SIMONE WEIL AND GERARD MANLEY HOPKINS ON GOD, AFFLICTION, NECESSITY AND SACRIFICE

JOHN McDADE

Heythrop College, University of London

Abstract. Simone Weil's ideas on affliction and sacrifice have been interpreted by some as though they are the product of psychological problems. I will approach her writings on necessity and affliction through G. M. Hopkins' little prose masterpiece. Later I will suggest that she may be profitably related to some French spiritual writers in the 17th Century, who develop a link between the necessity of offering sacrifice to God and the radical contingency of created existence.

> *If I light up an electric torch at night out of doors I don't judge its power by looking at the bulb, but by seeing how many objects it lights up… the value of a religious or, more generally, a spiritual way of life is appreciated by the amount of illumination thrown upon the things of this world.* (Simone Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, 1970, p. 147)

At the beginning of his biography of Simone Weil, David McLennan identifies paradoxes that have fascinated readers since her writings became known after the Second World War: born into a comfortable bourgeois family, she became a fanatical supporter of the proletariat; a pacifist, she fought in the Spanish Civil War; a Jew, attracted to Christianity, she refused to join the Church because, in part, it was too Jewish and too much an expression of collectivity; she wrote beautifully about love but seemed to abhor physical contact with others; harbouring a deep pessimism about human nature, she developed schemes for human improvement; finally the strange consonance between her writings on affliction and her self-imposed discipline in relation to food which contributed to her death in Ashford, Kent, in 1943 at the age of thirty four (McLeannan 1989). This last aspect – the relation between her writings on affliction and her self-afflicted life – is the most intriguing.

FORUM PHILOSOPHICUM 13(2008), pp. 1-16

But one should not treat her ideas on affliction and sacrifice as though they are the product of psychological problems.[1]

I will approach her writings on necessity and affliction in a different way, through Gerard Manley Hopkins' little prose masterpiece from his 1881 Long Retreat notes on „the Great Sacrifice." Written by Hopkins for his own spiritual benefit, it is an astonishing piece of writing because of the quality of imagination that underpins the difficult theological truths it uses. Later I will suggest that she may be profitably related to some French spiritual writers in the 17th Century, Cardinal de Bérulle and Charles de Condren who develop a link between the necessity of offering sacrifice to God and the radical contingency of created existence. Simone's writings seem to me to echo this spiritual tradition which she may not have known directly but which were generally influential on the French Church's interpretation of sacrifice and which she may have absorbed from Catholic circles in the 1930s.

Given the importance that another great English poet, George Herbert, had for her through his poem, „Love bade me welcome" – it was the occasion of her becoming aware of „a presence more personal, more certain, more real than that of a human being, though inaccessible to the senses and the imagination" (Herbert 2001, xxiii) – the link with Hopkins might be fruitful, particularly since this particular text is redolent of themes that she will explore in her writings. It reads:

> The first intention then of God outside himself or, as they say, ad extra, outwards, the first outstress of God's power was Christ; and we must believe that the next was the Blessed Virgin. Why did the Son of God go forth from the Father not only in the eternal and intrinsic procession of the Trinity but also by an extrinsic and less than eternal, let us say aeonian one? To give God glory and that by sacrifice, sacrifice offered in the barren wilderness outside of God, as the children of Israel were led into the wilderness to offer sacrifice. This sacrifice and this outward procession is a consequence and shadow of the procession of the Trinity, from which mystery sacrifice takes its rise. But of this I do not mean to write here. It is as if the blissful agony or stress of selving in God had forced out drops of sweat or blood, which drops were the world, or as if the lights lit at the festival of the 'peaceful Trinity' through some little cranny striking out lit up into being one 'cleave' out of the world of possible creatures.

[1] H.L.Finch attacks 'psychologism' in relation to her writings: 'the idea that spiritual things may be „explained" or understood in terms of psychology': 'Simone Weil: Harbinger of a new Renaissance?' in S*imone Weil's Philosophy of Culture*, ed. R.H.Bell, (CUP, 1993), pp. 296ff.

> The sacrifice would be the Eucharist, and that the victim might be truly victim like, like motionless, helpless or lifeless, it must be in matter. (Devlin 1959, p. 197, Philips 1986, pp. 288-289).

Hopkins imagines an 'outstress' that impels God *ad extra*, describing this as „the blissful agony or stress of selving in God" – remember that *agonia* means struggle. This impulse outwards – what it is we do not know, but it is something intrinsic to God's act of existence, his 'selving' or *esse* – leads to the world's creation („which drops were the world"). When Hopkins speaks of the „stress of selving in God," he is, of course, speaking analogically: just as creatures are governed by the impulse in their nature by which they fulfil themselves, so God is subject to an intrinsic 'stress' from within that leads outwards to creation, sacrifice and the giving of glory in the wilderness outside God. The original feature here is that the creation is described in ways that evoke Gethsemane, the place of Christ's *agonia* where drops of sweat and blood are forced out of the body of Christ as he faces his death (Luke 22.44). We are to imagine the 'blissful agony' by which the world flows from the 'selving' of God as analogous to that of Christ in Gethsemane when sweat and blood flow from him: the world is 'pressed' from God as sweat and blood are pressed from the body of Christ. I know of no parallel to this astonishing suggestion, which seems to be original to Hopkins.

This 'outstress' of God issues in the related dimensions of creation, Incarnation and sacrificial atonement. The inner procession of God's Son is, we might say, the ontological Big Bang, the foundational movement of gift and self-emptying that culminates in the sacrifice of the Son on Golgotha, the 'consequence and shadow' of the Trinitarian life. What unfolds in this divine expressiveness is the very actuality of God extended and conveyed outwards in time and space as creative and redemptive self-sacrificing gift. How interesting at the end of the passage is Hopkins' aesthetic justification (an argument from fittingness in other words) for the role of matter in this movement outwards: what is to be offered finally to God must be a 'lifeless' victim, and hence it must be material – clearly it is to be the dead body of the Saviour on the Cross and on the altar.[2] It also anticipates Simone Weil's treatment of affliction, but more of that later.

[2] Cf. Han Urs von Balthasar's reference to Christ's 'corpse obedience' in *A von Balthasar Reader*, ed. W. Löser & M. Kehl, (T. & T. Clark, 1982), p. 153. The background is the Franciscan spiritual tradition which advises that the friar should be so devoid of self-will and subject only to the will of his superior that he can be compared to a corpse completely dead to self.

I doubt that Simone Weil knew this text of Hopkins, but I think she would have treasured it. Simone, like Hopkins, is alert to the inseparability of Incarnation and Atonement as intrinsic features of God's work of creation. She will think of the Incarnation as God's „chaining himself down by necessity."[3] She will see both creation and Incarnation not as an expansive outreach of a super-abundant God, but as a costly renunciation of divine power, a self-limitation in which God wills not to be everything and, so to speak, makes space and has time for things.[4]

Like Hopkins, she focuses on the question of how everything is, in Hopkins' terms, a product and reflection of the 'outstress' of God. She will be clearer of course that God's outstress is a kenotic self-limitation, what she will call a „voluntary effacement of God." Where Hopkins speaks of it as a divine movement outwards to give glory through the self-sacrifice of the Son, she will present creation as a withdrawal of the divine presence so that things can have room to be and so that the Son of God can become subject to the impersonal ordering of the world, what she will dub 'necessity,' there to be afflicted and to love God in the condition of harsh obedience.

The wilderness outside God is for her certainly barren in that it is experienced as bereft of God's presence. „God can only be present in creation under the form of absence," she says (Hopkins 2004, p. 109). God's act of withdrawal so that the world can exist is simultaneously a relinquishing of divine control and a handing over of events to an impersonal chain of necessity as the systems of the world run themselves. Some years ago, one of the cartoonists in The Guardian said that his aim was „to have a lifestyle in which his personal presence wasn't required": one sometimes feels that Simone portrays God in similar terms, active, but not fully present to the reality that depends on him. She speaks at times as though God's personal presence in relation to the creation has been replaced by ordering principles that are objective expressions of divine goodness, but which are the sole active agents in relation to us, pressing us to abnegation. This absence of God from the ordering of the world is not disastrous, she insists:

[3] 'God turns himself into *necessity*….Creation: God chaining himself down by necessity… Everything that I suffer, God suffers it too, for that is the effect produced by necessity, the free play of which he refrains from violating.' (*Notebooks* I, 190-1).

[4] 'Because he is the creator, God is not all powerful. Creation is abdication…. God has emptied himself. This means that both the Creation and the Incarnation are included in the Passion.' (FLN, 120)

> God's absence is the most marvellous testimony of perfect love, and that is why pure necessity, the necessity which is manifestly so different from good, is so beautiful. (Weil 1976, 402)

It is because of God's absence, what she also refers to as God's 'secret presence', that there can be what she calls „an unconsoled affliction which is necessary" (Weil 2002, p. 12). „A time has to be gone through," she says, „that is without any reward, natural or supernatural." (Weil 2002, p. 11)

She engages this question of God's absence in ways that are dramatic, rhetorical, paradoxical and even, one sometimes suspects, in ways that are simply wrong and misguided. For example, she offers a grim list of some of the consequences of the 'pure necessity' that governs the world and then explains that this necessity is a screen that protects us from full exposure to God:

> Relentless necessity, misery, distress, the crushing burden of poverty and of exhausting labour, cruelty, torture, violent death, constraint, terror, disease – all this is but the divine love. It is God who out of love withdraws from us so that we can love him. For if we were exposed to the direct radiance of his love, without the protection of space, of time and of matter, we should be evaporated like water in the sun…Necessity is the screen placed between God and us so that we can *be*. It is for us to pierce through the screen so that we cease to be.[5] (Weil 2002, pp. 32-33)

Is the list of things in the first sentence really to be attributed to 'divine love'? Yes, says Simone: they arise because the features of the world are both an expression of divine goodness and beauty and also a context that breaks and dissolves human beings. Both of these things are true. She describes necessity as „the obedience of matter to God," „an order whereby each thing, being in its place, permits all other things to exist"; necessity is „for matter the intersection of obedience to God and of the brute force which subdues creatures," exercising an ordered constraint on what happens in the world. The world has an irreducible structure which expresses not only beauty and order and goodness, but also justice: necessity, she says, is „the principle of coexistence… and basically the supreme justice for us is acceptance of the coexistence with ourselves of all creatures and all things which make up the existent." This is why she commends that we „consent impartially to the existence of all that exists," recognising that God's light

[5] But exposure 'to the direct radiance of God's love' is what we mean by resurrection and it is not evaporation but consummated union.

„shines impartially on all beings and things."[6] (Weil 1987, p. 18) She even counsels 'loving' the impersonal necessity that afflicts us:

> 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. We know that this universe is an object belonging to God. We ought to thank God from the depth of our heart for giving us necessity, his mindless, sightless and perfectly obedient slave, as absolute sovereign… We are the slaves of necessity, but we are also the sons of her Master. (Weil 1968, p. 186)

This wonderful necessity, so impersonal and complex, is willed by God in its own right, and our human identity is set in this ordered cosmos in such a way that within it we will be decreated, decentred, made nothing, be afflicted, bodily undone and spiritually freed. Time in the end brings dissolution and it is intended to do so: Simone looks at this with a cold eye. „There can be no answer," she says, to the 'why?' of the afflicted because the world is necessity and not purpose... whenever we look for final causes in this world it refuses them." (Weil 1968, p. 197) Or rather, there is a purpose but it can only be understood in relation to Christ's subjection to necessity:

> The absolute domination throughout the whole universe of a mechanical, mathematical, absolutely deaf and blind necessity is unintelligible unless one believes that the whole universe, in the totality of space and time, has been created as the Cross of Christ. (Weil 1987, p. 198)

For her, God does more than permit this kind of world, but rather *wills* it as an objective expression of his goodness; God incarnates in the world, Simone suggests, the divine attribute of beauty, but its very structure presses on us and afflicts us in a purposeless way. What happens to us is without purpose – it is, she suggests, random and impersonal – but we can charge that emptiness with meaning by accepting and loving the absent God in it, and indeed that is our flourishing. The „other who will take us where we would rather not go" (Jesus' words to Peter in John 21.18) is God and the cord that leads us is the necessity that structures the order of the world. As Samuel Becket puts in so sharply and in such a natural Irish colloquialism:

---

[6] How she regards necessity is fully explored in D.Allen & E.O.Springsted, *Spirit, Nature and Community: Issues in the Thought of Simone Weil* (State University of New York Press, 1994), pp. 33-52.

„Birth was the death of him." That is the necessity that governs us, Simone says at one time „in place of God," at another, that this is simply how God governs and presses us outwards. God's providence breaks us, and that will be for our good. Pointedly, she says that „suffering has no significance. There lies the very essence of its reality. We must love it in its reality which is absence of significance. Otherwise we do not love God." (Weil 1976, pp. 483-484) And in a note to herself, she writes: „I must not love my suffering because it is useful, but because it *is*." (Weil 1976, p. 434) Just as we are to be *good for nothing*, so we are to *suffer for nothing*.

Here I'm tempted to return to Hopkins' image and say that, mirroring what takes place in God, the 'stress of selving' in we who are subject to necessity forces out drops of sweat or blood, which drops are the genuine self, freed from our imagined place at the centre of all things. She is in no doubt that we spontaneously place ourselves at the centre of the world and are aggrieved that it does not owe us a living; this needs adjustment:

> To empty ourselves of our false divinity, to deny ourselves, to give up being the centre of the world in imagination, to discern that all points in the world are equally centres and that the true centre is outside the world, is to consent to the rule of mechanical necessity in matter and of free choice at the centre of each soul. (Weil 2001, p. 100)

In pursuing this line, does Simone fall at times into deism? Yes, clearly, but you must realise what she is doing. When reading Simone Weil, you discover that there are multiple, apparently contradictory, certainly random or at least incompatible ways of thinking of a particular thing, and we need to remember one of the principles she sets down about how to think: „We must welcome all opinions but they must be arranged vertically and kept on suitable levels." (Weil 2004) Different opinions are, as it were, stacked on top of one another in the one place so that we do not have to choose between them. They have their place in the complex of necessary statements that we need to make. This random flurry of thoughts is one of the reasons why one keeps reading her. But unlike Pascal, her *pensées* are not crafted in advance of their being written; the aphoristic style persists even in her essays. We should remember the principle she enunciates: „Method of investigation: as soon as we have thought something, try to see in what way the contrary is true." (Weil 2004, p. 102) By ignoring this, we can sometimes make her more systematic and poised than she really was. She is really a more tentative thinker than her commentators often recognise.

If Simone Weil speaks at times as though the order of the world, so worthy of reverence for its coherent complexity and beauty, is positively willed by God to purify us, on a very different track she suggests that the human analogue for God creating the world is not that of a person making something, but what happens when human beings perform acts of charity. This is a very fruitful approach. „The mystery of creation," she says, „finds its analogy in us in the mystery of charity passing into acts." (Weil 1976, p. 300) In other words, if you want to know what creation is, then live and act out of the charity of the suffering Servant – then you'll get a feeling for what it is for God to create, because by acting within the demands of charity, and paying the price of genuine loving, you will experience the Christian truth that God's work of creation flows seamlessly into making his Word present within the world's order of necessity and thereby enduring on the Cross the painful separation from God that the creation registers. Terry Eagleton puts it strikingly: „Eternity lies not in a grain of sand but in a glass of water. The cosmos revolves on comforting the sick. When you act in this way, you are sharing in the love which built the stars. To live in this way is not just to have life, but to have it in abundance." (Eagleton 2007, p. 164-165)

But Simone's more common and brittle vision is that God abdicates governance of the world, or rather hands it over to two forces: the gravity that governs matter and human freedom which exists in varying degrees:

> God causes this universe to exist, but he consents not to command it, although he has the power to do so. Instead he leaves two other forces to rule in his place. On the one hand there is the blind necessity attaching to matter, including the psychic matter of the soul, and on the other the autonomy essential to thinking persons. (Weil 2001, p. 99)

God wills to hand us over to an order that is intended to decreate and decentre us. You will remember that Augustine sought a mythical but no less real connection between the sin of Adam and our burden of suffering and mortality, and did so in order to convict us and not God of responsibility for the state of things. Simone seems to place responsibility on God who not only permits but wills the wine-press of our existence. Now these aspects are troubling because they focus on issues of how necessity and random events cohere with a doctrine of God's providential care.

Reading her makes one doubt if one can successfully sustain a clear distinction between God permitting and God willing, which is often thought to carry weight. You will remember the moment in *Into Great Silence*, the film about La Grande Chartreuse, when an elderly blind monk said that God

wanted him to be blind and to love him in this affliction. This could only be said by the man himself, of course, but for someone to be brought to a deep acceptance of affliction and to the spiritual truth that this affliction enables a deeper love of God, is something to which one should listen because this might be a testimony to grace. If Hopkins is right in saying that everything springs from the desire of the Son to give a glory to God that extends into the physicality of matter, then the world is simply a movement *Into Great Sacrifice* in which „the blind necessity attaching to matter" and the corresponding decreation of the self are how the world is drawn into giving glory to God. We, and everything else, are in 'deep God,' moments in the trajectory of the Son of God giving glory to the Father in the barren wilderness. That may be one aspect of what we mean by saying that we, and the whole creation, are 'in Christ.'

Referring to the myth of the Cave in Plato's *Republic*, which she finds much more useful than the Genesis story of Adam and Eve for speaking about our condition, she comments, „Idolatry is a vital necessity in the cave." Given this kind of world, we should not be surprised by the prevalence of idolatry; at the same time, we should be consoled that there can be transformative but still implicit forms in which God is loved, through neighbour, beauty and religious rites. She even goes so far as to judge the truth of religion by the quality of its grasp of God's self-limitation:

> The religions which have a conception of this renunciation, this voluntary distance, this voluntary effacement of God, his apparent absence and his secret presence here below, these religions are true religion, the translation into different languages of the great Revelation. The religions which represent divinity as commanding wherever it has the power to do so are false. Even though they are monotheistic they are idolatrous. (Weil 2001, p. 88)

To worship a commanding sovereign God, the cosmic tyrant, or conversely to reject such a God in the spirit of Ivan Karamazov, is to construct a metaphysical idol in place of the real God.

> No one goes to God the creator and almighty without passing through God EMPTIED OF HIS DIVINITY. If one goes to God directly, it is then Jehovah (or Allah, the one in the Koran). We have to empty God of his divinity in order to love him. He emptied himself of his divinity by becoming man, then [emptied himself] of his humanity by becoming a corpse (bread and wine), matter… To rebel against God because of man's affliction, after the manner of Vigny or Ivan Karamazov, is to represent God to oneself as a sovereign.' (Weil 1976, p. 283)

To treat God as a despot running a brutal cosmos is wrong because the whole process of uprooting of self and subjection to necessity begins with the movement of love and gift that God is. Nehemiah Polen, writing about the Hasidic Rabbi Kalonymous Shapira who died in the Warsaw Ghetto, says that in the Hasidic tradition, „acceptance of what is" is a high point of spiritual attainment. In the context of the Warsaw Ghetto, surely a terrible place in which to learn and practice this virtue, Rabbi Shapira may have exemplified it.[7] Read that phrase, „acceptance of what is" in a Thomist way, as „acceptance of *esse*," and read it in the light of the themes that we have been exploring in Simone Weil's writings, and we can say that she is centrally concerned about how we are to accept the self-giving *esse* that is God by extinguishing the false *esse* of our imagined lives and our idols.

What Simone will call 'decreation,' how we pass from self-directed life into the uncreated without illusions or self-generated fantasy about the self, corresponds to what God is, the foundational movement of self-relinquishing love.[8] As well as being a „nothing thought by God," Simone says, „We are a part that has to imitate the whole," and the whole (God presumably) is the foundational movement of self-emptying in which we exist. (Weil 2004, p. 140) Her vocabulary seems to evoke the very striking rhetoric of Cardinal de Bérulle, the great founder of the French Oratory in 17th Century Paris who was under no illusions about the stability or character of the self that is entirely dependent on God, to the point that he saw the person as a „nothing tending towards nothingness." But let the great Cardinal speak for himself:

> Nous sommes un néant qui tend au néant, qui cherche le néant, qui s'occupe du néant, qui se contente du néant, qui se remplit de néant, et qui enfin, se ruine and se détruit soi-même pour un néant. (*Opuscules de Piété* 1644 p. 26)
> (We are a nothing that tends towards nothing, which seeks nothing, which is concerned with nothing, which is content with nothing, which fills itself with nothing, and which in the end ruins and destroys itself for nothing.)

---

[7] N. Polen, *The Holy Fire: The Teachings of Rabbi Kalonymous Kalman Shapira, the Rebbe of the Warsaw Ghetto*, Jason Aronson Inc, 1994, 'It was left then for Rabbi Shapira to simply affirm, as a matter of faith that what was taking place was „how it should be." Under the circumstances, such an affirmation necessitated an abrogation of independent critical judgement, an act of „mental martyrdom" akin to the mystic's self-surrender of his very being to God.' (pp. 92-93) Polen points out that this is only one aspect of Shapira's response to the Shoah.

[8] 'In a sense God renounces being everything. We should renounce being something. That is our only good.' (*Gravity and Grace*, p. 33).

What did congregations of devout and not so devout religious in Paris make of this intensely metaphysical rhetoric? They may well have drawn an ontological frisson from this discourse, but one wonders if ideas like this were of much practical or spiritual help to them. The atheistic Jean-Paul Sartre and the religious Simone Weil, however, would have well understood what Bérulle meant about emptiness at the heart of the self. Simone relates our vacuity to the Incarnation: „To teach us that we are non-being (non-être), God made himself into non-being." (Weil 2004) Of course there are other and better reasons for the Incarnation than to convey this metaphysical lesson, but the point is not without significance. Engagement with radical contingency is both part of our human condition and what God assumes into the divine existence.

Abnegation and the extinction of self, the moral and spiritual acceptance of what is and the costly direction of the self towards God are central features of how we come to God. Love, after all, for her is direction, movement, attentiveness, waiting, not a state of soul. God is not reached by an expansion of the self: that only leads to circle-dancing and tree-hugging. She would have understood the constraints contained in Kafka's aphorism: „Two tasks at the beginning of your life: to keep reducing your circle, and to keep making sure you're not hiding somewhere outside it." (Kafka 2006, p. 93) She thinks that God is reached through the chipping away of the self, through a rétrécissement, a shrinking or contraction of the circle of the self by which we come to our core identity, freed from the rat-runs of the self-serving psyche. She explores in a circuitous and sometimes contradictory way how a self-sacrificing God creates a world wonderfully obedient to the necessity that governs it and, how within it human beings are brought into the movement of kenosis that „moves the heavens and the other stars." J.P. Little's comment is perceptive:

> It is to the initial act of creation that decreation is a response. I am, says Simone Weil, God's abdication, and the more I insist on being, the more God abdicates. To allow the full existence of God once more, it is therefore necessary for me to reproduce God's initial act of abdication, by refusing to be, and by destroying a part of myself. (Bell 1993. p. 27)

We began with a passage from Gerard Manley Hopkins and we should go back to it and attend particularly to the final sentence because for both Hopkins and Simone the sacrificial offering of the Son is the only key to the meaning of the world under God: without Christ, it makes no sense. We read again from Hopkins:

> The sacrifice would be the Eucharist, and that the victim might be truly victim like, like motionless, helpless or lifeless, it must be in matter.

In Hopkins' account, the climax of the movement *Into Great Sacrifice* is the religious ritual of offering bread and wine which have become the body and blood of Christ. There is, Hopkins suggests, a particular fittingness in the inert quality of what is taken into the Great Sacrifice, namely matter that is subject, in Simone's term, to *pesanteur*, gravity, and is opaque to life and movement. The Eucharist extends Christ's sacrifice to all of humanity through the medium of two lifeless material realities: unleavened bread and acrid wine which become irradiated with the divine presence. Presumably too for Hopkins, the inert quality of the Eucharistic elements evoke the condition of the dead body of Christ on the Cross, his status as lifeless victim in matter.

It can be difficult to understand Hopkins' emphasis on this final point in his account if we have forgotten the significance that the theme of sacrificial victimhood had in Eucharistic theology. Again, the 17th Century French spiritual writers are the reference point because they bequeathed to the Church a profound analysis of sacrifice in relation to Eucharistic and ascetic theology. (Galy 1951) If we assume that the main lines of this tradition came through to Hopkins, we will not be far wrong: this French teaching shaped all Eucharistic teaching up to Vatican II when the emphasis on the Eucharist as sacred meal drew attention away from that of the Eucharist as ritual sacrifice. The three great writers on sacrifice in this period were Cardinal de Bérulle, Charles de Condren, the co-founder with Bérulle of the Oratory in Paris and Jean-Jacques Olier, the founder of the seminary of Saint-Sulpice. Condren has the most fully developed analysis of sacrifice. (Bermond 1936, p. 298) A summary of his teaching will introduce him here:

> At the heart of Condren's spirituality was a strong consciousness of the fact of creation and the nothingness of man the creature, who is wholly dependent on God. This led to a great devotion to the Word Incarnate, the supreme priest and perfect victim, who in a state of interior annihilation and total immolation offered to God the only sacrifice worthy of the Creator.[9]

Condren had such a reputation for sanctity (St Vincent de Paul said he was without peer) that when Bérulle passed his door he „would throw himself on the ground to kiss the place where so holy a priest had trod."

[9] *New Catholic Encyclopedia* (Catholic University of America Press, 2003), vol. 4, p. 74.

(Bermond 1936, p. 250) His teachings come to us through his disciple Père Amelote who recounts Condren's inaugural religious experience as a twelve year old boy:

> when studying one day was suddenly aware of his mind being encompassed with a wonderful light, in the radiance of which the divine Majesty appeared to him so immense and so infinite that it seemed to him that this One Pure Being alone ought to subsist, and that all the universe should be destroyed for his Glory. He saw that God had no need of any creature; that his own Son, in whom was all his good pleasure, had of necessity offered up his life to him; that only the disposition of offering up himself and all things in Jesus the victim was worthy of his greatness, and that it was not enough to love him, if one were not ready, with his Son, to lose oneself for love of him… […]
> He felt strongly drawn to that mode of life which is a complete dying to things of the present, and a clinging to none but Jesus Christ; and so great was the power of this divine light on him that he could have wished to be instantly immolated to the Majesty that filled his spirit. […]
> For being in the abyss of his nothingness before the divine holiness and desiring ardently to be sacrificed for his glory, he was suddenly filled with a particular joy in seeing that the Son of God was ever the victim of the Father… He recognised that the sacrifice of Jesus Christ was the fulfilling of the zeal of all who themselves desired their immolation, but who were incapable worthily of honouring God by their sacrifice. That to present to the Father the Son who died, was to praise in infinity the divine holiness, justice, all-sufficiency, and in a word his whole infinity, acknowledging before the Father eternal that not only the universe but he himself merited destruction before him; and he saw that only the unique sacrifice of Jesus Christ was worthy of God. (Bermond 1936, pp. 294-295)

This remarkable experience is very revealing in the bond it makes between radical metaphysical contingency (*God alone is*) the necessity (fittingness?) of an act of sacrificial atonement (*all creation must find its destiny in being immolated with Christ)*: ontology and atonement meet and embrace, one might say.[10] As with the passage from Hopkins, Simone would probably have treasured this text because it reverberates with some of her characteristic themes: a fragile and contingent creation vacant of purpose; the impulse to offer oneself to the holiness of God who alone is; the role of

[10] This account has almost certainly been amplified by the adult Condren in the light of his later spiritual teachings. But that an intelligent and devout twelve year old, endowed with sensitivity to spiritual matters and exposed to a catechesis about the creation's contingency and a sacrificial account of the Eucharist, should feel things in this way is certainly conceivable.

Christ in giving glory to God through being a victim; joy in seeing that total sacrifice is how we break through to the actuality and full presence of God. Did Simone draw upon traditions like these? Surely she did; the parallels are unlikely to be accidental. (Bell 1993, pp. 49-41)

Earlier we saw that she speaks of „the blind necessity attaching to matter, including the psychic matter of the soul," and that she identifies the Son's entry into 'matter' as the nadir of divine self-emptying. Analogously, she thinks that through labour „man turns himself into matter, as Christ does through the Eucharist. Work is like a death." (Weil 2004, p. 181)

The Eucharistic parallel is clear:

> Catholic communion. God did not only make himself flesh for us once, every day he makes himself matter in order to give himself to man and to be consumed by him. Reciprocally, by fatigue, affliction and death, man is made matter and is consumed by God. (Weil 2004, p. 34)

It is significant, she suggests, that God, though the death of the Son and his Eucharistic presence, „becomes matter" and that humans too, through affliction and death also become matter.[11] Both are matter-bound, we might say. She relates the theme of humans being „made matter" and the way humans make themselves resistant to God, drawing a parallel between the opacity of matter subject to physical constraints and laws and the dense resistance of those who, although endowed with freedom, do not love God. If we do not become obedient to God, we become not disobedient, but „subject to mechanical necessity." (Weil 1968, p. 178) When a person turns away from God, she says, he gives himself up to „the law of gravity":

> Then he thinks that he can decide and choose, but he is only a thing, a stone that falls. If we examine human society and souls closely and with real attention, we see that wherever the virtue of supernatural light is absent, everything is obedient to mechanical laws as blind and exact as the laws of gravity. To know this is profitable and necessary. Those whom we call criminals are only tiles blown off a roof by the wind and falling at random. Their only choice is the initial choice by which they became such tiles. (Weil 2001, p. 75)

She judges that criminals, especially the „worst criminals" in their graceless inertia, are immersed in the obedience of matter to God and so, they, even they, obey God. She reaches the view – and one suspects that she delights in the intellectual playfulness of this very serious theme – that those

[11] Here we might want to correct her Eucharistic theology: it is not that God or Christ 'becomes matter,' but that matter becomes the presence of Christ in the order of signs.

who do not love God are unexpectedly obedient to God because by their choice, they do not cease to be obedient to God, but become obedient to God differently, in ways consistent with the obedience of matter's „compact and dark mass":

> God has created – that is to say not that he has produced something outside himself, but that he has withdrawn, permitting a part of being to be other than God. To this divine renunciation corresponds the renunciation of creation, that is to say, obedience. The whole universe is nothing but a compact mass of obedience. This compact mass is scattered with luminous points. Each one of these points is the supernatural part of the soul of a rational creature who loves God and who consents to obey. The rest of the soul is caught in the compact mass. The beings endowed with reason who don't love God are only the fragments of the compact and dark mass. They too are completely 'obedience,' but only in the manner of a falling stone. Their soul too is matter, psychic matter, subject to a mechanism as rigorous as that of gravity (*pesanteur*). Even their belief in their own free will, the illusions about their pride, their threats, their revolts – all that simply constitutes phenomena as rigorously determined as the refraction of light. Considered in this way, as inert matter, the worst criminals form part of the order of the world, and consequently, of the beauty of the world. Everything obeys God, and consequently everything is perfectly beautiful. To know that, and to know it truly, is to be perfect as the Heavenly Father is perfect. (Weil 1987, pp. 193-194)

Whenever I read this, it takes my breath away. Can we say this, I wonder? Is Simone ignoring the irreducible freedom and transcendence found in all human beings? It is the kind of statement which we cannot positively make because we do not know enough either about human beings or about how the world relates to God to be able to say that this is the case. But for our purposes here, allow it to stand as a speculation born of Simone's habit of bringing opposing realities into a coherent vision (*coincidentia oppositorum*). She must intend us to see a parallel here between what „great criminals" do – render themselves opaque to grace – and what affliction does indiscriminately to human beings, „depriving victims of their personality and turning them into things":

> It is indifferent, and it is the chill of this indifference – a metallic chill – which freezes all those it touches, down to the depth of their soul. They will never find warmth again. They will never again believe that they are anyone. (Weil 1968, p. 175)

Extending the theme to include the Incarnation, Simone points out that when the Son of God enters matter, going, as Hopkins puts it, „into the bar-

ren wilderness outside of God," subject to its dark necessities, he dies „like a common criminal, in the same class as thieves." (Weil 1968, p. 176) The Son's culminating obedience as lifeless victim is how they, „great criminals," we, matter itself, are taken up to give glory to God and this is extended to all through Christ's sacrificial presence in the Eucharist. As we know, Simone did not actively share in the Church's Eucharistic rite, but on the periphery of the Church she lived out Christ's mystery of obedient affliction and, we trust, entered the Great Sacrifice of creation with a difficult faith and a painful love.

References

Allen, D. & Springsted, E.O., 1994, *Spirit, Nature and Community: Issues in the Thought of Simone Weil* State University of New York Press.

Bell, R.H., 1993, „Simone Weil's Concept of Decreation," in S*imone Weil's Philosophy of Culture*, Cambridge University Press.

Bremond, H., 1936, *A Literary History of Religious Thought in France*, III, SPCK.

Devlin, C. (ed.), 1959, *The Sermons and Devotional Writings of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, Oxford University Press.

Eagleton, T., 2007, *The Meaning of Life*, OUP.

Galy, J., 1951, *Le sacrifice dans l'école francaise de spiritualité*, Paris: Nouvelles Editions Latines.

McLennan, D., 1989, *Simone Weil: Utopian Pessimist*, Macmillan.

Phillips C. (ed.), 1986, *The Oxford Authors: Gerard Manley Hopkins*, Oxford University Press.

New Catholic Encyclopedia, 2003*,* Catholic University of America Press, vol. 4.

Polen, N., 1994, *The Holy Fire: The Teachings of Rabbi Kalonymous Kalman Shapira, the Rebbe of the Warsaw Ghetto*, Jason Aronson Inc.

Veto, M (ed.), 1997, *Opuscules de Piété* 1644, Jerome Millon.

Weil, S., 2001, *Waiting for God*, Perennial Classics.

Weil, S., 2002, *Gravity and Grace*, Routledge.

Weil, S., 1976, *Notebooks*, II, Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Weil, S., 1968*, On Science, Necessity and the Love of God*, OUP.