



FAITH & REASON

THE JOURNAL OF CHRISTENDOM COLLEGE

Autumn & Winter 2003 | Vol. XXVIII, No. 3-4

SIMONE WEIL'S CRITIQUE OF THE *ZEITGEIST*¹

Marie Cabaud Meaney

L

IKE SO MANY FRENCH INTELLECTUALS OF THE 1930S, THE AGNOSTIC PHILOSOPHER Simone Weil was attracted to Communism. It appealed to her since it claimed to care for the oppressed and promised to bring about justice. Yet she never joined the Communist party. Weil was one of those few intellectuals who actually shared for a while the condition of the proletariat by working in different industrial plants for a year. Though naturally clumsy and racked by almost constant headaches, Weil did this in order to understand the problems of the workers from the inside and to search for solutions. She came to see that the answers were not to be found in Communism, and later wrote some scathing articles criticizing its inner contradictions and its poor intellectual framework. Simone Weil shows us that if you seek the truth, you will find it and you will see through the ideologies of your day, however compelling they are. Later on she was to say that even in her agnostic days she was already implicitly seeking and obeying God though she was not even aware of it.² This implicit search is probably the greatest protection against ideology. Ultimately, Weil came to the conclusion that all ideologies are fundamentally forms of idolatry. Since their nature is spiritual, the answer to them must have spiritual roots as well.

Thus the argument I wish to make, together with Weil, is that ideology is a result of the refusal of the supernatural. It attempts to fill the spiritual vacuum that the rejection of God has left. It turns something—a nation, an idea, a class—into an absolute, and thus becomes a form of abject worship. Hence Weil called World War II a war of religions, meaning that the ideologies at war were religious because of the place they took up in people's hearts. After looking at Weil's definition of ideology, I will present her criticism of the two main ideologies of her day, namely Nazism and Communism, and investigate her suggestions of how to overcome these modern plagues. Then I will analyze the reasons for which people accept ideology, ranging from the use of terror, to mass dynamics, to spiritual pride. Finally, I will briefly examine Weil's interpretation of the Sophoclean *Antigone* to show the impact ideology has on one's perception and one's sense of justice.

Simone Weil was born on February 3, 1909 into an agnostic Jewish family in Paris. In her teens Weil decided that the question of God's existence could not be resolved; thus there was no sense in trying to address it.³ But she always sought for truth, discovered the value of purity at the age of 16, preferred poverty to the comfortable life-style of her well-to-do family, and felt strongly for the destitute, to whom she gave most of her salary. In spite of the fact that she went to the elite schools and colleges of her day in Paris to study philosophy, she felt that her vocation did not lie in academe.



Simone Weil

Though she taught philosophy at various high-schools throughout France, she spent all of her free time teaching at evening-schools for workers, getting involved in worker's unions, and writing articles on the political issues of the day. In the summer of 1932 she went to Germany to get a sense of the political situation there and wrote some interesting articles on the question. Then in 1934 she took a year off to work in industrial plants, and in 1936 she briefly participated in the Spanish Civil War on the side of the anarchists. A severe burn prevented her from participating in combat and she had to leave Spain after just a few weeks. But this did not hinder her from scrutinizing the motivations of her companions and criticizing their moral blindness and callousness. In November of 1938 Weil, to her great surprise, had her first mystical experience of Christ. She had thought until then that man could not reach God, but it had not occurred to her that God might come to man. While she was reciting the poem *Love* by George Herbert, it unconsciously became a prayer and then, as she writes: "Christ himself came down and took possession of me."⁴ Though this came unexpectedly to Weil, this encounter had been preceded by some events. As she would later say, God had given her "the gift of affliction" ("le don du malheur") which He gives to those whom He wants to draw particularly close to Himself.⁵ Shattered in mind and body, as she put it, she went with her parents on a trip to Spain and Portugal to recover from her industrial experience and from her continuous headaches, from which she had been suffering since 1930. In the poor little Portuguese fishing village Povoia do Varzim she witnessed a religious procession on September 15, 1935, the feast of Our Lady of Sorrows. The heart-wrenching hymns which the villagers sang gave Weil the sudden insight that Christianity was the religion of slaves, of the poor and the oppressed. Since she felt like a slave herself after her industrial experience where she had received "forever the branding of the red-hot iron the Romans put on the foreheads of their most despised slaves," she thought that she also belonged by right to this religion.⁶ In 1937, she visited Assisi, and there, in the little chapel of Santa Maria degli Angeli "something stronger than [herself] ... forced [her] for the first time in [her] ... life to go down on [her] ... knees," as she wrote in her later famous letter to the


"While she was reciting the poem Love by George Herbert, it unconsciously became a prayer and then, as she writes: 'Christ himself came down and took possession of me.'"


Dominican priest Father Perrin in 1942. Like many intellectuals of her time, Weil loved Gregorian chant and the beauty of the liturgy. She went for ten days to the Benedictine Abbey of Solesmes for Easter 1938 where "it goes without saying that in the course of these [liturgical] services the thought of the Passion of Christ entered into my being once and for all."⁷

Strangely enough, Weil was a mystic who, because of her fear of self-delusion, did not pray after her first mystical experience. It was only after she had fled Paris before the German occupation and had gone to Marseille, where she met Father Perrin and the Catholic Gustav Thibon, that the question of baptism was raised for the first time and that her life of prayer started. Thibon and Weil had promised each other to learn the "Our Father" in Greek. From that point on, when Weil would recite it with great attention (which was at least once a day), she had a mystical experience:

At times the very first words tear my thoughts from my body and transport it to a place outside space where there is neither perspective nor point of view. The infinity of the ordinary expands of perception is replaced by an infinity to the second or sometimes the third degree.... Sometimes, also, during this recitation or at other moments, Christ is present with me in person.⁸

In June 1942 she left France for New York with her parents, but stayed there only a few months before joining the Free French Government in London. After a few months of intense work, she collapsed in March 1943. She died at the sanatorium in Ashford, Kent, on August 24, 1943 from a combination of starvation (she did not want to eat more than what she thought the French were getting under the occupation), exhaustion and tuberculosis.

After this overview, let us now look at Weil's criticism of the *Zeitgeist*, of the ideologies of her day. What is the *Zeitgeist*? St. Paul in the second letter to the Corinthians calls it "the god of this age" that "has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, so that they may not see the light of the Gospel of the glory of Christ" (II Cor. 4:4). The *Zeitgeist* is the current mentality of the day which

distorts reality and blinds one to the Christian truth. This, in any case, is St. Paul's definition, which has not lost any of its pertinence. Confusingly, any world-view, regardless of its content and truth, is called an ideology today. But many thinkers of the recent past, among them Weil, Eric Voegelin, and Dietrich von Hildebrand, have made a strong distinction between truth and ideology-just as St Paul did. Truth is adequate to reality while ideology is not and prefers to impose itself on it. Weil is keenly aware of ideology's power to distort perception as well as of its totalitarian claim to explain everything and to dismiss reality when it does not conform to its tenets. It is sometimes hard to understand the grip ideologies have on people. This is only explainable if one sees that at its source lies a spiritual choice, as Weil claims. But Weil did not come to see this immediately.

In her pre-mystical days, Weil had already written about the power of words that start with a capital letter such as Communism or Fascism. In her article from 1937, "The Power of Words" ("Ne Recommençons pas la guerre de Troie"), her approach was still a purely intellectual one. These words, she writes, are empty and meaningless, and when they are given capital letters:

Then, on the slightest pretext, men will begin shedding blood for them and piling up ruins in their name, without effectively grasping anything to which they refer, since what they refer to can never have any reality, for the simple reason that they mean nothing.⁹

The solution Weil proposes to combat these ideologies is greater intellectual rigor, for if these concepts are analyzed carefully, their lack of intelligibility will become clear.¹⁰ This somewhat naive answer was revised by Weil in her 1943 article "A War of Religions" ("Cette guerre est une guerre de religions"). She calls the current war "a single religious drama whose theatre is the whole world."¹¹ The war is due to the fact that man wants to shake off the "intolerable" burden of moral choice and the unalterable difference between good and evil. There are three basic approaches to this problem. The first is "an irreligious method" which "consists in the denial of the reality of the opposition between good and evil." But by this denial, man loses his sense of direction and becomes "mad in the literal, medical sense." First he will become the slave of his desires and subsequently will experience the usual tedium which follows the fulfillment of desire. Europe experienced that after World War I, according to Weil, and the various countries responded

differently to it. France remained in its gray-zone and thus lacked the spiritual strength, hope and energy to fight Germany. Germany, on the other hand, chose the second way of evading the problem of good and evil, which is idolatry. A certain area or idea is declared an absolute where the contradictories of good and evil are abolished. Thus anything that is done for the sake of that absolute is by definition good. One has been freed of the constraining factors of good and evil, and is allowed to murder, steal and lie, as long as it is for the sake of the cause. This is an extremely strong driving force which makes people immune to such feelings as compassion. But lest we think that Germany had the monopoly of this attitude during the Third Reich, Weil tells us that: "Germany is a mirror for all of us. What looks to us so hideous are our own features, but magnified."¹² Idolatry is a temptation for all and significantly its prohibition is the first of the Ten Commandments. The third possible answer to the opposition of good and evil is what Weil calls a "mystical" one. It means embracing the good to such an extent that it becomes second nature to us. This is the freedom of the children of God which St Augustine refers to, when he says "love and do what you want." The boldness of Weil's analysis becomes even more striking, if one keeps in mind that she wrote this text as a political analysis for the Free French Government in London.



Weil rightly calls her age one "of idolatry and faith, not of mere belief."¹³ Yet even in light of idolatry with its fanatizing power, it is still difficult to understand the resulting moral deterioration of people, as Emmanuel Gabellieri points out in his excellent article, "La Barbarie selon Simone Weil" ("Barbarism according to Simone Weil"). In a letter to the Catholic French writer Georges Bernanos, probably from 1938, Weil relates some of her experiences during the Spanish Civil War, which were similar to those Bernanos had on the Franquist side (and which he recounted in his book *Les Grands Cimetières sous la lune*).

For example:

Two anarchists once told me how they and some comrades captured two priests. They killed one of them on the spot with a revolver, in front of the other, and then told the survivor that he could go.

When he was twenty yards away they shot him down. The man who told me this story was much surprised when I didn't laugh.¹⁴

Men who otherwise were courageous and fraternal now have no inhibitions to kill people at random. What is the reason for this? It is because "once a certain class of people has been placed by the temporal and spiritual authorities outside the ranks of those whose life has value, then nothing comes more naturally to men than murder."¹⁵ This is the elimination of morality from a certain area which takes place in ideology/idolatry, as referred to by Weil in her essay, "The War of Religions." Similarly, Eric Voegelin thought that modern ideologies are really "political religions" and are modern forms of gnosticism. In his book *Science, Politics and Gnosticism* he quotes Rudolf Höss, the commandant of the concentration camp Auschwitz. Höss' statement exemplifies this reversal of morality to the point of not even questioning gruesome orders:

At that time I did not indulge in deliberation: I had received the order and I had to carry it out.... I do not believe that even one of the thousands of SS leaders could have permitted such a thought to occur to him. Something like that was just completely impossible.¹⁶

Höss neither questioned his orders nor did he feel any horror at what he was doing. As Weil puts it in *Gravity and Grace*: "The service to the false God . . . purifies evil by eliminating horror. Nothing seems evil to those who serve it, except failing in its service."¹⁷

But there is more at stake, as Weil describes so well in her articles on Nazi Germany from 1932/33 and from 1939. Already in 1932, she had noticed that the Nazis and Communists experienced frustration when debating with each other, for they realized that what they were saying sounded similar. Their slogans sounded alike: both sides were against the exploitation of the workers and low wages, and wanted to transform the system.¹⁸ These similarities made it difficult to see the other party as an enemy opposed in all respects. They also point to Weil's later analysis, which reveals the common source of all ideologies-their religious nature-thus making them more similar to each other than one might have thought. But it is not only in their source and in their ideas that Communism and Nazism are close, but also in their methods. Weil makes this very clear in her long article from 1939, "Reflections on the Origins of Hitlerism" ("Quelques réflexions sur les origines de l'hitlérisme"). Weil compares Hitler's methods to those of ancient Rome, the way he

inspires terror, his use of prestige to reinforce that terror, and the use of crowd dynamics. Weil claims that "the Romans were unsurpassable in the art of perfidy." However, the use of perfidy has two disadvantages: it arouses indignation and makes people distrustful of you.¹⁹ Thus the Romans only used it when they were sure they could annihilate their enemy, so that there was no one left to protest.²⁰ "On the other hand," as Weil writes "spectators were terror-struck; and since terror makes the soul credulous, the very perfidy of the Romans had the effect of strengthening rather than weakening their neighbours' inclination to believe them. People are eager to believe whatever they very much hope is true."²¹

At the same time, the Romans were good at propaganda and proclaimed their own good faith, claiming that they were acting in self-defense rather than attacking. Furthermore, even if they were not as powerful as they seemed, they made up for this by the use of "prestige." Prestige is the gloss and shine which power bestows on those that possess it: the powerful thus seem bigger and more awe-inspiring than they really are. It therefore takes a certain kind of supernatural courage to pierce this aura of power and estimate one's opponents at their true value. David did this when facing Goliath. England did this, Weil claims, when it faced Germany like a helpless child: "In such a situation there is not much that a child can do. But if it coldly looks the brute in the eye it is certain that the brute will hesitate for a moment."²² To disguise its hesitation, Weil holds, Germany attacked Russia. Whether or not one agrees with Weil's interpretation of this historical event, her point about prestige and terror still holds.²³

This interpretation of the Romans may seem shocking or at least unusual to us, since we have come to admire them for their juridical code and for their other achievements which have shaped Western Civilization.²⁴ But history was written to a great extent by the Romans and thus by the victors, and the point of view of the defeated is lost to us:

For it is the conquests that threaten us that seem horrible; those that we ourselves achieve are always good and noble. Further, we know Roman history only from the Romans themselves and their Greek subjects, who were obliged, poor wretches, to flatter their masters. So it requires a constant critical effort to make an objective judgement of Roman policy. We lack the accounts of it that might have been given by the Carthaginians, the Spanish, the

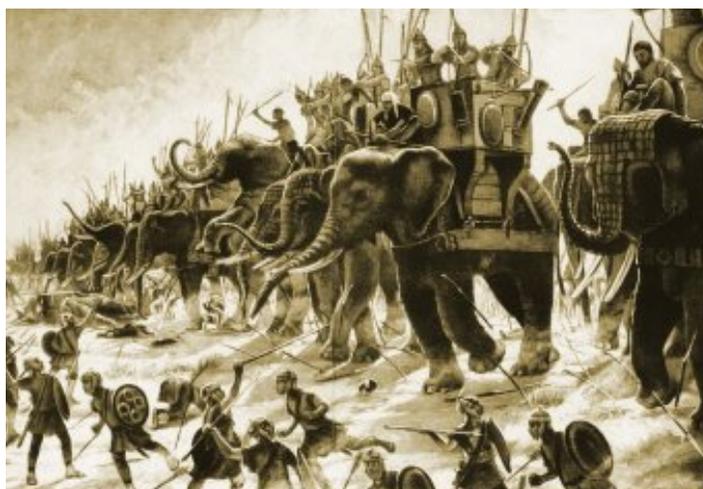
Gauls, the Germans, and the Britons.²⁵

The Romans were able to get away with their deeds because of their use of terror and of propaganda, at which they were masterful. Weil explains this in the following manner: “As Retz said, it is possible to keep up appearances if one’s evil-doing is the result of cool resolution, whereas those who fall into evil-doing unintentionally will always provoke a scandal.” Thus the Romans had a better reputation than the Carthaginians “who broke their word from necessity, or fury, or despair, acquired a reputation for perfidy which has endured, because posterity never listens to the vanquished.”²⁶ But the Romans cruelly destroyed Carthage despite their promise to spare the city. The Carthaginians had been blind to the perfidy of Rome, as most adversaries of Rome had been, for as Weil explains “the human soul recoils from looking extreme disaster in the face. It arouses gratitude in all those who might have been destroyed, but have not been; because they had expected to be.”²⁷ Since power “is nearly always in the wrong if it is silent when the victim appeals to its rights,” propaganda is essential. Strangely, even if the pretexts used are “grossly contradictory and hypocritical they are plausible enough when used by the stronger.” Even if they are blatantly false, “they give towards an excuse for flattery and the indifferent an excuse of inertia.”²⁸ Hitler and other totalitarian regimes employed these tactics as well.

Whether or not one agrees with Weil’s interpretation of Roman history does not undermine her analysis of the use of force, terror and propaganda. Since Weil always wanted to be on the side of the underdog, she was somewhat blind to the fact that the weaker can also be in the wrong. Carthage was striving just like Rome for dominance in the Western Mediterranean and had the bad luck to lose. We do not know whether Hannibal would have treated Rome any better than the Romans treated Carthage, had he been successful with his campaign during the second Punic War. But the episodes that Weil picks from Roman history are certainly not in its favor.²⁹ For example, in 133 B.C. the Romans besieged the Spanish town of Numantia. Twice the Roman generals

made a peace-treaty in order to save their armies, which according to Plutarch amounted to 20,000 Roman soldiers. But the Senate broke the treaties. Starving, the city had to surrender, and the town was razed to the ground at the order of Scipio Aemilianus because he thought “great reputations are founded upon great calamities.”³⁰

Another factor influencing people’s blind acceptance of certain ideologies is societal pressure. Weil loved to refer to Plato’s coining of the term “the big animal” (“le gros animal”) in his *Republic* to express the way society can be swayed like an animal, either by stimulating its desires, or by instilling fears and deadening its reason.³¹



Carthagina elephants in the 2nd Punic War

This animal, signifying the masses, is not led by truth but by opinion, and charismatic leaders know how to sway it/them by pleasure or fear. Hitler and Communist Russia put this into practice by, for example, organizing quasi-religious mass events. They were all the more powerful, since these ideologies put their race (Nazism) or the proletariat masses at their center rather than the individual.

Eric Voegelin mentions a further reason for adopting ideology, one which is to some extent present in Weil’s thought. In *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism*, Voegelin claims that since Christianity is challenging and tells us some hard truths, many people prefer to adhere to Gnostic ideologies which are more reassuring. It is not easy to be uncertain about one’s eternal fate and know that it requires death-to-self in order to reach it.³² It is thus understandable that Israel alone was falling away from its God at regular intervals, while the other nations kept true to their gods—one never hears about their falling away from their idols. On the other hand, Weil, like Blaise Pascal, is very aware of man’s desire to escape boredom (“ennui”), death to self and the dark night of the soul. It is a scary thing to be stripped and scorched by the living God. Thus, as Weil writes in her *Notebooks*:

With the help of their imagination human beings try to close the holes through which grace might pass. They do this at the cost of lies and idols ...[If one sees idols for what they really are, namely relative things rather than absolutes, then] there is

emptiness ... Idolatry is thus a vital necessity. To think [of idols as relative beings] ... means accepting death.³³

Idols fill our need for reassurance and meet our fear of death-to-self.

Weil analyzed perceptively the means used by Nazism to gain and remain in power. She did not give a detailed criticism of its content, simply because it was so obviously wrong to her and to many of her contemporaries that this was not necessary. Communism, on the other hand, was much more popular in France and therefore deserved a more thorough criticism, which Weil provided in a series of articles. Already in 1934 in her long essay, "Reflections concerning the Causes of Liberty and Social Oppression" ("Reflexions sur les causes de la liberte et de l'oppression sociale"), Weil bemoaned the fact that people accepted Marxism or "scientific socialism" dogmatically without any analysis of its concepts and content.³⁴ Where the Marxist revolution has taken place, such as in Russia, it oppresses the proletariat just as much as capitalist society, since the difficult situation of the worker is due to the industrial working conditions rather than to the existence or non-existence of private property. Marx's theory becomes religious when he turns Hegelianism on its head and claims that instead of the world spirit increasing and improving throughout history, it is the productive forces which are always driving towards some better utopian state.³⁵ Implicitly this means believing in a form of providence which has ordered history to further productive forces and thereby to establish one day the rule of the proletariat—a postulate which has no argument with which it could be buttressed.

Weil's criticism of Marxism is already incisive in 1934, but gets much stronger by 1938 when she writes her article, "On the Contradictions of Marxism" ("Sur les contradictions du marxisme"). According to Marx, revolutions occur when conditions in society have reached such a point that they are already underway, i.e. when those who have been oppressed are ready to take power into their hands.³⁶ Not only has this take-over by the masses not happened in the almost 100 years since Marx formulated that doctrine and Weil was writing her article, but society is not any closer to it. The workers are not close to being in charge, Weil writes, and are simply part of the mechanism of an enterprise.³⁷ In her article from 1943, "Is There a Marxist Doctrine?" ("Y a-t'il une doctrine marxiste?") Weil denies that there is such a thing

as a Marxist doctrine, for Marxism lacks the coherence to form anything like a doctrine. Again, Weil points out the religious undertones of Marxism. Marx himself, she says, "was seized with a sort of messianic illusion which made him believe that he had been chosen to play a decisive role for the salvation of mankind."³⁸ He adopted the utopian socialism of his day in the belief that absolute justice and happiness would come about. Yet, at the same time, he was a materialist and thought that different forces rule society. The belief that matter would eventually produce the good is a contradiction in itself, but one that Marx embraced and which his followers accepted as well. Thus:

Marxism is a full-fledged religion, in the impurest sense of the word. In particular it shares in common with all inferior forms of the religious life the fact of having been continually used, according to Marx's perfectly accurate expression, as an opium of the people.³⁹

Thus Weil turns Marx's criticism of religion as the opium of the people against himself: it is ideology that is an opiate and which closes the soul to truth, while Christianity feeds the soul with nourishing truth.⁴⁰

One must insist then that ideologies are a spiritual problem. The answer to them must therefore be spiritual as well. Since ideologies are a form of idolatry, a denial of the supernatural and of the true God (this is also the case when the ideologue calls himself a believer), the ultimate answer must be faith. This is Weil's claim. The supernatural is present in this world in a silent, invisible way, but a highly potent one. It is like the mustard seed, which is the smallest of all seeds, but grows into a big tree and hosts the birds of the sky. The supernatural has the capacity to change the world, to leaven it through. It is like the key-stone that supports the whole building from above. Weil likes to quote Archimedes' saying: "Give me a point of leverage and I will lift the world." The point of leverage is Christ's Cross, his redeeming act which mediates between God and the world. On the other hand, if the existence of the supernatural is denied, then reality is falsified. Even if one were to try to explain the universe to blind inhabitants living on a cut-off island, but would fail to mention light—though it is weightless, exerts no pressure, offers no obstacle, etc. the account, according to Weil, would be false and would leave important elements unexplained, such as the ripening of fruit, the process of photosynthesis, etc.⁴¹ Thus Weil was particularly critical of the Enlightenment thinkers who excluded the super-

natural from the universe, for this falsified everything. Materialists at least are logical, Weil thought, for if one excludes the supernatural, then it is right to conclude that there exists nothing but matter.

Thus it is impossible to choose neutrality or secularism, for not only will this choice be wrong, but it will also be dangerous. As Weil writes in *The Need for Roots (L'Enracinement)* in 1943: "It is certain that neutrality is a lie. The secular [educational] system is not neutral.... If one gets children used to not thinking about God, they will become Fascists or Communists because of the need to give oneself to something."⁴² For as she writes in her Notebooks from 1942: "One can only choose between God and idolatry. There is no other possibility. For the faculty of adoration is in us, and it is directed to something in this world or in the other."⁴³ Everybody has to make this choice explicitly or implicitly. Weil thought that one could love God implicitly, before one knew of His existence, such as happened to her. By loving values, obeying the moral law, one is making a choice for or against Him. This is the only alternative: "There is only faith, implicit or explicit, or else betrayal."⁴⁴

Weil's interpretation of the Sophoclean *Antigone* shows paradigmatically the confrontation between those who deny the supernatural and are ideologues, and those who accept its existence. Let me just briefly touch on a few elements of Weil's fragmentary reading of the tragedy.⁴⁵ According to Weil's interpretation, *Antigone* is a Christological figure who gives her life out of love and out of obedience towards the supernatural moral law rather than from a desire to obey the positive law that Creon promulgated: "For the unwritten law which this little girl obeyed had nothing whatsoever in common with rights, or with the natural; it was the same love, extreme and absurd, which led Christ to the Cross."⁴⁶ Thus she performs burial rites over the body of her brother Polynices, who had attacked Thebes. This places her in open disobedience of the decree of Creon, the King of Thebes, who is also her uncle. Creon had ordered that Polynices be left unburied, whilst his brother Eteocles who had defended Thebes is given an honorable funeral. Anyone who disobeys this decree faces execution.

Creon, on the other hand, reveals himself to be a tyrant and an ideologue who is willing to sacrifice everything to the state. This becomes particularly clear in his conversation with his son Haemon, who is also the fiance of *Antigone*.⁴⁷ Creon has turned the state into an absolute.⁴⁸ Weil would say that he is committing idolatry. Creon claims to be honoring the gods in punishing the fallen Polynices who had intended to desecrate their temples. But in reality Creon does not allow for their presence (11.199 ff). When the Chorus suggests that the gods may have been responsible for the burial of Polynices, Creon reacts with anger (11.280 ff). Creon "defies augury" and even responds to the seer Tiresias' warning with a sacrilegious remark.⁴⁹

What Weil wrote about the USSR in 1943 could just as readily be applied to Creon: "As each of us considers himself sufficiently capable of practicing justice, each of us naturally thinks that a system under which he wielded power would be a reasonably just one. This is the temptation Christ underwent at the hands of the devil."⁵⁰ Creon thinks he can dictate to the gods who is just and who is not, and thus commits injustices towards *Antigone*, Polynices, his son, the gods, and ultimately the state. His narrow rationality, which is the result of his exclusion of the supernatural and his idolatrous attitude towards the state, leads to a misconception of reality and thus to injustice. He lacks *caritas* or supernatural love which is an epistemological necessity,

for as Weil says: "Love is the eye of the soul." It enhances one's perception and makes one see things one otherwise would have overlooked.⁵¹

Furthermore, love opens our eyes to the concrete existence of other people who would otherwise seem insignificant: "Love sees what is invisible."⁵² Morally speaking, most mortals live in a Ptolemaic world. They perceive themselves as being the center of the universe, and hardly acknowledge the existence of other people to whom they are not connected by family bonds or friendship.

Just as God, being outside the universe, is at the same time the center, so each man imagines he is situated in the center of the world. The illusion of perspective


"One can only choose
between God and idolatry.
There is no other possibility.
For the faculty of adoration
is in us, and it is directed to
something in this world or
in the other."


perspective places him at the center of space; an illusion of the same kind falsifies his idea of time; and yet another kindred illusion arranges a whole hierarchy of values around him.⁵³

Creon sees everything in terms of his own interests which are those of the state. Antigone looks at things in terms of whether the gods will be pleased and in terms of her love for her brother. If one adopts the supernatural perspective, God becomes the measure of all things instead of man, and God commands us to love our neighbor.⁵⁴ Instead of one's perception being clouded by the *Zeitgeist* or by passions, one sees things more from God's perspective (which does not mean that one becomes omniscient or immune to error).

But Creon lacks not only *caritas*, but also faith. As Weil writes (commenting on the passage of St Paul's letter to the Hebrews concerning faith which "prove[s] the existence of realities that are unseen" (Heb 11:1)): "There is no justice without faith, and faith is the belief in invisible things."⁵⁵ Creon's justice is not sufficient. Justice is not true justice when separated from love: "The spirit of justice is nothing other than the supreme and perfect flower of the madness of love."⁵⁶ Thus the apparent folly of Antigone is the reverse side of her justice.

Yet, let us not judge Creon too severely, for we are all in danger of becoming like him. As Weil writes: "It is not for us to blame him, we who at this very moment think, talk, and act exactly like him."⁵⁷ We are all potentially in danger of becoming ideologues, Weil warns her colleagues of the Free French Government. In her essay, "Are we struggling for justice?" she says that in order to be just one needs to possess charity, and this alone will be a strong enough weapon to fight Hitler. She questions her colleagues as to whether their organization possesses the "folly of love" necessary for justice.

Similarly, she speaks in her essay, "A War of Religions," ("Cette guerre est une guerre de religions") of the necessity of faith in order to fight Hitler successfully: "If a faith were to arise in this unhappy continent, victory would be rapid, certain, and secure." Why? The means of communication of the Germans in France could easily be destroyed by the oppressed French, but only "if all the land were set ablaze by a true faith." Faith and hope would give the French the necessary motivation and strength to stand up against the Germans. Hitler understood this, as Weil writes, for: "Hitler has taught us,

if we are capable of learning, that a truly realistic policy takes account first and foremost of thoughts." Yet the methods of Hitler and of the Free French are different: "[Hitler] hopes for the triumph of evil; his material is the mass, the dough. We hope for the triumph of good; our material is the yeast."⁵⁸ This is a very interesting point which reveals two different ideals of community. Hitler wants to turn people into a mass (the Platonic "great beast") that can easily be manipulated and which can be used as a powerful tool against his opponents. He just needs to sway its opinion through propaganda to unleash its destructive force.

Weil, however, wants to proceed by converting the hearts of individuals. This happens silently and, like yeast, is communicated to others. It is a comparatively slow and discreet transformation of society, but one which once it takes place is fairly immune to the use of power and manipulation. Thus it is a weapon against ideology and leads to a better and more Christian society.



When Weil came to England, she desired to do one of two things. She either wanted to be sent on a no-return mission to France or start a project of front-line nurses. In the first case, she would have fulfilled her vocation, which she felt was to become a sacrificial lamb, a scapegoat with all the spiritual significance that this would have for the cause of truth and justice. Or she would have liked to be a front-line nurse who would share in the dangers of the soldiers in combat. The wounded could thus be helped more efficiently. But more significantly, it would be a strong spiritual weapon. The soldiers would be encouraged by the sight of these women willing to risk their lives to help them. To the German soldiers, on the other hand, the presence of these women would be a challenge to their own fanatical brutality.⁵⁹

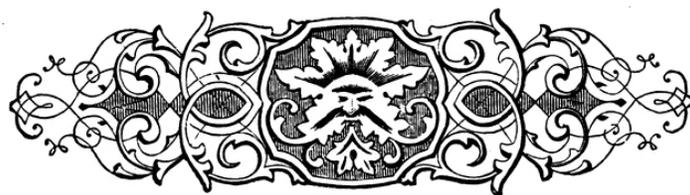
The supernatural is thus the strongest weapon against ideology. If a society eliminates the supernatural, it is in grave danger of becoming ideological, of turning against its members and of becoming self-destructive. The absence of the supernatural slowly corrupts society

and a true *communitas*, because it cannot defend itself any longer against the corrupting influences of ideology with its disregard for truth and justice. Our times are extremely ideological, and not surprisingly, the supernatural has been excluded from many areas of society and even from some parts of the Church. As Weil already said: “The errors of our epoch are a Christianity without the supernatural. Secularization is the reason for this, and first of all humanism.”⁶⁰ People wrongly think that by eliminating religion or by avoiding religious fervor, they are in less danger of becoming fanatics and ideologues. The sad truth is that they are thereby cutting themselves off from the best medicine against ideology and fanaticism. As we have come to see, ideology is an Ersatz religion. If one rejects God or does not let Him play the main part in one’s life, one is in great danger of seeking something to take His place. This does not, however, mean that believers are incapable of becoming ideologues. We continually have to tear down the idols that have taken hold of our hearts. Of course, one can further one’s ideological goals in the name of God and of religion. But that is not the fault of religion or of God, but of the use we make of them. Thus Weil’s analysis of the nature of ideology and of the ideologies of her day is still very actual. The supernatural or Christian point of view which sees through ideology is of great significance, and contrary to what many people think, it is not limiting, for it embraces all that is true. As Weil writes: “There is no such thing as a Christian point of view and other points of view, but only truth or error. Not: what is not Christian is false, but: everything that is true is Christian.”⁶¹ The Christian or supernatural point of view tears from before our eyes the web that our idols have woven. As St. Paul writes again in the second letter to the Corinthians: “whenever a person turns to the Lord the veil is removed,” the veil which “lies over the hearts” of people (3:15,16).

It will be helpful to conclude by demonstrating the link between barbarism and ideology. One tends to

think of barbarism as either a thing of the past, as part of less civilized times, or as something reaching a grand scale only through technology, as Weil writes in her article fragment, “Reflections on Barbarism” (“Reflexions sur la barbarie”). Neither is true, for Weil thinks that barbarism is “a permanent and universal human characteristic.” What defines barbarism? It is to be inhuman towards the weak, to prefer-as Gabellieri puts it-the death of the other to one’s own death.⁶² If this is true, then we have but to take a look at our society to know that ours is particularly barbarous with abortion on demand, the use of the unborn for research, the growing numbers of victims of euthanasia, etc. Ideology, as we have seen, gives us a morality-free zone, in which it seems legitimate to kill. The ideology of the culture of death has made many people blind to the rights of the unborn and, to add insult to injury, the justification for this is couched in the language of compassion.

In her book *The Need for Roots*, as well as in some of her essays for the Free French, Weil was sketching her vision of how post-war France should look in the case of victory. Society should be built on the sacredness of the human person-sacred because of her transcendent source and destiny. The needs of the human soul-which range from the need for order, freedom, obedience, responsibility, equality and hierarchy, to freedom of opinion, truth, and rootedness in a culture-need to be furthered and respected by society. But this material would require the space of another article. Instead, let me finish with a quotation by Weil from her essay, “Human Personality” (“La Personne et le sacre”) regarding the radicalism of our choices. The temptation for human beings to remain neutral is great, but it is not a real option. Let us not fool ourselves, for as Weil writes: “In all the crucial problems of human existence the only choice is between supernatural good on the one hand and evil on the other.”⁶³



NOTES

1 Sections of this article have appeared in my article “Mission of the Non-Baptized” Simone Weil: “Apolo-
gist of the Supernatural,” *Second Spring: An International Journal of Faith and Culture* 3, 2002, 39-49 and in my doctoral
thesis, *Literature and Apologetics: Simone Weil's Christological Interpretations of Ancient Greek Texts* (Bodleian Library, Ox-
ford).

2 Simone Weil, *La Connaissance surnaturelle* (Paris: Gallimard, 1950), 87.

3 Ibid., *Attente de Dieu* (Paris: Fayard, 1966), 36. *Attente de Dieu*, or *Waiting on God*, trans. Emma Crauford
(London: Fount, 1995), is a good introduction for those interested in Weil. It contains her letters to Father Perrin, in
particular her autobiographical letter which describes her religious journey, as well as some of her best essays. Wait-
ing on God, 22.

4 *Attente de Dieu*, 44; *Waiting on God*, 27.

5 *Attente de Dieu*, 82; *Waiting on God*, 5 2.

6 *Attente de Dieu* 42-3; *Waiting on God*, 25.

7 *Attente de Dieu*, 43; *Waiting on God*, 26.

8 *Attente de Dieu*, 48/9; *Waiting on God*, 29.

9 Simone Weil, (*Euvres completes* II, 3, *Ecrits historiques et politiques: vers la guerre* (1937-1940), ed. S. Fraisse, 1989,
51; *Selected Essays*, trans. And ed. Richard Rees (London: Oxford UP, 1962),156.

10 It is interesting to note that Eric Voegelin points out in *Science, Politics and Gnosticism* (Chicago: Henry Reg-
nery Company, 1968, 4-5) that by the time the modern ideologies, which are ultimately forms of gnosticism, became
revolutionary powers in the late nineteenth century, Europe lacked the conceptual tools and rigor to analyze their
nature and origin.

11 Simone Weil, *Ecrits de Londres et dernieres lettres* (Paris: Gallimard, 1957),98; *Selected Essays*, 211.

12 *Ecrits de Londres*, 102; *Selected Essays*, 214.

13 *Ecrits de Londres*, 106/7; *Selected Essays*, 217.

14 *Ecrits historiques et politiques* (Paris: Gallimard, 1960), 223; *Selected Essays*, 174.

15 Ibid.; Emmanuel Gabellieri, “La Barbarie selon Simone Weil, “ *Cahiers “Lumen Gentium,* “ 111, 3. My pa-
per is much indebted to his article.

16 *Science, Politics and Gnosticism*, 27-8.

17 Simone Weil, *La Pesanteur et la grace* (Paris: Plon, 1948), 163, quoted by Gabellieri, 5. [MM] All the quota-
tions that have been translated by me are marked thus: [MM].

18 Simone Weil, *Euvres completes* II, 1, *Ecrits historiques et politiques: l'engagement syndical* (1927 juillet 1934), ed. G.
Leroy, 1988,147-8.

19 *Euvres completes* II, 3, 182; *Selected Essays*, 103.

20 Similarly “Hitler, in conversation, perfectly formulated the rule for this when he said that one must never
treat a man as an enemy until the precise moment when one is in a position to annihilate him” (*Selected Essays*, 118;
(*Euvres completes* II, 3, 197).

21 *Euvres completes* II, 3, 182; *Selected Essays*, 103 ; my italics.

22 *Ecrits de Londres*, 106; *Selected Essays*, 217.

23 This is something one should keep in mind, when faced by great powers such as IPPF and UNFPA,
when they pursue their demeaning campaigns of sterilization and of abortion, be they forced or not. Prolifers easily
feel overwhelmed by the money, manpower, organization and past victories of these organizations. In reality, when
overhearing some of their conversations, one realizes that they are merely human and are actually afraid of their op-
ponents.

24 It is noteworthy that in nineteenth-century France, the Romans were looked upon in a negative way
because of their love of war and because of their conquest of Greece. In the first half of the twentieth century,
this negative view still existed, though it was mixed with an admiration for their cultural achievements. The human-
istic education in Weil's time focused on the first and second centuries after Christ, describing the corruption of the
Roman emperors. Weil, however, concentrates on the colonial period, namely the third and fourth centuries before
Christ (Simone Fraisse, “Simone Weil contre les Romains,” *Cahiers Simone Weil* 3/1,1980, 5-18,6 ff).

25 (*Euvres completes* II, 3, 181; *Selected Essays*, 102.

26 *Euvres completes* II, 3, 183 ; *Selected Essays*, 103. Applied to our most recent history, this might explain why the US has been viewed negatively by Europe for the last 40 years, while Communist Russia did not receive the same negative press.

27 *Euvres completes* II, 3, 186; *Selected Essays*, 107.

28 *Euvres completes* II, 3, 194; *Selected Essays*, 115.

29 This is the history of Carthage according to Simone Weil, which she bases on the accounts of Appian's *Roman History* and Polybius' *Histories*. Carthage had been conquered by the first Scipio Africanus, and "had to accept an alliance with Rome and promise never to make war without her ally's permission." But for the next 50 years the Numidians invaded and pillaged their territory. Though the Carthaginians begged the Roman senate for its protection as its treaty guaranteed them, the senate refused. Finally, Carthage fought against the Numidians, but was defeated. Ambassadors were sent to Rome to beg for peace, and it was granted at the condition that three hundred children from the nobility would be given as hostages to Rome. This was done, yet the Romans sent their fleet and ordered that the Carthaginians abandon all arms to which they complied. Then they were ordered to stand back while the city was destroyed. Though they begged for mercy, they were not even allowed to plead once more with the Senate. They were told that the city was to be demolished in their own interest which Weil calls a "sort of refinement in outrage" unknown to the Greeks. Carthage was still defended by its inhabitants for another three years before it was destroyed by the second Africanus (*Euvres completes* II, 3,183 ff; *Selected Essays*, 104 ff).

30 *Euvres completes* II, 3, 191; *Selected Essays*, 112.

31 Simone Weil, *Intimations of Christianity among the Ancient Greeks* (London: Routledge, 1998), 85; *La Source grecque* (Paris: Gallimard, 1953), 89 ff.

32 *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism*, 107 ff.

33 Simone Weil, *Euvres completes* VI, 2, *Cahiers* (septembre 1941 - février 1942), ed. Alyette Degraçes et al., 1997, 15 l.

34 Simone Weil. *Euvres*, ed. E de Lussy (Paris: Gallimard, 1999), 277; *Oppression and Liberty*, trans. A. Wills & J. Petrie (reprinted by London: Routledge, 2002), 38-9.

35 Simone Weil: *Euvres*, 281 - 2; *Oppression and Liberty*, 43.

36 Simone Weil. *Euvres*, 359 - 60; *Oppression and Liberty*, 141- 2.

37 Ibid.

38 Simone Weil, *Oppression et liberte* (Paris: Gallimard, 1955), 224; *Oppression and Liberty*, 161.

39 *Oppression et liberte*, 229; *Oppression and Liberty*, 165.

40 *Selected Essays*, 23 - 24, 33; *Ecrits de Londres*, 30,42; *L'Enracinement* (Paris: Gallimard, 1949),161; *The Need for Roots: Prelude to a Declaration of Duties towards Mankind*, trans. Arthur Wills (London: Routledge, 2002),185-6.

41 *Oppression et Liberte*, 231; *Oppression and Liberty*, 166.

42 *The Need for Roots*, 90 - 1; *L'Enracinement*, 82 - 3 [MM].

43 *La Connaissance surnaturelle*, 88 [MM].

44 *Intimations of Christianity*, 196; *Intuitions pre-chretiennes* (Paris: Fayard, 1985),165.

45 For a more extensive analysis, see my articles "Mission of the Non-Baptized: Simone Weil: Apologist of the Supernatural," *Second Spring: An International Journal of Faith and Culture* 3, 2002, 39-49, and "Why Antigone was right after all: Simone Weil's Mystical Hermeneutics," *Shifting Borders: Theory and Identity in French Literature*, ed. E. Buterworth & K. Robson (Oxford: Lang, 2001),123-138.

46 *Ecrits de Londres*, 26; *Selected Essays*, 20. Weil writes about this moral law with Kantian overtones in her "Draft for a Study of Human Obligations" ("Etude pour une declaration des obligations envers l'etre humain"): "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 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 of this world" (*Selected Essays*, 219; *Ecrits de Londres*, 74).

47 C.M. Bowra, *Sophoclean Tragedy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1944), 72 - 3:

Creon: Must I to rule this land for another and not for myself? Haemon: Yes, there is no city that belongs to a single man. Creon: Is not the city thought to belong to its ruler? Haemon: You would be a fine ruler over a deserted city! (Sophocles, *Antigone*, ed. and trans. Hugh Lloyd-Jones, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1994).

48 Martha Nussbaum points this out in her book *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy*, rev. edn, (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001), 55.

49 But you shall not hide him in the grave,
even if Zeus' eagles should snatch the body
and bear the carrion up to their master's throne! (11.1039-41)

50 *L'Enracinement*, 134; *The Need for Roots*, 152.

51 "Implicit Forms of loving God" ("Formes de l'amour implicite de Dieu"), *Attente de Dieu*, 212; *Waiting on God*, 140 [MM].

52 *Attente de Dieu*, 136; *Waiting on God*, 92.

53 *Attente de Dieu*, 147; *Waiting on God*, 99.

46. 54 See Joseph-Marie Perrin and Gustav Thibon, *Simone Weil telle que nous l'avons connue* (Paris: Fayard 1967),

55 *Euvres completes* VI, 2, 299.

56 *Ecrits de Londres*, 56 ; *Simone Weil: Writings*, ed. and trans. Eric O. Springsted (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1998), 129.

57 *Ecrits de Londres*, 25; *Selected Essays*, 20 [MM].

58 *Ecrits de Londres*, 107 - 8; *Selected Essays*, 218.

59 *Ecrits de Londres*, 191 ff.

60 *Euvres completes* VI, 3, *Cahiers* (fevrier 1942 juin 1942), ed. Alyette Degraes et al., 2002, 201.

61 *La Connaissance surnaturelle*, 24.

62 *Selected Essays*, 143; *Euvres completes* II, 3, 223 ; *La Barbarie selon Simone Weil*, 17.

63 *Ecrits de Londres*, 29; *Selected Essays*, 23.