
Prophetic Mysticism

BY ALEX NAVA

In the life and thought of Simone Weil we have an example—and an edifying and brilliant one at that—of a Christian who embodied both the mystical and prophetic elements of the faith. If her ideas offer us glimpses of the import of justice, her life more fully discloses its complete meaning. Her daring passion for truth and justice can ignite a spark in our hearts.

Susan Sontag describes our age as stained by the nightmare of history. It is fragmented, broken, and deafened by contradictory historical and intellectual experiences. If the term “postmodern” has any meaning for us, it is precisely that the celebrations of reason, confidence in human achievement, and belief in progress have collapsed. Modern history is filled with too much ambiguity and our globe is brimming with too much poverty and violence for us to remain untroubled and naively sanguine.

No wonder, then, that the voices we most appreciate and cherish are the countercultural ones, the prophetic voices that disrupt our complacency and triumphal confidence. The voices of mystics and prophets, of the marginal and afflicted, become for many of us—even when regarded as mad and neurotic—the voices of wisdom and truth. If madness looms over mystics and prophets, these figures also expose the madness of reason and the insanity of much of our politics, economics, and social lives. After all, voices of madness, as Michel Foucault once argued, can be more visionary, real, and lucid than many of the most reasonable of our philosophers and scientists. “Ours is an age,” writes Sontag, “which consciously pursues health, and yet only believes in the reality of sickness. The truths we respect are those born of affliction. We measure truth in terms of the cost to the writer in suffering—rather than by the standard of an objective truth to

which a writer's words correspond. Each of our truths must have a martyr."¹ Sontag penned these words with direct reference to Simone Weil.

One can question Simone Weil's sanity: she was extreme in many of her convictions and judgments. She espoused and practiced an extreme of body denial, she was uncompromising in her hatred of Roman civilization and aspects of Judaism, and she spurned any philosophy of happiness and pleasure.

Christian mysticism is "the preparation for, the consciousness of, and the reaction to . . . the immediate or direct presence of God." Mystics describe this intense consciousness in various ways but agree on the immediacy with which they experience God.

There is insanity in much of this. No one can doubt, on the other hand, Weil's sacrifices on behalf of truth, her pursuit of a wisdom born of suffering, her passion for spiritual truths, and her devotion to justice. Weil sought to live the philosophical life with intensity and depth, integrity and compassion. Her vision of philosophy is in accord with the ancient

import of the word, "love of wisdom." The modern separation between theory and practice, or reason and spirituality, struck her—as it would most ancient philosophers—as a peculiar and distorted understanding of the meaning of philosophy. She sought to embody and practice the philosophical life. Philosophy was a spiritual discipline for her.

It is for this reason that Weil's life and thought has attracted me for so many years. Her life is as unique and extraordinary, brilliant and mysterious, as her philosophical and theological thought. I think most of us want the guidance of not only great thinkers but of those who have lived fully and authentically, with intensity, love, and justice. There is indeed a particular appeal about intellectuals who offer more than theories of justice or truth, but who provide us with hints and suggestions on how we are to live our lives. If their ideas offer us glimpses of the import of justice, their examples can be gifts that unveil and more fully disclose its complete meaning. It is the union of their ideas with their lives, their daring and uncompromising passion for truth or justice, which has the potential to ignite a spark in our hearts.

MYSTICS AND PROPHETS

Mystics and prophets are certainly countercultural. They challenge the norms of their time and transgress the border of the reasonable and predictable, of the normal and ordinary. Their pronouncements and judgments are startling and disturbing. They speak truths few want to hear and communicate realities that few can understand. No wonder they often are considered mad and are shunned and persecuted.

If mystics and prophets share these commonalities, there are characteristics that distinguish these two figures from one another. Christian mysticism, for the sake of definition, is a form of spirituality that “concerns the preparation for, the consciousness of, and the reaction to...the immediate or direct presence of God.”² Though mystics describe this intense consciousness in various ways—as vision or union with God (or the cosmos), deification, ecstasy and rapture, auditory communications, otherworldly journeys, birth of the Word in the soul, and so on—they agree on the sense of immediacy with which they experience God.

Of course, some biblical prophets also experienced God in a direct manner—recall Ezekiel’s vision of the chariot (Ezekiel 1) and Isaiah’s vision of God in the Temple (Isaiah 6:1-8). What distinguishes the prophet from the mystic, however, is the prophet’s emphasis on proclaiming the Word of God, usually by rebuking the sins of particular individuals or communities. Even if it is overstated that ethics is the key element of their message, it is not wrong to interpret the prophets as passionate in their concern for the poor and the oppressed, widows and orphans, strangers and aliens. An ethics of justice pervades their proclamations.

Mystics, by contrast, may seem to be preoccupied with ahistorical realities and otherworldly truths. Aesthetics rather than ethics, or a concern with beauty rather than with moral goodness, is prominent in their lives. Many of the great mystics taught a nature-oriented and liturgical form of theology; they encountered the face of God in the beauty, grandeur, and mystery of the cosmos. The prophets regarded this with suspicion: lurking behind the reverence felt for nature or the beautiful, they warned, is the demon of idolatry. If you are looking for God, look here in the face of the other, in the face of the hungry and needy. Beware of your reverence for this particular mountain, this tree, this rock. Fidelity to the God of history, to the God revealed through the Sacred Book and revealed through the events and circumstances of the nation Israel will not be discerned or read in the book of nature. Unknown gods lie beneath rocks and trees.

Though there are real differences between mystics and prophets, most of us recognize a need for both. Even if we are attracted more by one tradition, we can see the wisdom that the other one offers. Sparked by a comment by the theologian David Tracy—that one major task of contemporary theology is to interpret the hyphen in the term “mystical-prophetic”—I have been attracted to thinkers that represent both elements of the Christian tradition, the mystical and prophetic.

I see the need for the mystical all around me—in my college students’ insatiable quest for spiritual fulfillment and in the appreciation and reverence for beauty that is manifest in nature, art, liturgy and ritual, or music and dance. I see the wisdom of many mystics in their brilliant philosophical ruminations concerning not only the possibilities but also the limits of language when speaking of the Divine reality, what Meister Eckhart calls the

“God beyond God.” I recognize the truth of the mystics’ celebration of love—sensual, erotic, and agapic.

The prophets, on the other hand, remind me of the needs of the dispossessed and disenfranchised. Love without justice, they insist, is too cheap and sentimental, too emotional and individualistic. They do not let me forget that God is present in the events of history and exigencies of society, and that I must be vigilant to respond to God in the concrete circumstances of life. The biblical prophets teach a hard truth: that God is manifest in the lives of the afflicted and oppressed and that wisdom is not merely the fruit of learning, but a knowledge born of suffering.

Fortunately, in the life and thought of Simone Weil, we have an example—and an edifying, brilliant one at that—of a Christian who embodied both the mystical and prophetic elements of the faith. Weil helps us to make sense of the hyphen that connects the mystical-prophetic traditions.

A SAINT “FOR THE PRESENT MOMENT”

Simone Weil’s life and philosophy resonates with me for many reasons, but one dimension of her life is especially captivating: her brilliant intellectual achievements joined with a commitment to manual labor, especially factory work. Not only did Weil study the working conditions in the 1920s and 1930s, she also entered the factories to experience firsthand the life of a worker in France. Are her reflections on the conditions of factory work still relevant today, given the many changes in industrial capitalism since the early twentieth century? I think they are very relevant because of the increasingly oppressive and exploitive working conditions in factories in developing countries. She anticipated the concerns that many are expressing now about sweatshop labor in Latin America and Asia. As an increasing number of U.S. companies are moving their enterprises across the border in order to avoid paying livable wages, to avoid decent and safe work conditions, and to escape environmental restrictions, Weil’s insights are perspicacious and prophetic.

Make no mistake about it: Weil was a great intellectual, not simply an activist. She was an intellectual, however, who discerned with great lucidity and passion the shortcomings of academic life. When Weil wrote “Intellectual: a bad name, but we deserve it,” she stated nicely her ambivalence toward her undeniable intellectual gifts and interests. Gustavo Gutiérrez, who many call a “liberation theologian,” is another intellectual in this vein, an academic who finds much that is abstract, unreal, and trite about the self-contained ideas of the academic community. In both of their cases, the world of ideas is only legitimate when it thoughtfully articulates the experiences and struggles of the poor and afflicted and inspires solidarity with such communities and histories.

“Today it is not nearly enough merely to be a saint, but we must have the saintliness demanded by the present moment,” Weil warns. “The

world needs saints who have genius, just as a plague-stricken town needs doctors.”³ When she says that a new saintliness is required in our time, she has in mind the need for sages who are capable of addressing in thought and action the problems and injustices of our world.

“POURED OUT LIKE WATER”

At the age of seventeen, Weil wrote an essay on the story that Alexander the Great, while crossing the desert with his army, poured out his allotment of water in order to share his soldiers’ suffering. Her comments on this story foreshadow her entire life. “His well-being, if he had drunk, would have separated him from his soldiers,” she notes. “Sacrifice is the acceptance of pain, the refusal to obey the animal in oneself, and the will to redeem suffering men through voluntary suffering. Every saint has poured out the water; every saint has rejected all well-being that would separate him from the suffering of other men.”⁴

A few years later, while Weil was preparing to take the entrance exam for the prestigious *École Normale Supérieure*, she was approached by the young Simone de Beauvoir who was fascinated by the reputation of Weil’s intelligence, ascetic appearance, and sensitivity to others’ suffering (apparently some students had found Weil weeping for famine victims in China). During their conversation, Weil proclaimed that the only thing that mattered was the revolution that would feed all the starving people on earth. Beauvoir responded by saying that the problem is to find the reason for human existence. Looking her up and down, Weil retorted, “It’s easy to see that you’ve never gone hungry.”⁵ It is clear that Weil, in spite of being born into a privileged family, was determined from her youth to know what it is like to suffer in body and spirit.

Weil’s education was exceptional. She became a student at age sixteen of the distinguished philosopher Alain. Three years later, she had the highest score on the entrance exam for the *École Normale Supérieure*, with the second highest score going to Simone de Beauvoir. At the *École Normale*, she began

reading Marx and dedicated herself to issues pertaining to the working classes, the poor, and the cause of France’s unions. By the age of twenty-one, she had finished her thesis on *Science and Perception in Descartes* and had begun teaching philosophy to young girls in the city of Le Puy.

She allied herself with the unemployed of Le Puy and led a demonstra-

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tion before the city council. Her concern with the issue of colonialism was also strongly ignited at this time. After reading an article on the condition of France's colonies, she remarked that she could hardly bear the description of "the condition of the Indo-Chinese, their wretchedness and enslavement, the perennially unpunished insolence of the whites."⁶ Her activism in the community of Le Puy displeased the school's administrators and soon

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she was transferred to Auxerre. Her term did not last long there either because she refused to teach her students the kind of rote learning the school expected. By 1933, she was teaching again at Roanne. She participated in a major event on behalf of miners and the unemployed, the March of the Miners, which only confirmed her growing reputation as a dangerous leftist.

Weil continued to struggle during this period to clarify the direction of her life: would she be an intellectual or an activist? This is when, following neither a purely intellectual nor political activist vocation, she decided to work in a factory to get firsthand experience of the daily circumstances of the working poor. "She was forced to think that where theoretical thought could not find a solution, actual contact with the object might suggest a way out," her biographer, Simone Petremont, writes of Weil's decision. "The object was the misery for which remedies had to be found. If she herself plunged into this misery, she would be able to see more clearly what remedies were appropriate to it."⁷ Another biographer, Robert Coles, explains the significance of this decision to enter the factory: "She was convinced that hard physical work was essential for an intellectual, lest the mind become all too taken with itself, all too removed from the concrete realities of everyday life, the burdens that rest upon the overwhelming majority of the earth's population."⁸ Simone Weil recognized the limits of pure theory and the necessity of committed action in history and society.

In 1935, she took up work on the assembly line in the Renault automobile factory. In addition to the physical pain and exhaustion that Weil endured while working there, she suffered severe migraine headaches. Her parents convinced Weil, because of her worn-out condition, to join them on a vacation in Portugal. In a small village, on the day of the festival of its patron saint, the conviction was born in her that Christianity is a religion of slaves and she could not help being one of them (WFG, p. 67). The

simple faith of the lowly—in this case, the peasants of this Portuguese village—imparts a wisdom that is born from their experiential contact with suffering, a wisdom inaccessible to many of the privileged of the world. The outcasts and the poor are bearers of truths about God, the human condition, and even nature that, in the words of the Apostle Paul, shame the powerful and wise of the world (cf. 1 Corinthians 1:26 ff.).

“LOVE BADE ME WELCOME”

Prior to this, there had been a notable absence of any clear interest by Weil in Christianity or religion. She was raised in a secular Jewish home and was not exposed to any regular form of worship or religious belief. Her education, shaped by the classics of Western thought from Greek tragedy and philosophy to Descartes and Marx, did not have a religious focus. Though she had not ignored the question of God (she had taken it up in her thesis on Descartes, for instance), it is striking that in her early writings Weil considered God to be an object of intellectual abstraction, an omnipotent being who is the source of the power of the mind.⁹ The God about whom she spoke after her time with the peasants was quite different; she described God as “the Good.” Her experience in Portugal, then, represents a turning of her soul that profoundly marked the direction of her life.

In 1937 and 1938, she had more intense experiences of God. She writes that in Assisi, Italy, in 1937, something compelled her for the first time in her life to go down on her knees (WFG, pp. 67-68). In Solesmes in 1938, she witnessed the liturgical celebrations from Palm Sunday to Easter. She describes the beauty of these celebrations—the music, ritual, and church architecture—as filling her with pure joy. During this time at Solesmes, she met a young English Catholic who introduced her to the metaphysical poets of the seventeenth century. She embraced this poem, the well-known “Love (III)” by George Herbert, with a passion:

Love bade me welcome: yet my soul drew back,
guilty of dust and sin.
But quicked-ey'd Love, observing me grow slack
from my first entrance in,
drew near to me, sweetly questioning,
if I lack'd any thing.

A guest, I answer'd, worthy to be here:
Love said, You should be he.
I the unkinde, engrateful? Ah my deare,
I can not look on thee.
Love took my hand, and smiling did reply,
who made the eyes but I?

Truth Lord, but I have marr'd them: let my shame
go where it doth deserve.

And know you not, sayes Love, who bore the blame?
My deare, then I will serve.
You must sit down, sayes love, and taste my meat:
so I did sit and eat.

She made herself meditate on this poem during her violent headaches. "I used to think I was reciting it as a beautiful poem," she writes, "but without my knowing it the recitation had the virtue of a prayer. It was during one of these recitations that, as I told you, Christ himself came down and took possession of me" (WFG, pp. 68-69). Weil later explains that God had prevented her from reading the mystics so that, given her critical and skeptical mind, it should be evident to her that she had not invented this completely unexpected contact.

The implications of this spiritual transformation in the life of Simone Weil were profound, but one potential implication certainly did *not* follow: namely, an abandonment of her commitment to social justice. Hers was not a dualistic spirituality; her concern for addressing the material needs of the human spirit was just as passionate as before her religious transformation, only now it was more consciously related to an awareness of the presence of the crucified Christ in the faces of the afflicted. Her involvement in the Young Christian Worker's Movement illustrates her interest in imbuing social and political reform with a Christian spirit. It is quite clear that Weil's nascent mystical consciousness only intensified and deepened her attention to the invisible and powerless of history and society.

Given this powerful interest in Christianity, and Roman Catholicism in particular, why is it that she refused to be baptized? Her answer to that question is a further instance of the strength of her convictions. She tells us that her love of non-Christian traditions and spiritualities (from ancient Greece, Egypt, India, and China) kept her from entering the Church (WFG, pp. 94-95). Given the negative attitude of the institutional pre-Vatican II Church toward the world's religions and secular traditions, Weil felt that a decision to enter the Church would signify a betrayal of the wisdom and truth that lies outside of the Church. This fidelity reveals her desire to be in solidarity not only with the European traditions of Christianity, but to embrace the histories and cultures of non-European peoples, "all the countries inhabited by colored races," in her words (WFG, p. 75). Thus, while Weil confesses that she loves "God, Christ, and the Catholic faith," she understood her vocation to be one in exile from the Church, to be a witness to the truth of Christ wherever she discerned truth to exist.

SIMONE WEIL'S INFLUENCE

The list of figures who have been inspired by Simone Weil is quite extensive. Albert Camus thought that her essays on Marx and on social and political themes, collected under the title *Oppression and Liberty*, were "more penetrating and more prophetic than anything since Marx."¹⁰ In his intro-

duction to Weil's *The Need for Roots*, the poet T. S. Eliot remarked, "we must simply expose ourselves to the personality of a woman of genius, of a kind of genius akin to that of the saints."¹¹ Pope John XXIII, who convened the Second Vatican Council, mentioned Simone Weil as a significant influence on the development of his thought. Such testimonies by very different individuals suggest the breadth and complexity of Weil's thought.

Not all the responses to her life and thought are affirmative. Charles de Gaulle didn't mince words: "She's out of her mind."¹² Georges Bataille called her with disgust "the Christian" and, in *The Blue of the Sky*, describes in the following way a character that he modeled on her: "She wore black, ill-fitting, and dirty clothes.... I felt that such an existence would only have sense for men and a world doomed to misfortune."¹³ Perhaps Weil would have conceded that her existence is unintelligible in a world devoid of affliction and misfortune, but, tragically, these are all-too-real in the time and space we inhabit. In Weil's own perspective, the suffering of the world, the mark of slavery, and the mark of the cross had entered into her person and contributed to the construction of her unique and transgressive identity.

The relevance of Simone Weil has never been greater. She is precisely the type of thinker that we should pick up to read as we embark on the new millennium because she helpfully combines perspectives that we hold apart in unhealthy separation—such as mysticism and prophetic thought, spirituality and politics, and theory and practice. And Weil's books are very readable. Her writing, like her way of life, is direct, honest, unsentimental, precise, and bare. In this light, her close friend Gustave Thibon expresses well the unity of theory and practice, form and content, and mysticism and prophecy in her life: "She did not write one line which was not the exactest possible expression of an irresistible inspiration and, at the same time, an invitation and an engagement to remain faithful to this inspiration, to embody in her whole life and to the very depths of her being what her spirit had glimpsed."¹⁴

NOTES

1 Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation* (New York: Delta Books, 1966), 49-50.

2 Bernard McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism*, volume 1 in *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1992), xvii.

3 Simone Weil, *Waiting For God* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1951), 99 (further page citations will be in the text).

4 Simone Petremont, *Simone Weil: A Life* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1976), 37.

5 *Ibid.*, 51.

6 Gabriella Fiori, *Simone Weil: An Intellectual Biography* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1989), 43.

7 Simone Petremont, *Simone Weil*, 204.

8 Robert Coles, *Simone Weil: A Modern Pilgrimage* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1987), 10.

9 See Simone Petremont's discussion of Weil's thesis in *Simone Weil: A Life*, 64-68.

10 See Henry Leroy Finch, *Simone Weil and the Intellect of Grace* (New York: Continuum, 1999), 59.

11 T. S. Eliot, "Preface" in Simone Weil, *The Need for Roots*, second edition (New York: Routledge, 2001), viii.

12 "Preface," in Simone Weil, *Oppression and Liberty*, new edition (New York: Routledge, 2001), xii.

13 Quoted in Gabriella Fiori, *Simone Weil*, 124-125.

14 Joseph-Marie Perrin and Gustave Thibon, *Simone Weil as We Knew Her* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1953), 135.



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