

Social Justice, Civil Society and Simone Weil

This talk will offer a short introduction to the life of Simone Weil. It will engage some ideas and quotes from two of her most famous writings, *Waiting on God* (French: *Attente de Dieu*, published posthumously in 1950), and *The Need for Roots* (French: *L'Enracinement*, published posthumously in 1949), in order to consider questions of Christian action and civil society.

Simone Weil: Biography (1909-1943)¹

- Weil was born in Paris in 1909 to secular Jewish parents. She was raised 'agnostic'. She had an elder brother, the talented mathematician André Weil. They were reasonably well-off. Like her brother, Simone was a precocious child.
- Weil was admitted to the highly selective *École Normale Supérieure* in 1928: her second try.
- She had a vocation for social justice work and political activism that began at a young age; she sought to identify herself with the poor, the excluded and the afflicted.
- She qualified as a teacher of philosophy at the ENS in 1931, and upon graduation worked in schools in Puy, Auxerre and Roanne.
- At this stage she had become involved in the trade union movement, and actively marched and advocated for workers' rights.
- In 1933 Weil took a year's leave from her teaching post to work as a labourer in a Renault car factory, with the aim of better understanding a worker's life.
- In 1936, Weil travelled to Spain to fight in the Civil War, on the side of the Republicans against Nationalist forces.
- Having returned to Paris in 1937, Weil succumbed to illness and poor health, which would prevent her from working.
- It was during this time that Weil had a series of affecting mystical experiences. She describes how in 1938, she took to reciting George Herbert's poem *Love*. It was during one of these recitations, she explains, that 'Christ himself came down and took possession of me'.
- After the outbreak of WW2 in 1939, Weil moved to Marseilles. Here she met Father Perrin, who became her closest friend. Weil's letters and treatises addressed to Perrin form the basis of the work now published as *Waiting on God*.
- In May 1942 she and her family left war-torn France for New York, USA.
- Later that same year Weil travelled to London, UK, in order to serve the government of General de Gaulle, which was at that time in exile from occupied

¹ For a fuller biography see Malcolm Muggeridge's Foreword to Simone Weil, *Waiting on God* (London: Routledge, 2009), which is a major source for this handout.

France. It is here that Weil would write *The Need for Roots*. The text was intended as a report, written for the Free French in London, on the task of organising the regeneration of France.

- Weil's desire was to return to France in order support the war effort and tend to soldiers on the front line. This was not to be.
- In 1934, Weil's health, already frail, deteriorated. She was admitted to hospital in April, diagnosed with tuberculosis, and then later transferred in August to a sanatorium in Kent.
- Weil died on 29th August 1943, at the age of 34.

Key themes

Attention; obedience; passivity; affliction; love of neighbour; rootedness.

Key Quotes

Waiting on God (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1951).

"It is true that we have to love our neighbour, but, in the example that Christ gave as an illustration of this commandment, the neighbour is a being of whom nothing is known, lying naked, bleeding and unconscious on the road. It is a question of completely **anonymous**, and for that reason completely **universal** love".

"Christ made this clear enough [that the love of neighbour has the virtue of a sacrament]. He said that he would one day thank his benefactors, saying to them 'I was hungered and ye gave me meat.' Who but Christ himself can be Christ's benefactor? How can a man give meat to Christ, if he is not raised at least for a moment to the state spoken of by Saint Paul, when he no longer lives in himself, but Christ lives in him?"

The Need for Roots (translated by Ros Schwartz, London: Penguin, 2023).

"All Christians know that one day they are likely to hear Christ himself say to them: 'I was hungry and you fed me not'. Everyone imagines progress as being first and foremost reaching a state of human society in which people will not suffer from hunger...It is therefore an eternal obligation to a human being not to let them suffer from hunger when one has the opportunity to help them".

"Rootedness is perhaps the most important and least known human spiritual need. It is one of the hardest to define. A human being is rooted through their real, active and natural participation in the life of a collectivity that keeps alive treasures of the past and has aspirations for the future. This participation is natural in that it stems automatically from place, birth, occupation and those around them. Every human being needs to have multiple roots and to derive almost all their moral, intellectual and spiritual life from the environment to which they naturally belong".