

Simone Weil and 'the supernatural use of suffering'¹

STEPHEN PLANT

THE title of this paper comes from a comment in one of Simone Weil's notebooks:²

The extreme greatness of Christianity lies in the fact that it does not seek a supernatural remedy for suffering but a supernatural use for it. (GG 73)

Like many of her aphorisms, this is a bold and thought provoking statement. But I am uneasy with it. What does it mean to believe that suffering is useful? My computer is useful, my car is useful, but suffering is not, cannot and must not be useful. What Weil means by the supernatural use of suffering and the reasons why what she means makes me uneasy, are the subjects of this paper.

Giotto and Chagall

In order to crystallise some of the ideas which follow it is helpful to focus on two paintings. Both are concerned with suffering and in both the figure of the crucified Christ is central. These paintings provide symbols which, I suggest, present alternative versions of the relationship between human and divine suffering.

The first is Giotto's fresco *Lamentation*, painted between 1304 and 1306. It is a painting Simone Weil knew well, and loved. She visited Italy in 1937 and was enchanted. Giotto was enrolled in her short list of life's pure joys (SL 93), seeing in his painting an expression of holiness (N I 422). When in Padua she saw Giotto's frescoes in the Scrovengi Chapel, she confided to her journal that she became completely drunk with pleasure.³

In the *Lamentation* Giotto intends the focus to be the juxtaposed heads of Mary and Jesus, to which the rocky ridge dissecting the painting leads the eye. The weight of Jesus' lifeless body is taken on his mother's lap, while his head, hands and feet are tenderly supported by four women. Behind and around this group stand three apostles and two more women, and beyond them, still more women bowed in grief. Above these groups hover ten angelic figures who play a dramatic role. In a variety of poses expressive of grief, they cover their heads, clasp their hands and hold their faces. Their gestures accompany the mourners below whose faces are also contorted with grief. Saint John, beardless at the centre of the scene, spreads his hands unnaturally as though in surrender. All the despair of the painting is directed towards the suffering of the dead Christ. Giotto narrates not merely the removal of Jesus' body from the cross; he explores the effects of his death on those who loved him, portraying their affliction as an act of pure love. The *Lamentation* is a painting in which the mourners are captured, in Weil's words, as they 'love the affliction of God'.

Scenes from the life of Christ. Padua, Arena Chapel
Lamentation – Giotto (1265-1337)



'We are commanded to love . . . the affliction of God' – Simone Weil

From the Library of Great Masters, Giotto © 1981 Scala Istituto Fotografico Editoriale, Firenze

In contrast, Marc Chagall's *White Crucifixion* is a 'collage' of many stories of human suffering. Expropriating instances of suffering from his own Jewish context, Chagall conveys an impression of universal human suffering. Above this picture hover lamenting patriarchs and matriarchs. On the left are scenes of revolution. Homes are destroyed and a band of refugees sets off in a flimsy boat. On the right, a man in Nazi uniform ransacks a synagogue, while Ahasverus, the wandering Jew, steps over a burning scroll of the Torah. Firmly planted in the middle of these cameos of despair is the Cross of Christ. In the context of the whole painting he is one among many instances of human suffering. Yet, Jesus is uniquely illuminated by a shaft of light from above. This shaft of light also appears to offer a pathway beyond the awfulness of so much trauma. The figure of Christ participates fully in the general suffering of humanity and by this means brings hope.

In the opening paragraphs of *The Crucified God* Jürgen Moltmann refers to another of Chagall's apocalyptic crucifixion scenes, the *Crucifixion in Yellow*. It is a painting which, he notes, has accompanied him for a long time and which symbolises 'the cross on the horizon of the world' (Moltmann p. 6). Christ in Chagall's painting represents what, later in *The Crucified God*, Moltmann calls 'the protesting God involved in human sorrow and suffering' (GG 226). This presents an alternative to Weil's understanding of the usefulness of the cross and of suffering.

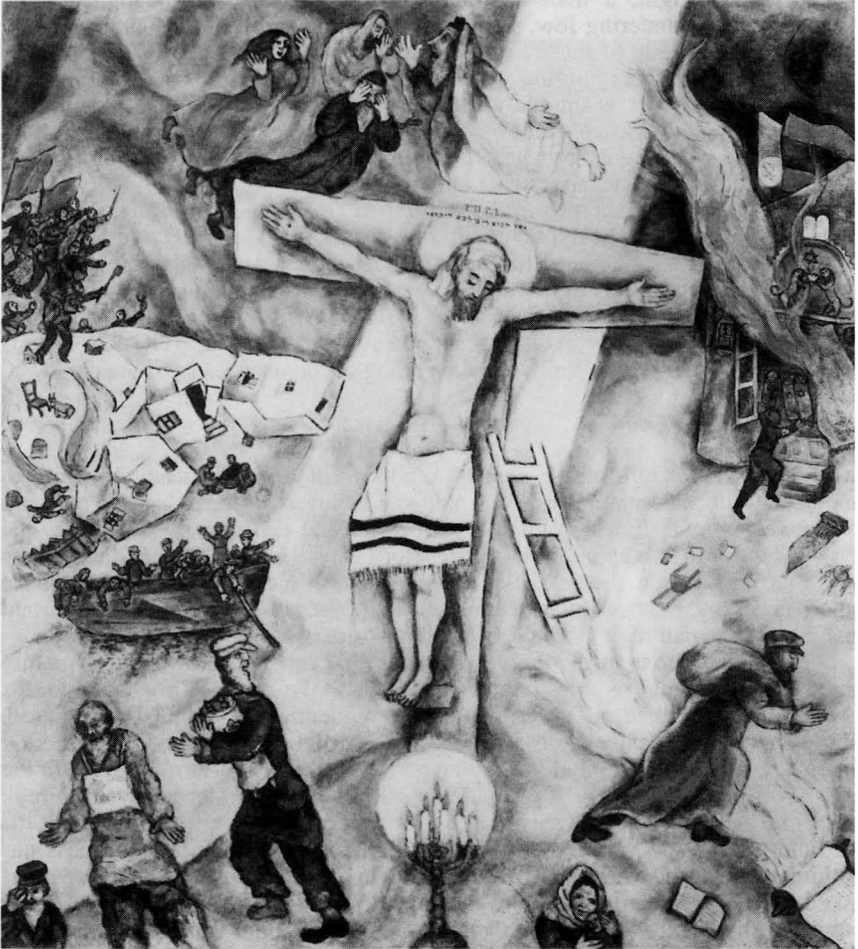
Necessity

Suffering is the centre of the web of Weil's most original ideas. In order to understand the supernatural use to which she believed suffering can be put, two key concepts must first be outlined: necessity and decreation. Weil uses the term necessity in two apparently contradictory ways. On the one hand, necessity is the term by which she describes the pitiless harshness of the world. On the other, necessity is beautiful and must be loved because it offers an important insight into the nature of God's love for the world.

Traditional Christian theology holds that God has foreknowledge of nature and history, ruling as sovereign over both. To most Christians, God's sovereignty is 'cashed in' in terms of His providential provision for the world. Things may occasionally seem to go badly for particular individuals at particular times but, it is believed, God has a plan and everything will turn out right in the end. Weil did not believe in providence; she believed in necessity. She took Jesus at face value when he said that the sun shines and the rain falls on both the just and the unjust (Matthew 5:45). Our righteousness or unrighteousness has nothing at all to do with what befalls us. This makes sense: when Jesus was asked if the eighteen men on whom the tower of Siloam fell were being punished by God's providential intervention for their unrighteousness he answered unswervingly that they were not (Luke 13:4).

Instead of providence Weil thought she observed a world which changes daily, whose one essential and unchanging characteristic is its continual, relentless presence. In its relentlessness the world can appear merciless. It appears so because at creation God had literally abandoned the world to its existence.

The White Crucifixion, 1938
Marc Chagall, (1887-1985)



‘The cross on the horizon of the world’ – Moltmann

The creation is an abandonment. In creating what is other than Himself, God necessarily abandoned it. (FLN 103)

Before creation when God was everything, there was no time or space for creation to be. The Creation, according to Weil, consisted in God withdrawing sufficiently from space and time for the cosmos to take up squatters' rights. When God created the world, she insisted, he left it to obey its own blind rules, the rules of necessity.

The extent of God's abandonment of creation is almost total:

God abandons our entire being – flesh, blood, sensibility, intelligence, love – to the pitiless necessity of matter and the cruelty of the devil, except for the eternal and supernatural part of the soul. (FLN 103)

The supernatural part of the soul, like the divine spark in Platonic anthropology, is the only unabandoned part of each of us. 'God is absent from the world', Weil continued, 'except in the existence in this world of those in whom His love is alive.' (FLN 103)

However, and this is necessity's flip side, if one learns to accept that the world is subject to the rules of necessity and not to some sentimental Victorian version of providence, certain things about God and his relation to us begin to make sense.⁴ If what happens to us, good or bad, is a result of necessity, then God cannot be accused of having favourites. In this way, Weil thought, necessity becomes 'an image by which the mind can conceive of the indifference, the impartiality of God.' (GG 94)

For two reasons, she continues, we must learn to love necessity, not in spite of but because of its indifferent harshness. First, the existence of necessity testifies to the love God showed when he abandoned his complete sovereignty and created a space in which the universe of necessity could exist. Thus, Weil insists that: 'The absence of God is the most marvellous testimony of perfect love, and that is why pure necessity, necessity which is manifestly different from good, is beautiful.' (GG 96)

A second reason for us to love necessity is that we can love God through loving the natural world he has made. God made the world as it is and even when it hurts us we should love it because it is God's gift:

One must tenderly love the harshness of that necessity which is like a coin with two faces, the one turned towards us being domination and the one turned towards God, obedience. We must embrace it closely even if it offers its roughest surface and the roughness cuts into us. Any lover is glad to clasp tightly some object belonging to an absent loved one, even to the point where it cuts into the flesh. (SNLG 196)

The first step towards obeying necessity is to learn to love it (GG 38).

Decreation

A second concept essential to understanding Weil's use of suffering is decreation. Weil believed that, excepting those that had become enslaved to imperialist purposes, all religions shared an inner core of ideas. Consequently she saw no difficulty in importing into a Christian context the Buddhist idea of

non-attachment. Desires, like appetite for food, or success, can only ever be met temporarily. In the end, she thought, we can only possess those things which we give up desiring, those things we renounce. This means becoming detached from our desires. By detachment Weil meant:

to empty desire, finality of all content, to desire in the void, to desire without any wishes. To detach our desire from all good things and to wait. Experience proves that this waiting is satisfied. It is then that we touch the absolute good. (GG 13)

Another way in which Weil described this detached state of being was as '*Attente de Dieu*', variously translated as waiting on God, or attention to God. This is the same thing as prayer. Where we open ourselves up to God, he is able to return to a space now open to him which he had abandoned at creation. Whether he does come is his choice, his gift. Weil denies that detachment, waiting on God, is a spiritual technique through which we can achieve the experience of God.

We cannot take a single step towards the heavens. God crosses the universe and comes to us . . . We have the power to consent to receive him or refuse. (WG 91)

Weil took the principle of detachment from personal desire further in the concept of *decreation*. Suffering violently destroys the soul. Destruction means making a thing cease to exist. But *decreation* means transforming a thing which belongs to the natural world into something that belongs to God. It is an idea she believed had roots in Jesus' teaching as well as in Buddhism. Jesus taught in John's Gospel 'Except the seed die' [John 12:24]. Weil explained that:

it has to die in order to liberate the energy it bears within it so that with this energy new forms may be developed. So we have to die in order to liberate a *tied up* energy, in order to possess an energy which is free and capable of understanding the true relationship of things. (GG 30)

The self which has been created, must be *decreated*. This is the meaning of the petition in the Lord's prayer which says 'Thy will be done'. Insofar as Weil shows any interest in sin, it is identifying sin with the 'I' in a person which must be *decreated* (GG 27).

Returning momentarily to Giotto's *Lamentation*, what she observed in his art was precisely the *decreation* of men, women and angels as they become transparent in the light of God's love. The means to such *decreation*, for Weil, was affliction.

Affliction

Up to this point I have preferred the term suffering to affliction because Weil used it in the saying from which this paper takes its title. To Weil, however, suffering and affliction were not synonymous. She favoured the term 'malheur', a condition compounded of both pain and distress. She accepted that affliction was inseparable from suffering, but that it was distinct. It is quite possible, she wrote, to experience suffering without affliction, but never affliction without suffering. She gave the example of toothache. At the time when one's teeth are throbbing in one's gums one can think of nothing else. But once it has been

cured it is easily forgotten; it leaves no mark on the soul. Pain on its own causes neither degradation nor hopelessness. Affliction, however, captures a person's whole existence. This was an insight not forged in the classroom, but on the anvil of experience. All through her adult life Weil suffered debilitating migraine headaches. In 1935 she spent a sabbatical year as a factory labourer in punishing circumstances. Weil had learned that affliction is:

an uprooting of life, a more or less attenuated equivalent of death, made irresistibly present to the soul by the attack or immediate apprehension of physical pain. If there is complete absence of physical pain there is no affliction for the soul, because our thoughts can turn to no matter what object . . . Here below physical pain, and that alone, has the power to chain down our thoughts. (WG 77)⁵

The point is that affliction knows no half measures. To be afflicted the extent of suffering must be total: physical, psychological and social. Clearly she did not think that affliction was a particularly common human experience. Most martyrs, she believed, did not experience real affliction, because as they died they nurtured a hope of reward for their sacrifice. The cross of Christ was, in contrast, not a martyr's death at all. Jesus died alone as a criminal, abandoned even by God.

Presented in these stark terms, while one might willingly suffer for a cause and be praised for it, the same cannot be said of affliction. Weil spelled this out:

It is wrong to desire affliction; it is against nature, and it is a perversion; and moreover it is the essence of affliction that it is suffered unwillingly. (G to G 87-8)

But though affliction should not be sought out, Weil went to the extraordinary length of envying those who experienced it. To Joë Bousquet, a friend paralysed by an injury sustained during the Great War, Weil wrote that she believed his paralysis to be 'fortunate'. This is because, and here we arrive at this paper's punch line, affliction has several uniquely significant uses.

The uses of affliction

In Weil's thought, there are at least five uses to which affliction can properly be put. First, pure affliction is one of two ways in which individuals may grasp the true nature of necessity in the world (the other is pure joy). Imagine meeting an old friend you have not seen for some time. When she meets you she hugs you so tightly that it hurts. But in spite of the pain, one is glad to be hugged so tightly for the pain confirms the presence of the old friend. Similarly, when the soul is pierced by affliction, Weil believed it is to be welcomed as a genuine encounter with creation.

Once this insight has been accepted, one can learn to live with the unanswerability of the question: 'Why?' Weil understood that the question was natural in the presence of affliction, indeed, she observed, Jesus himself had asked it. But, she argued:

There is a question which is absolutely meaningless and therefore, of course, unanswerable, and which we normally never ask ourselves, but in affliction the soul is constrained to

speaking it incessantly like a sustained monotonous groan. This question is: Why? Why are things as they are? . . . If one explained to him the causes which have produced his present situation, and this is in any case seldom possible because of the complex interaction of circumstances, it will not seem to him to be an answer. For his question 'Why?' does not mean 'by what cause?' but 'For what purpose?' (G to G 100)

One of the few books from the Jewish Scriptures which she greatly admired was the book of Job. When Job asked God 'Why?', God did not answer. Affliction can teach us the difficult lesson of living with necessity, and of loving it. In this way, Weil simply side-steps the thorny problems of theodicy. God does not send sufferings to test us. He simply lets 'necessity' distribute them in accordance with its own proper mechanisms.

A second use to which the afflicted may put their experience is to enable them to share compassionately in the suffering of others. Weil explained in her letter to her paraplegic friend Bousquet that he was privileged because he had the sufferings of war permanently embedded in his body. Affliction has to be driven into the body and soul until it lodges there. When a mother sits by the bedside of her sick child she projects herself into the affliction her child is experiencing. Weil believed that to any who had experienced and grasped suffering, such a capacity for compassion is extended beyond the immediate circle of those one loves, to encompass everyone. Such compassion has the quality of allowing an abandoned part of creation to come into contact with God:

Through compassion we can put the created, temporal part of a creature in communication with God. (FLN 103)

A third use for affliction is that it enables those who experience it to enter into the affliction of God in Christ. 'Affliction', wrote Weil, 'is truly the centre of Christianity . . . What we are commanded to love first of all is affliction: the affliction of man, the affliction of God.' Weil believed that the 'real' God could only be loved when one has grasped the lessons of affliction. Through affliction one understands necessity, and through necessity one understands that the reason there is suffering in the world is not that God has either failed to be all good or almighty, but that he loved the world so much that he abandoned it to be other than him and beyond his control.

Fourthly, the Christian understanding of affliction as outlined by Weil provides a point of contact with true religion wherever else it is to be found. The best example of this is Weil's use of Aeschylus' rendering of the story of Prometheus. In the legend of Prometheus she perceived intimations of the Christian gospel. Because he loved humanity Prometheus stole fire from heaven. For his crime Zeus had him chained to a rock where an eagle visited him daily to feast on his liver. Just as Christ had been crucified for love of humanity, so Prometheus was crucified (and Weil uses exactly this word) on a rock and for the same reason. There are enough hints in Aeschylus's play, she thought, to alert us to something odd in the relationship between Prometheus and Zeus. Zeus, it seems, allowed Prometheus to give fire to humanity. On the rock Prometheus foretells that he will in time be reconciled to his father on Olympus. In this Weil perceived a foreshadowing of the relationship of the Father and his abandoned Son.

Certainly Weil acknowledged that there were differences between the historical events of Jesus' death and the legends of the Greeks. She also knew that Aeschylus died 450 years before Christ lived. Her point was that the story of Prometheus was 'like the refraction into eternity of the Passion of Christ' (IC 70). Such 'refractions' were also discernible in living religions. Where the teaching of a religion recognised the true nature of affliction, she concluded, there was a point of contact with the story of the Cross.

The fifth use to which affliction is put differs in an important respect from the previous uses of affliction. While the previous four points list uses to which the afflicted may put the experience of affliction, the fifth concerns the use to which affliction is put by God. Weil was convinced that in an important respect affliction is necessary for God:

Suffering: superiority of man over God. The Incarnation was necessary so that this superiority should not be scandalous. (GG 72)

Without the experience of affliction God would be merely a *Deus incurvatus in se*, a kind of metaphysical Narcissus.

Lurking behind Weil's conception of the necessity of God's affliction lies a raw soteriology. Weil, who had never been trained in theology, had little interest in positioning herself within one or other theory of the atonement. Whatever uses the cross of Christ has in her thought, finding a solution to the problem of sin was not one of them. But although she did not discuss atonement theory as such, Weil hints at the effect which the cross of Christ has for those who attend properly to it. In doing so, unconsciously she takes the side of Abelard against Anselm in one of the classic controversies of Christian theology. For Weil the affliction of Christ on the cross did not effect any objective change in God. For her there were no debts to be paid, either to God or to the devil; Christ's suffering did not enact any forensic transaction. However, as a supreme act of love the cross bridged the gap between God and all that has been separated from God. Weil pictured the universe taking up the infinite distance between the Father and his abandoned Son. At one end of the spectrum of reality was God the Father. At the other end are we ourselves: 'We are what is furthest from God, situated at the extreme limit from which it is not absolutely impossible to come back to him' (GG 81). This gap was the gap between the good of God, and the evil of humanity. The only means by which the Father could bridge this gap was the passionate love of the cross. The effects of God's use of the affliction of the cross is, then, existential; it offers authentic human existence. The love God showed on the cross has a powerful subjective effect on any part of creation that is open to it.

Affliction, masochism, resurrection and the doctrine of God

I began with a sense of unease with the idea that suffering or affliction are useful. This uneasiness has three components. The first concerns a charge that has been levelled by many at Weil: that when she bids us love affliction, she bids us to become masochists. It might be imaginable that we should love affliction on account of the uses to which it may be put. However, Weil rules out loving affliction for gain. Affliction is to be loved for its own sake:

I should not love my suffering because it is useful. I should love it because it is. (GG 72)

The reason for this is that:

God suffered. Therefore suffering is a divine thing. In itself. Not because of compensations, consolations, recompenses. But the very suffering which inspires horror, which we endure against our will, which we seek to escape, which we beg to be spared. Affliction. (FLN 82)

Unfortunately, Weil herself does not appear to have put much energy into seeking to escape suffering. Though she wrote that affliction must not be sought out, Weil herself apparently went to extraordinary lengths to seek it herself. Using biographical details either to support or to challenge the honesty or value of a person's thought is a tricky business. Yet, Weil's capacity to make life difficult for herself inevitably raises doubts. As a student she cultivated an image of studied disdain for her appearance. She chose to work herself into ill-health as a factory labourer. She put to one side her pacifist convictions and joined the anarchist militia in the Spanish Civil war. The coroner at the inquest into her death recorded a verdict of suicide because she had deliberately refused the nourishment her body needed to recover from a bout of tuberculosis. The anorexia which killed her might almost be a physical manifestation of her desire to decreate herself. Is her theology not as anorexic as was her body?

What Weil's uses of affliction form together is a mystical, highly personal approach to life. They belong within the traditions of the *via negativa*. Weil believed that her kind of mysticism was not an aberrant or esoteric form of Christianity, but its essential form, accessible to everyone. Weil's first sustained original essays were on the themes of oppression and liberty. Her last and longest essay on the *Need for Roots* was drafted for the Free French as a philosophical basis for a post-war French Constitution. Weil can hardly be accused of ignoring the social or political dimension of human life. But what effect does her theory of affliction actually have? She saw this world as both a barrier to real life and the door through which we must pass to God. Weil on affliction directs attention away from removing the causes of affliction and towards using it to reach out to God.

This touches the crucial role played in Weil's thought by the philosophy of Plato. His influence on her cannot be overestimated. She is one of the few neo-Platonists of the twentieth century. Weil's understanding of necessity, decreation and affliction is based on a Platonic anthropology and a Platonic cosmology. Human beings are comprised of a body, which is of the world, and a soul, which is a shard of divinity embedded in the world. There are two kinds of reality: natural and supernatural. The supernatural reality, Weil believed, is the one which really *matters*. Weil's extreme dualism, however, places a terrible strain on the incarnation and on Christology. Not only would it seem to commit her to the idea that each of us has two natures, a natural and a supernatural; it would seem to commit her also to a two-natures Christology. This distinction between supernatural and natural suffering rests on a Platonic conception of reality I do not share.

Weil's dualism leads also to the worrisome imbalance in her treatment of affliction and of joy. On several occasions she noted that both pure affliction and pure joy provide bridges to God. However, on the uses of joy she wrote almost nothing. Perhaps, and perhaps rightly, she took it for granted that people find it easier to see pure joy as a way to God, and that her task was to redress the

balance in the direction of affliction. But the imbalance nevertheless raises too many questions.

A second component of my unease is Weil's extraordinary attitude towards resurrection. On more than one occasion her notebooks record that 'The cross by itself suffices me' (G to G 129). For Weil, the miraculous aspect of the cross was its perfect beauty. It was, for her, the cross and not the resurrection which 'proved' the divinity of Christ. 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?' she cites, adding the commentary: 'There we have the real proof that Christianity is something divine.' (GG 79) In a letter to a priest explaining in great detail why she did not wish to be baptised, she even said that if Hitler died and rose to life fifty times she would not believe him to be divine. Partly this is related to her greater readiness to perceive God in suffering than in joy. Yet her failure properly to understand the interrelationship between Christ's death and his resurrection is a nearly fatal flaw in her understanding of affliction. Weil's comment about Hitler suggests that she was unable to distinguish between resuscitation and resurrection.

At several points in this essay I have been conscious of the presence of Jürgen Moltmann hiding between the lines. Now is the moment for him to step forward. Since its publication in 1973 Moltmann's *The Crucified God* has been closely scrutinised.⁶ Today even Moltmann seems dismissive of its significance, suggesting that it be regarded as part of a prolegomenon to his theology proper. At several points there are striking connections between Weil and Moltmann on the subjects of suffering and the suffering God. Both insist that extreme suffering entails social, as well as physical and mental anguish; the suffering that interests them is total. Both search out ways to speak of the suffering of God. However, Moltmann insists that just as the risen Christ can only be understood in the context of the cross, so the crucified Christ can only be comprehended in the context of his resurrection, and therefore of freedom and hope. All theology, Moltmann has famously argued, is eschatological; even and especially, a *theologia crucis*. The connections between suffering and hope, cross and resurrection cannot be blurred or erased. The cross, as in Chagall's *White Crucifixion*, is thrown into relief by the light of hope. The insights of the traditional Christian theologies of the cross which Moltmann explores so compellingly in *The Crucified God* prove not to be shared by Weil. Her inability to understand affliction in the context of resurrection and hope is a serious flaw.

Just as worrisome as the questions Weil's concept of affliction raises about resurrection are the questions she fails to raise about the doctrine of God. Weil disdained Aristotle in favour of Plato. One result of this was that she scorned metaphysical speculation. At the heart of her understanding of God she acknowledged a contradiction. On the one hand, nothing her limited mind could conceive about God could be real; on the other hand, her love for God is so real that the object of that love can hardly be illusory. Weil took this as a licence to abstain from speculation about the nature of God. However, her clear insistence that God is afflicted poses all the questions with which Moltmann has tried to wrestle. What does it mean for the doctrine of God for God in affliction to have experienced finitude? What is the meaning for God's transcendence of his immanence, or for his immanence of his transcendence? Does God's condescension into time affect his blessedness? Weil provides a plausible answer to questions about the religious usefulness of the idea of God's

passibility, but ignores these other important questions. Similarly, she ignores the question of divine immutability as a piece of Aristotelian mumbo-jumbo. It may seem churlish to criticise Weil on the basis of what she did not say rather than what she did. She did not intend that her theory of affliction should be dissected by theologians, but offered it to anyone able to look at and love the paintings of Giotto or for that matter Chagall. Nevertheless, her failure to address such questions restricts the *theological* value of her use of affliction.⁷

Abbreviations

The works of Simone Weil:

- FLN *First and Last Notebooks*, OUP, London, 1970
GG *Gravity and Grace*, Routledge, London and New York, 1992
G to G *Gateway to God*, Collins, Glasgow, 1974
IC *Intimations of Christianity among the Ancient Greeks*, Ark Paperbacks, 1987
N *Notebooks Volumes I and II*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1956
SL *Seventy Letters*, ed. Richard Rees, OUP, 1965
SNLG *On science, necessity and the Love of God*, OUP, 1968
WG *Waiting on God*, Fount paperbacks, Glasgow, 1983

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Chagall, Benedikt Taschen Verlag, Bohn, 1993 p.63

Giotto: The Library of Great Masters, Luciano Bellosi, Scala Riverside, Firenze, 1981 p. 50, illustration no.91

Notes

- 1 One draft of this paper was presented to the Exeter University Research Seminar and another to the Systematic Theology Seminar at Cambridge University. I am grateful to all who made comments on those occasions, in particular to Professor Nicholas Lash and Drs David Horrell and Janet Martin Soskice.
- 2 For an introduction to Weil's life and work see *Simone Weil*, Stephen Plant, Fount, 1996.
- 3 *Utopian Pessimist*, David McLellan, Macmillan, 1989, p. 138.
- 4 Weil's contrast between providence and necessity establishes, in my view, an artificially sharp 'either or'. Schleiermacher suggests that the term 'providence' is borrowed from 'heathen authors', and that a proper appropriation of the word 'predestination', a truly biblical term, solves the matter of the relation between God's fore-ordination and the rules he has established for the coexistence of things in creation. (*The Christian Faith*, T & T Clark, 1968, pp. 725-6).
- 5 Weil was prepared to add a codicil to this otherwise dogmatic definition to allow that there are some kinds of affliction in which there is no actual physical pain; grief at the loss of a loved one, or the fear of torture are examples.
- 6 Eg *Diskussion: Jürgen Moltmann – Der Gekreuzigte Gott*, edited by Michael Welker, Chr. Kaiser Vlg, 1979.
- 7 An important hermeneutical question is raised by criticising Weil according to the 'canons' of 'orthodox' theology. Though she may or may not have been baptised,

she was certainly never trained as a theologian, or called obediently to represent the doctrines of the Church. Any critique of the theological value of her thought for orthodox Christianity should not be taken as a ruthless assault on her integrity, or on the value of her thought in questioning Christian theology from its boundaries.

TRINITY SUNDAY

As I walk I am marked by geology
which places me between faults on cornbrash, limy sandstone,
of all the layers laid, shifted, cut through and quaked
twice Scafell's height above the volcanic ash at Nocton
the result of potential and destruction
worked achingly long ago yet casually passing by
to an incomprehensible creator.

As I breathe I am marked by biology
which places me between extinctions in self awareness
of all the possibilities in gene pools
distances beyond those who needed a swimming reflex
the result of potential and mutation
worked randomly over time yet inhabited just now
in a recent accessible redeemer

As I think I am marked by theology
which places me between schisms in postmodernity
of all the frameworks explored and disputed
millennia on from a wandering Aramean
the result of potential and heresy
worked repeatedly until now yet held in communion
by something mysterious and ordinary.

Peter Mullins