

CWR^m magazine

October 2024
Volume 15, Number 5

CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION



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Simone Weil

An Astonishing Life by Brad Jersak

Simone Weil (1909-1943) was an astonishing woman who represents the “cross-shaped life” par excellence. Her life story makes her a patron saint of the unwelcomed, the afflicted and the “oddballs.” In the preface to her *Notebooks*, we see hints of her vocation and importance:

“French philosopher, activist and religious searcher... earned a reputation as one of the most original thinkers of her era. T.S. Eliot described her as ‘a woman of genius, akin to that of the saints.’ Albert Camus called her ‘the only great spirit of our time.’”

For me personally, discovering Weil’s astonishing vision of Christ in the depths of my own spiritual unraveling came as a lifeline for which I owe both Jesus and Weil a debt of gratitude. In this article, I’ll sketch a few highlights of her remarkable journey, hoping that she might inspire others as she has me.

EARLY WEIL: JEWISH AGNOSTIC, CHRISTLIKE COMPASSION

Simone Weil was born in France to a non-practicing Jewish family. She loved her parents (her father was a doctor, her mother a doter!) and grew up with her elder brother André, who would become a mathematical genius. Weil had no early religious experience aside from visits with a devout Jewish grandmother, but she was, from a very early age, deeply concerned with justice, compassion and solidarity with *the afflicted* (French: *malheureux*)—a term she used to describe *non-redemptive suffering* (such as the tragic death of a child).

Weil’s sense of empathy regularly led her to extremes. Even as a five-year-old, she insisted on sending her candy rations to frontline soldiers in the Great War and joining the protest marches of striking trade unionists. As a physically awkward child genius (possibly on the autistic spectrum),



“Attention is the rarest and purest form of generosity.”
—Simone Weil

she studied philosophy (receiving her doctorate when she was only 22) and dove into political activism.

For example, she briefly joined the anti-fascist resistance in the Spanish civil war (as a pacifist!) before accidentally stepping in a pot of boiling oil. That injury saved her life because her entire unit was killed weeks later. She also tutored unschooled factory laborers and joined them on the assembly

line of a Renault plant for a year—a dehumanizing experience that also nearly killed her.

During those years, Weil was tormented with excruciating migraines that persisted for the rest of her life. In all these strange experiences, her agenda was simple: to identify with the afflicted in their affliction.

WEIL'S AWAKENING FAITH

While Simone Weil arguably laid down her life in Christlike life, she was a compassionate agnostic until we hear of her first experiences with Christ as a 26-year-old. During a trip to a poor coastal community in Portugal, she heard a procession of wives singing mournful goodbyes (in a genre called “fado”) as their husbands sailed away for months on fishing trawlers. She knew in that moment that unlike the false gods of might and power, Jesus is the Savior who draws near to the afflicted and the poor, Lord of all, even peasants and slaves.

Two years later (1937), Weil visited the church in Assisi, Italy where St. Francis often prayed (the Santa Maria degli Angeli). She reports that in the holy solitude of that moment, *“for the first time in my life, something stronger than I compelled me to go down on my knees.”*

Such strong language—not the gentle invitation common to most believers. But I compare her encounter to that of the prophet Isaiah, who said, “Woe is me; I am undone” or Paul’s Damascus Road experience, blinded by the light and knocked to his knees in surrender.

Another year passed so that 1938 brought about her most significant *“faith shifts.”* First, Weil read the entire Old Testament for the first time but she was repulsed by the violent portrayals of God.

Then in April, trying to flee her migraines, she stayed at the Abbey of Solesmes, France through their Easter week services. The Gregorian devotional chants to Jesus moved her deeply. As her

LOVE III — George Herbert

Love bade me welcome: yet my soul drew back,
Guilty of dust and sin.

But quick-eyed Love, observing me grow slack
From my first entrance in,

Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning
If I lacked anything.

“A guest,” I answered, “worthy to be here”:
Love said, “You shall be he.”

“I, the unkind, ungrateful? Ah, my dear,
I cannot look on thee.”

Love took my hand, and smiling did reply,
“Who made the eyes but I?”

“Truth, Lord; but I have marred them; let my shame
Go where it doth deserve.”

“And know you not,” says Love, “who bore the blame?”
“My dear, then I will serve.”

“You must sit down,” says Love, “and taste my meat.”
So I did sit and eat.

spiritual thirst deepened, she was inspired to read and pray the poem from the English poet, George Herbert, *“Love 3”* [cited above] as a daily practice.

And the Lord heard! Once again, she felt that overwhelming sense of Christ’s Presence, now indwelling her whole being. She knew she belonged to God and her life was no longer her own.

In the coming years, Weil also began to pray the Lord’s Prayer (*“Our Father, who art in heaven...”*) every day, in the language of New Testament Greek, giving great attention to every word. If her mind wandered, she would start over. Her goal was to develop the discipline of absolute *attention* (attentive receptivity) in all she did, whether prayer, study, friendship, or service for the oppressed.

She concluded, *“Attention, taken to its highest degree, is the same thing as prayer. It presupposes faith and love. Absolutely unmixed attention is prayer.”*

WEIL'S UNIVERSAL FAITH: OUTSIDE THE THRESHOLD

While Simone Weil became aware of the story of Jesus and his love for the afflicted, her encounters with Christ and her friendships with priests did not convince her to join the church. In her time, the Roman Catholic church still stood in

the shadow of the Council of Trent (held from 1545–63), which taught that no one could enter God’s kingdom unless they were baptized into the Catholic Church (a reaction to Protestantism).

Weil pointed out that this was, ironically, very *uncatholic* of them, since “*catholic*” literally means *universal*. She preferred to stand outside the threshold of the church in solidarity with the world that God loves rather than join their exclusive religious club.

This stung her Catholic acquaintances because they knew without a doubt that her faith and her spiritual experiences were authentic—perhaps even “saintly.” For example, her Notebooks describe a three-day encounter with Christ in a garret in Marseilles, France. Weil describes her face-to-face communion with the Lord, reminiscent of Moses’ “tent of meeting” in Exodus 33. Whether her descriptions were meant literally or not, her priest friends believed her, acknowledged she was a genuine Jesus-follower and therefore, obviously one of “them.” But they could never push past her objections to joining their flock.

Her defiance would become important after her death, when the papal nuncio in Paris met her father, read her Notebooks, and became convinced she was completely right. He began preaching her convictions publicly and instead of being defrocked, would ultimately become the Pope John XXIII, who launched Vatican II (a

council held from 1962-65) through which the RC Church began to repent of their imaginary monopoly on the kingdom of God.

In a sense, by refusing to be baptized into the exclusive system of Trent, Weil succeeded in “baptizing” the council in her universal gospel—a revelation we’re only beginning to grasp.

WEIL’S “DE-CREATION,” RESISTANCE & DEATH

Meanwhile, back to Weil’s life in the 1940’s. As Hitler’s stormtroopers occupied France,



our hero scooped up her aging parents and joined the resistance in Vichy, France. She used her writing skills there for the resistance, but she recognized time was running out to help her Jewish parents escape. Together, they boarded a ship to New York City, where she left them with

her brother André and proceeded to England to join Charles de Gaulle in exile.

There, Weil focused on writing up radical plans for overcoming Hitler’s tyranny (e.g., deploying front line nurses to change the moral atmosphere) and reimagining France after the war (e.g., she wrote a *Charter of Freedoms and Responsibilities*). Sadly, De Gaulle did not take her seriously and marginalized her involvement.

At this point, she contracted tuberculosis and was admitted to a sanatorium. Her inability (some call it a refusal) to ingest adequate nourishment led to heart failure and death at just 34 years of age.

Post-mortem, we now recognize that her decades of self-imposed fasting caught up with her—and should have been diagnosed as an eating disorder. But her father (though a doctor) would never admit to that.

Whatever the reasons lurk behind her great struggles with food, she always chose to offer up her shrunken appetite in solidarity with the hungry. But her battle with food was also related to her desire to “*de-create*” her will—that

is, to empty herself and become selfless (the way Christ was in Gethsemane). But there is a shadow side to her *de-creation*: Weil found simply receiving God’s grace terribly difficult—as difficult as she found swallowing meat—and she knew it.

As you reread Herbert’s *Love III*,

you can see this whole arc of her story: the mystery of Weil's eating disorder, her stubbornness around grace, but also her desire to surrender to Jesus. Imagine her praying this poem with full attention and utter sincerity each day over the course of years. Her acute awareness of her need and her willingness to bring it to Christ are astonishing indeed.

WEIL'S THEOLOGY OF THE CROSS

When I ponder Simone Weil's life, it's not her savant-level genius or radical activism that grips me. Rather, it is her real-life experience of the Cross. She reckoned the goodness of God and the affliction of humanity as a real contradiction and an infinite distance. Evil cannot be rationalized or justified without calling good evil or evil good.

BUT, she says, the Cross of Christ spans that distance because right there, we see goodness and affliction intersect in the heart of Perfect Love as he hangs dying, forgiving, and loving.

And, she adds, at the Cross, our own afflictions act like pincers that grab us and arrest us before the Mystery of the crucified God.

As we wait there (our gaze attentive to grace), healing love flows from Christ's wounds into us and through ours into this broken world.

Thus, I would argue, Simone Weil's astonishing vision of the Cross, the source of divine healing, is precisely what our afflicted world needs today. □

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Everyone Is Forgiven

by Greg Albrecht

T*o forgive somebody is to say... "You have done something unspeakable and by all rights I should call it quits between us. Both my pride and my principles demand no less. However, although I make no guarantee that I will be able to forget what you've done, and though we may both carry the scars for life, I refuse to let it stand between us. I still want you for my friend."*

To accept forgiveness means to admit you've done something unspeakable that needs to be forgiven. And thus both parties must swallow the same thing: their pride.

*—"Wishful Thinking"
by Frederick Buechner*



If you are anything like me, you have traveled the road of forgiveness many times, coming and going, in both directions. Ironically, the more I stand in awe of the imponderable beauty of forgiveness, the less I realize I actually know! You may say, "Well, if you don't know that much about forgiveness, what kind of a pastor are you anyway?" Funny you should ask such a question. It allows me to tell the story of the man who thought he was calling the liquor store. He made a mistake and punched in the phone number of his pastor instead.

The pastor picked up