

often enough stained by sin, but still also imbued with true vocation and noble obedience. It may be that God permitted the political destruction of so many institutions that seemed external only, and the inner meaning of which was never grasped by our superficial minds. It may be that he wants to see what we can do when we no longer live in a Christian State but under a Nazi or Communist dictatorship. Yet all such philosophising on the divine judgment is merely guesswork. There is no doubt about God's sovereignty. He will do as he pleases. But there is no doubt either about our duty. As far as our inner life is concerned it is expressed by the Sacred Heart of Jesus that remains the eternal model and goal of our love. And as far as the institutions of State and community go, there is the rulership of Christ the King; his word is the law of laws because he is the King of Kings.

THE ENIGMA OF SIMONE WEIL

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WHY was it that Simone Weil, with her intense desire for the truth at all costs, with her love of God, of Christ crucified and of the Mass, was yet kept outside the Church and died without receiving baptism? The answer to this question is to be found partly in the letters which she wrote to Father Perrin, the Dominican, and which were published in an earlier book, *Waiting on God*, and more definitely in the *Letter to a Priest*,¹ which she wrote from New York a year before her death. It is not merely a personal question, because Simone Weil, though more intense in the ardour of her desire for truth and more uncompromising in its pursuit than anyone, perhaps, in our time, was yet typical of a whole generation of those who are apparently estranged from the Church or from any form of organised Christianity. She expresses the position both of herself and of many others in the opening words of the letter: 'When I read the catechism of the Council of Trent, it seems as though I had nothing in common with the religion there set forth. When I read the New Testament,

¹ (Routledge and Kegan Paul; 7s. 6d.)

the mystics, the liturgy, when I watch the celebration of Mass, I feel with a sort of conviction that this faith is mine. . . .' She then goes on to enumerate all the reasons which keep her from the Church, about which, she says, 'I have been thinking . . . for years with all the intensity of love and attention of which I am capable'.

The principal obstacle which stands in her way is undoubtedly the question of the relation of Catholicism to the other religious traditions of mankind, especially those of Egypt, India, China and Greece. This is a matter which deserves far more serious attention than it has yet been given. The awakening of the religious spirit in different parts of the world about five centuries before the birth of Christ is surely the most remarkable phenomenon in the history of mankind. It has recently been made the basis of a complete theory of history by Karl Jaspers in his book, *The Origin and Goal of History*. In it he takes this 'axial period' as he calls it, as the key to the meaning of human history. However we may explain it, it remains a fact that at this period there arose a series of teachers in India and China and Persia and Greece, who laid the foundations of all the great cultures which have survived to the present day, and who were moreover contemporary with the Prophets of Israel. What is the relation of this religious tradition to Christianity? This is the question which occupied Simone Weil continually. She was deeply impressed with the wisdom of this tradition, which she considered to be identical in many respects with that of Christianity, yet she feared that if she became a Christian she might be compelled to renounce it. Unfortunately the problem was rendered almost insoluble for her by the fact that she was possessed by a violent and irrational hatred of the Hebrews and the Romans, which prevented her from forming a just judgment of the relation of the religion of Israel to that of Egypt and Greece and the East. She could see nothing but what was good in the latter, while in Israel apart from Isaiah, the book of Job, some of the Psalms and the Song of Solomon, she could see nothing but what was bad. This extraordinary prejudice so clouds her vision that she is incapable of forming a sane judgment on the matter. This

is most unfortunate, as it is really the crux of the whole question. It is disappointing to find that Karl Jaspers, though he has a far more balanced view of the position of Israel, does not come to any more satisfactory conclusion. Though he believes that the 'biblical religion' may yet have a decisive effect on the future of mankind, he has no faith in any divine revelation properly so called, and all he has to offer, as a result of his study of history, is a humanistic faith based on natural religion.

There is surely a place for a view of history which, while recognising the unique character of the Hebrew and Christian revelation, would see in the whole of this great movement of thought in the centuries before the coming of Christ a providential preparation for that event. Already in the second century A.D., we find St Justin declaring that all who in time past have lived by the light of the 'Word' (the *Logos*) 'are Christians'; and Clement of Alexandria, whom Simone Weil so strangely accuses of talking 'silly nonsense', maintained that what the Law was to the Jews, Philosophy was to the Greeks, a 'pedagogue' to lead them to Christ. There is nothing to prevent us from extending this conception to embrace the teaching of the Upanishads, and the Buddha, of Confucius and Lao Tzu (or whoever the author of the Tao Te Ching may have been). But further than this there is evidence that the religion of Egypt and Babylonia and the archaic civilisation in India and China, from which the religion of the 'axial period' took its rise, was itself the inheritor of a profound religious tradition which can be traced back, as Rachel Levy has shown in *The Gate of Horn*, through the megalithic period right back to palaeolithic times. There is evidence therefore of a religious tradition going back to the earliest period of human history of which we have any knowledge, which can be seen to underlie the whole system of pagan religion; whether we attribute it to a primitive revelation or simply to natural religion, it is surely a sign that the approach to God has always been open to man under every system of religion. The figures of Abel and Noe, of Melchisedec and Job, who all stand outside the Jewish revelation, are evidence of this, as Simone Weil recognised. To this extent, therefore, it

is possible to go with her and to grant that under every form of religion there have been those who truly sought God and were recipients of his grace.

On the other hand it is impossible to put pagan religion even at its best on the same level as, much less above, the Hebrew revelation, as Simone Weil would do. There is something rather absurd in her remark that 'Zeus in the Iliad (in contrast with the God of the Old Testament) orders no cruelty whatever'. The point about Zeus, as about all the pagan gods, is surely that he orders nothing whatever. He has no moral authority at all. It is this matter of the moral law which she seems never to have squarely faced. 'The essential truth concerning God', she says, 'is that he is good.' Precisely, but none of the pagan gods were 'good' in the proper sense. The apparent cruelty of the Old Testament is due to the terrible demands of the moral law, which the prophets of Israel were the only religious leaders to face in all their rigour. There is no doubt an element of harshness in the Old Testament which was due to the imperfection of a people which had to learn the hard lesson of the Law without being yet able to grasp the mystery of love. But without the Law there can be no charity in the full and proper sense, and it was for this reason that the revelation of divine charity was given to Israel as it was given to no other people. However high one may place the level of contemplation attained by the eastern mystics, it is not the same as Christian contemplation, as Simone Weil maintains. There is no need to deny that they may have received supernatural grace, as grace is open to all who truly seek God, but it still remains necessary to discriminate between them. But if it were not for her irrational prejudice against the Hebrews and the Romans, one feels that Simone Weil might have been satisfied without great difficulty on this matter of the relation of Catholicism to the other religious traditions of mankind.

But there still remains the problem of the Council of Trent, and here, perhaps, we touch a deeper level of her difficulty. It is the dislike of dogma in any form which she shares with almost all people outside the Church at the present day. Simone Weil was a contemplative; for her 'the

dogmas of the faith are not things to be affirmed. They are things to be regarded from a certain distance with attention, respect and love.' Her trouble here arises, we believe, as is very commonly the case, from a confusion between the dogmas and the mysteries of the faith. The object of faith is properly speaking not a dogma but a mystery. Before the mysteries of the faith that attitude of loving 'attention' which she inculcated is indeed the proper attitude. But in order that the mysteries of faith may be made known to us, they have to be presented to us in an intelligible manner, and the dogmas of our faith are simply the intelligible terms in which the mysteries of the faith are presented to us. They are not the object of faith, but the means by which the object of faith is made known. They are like the sacraments, signs of a mystery which infinitely transcends them. Simone Weil was able to accept the sacraments of the Church as absolutely perfect, because they make present Christ himself. Could she have learned to see in the dogmas of the Church things no less perfect and holy, to be accepted by the intellect because they make present to our minds the divine Truth itself? This would have been the crucial question for her. She needed above all things to be able to submit her intellect to the truth. She had experienced the supernatural light which comes when the intelligence 'becomes silent in order to let love invade the whole soul'. But she needed to learn to submit her mind to the control of dogma in matters of faith in order to free herself from her own limitations. One feels a great power of supernatural love, but the intelligence, though keen and penetrating, was in many ways defective and blinded by ignorance and prejudice. There is also an element of intellectual arrogance. It is noticeable that, though the letter begins with a request for guidance as to the compatibility of her views with Catholicism, it becomes more and more an assertion of her own view in opposition to Catholicism. Whether she would ever have learned to submit her mind so as to receive the full light of faith we cannot tell, but of the quality of her love of God there is happily no doubt, and it is by our love that we are ultimately to be judged.