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Letter to a Priest

Simone Weil was born in Paris on 3 February 1909. Her parents were Alsatian Jews who had settled in Paris following the German annexation of Alsace-Lorraine. Her elder brother, André, was to become one of the greatest mathematicians of his generation. Whilst an infant she had a severe attack of appendicitis, after which she battled with poor health throughout her life.

Weil showed even in early childhood an intense commitment to social and political causes. In 1915, aged 6, she refused sugar in solidarity with French troops on the Western Front and at 10 declared herself a Bolshevik. In her late teens, she became involved in the workers' movement. She was an outstanding student, reading Ancient Greek by the age of 12, and Sanskrit after reading the Bhagavad Gita. As a teenager she studied at the Lycée Henri IV in Paris before entering the prestigious École Normale Supérieure in 1928. She studied philosophy, receiving her diploma in 1931. She finished first in the exam 'General Philosophy and Logic'; Simone de Beauvoir was second. During this period Weil attracted much attention for her radical opinions and personal appearance. According to her friend and biographer, Simone Pétrement, Weil decided she would need to adopt masculine qualities, forgoing love affairs and often wearing men's clothes in order to fully pursue her vocation to improve social conditions for the disadvantaged. Weil never formally joined the Communist party, and in her twenties, became increasingly critical of Marxism. After graduating she taught philosophy at a secondary school for girls in Le Puy in central France.

In 1932, Weil visited Germany to aid Communist activity. After Hitler rose to power in 1933, she spent much of her time trying to help German communists flee his regime. She wrote about social and economic issues, including *Oppression and Liberty* in which she criticised popular Marxist

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thought. Trotsky himself responded to several of her articles, attacking both her ideas and her as a person. She joined the French general strike of 1933 and the following year temporarily left her teaching position to work in factories, one of which was owned by Renault. In 1935 she resumed teaching, donating most of her income to political causes and charities.

In 1936, despite her professed pacifism, she fought in the Spanish Civil War on the Republican side, as an anarchist. Whilst showing great willingness to engage in even the riskiest areas of the conflict, her poor eyesight and failure to shoot accurately forced her to leave her unit after only a few weeks. On returning to Paris, Weil continued to write essays on working conditions and war and peace.

Despite being born into a secular household and raised in 'complete agnosticism', from 1935 Weil became increasingly drawn, albeit in an ambivalent manner, to Christianity. In Portugal she was moved by the beauty of villagers singing hymns during an outdoor service and in Assisi in 1937 she experienced a religious ecstasy in the Basilica of Santa Maria degli Angeli – the same church in which Saint Francis of Assisi had prayed. She had another revelation a year later while reciting George Herbert's poem *Love III*, after which, she said 'Christ himself came down and took possession of me'. From 1938 on, her work took a major spiritual turn, whilst retaining a focus on social and political issues. She was attracted to Roman Catholicism, but declined to be baptised, ultimately preferring 'the love of those things that are outside Christianity'.

In 1942, following the German occupation of Paris, Weil and her parents fled first to Marseilles and then the United States. After a few months in New York she travelled to London, where she joined the French Resistance. Whilst in London she wrote one of her best known works, *The Need for Roots,* in which she argued that social life should be based on obligations rather than rights and urged the French to rediscover their spiritual roots. It includes a preface by T. S. Eliot, who found in Weil 'a balanced judgment, wisdom in avoiding extremes, astonishing in anyone so young'.

In May 1943, the year she wrote her great essay *Human Personality,* she was diagnosed with tuberculosis. Refusing special treatment, she limited her food intake to what she believed those in occupied France were eating at the time. Her condition quickly deteriorated and she was moved to a sanatorium in Ashford, Kent. She died there in August 1943 from cardiac failure at the age of 34 and was buried in Bybrook Cemetery in Ashford. 'Simone Weil Avenue', a section of the A28 road which runs close to her grave, was named in her honour in 1983.

Her main works, published after her death, include *The Need for Roots* (1952), *Gravity and Grace* (1952), *Letter to a Priest* (1954) and *Oppression and Liberty* (1958). In 1951 Albert Camus said she was 'the only great spirit of our times'.

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Letter to a Priest by Simone Weil
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Sketch for a Theory of the Emotions by Jean-Paul Sartre
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Simone

Weil

Letter to a Priest

Translated by A.F. Wills

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LONDON AND NEW YORK

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Note from the Publisher

This Routledge Great Minds edition of *Letter to a Priest* differs from the Routledge Classics edition by its inclusion of Simone Weil's essay 'Human Personality', written in 1943, the year she died, whilst she was living in England. It also includes a new foreword by Raimond Gaita which considers these two works by Weil together.

Those wishing to read *Letter to a Priest* alone may consult the Routledge Classics edition, introduced by Mario von der Ruhr.

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Foreword to the Routledge Great Minds Edition

In the early 1960s I worked in a psychiatric hospital in a ward that housed patients who were incurable. Some of them had been locked up for thirty years. They had lost everything that gives most people reason to live and they had no chance of recovering their health. Most of the nurses and psychiatrists treated them brutishly. When patients soiled themselves, as some often did, they were taken to the shower block, ordered to undress, and to stand under the shower, sometimes still wearing their shirts. A member of the nursing staff washed them down, the distance of a mop handle from them, as zookeepers wash down elephants.

A couple of times each week the patients went to occupational therapy. One of the therapists often congratulated them if they had worked well, or sometimes if they worked

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at all. I heard her praise a patient by saying that on that day he had made twelve clothes pegs whereas the previous week he had made only five. She was a kind woman who said this with openhearted generosity, but her tone betrayed a benign condescension. Or, perhaps more accurately, her tone made it clear that she would have found it literally unintelligible that kindness that was truthfully responsive to their condition could be different.

In that same hospital there were four or five psychiatrists who insisted that the patients be treated with respect. One of them told me that even the patients in that ward possessed an inalienable dignity. It was the first time I heard that expression. Most of their colleagues scorned them, sometimes fiercely.

A nun visited the ward one day. When I saw her talk to the patients and move amongst them I was struck with wonder. She behaved towards them without a trace of condescension. Ashamed, I had to acknowledge I had not done so and I was mortified to realise that neither had the psychiatrists whom I had so admired. She revealed, in a way impossible to deny, but also for reason to accept, that her authentic, entirely unsentimental sense of equality with those degraded patients was the only response that is truthful to their humanity.[1]

Ten years later I read Simone Weil: 'The supernatural virtue of justice,' she says, 'consists in behaving exactly as though there were equality when one is the stronger in an unequal relationship. Exactly in every respect, including the slightest details of accent and attitude, for a detail may be enough to place the weaker party in the condition of matter which on this occasion naturally belongs to him, just as the slightest shock causes water which has remained liquid below freezing point to solidify.'[2] Elsewhere she writes that 'compassion for the afflicted is, I believe, more miraculous than walking

on water, healing the sick or raising the dead'.[3] When I read those words I remembered the nun and how her behaviour towards the patients differed from the psychiatrists and the good-hearted occupational therapist.

To explain why Weil's writing about affliction had impressed me more deeply than anything else I had read, I must emphasise that I was not then, and am not now, morally critical of the psychiatrists and the occupational therapist. No conception of virtue, of what is natural or reasonable, could require that they should have acted differently. When I reflected on the nun, I was struck by the fact that whereas I admired the psychiatrists for their compassion, hard work and courage in enduring the contempt of their colleagues, her virtues played no conscious part in my wonder at what I saw. She became transparent to what her love revealed—that even such people could truthfully be treated as fully our equals. The nun would, of course, have had many fine moral qualities but my wonder at what she revealed was not informed by the thought that they enabled her to do superlatively well what the psychiatrists and the occupational therapist did only very well.

Earlier I said that the occupational therapist behaved with a benign condescension because she found it unintelligible that compassion for such patients could be anything other than condescending if it were unsentimental and truthful. For that reason I am disinclined to call the nun's behaviour supererogatory. We learn from supererogatory acts what human beings are capable of. Sometimes what we learn astonishes us, but Weil does not call compassion for the afflicted miraculous because she believes we need a supernatural booster to perform saintly or heroic deeds. Such deeds are perfectly intelligible to those who know they

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cannot perform them. They might, indeed, dream of performing them. The occupational therapist, however, could not dream of doing what she found unintelligible to do. To think of the nun as the agent of supererogatory deeds is to think of her as a superwoman of compassion. Hardly anyone can behave as the nun did, but the reason is not of the same kind as would explain why few people can be heroes.

I cannot speak as Weil does of a supernatural virtue because I am not religious, but the distinction in kind that I have tried to draw between the nun and the psychiatrists locates the conceptual space in which to place what she says. Religious people will understandably say it is a space that religion has created and which it must occupy if one is to think honestly in it. That is not a claim I can engage with here, but I will make an observation about it. If one were inclined to eliminate or reduce the mystery of what the nun revealed by saying that she believed rightly that the patients were God's children, each one of whom He loved, one would still need to explain why that should inspire anything more than a tender, but condescending compassion towards them of the same kind as was shown by the occupational therapist and the psychiatrists. One might say, to the contrary, that one must first be able to see the possibilities in our relations to the afflicted that the nun revealed if we are to have so much as even the idea that God's love should be the condition of such possibilities. I suspect that Weil would agree. That is why she says so often that God is present in such deeds, but not in the thought of the person who does them. Her belief in God does not diminish her insistence that people like the nun have been driven mad by love. Wittgenstein would say, I think, that is a fact that should alert us to the grammar of what she takes 'belief in God' to be.

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The conceptual space in which to place Weil's thought about the miraculous nature of compassion for the afflicted is the one we must enter if we are to understand her ethical, social and political thought, especially if we are to understand her hostility to the concept of rights.

In Human Personality she presents an example of a young girl who is forced into a brothel. The girl, Weil says, will not protest that her rights have been violated. She does not mean that it would be pointless to do so. She means that the concept of rights is radically inadequate to the moral terribleness of what the girl suffers. Were the perpetrator to come to realize what he had done, the concept of rights could not fully awaken him to it. 'My God! What have I done! I violated the girl's human rights'. That would be a parody of a lucid and serious remorse and is one reason why Weil says the concept of rights is a mediocre one. Its moral force depends upon elaborations of the kind to which we gesture when we say, incredulously, 'Don't you understand what it means to suffer this kind of humiliation?', or which a person who is seriously remorseful would seek in order to understand fully what he did.

Weil died in 1943. Her understanding of war and the almost limitless character of human cruelty shows in much of her writing, perhaps most beautifully in 'The Iliad: a Poem of Force'.[4] The horrors of the Second World War gave urgent reasons for a resurgence of interest in human rights as an important basis for international law, most famously in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. The preamble speaks of 'the inherent dignity . . . of all members of the human family' and of 'the dignity and worth of the human person'. Reference to 'human dignity' and 'inalienable dignity' occurs in many of the preambles to

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important instruments of international criminal law. Its place in those preambles suggests that the idea of the dignity of humanity—of a dignity that one possesses simply by virtue of being human—underpins the concept of an inalienable right and is fundamental to the elaboration of what it means ethically to violate such a right. The morally terrible character of crimes against humanity is often rendered as an offence against the human dignity of those who suffer them. Weil believes this is an illusion. Talk of dignity was not as common when she wrote as it is today, but she heard the tone in which we now speak of it in the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen of 1789, and it is that tone to which she objects.

It is characteristic of Weil as a writer that she should be able to convey so powerfully in only a few words the pitilessness of the assault on the girl and her powerlessness in the face of it. She presents neither a physical nor a moral obstacle to the man who seeks to enslave her. Writing about slaves, Weil says that they often fall into a state of 'dumb and ceaseless lamentation'.[5] The same is true of the patients in the hospital who were forced under the shower to be mopped down of their faeces. Recall that one of the psychiatrists in the hospital told me that even such people possess inalienable dignity. If we are to understand the ethical character of affliction when it has been inflicted on people by others; if we are fully to understand what it means for them to have been violated, we must, Weil says, keep a distance from words like rights and Dignity (when it takes a capital D) that move us because they are in an heroic register. She warned against succumbing to the illusion that despite the girl's degradation, she retains a dignity that she cannot lose. In humanity's struggle against oppression, cruelty and the crimes of war, Weil believes, we have developed an ethical language that cannot enable us to

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speak truthfully about or to affliction. In the key of the heroic and the noble, the language of rights and Dignity has made it almost impossible to hear the cry of the afflicted, 'Why am I being hurt?'. That is why she says it is often a silent cry.

In Human Personality and other writings Weil appears to explain why she believes that compassion for affliction is a miracle. She writes: 'To acknowledge the reality of affliction means saying to oneself: "I may lose at any moment, through the play of circumstances over which I have no control, anything whatsoever that I possess . . . It could happen at any moment that what I am might be abolished and replaced by anything whatsoever of the filthiest and most contemptible sort." '[6] And in many other places she says that thought flees from affliction as it does the contemplation of death.

I suspect that is misleading. We can perhaps see why if we reflect on her analogy of the fear of death. Young people, it is often said, believe in their heads but not in their hearts that they are mortal. It is hard to face the reality of death at any age. Weil would insist that is harder and happens far less often than we think. Suppose that is true and suppose also that a lucid understanding of one's mortality and vulnerability to misfortune will transform one's life. Even so, it would be mere hyperbole to say such an understanding is a miracle.

Human Personality is, in part, a political essay. I would not wish to give the impression that the importance of compassion, as the nun showed it, should play a role in politics of the kind proposed in the 1960s for love. But as I suggested earlier, Weil believes that thought about social and political life should be informed by an understanding of affliction and of what enables and prevents us from being attentive to it. She insists that we must therefore acknowledge, even if we do

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not fully understand in our hearts, that when the concept of rights is underpinned by an heroically inflected conception of inalienable dignity, it tends to make us deaf to the cry of the afflicted. Goodness, love and purity would then be the primary concepts in a perspective on value that would transform rather than replace our understanding of the virtues as they appear from an heroic perspective—integrity, autonomy, rights and dignity, amongst others.

More or less at the same time that she wrote Human Personality, Weil drafted what became *The Need for Roots*, first published in French six years after her death. The leaders of the Free French in London asked her to write a new Declaration of Rights for the Fourth French Republic, as they hoped it would be formed after the liberation of France. Weil wrote instead a Declaration Obligation to Human Beings. Her acknowledgement of the need in human beings for roots and for the protection of those roots by military force, which then as now is primarily invested in nation states, ameliorates considerably the hostility she expresses in Human Personality to uses of 'we', that record a sense of fellowship rather than merely the fact that one belongs with others to a particular group. Yet in that work, her hostility to our tendency to be inspired by grandeur and the heroic is not diminished in the slightest. Love of country that is distinguished from its false semblance, jingoism, she writes in *The Need For Roots*, is nourished by appreciation of what is beautiful and vulnerable in one's country and its history rather than by what is grand and noble. True to her newly formed rejection of pacifism, she believes that when it is properly focused, such love of country can provide the energy needed for soldiers to fight as fiercely as German soldiers, who were inspired by dreams of heroic grandeur that had

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been celebrated in European history since the time of the Roman Empire.

It is hard to be open to Weil's political thought in a way that is consistent with both sobriety and idealism. Such openness is necessary if we are to distinguish what is original and of lasting importance in her political thought from what is utopian and even anti-political and destructive to any serious conception of a political vocation and citizenship.

Deepening political instability in many regions of the earth, compounded by the effects of climate change, will almost certainly cause even more people to be uprooted than were uprooted last century. Strong nations are likely to protect themselves in ways that become increasingly brutal, testing the relevance and the authority of international law. We are therefore under an urgent imperative to think in new ways about how to respond morally, legally and politically to the fact that mere luck ensures that some people enjoy the fruits of the earth and that others suffer the miseries of the damned. Thinking about Weil will set us in the right direction and provide food for the journey. We are likely to find that the idea of obligation to need is more fruitful and truthful in characterizing our responsibility to give succour to the dispossessed than the way we now appeal to human rights. And we can learn from Weil that, even if it is whistling in the dark to posit an inalienable dignity that no degree of degradation can touch, we should be more respectful than we are of dignity that is essentially alienable. No one should be so alienated from their ordinary, alienable dignity, that only a saint could see them as fully human. In both cases, one will possess the gift she has to offer only if one understands her thought on affliction.

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When one tries to understand Weil's religious thought it is not profitable to dwell on the question: what counts as true religion? Much of what she says in Letter to a Priest—about dogma, about the freedom of intelligence, about conduct of missionaries in colonial times and perhaps about miracles—will be congenial to religiously liberal thinkers. By the same token much of what she says, and, perhaps, even more her tone, will alienate them. Her intensity will be offensive to liberals who are likely to find it indistinguishable from fundamentalism, which offends their urbanity. She cannot be classified along a liberal–conservative continuum. And her clear-sighted hard-headedness about affliction, her lack of interest in whether there is life after death and whether Jesus rose from the dead should persuade atheists that it is foolish to think that people who are religious necessarily seek false consolation.

I have never read anyone who trusts Weil's scholarship, which is one reason why I have not commented in detail on *Letter to a Priest*. That should not, however, distract attention from how illuminating and original she can be even when her scholarship is unreliable. So, at any rate, I have found when reading her on Plato, Homer, and the Greeks tragedies. It is hard to know what her attitude to Judaism would have been if she had lived to read thinkers like Martin Buber or Yeshayahu Leibowtiz.[7] The latter condemned the idolatry she takes to be at the heart of Judaism, and its political consequences, as fiercely as she did and as an expression of the same love of justice, but he did it because he thought it was corruption of Judaism. Many have noted the obsessive quality of her hostility to Judaism and have speculated about its psychological causes. I have no desire to add to that speculation, but there can be no doubt that what she said about Judaism was

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and remains a boon to anti-Semitism. Many readers—certainly most Jews—will justifiably find the unrelenting hostility to Judaism expressed in Letter to a Priest and elsewhere repugnant. Because she expressed it during the most terrible years of the Holocaust, when the Vichy Government participated with alacrity in the Nazi extermination of French Jews, they will also find it unforgivable.

Weil was not a systematic thinker and one runs the danger of distorting her work and forfeiting its treasures if one tries to press for consistency in the wrong places. Insofar as she has a philosophy of religion it is far from orthodox. But the concept of affliction, which she distinguishes from even intense suffering because it has an element of social degradation, and the belief that compassion for it is a supernatural virtue—a miracle—were at the heart of her ethical and religious thought. It is why she writes in Letter to a Priest: 'One might lay down as a postulate: All conceptions of God which are incompatible with a movement of pure charity are false.'[8] She might have put it the other way around: all conceptions of God that render possible the supernatural virtue of compassion for the afflicted are, to that extent, true.

Raimond Gaita
April 2013

NOTES

1 I first wrote about the nun in *A Common Humanity: Thinking about Love & Truth & Justice*, London & New York, Routledge, 2000. I wrote about her again in 'Morality, Metaphysics and Religion' in Joseph Carlisle, James Carter and Daniel Whistler (eds), *Moral Powers, Fragile Beliefs*, New York, Continuum, 2011, critical of some of what I had said in *A Common Humanity*; and last and most fully in 'Character and its Limits' in *After Romulus*, Melbourne, Text Publishing, 2011.

2 Simone Weil, 'Forms of the Implicit Love of God', *Waiting On God*, Glasgow, Collins, 1977, p. 100.
3 Simone Weil, 'The Love of God and Affliction', *Science Necessity and the Love of God*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1968, p. 172.
4 Simone Weil, *Intimations of Christianity Amongst the Ancient Greeks*, London, Routledge, 1988.
5 Simone Weil, Human Personality, this volume, p. 60.
6 Ibid, p. 81.
7 Martin Buber, *I and Thou* (there are many editions). Yehshayahu Leibowitz, *Judaism, Human Values, and the Jewish State*, Harvard, Harvard University Press 1992.
8 Simone Weil, 'Letter to a Priest', this volume, p. 41.

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Note

This letter was addressed by Simone Weil to a French priest living in New York when she was staying there in the autumn of 1942, waiting to join the Free French movement in London.