Christianity Among the Ancient Greeks*, 182–83; cf. Weil, *Notebooks*, 1:262.

⁸⁰ Weil, “The Love of God and Affliction,” 79; Also in Weil, *Science, Necessity, and the Love of God*, 181.

⁸¹ Simone Weil, *Simone Weil: Awaiting God*, trans. Bradley Jersak (Abbotsford, BC: Fresh Wind Press, 2012), 36; See also Weil, “The Love of God and Affliction,” 72.

⁸² Weil, *Intimations of Christianity Among the Ancient Greeks*, 196.

⁸³ Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, 130. Italics original. Note that she capitalises “Creation” here.

⁸⁴ Simone Weil, *Simone Weil Reader*, ed. George A. Panichas (Wakefield, RI: Moyer Bell, 1977), 463. The essay, “The Love of God and Affliction,” in *Waiting for God* is edited with sixteen pages remaining. This is the longer version.

[or a 'link']".⁸⁵ Our reality is that "This world is the closed door. It is a barrier. And at the same time it is the passage-way."⁸⁶

Similarities to process theology

Superficially Weil's understanding of creation's relation to God has similarities to contemporary open and relational theologies and, to a lesser extent, process theology, in which God experiences time (and therefore suffering) and creation is free to choose or reject God.⁸⁷ In process theology, however, God is conceived as dipolar. There is the abstract potential of what God can become, and the reality of God as he is at each moment in time. God does not have foreknowledge but relates perfectly to creation as it makes a multitude of independent choices, while seeking to persuade it to develop increasing complexity and fulfil its potential.⁸⁸ In the memorable phrase of A. N. Whitehead, God is "the greatest companion – the fellow-sufferer who understands."⁸⁹ In this view God is essentially passive, responding to an evolving cosmos and cooperating with it.⁹⁰ However, as Ian Barbour notes, "process thought differs from most versions of kenotic theology [including Weil's] by claiming that the limitations of divine power are a product of metaphysical necessity rather than a voluntary self-limitation."⁹¹ While creation as absence is key to Weil's understanding of the Incarnation and salvation, Philip Goodchild correctly observes that she "offers not a doctrine but a method."⁹² Weil approaches the eternal from the

⁸⁵ Weil, *Notebooks*, 2:497; Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 145.

⁸⁶ Simone Weil, "Human Personality," in *Selected Essays 1934–43: Historical, Political, and Moral Writings*, ed. and trans. Richard Rees (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2015), 27.

⁸⁷ Thomas Jay Oord, *Open and Relational Theology: An Introduction to Life-Changing Ideas* (Grasmere, ID: SacraSage Press, 2021).

⁸⁸ Weinandy, *Does God Suffer*, 23; See also Paul S. Fiddes, *The Creative Suffering of God* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1988), 37–45.

⁸⁹ Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology*, ed. David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne, Corrected Edition. (New York: Free Press, 1978), 351; John Polkinghorne, "Kenotic Creation and Divine Action," in *The Work of Love: Creation as Kenosis*, ed. John Polkinghorne (London: SPCK, 2001), 91–92.

⁹⁰ C. Hartshorne, *Man's Vision of God and the Logic of Theism* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1964), 298.

⁹¹ Ian G. Barbour, "God's Power: A Process View," in *The Work of Love. Creation as Kenosis*, ed. John Polkinghorne (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2001), 6.

⁹² Philip Goodchild, "Weil's Boat: On Becoming and Being," in *Simone Weil and Continental Philosophy*, ed. A. Rebecca Rozelle-Stone (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2017), 31.

concrete world of experience and outlines a theology of becoming *and* being as she describes the reconciliation resulting from “the union of contraries in the reality of time.”⁹³ She describes how,

We are like shipwrecked persons clinging to logs upon the sea and tossed in an entirely passive manner by every movement of the waves. From the height of heaven God throws each one a rope. He who seizes the rope and does not let go, despite the pain and fear, remains as much as the others subject to the buffeting of the waves, only for him these buffets combine with the tension of the cord to form a different mechanical whole.”⁹⁴

God throws us a rope to cling to, while we are adrift in time that, across an infinite distance, connects the creature to the creator. This is a powerful metaphor that speaks of both grace and the cross. Weil’s answer to the problem of theodicy is that we are separated from God, who consents not to intervene omnipotently in creation. However, while we are helpless, Christ comes to us, and by sharing our humanity bridges this distance making possible our reunion with God. How Weil understands this through the incarnation is the subject of my next chapter.

⁹³ Goodchild, “Weil’s Boat,” 30.

⁹⁴ Weil, *Intimations of Christianity Among the Ancient Greeks*, 197.

Chapter III: Incarnation

Creation as a cross

Weil conceives that “The whole universe, in the totality of space and time, has been created as the Cross of Christ.”⁹⁵ This soteriological event, in which we participate through existing, involves both the Father and the Son and precedes the physical incarnation recorded in the gospel accounts. She comments, “Already before the Passion, already by the Creation, God empties himself of his divinity, abases himself, takes the form of a slave.”⁹⁶ “Incarnation, eucharist. God made himself man, he makes himself matter.”⁹⁷ In a startling passage she records that “God not incarnate is not really God; he has been incarnate and sacrificed from the beginning; ‘the Lamb slain from the beginning of the world’” (Rev 13:8).⁹⁸ Although choosing to be powerless God is intimately involved in Creation. Weil is careful, however, to avoid any suggestion that God is limited or incomplete without the creation. I have already noted her statement that “God and all his creatures are less than God alone.”⁹⁹

An example of a classical, systematic approach which, while not addressing Weil directly, would take issue with her is Weinandy. He is critical of views, for example in Process Theology, which seek to place God and creation on the same order of being, undermining concepts such as *creatio ex nihilo* and divine transcendence.¹⁰⁰ However, in Weil’s defence she is not arguing for *panentheism* (meaning “all is in God”), the belief that the universe “equates to God,” although God retains “a separate identity distinct from it.”¹⁰¹ She is thinking relationally and arguing that God’s defining character is revealed to us within creation as self-giving love. Since “love is always connected with a body, and God has no other body which is offered to our

⁹⁵ Weil, *Intimations of Christianity Among the Ancient Greeks*, 198.

⁹⁶ Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, 70.

⁹⁷ Weil, *Notebooks*, 1:190.

⁹⁸ Weil, *Notebooks*, 1:222.

⁹⁹ Weil, “Forms of the Implicit Love of God,” 89.

¹⁰⁰ Weinandy, *Does God Suffer*, 154–55. Especially note 17.

¹⁰¹ John D. Barry et al., eds., “Panentheism,” in *The Lexham Bible Dictionary* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016).

senses except the universe itself,” it follows, she argues, that every “occurrence, whatever it may be... is a caress of God’s.”¹⁰²

Christ and the cross

If creation is God emptied of divinity, then the death of Christ (the perfect man) on the cross represents the “intersection of time and eternity, where the two limbs of the cross meet.”¹⁰³ Weil describes this as a “fulcrum.”¹⁰⁴ In her notebooks, she develops this image further,

When the whole universe is weighing down on us, there is no other counterweight for the other scale of the balance except God himself... That is why the Cross is a balance on which a frail and light body, but which was God himself, [from an infinite distance] was able to lift the weight of the entire world... This fulcrum is the Cross. There can be none other. It has got to be at the point of intersection between the world and what is not the world. The Cross is this point of intersection.¹⁰⁵

Sarah Coakley, noting “that ‘divinity’ and ‘humanity’ *are*... radically distinct and qualitatively different categories,” also describes the incarnation as a “unique intersection... of opposites”.¹⁰⁶

Vetö argues that lacking a formal theological education, Weil does not have a fully formed understanding of the Trinity in the conventional sense. It is her experience of Christ that shapes her conception of God. He writes, “it is... a vision of reality containing in its totality only two true perfections, necessity and love, which will thereby become the two faces of God. The act of creation itself will reveal this duality.”¹⁰⁷ There remains, however, an essential unity to Weil’s thought despite the contradictions of existence. Adopting a broad-brush metaphor, she illustrates this by comparing creation to an infinite circle, beginning and ending in God. Our lives, and the infinity of time and space, are points on this circle.

¹⁰² Weil, *Notebooks*, 1:322.

¹⁰³ Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, 177; See also Weil, *Notebooks*, 2:467.

¹⁰⁴ Weil, *Letter to a Priest*, 47.

¹⁰⁵ Weil, *Notebooks*, 2:433.

¹⁰⁶ Sarah Coakley, “Does Kenosis Rest on a Mistake?,” in *Exploring Kenotic Christianity. The Self-Emptying of God*, ed. C. Stephen Evans (Vancouver, BC: Regent College Publishing, 2006), 261–62.

¹⁰⁷ Vetö, *The Religious Metaphysics of Simone Weil*, 11–12.

The Son separated from the Father by the totality of space and time, by the fact of having been made a creature; this time... is a segment of the line that stretches, through the Creation, the Incarnation, and the Passion, between the Father and the Son... Infinite circle. The circumference is a straight line. The two extremities of an infinite line make only a single point. My life is a segment of that line. I am a part of the distance between the Father and the Son, that distance which the Holy Spirit travels.¹⁰⁸

Some versions of Gnostic thought also conceived of God and creation as a “continuous whole,” across a great distance. However, their solution for maintaining divine transcendence was to speculate a hierarchy of intermediate beings who interacted directly with creation.¹⁰⁹ Weil’s vision, however, hinges on the fact that it is God himself who, in Christ, comes to us.

The self-emptying God

Weil does not minimise the challenge this presents. She writes, “The Incarnation does not bring God closer to us. It increases the distance. He has placed the Cross between himself and us. The Cross is harder to bridge than the distance between heaven and earth. It is this distance.”¹¹⁰ McCullough observes that “very few commentators have grasped the centrality of the ‘self-emptying God’ in the deep structure of Weil’s religious thinking.” The significant exceptions, in her opinion, being Madeline Hamblin and Louis Dupré.¹¹¹ In the notebooks, Weil records Philippians 2:6–10, the passage where Paul writes that Christ “emptied [*kenoō*] himself” (v.7), in the original Greek.¹¹² She notes that no one “goes to God the creator and almighty without passing through God EMPTIED OF HIS DIVINITY... We have to *empty God of his divinity* in order to love him.”¹¹³ On the next page she continues, “To represent God to oneself as all-powerful is to represent oneself to oneself in a state of false

¹⁰⁸ Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, 83.

¹⁰⁹ Weinandy, *Does God Suffer*, 90.

¹¹⁰ Weil, *Notebooks*, 1:298.

¹¹¹ McCullough, *The Religious Philosophy of Simone Weil*, 102, note 7 ; Madeline Hamblin, “Simone Weil’s Theology of Evil, Love and the Self-Emptying God,” in *Mysticism, Nihilism, Feminism: New Critical Essays on the Theology of Simone Weil*, eds. Thomas Idinopolos and Josephine Knopp (Johnson City, TN: Institute of Social Science and Arts, 1984), 39–56; Louis Dupré, “Simone Weil and Platonism,” in the *Christian Platonism of Simone Weil*, eds. E. Jane Doering and Eric O. Springstead (Southbend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004), 15–16.

¹¹² Weil, *Notebooks*, 1:208.

¹¹³ Weil, *Notebooks*, 1:283. Upper case and emphasis are original.

divinity. Man is only able to be one with God by uniting himself to God stripped of his divinity (EMPTIED of his divinity).¹¹⁴ McCullough emphasises that Weil is not saying that Christ “ceases to be divine.” What is relinquished is “the *power* and *prestige* of divinity, which are not the locus of his essential divinity.”¹¹⁵ Michael Welker, independently parallels Weil’s thoughts when he defines kenosis as “the willingness to meet creatures at their greatest distance from God and even in their attempts to seclude and shield themselves from God, so that they may finally” to quote Keith Ward, “share in the bliss and become vehicles of the truly creative freedom of the divine nature.”¹¹⁶

Weil and the resurrection

While Christ’s identification with us through the incarnation and cross is central to her understanding of who God is and how we relate to him, Weil is ambivalent about the resurrection itself, noting,

Hitler could die and return to life again fifty times, but I should still not look upon him as the Son of God. And if the Gospel omitted all mention of Christ’s resurrection, faith would be easier for me. The Cross by itself suffices me. For me, the proof, the really miraculous thing, is the perfect beauty of the accounts of the Passion...¹¹⁷

However, her words should not be taken out of context and as Yourgrau perceptively comments, “it is not the event” of the resurrection that Weil refers to, “but the role it plays in church doctrine.”¹¹⁸ She believes that it is the way in which Jesus died on the cross that gives it significance and, as she writes, “compels me to believe... the Cross produces the same effect upon me as the resurrection does upon other people.”¹¹⁹ Weil argues that “the death on the Cross is something more divine than the Resurrection, it is the point where Christ’s divinity is concentrated. Today the

¹¹⁴ Weil, *Notebooks*, 1:284. Upper case is original.

¹¹⁵ McCullough, *The Religious Philosophy of Simone Weil*, 105.

¹¹⁶ Michael Welker, “Romantic Love, Covenantal Love, Kenotic Love,” in *The Work of Love. Creation as Kenosis*, ed. John Polkinghorne (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2001), 134; Keith Ward, “Cosmos and Kenosis,” in *The Work of Love. Creation as Kenosis*, ed. John Polkinghorne (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2001), 166.

¹¹⁷ Weil, *Letter to a Priest*, 34–35.

¹¹⁸ Yourgrau, *Simone Weil*, 149.

¹¹⁹ Weil, *Letter to a Priest*, 35.

glorious Christ veils us from the Christ who was made a malediction.”¹²⁰ It is through contemplating Christ’s perfect humanity and self-sacrifice that his divinity and the Father’s love are most clearly revealed to us, not in the glory of the resurrection.

How does this save

Commenting on the resurrection, Weil notes that it “is Christ’s pardon to those who killed him, the evidence that in doing him the greatest possible harm they did him no harm. Evil is only felt within a pure being; but in him it is not evil.”¹²¹ This is an example of Weil’s orthodoxy even if she does not follow it through in an orthodox fashion. Christ crosses the infinite distance separating creation from God and by experiencing the extremes of affliction within it, restores harmony not just between God and humanity, but also between God and God as absence. Acknowledging the non-competitive relationship between Christ’s divinity and his humanity, Weil observes that “God is mediation between God and God, between God and man, between man and man. Unique harmony.”¹²²

Turning away from traditional atonement theories, Weil argues that salvation is a gift of God’s “mercy” (grace) which is received by “waiting patiently in expectation.”¹²³ Our predicament is that as creatures, “We are abandoned in time. God is not in time... Time is God’s waiting as a beggar for our love... The crucifixion is the image of this fixity in God. God is attention without distraction.”¹²⁴ She argues that “All that is needed for God to come to the soul is attentiveness to the places where he is...”¹²⁵ In her essay on the *Right Use of School Studies*, Weil writes that “desire alone draws God down. He only comes to those who ask him to come; and he cannot refuse to come to those who implore him long, often, and ardently.”¹²⁶ We choose whether to

¹²⁰ Weil, *Intimations of Christianity Among the Ancient Greeks*, 143.

¹²¹ Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, 69.

¹²² Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, 87, cf. 89; For a more orthodox understanding of the non-competitive relation between God and humanity see Kathryn Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001), 2–4; Coakley, “Does Kenosis Rest on a Mistake?,” 262.

¹²³ Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, 99.

¹²⁴ Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, 140–41.

¹²⁵ Diogenes Allen, *Three Outsiders: Pascal, Kierkegaard, Simone Weil* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2006), 121.

¹²⁶ Weil, “Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies,” 61.

respond by consenting to die to what separates us from God (the false self, her term for what Paul calls the flesh) and, enlightened by the Holy Spirit, allow God's love to pass through us uninterrupted to the world.

Reflecting on the tumultuous times in which she lived, Weil notes that "there has never been a period in which souls have been in such peril as they are today in every part of the globe. The bronze serpent must be lifted up again so that whoever raises his eyes to it may be saved" (John 3:14; Num 21:6–9). Weil understood this as a reference to faith and contemplating Christ on the cross, but her focus is on how we respond in this world. God takes the thing that harms us and turns it to good.

Recognising that she was engaged in a spiritual as well as physical fight, she continues, "I think, and so do you, that our obligation for the next two or three years, an obligation so strict that we can scarcely fail in it without treason, is to show the public the possibility of a truly incarnated Christianity."¹²⁷

Christ and other faiths

In her *Letter to a Priest*, Weil outlines the questions posing a barrier to her receiving baptism and entering the Catholic Church. Many of these relate to the fate of those outside it. Her criticism was that the church was not truly "Catholic in fact as it is in name, and that it must one day become so, if it is to fulfil its mission."¹²⁸ She questions whether God can only speak through Israel and the New Testament, and argues that the sacred writings and literature of other cultures can also bring light and revelation. Commenting on Augustine's claim that "If an infidel clothes the naked, etc., he is doing ill although the work is good," since "without the faith one cannot please God," she contrasts the parable of the Good Samaritan noting, "You shall know the tree by its fruits—not the fruits by the tree."¹²⁹ Her belief was that,

Every time that a man has, with a pure heart, called upon Osiris, Dionysus, Krishna, Buddha, the Tao etc., the Son of God has answered him by sending the Holy Spirit. And the Holy Spirit has acted upon his soul, not by inciting him to abandon his religious tradition, but by bestowing upon him

¹²⁷ Weil, "Spiritual Autobiography," 32.

¹²⁸ Weil, *Letter to a Priest*, 3.

¹²⁹ Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, 117; Augustine, *Against Julian*, trans. Matthew A. Schumacher, vol. 35 of *The Fathers of the Church* (New York: Catholic University America, 1957), 194–95.

light—and in the best of cases the fulness of light—in the heart of that same religious tradition.¹³⁰

The gospels, especially John, have a preeminent place for Weil; but by contrast, there are few references to Paul's letters (the exceptions being Romans 8 and Philippians 2), which have been so influential in Western theology, both Catholic and Protestant. Weil questions the idea that scripture can be the primary means of divine revelation, when so many people alive today and in the past, are denied access to it. In her view, the Genesis account of creation and the origin of sin is a "reflection" of a truth that is "untranslatable into human words," however, it is not uniquely true. Other traditions and cultures can also express the truth it relates.¹³¹ She writes,

As the Hindus say, God is at the same time personal and impersonal. He is impersonal in the sense that his infinitely mysterious manner of being a Person is infinitely different from the human manner... All those who possess in its pure state the love of their neighbour and the acceptance of the order of the world, including affliction—all those, even if they should live and die to all appearances atheists, are surely saved.¹³²

While her faith is founded on the centrality of the cross and Christ's physical incarnation, she observes, "it seemed to me certain, and I still think so today, that one can never wrestle enough with God if one does so out of pure regard for the truth. Christ likes us to prefer truth to him because, before being Christ, he is truth. If one turns aside from him to go toward the truth, one will not go far before falling into his arms."¹³³ Weil is not arguing that all religions are of equal value. However, she does believe that, if we seek God with a pure and undivided attention, then Christ makes himself known to us wherever we are.¹³⁴ She is critical of colonial missionary ventures (e.g., in French Indo-China) that uprooted individuals from their culture and sought to impose an external belief system on them.¹³⁵ The Catholic theologian Karl Rahner, who holds a more positive view of Christian mission, describes such

¹³⁰ Weil, *Letter to a Priest*, 15–16.

¹³¹ Weil, *Letter to a Priest*, 42.

¹³² Weil, *Letter to a Priest*, 20–21.

¹³³ Weil, "Spiritual Autobiography," 27.

¹³⁴ An example of the pluralist view would be John Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths: Essays in the Philosophy of Religion* (London: Macmillan, 1973).

¹³⁵ Weil, *Letter to a Priest*, 17.

individuals as “anonymous Christians.”¹³⁶ Like Weil, however, he recognises that God’s will is to save, and that this can be experienced outside the orbit of the church.¹³⁷

In this chapter I considered Weil’s metaphor of creation as a cross and how we participate in it by existing. Setting aside the power of divinity, Christ consents to become fully human and experience the extremes of separation from the Father, making possible the union of opposites. In Christ and the cross, time and eternity come together, and our response is to contemplate this in faith and seek to incarnate God’s unconditional love in the world. Weil’s view, however, is that this can occur outside the sphere of the church, even when Christ is not specifically named. This is yet another example of Weil’s independent thinking and, before going further, it is necessary to address more closely the question of her orthodoxy or the lack of it.

¹³⁶ Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations: Vol. XIV Ecclesiology, Questions in the Church, The Church in the World*, trans. David Bourke (New York: The Seabury Press, 1976), 283.

¹³⁷ Karl Rahner, *Foundation of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, trans. William V. Dych (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2005), 147, 314–16.

Chapter IV: Weil and Classical Christianity

In the previous chapters, I laid a foundation illustrating how the themes of creation and incarnation are closely connected in Weil's Christological thinking. However, her scheme is unconventional and, her critics would argue, heterodox. In this chapter, I respond to these criticisms by considering Weil's thought in relation to three key Christian doctrines: Christ's dual nature, divine impassibility, and most crucially her portrayal of creation as a rending or separation within God. The orthodox view, which has come to be known as classical Christianity, was "defended" by Athanasius at Nicea (325 CE) and, having been given greater "precision" by the Cappadocians in the continuing controversies of the fourth century, affirmed by the Council of Chalcedon (451CE).¹³⁸ Gilles Emery reduces the deliberations of Chalcedon to the statement that "The Church confesses three divine persons [*hypostases*, or relations], but it affirms only one nature [*ousia*, or essence] in the Trinity. And Christ, who is one of the Trinity, is one person existing in two natures [human and divine]."¹³⁹ In this way they were able to test alternative and potentially "heretical" understandings of Christ by identifying points of deviation. However, as Rowan Williams notes, Chalcedon "represented less the triumph of a theory, let alone a vocabulary, than a reassertion of the basic elements of the problem."¹⁴⁰ The unresolved "tension of classical Christianity" was "how could an impassible God experience suffering in a finite human form."¹⁴¹

Human and divine

Various answers were proposed. Arius's solution was to deny that Jesus was fully God, while Nestorius, who held that Jesus was both fully human *and* fully God, struggled to define how the two natures could be united ontologically without

¹³⁸ Lewis Ayres, *Nicea and Its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 236–37.

¹³⁹ Gilles Emery, *The Trinity: An Introduction to Catholic Doctrine on the Triune God*, ed. Matthew Levering and Thomas Joseph White, trans. Matthew Levering, Thomistic Ressourcement Series 1 (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2011), 105; *Catholic Church. Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997), 67. (255).

¹⁴⁰ Williams, *Christ: The Heart of Creation*, 119.

¹⁴¹ Alvyn Petterson, *Athanasius*, Outstanding Christian Thinkers Series (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 2007), 116–17.

affecting God.¹⁴² It was Cyril of Alexandria who, through his understanding of the communication of idioms, argued that Jesus' human nature was capable of suffering while his divine nature remained impassible, and that this was achieved without any division or mixture.¹⁴³ The attributes of each nature can be predicated of him as the "Word incarnate."¹⁴⁴ Cyril is an example of theological clarity emerging through controversy (in his case the argument with Nestorius).¹⁴⁵ Although debated among scholars, Weinandy contends that it was the "*mia physis*" (one nature) formula used by Cyril as an illustration, that was misinterpreted by Nestorius and the Antiochenes.¹⁴⁶ Christ is one person with two natures, human and divine, and the former represents, not a change but "the person of the Word taking on a new mode or manner of existence" as a human being.¹⁴⁷ Cyril's understanding was later endorsed by Chalcedon.¹⁴⁸ Christ is *homoousion* (one substance) with the Father. It is his very "otherness as God which gives significance to the Son's incarnate existence."¹⁴⁹ Weinandy refers to Cyril's comment that "It is so that we might see side by side the wound together with the remedy, the patient together with the physician"¹⁵⁰ This requires that there is "an ontological union between the Son of God and his humanity, for only within such a union could the Son truly save and so divinize his and our own humanity."¹⁵¹

¹⁴² Weinandy, *Does God Suffer*, 175–81.

¹⁴³ Thomas G. Weinandy, "Cyril and the Mystery of the Incarnation," in *The Theology of St. Cyril of Alexandria: A Critical Appreciation*, ed. Thomas G. Weinandy and Daniel A. Keating (London; New York: T&T Clark, 2003), 28; See Norman Russell, *Cyril of Alexandria, The Early Church Fathers* (London: New York: Routledge, 2003), 79. *Commentary on John 7:14–16*; Also, Russell, *Cyril of Alexandria*, 125–27. *Commentary on John 11:9*; Russell, *Cyril of Alexandria*, 149–50. *Against Nestorius*.

¹⁴⁴ Weinandy, "Cyril and the Mystery of the Incarnation," 38.

¹⁴⁵ Weinandy, "Cyril and the Mystery of the Incarnation," 23–24.

¹⁴⁶ See Weinandy, "Cyril and the Mystery of the Incarnation," 32–40.

¹⁴⁷ Weinandy, "Cyril and the Mystery of the Incarnation," 42; See Russell, *Cyril of Alexandria*, 179–89. *An Explanation of the Twelve Chapters*, Anathema 2.

¹⁴⁸ Weinandy, "Cyril and the Mystery of the Incarnation," 43–44.

¹⁴⁹ Weinandy, "Cyril and the Mystery of the Incarnation," 46.

¹⁵⁰ Russell, *Cyril of Alexandria*, 105. *Commentary on John 1:14a*.

¹⁵¹ Weinandy, "Cyril and the Mystery of the Incarnation," 27; See Russell, *Cyril of Alexandria*, 106. *Commentary on John 1:14a*.

Weil also emphasises the reality of Christ's humanity, arguing that if Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, then he did so as a human being, but she does not question his divinity.¹⁵² Weil believes in the possibility of miracles but understands them to be latent in creation and manifested under certain spiritual states, not as violations of the laws of nature.¹⁵³ The miracles performed by Christ, are executed by him as a human being, not through the sovereign exercise of divine power.¹⁵⁴ Weinandy agrees, although he arrives at this through a detailed examination of Chalcedon transmitted through Cyril of Alexandria.¹⁵⁵ From radically different starting points they reach the same conclusion, that the impassible God, as the human Jesus, experiences fully what it is to be human, including suffering. Weil does not describe Christ's dual nature with the precision of Chalcedon, but it is implicit within her larger theme of creation, affliction, and the saving love of God. The crucial difference is that for Weinandy, this begins with Christ's physical incarnation and birth (God, as Christ, does not experience suffering prior to this), whereas for Weil it is initiated in the very act of creation and brought to completion on the cross.

Impassibility

For Weinandy, however, the major objection to contemporary theologies of the suffering God, such as Weil's, is the traditional Christian understanding of divine impassibility.¹⁵⁶ Fundamental to this is the belief that God is "simple," i.e., not compound or made up of parts. God's *aseity* (self-existence) would be compromised "if the being of God owed anything to any other reality outside itself."¹⁵⁷ God's

¹⁵² Weil, *Notebooks*, 1:315.

¹⁵³ Weil, *The Need for Roots*, 263–66; Weil, *Notebooks*, 1:243; Weil, "The Love of God and Affliction," 75; See Vance G. Morgan, "Miracles and Supernatural Physics: Simone Weil on the Relationship of Science and Religion," in *The Relevance of the Radical: Simone Weil 100 Years Later*, ed. A. Rebecca Rozelle-Stone and Lucian Stone (London; New York: Continuum, 2010), 107–22 for more detail.

¹⁵⁴ Weinandy, "Cyril and the Mystery of the Incarnation," 29–30 and especially note 21; Russell, *Cyril of Alexandria*, 115, where Cyril uses the example of the raising of the Synagogue ruler's daughter. *Commentary on John* 6:53.

¹⁵⁵ Weinandy, *Does God Suffer*, 182–206, especially 205.

¹⁵⁶ See Weinandy, *Does God Suffer* for a defence of this view.

¹⁵⁷ Cf. Paul S. Fiddes, "Creation out of Love," in *The Work of Love. Creation as Kenosis*, ed. John Polkinghorne (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2001), 171; Thomas Aquinas, *The*

essential being can neither be added to nor taken away.¹⁵⁸ "God cannot even change himself" since "as pure act there are no unrealised potentials in God."¹⁵⁹ If God is unchanging then he cannot be injured, and emotions are also "excluded from God because, as passions, they arise from receiving something from an external force through the senses."¹⁶⁰ However, this does not mean that God is apathetic toward creatures, although maintaining the tension between divine impassibility and selfless love requires an acceptance, as Cyril of Alexandria acknowledges, that Christ "suffers and does not suffer... for He suffers humanly in the Flesh as Man, He is impassible Divinely as God."¹⁶¹ Weinandy argues that to say God is immutable and impassible does not imply that God is "static and inert."¹⁶² He contends that the persons of the Trinity are best described as verbs rather than nouns, and that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are "the names that... designate the acts by which they are defined."¹⁶³

The difference between Weil and Weinandy is primarily language. The impersonal Father is Weil's shorthand for the "simple" God of classical theism.¹⁶⁴ This reflects her recognition of God's unconditional love and her concept of *amor fati*, the "love of the order of the world" or fate, but also that God is "not a being" as we understand it, but *the* transcendent reality beyond everything else.¹⁶⁵ Weil views the cross from our human perspective of suffering and separation, and she is suspicious of any system that claims to adequately describe God. Such schemes, in her view, will inevitably contain both truth and error.

Summa Theologica, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benziger Bros, 1947) I-II. 2. 3; 3. 1; 9. 1.

¹⁵⁸ Ayres, *Nicea and Its Legacy*, 280–81.

¹⁵⁹ Fiddes, *The Creative Suffering of God*, 50; cf. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I-II. 9. 2.

¹⁶⁰ Fiddes, *The Creative Suffering of God*, 50; cf. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I-II. 9. 1; 20. 1.

¹⁶¹ Cyril of Alexandria, "Scholia on the Incarnation," in *Five Tomes against Nestorius; ; Christ Is One; Fragments against Diodore of Tarsus, Theodore of Mopsuestia, the Synousiasts*, trans. P. E. Pusey (London; Oxford; Cambridge: James Parker and Co.; Rivingtons, 1881), 228–229. *Scholia* 36; Cf. Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God* (London: SCM Press, 1974), 269–270.

¹⁶² Weinandy, *Does God Suffer*, 123.

¹⁶³ Weinandy, *Does God Suffer*, 118–19. See also 122, 127.

¹⁶⁴ Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, 129.

¹⁶⁵ Weil, "Forms of the Implicit Love of God," 99; McCullough, *The Religious Philosophy of Simone Weil*, 14–15.

Separation within God

Weil challenges the orthodox view, however, when she posits creation as a separation or rending within the Trinity (it is not always clear whether she is arguing for a literal separation or employing a Christological metaphor), and that Christ experiences suffering within creation, which divides him from the Father. This is her response to the apparent contradiction between the God who is love, but totally other, and the loving Son who embraces our human experience to reconcile us to the Father. In a significant passage, she writes,

God created through love and for love. God did not create anything except love itself, and the means to love. He created love in all its forms. He created beings capable of love from all possible distances. Because no other could do it, he himself went to the greatest possible distance, the infinite distance. This infinite distance between God and God, this supreme tearing apart, this agony beyond all others, this marvel of love, is the crucifixion. Nothing can be further from God than that which has been made accursed.¹⁶⁶

How are we to understand Weil's reference to a "tearing apart" or rending within God? She begins with creation but makes a breath-taking leap to Christ's incarnation and Passion in a way that compresses time. The answer, I believe, lies in her use of metaphor. God is the ultimate mystery and Weil, who is fascinated by myths and folk tales in other cultures, writes, "The foundation of mythology is that the universe is a metaphor of the divine truths."¹⁶⁷ The incarnation is the embodiment of those truths. "The story of Christ is a symbol, a metaphor. But it used to be believed that metaphors produce themselves as events in the world. God is the supreme poet."¹⁶⁸ In the *Letter to a Priest*, Weil states that "In the domain of holy things I affirm nothing categorically."¹⁶⁹ She recognises there are limits to what we can know about God, and in her apophatic (negative) theology we approach the divine mystery of the Trinity by way of analogy.¹⁷⁰ God is revealed to us through the incarnation but veiled

¹⁶⁶ Weil, "The Love of God and Affliction," 72; See also Weil, *Science, Necessity, and the Love of God*, 174–75.

¹⁶⁷ Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, 191.

¹⁶⁸ Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, 194.

¹⁶⁹ Weil, *Letter to a Priest*, 3.

¹⁷⁰ See Ayres, *Nicea and Its Legacy*, 278–79.

in a human form. This enables us to conceive and relate to God, who is free of creaturely limitations, while permitting us to speak of his perfection and being.¹⁷¹

Weil's statement that "The function of mediation in itself implies a tearing asunder" within the Trinity is shocking to us because it appears to "entail a degradation of the divine Being" that is inconceivable for a traditional understanding of God.¹⁷² She argues that "The interposed density of all space and all time sets an infinite distance between God and God."¹⁷³ The paradox is that "God and creation are one; God and creation are infinitely distant from each other... to feel this distance means a spiritual quartering, it means crucifixion."¹⁷⁴ We participate in this as creatures through existing. "We are what is farthest removed from God, at the extreme distance whence it is yet not absolutely impossible to return to him. In our being God is torn asunder. We are God's crucifixion."¹⁷⁵

When describing the exiles in London, turning their attention away from the French people under Nazi occupation to facilitate good relations with the British, Weil speaks of "do[ing] themselves a sort of violence."¹⁷⁶ When she talks about a separation or rending within God, I suggest that she is employing similar verbal licence. It is intended to be descriptive, and her focus is on the cross, not trinitarian ontology. Christ's cry of dereliction, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" is the moment when he embraces the totality of the distance between the worst that a human being can experience and God's absolute perfection (Matt 27:46; Mark 15:34; cf. Ps 22:1). Weil notes, "At the supreme moment of the Passion, there is an instant where there appears a thing which to human eyes seems a separation, an opposition between the Father and the Son." However, she continues, "Certainly this is no more than an appearance."¹⁷⁷ It is on the cross that we see Christ at his most human and yet divine. Weil does not try to explain this, she only asks us to contemplate it. Christ

¹⁷¹ See Emery, *The Trinity*, 95–98.

¹⁷² Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 90; Weil, *Notebooks*, 2:380; Frénaud, "Simone Weil's Religious Thought in the Light of Catholic Theology," 370.

¹⁷³ Weil, *Science, Necessity, and the Love of God*, 176; cf. Weil, *Notebooks*, 2:428.

¹⁷⁴ Weil, *Notebooks*, 2:400.

¹⁷⁵ Weil, *Notebooks*, 2:564.

¹⁷⁶ Weil, *The Need for Roots*, 198–99.

¹⁷⁷ Weil, *Intimations of Christianity Among the Ancient Greeks*, 68–69.

never stops being God and, in his willingness to accept the humiliation of becoming human, invites us to participate in his sacrificial love for creation. “Man is permitted only to imitate God the Son. That is why ‘No man comes to the Father save by me.’” We can only imitate “the Father in his abdication, of which the complete fulfilment is in the incarnation.”¹⁷⁸

Weil’s understanding of creation as withdrawal has parallels in Jewish thought. Moltmann also utilises the concept of *tsimtsun*, which the Kabbalist Isaac Luria (d. 1572), employed to explain creation.¹⁷⁹ This Hebrew word denotes “‘contraction,’ ‘withdrawal,’ ‘retreat.’” God steps back to create a space in which creation can exist. The initial act, therefore, is one of “negation or limitation.”¹⁸⁰ While it is unlikely that Weil was aware of this Jewish tradition, she appears to have arrived at it independently. Gerhard Scholem, an eminent Jewish Kabbalistic scholar, commenting on Luria, writes, “God was compelled to make room for the world by as it were, abandoning a region within Himself, a kind of mystical primordial space from which He withdrew in order to return to it in the act of creation and revelation.” He adds, “but for this perpetual tension, this ever repeated effort with which God holds himself back, nothing in the world would exist.” He notes that this represents “the only serious attempt ever made to give substance to the idea of Creation out of Nothing.”¹⁸¹

To summarise, Weil’s view of Christ’s two natures, while lacking the precision of Chalcedon, is in essential agreement with it; and her understanding of impassibility, also has support among some contemporary theologians. It is her radical suggestion that the act of creation necessitates a rending within the Trinity that is her most heterodox speculation. I argue, however, that she employs this as a Christological metaphor, and does not intend for it to be understood literally with regard to the Trinity. While strikingly original and unorthodox, approached from the perspective of suffering in creation, Weil’s theology is Christ centred and falls within a broad

¹⁷⁸ Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, 154.

¹⁷⁹ Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation: A New Theology of Creation and the Spirit of God*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993), 86–93.

¹⁸⁰ McCullough, *The Religious Philosophy of Simone Weil*, 87–88.

¹⁸¹ Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, (New York: Schocken, 1941), 260–62 cited in McCullough, *The Religious Philosophy of Simone Weil*, 88.

contemplative tradition. Having looked at some of the complex questions her thought raises, I now turn to how she applied these ideas in her own life and our relation to God in the world.

Chapter V: The Hiddenness of God

I began with a question, where was God? Many of us will experience periods in our lives when it seems as if God is hidden or distant and this is a recurring theme in Weil's writings. "The true God is the God we think of as almighty, but not as exercising his power everywhere, for he is found only in the heavens or in secret here below."¹⁸² The supernatural illuminates this world and God reveals himself in it through beauty and affliction, but we are the obstacle and, having met with God we must return to the world to share his love.

Atheism as purification

Before God met with her, Weil believed that it was not possible, in this world, to know with certainty whether there was a God. Looking back, however, she could see that God was preparing her. "In order to obey God, one must receive his commands. How did it happen that I received them in adolescence, while I was professing atheism? To believe that the desire for good is always fulfilled – that is faith, and whoever has it is not an atheist."¹⁸³ A more accurate description of her then would be agnostic. The existence of God is a matter about which we can have no first-hand knowledge, it is better, therefore, to leave the question "alone" than to "reach a wrong solution."¹⁸⁴

However, she came to believe that some forms of atheism could bring genuine seekers closer to God than formal religion when personal experience of grace is lacking. Between "two men who have no experience of God, he who denies him is perhaps closer to him than the other."¹⁸⁵ God "must first of all be desired as truth, only afterwards as food."¹⁸⁶ There is a danger that we "fall into an imaginary love of God" that separates us from the world as it actually is.¹⁸⁷ In the notebooks she observes that "Religion in so far as it is a source of consolation is a hindrance to true

¹⁸² Weil, "Forms of the Implicit Love of God," 88.

¹⁸³ Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, 137.

¹⁸⁴ Weil, "Spiritual Autobiography," 22.

¹⁸⁵ Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 115; Weil, *Notebooks*, 1:151.

¹⁸⁶ Weil, *The Need for Roots*, 238.

¹⁸⁷ Weil, *Notebooks*, 1:326.

faith: in this sense atheism is a purification,” and adds, “Since we are, in fact, in an age of incredulity, why neglect the purificatory use of incredulity? I have had experimental knowledge of its use.”¹⁸⁸ Understood in this way, atheism can be “a cleansing of the concepts and images that we usually name God,” which are idols of our own making, to open the way for the possibility of a better understanding of God as he shows himself to be.¹⁸⁹

Affliction (*malheur*)

It is through suffering that we come up against the harsh realities of the world and the paradox of God’s love revealed in it. It is our vocation as created beings “To love God through and beyond the destruction of Troy and of Carthage—and without consolation. Love is not consolation, it is light.”¹⁹⁰ Despite her reservations regarding the portrayal of God in the Hebrew bible, Weil believed that the book of Job was “a pure marvel of truth and authenticity from beginning to end.”¹⁹¹ She writes, “Only one who like Job in the depths of affliction still tries to love God feels in its fulness and at the very centre of his soul all the bitterness of affliction. If he renounces God he would not suffer in this way.”¹⁹² While continuing to trust in God’s faithfulness despite external appearances to the contrary, Job is not afraid to question God and ask “why?”¹⁹³

Some experience of suffering is inevitable and cannot be avoided. Weil notes, “What does it matter to a lover if the message be polite or rough, so long as he delivers the message?”¹⁹⁴ She accepts suffering as a means of grace that should be embraced when it comes, but she also recognises that extreme affliction has the power to degrade and dehumanise us. “But it *is* surprising that God should have given affliction the power to seize the very souls of the innocent and take possession of

¹⁸⁸ Weil, *Notebooks*, 1:238; Weil, *Notebooks*, 1:239.

¹⁸⁹ Nava, *Simone Weil and Gustavo Gutiérrez*, 166; cf. Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 114–15; Weil, *Notebooks*, 1:126.

¹⁹⁰ Weil, *Notebooks*, 1:258; Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 14.

¹⁹¹ Weil, “The Love of God and Affliction,” 70.

¹⁹² Cited in Vetö, *The Religious Metaphysics of Simone Weil*, 87.

¹⁹³ Cabaud Meaney, *Simone Weil’s Apologetic Use of Literature*, 159.

¹⁹⁴ Weil, “The Love of God and Affliction,” 79.

them as their sovereign lord.”¹⁹⁵ The year she spent working in the factories had impressed upon her that “Affliction is essentially a destruction of personality, a lapse into anonymity. Just as Christ put off his divinity for love, so are the afflicted stripped of their humanity by misfortune.”¹⁹⁶ In the margin of a notebook, she records, “I believe in the value of suffering, so long as one makes every effort to escape it.”¹⁹⁷ For Weil, “The tremendous greatness of Christianity comes from the fact that it does not seek a supernatural remedy against suffering, but a supernatural use of suffering.”¹⁹⁸

Beauty as a window

In a document she produced for the Free French in London, shortly before she died, Weil writes,

There is a reality outside this world, that is to say, outside space and time, outside man’s mental universe, outside any sphere whatsoever that is accessible to human faculties. Corresponding to this reality, at the centre of the human heart, is the longing for an absolute good, a longing which is always there and is never appeased by any object in this world.¹⁹⁹

It is through the contemplation of beauty and the impersonal order of the world including suffering, that as creatures, we become aware of this ultimate reality. Elsewhere she notes, “Beauty is the supreme mystery of this world.”²⁰⁰ It “is the only finality here below,” but contemplating it leaves us unsatisfied, and the resulting desire leads to all manner of “vice, depravity, and crime.” She continues, “Eve began it. If she caused humanity to be lost by eating the fruit, the opposite attitude, looking at the fruit without eating it, should be what is required to save it.”²⁰¹

¹⁹⁵ Weil, “The Love of God and Affliction,” 69. Italics are original.

¹⁹⁶ Simone Weil, “Three Essays on the Love of God,” in *Gateway to God*, ed. David Raper (Glasgow: Collins, 1974), 94.

¹⁹⁷ Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, 3.

¹⁹⁸ Weil, *Notebooks*, 2:386–87.

¹⁹⁹ Simone Weil, “Draft for a Statement of Human Obligation,” in *Selected Essays, 1934–1943*, ed. and trans. Richard Rees (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2015), 219. This first section, written in 1943, is subtitled “Profession of Faith.”

²⁰⁰ Weil, “Human Personality,” 29.

²⁰¹ Weil, “Forms of the Implicit Love of God,” 105.

Beauty like suffering, is something we should “contemplate” without either “trying to seize it” or “drawing back.”²⁰² It is as we become aware of the impersonal (i.e., unconditional) love of God revealed through the order of the world in *all* its forms, that we begin to see from God’s cruciform perspective. “The only people who have any hope of salvation” Weil writes, “are those who occasionally stop and look for a time, instead of eating.”²⁰³ The temptation is to avoid this, but “If one does not seek means to evade the exquisite anguish it inflicts, then desire is gradually transformed into love; and one begins to acquire the faculty of pure and disinterested attention.”²⁰⁴ Beauty (and spontaneous joy) is a window, through which we can glimpse, but not touch, the shadow of the perfection that lies beyond. However, Weil also refers to the supernatural as light. She comments, “The object of my search is not the supernatural, but this world. The supernatural is the light. We must not presume to make an object of it, or else we degrade it.”²⁰⁵ Weil’s insight is that the supernatural brings into relief objects in this world, not the next.

The supernatural as light

In her essay, *Human Personality* (1943), Weil observes, “It is the light falling continually from heaven which alone gives the tree the energy to send powerful roots deep into the earth. The tree is really rooted in the sky.”²⁰⁶ The light descending from above draws us towards it (grace), but the temptation (gravity) is to turn aside to substitutes to satisfy our desire, when what we really need is “a chlorophyll conferring the faculty of feeding on light.”²⁰⁷ She comments,

The Gospel contains a conception of human life, not a theology. If I light an electric torch at night out of doors I don’t judge its power by looking at the bulb, but by seeing how many objects it lights up. The brightness of a source is appreciated by the illumination it projects upon non-luminous objects. The value of a religious or, more generally, a spiritual way of life is appreciated by the amount of illumination thrown upon the things of this

²⁰² Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 150; Weil, *Notebooks*, 1:283.

²⁰³ Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, 286.

²⁰⁴ Weil, “Human Personality,” 29.

²⁰⁵ Weil, *Notebooks*, 1:173; See also Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 130, although the translation there is slightly different.

²⁰⁶ Weil, “Human Personality,” 23.

²⁰⁷ Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 3; Weil, *Notebooks*, 1:222.

world. Earthly things are the criterion of spiritual things... If, on the pretext that only spiritual things are of value, we refuse to take the light thrown on earthly things as a criterion, we are in danger of having a non-existent treasure.²⁰⁸

Stone observes that “a refusal to look away from the light bulb... causes a kind of blindness.” Our authentic knowledge of God comes from being faithfully attentive to what we see revealed in this world.²⁰⁹ Winch, a secular philosopher for whom the supernatural is unprovable and therefore, should not be taken into account, argues that Weil’s “insistence that ‘earthly things are *the criterion* of spiritual things’ shows that we are not being offered a ‘metaphysics of the spiritual,’ but a certain way of thinking about the earthly,” although he recognises his need to defend this view.²¹⁰ However, Cabaud Meaney counters that Winch’s “approach remains reductive,” and fails to recognise that “The supernatural is a reality for Weil.”²¹¹ Weil is insistent that having a supernatural perspective causes us to “engage in present concerns and care for others.”²¹²

It is what Weil terms our “false self” that prevents us from recognising this, introducing an aspect of her thought that shows the influence of Plato and eastern religions, as well as the Christian mystical tradition. “The ‘I’... is only the shadow cast by sin and error which obstruct[s] the light coming from God, and which I take to be a being.”²¹³ Reconfiguring traditional understandings of sin, she employs the myth of Plato’s Cave to capture our predicament.²¹⁴ We are unable to find our way out of the cave without the operation of grace.²¹⁵ “The flesh is not what keeps us away from God; it is the veil we place before us to screen ourselves from him.”²¹⁶ Just as “He

²⁰⁸ Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, 147.

²⁰⁹ Rozelle-Stone and Stone, *Simone Weil and Theology*, 6.

²¹⁰ Winch, *Simone Weil: The Just Balance*, 199–200; Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, 147.

²¹¹ Cabaud Meaney, *Simone Weil’s Apologetic Use of Literature*, 100, note 95.

²¹² Cabaud Meaney, *Simone Weil’s Apologetic Use of Literature*, 100.

²¹³ Weil, *Notebooks*, 2:419.

²¹⁴ Plato, *The Republic of Plato*, trans. Benjamin Jowett, Third Edition. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1888), <https://oll-resources.s3.us-east-2.amazonaws.com/oll3/store/titles/598/0061_Bk.pdf> (14 June 2021); Simone Weil, *Lectures on Philosophy*, trans. Hugh Price (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 219–21.

²¹⁵ Weil, *Notebooks*, 2:348; Bradley Jersak, *From the Cave to the Cross: The Cruciform Theology of George Grant and Simone Weil* (Abbotsford, BC: St. Macrina Press, 2015), 81.

²¹⁶ Weil, *Notebooks*, 2:623.

[Christ] emptied himself of his divinity. We should empty ourselves of the false divinity with which we were born.”²¹⁷ What we take for a being is an illusion that it is necessary to relinquish in order to discover our true selves in Christ.

Where Paul speaks of putting off the old man that is crucified with Christ and putting on the new, Weil uses the philosophic language she is familiar with to describe the necessary transformation (cf. Rom 6:6; Col 3:9–10, Eph 4:22–24). Faith is our consenting to turn toward the light of God’s love. She writes, “Faith is the experience that the intelligence is lighted [enlightened] up by love... The organ in us through which we see truth is intelligence. The organ through which we see God is love.”²¹⁸ This is a contemplative rather than rational, evangelical faith. However, Weil is aware of the subjective dangers, insisting on the necessity of waiting and not seeking to supply answers of our own. This is a work of the Holy Spirit in response to faith, and Weil downplays the role of human intermediaries, including church doctrine and tradition to accomplish it.²¹⁹

Returning to the world

Having been touched by God, however, we must return to the world to make a difference there. Weil argues that “It is not the way a man talks about God, but the way he talks about things of the world that best shows whether his soul has passed through the fire of the love of God.”²²⁰ As Alexander Nava notes, “it becomes obvious that one has slept with God by the extraordinary life one leads.”²²¹ Weil gives the analogy of a painter, who “does not draw the spot where he is standing. But in looking at his picture I can deduce his position by relation to the things drawn.”²²² Our actions are indicative of our supernatural perspective.²²³

²¹⁷ Weil, *Notebooks*, 1:217, cf. 212, 283.

²¹⁸ Weil, *Notebooks*, 1:240.

²¹⁹ Frénaud, “Simone Weil’s Religious Thought in the Light of Catholic Theology,” 359.

²²⁰ Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, 145.

²²¹ Nava, *Simone Weil and Gustavo Gutiérrez*, 166; Cf. Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, 146.

²²² Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, 146.

²²³ McCullough, *The Religious Philosophy of Simone Weil*, 82.

Mary Dietz, commenting on Weil's political writings, notes that, while a deep appreciation of human suffering prompted her religious thought, Weil's "theology had little to do with the real world."²²⁴ I argue, however, that for Weil it is only *in* the world that we can meet with God, and that the love of our neighbour is intimately connected to justice for the oppressed and being fully attentive to each person we come into contact with.²²⁵ Although conversion involves turning away from the world toward the light (God), Weil is insistent that "the wise have to return to the cave and act there."²²⁶ She observes, "the saint, after crossing the valley of death to reach God, must somehow be incarnated in his own body in order to cast a reflection of the supernatural light over this world, in this earthly life."²²⁷

Weil argues we can only meet with God in this world, and although he hides from us, if we are attentive, we will discover that the supernatural is present everywhere, illuminating the paradoxes of existence as we learn to see from God's perspective. Beauty and suffering, because they result from the impersonal order of the world as God created it, bring us into an awareness of God as absence and faith is our consenting to allow the supernatural light to pass unimpeded through us back to the world. What stands in the way of this is our individual autonomy, the "false self." How Weil envisages we overcome this obstacle, and the price she paid personally, is the subject of my next chapter.

²²⁴ Mary G. Dietz, *Between the Human and the Divine. The Political Thought of Simone Weil* (Tobowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1988), 115; See also Blackburn, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Simone Weil*, 46.

²²⁵ Maria Clara Bingemer, *Simone Weil: Mystic of Passion and Compassion*, trans. Karen M. Kraft (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2015), 51–53.

²²⁶ Weil, *Science, Necessity, and the Love of God*, 104; See also Jersak, *From the Cave to the Cross*, 152–53.

²²⁷ Simone Weil, *La Source grecque* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966), 96 cited in Gabellieri, "Reconstructing Platonism," 137.

Chapter VI: Union with God

What separates us from God is the fact of our existence, and our reunion requires the removal of this barrier, as we consent to be made new. For Weil this involves a voluntary limitation and self-sacrifice imitating that of Christ. Having met with God, we must return to the world and manifest his unconditional love there but, in doing so we will find ourselves changed. This has parallels in Christian thought, which I explore by turning again to Cyril of Alexandria, an influential Church Father, who himself frames his narrative in an unexpected fashion, before contrasting with Weil's own challenging concept of decreation.

Theosis

Daniel Keating notes that building on Irenaeus and Athanasius before him, Cyril of Alexandria portrays the incarnation and work of the Holy Spirit as an exchange leading to what has been "variously termed 'divinization,' 'deification,' or 'theosis'"²²⁸ The goal of redemption is to make possible our participation in the life of the Trinity.²²⁹ In his *Commentary on John*, Cyril discusses this using the example of Jesus' baptism and receiving the Spirit (John 1:29–34).²³⁰ Rather than focussing on the trinitarian implications, he casts this in the narrative of creation and humanity's recovery of the image of God and the life-giving spirit that was lost in the Fall (Gen 2:7).²³¹ He describes how, by turning away from God, humanity, "forfeited" the Holy Spirit until it eventually departed.²³²

Contrary to the reading of some scholars, Cyril emphasises the necessity of the full humanity of Christ.²³³ Rejecting the adoptionist view of his opponents, he argues that

²²⁸ Daniel A. Keating, "Divinization in Cyril: The Appropriation of Divine Life," in *The Theology of St. Cyril of Alexandria: A Critical Appreciation*, ed. Daniel A. Keating and Thomas G. Weinandy (London; New York: T&T Clark, 2003), 149.

²²⁹ Keating, "Divinization in Cyril," 151–52.

²³⁰ Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary on John*, vol. 1; Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary on John*, vol. 2.

²³¹ Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary on John*, 1:182; Cf. Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary on John*, 1:185 and his exposition of John 14:20; See Keating, "Divinization in Cyril," 153–55.

²³² Keating, "Divinization in Cyril," 155; Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary on John*, 1:183.

²³³ Keating, "Divinization in Cyril," 173–75. See note 54, where Keating gives the example of Frances Young, *Nicaea to Chalcedon* (London: SCM Press, 1983), 260 as someone who also rejects the view that Cyril holds to a "thinly disguised Apollinarianism."

“What the Son eternally possesses as God he now receives for us as man.”²³⁴ Cyril highlights how, at his baptism, the Spirit “remains” on Jesus. What was lost by humanity can be regained through faith in Christ.²³⁵ God’s plan involves “the re-creation of the human race through the reacquisition of the Spirit in and through the Incarnate Word.”²³⁶ However, Christ “as the Second Adam, [is] not only the *agent* but also the *recipient* of redemption.”²³⁷ The end becomes the beginning, as the fallen Adam is raised to be with the ascended, ruling Christ.²³⁸ In Christ, the life-giving Spirit instigates a process of restoration that will only be completed when we are raised incorruptible with him.²³⁹ It is as “partakers of the divine nature” that we enter into the fulness of the Spirit (2 Peter 1:4).²⁴⁰

Decreation and the void

Exchange also features in Weil’s scheme, however, she approaches it through perhaps her most difficult concept, decreation. She comments, “The Incarnation is simply a figure of the Creation. God abdicated by giving us existence. By refusing it, we abdicate and become, in that way, similar to God.”²⁴¹ Our vocation as creatures is to mirror God’s ongoing creative abdication through a decreative offering that, by turning away from self, enables us to participate in God’s unconditional love for the world. Decreation is not self-hate (although that was a temptation for her). It is loving both God and the world purely, without any thought of self. Weil notes how, like an unwanted third person on a date, we must remove the screen (“My presence”) so that God, “who loves to touch them” can meet those with whom we come into contact.²⁴² To experience this, she argues, it is necessary to pass through the void of

²³⁴ Keating, “Divinization in Cyril,” 153–54; See Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary on John*, 1:182.

²³⁵ Keating, “Divinization in Cyril,” 153, 156; Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary on John*, 1:174–75.

²³⁶ Keating, “Divinization in Cyril,” 156–157.

²³⁷ Keating, “Divinization in Cyril,” 157.

²³⁸ Keating, “Divinization in Cyril,” 158–59; *Commentary on John*, 2:441–42. Note the page reference Keating gives is incorrect.

²³⁹ Keating, “Divinization in Cyril,” 158; Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary on John*, 1:135.

²⁴⁰ Keating, “Divinization in Cyril,” 169–70.

²⁴¹ Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, 297.

²⁴² Weil, *Notebooks*, 2:404.

the absence of God, which often takes the form of affliction, while continuing to love God and neighbour purely.

Rowan Williams, who was close to the Twin Towers when the planes struck in 2001, gives an example, “It was an empty space. I don’t want to forget that... Somehow the emptiness ‘resources’ us... Simone Weil said that the danger of the imagination was that it filled up the void when what we need to learn is to live in the presence of the void.” Williams talks about the need for a “breathing space,” where God can speak to us in our pain and suffering. The temptation is to provide answers to the question “why,” when the only legitimate response is to contemplate the cross and the infinite compassion of God for all those who are suffering.²⁴³

Vetö observes that “The basic vision of her entire philosophy rests on a God suffering from being separated from himself by the obstacle of human autonomy. Decreation is the elimination of the obstacle.”²⁴⁴ However, it is not the goal. Weil writes, “After having traversed death in order to reach God, the saint should in a sense incarnate himself in his own body in order to spread in this world, in this earthly life, the reflection of supernatural light.”²⁴⁵ She recognises that “Destruction is the opposite extreme of de-creation.” If evil is “the distance between the creature and God,” then “To abolish evil means to decreate; but that is something which God is able to do with our co-operation.”²⁴⁶ Decreation leads us into a “Pythagorean harmony,” in which the good (her term for the “impersonal” God) is “defined by the union of opposites.”²⁴⁷ It is all by grace, but it is a grace that seeks our consent as a free will response of reciprocal love that cannot be coerced or earned.

²⁴³ Rowan Williams, *Writing in the Dust. Reflections on the 11th September and Its Aftermath* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2002), 10–11; See also Blackburn, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Simone Weil*, 225–26.

²⁴⁴ Vetö, *The Religious Metaphysics of Simone Weil*, 73.

²⁴⁵ Weil, *Science, Necessity, and the Love of God*, 112.

²⁴⁶ Weil, *Notebooks*, 2:342, cf. 588.

²⁴⁷ Weil, *Intimations of Christianity Among the Ancient Greeks*, 169; Weil, *Notebooks*, 2:447; See also McCullough, *The Religious Philosophy of Simone Weil*, 226.

Ascent through “non-being”

Weil is describing an ascetic path that few can walk faithfully unaided. It is as we consent to be aware of God’s hidden presence in the world (e.g., through beauty, affliction, and personal “experiences” of the love of God), that he makes himself known to us and rewards those who attentively seek him or show selfless compassion. God loves “himself through us,” as we mirror his unconditional love for others and the world.²⁴⁸ It is “by means of the disappearance of the individual ‘I’ [that] the love of God for God passes through the soul of a man like the light through a piece of glass. That is what is meant by the presence of the Holy Spirit in the soul.”²⁴⁹ She writes that,

We are worthless slaves.” That is the highest point a human creature can attain to. For glass, there is nothing better than absolute transparency. For a human being there is nothing more than nothingness. Every value in a human being is really a negative value. It is like an opaque stain on glass. If a piece of glass is covered with such blemishes it may easily believe it amounts to something and is much superior to some perfectly transparent glass through which the light passes as if there was nothing there.²⁵⁰

The goal is to become perfectly transparent and open to God. However, “We are born far below zero. Zero is our maximum.”²⁵¹ Therefore, moving from -10 or -20 to zero is an ascent through which we “emerge from non-being” into the “supreme plenitude” that is God.²⁵² Weil describes, “The cross as a balance, as a lever. A going down, the condition of a rising up. Heaven coming down to earth raises earth to heaven.”²⁵³ Her language reflects the mystical Christian writers, such as St. John of the Cross, that she came to love. As I will show, there are hints in her notebooks that she was beginning to appreciate the possibilities (“plenitude”) existing on the other side of decreation through union with God, but her personal frustrations, illness, and early death cut short this development in her thought, ultimately leading her in a self-destructive direction.

²⁴⁸ Weil, *Notebooks*, 1:280, 193; Weil, *Notebooks*, 2:613–14.

²⁴⁹ Weil, *Notebooks*, 2:344.

²⁵⁰ Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, 354.

²⁵¹ Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, 354.

²⁵² Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, 96–97, 161.

²⁵³ Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 92; Weil, *Notebooks*, 2:560.

Weil's "terrible" prayer

Before she left New York in October 1942, Weil records in her notebook what has come to be known as "the terrible prayer."²⁵⁴ In it, she asks that she might cease to exist as an individual, so that she can be "in continuous conformity" with God's will and consumed by "an absolutely devouring flame of love for God. May all this be stripped away from me, devoured by God, transformed into Christ's substance, and given as food to afflicted men whose body and soul lack any kind of nourishment." She concludes, "Father, since thou art the Good, and I am mediocrity, rend this body and soul away from me to make them do things for your use, and let nothing remain of me, forever, except this rending itself, or else nothingness."²⁵⁵

How are we to understand this? Weil calls it an "example" of prayer, and it shows evidence of being carefully crafted. The language suggests it is more than an intellectual exercise, it is the distillation of ideas that are important to her. The clue is when she says, "May this body move or be still... in continuous conformity to thy will. May my faculties of hearing, sight, taste, smell and touch register the perfectly exact impress of thy creation."²⁵⁶ Emmanuel Gabellieri argues that the background is Plato's *Timaeus*, which refers to "the perfectly obedient original substance" (underlined in Weil's own copy).²⁵⁷ Weil's sense of her calling from God leads her to embrace a fervent desire to participate and share in the sufferings of Christ for the world.²⁵⁸ She acknowledges, however, that we should not ask for this unless it is "dictated by the Spirit." Reflecting on the prayer she has just written, she asks, "Is it from this that the metaphor of marriage is taken? This relation between God and the soul resembles the relation between a bridegroom and a still virgin bride on their wedding night. Marriage is a consented rape. And so is the soul's union with God."²⁵⁹ This shocking image recalls the myth of Cupid and Psyche.²⁶⁰ A union of opposites

²⁵⁴ Pétrement, *Simone Weil, A Life*, 486.

²⁵⁵ Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, 243–44.

²⁵⁶ Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, 244.

²⁵⁷ Gabellieri, "Reconstructing Platonism," 152.

²⁵⁸ See Robert Coles, *Simone Weil: A Modern Pilgrimage* (Woodstock, VT: Skylight Paths, 2001), 131–33 who brings a psychologist's perspective.

²⁵⁹ Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, 243–45.

²⁶⁰ Apuleius, *The Golden Ass or Metamorphoses*, trans. E. J Kenney, New ed., Penguin Classics (London: Penguin Books, 2004). Although this Latin text from the 2nd Century CE, is the earliest

between the god and his human bride that, although overpowering, is consented to and life transforming.

Weil understood her vocation, in the context of a world being torn apart by war, to be that of a martyr called, through compassion for the afflicted, to offer her life as a self-sacrifice, imitating that of Christ.²⁶¹ She had an almost pathological dislike of being touched, but her niece Sylvie Weil speculates that this “desire for annihilation concealed something else” when considered alongside the intimate, almost bodily language Weil uses when describing her spiritual experiences.²⁶² Sylvie is among those who believe that, thwarted in her desire to sacrifice herself on the front line, Weil simply allowed herself to die, as comments in her notebooks and correspondence suggest she anticipated.²⁶³ Shortly before this, she had written that only her parents could “glue” her “back together again,” as they had from the effects of her year in the factories and injuries sustained during the Spanish Civil war.²⁶⁴ Her determination to share in the French people's sufferings under occupation exacerbated her tuberculosis, and separated from her family, she slowly unravelled both physically and emotionally.

Ignatius' Letter to the Romans

However, a more positive parallel from the early church is Ignatius of Antioch's *Letter to the Romans*, in which he asks his friends not to attempt to prevent his martyrdom.

I am writing to all the Churches to tell them all that I am, with all my heart, to die for God—if only you do not prevent it. I beseech you not to indulge your benevolence at the wrong time. Please let me be thrown to the wild beasts; through them I can reach God. I am God's wheat; I am ground by the teeth of the wild beasts that I may end as the pure bread of Christ.²⁶⁵

reference in literature, the myth appears in Greek art from the 4th Century BCE; See also C. S. Lewis, *Till We Have Faces: A Myth Retold* (London: William Collins, 1979).

²⁶¹ See Bingemer, *Simone Weil*, 91–92.

²⁶² Weil, *At Home with André and Simone Weil*, 76, 14.

²⁶³ An example is her letter to Maurice Schumann cited in Bingemer, *Simone Weil*, 36.

²⁶⁴ Weil, *At Home with André and Simone Weil*, 115, see also 129–130.

²⁶⁵ Ignatius of Antioch, “The Letters of St. Ignatius of Antioch,” in *The Apostolic Fathers*, trans. Francis X. Glim, Joseph M. F. Marique, and Gerald G. Walsh, vol. 1 of *The Fathers of the Church* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1947), 109. IV.4.

He continues, “Allow me to receive the pure light. When I reach it, I shall be fully a man.”²⁶⁶ For Ignatius, to die *in* Christ was to enter *into* life. We are not yet truly born or living and are still on our way to becoming fully human.²⁶⁷ As Irenaeus, another early figure writing in the context of martyrdom comments, “The glory of God is a living human being; and the life of the human being is to see God.” John Behr notes that Irenaeus “specifically has in mind the martyr (for no one can see God and live).”²⁶⁸ I have previously argued that for the early martyrs, death was the passageway *into* a greater life (cf. John 16:20–24).

They believed they were following Jesus’ example, one that “all men” were “eager to copy,”²⁶⁹ and that everyone who suffered for Christ would “have unbroken fellowship with the living God” and after death would receive “the crown of incorruptibility.”²⁷⁰ Martyrdom was “sent by God”²⁷¹ and therefore to be desired.²⁷² Tertullian spoke of “longing for martyrdom”²⁷³ and “embracing death” was, for them, to choose “life”²⁷⁴ (c.f. 2 Cor 5:8).²⁷⁵

This perspective is alien to our modern emphasis on personal identity and the immediacy of the present, which Weil describes as an “*ersatz*” divinity.²⁷⁶ The alternative is to be so gripped by the reality of God and the desire to do his will and be one with him, that this world falls away as our present sufferings refine and bring us into a closer conformity with Christ. As Behr writes, “Christ is the true human (and Adam... a preliminary sketch, cf. Rom 5:14).”²⁷⁷ Weil shares Christianity’s essential

²⁶⁶ Ignatius of Antioch, “The Letters of St. Ignatius of Antioch,” 110–11. IV.6.

²⁶⁷ Ignatius of Antioch, “The Letters of St. Ignatius of Antioch,” 110–111. IV.6.

²⁶⁸ John Behr, “St Irenaeus of Lyon and the School of John,” *Phronema* 34.2 (2019): 28. This is Behr’s own translation from Irenaeus’ *Against Heresies*, 4.20.7.

²⁶⁹ *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, 14.1 in J. Stevenson, *A New Eusebius: Documents Illustrating the History of the Church to AD 337*, New Edition. Revised by W.H.C. Frend. (London: SPCK, 1987), 28.

²⁷⁰ Letter of the Churches, Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, V.I.41–42 in Stevenson, *A New Eusebius*, 39–40.

²⁷¹ Paul Middleton, “Early Christian Voluntary Martyrdom: A Statement for the Defence,” *The Journal of Theological Studies* 64.2 (2013): 564.

²⁷² Middleton, “Early Christian Voluntary Martyrdom,” 557–58.

²⁷³ Tertullian, *Scorpiace*, 1, 5, 7 cited in Paul Middleton, *Martyrdom: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: T & T Clark International, 2011), 77.

²⁷⁴ Middleton, “Early Christian Voluntary Martyrdom,” 560.

²⁷⁵ Michael Partridge, “Embracing Death: Martyrs, Witness, and Memory” (Unpublished Graduate Paper, Westminster Theological Centre, 2016).

²⁷⁶ Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 164; Weil, *Notebooks*, 2:618.

²⁷⁷ Behr, “St Irenaeus of Lyon and the School of John,” 33.

vision that for there to be a resurrection, we must first be ready to die (baptism and the eucharist both speak to this). What is created must pass away, so that we can share in the life of the uncreated, the eternal love of God, through a voluntary self-offering and consent to be made new (John 3:5–8).

The new creation

In her final London notebook, Weil writes, “Postulate: This universe is a machine for making the salvation of those who consent to it.” She then references Romans 8:28, “All things work together for him who loves God.”²⁷⁸ The purpose of existence is to bring us into the place where we recognise and embrace this. Weil notes, “Those who have fully recognised their own non-being have passed over to God’s side.”²⁷⁹ She describes this as a “love union” between the creature and God, writing, “If only I could manage to disappear, there would take place a perfect love union between God and the earth that I tread, the sea that I hear...”²⁸⁰ Weil came to believe that for “those who have been born twice, who have been born from on high by the spirit, who have passed through the death and resurrection of Christ, there is a second indestructible attribute—that of being a child of God.”²⁸¹ She observes that

we deserve... to be loved uniquely, exclusively. But the thing in us which deserves that is the uncreated part of the soul, which is identical with the Son of God. When the self which is a composite of attributes has been destroyed and the uncreated part emerges, then “I no longer live in myself, but Christ lives in me.”²⁸²

Thibon recalls that Weil had “a longing for absolute self-effacement, and an unlimited opening to reality even under its harshest forms,” which was allied to “an inflexible desire that this stripping should be her own work and should be accomplished in her own way.”²⁸³ Her compassion and personal experience of God led to a desire to participate in the sufferings of Christ in the world. This became for her a means of personal contact with God. “It is only through contact with God that the evil falls into

²⁷⁸ Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, 337.

²⁷⁹ Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, 218.

²⁸⁰ Weil, *Notebooks*, 2:403.

²⁸¹ Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, 283.

²⁸² Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, 283. cf. Col 1:27.

²⁸³ Perrin and Thibon, *Simone Weil as We Knew Her*, 114.

nothingness.”²⁸⁴ Writing to Father Perrin she observes, “I want nothing else but obedience, obedience itself, in its totality, that is to say even to the Cross.”²⁸⁵ Weil’s vision was to be a perfect instrument for God’s love to pass through. She recognised that death and eternity beyond is the great boundary and is dismissive of those who claim to have certainty about it, and yet her thoughts inevitably drew her back to the point where creation and eternity meet in the cross. It is necessary, therefore, to reflect on how Weil conceives of the future hope that Christians hold and what it was that finally held her back from fully embracing it for herself.

²⁸⁴ Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, 154.

²⁸⁵ Weil, *Waiting for God*, 15. Letter II.

Chapter VII: The Future Hope

For Weil, everything that we experience in life is a preparation for the moment of death. Her vision of eternity, however, is stripped of imaginary consolations behind which we can shelter, and she is tentative in her speculations concerning it. In this final chapter I shall consider how she conceives of creation's end and the implications for us as creatures in eternity before, using the Marseille "*Prologue*," I look at her own self-doubts and lack of assurance.

Creation's end

Weil's critics mistakenly characterise her thought as a form of Gnostic dualism. For example, Dupré comments that "Weil's Gnostic leanings can hardly be doubted and may in fact have been even more radical than ancient Christian Gnosticism was. Contrary to that ancient Gnosticism, hers was shorn of any final triumph of good over evil."²⁸⁶ The charge of Gnosticism (a term lacking precision, which takes many forms), particularly as an escape from the world is, in my view, unfounded, but Dupré has a point in that Weil does not look forward to Christ's triumphant return in glory, neither is the goal (Greek *telos*) of creation to be redeemed and renewed, as in the orthodox Christian understanding of *apokatastasis*, "the restoration of all things" (Acts 3:21; Rev 21:1); it is to be assimilated and consumed, finding its completion and perfection in God. While she values creation and our physical bodies because that is where we meet with God and participate in loving others, ultimately hers is a negative view. This world is passing away and contains no finality within it.

Our vocation is to love God through the world, but it is God separated from himself by the cross. Weil observes that "Negation is the passage into the eternal."²⁸⁷ "Time is the cave" and the fact of our existence within it, is the obstacle that stands in the way of God being reunited with God.²⁸⁸ In her notebook she writes, "De-creation regarded as the transcendent completion of creation; annihilation in God which confers the

²⁸⁶ Louis Dupré, "Simone Weil and Platonism," in *The Christian Platonism of Simone Weil*, ed. E. Jane Doering and Eric O. Springstead, trans. Céline Bally and Chris Callahan (Notre Dame: IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004), 21.

²⁸⁷ Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, 125.

²⁸⁸ Weil, *Notebooks*, 2:373.

fulness of being upon the creature so annihilated, a fulness which is denied it so long as it goes on existing.”²⁸⁹ This has led to the accusation that, for Weil, nothing of our individual personality survives beyond death.²⁹⁰ However, it also brings to mind a passage from George MacDonald, a 19th Century author who, like Weil, speaks to contemporary seekers of God, “Alister, if we were right with God, we could see the earth vanish and never heave a sigh; God, of whom it was but a shimmering revelation, would still be ours!”²⁹¹ Elsewhere, in words reminiscent of Weil, he writes

There is nothing eternal but that which loves and can be loved, and love is ever climbing towards the consummation when such shall be the universe, imperishable, divine. Therefore all that is not beautiful in the beloved, all that comes between and is not of love’s kind, must be destroyed. And our God is a consuming fire.²⁹²

What is lacking in Weil, however, is MacDonald’s trusting assurance that God is a loving Father who can be met with in this world and that Christ’s humanity is the model for what we may yet become. They both recognise, however, that drawing closer to God necessitates a cleansing of whatever stands in the way of our being eternally united with him.

Entering the light

Reflecting on the parable of the labourers (Matt 20:1–16), Weil comments, “One is called; one either comes running up, or one doesn’t... One enters or one doesn’t enter into eternity, as the case may be, according to whether one has consented or refused.”²⁹³ This raises the question of the fate of those who do not consent. In the London notebook, shortly before her death, Weil considers the experience of creatures at the Last Judgement. She observes that, “when creation is seen naked in the light of God, which makes it totally manifest, it becomes nothing but light. There is no more evil... The devil and the damned suffer throughout the whole of time, but the coming of eternity puts an end to time.” The choice “is between annihilation... and

²⁸⁹ Weil, *Notebooks*, 2:471.

²⁹⁰ Frénaud, “Simone Weil’s Religious Thought in the Light of Catholic Theology,” 371.

²⁹¹ George MacDonald, *What’s Mine’s Mine* (Whitehorn, CA: Johannesen, 1995), 170.

²⁹² George MacDonald, “The Consuming Fire,” in *Unspoken Sermons* (London: Alexander Strahan, 1867), 28.

²⁹³ Weil, *The Need for Roots*, 253.

disappearance by merging with God.” Catholic theologians, had in her opinion, chosen to obscure this truth by showing people “an endless whipping on the one hand and an inexhaustible supply of sugar on the other,” thereby ensuring “docile children of the church,” since otherwise there would be no incentive “to choose the good.” Weil acknowledges, however, that such “matters [are] impenetrable and unthinkable; it is better to have no opinion at all,” before adding, “One thing seems certain, however. When the divine seed which has been placed in the created being becomes ripe, all the evil in him is abolished and all good vanishes by becoming merged with God. How dare people pretend that the souls of the blessed are other than God or are separate from him.”²⁹⁴ She describes,

An annihilation which is light—that is what eternal life is. Hell is eternal. That doesn’t mean to say that it goes on forever, but only that souls which are lost have no other future in front of them... Hell is a flame which burns the soul. Paradise also. It is the same flame. But, depending on the orientation of the soul, this single and unique flame constitutes either infinite evil or infinite good, the fire of hell or that of the Holy Spirit.²⁹⁵

Our eternal state is determined by how we respond in this life and everything that we experience is intended to bring us into an awareness of this. Weil offers us a nihilism of self that is tinged with hope noting,

Reincarnation and purgatory mask the truth that life is unique, irreparable, the only one in which we can either be lost or saved... and that the whole meaning of life lies in making preparation for the moment of death. The death, which remains for us the most precious gift bestowed by divine providence.²⁹⁶

We should therefore, “desire only to be perfectly obedient to God during all the time between the present moment and death... The mind’s eye should be fixed on this moment, and not upon mortal life, nor upon eternity either, because our ignorance about eternity allows the imagination utter licence when we think about it.”²⁹⁷

²⁹⁴ Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, 339.

²⁹⁵ Weil, *Notebooks*, 2:468.

²⁹⁶ Weil, *Notebooks*, 2:468.

²⁹⁷ Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, 177; cf. Weil, *Notebooks*, 1:271.

The Marseille “Prologue”

Weil’s ideas found expression in how she lived, and toward the end, her life increasingly became the metaphor as she sought to imitate Christ’s own kenotic abasement and love for the world. She remains keenly aware, however, of the contradiction existing between God’s perfection and our creatureliness and, in the document that has come to be known as the “Marseille Prologue,” she seeks to explore this tension in her own life, as she reflects on her experience of God.

There exist three versions of this remarkable text (Appendix I).²⁹⁸ The first draft with corrections found among her papers, and another in the notebook left with Thibon, which opens, “Beginning of the book (the book which should contain these thoughts and many others).”²⁹⁹ The third is simply entitled “Prologue.”³⁰⁰ While they differ in detail, they essentially cover the same themes. Cabaud Meaney argues that the title “Prologue,” and particularly the opening comment in Thibon’s version, suggests “it is intended to stand at the beginning of her work, particularly the *Cahiers* [notebooks], which need to be read in that light.”³⁰¹ However, Vivienne Blackburn is justified in cautioning against assuming, as some commentators have, that this text describes a further spiritual experience.³⁰² Joan Dargan calls it “a brief allegory of a mystical encounter,” while Gabriël Maes describes it as a “mystical tale.”³⁰³ It has a dreamlike quality and may be an instance of Weil using creative writing to explore her own religious experiences and ideas as, for example, in her unfinished play *Venice Saved*.³⁰⁴ It should be noted that when she writes, “I have not been baptised,” this is in the masculine tense, but the interactions with “He” (Christ is inferred but never

²⁹⁸ See Cabaud Meaney, *Simone Weil’s Apologetic Use of Literature*, 199, note 89.

²⁹⁹ Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, 63.

³⁰⁰ Weil, *Notebooks*, 2:638.

³⁰¹ Cabaud Meaney, *Simone Weil’s Apologetic Use of Literature*, 202.

³⁰² Blackburn, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Simone Weil*, 77; For an alternative view and dating, see Vetö, *The Religious Metaphysics of Simone Weil*, 164, note 20.

³⁰³ Joan Dargan, *Simone Weil: Thinking Poetically* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1999), 52 cited in Cabaud Meaney, *Simone Weil’s Apologetic Use of Literature*, 199; Gabriël Maes, “Lecture(s) de Prologue”, *Cahiers Simone Weil* 23.2 (2000) cited in Cabaud Meaney, *Simone Weil’s Apologetic Use of Literature*, 179.

³⁰⁴ Simone Weil, *Venice Saved*, ed. Silvia Panizza and Philip Wilson (London; New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019).

named) reflect Weil's own questions and self-doubts.³⁰⁵ She concludes with, "I know well that he does not love me. How could he love me? And yet deep down within me something, a particle of myself, cannot help thinking, with fear and trembling, that perhaps, in spite of all, he loves me."³⁰⁶

Authentic experiences of God as loving encounter often occur when we are almost at the point of giving up hope (for example where Electra recognises Orestes in Sophocles' play, a passage which figures prominently in Weil's writings). In the *Prologue* Weil strips the mystical experience to its essentials; both private and unexpected, it afterwards leaves us unsatisfied and incomplete.³⁰⁷ Writing to Father Perrin she describes how, while attentively reading the Lord's Prayer (the "Our Father") in Greek, there are moments when "Christ is present... [and] infinitely more real, more moving, more clear than on that first occasion when he took possession of me." She recounts this because she is leaving "with the idea of probable death" and feels compelled to leave behind a testimony.³⁰⁸ However, her reluctance to be baptised was in part because she felt unworthy.³⁰⁹ "God likes to use castaway objects, waste, rejects."³¹⁰ The only thing that mattered for her was to be obedient to God's leading but, while she longed to be a perfect channel for God's love to pass through, she also had a profound sense of her own imperfections and feared that she might still be rejected.

Simone Weil knew Christ as beloved, but she struggled to accept God as a loving personal Father. Her analysis helps us to make sense of our present reality, but it is incomplete when we seek to look beyond it. There are indications in her final

³⁰⁵ Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, 65; Cabaud Meaney, *Simone Weil's Apologetic Use of Literature*, 200.

³⁰⁶ Weil, *Notebooks*, 2:638.

³⁰⁷ Cabaud Meaney, *Simone Weil's Apologetic Use of Literature*, 199–202.

³⁰⁸ Weil, "Spiritual Autobiography," 29–30.

³⁰⁹ Simone Weil, "Letter I: Hesitations Concerning Baptism," in *Waiting for God*, trans. Emma Craufurd (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2009), 5–6; See also Bingemer, *Simone Weil*, 89–91; See Eric O. Springstead, "Simone Weil and Baptism," in *Persona e Impersonale: La Questione Antropologica in Simone Weil*, ed. Giulia Paola Di Nicola Danese and Attilio Danese (Rome: Rubbettino, 2009), <<http://www.laici.va/content/dam/laici/documenti/donna/culturasocieta/english/simone-weil-and-baptism.pdf>> (27 March 2021) on the claim that, shortly before she died, Weil was baptised by her friend Simone Deitz.

³¹⁰ Weil, "Spiritual Autobiography," 30.

notebooks that she had begun to glimpse the possibility of experiencing the assurance that comes from being found and loved as a child of God. However, she was conceptually unable to embrace the implications of this and the physical and emotional turmoil of exile and illness fed into the self-destructive tendencies that ultimately led to her death.

Chapter VIII: Conclusion

In this paper I considered Simone Weil's soteriology in relation to her doctrine of creation, as a response to the question "where is God" in a suffering world. She shines a searchlight for us on the cross and the mystery of the divine embrace of human suffering, and speaks profoundly to those who are struggling with the paradoxes of faith in a fallen world and are asking, "where is God?" (Or even, "Is there a God?"). Ultimately, however, she does not have a fully developed doctrine of salvation. What she has is an experience of God's love and perfection, and a vision of the cross that is centred on the suffering experienced in this world.

Rowan Williams, comments, that even her "errors are more fruitful than the right answers of others," and I agree that if we approach Weil's thought with the intention of critiquing where it diverges from an orthodox perspective, we risk rejecting the depths of her insights into God and the human condition.³¹¹ Nava notes that Weil seeks to "illuminate, not explain, the irreducible absurdities and contradictions of the human condition."³¹² She does not offer certainties but provides us with language and metaphors, that help us to make sense of God in a confusing world.

All our speculations about God are provisional at the foot of the cross. Weil argues that the sovereign God of power is made in our own image, and it is necessary that we be remade in his. Her weakness was that while Christ's passion and Good Friday gripped her, she struggled to fully accept for herself the hope of the resurrection. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a close contemporary of Weil and they addressed, from very different perspectives, many of the same questions. However, the analogy of Easter illustrates the difference between them. Weil has passed through the experience of watching Christ suffer on the cross (Good Friday) and she finds herself caught, with the women, in the void of the empty tomb (Holy Saturday). She wants to believe but is living in a present of loss and abandonment and, for love of Christ, denies herself any consolation in the future. Bonhoeffer experiences the same loss but knowing himself to be loved as a child of God, has confidence that Christ is risen (Easter

³¹¹ Rowan Williams, *Wrestling with Angels: Conversations in Modern Theology*, ed. Mike Higon (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2007), xvii.

³¹² Nava, *Simone Weil and Gustavo Gutiérrez*, 159; See Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, 182; Weil, *Notebooks*, 2:411–12, 396.

Sunday) and that, despite external appearances to the contrary, he will in turn rise with him. Weil reminds us, however, that Holy Saturday is when Christ is seen at his most human and powerless, bridging the infinite distance between creation and God as he experiences the ultimate separation that comes from death. Nothing is therefore excluded from God's presence and saving love.

Thibon comments that "Simone Weil is, before all things, a guide on the road leading to God, and many of her phrases gain from being interpreted not as a description of the country but as *advice to travellers*."³¹³ She counsels that to ascend, we must strip ourselves of everything that would hold us back. However, in this life she never reached her destination, standing back from making a formal commitment to the Catholic church because of unresolved questions and an identification with all those who remained outside it. Weil is a witness or martyr (the same word in Greek) to what she believed, and stubbornly persisted in what she understood was her vocation to follow wherever Christ led her. To love Simone Weil is to acknowledge her contradictions as well as insights. David McClellan describes her as a "utopian pessimist," and that captures these contradictions well.³¹⁴ For those who share her questions and walk with her, she is a rewarding, although sometimes demanding, companion who provokes us to go deeper with God through her life and words.

³¹³ Perrin and Thibon, *Simone Weil as We Knew Her*, 153.

³¹⁴ McLellan, *Utopian Pessimist*.

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Appendices

Appendix I – The Marseille “Prologue”³¹⁵

Beginning of the book (the book which should contain these thoughts and many others).

He entered my room and said: “Poor creature, you who understand nothing, who know nothing. Come with me and I will teach you things which you do not suspect.” I followed him.

He took me into a church. It was new and ugly. He led me up to the altar and said: “Kneel down.” I said “I have not been baptised.” He said “Fall on your knees before this place, in love, as before the place where lies the truth.” I obeyed,

He brought me out and made me climb up to a garret. Through the open window one could see the whole city spread out, some wooden scaffoldings, and the river on which boats were being unloaded. The garret was empty, except for a table and two chairs. He bade me be seated.

We were alone. He spoke. From time to time someone would enter, mingle in the conversation, then leave again.

Winter had gone; spring had not yet come. The branches of the trees lay bare, without buds, in the cold air full of sunshine.

The light of day would arise, shine forth in splendour, and fade away; then the moon and the stars would enter through the window. And then once more the dawn would come up.

At times he would fall silent, take some bread from a cupboard, and we would share it. This bread really had the taste of bread. I have never found that taste again.

He would pour out some wine of me, and some for himself—wine which tasted of the sun and of the soil upon which this city was built.

At other times we would stretch ourselves out on the floor of the garret, and sweet sleep would enfold me. Then I would wake and drink in the light of the sun.

He had promised to teach me, but he did not teach me anything. We talked about all kinds of things, in a desultory way, as do old friends.

³¹⁵ Weil, *Notebooks*, 2:638.

One day he said to me: "Now go." I fell down before him, I clasped his knees, I implored him not to drive me away. But he threw me out on the stairs. I went down unconscious of anything, my heart as it were in shreds. I wandered along the streets. Then I realised that I had no idea where this house lay.

I have never tried to find it again. I understood that he had come for me by mistake. My place is not in that garret. It can be anywhere—in a prison cell, in one of those middle-class drawing-rooms full of knick-knacks and red plush, in the waiting-room of a station—anywhere, except in that garret.

Sometimes I cannot help trying, fearfully and remorsefully, to repeat to myself a part of what he said to me. How am I to know if I remember rightly? He is not here to tell me.

I know well that he does not love me. How could he love me? And yet deep down within me something, a particle of myself, cannot help thinking, with fear and trembling, that perhaps, in spite of all, he loves me.