

Simone Weil and Baptism

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For more than twenty years after her death Simone Weil was assumed to be a "saint of the outsiders." Visited by Christ, a profoundly Christian thinker, she was, nevertheless, unbaptized and had refused baptism categorically. Or, at least so it was assumed, with little or no reason to think otherwise at the time. She had *investigated* the possibility of baptism; however, in at least two letters she had outlined several strong reasons for refusing it. These included a fear of joining groups, including the Church, because of a herd instinct therein that suppressed thought and moral imagination; she believed that entering the Church would mean abandoning those outside it whom she loved and from whom she had profited spiritually; she thought subscription to doctrine would stifle her intellectual vocation; finally, she had not been commanded to be baptized by God. All that seemed to settle the issue.

Reports, however, began to appear in the 1960s saying that she had been baptized *in extremis* by a layperson. Jacques Cabaud first suggested it in 1967 in *Simone Weil à New York et Londres*, although he neither named his source nor gave many details. In 1971 Wladimir Rabi, editor of the Jewish journal *Les Nouveaux Cahiers*, published a full account.¹ Rabi heard the story from a Michele Leleu who had been told it by a person identified only as X while she and X were attending a conference in Paris in 1965. X was the person who claimed to have baptized Weil. Rabi published Leleu's story with the results of his own extensive research. Petrément mentioned it in her biography largely repeating the information given by Rabi and Cabaud. In 1994, I published an account based on these published sources and on my discussions over the previous thirteen years with Simone Deitz, Weil's companion in New York and London, the X of Rabi's article and the one who was Cabaud's source.² This is the story:³

On April 15, 1943, Deitz noticed that Weil had not appeared at work and went to her apartment, only to find her unconscious on the floor. Weil was taken to Middlesex Hospital, and diagnosed with tuberculosis. Deitz claims Weil knew she was ill before she left New York, but had hidden it since it would have prevented her from leaving New York and especially would have kept her from embarking on her front line nurses project. At Middlesex, Weil asked to speak to a priest. Upon Deitz's request, the Abbé de Naurois, chaplain of the Free French in London, visited her three times that spring. The visits did not bear fruit, to say the least. According to Deitz, Weil said of the meetings: "I said to him I want to receive baptism but I want to do it only under certain conditions. I don't admit that unbaptized infants are excluded from Paradise and it is necessary that my attitude in that not be in contradiction with Catholic dogma." The abbé responded: "That will never do. You are a proud one!" Deitz reports that Naurois said that Weil appeared "too feminine," "too khâgneuse," and "too Jewish." The discussions of baptism with Naurois ended here. (Naurois denies having made the statements, but admits to great irritation with Weil.) Afterwards, Deitz asked Weil: "And now, are you ready to accept baptism?" Weil replied, "with much warmth," "Yes." Deitz took water from the tap

¹"Simone Weil (1909-1943) ou l'itinéraire d'une âme: Les derniers jours – Le baptême *in extremis*." (Automne).

² "The Baptism of Simone Weil" in *Spirit, Nature and Community: Issues in the Thought of Simone Weil* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994).

³This reproduces briefly the story as told in Springsted, "The Baptism of Simone Weil." Quotations can be found there, with many also in Rabi.

and pronounced the formula, “I baptize you in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.” Although Deitz in her initial accounts seemed a bit unsure where the baptism took place, she ultimately insisted that it happened at Middlesex;⁴ confusion about this has occurred in various accounts. On August 18, Weil was transferred to Grosvenor Sanitarium in Ashford, Kent. On August 24 she died in her sleep. She was buried August 30 in Ashford in the section reserved for Catholics. Seven or eight persons were in attendance, including Deitz. The priest – supposedly Naurois – missed his train and Maurice Schumann therefore read the prayers. Deitz thought Naurois deliberately missed the train.

What are we to make of this? Here are, briefly, the chief arguments for and against this story:⁵ Arguments against are of two sorts: first, are the inconsistencies in Deitz’s story; second, it is argued that accepting baptism was impossibly out of character for Weil. Neither are strong enough to say that it did not or could not have happened. It was not impossibly out of character. Weil always left open the possibility of baptism and kept investigating it. With respect to inconsistencies in the account, there has indeed been some uncertainty about where it took place. Deitz in some of her early accounts was not always definite about it. In the end, however, she did insist that it took place at Middlesex, but did not remember the date. Deitz also was deeply sensitive, emotionally charged, a person of great enthusiasms and disappointments, and sometimes overly earnest. Cabaud has mentioned recently that there were occasions in her interviews with her when she seemed to embellish, and make up things.⁶ Still, such instances, he thinks, ultimately do not discredit this story. He is not alone, as many have accepted it. Given any positive evidence against it, they should. The question, though, is what significance it has. Here is where there is the widest divergence in opinion.

Rabi, for example, believed the story but argued that baptism was forced upon an unconscious Weil. So, even though it was valid according to the church, it had no significance, he claimed. (How he might have known that she was unconscious, since he was not there and Deitz never said Weil was unconscious, is inexplicable.) He did claim, though, that Catholics did not want to believe it because Weil was an embarrassment to them; he thought she was “actually one of us,” i.e., Jewish. Pétrément, agnostic about the story, suggested that, if it occurred, Weil didn’t put much stock in it since she later neither asked for the Eucharist nor signed herself into Grosvenor as a Catholic. Deitz gave a possible explanation for both these things. She noted in a letter to me that she herself was baptized similarly (she, too, was of assimilated Jewish heritage) – i.e., by a non-ordained friend, and then later when in a *clinique* in Paris in 1941 did not register as a Catholic. She also argued: “Do you think Simone would have asked for the host if she didn’t want to bring the baptism in the open? She added: “Don’t forget before dying *it may have been a sacrifice on her part to deprive herself of what she wanted most.*” All are possible explanations of what significance the baptism might or might not have had to Weil; all are in the end, are hypothetical.

The fact is that what we do not know, and cannot know is what Weil herself thought about it. With respect to the sacrament as it was performed, as a grace of God, it is valid, unless she was insincere in her profession of belief in Christ. That is not likely. We also have no reason to think she committed apostasy afterwards. But while the baptism is valid, still, this does not undo her earlier objections, especially her larger philosophical objections wherein she thought that the church’s demand for intellectual adherence to dogma as a criterion for baptism was illegitimate. There is no

⁴Thus it was not a death bed event. Even though it could support her account, Deitz insisted that Weil had not given up on her “intellectual vocation” at this point, something Weil had allowed in a letter to Perrin might cause her to reconsider her position.

⁵A fuller account of many of the reasons for and against is given in my “The Baptism of Simone Weil” cited above.

⁶My experience was that she could be extremely and maddeningly exact in remembering some details – for example, that Weil and Coutourier met at the Plaza Hotel, and had oysters for a meal, but then vague on more important details. But such may also be the nature of memory which is often fixed in images and not in large context and comprehensive detail.

reason to think she renounced those objections. It is those objections and her own understanding of baptism, a very positive one, which touch closely on the issue of the impersonal and personal, that I now want to consider.

Weil had two sorts of objections to baptism. First, she had personal objections. For example, there is her attachment to thinkers outside the church that she would not renounce; there is also the fact that she had not been commanded by Christ to be baptized. These I will leave aside, noting only that in calling them personal, we are simply saying that they are *private* reasons, not ones directly touching on the personal/impersonal distinction. They simply belong to her as an individual agent and not necessarily to anybody else. The second sort of reasons, though, do touch on this distinction. These deal with Weil's objections to the church's demand for intellectual adherence to a set of doctrinal propositions.

Weil saw baptism as requiring subscription to church doctrines. This is to say, she believed that one had to say implicitly or explicitly "yea" or "nay" to them as *propositions*. At numerous points she then saw a contradiction between what she believed and what she thought the Church expected her to believe. This, she thus believed, disqualified her from being baptized. The best example is in her "Letter to a Priest" where she lays out what she believes, as well as a lot of things that she has thought about, and asks Father Coutourier to tell her whether or not they are incompatible with what the Roman Catholic church proclaims. Her request is slightly bizarre since she seems to have listed just about every thought about religious issues that ever came into her head. Few are so scrupulous; one suspects that her request was met with bewilderment. With respect to her objecting in this way, Father Perrin later said she was missing the point of what she was being asked to do. The real issue was whether Christ left a teaching authority to the church or whether Christians are left on their own to fabricate their faith. "She never posed it to herself that way," he noted in 1979.⁷

Certainly, a deep issue *is* the doctrinal authority vested in the church. Christian faith is not only a state of mind, it is also an act; that act requires the act of confession, both upon baptism and at various points in the Christian life. Yet, Weil was not confused about this. She freely admits that the church is the guardian of dogma and that doctrine needs to be a discipline for attention. She doesn't think one can have faith in just anything, and still have faith. But for her the important question is really somewhere else. Her question is: how is dogma to be understood, and what is adherence to it? For those she asked in the 1940s, dogma was narrowly equated with a set of propositions, and it was intellectual adherence to them that was demanded of her.⁸ She saw the whole issue of faith, belief and intellect differently, though. She did not think that the Church could legitimately require intellectual adherence. "Intellectual adherence is never owed to anything whatsoever. For it is never in any degree a voluntary thing,"⁹ she says. Why is this true, if the church has a teaching authority?

Weil's reasoning is surprising. It has nothing to do with the height of the intellect, a natural and even "personal" faculty as far as she is concerned. Weil, despite her high opinion of the intellect, and insistence on her own intellectual vocation does *not* think that the intellect is the way to go on this at all. Instead, she argues: "The mysteries of faith are not a proper object for the intelligence considered as a faculty permitting affirmation or denial. They are not of the order of truth, but above it. The only part of the human soul which is capable of any real contact with them is the faculty of supernatural

⁷"L'eau du baptême" in *Entretiens en marge du colloque du Sète* (1979). (Association pour l'étude de la pensée de Simone Weil, 1982). 44.

⁸I do not think Weil ever tackled the question of whether this propositionalism (say, such as one found in Garrigou-Lagrange's view of doctrine and theology) was consistent with the nature of belief as understood in the church historically. She took the imposition at face value. However, as we shall see, her own views about what she thought the church ought to be doing come rather close to the "nuptial mysticism" that theologians such as de Lubac and others were proposing.

⁹"Letter to a Priest" in *Gateway to God* (New York: Crossroad, 1982). 119

love.”¹⁰ Intelligence is not at stake in doctrine; attention is.

Part of the key to what she is saying is found in the fact that Weil takes intellect in a Kantian way, i.e, as strictly discursive, not intuitive. It is restricted to certain publicly logical and empirical relations. This causes her elsewhere to distinguish between the language of the marketplace and the language of the nuptial chamber. Intellect belongs in the market place, love in the nuptial chamber. So doctrine is something that *should* appeal to love and attention; the church can and should propose doctrine as a “discipline for attention.”¹¹ But it cannot impose adherence on the intellect.

Why not, if the intelligence is not the highest faculty? Why must intellect be free? Why, if it is in second place, would denying its freedom be a reason to reject baptism? The reason is in the role that the intellect plays in the increase of attention for Weil. What she is interested in is how the intellect, as a natural faculty, must ultimately be decreased, ceding its own function to attention as attention yields the self to the object of love. It is an intermediary between attention and sensation.

How does this work? The natural intellect does not and cannot reach into the realm of mystery. It can only think being and beings under the heading of necessity. Necessity, however, can be read at differing levels: as brute force, as a tissue of mathematical relations, and finally as “persuaded by goodness” -- a creation obedient to a transcendent goodness. These “levels” are not closed worlds; the first two are nested within the third. Together all speak of a mystery behind and in all that exists. Attention and love are what open us so as to let that mystery dawn upon us. Intellect for its part encounters mystery when it comes up against contradictions within these readings, because no reading is complete in itself. Ultimately, this forces the intellect to move up in level, for “contradiction is the lever of transcendence.”¹² This upward movement is not under its own power, though, since the intellect always reasons within a reading. It is the desire that is found in welcoming attention is what draws it up. But at this higher level the earlier contradictions are resolved on a higher plane. The process can be repeated.

What Weil is most interested in here is *not* that the intellect has reached a higher level and comprehends reality better, even if it does. She is interested in the spiritual relation found in the mind’s giving of itself to a reality that it did not create or comprehend. Thus, she notes, a very intelligent man can comprehend a lot but be spiritually impoverished; the village idiot can be spiritually superior to any number of intellectuals. The spiritual point is to give one’s consent and love to what is. Thus the nature of the spiritual relation means that the value of the intellect is *not* in its systematic comprehension, which is always limited anyhow. Rather, if it reaches a conclusion, its spiritual strength is in bowing to the necessity of the conclusion as something not of its own making. One does not *have* to bow in this way. If, however, one is willing to bow then mysteries are “turned into ko-ans by contemplation by the elect who disdain both rebellion and servility of mind.”¹³

Developing one’s consent to reality is the point of school studies as Weil argues in the essay “The Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God.” The point of school studies in developing the intellect is not for competence, comprehension and control, it is for the development of attention, the ability to open oneself to reality. Intellectual exercise develops a habit of readiness, openness and availability to reality (*disponibilité*.) Whether we actually succeed or not in comprehending a problem does not really matter; it is our respect for it on its own terms that is most salutary in the learning process. Thus school studies and intellectual work are a preparation for prayer and the love of God, and are not for intellectual comprehensiveness.

So, why does the intellect need freedom? Because it must be able to give itself to the necessity

¹⁰“Letter to a Priest” 118

¹¹“Letter to a Priest” 120

¹²*First and Last Notebooks* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970). 134.

¹³*First and Last Notebooks* 109.

it sees, as it sees it. Without this freedom, if it is forced to a conclusion, as the words *anathema sit* mean to force it by threat, two things may happen. First, one may mistake the real spiritual point of doctrines and mysteries. One who does not realize that the love of God lies in attention may think it is an intellectual position and will always treat it as such, i.e., as an ideology, missing the spiritual opportunities of thought. Faith then becomes, as Mark Twain once joked, “believing what you know ain’t true.” And when one then encounters contradictions, which we always do in natural thought, the thought of surrender will not dawn on one; the temptation to insist on one’s way will, however. “Real genius is nothing else but the supernatural virtue of humility in the domain of thought,”¹⁴ she claims. The need for intellectual freedom is to encourage this kind of genius. Second, when one is coerced, the human being as a spiritual being and as a thinker is not respected. To be treated with respect is to be able to give one’s assent freely, it is to be asked, and it is to be given a reason for why one should assent. One can only do that within the limits of what he conceives. One *will* submit to necessity one way or another, of course. But to treat another with respect is to let him see necessity for himself and then to let him give himself. The Church is therefore obligated to present the soul with mysteries for contemplation; to let one lose mystery would imprison his soul. But it also has to let a thinker come to intellectual obedience himself through love. That is why Weil thought that the church needed a thorough revision of its philosophical basis; it had confused faith, which belongs to contemplation and love, with intellectual belief.

III

What does this have to do with baptism? Quite a lot. St. Paul says that “all of us who have been baptized into Christ were baptized into his death. Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.” (Romans 6:3) So, too, Weil. In “The Love of God and Affliction” she writes:

In the old baptism by immersion the man disappeared under the water; this means to deny one’s self, to acknowledge that one is only a fragment of the inert matter which is the fabric of creation. He only reappeared because he was lifted up by an ascending movement stronger than gravity; this is the image of the divine love in man. Baptism contains the symbol of the state of perfection. The engagement it involves is the promise to desire that state and to beseech God for it...¹⁵

Weil’s objections to baptism rest on this positive understanding. She was not asked for the obedience that leads to the death of the old man and to the resurrection of the new one in Christ and the “impersonal.” It was a natural obedience to doctrine naturally conceived that was being asked of her. Perhaps had the church asked *more* of her by asking for the ultimate commitment she wanted to make, her baptism would not be under question.

¹⁴ “Human Personality” in *Selected Essays: 1934-43* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962) 25.

¹⁵ in *Simone Weil; Writings Selected...* ed. E.O.Springsted (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998) 61.