

ENDRE J. NAGY*

SIMONE WEIL: THE MYSTICAL ASCETIC

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‘Psychology and sociology and even
philosophy will not help us with Simone Weil.
Her messages are messages of grace, received
by those who wait and not by those who grasp.’
Finch

The essay deals with the life and work of the great but contested figure of Catholicism of the last century, Simone Weil. It follows up the career of her life from the intellectual illumination (mystical visions) through her destiny event (submerged in the ‘sub-world’) up till her resistance to being baptised. It looks at her teachings together with Max Weber’s theory on modernisation, that is, the ‘Ausdifferenzierungen’ of various spheres of life (economy, politics, etc.) that excludes the possibility of life and of the ethics of brotherliness in the 20th century. The essay seeks to point out the life and work of Simone Weil as a whole but disapproves of this tenet. For she has found in everyday life holiness and sacrilege at the same time from which God is revealed. The essay deals with the question why she resisted being baptised emphasising that the main reason was her keeping aloof of the Old Testament and that in her view the Church showed totalitarian traits throughout its history.

Keywords: conversion, mystical visions, ascetic mode of life, Catholicism without baptism, independent life-spheres, ethics of brotherliness, rationalised economy, obligations towards mankind

Simone Weil: Die Mystische Asketin: Der Artikel beschäftigt sich mit dem Lebenswerk von Simone Weil, der großen, beinahe der katholischen Kirche beigetretenen, durchaus umstrittenen

* Endre J. Nagy, Institute of Mental Health, Semmelweis University, Nagyvárad tér 4., 19. em., H-1089 Budapest, Hungary; E-mail: dr.nagy.endre@gmail.com.

Persönlichkeit des vergangenen Jahrhunderts. Zunächst gibt er einen Überblick über ihren Lebenslauf von der intellektuellen Erleuchtung (mystische Visionen) über das Schicksalsereignis (Abstieg in die Unterwelt) bis hin zu ihrem Widerstand gegen die Taufe. Er stellt ihre Thesen der Modernisierungstheorie Max Webers gegenüber, die die Ausdifferenzierung einzelner Lebensbereiche (Wirtschaft, Politik usw.) postuliert und die Möglichkeit einer Ethik der Brüderlichkeit unter den Bedingungen des 20. Jahrhunderts ausschließt. Die Abhandlung versucht zu zeigen, dass das Lebenswerk von Simone Weil in seiner Gesamtheit eine Widerlegung dieser These ist, da sie im Alltag sowohl das Heilige als auch die Heiligkeit gefunden hat, in denen Gott sich offenbart. Die Studie untersucht auch die Frage, warum Simone Weil sich der Taufe widersetzt hat. Der Hauptgrund hierfür war ihre distanzierte Haltung zum Alten Testament und die Tatsache, dass die Kirche ihrer Ansicht nach im Laufe der Geschichte totalitäre Züge gezeigt hat.

Schlüsselbegriffe: Bekehrung, mystische Visionen, asketische Lebensführung, Katholizismus ohne Taufe, unabhängige Lebensbereiche, Ethik der Brüderlichkeit, rationelle Ökonomie, Verpflichtungen gegenüber der Menschheit

1. A brief account of her life

Simone Weil was born into an upper-middle class Jewish family in France, 1909.¹ However, the family was completely assimilated and secularised. Simone Weil has never felt connected to her ancestry, even the opposite was her case. As it seems in her literary oeuvre, she repudiated her original background as if she wanted to prove the tenet of Sigmund Freud about ‘Selbsthass’ (COLES 2001, 49, 57–58), for she rejected the Jewish embeddedness of Christianity (WEIL 2004, 159–69). She grew up in a neutral spirit in regard to religion, and she denied also the problem of God as insoluble. In spite of this, she was – according to her autobiography – unconsciously Christian.

I always adopted the Christian attitude as the only possible one. I might say that I was born, I grew up and I always remained within the Christian inspiration. While the very name of God had no part in my thoughts, with regard to the problems of this world and this life I shared the Christian conception in an explicit and rigorous manner, with the most specific notions it involves. (WEIL 1959, 62)

Taking into consideration values such as truth, beauty, virtue, poverty, love of one’s neighbour as equal with justice and purity, all of them compelled her to state that she was aware of the fact that her world-view was Christian. Therefore, it never came into her mind to enter Christianity. There are many reasons for it and we will see some of them later. One reason for it was that she thought she had been born into it.

After having graduated in an *École Normal Supérieure* she went to work in a metal factory in order to experience the real life of the workers. But being maladroit she was hardly keeping up with the piece work rate. And she happened to recognise that the

¹ Cf. REISINGER 1983; SPRINGSTED 1998; COLES 2001; COURTINE-DENAMY 2002; KEMPFNER 1960.

work is humiliating in the factory system for the workers and counts for nothing in the eyes both of the 'patron' and of themselves as well. In 1935 she went to the Civil War in Spain on the side of the anarchists where she experienced the brutality not only of the fascists but of her comrades who executed a priest and a fifteen-year-old boy. She was forced back to France by virtue of an accident gaining the lesson as follows: 'One . . . finds oneself in a war which resembles a war of mercenaries, only with much more cruelty and with less human respect for the enemy' ('Letter to Georges Bernanos', quoted by SPRINGSTED 1998, 18).

She encountered Catholicism three times through three mystical experiences in her life. The first happened to her just after the factory episode. She was living partly teaching and partly being on sick leave when she went to Portugal where she met, in a wretched fishing village, a procession honoring their patron saint. She reports it in her 'spiritual autobiography':

The wives of the fishermen were, in procession, making a tour of all the ships, carrying candles and singing what must certainly be very ancient hymns of a heart-rending sadness. Nothing can give any idea of it. . . . There the conviction was suddenly borne in upon me that Christianity is pre-eminently the religion of slaves, that slaves cannot help belonging to it, and I among others. (WEIL 1959, 67)

The second mystic experience happened to her in 1937 when she was visiting Assisi, Italy. She was staying alone in the small, Roman Style chapel of Santa Maria degli Agnelli where St. Francis was often praying. Then she felt that a power stronger than she – as she reported – 'compelled me . . . to go down on my knees' (WEIL 1959, 68). This was the 'destiny event' when she abandoned being a social revolutionary. As Finch describes: 'We should not underestimate the concentrated expressiveness of the physical act. . . . Religion goes down into the body' (FINCH 1999, 121). Or – as we named it elsewhere – act-speech: when the body does something or does not (cf. NAGY 2001, 138). The third experience happened to her in Solesmes, France, in 1938 when she was attending the Holy Week. 'I was suffering from splitting headaches, each sound hurt me like a blow; by an extreme effort of concentration I was able to rise above this wretched flesh, to leave it suffer by itself, heaped up in a corner, and to find a pure and perfect joy in the unimaginable beauty of the chanting and the words' (FINCH 1999, 121). In her wretched situation she met a young Catholic who introduced her to the English metaphysical poets, among them, George Eliot and his poem: 'Love'. She quickly memorised it and recited it particularly in the midst of a headache, and 'it was during one of these recitations that Christ . . . himself came down and took possession of me' (WEIL 1959, 69).

During this period she underwent an 'intellectual illumination' – as I called elsewhere the first stage of conversion (cf. NAGY 2001, 137) – though not at one blow but gradually, as it were, in crescendo, i.e. she *repeatedly* gained insight into the truth. But the conversion is not completed by this act. According to the great converts (including St. Paul, St. Augustine, Paul Claudel, etc.), there remains always an inner resistance to be mastered, and implying it in the practice he or she became enlightened with. The second stage can be called 'destiny event' when the conversion has

been perfected. In the case of Simone Weil even the reason for this was not her love that resisted. Nevertheless, her intelligence led her further through the reading of Plato (whom she felt to have been a Christian), the Iliad and the Bhagavad Gita to the perfection of conversion. It took a long time for her to pray at all. It happened when she was working with Gustave Thibon, a deep thinking Catholic land owner, as a land girl, and learned the Greek language. She learned the Lord's Prayer in Greek and she developed the practice of reciting it each morning 'with absolute attention'. And 'sometimes during this recitation or at other moments, Christ is really present with me in person. . . In this sudden possession of me by Christ, neither my senses nor imagination had any part; I only felt in the midst of my suffering the presence of a love, like that which one can read in a smile on a beloved face' (FINCH 1999, 72). Though perfectly converted she never felt invited by God to enter the Catholic Church. She refused to be baptised, the reason for which is stated below. After leaving France for the United States, she regularly went to a church in New York, Harlem, in the black community. Then she came back to England. Her health collapsed in 1943, suffering from tuberculosis. In an era which did not know penicillin she was close to death. Furthermore, she refused to eat more than the official rations for ordinary people in France. She died in August, 1943 in Ashford, Kent.

Before going into details by taking into account the lessons she left with us let me cite a passage of T.S. ELIOT from the 'Preface' that he wrote for the English version of the *Need for Roots*, since it is almost the same as the one chosen from Finch as a motto (see above):

As a political thinker, as in everything else, Simone Weil is not to be classified. . . On the one hand she was a passionate champion of the common people and especially of the oppressed – those oppressed by the wickedness and selfishness of men and those oppressed by the anonymous forces of modern society. . . On the other hand, she was by nature a solitary and an individualist, with a profound horror of what she called the *collectivity* – the monster created by modern totalitarianism. . . She cannot be classified either as a reactionary or as a socialist.
(1987, XIII–XIV)

And about the *Need for the Roots* Eliot makes a brief but very telling account:

This book belongs in that category of prolegomena to politics which politicians seldom read, and which most of them would be unlikely to understand or to know how to apply. *Such books do not influence the contemporary conduct of affairs: for the men and women already engaged in this career and committed to the jargon of market-place, they always come too late.*
(1987, XI–XII; italics mine)

I cannot avoid recalling the Hungarian revolutionary of 1956, István Bibó, who answered those doubting the usefulness of his writings:

I know that my oeuvre is naïve in the last analysis as much as those articles written in 1945–46 when I was explaining to Ferenc Nagy and Rákosi what they should have done if they had any cleverness at all, and my projects concerning 1956 were naïve as well, of which I knew nobody needed them. But much as I could have known and I do know that the intrinsic truth lying in such works can prevail but in the longer run, yet indirectly it is the possibility of I don't know how small a proportion that they can make an effect just

there and then for when and where they have been written which makes them vital and has them written. (BIBÓ 1990, 4:253, my trans.)²

However, I am convinced that much more can be said about Simone Weil as a political thinker. As we will see, she was a social and moral revolutionary who always went beyond social boundaries, the actual state of affairs, and sought to better their moral basis and by doing so she hoped to better society as a whole. In contrast to the social revolutionaries such as Marx, or Lenin) who wanted to do the opposite: ‘to erase the past in one blow’, and abolish the old institutions and hope human beings would be changed by themselves, Simone Weil was convinced that the actual political order was worse because it was based on the right of men and not on obligations *vis-à-vis* mankind. She wanted to shake up the whole of the moral basis of society. She *stood* up against both the market-oriented economy and the so-called political democracy as practiced then and up till now.

2. The great challenge: Max Weber’s theory of the impossibility of any ethics of brotherliness in modernity

The entire modern world suggests that we are living in a world where God is less present. Already Max Weber raised the question in the most radical way by suggesting that the ethics of brotherliness came in sharp contradiction to the exigencies of modern formal rational, market-oriented capitalism. In his ‘Zwischenbetrachtung’, that is a part of the *Religious Rejection of the World and Their Direction* Weber carried out a study of how the sublimated religion of salvation had become increasingly tense in their relationships with rationalised economies.

A rationalised economy is a functional organisation oriented to money prices which originate in the interest-struggles of men in the *market*. Calculation is not possible without estimation in money prices and hence without market struggles. Money is the most abstract and ‘impersonal’ element that exists in human life. The more the world of the modern capitalist economy follows its own immanent laws, the less accessible it is to any imaginable relationships with a religious ethic of brotherliness. The more rational, and thus impersonal, capitalism becomes, the more this is the case. In the past it was possible to ethically regulate the personal relations between master and slave precisely because they were personal relations. But it is not possible to regulate – at least not in the same sense or with the same success – the relations between the shifting holders of mortgages and the shifting debtors of the banks that

² ‘[T]udom, hogy az én művem is végsőleg naiv; naiv úgy, ahogyan naivak voltak 1945–46-os cikkeim, melyekkel Nagy Ferencnek és Rákosinak magyaráztam, hogy mit kellene tenniük, ha eszük volna, s naivak voltak 56-os tervezeteim, melyekről tudhattam, hogy senkinek sem kellene. De ha mégannyira is tudhattam és tudom, hogy az ilyenféle művekben rejlő belső igazság csak nagyobb időkifutásban érvényesülhet, mégis közvetlenül ezeket az írásokat az a nem tudom, milyen kevés hányadnyi eshetőség élteti és írhatja, hogy hátha ott és akkor hatnak, amikor és ahová írtak.’

issue these mortgages: for in this case, no personal bond of any sort exists (WEBER 2005, 331).

Weil's reaction to this can be divided into two stages. First she was a social revolutionary when she wrote her thesis in *Reflexion sur les causes de la liberté et de l'oppression sociale* (WEIL 1958). This work of which Albert Camus said that it is 'more penetrating and more prophetic than anything since Marx' (FINCH 1999, 59) merits switching our attention for it culminates in harsh criticisms of Marx but at the same time she appreciates Marx's great achievements as well. First of all she admits 'la grand idée de Marx' in his decouvert that changes in society or nature cannot be brought about without any material transformation. It is true that men make their history but always in 'determined conditions'. It goes without saying that WEIL (1958) admits the merits of Marx:

Marx's truly great idea is that in human society as well as in nature nothing takes place otherwise than through material transformation. . . To desire is nothing; we have got to know the material conditions which determine our possibilities of action; and in the social sphere these conditions are defined by the way in which man obeys material necessities in supplying his own needs, in other words, by the method of production. (1958, 44)

And so forth:

Marx demonstrated forcibly, in the course of analyses of whose far-reaching scope he was himself unaware, that the present system of production, namely, big industry, reduces the worker to the position of a wheel in the factory and a mere instrument in the hands of his employers; and it is useless to hope that technical progress will, through a progressive and continuous reduction in productive effort, alleviate, to the point of almost causing it to disappear, the double burden imposed on man by nature and society. (1958, 53–54)

Thus, Marx sees well the material consequences of the capitalist mode of production. In her interpretation, Weil as always lays emphasis on the suffering men. But at the same time she makes a criticism of Marx's neglecting crucial facts. For example, Marx did not perceive that while he demonstrated that exploitation was not in the interest of the capitalists but had come from the concurrence with other factory owners for the growth of the factory, he did not realise that the cause of it lies *not* in the capitalist mode of production but in the nature of a big factory as such. Thus, irrespective of who the owner of the factory is (private or State owned or by the workers' owned cooperatives) the structure remains. For always there must be those who manage and those who obey. Furthermore, Marx believed that once the proletariat won through a revolution, the struggle for power would disappear. However, in spite of this – said Weil – history has shown that the revolution cannot win all over the world at the same time and this situation alone will entail the struggle between the workers of different countries (e.g. between communist Russia and others).

In my view Weil has here anticipated her later discovery of terms like 'gravity' (cf. WEIL 2004, 1–4). These terms encompass 'things happen in conformity with the laws of gravity'. Here, already, are the seeds of her teaching of the double world in her *Gravity and Grace*:

All the natural movements of the soul are controlled by laws analogous to those of physical gravity. . . We must always expect things to happen in conformity with the laws of gravity unless there is supernatural intervention. . . Generally what we expect of others depends on the effect of gravity upon ourselves, what we receive from them depends on the effect of gravity upon them. . . Lear, a tragedy of gravity. Everything we call base is a phenomenon due to gravity. Moreover the word baseness is an indication of this fact. (2004, 1–2)

In this passage it seems clearly that Weil always accepted the real, mundane world ruled by gravity, and it is why she admired Marx for his depicting ‘la grand idée’, i.e. one must know ‘the material conditions which determine our possibilities of action’ (WEIL 1958, 44). But what is more interesting in this connection is that she puts just close to it the other world that is not detached from the former but closely integrated to it. In connection to obedience she emphasised that there are two kinds:

We can obey the force of gravity or we can obey the relationships of things. . . If we fix our attention on the relationship of things, a necessity becomes apparent which we can not help obeying. . . The obedience must, however, be obedience to necessity and not to force. . . (WEIL 2004, 48–49)

Here can we see in Simone Weil’s doctrine a certain Manichean flavour by dividing the world into two parts that are in a permanent struggle one against the other. But there is a crucial difference to it: While in the original system of Mani the Ultimate Good, that is, the Grace was separated from the world by 365 aeons, and only some messengers come from the far-away Lights to remind us of our ultimate home (like Jesus, Buddha, Zoroaster, Mani), Simone Weil stated a paradox: much as Good stepped backwards to let men to be (this is a kabbala influence on her) since by doing this His very absence is the most perfect expression of His love. As FINCH (1999) explains:

The meaningless, blind necessity of brute force which is the extreme absence of God in the material world is paralleled by affliction, which is something worse than suffering because it is permanent, a permanent maiming, combined with the social humiliation that is extreme absence of God in the human world. It is only if these two together, necessity and affliction, can be given meaning that there is any meaning in speaking about God. That this ever happens has to be experienced to be believed. To the afflicted’s agonized cry of Why? Why is this happening? Why I am abandoned? – a cry that was wrenched even from Christ – there is no answer. But Weil says that if the afflicted nevertheless persists in the orientation toward Good, something more miraculous than creation of the world will be revealed. (1999, 14)

We have seen so far how the young Weil anticipated the matured one. However, let us come back to Weber who also explains in his ‘Economic ethics of world religion’ that not only the formal rational, impersonal economy is in sharp contradiction with the ethics of brotherliness but more generally with other spheres (political, aesthetic, erotic, intellectual) as well.

For the rationalization and the conscious sublimation of man’s relations to the various spheres of values, external and internal, as well as religious and secular, have then pressed towards making conscious the *internal and lawful autonomy* (*Selbstgesetzlichkeit*) of the

individual spheres; thereby letting them drift into those tensions which remain hidden to the originally naïve relation with the external world. (WEBER 2005, 328)

It holds truth the prophecies of salvation (i.e. all religions that hold deliverance from suffering to their adherents) but it does not hold for the exemplary religions like Buddhism or Hinduism. For the ways for salvation these religions did not require a compulsory calling but they remain optional. However, there were two ways to avoid this difficulty (beside radical rejection of rational economy by the ascetic monks). The one was the puritan, protestant ethics as a religion for completeness that abdicates from universal love and considers every relation between men as ‘thingness’, and so considers this, at the same time, as the service for the will of the unfathomable God. It goes without saying that by doing so, Calvinism also accepts the world having lost values as pure ‘objectification’ of the economic sphere. Consequently, Calvinism abandoned salvation for a particular grace that was not underpinned. In spite of such an unbrotherhood’s ethics, the other solution seemed to be an extreme of brotherhood which had not questioned the meaning of the world but gave his/her soul for the ‘goods’ of everybody who is in need. This self-giving of the soul without any prerequisite Baudelaire called ‘the sacred prostitution’ not for any man but for dedication itself (WEBER 2005, 352).

We will soon have the insight that Simone Weil did not follow either of them. However, before dealing with this theme let us see the development of thought by Weber. After having pointed out that the market runs ‘without regard to human beings’, i.e. it discharges the business according to calculable rules Weber also demonstrates that the same holds true for bureaucracy as well.

The peculiarity of modern culture, and specifically of its technical and economic basis, demands this very ‘calculability’ of results. When fully developed, bureaucracy also stands in a specific sense, under the principle of *sine ira et studio*. Its specific nature, which is welcomed by capitalism, develops the more perfectly the more the bureaucracy is ‘dehumanized’, the more completely it succeeds in eliminating from official business love, hatred and all purely personal, irrational and emotional elements which escape calculation. (WEBER 2005, 215–16)

That is, both of them is pursued on the basis of ‘impersonal’ manner. The third sphere that runs encounter to the ethics of brotherliness is the politics and the State, for both of them are based on the legitimate use of force. Interfering with politics means – according to Weber – contract ‘with diabolical powers’ (WEBER 2005, 123). The struggle for state power, even in the most developed form, or else the struggle in the war, brings about the community of soldiers giving them the honor of their own death which comes in sharp contradiction to all kinds of brotherliness. To escape this it is only either radical pacifism that accepts the ethics of the Sermon of the Mount (‘don’t resist the force’) or the Calvinist contempt of the world that, on the basis of an ethics of calling, must coerce the commands of God on the world with its own means that is with force. But the latter cannot be considered as a kat’ exogen ethics of brotherliness.

We are not to follow the analysis of Max Weber further on the spheres of arts, erotic love and intellectuality (science and philosophy) (cf. HABERMAS 1981, I.205–365, II.449–85) that are by profession anti-religious ones (at least as Weber designed them). Suffice to quote the final conclusion of WEBER:

[I]n the midst of a culture that is rationally organized for a vocational workaday life, there is hardly any room for the cultivation of a cosmic brotherliness, unless it is among strata who are economically carefree. Under the technical and social conditions of rational culture, an imitation of the life of Buddha, Jesus or Francis seems condemned to failure for purely external reasons. (2005, 357)

In a similar vein one of the great Hungarian political thinkers in the 19th century, József Eötvös (1813–1871) conceives it – in a passage where he was discussing the future of the religion – as follows:

It is not the great progress that modern times have brought about in sciences that endangers the religion. . . . It is not the scientific but the industrial trends that religion can be afraid of. . . . As discoveries of Copernicus, Galileo and Newton did not shake our religion, the great discoveries of our contemporaries will not do it either; and the Church that could reconcile earthquakes with her teachings will do the same with geological discoveries as well; however, the contradiction that exists. . . . between morality as practised and the principles of the Christian religion can never be reconciled by anyone in the world. (EÖTVÖS 1864, 26–27, my trans.)³

Voilà: a great mind – before Max Weber by half a century, or so – could be wording the same problem with capitalism. It is very likely that Max Weber was right to describe these anti-religious elements of modern capitalist culture but it holds for the domain of the economy only to some extent that he studied. Because at the time Weber was living, there were some tacit assumptions that he was not aware of, just because of the fact that they were taken for granted during the period of capitalism of that time. For us who experience both totalitarianism in the midst of the so-called planned economy (cf. POLANYI 1980) and the transitory stage of capitalism in Eastern Europe (cf. VAJDA 1992) it is clear that there is no pure market for several reasons (cf. PERROUX 1960; KORNAI 1971; KORNAI 1975). For capitalism the primary precondition is trust that must overwhelm all alongside business life. It presupposes partners who give trust to one another before entering into bargaining, for without trust there exists but a ‘feigned capitalism’ (cf. LEOPOLD 1917). Furthermore, there has been in Europe a law in force coming from the natural law theories from the Stoic up to now that declared: ‘Pacta sunt servanda’. There are ‘external factors’ (as the economists call them) that play an important part in the economic process. There are sentiments

³ ‘Nem azon előmenetel, melyet az újabb kor a természettudományok körében tett, veszélyezteteti vallásunkat. . . . Nem korunk tudományos, hanem korunknak industrialis iránya az, mitől vallásunkat félthetjük. . . . Valamint Kopernik, Galilei és Newton nagy találmányai vallásunkat nem ingatták meg: úgy nem fogják azt megingatni korunk új felfedezései sem; s az egyház, mely a földnek mozgását összhangzásba tudta hozni tanaival, ugyan azt fogja tenni geológiai felfedezéseinkkel is; de azon ellentétet, mely a. . . követett moral s a keresztyén vallás elvei között létezik, nem egyenlitheti ki senki a világon.’

that also play a part when somebody enters into business talks (cf. EISERMANN 1964). Even small entrepreneurs are welded in their behaviour not by greedy profit-maximising interests but rather by mutual aid. Accordingly, there have been tacit, moral commands and external effects as well underpinning the whole of the economy. We enlist only a few elements to demonstrate that the formal rational economy does not work in a pure ideal typical form (as Walras, or Max Weber described it) (PERROUX 1960). It is not due to the 'invisible hand' but to many other factors like international differences between countries having divergent interests, to multinational agencies who are lying and hiding their real budget as it happened with some of the big banks in the US, or to the big maffiosi in Russia who privatised the formerly state-owned factories at artificially low prices and enriched them enormously. Thus, looking both at the world market and the former socialist countries one must stress that all of capitalism has an underlying *moral basis that was tacitly accepted by Max Weber* but we have already learned that these prerequisites became explicit and without taking them into consideration the workings of capitalism cannot function properly. One can assume that capitalism can be running in its purest form when the invisible hand settles the integration of economic process in principle, in theory but not in reality.

This is the proof of reality. But there are also theoretical tenets not to be enumerated here but which speak about the collapse of Neo-liberal economic theories, and urge for 'new axiomatisation' of economic principles (PERROUX 1960; KORNAI 1975).

3. Simone Weil's challenge to Weber's theory

Simone Weil did not know these new developments of both experience and of economic theories. But her incomplete theory (rather miscellaneous thoughts) is none other than a radical and incisive intrusion into the terrain of Max Weber's anti-brotherhood teachings both in the domain of politics and bureaucracy and economy. From a firm stand-point, or if you will a mystic one, she is laying down the fundamental principle:

There is a reality outside the 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 center of human heart, is the longing for an absolute good, a longing which is always there and never appeased by any object of this world. . . . Just as the reality is the sole foundation of facts, so that other reality is the sole foundation of good. That reality is the unique source of all the good that can exist in this world: that is to say, all beauty, all truth, all justice, all legitimacy, all order, and all human behavior that is mindful of obligation. (WEIL 1998, 132)

By stating this it is given a central category that penetrates her whole theory. At the outset of the *Need for Roots*, as a special kind of introduction she is conceiving a crucial tenet as follows:

The notion of obligation comes before that of rights which is subordinate and relative to the former. A right is not effectual by itself, but only in relation to the obligation to which

it corresponds, the effective exercise of a right springing not from the individual who possesses it, but from other men who consider themselves as being under a certain obligation towards him. Recognition of an obligation makes it effectual. An obligation which goes unrecognized by anybody loses none of the full force of its existence. A right which goes unrecognized by anybody is not worth very much. (WEIL 1987, 3)

I remember how much I was struck when I read these sentences for the first time. I studied law and we were educated in the belief that rights were always running in tandem with obligations and vice versa: a teaching that seemed understandable in itself beyond doubt. And to learn that obligations come first before rights was for us, lawyers, at the same time iconoclastic and even sacrilege. Furthermore, to read that a ‘man left alone in the universe would have no rights whatever, but he would have obligations’ (WEIL 1987, 4) was first unfathomable, but later on it became understood by considering the Simone Weilian way of thinking. It is clear: to be alone in the universe means to be responsible for one’s own life and at the same time to be inclined towards God.

This tenet has a political assumption as well. Simone Weil developed it further by accusing the ‘men of 1789 [who] did not recognize’ this for they were tied to the ‘human plane’ and wanted to postulate absolute principles. That is why they ‘started off with the idea of rights’ (WEIL 1987, 4). And the same holds to political constitutions of the world as a whole up to now which lay emphases on political rights instead of obligations. Are we not speaking a great deal about the rights of minorities, of youth and even of animals? But the question arises: where are the obligations? –

Thus, there is much that is revolutionary in Simone Weil’s tenets of her theory. Let us follow her train of thought. The obligations co-exist with the eternal destiny of human beings, and unconditional ones, that is, there are no subjects of any condition. Even if the positive right was in contradiction with them their origin should become illegitimate. Simone Weil bases her thought on moral considerations. The root of this she led back to the saying of Jesus Christ: ‘I was hungry and you gave me no food’ (Mt 25:42). Accordingly, from this comes the eternal obligation towards a human being: not to let him suffer from hunger when one has the chance of coming to his assistance. As in the case of physical needs (i.g. protection against violence, housing, clothing, heating, hygiene and medical care in illness) one has to assist him as the obligations corresponding with the moral side, that is that of the soul, and this deserves respect as well as the physical needs. ‘They are much more difficult to recognize and to enumerate than are the needs of the body’ (WEIL 1987, 7). Before enumerating them let us recollect the needs as enlisted by Maslow and compare them with those of Simone Weil. And we will have an insight into how much the latter’s are more sophisticated and stand closer to reality than those of his. Thus, Simone Weil does not enlist them as did Maslow but she orders them ‘in pairs of opposites which balance and complement one another’ (WEIL 1998, 139) as follows: equality versus hierarchy, obedience versus liberty, truth versus freedom of expression, solitude and privacy versus social life, personal property versus collective property, punishment versus honor, disciplined participation in the common task of public values versus personal initiative within this participation, security versus risk, rootedness in several natural environ-

ments versus making contact with the universe. I have no time to digress in all of them but let me bring some of them into sharp relief.

Equality versus hierarchy. Equality consists of public recognition, general, effective and genuinely expressed institutions and customs that respect is due to a human being as such and it is not a matter of degree (WEIL 1987, 15). Henceforth she explains that a certain balance is needed between equality and inequality. For instance, what the equality of opportunity means ('prospects for each man are the same as for the other man regardless of birth, education is so generalised that no one is prevented from developing any capacity simply on account of his birth') needed a counterbalance as well. 'To the extent to which it is really possible for the son of a farm labourer to become a minister, to the same extent should it really be possible for the son of a minister to become a farm labourer'. But she remarks: 'This second possibility could never assume any noticeable proportions without a very dangerous degree of social constraint' (WEIL 1987, 16). After having enlisted several examples she concludes: 'The balance of equality would mean honouring each human condition with those marks of respect which are proper to it, and are not just a hollow pretence' (WEIL 1987, 18). This is a sound position with regard to this crucial and nowadays much debated question that betrays Simone Weil's both a good sense of reality and fine compassion for people of a lower social rank. However, a human being needs a hierarchy at the same time, i.e. 'a certain veneration, a certain devotion towards superiors'. But how? – the question is raised. The answer: One owes respect to persons not for their being in power, for that is not for them as individuals but as symbols. Because they symbolise the high positions assuming obligations towards fellow-men. 'A veritable hierarchy presupposes a consciousness on the part of superiors of this symbolic function and a realization that it forms the only legitimate object of devotion among their subordinates' (WEIL 1987, 18).

As one sees it, according to Simone Weil every human being in a society has a higher or lower position bound to them and self-respect is to be deserved and required. And it does not exclude the fact that Simone Weil – as we have seen above – considers herself to be a slave for ever. However, this is a character of a just society. What is a just society? In its core it is not the empowered self that has freedom and autonomy as it is proclaimed by many seeking social justice. The latter believe that 'as we think we can help the poor by increasing the economy through additional material production and competition, by increasing wealth, so, too, we often believe that everyone can be morally prosperous by increasing the personal power of individuals'. However – following Springsted's correct interpretations – Simone Weil insisted on the fact that the human soul was fragile and always could be destroyed, and from its 'afflictions' as a 'human condition' can be saved not by empowerment but by a particular self-emptying for others. At his crucifixion Jesus Christ had given the perfect example for it. As he had self-emptied on the cross not creating power but giving love, so must we follow him. By an implicit love of God – love of the neighbour, love of the beauty of the world, love of religious ceremonies and friendship, or by paying attention to others (cf. SPRINGSTED 1998, 25–27).

Another pair of opposites is the freedom of opinion versus truth. In the case of freedom she is mostly dwelling on the arts and publications. Not dealing in detail with what she developed let us confine ourselves only to one topic. Intelligence should express itself without control by any authority but not without any limit, for:

[R]epression could be exercised against the press, radio broadcast, or anything else of a similar kind, not only for offences against moral principles publicly recognized, but also for baseness of tone and thought, bad taste, vulgarity or a subtly corrupting moral atmosphere. This sort of repression could take place without in any way infringing on freedom of opinion. (WEIL 1987, 25)

One can imagine what would happen if any government implemented this rule. But it goes even further when she deals with the truth, that is ‘more sacred than any other need’ (WEIL 1987, 35). Nonetheless, all of us know that ‘journalism becomes indistinguishable from organized lying’, that ‘constitutes a crime. But we think it to be impossible to punish it’. She gives several examples. One of them is the following. Maritain wrote in a book, that ‘the greatest thinkers of antiquity had not thought of condemning slavery’. But Aristotle did this when he wrote somewhere: ‘Some people assert that slavery is absolutely contrary to nature and reason’. This sentence would be put before the court that would condemn Maritain by stating that it was an outrage against the entire civilization. ‘All the daily newspapers, weeklies and others, all the reviews and the radio would be obliged to bring the court’s censure to the notice of the public, and if needed, Maritain’s answer’ (WEIL 1987, 37). The more instructive this example is, the less it seems effective, and were it applied nowadays it would shake not only the judicial system but even public life itself.

At the end we must digress on Max Weber’s other position relative to the relationship between ethics of brotherliness and politics that was running counter to his stance – at the very beginning. In his later lecture about *Politics as vocation* he concedes a certain coincidence, better said, a coexistence between the ethics of brotherliness and politics. Just in the passage where he points out that an incongruence consists between the Christian faith based on the Sermon on the Mount and the ethics in politics prescribing the application of violence as a means for determined ends. The early Christians knew that ‘the world is governed by demons and that he who lets himself in for politics, that is, for power and force as means contracts with diabolical powers’ (WEBER 2005, 123). And one has to do justice to Max Weber, whose religiosity is up till now dubious (cf. RADKAU 2009, 531–33). For he admits that:

The great *virtuosi* of acosmic love of humanity and goodness, whether stemming from Nazareth or Assisi or from Indian royal castles [clear hints, as above, at Jesus, Francis and Buddha] have not operated with the political means of violence. Their kingdom was ‘not of this world’ and yet they worked and *still work* in this world.

(WEBER 2005, 126; italics added)

The present time of the text shows that Weber attributed a validity to his statement that also holds up in our time as well. In *Politics as vocation* there is one place where he explains why and when the ethics of brotherliness can flourish. There are two kinds of ethics: one is the ethic of responsibility, the other one is ‘the ethic of

ultimate ends'. The first belongs to the politicians, the second to those who follow the absolute ethic of the Gospel, the commandments of the Sermon on the Mount. 'This ethic is no joking matter. . . it is not a cab, which one can have stopped at one's pleasure; it is all or nothing. This is precisely the meaning of the gospel, if trivialities are not to result' (WEBER 2005, 119). If we take, for example, the commandment of 'turn the other cheek' to be taken seriously:

[T]his command is unconditional and does not question the source of the other's authority to strike. . . This is it: one must be saintly in everything at least in intention, one must live like Jesus, the apostles, St. Francis, and their like. *Then* this ethic makes sense and expresses a kind of dignity; otherwise it does not. (WEBER 2005, 119)

If somebody ever met these requirements it was Simone Weil.

4. Why Simone Weil did not enter the Church

It is well known that Simone Weil refused to be baptised. In her spiritual autobiography she explains why she does not want to be baptised in a letter to Father Perrin. She was staying with him before leaving France. As Father Perrin conveys to us Simone Weil was very much ambiguous towards the baptism:

At times she envisaged the possibility of baptism and, whatever she may have said, the question was often in her mind. It was then that she went to see at least two priests that I know of in order to find out whether their doctrinal demands were the same as mine or whether the power of suggestion which she feared so much in friendship was not causing her to see the Catholic faith in too favorable a light. At other times, on the contrary, she thrust the idea of baptism aside for one reason or another. . . speaking of her during these months, it is necessary to bear in mind this flux and reflux, otherwise our conversation cannot be understood. Her side of it must be seen against the background of a series of conflicts which on some days were painfully apparent but which were always latent and which gave her thought and her deeper life the character of incompleteness. . .

(PERRIN & THIBON 2003, 36)

Thus it is against this backdrop that we must read her confession:

Christianity should contain all vocations without exception since it is catholic. In consequence the Church should also. But in my eyes Christianity is catholic by right but not in fact. So many things. . . I love and do not want to give up, so many things that God loves, otherwise they would not be in existence. All the immense stretches of past centuries, except the last twenty are among them; all the countries inhabited by coloured races; all secular life in the white peoples' countries; in the history of these countries, all the traditions banned as heretical, those of the Manicheans and Albigenses for instance; all those things resulting from the Renaissance, too often degraded but not quite without value. Christianity being catholic by right but not in fact, I regard it as legitimate on my part to be a member of the Church by right but not in fact; not only for a time being but for my whole life if need be. But it is not merely legitimate. So long as God does not give me the certainty that he is ordering me to do anything else, I think it is my duty. . . I have always remained at this exact point, on the threshold of the Church, without moving, quite still

En hūpomé (it is so much more beautiful a word than *patientia!*); only now my heart has been transported, for ever, I hope, into the Blessed Sacrament exposed on the altar.

(FINCH 1999, 122–23)

And a passage that is an excerpt from another letter:

I adhere completely to the mysteries of Christian faith, with the kind of adherence which alone seems to me to be suitable for mysteries; this adherence is made of love, not assertion. Certainly, I belong to Christ; at least I like to think so.

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

Although outside the Church, or more exactly on the threshold, I cannot help having a feeling that all the same I am really inside. Nothing is nearer to me than those who are inside.

(PERRIN & THIBON 2003, 51)

I am leaving aside the very important contribution of the two Catholic eyewitnesses (Father Perrin and Gustave Thibon) who dedicated a whole book to analyse Simone Weil's views concerning whether they meet or not the dogmatic tenets of the Catholic Church. Not because of that since I do not attribute any significance to their work. Quite the opposite: it is very important to weigh the thoughts of Simone Weil from this point of view, and I hope it becomes clear at some point of this essay, too. However I think to digress only on some of them because they have no importance regarding the lessons which I want to draw below.

Instead, let us dismember this text for the lesson to be brought home. First: There is some syncretism (cf. PERRIN & THIBON 2003, 52–66) in the text. She is inclined to sympathy to certain heretics (like Catharism that she falsely held to have been 'a religious society without laws, holding faith without dogma') (PERRIN & THIBON 2003, 65), and some pre-Christian antecedents (thought by her, like Egyptians, Plato), but at the same time there is a crying lack of Israel and Judaism, that is the Old Testament (FINCH 1999, 109). I have made a hint earlier to her 'Selbsthass' *vis-à-vis* her Jewish background, though she held the Book of Job in high esteem. As Father Perrin refers to this which is missing:

[W]hy does she forget that Our Lord chose to be a Jew to the very fringe of his garment and to the very manner of his discussions, parables and argument. If she had had some regard for her historical data, if she had deepened her intuition and made them universal, Simone could have shown most conclusively that Christ is the center, the heir and the crown of all things. But by imagining this fraud which was supposed to have substituted Israel for Greece or Egypt as the forerunner and herald of Christ, she was throwing herself into a hopeless adventure.

(PERRIN & THIBON 2003, 57)

But she did not only do that. She was always blaming the Romans together with Israel on account of their warlike aspirations. She saw no difference between ancient Rome and Israel in this respect: Both of them were seeking power. That is why for her God of the Old Testament was but wrath and rule. And since Jesus Christ was identified by her as the love he could not be led back from the New Testament to the

Old one. By doing this she made an unbridgeable split between the two parts of the Bible, and in consequence she deprived herself of the prophetic inspiration that had been implied in the Old Testament.

This was perhaps her greatest mistake. Let me refer to one of the telling essays of Paul Tillich. He was dealing with the Jewish question and in connection with this he pinpointed the undisputable unity between the Old and New Testament. As he demonstrates it: without the prophetic spirit of the Old Testament that makes Christianity able to renew herself, Christianity would be petrified. Through an interesting train of thought he has come to this conclusion. As a point of departure he takes the experience of the Holy. The Holy is an experience of something which is unconditional. But what is unconditional comes to us with two sides. On the one hand, the Holy contains in itself what is good and true but created not from them. On the other hand, the Holy is never perfect and needs to be completed and fulfilled. Between the two sides there is a tension, namely between what *is* and what *ought to be*. This is a polar relation and the poles can encounter and bring about conflicts. On the one side of the Holy resides the sacramental pole represented by priests who implemented and save it. On the other side one finds the prophetic spirit seeking to make what is required to be the standard for the existing, that is, prophets represent social justice. People who belong to the first are those of the Space, the latter to the Time. Both poles are inherent in the history of all religions and when they separate from one the other, both of them look forward to dangers. The sacramental pole is threatened by becoming idolatry, and the prophetic one is heading for an excess in *l'art pour l'art* movement. Christianity has been threatened by a cramped rigidity, that is to become idolatrous. From this state the prophetic pole pushed it forward. And, according to Paul Tillich this pushing force has been manifested in the activity of sects, and last but not least in the Reformation. And this revitalising power came from the Old Testament, and the Jewish people as being the people of the Time and Social Justice always contributed to the renewal of the Church. Thus, as Tillich concludes: 'Es ist seine Funktion [des Judentums], den Geist des Prophetismus wachzuhalten, sich selbst gegenüber den nationalen Gruppen und gegenüber den christlichen Kirchen, wenn sie der Bindung an dem Raum verfallen' (TILLICH 1966, 160). If Simone Weil did not let herself be misled by first impressions and surmounted and accepted her origin she must have found in the Jews a brave alliance against dogma and for social justice. As to her 'anti-Semitism' it suffices to quote a passage of Gustave Thibon in the preface to *Gravity and Grace* to see this objection effaced:

She had, for example, the same aversion for Hitlerian antisemitism as for the Jewish idea of temporal Messianic rule. How many times did she not speak to me of Jewish roots of anti-semitism! She was fond of saying that Hitler hunted on the same ground as the Jews and only persecuted them in order to resuscitate under another name and to his own advantage their tribal god, terrestrial, cruel and exclusive. Her horror of the social idol was of course extended to all other forms of totalitarian mysticism and in particular to Marxism. Even the Catholic church, which moreover she admired in many of its aspects, did not escape her criticism as a social body. (THIBON 2004, 30)

Second: As we have seen above Simone Weil did not like the Church as a social institution and made it equal with the 'Great Beast' of Apocalypse. She discarded the Church as the first totalitarian rule in the history. She refused the *anathema sit*. To this extent she was more Protestant than Catholic. As Perrin reported 'she had read a great deal . . . the Calvinistic and Jansenist texts' (PERRIN & THIBON 2003, 63). We have to bear in mind this point of her teachings. One lesson to draw from this is perhaps to be more tolerant towards everybody who seems to deviate from the dogma of the Catholic Church. Namely, she considered the other religions not to replace the Catholic one but in their teachings to add to the Christian religion. Weil says that person could be a Hindu and a Christian (like Gandhi), a Jew and a Christian (like Brother Daniel), a Moslim and a Christian (Titus Burkhardt). There are some who can be considered as judaised Christians and christianised Jews (Franz Rosenszweig, Eric Gutkind, Martin Buber).

We cannot share with position. Much as these exceptional figures adopt some of the elements mutually from the other religion it is absolutely excluded to be at the same time Christian and of another religion. From the other side, from Buddhism, Hinduism, Shintoism etc. it can be imagined to join another religion (including the Christian one) and at the same time remaining Buddhist, etc., for they are permissive towards other confessions of faith. But for a Christian the first command is compulsory: we must pray the unique God who 'made flesh' in Jesus Christ. As Paul Tillich sets it forth with clear lucidity in connection with Judaism:

Es gibt einen Punkt, wo Christentum und Judentum auseinandergehen und meiner Erfahrung nach nicht zusammenkommen können. Das ist der Glaube des Christentums, dass Jesus der Christus ist, und die Frage des Judentums, wie jemand 'Christus' sein kann, der nicht die Funktion des Christus erfüllt hat, nämlich die Wirklichkeit zu verwandeln und eine neue Wirklichkeit herbeizuführen. Ist nicht der Jesus der an seinem Werk verzweifelt am Kreuz gestorben ist, das Gegenteil von dem, was der Christus bedeutet? Damit sind wir am tiefsten Punkt der – Auseinandersetzung zwischen Judentum und Christentum. Die Frage ist: Ist der Messias gekommen oder wird er kommen? Der Gegensatz scheint absolut . . . [U]nd doch bleibt der fundamentale Unterschied, nämlich die Hinwendung zum Christus, der gekommen ist, im Christentum und die Hinwendung zum Messias, der erwartet wird, im Judentum. (TILLICH 1966, 169–70)

But at the same time Simone Weil loves in Christianity the following elements (worded in a letter): 'God, the Catholic faith, the Saints, Catholic genuine spirituality, the Catholic liturgy, hymns, architecture, rites and ceremonies' (PERRIN & THIBON 2003, 43–44). Thereafter the authors put the poetic question correctly: 'what is really left? Our individual and collective sins . . . and the prejudices she never lost'. Thus, to this extent she is nearer to Catholicism. But not just for this. Much as she felt a reluctance to enter the Catholic Church she was attracted to the Church as a trustee of a more universal faith, at least in principle. Simone Weil represented an over-estimated universalism. Following Simone Weil, there could not be any conflict between the old teachings of the great religions of the world because they (including the Celts, Druids, American Indians African folk religions, etc.) are in harmony, if properly understood,

with the inner truth of Christianity and the biblical prophets, Greek religion and Buddhism (FINCH 1999, 29). (We have seen this above.)

It must be added that since the Vatican Synod II and particularly by the activity of John Paul II the Church's policy underwent a radical change concerning the other religions. In several encyclicals the Pope declared his brotherliness *vis-à-vis* not only the other Christian Churches but to the other Monotheist religions as well. Furthermore, the Pope apologised several times not only to Judaism and Buddhism but even to African tribes as well. Sorry to say, but Finch was ignorant of these facts when he wrote his book.

5. Account

In his sociology of religion Max Weber makes a clear distinction between two kinds of religious direction (WEBER 2005, 324–26). The one is the mystic who is seeking to be 'the vessel of God'. It means that the mystic intends to get rid of all mundane ties in order to give himself to contemplation. Weber calls this state of mind 'contemplative flight from the world'. Though it has a tempered variant as well when the contemplative mystic does not draw the conclusion of fleeing from the world but remains in the orders of the latter. As to the ascetic he can also be divided into two kinds. The first is the active one who operates in the world, who seeks to influence the world, and seeks to defeat what is creatural and wicked through work in a wordly 'vocation' (called by Weber 'inner-worldly ascetism'). As compared with the mystic who wants to reach the contemplative possession of the holy, he wants rather to be the 'tool of God'. This type of ascetic can also be tempered when the ascetism confines itself to keeping down and to overcoming creatural wickedness in the actor's own nature. It focuses on the concentration; the firmly god-willed redemptory accomplishment amounting to avoid any action in the orders of the world (Weber: ascetist flight from the world).

In the light of these assumptions of Weber let us recall Simone Weil's mode of life. It seems we have to rebuff the two 'tempered forms' both of mysticism and ascetism. Simone Weil did not flee from the world in order to minimalise the actions in the world. Nor can she be held to be an ascetic who practiced an ascetism in the ways in which the Puritan has acted in 'blissfull bigotry'. No, she was experiencing and writing in mystic 'ecstasy' but always tempered with a particular rationality and, paradoxically, 'impersonally'. And, of course, we can claim her to be an active ascetic who wanted to be the 'tool of God' in the mundane world. She wanted to be submerged in the very 'sub-world' like Orfeo for her lover, but she went in the midst of physical work of the 'sub-world' to experience for herself what the affliction does actually mean. Thus, one can state that her spiritual life was a mystic one while her real life was an ascetic one. Therefore one can rightly call her: a mystic ascetic.

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