

**The Dialectical Tension between *Detachment* and the *Relational*
in the Life and Writings of Simone Weil (1909-1943)**

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A Thesis presented to the Faculty of Theology in fulfilment of the requirements for the
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Abstract

Tyrone Grima

The Dialectical Tension between *Detachment* and the *Relational* in the Life and Writings of Simone Weil (1909-1943)

This study explored the themes of *detachment* and the *relational* within the life and the writings of the French mystic Simone Weil. This was done through intertextuality, using several primary and secondary sources. A number of sub-themes were selected and analysed to show the tension that these two seemingly opposite polarities can cause. Constant reference was made to the diverse socio-political movements that were developing at the time when Weil lived. The study also proposed a model of integration based on her life and writings, demonstrating that the apparent antagonism between these two main themes can be used as a vehicle for spiritual development and maturity. This study showed as well the relevance of the works of this mystic to contemporary society, particularly in the analysis of intimate one-to-one relationships. The main theological framework in this study was Catholic although it was also essential to refer to pre-Christian and Eastern religions due to the influence that these had on the spirituality of Simone Weil. This study also promoted the inter-disciplinary approach that can be fostered between various disciplines.

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Author's Declaration

I, Tyrone Grima, hereby declare that this thesis entitled “The Dialectical Tension between *Detachment* and the *Relational* in the Life and Writings of Simone Weil (1909-1943)” is an original study carried out by myself and that the conclusions drawn herein are a result of my own research.

Signature: _____

Tyrone Grima

Date: _____

Dedicated to Chris, who taught me more about the dynamics in this work than anyone else could have, by challenging me through our daily interchanges.

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

‘Il a créé toutes les forms d’amour. Il a créé des êtres capables à aimer à toutes les distances possibles.’¹

1.1 The starting point

Detachment and the *relational* are two fundamental themes studied in the works of mystics and spiritual authors, as well as scholars and academics in the history of spirituality. In the spiritual journey, the individual needs to detach from worldly possessions and attachments, including human attachments, to be able to grow in union with the Divine. The person is also called to grow in love with others, particularly the significant others in his life.² ‘All spirituality lies in consciousness’,³ and that involves primarily, a responsibility to the other. There is also a direct connection between the love for others and the love for God. In fact, ‘whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen’ (1 John 4: 20).⁴ This is due to the fact that the human being has been created in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1: 27). Each significant other becomes a tangible mirror of the intangible God, and by loving the other, the individual also loves God. These two themes, *detachment* and the *relational*, can be perceived as being antagonistic to each other. The research question that ensues, and that this study will investigate is, if a person is called to

¹ ‘He has created all forms of love. He has created beings who are capable of loving from all possible distances.’ Simone Weil, “L’amour de Dieu et le malheur,” in *Œuvres Complètes: Écrits de Marseille, Volume 1: Philosophie, science, religion, questions politiques et sociales* (Paris: Gallimard. 2008), 351.

² It is very cumbersome to keep on referring to the masculine and feminine gender continuously for the sake of political correctness. The end result would be the production of too heavy a text for the reader. Hence, I have decided to use the masculine.

³ Emmanuel Levinas, “Substitution,” in *The Levinas Reader*, ed. Sean Hand (Malden/Oxford/Victoria: Blackwell Publishing, 2009), 89.

⁴ The New International Version will be used for all Bible quotations, unless otherwise stated.

renounce all, how can he be in a relationship with self as well as with others, and what model of spirituality can be proposed to provide further reflection on how the person in his spirituality can practise the virtue of detachment and still be a relational creature.

The aim of this study will be to explore the tension that exists between these seemingly diametrically opposing polarities, and to present ways and approaches of how these relevant aspects can be integrated together in the spiritual life. According to Lonergan, it is the dialectical tension that characterises the religious experience.⁵ This implies that the tension between the polarities is not negative but needs to be understood in the complexities of its depth to be able to investigate the dynamics of the religious experience and to make use of these insights to create a model for integration. This will be done by studying in detail the writings and the life of the French mystic Simone Weil (1909-1943), who will serve as a paradigm to explore the tension and the integration of these two polarities.

Weil's life, albeit brief, is a very eventful and remarkable one. Born towards the end of the *belle époque*, she lived in a France and a Europe in which notable and important changes were occurring. She was a very well-read person and had an astounding knowledge of a variety of academic disciplines, being aware of the different contemporary movements in the arts and the social sciences that were developing in her time. Simone graduated in Philosophy from the *Ecole Normale Supérieure* in 1931 and worked as a lecturer till she quit her job to experience work in the factories. She persisted in these conditions for a full year to the point of exhaustion, and subsequently, she travelled around Europe. After her unsuccessful venture in the Spanish Civil War, Weil continued travelling. It was at this point in her life that Weil had deep spiritual and mystical experiences. The outbreak of the Second World War meant

⁵ Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1972), 111.

that following the Nazi invasion, and due to its Jewish origins, the Weil family had to translocate to the newly formed Vichy Regime in the southern part of France. When the situation deteriorated, the family migrated to New York. Weil's stay in the United States of America was very brief because her plan was to return to her native country to collaborate with the *Résistance*. She arrived in the United Kingdom in 1942 but was not given permission to be parachuted into France. Instead, she decided to reduce her food intake to share in the suffering that her compatriots were experiencing under the Occupation. This led to a collapse in her health. She was hospitalised but only survived for a few weeks till her premature death at Ashford in Kent on the 24th August 1943.

Simone Weil's thoughts are considered to be controversial, and have caused various debates in academic circles. The 'controversies' that are found in her writings should not deter the scholar in spirituality from studying the rich source of spiritual wealth present in her writings. After a dormant period, Weil's writings are being rediscovered and analysed further, showing her relevance to the contemporary person. Weil's writings need to be grounded also in her life narrative, not simply as an exercise of contextualisation, but because there is no schism between the writings and the life of Weil. On the contrary, they reflect each other constantly.

1.2 Religious framework

In the field of spirituality, it is possible to study themes without embedding them in a specific religious nomenclature. This is due to the fact that primarily the human being is spiritual before being religious. The spiritual dimension is an integral and innate part of the human being whereas religion is culturally bound. A person chooses a religious system, or else the religious system is 'enforced' by the cultural context he was raised in. Spirituality is not a choice since it is an inherent aspect of the human ontology.

Another available option in the study of spirituality was an eclectic or inter-religious framework where the themes being explored are studied against the models of a spectrum of spiritualities, rooted in a selection of religious denominations. The notions of *detachment* and the *relational* are important notions studied in a number of religious practices including Buddhism, Hinduism and Taoism, and, hence, it would have been possible to embrace an inter-religious approach in this work.

The initial approach taken in this study towards spirituality was a more focused one because the themes will be studied from the perspective of a particular religious denomination. This will also provide a legacy of wealth through which these themes can be analysed. A religion offers a framework against which themes in spirituality can be researched within a determined context, offering paradigms acquired over the centuries in the tradition of that particular religion and against which spiritual phenomena can be studied. Each religion offers the accounts and the experiences of individuals who have progressed on the spiritual path and whose narratives can help persons of the same religion to understand better the dynamics of their own spiritual life. This also implies that the themes, as understood within a particular religious denomination, will differ from the same themes explored in any other denomination,⁶ giving them a clearer and sharper definition.

A major methodological challenge was deciding which religious framework to adopt. This study focuses on Simone Weil, a person who never embraced officially, or totally, a religious denomination. She was interested and attracted profoundly towards Catholicism, but, nevertheless, Weil refused to be baptised,⁷ and never officially became a Catholic. In spite of

⁶ R. L. Gorus and W. R. Miller, "Assessing spirituality," in *Integrating Spirituality into Treatment: Resources for Practitioners*, ed. W. R. Miller (Washington D.C.: American Psychological Association, 1999), 57.

⁷ It is claimed that Weil was baptised before her death. According to Simone Pétrement, when Weil was in hospital in Middlesex, a visitor poured some water onto Weil's head, pronouncing the words of the Baptismal

the struggle with the Catholic Church as an institution, her spirituality is essentially Christocentric, focusing on the Passion and the Suffering of Jesus Christ⁸ and deeply rooted within the Catholic and Christian tradition. However, there are various aspects in her writings which are less orthodox to the Catholic tradition. There are also influences by Eastern and pre-Christian spiritualities, even though Weil perceived these spiritualities as having parallels with Christianity and reaching their fulfilment within Christian spirituality. It would have been limiting had Weil's reflections on *detachment* and the *relational* been examined exclusively from a Catholic perspective. Since Weil's writings transcend the institution of the Catholic Church, even though paradoxically they are rooted in it, the final decision was to opt for a phenomenological approach, based on Weil's own experience and understanding of the selected themes. This study will reach its conclusions based on the subjective experience and understanding of the French mystic, as expressed in her writings and juxtaposed against the myriad of influences, including the socio-political and religious milieu she experienced and reacted to, and the vast readings that Weil engaged in and reflected upon. The themes of *detachment* and the *relational* will be studied within the Catholic framework of spirituality in this work, but to render justice to the essence of the spirituality of Simone Weil, the themes will be also examined from a wider perspective to reflect the subjectivity of the mystic's thought processes.

rite. However, it seems that Weil never acknowledged the validity of this action because when she was admitted shortly afterwards in the sanatorium in Ashford, she stated that she was not a Catholic. See Simone Pétrement, *La vie de Simone Weil* (Paris: Fayard, 1973), 677-8.

⁸ Simone Weil focused on the Passion of Jesus Christ because of the theme of suffering and affliction that were central to her spirituality. She related and gave less importance to the Mystery of the Resurrection, being incapable in her human condition to relate with it. 'Et si l'Évangile omettait toute mention de la résurrection du Christ, la foi me serait plus facile. La Croix seule me suffit.' Simone Weil, *Lettre à un Religieux* (Paris: Gallimard, 1951), 62. 'And if the Gospel could remove any reference to the Resurrection of Christ, my faith would have been easier. The Cross is enough for me.'

1.3 Schools of spirituality

Weil's thoughts and experiences will be explored within the context of the schools of spirituality she is generally associated with. The tension in the study of spirituality between micro and macro spiritualities will also ensure the avoidance of any form of reductionism. It is possible to classify Weilian spirituality within a school or schools (macro-spirituality), but not at the detriment that Weil's understanding of her relationship with the Divine is simplified to conform to a predetermined model. Each person's spirituality is unique because each relationship with the Divine is unique, demonstrating that the macro-spirituality needs to be studied within the reality of the constantly evolving and developing micro-spirituality. Weil was an independent thinker who does not fit totally or exclusively in any school of thought, to the extent that she can be accused of syncretism.⁹ A holistic approach is recommended to avoid disregarding the richness of the nuances of Weilian spirituality by constraining it too rigidly into a school of spirituality.

Kinerk claims that there are four principal schools or models: the apophatic, the apostolic, the City-of-God and the prophetic.¹⁰ The *apophatic* model highlights the importance of negation in the spiritual path. The process of detachment from any external or internal factors is central in this model. The passive process in spirituality is also perceived to be the adequate approach in the relationship with the Divine. In the process of passivity, the individual is surrendering his will to God and allowing the Divine to become the main agent of his actions, thoughts and being. Conversely, in the *apostolic* model, the person works through external and internal factors to mature in the relationship with God. The other two models are less

⁹ Eric O. Springsted, *Christus Mediator: Platonic Mediation in the Thought of Simone Weil* (Chico: Scholars Press, 1983), 3.

¹⁰ Edward Kinerk, "Toward a Method for the Study of Spirituality," in *Review for the Religious* 40 (1981): 3-19.

relevant to this study. The *City-of-God* model focuses on the spatial dimension, believing that its parameters and the *modus operandi* of the chosen space will be the stimulus and the vehicle towards spiritual maturity. The fourth model, the *prophetic* model, fosters the cultivation of a specific virtue as a means of spiritual growth.

Simone Weil's spirituality is generally associated with the first model since, through the *via negativa*, the individual removes any excess that prevents maturing into the experience of nothingness. In this school of spirituality, *detachment* is a principal and salient trait. Weil's spirituality is also strongly rooted in the second model too, even though this might not be immediately clear. Her spirituality can be described as 'an other-centred' spirituality, that is, the mission to be a person for others. The *relational* is an extremely important component of Weilian spirituality. This work is going to attempt to demonstrate that these two aspects, from two different schools of spirituality are: a) strongly present in the spirituality of Simone Weil to the extent that they can be classified as corner-stones; b) are not separate to each other, but on the contrary, are mutually dependent, in spite of the tension and the antagonism that stems out of these two polarities; c) form the basis of a specific framework of integration.

1.4 Anthropological framework

The tension between the two models of spirituality that Simone Weil appertains to enables a better understanding of her anthropological framework. It is against this framework that the various themes studied in this work will be analysed. The first paradigm of her perception of the human person that can be identified from her writings and narrative is intimately linked with the apophatic model of spirituality. Weil believes that the human being needs to embark on a journey to embrace his nothingness to reach God through detachment. The second line of thought evident in the anthropology of Weil is connected with the apostolic model. In this

model, that emphasises the relational, the person is perceived as being a political creature whose duty is to be vigilant to the suffering of his neighbour: it is only by being attentive to the affliction of the needy that the union with the Divine can be achieved.

1.4.1 The apophatic model

Weil's point of departure in the apophatic model is that the human being needs to be in a process where he detaches from illusions.¹¹ Weil describes a journey wherein the person removes all obstacles that hinder him from reaching the truth. In Weil's understanding, the truth is the mystery of the *Logos*.¹² Her life and writings demonstrate that in her search for the truth, she was not afraid to face the crude reality of life, even at the cost of being radical and perceived as controversial. This study will also take into consideration the philosophical approach of existentialism, particularly the theories of Kierkegaard and Sartre, placing Weil's insights as an interesting 'alternative', where the human being detaches from everything, including the search for meaning, to be able to become part of the Divine reality of nothingness.

The cardinal dilemma that follows is to understand why Weil demands that the human being should venture into the void of nothingness. Is it absolutely necessary to engage in all this painful selflessness that she is proposing? The answer lies in Weil's vision of Man as a transcendental creature, capable of reaching union with God as a result of the intervention of Grace. According to Weil, Grace can only operate if there are no obstacles: it is the void that draws Grace.¹³ Paradoxically, though, this void can only be created through Grace itself. The

¹¹ Simone Weil, "Cahier IV," in *Œuvres Complètes: Cahiers (septembre 1941 – février 1942): La Science et l'Impensable* (Paris : Gallimard, 1997), 138.

¹² Simone Weil, "Intuitions pré-chrétiennes," in *Écrits de Marseille, Volume II: Grèce- Inde-Occitanie* (Paris: Gallimard, 2009), 203.

¹³ Simone Weil, "Cahier III," in *Œuvres Complètes: Cahiers (1933 – septembre 1941)* (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), 291.

duty of the human being is to be attentive and to focus on the love of God, allowing Grace to operate within the person. Referring to the parable of the Pearl¹⁴ in the Gospel of Matthew (13, 45-46), Weil explains that the person who found the pearl ‘did not need to dig up the field again to bury the pearl. It was enough for him to sell all his goods. Desiring God is renouncing everything else.’¹⁵

This clearing away of obstacles, in Weilian spirituality, also implies that human beings are limited, and cannot love God relying on their own merits. It is not within the capability of the person to love the Divine. The function of this withdrawal is to lead to self-effacement in such a way that the withdrawal will create the required space so that God can love humanity.¹⁶ The focus shifts from the self to God. The void allows God to love humanity, creating a space where this can happen.

In the apophatic model, Weil does not only explain the barriers that the individual has to overcome in the process of detachment in his internal life. Weil also speaks at length about the social constraints to the spiritual development of the person, since she perceives the human being as a social creature. Simone Weil refers to the damage caused by collective society¹⁷ as the Social Beast, a notion borrowed and developed further from Plato.¹⁸ She even declares that the social element in the human being is the realm of the Evil One. The sensory appetites propel the individual to focus on the ‘I’ whereas the Evil One, manifested in the

¹⁴ It seems that Weil, intentionally or otherwise amalgamates the Parable of the Pearl with the Parable of the Hidden Treasure, found in the same Gospel, a few verses earlier (Matthew 13: 14).

¹⁵ ‘...il n’a pas besoin de retourner le champ à la bêche pour déterrer la perle, il lui suffit de vendre tous ses biens. Désirer Dieu est renoncer à tout le reste.’ Simone Weil, *Attente de Dieu* (Paris: Fayard, 1966), 192-3.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 118.

¹⁷ By ‘collective society’ Weil is referring to political systems whereby any kind of group (such as a class, nation, race, society, state, etc.) was prioritised before the individual. This political trend was common in the 1930s, especially with the development of Stalinism in Russia and Fascism in Germany and Italy. Weil is not advocating individualism over collectivism since in both scenarios there is attachment to an entity, whether it is society itself (‘we’) or the self.

¹⁸ See Plato, *The Republic*, 492ec-493d, trans., John Llewelyn Davies and David James Vaughan (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth, 1997), 200-1.

collective nature of the city, focuses on the 'we'. In both cases, detachment is not possible since the emphasis is on the first person, whether singular or plural,¹⁹ whereas Weil believes that the focus should be shifted from the I/we to God.

Another notion that emerges strongly in Weil's writings and sheds light on her anthropology and spirituality is the notion of the impersonal God, although this aspect eventually developed and changed in Weil's spiritual journey, where she acknowledged partially the personal element in the relationship with the Divine.²⁰ Initially, Weil believed that the relationship between humanity and God should not be a personal one.²¹ If the human being is on a journey towards nothingness, he needs to surrender all securities, including God. Nobody can claim that God belongs to him, as though it were a personal relationship between two equal entities. In the process of self-effacement, there is no space for belonging: nothing does not belong to anyone and cannot be 'belonged' by anyone. God's manifestation can only be revealed through His hiddenness, through the impersonal rather than the ostentatious and the personalised rapport.

1.4.2 The apostolic model

Simone Weil also perceives the human being as a political and social creature: a creature who is in relation with the others around him, and that can attain union with God only as a result of relating with the other. According to Weil, humanity is in Plato's Cave²², and the constraints of this Cave deprive humanity from reaching total detachment.²³ Weil explains that as long as the person remains in the Cave, that is, in this world, he will never succeed in breaking free totally and permanently. Attachments, or what Weil calls *idols*, are

¹⁹ Weil, *Attente*, 25.

²⁰ *Infra*, 107-9.

²¹ Simone Weil, "Cahier V," in *La Science et l'Impensable*, 245.

²² See Plato, *The Republic*, 514a-520a, 225-30.

²³ Weil, "Dieu dans Platon," in *Marseille, vol II*, 99.

unavoidable. If the human condition obliges the worship of idols, at least partially, it is important to choose the least bad attachment, and that is God. All other human relationships are also valid if they lead to God,²⁴ thus corroborating the attachment.

Politics is a vocation and a vehicle that allows the human person to reach God through an active commitment towards others. Weil herself was actively involved in the political world, helping the individuals who were at the margins of society, and engaged in taking concrete steps in improving the conditions of the oppressed workers. Work should be a means that permits human beings to respect each other because of its cooperative nature, and not become a medium of oppression.²⁵ The worker should never become part of the collectivity because the consequence of this would be the loss of one's identity.²⁶ On the contrary, the cooperative nature of work should ensure that workers, through their individuality and uniqueness, work in tandem, fostering peace and love. It is towards this target that the spirituality of Simone Weil drives at. This concept is radically different from the concepts presented in the previous model, whereby the person is invited to venture into a passive journey to reach nothingness. This is another facet of Weil, which is definitely more active and dynamic. However, even in this model, the focus is not on the self. The political engagement is an instrument that facilitates the shift of the person's attention from the self to the other.²⁷

This study will not only focus on otherness within a political context, but will also analyse the insights provided by Weil within an interpersonal context, particularly in the case of intimate one-to-one relationships. The same dynamics which apply to Weil's political spirituality can be extended to one-to-one relationships, although the parameters and the

²⁴ Robert Coles, *Simone Weil: A Modern Pilgrimage* (Woodstock: SkyLight Paths, 2001), 147.

²⁵ Weil, "Cahier V," 237.

²⁶ Simone Weil, "Sur l'idée de Ganuchaud et Canguilhem," in *Œuvres complètes: Ecrits historiques et politiques, Volume I, L'Engagement Syndical* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), 49.

²⁷ Coles, *Modern Pilgrimage*, 59.

reality of such relationships demand a specific and pertinent approach and understanding. Within Weilian spirituality, whether in an interpersonal, social or political context, the *relational* is a vehicle that permits the person to journey from the self to the other, and ultimately leading to the Divine Other.

1.5 Sources

The principal methodology that will be used in this study is the intertextual approach. The starting point is the text, particularly the ones written by Weil herself. The study will refer to the extensive spectrum of writings that Weil has left in her legacy. The genres are varied, and this needs to be kept in mind when discussing the insights presented by her. This has not always been the case in Weilian studies, leading to the possibility of misinterpretation.²⁸ Appraising the genre adopted in her writing is a study in context within itself, which influences the understanding of the spirituality of Simone Weil. The range includes academic writings, some written in her student days and others published as articles in her lifetime. Other writings comprise notebook entries; letters to her family, friends, and to her spiritual director; and literary work. After her death, her mother collected these works, and parts of them were edited by Simone's friend Gustave Thibon. Recently, the French publishing house Gallimard gathered her writings in a number of volumes that are gradually being released.²⁹

²⁸ Examples would be Paul.Giniewski's *Simone Weil ou la haine de soi* (Paris: Berg International, 1978), who depicts Weil negatively and presents her as an anti-Semite, and John Hellmann's *Simone Weil's: An Introduction to her Thoughts* (Eugene: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1982), who considered her as having serious psychological issues.

²⁹ Not all the editions have been released to the date of the publication of this study, albeit the majority have. Most of the remaining few that have not been issued yet can be found as isolated publications and are also included in the bibliography at the end of this work. The only material that this study does not make reference to is some of the letters that Weil wrote to non-family members because of their lack of availability.

A number of secondary sources are also going to be referred to, in order to delve deeper into the multitude of interpretations on Weil's spirituality and philosophy, especially the aspects which are of a more controversial nature, such as her relationship with Judaism or her issue with gender. The selected spectrum of secondary sources will cover both writings that are 'apologetic', hence justifying stances that Weil took which might be initially perceived as perplexing, as well as others that are more critical of Weilian thought. The former transcend the initial reaction, either by juxtaposing it against the socio-political milieu, or by focusing more intently on the spiritual dynamics. In this category, one of the main authors is Coles (2001) who dares to address uncomfortable aspects of Weilian spirituality, grappling with them to invite the reader to penetrate deeper. Vetö (1994) provides a philosophical analysis of Weilian thought and spirituality whereas Rozelle-Stone and Stone (2013) present Weil's unorthodox theology, looking at the complexity and depth of her thought. In the second category, the most notable author is Giniewski (1978) who embarks on a fundamentalist crusade to challenge the image of the mystic and prove that Weil's anti-Semitism is a result of an intrinsically disturbed mind. Nevin (1991) is more balanced, not avoiding the darker aspects of analysis, and making sure that Weil is not idolised. This bilateral approach, which includes a wide range of authors who wrote about salient themes in the spirituality of Simone Weil, should approximate a more well-adjusted approach in the analysis of her spirituality.³⁰

³⁰ Although a wide range of studies were consulted for this study, the following had to be omitted as they were not available and within the author's reach: Rudolf Khun's *Deuten als Entwerden* (1989) is only available in German. Attilio Danese and Giuila-Paola di Nicola's *Abitare la contraddizione* (1991) and Massimiliano Marianelli's *Metafora ritrovata* (2004).

The character profile and the interiority of the mystic need to be evaluated appropriately as well. The mystic transformation can be studied not only through the writings of Simone Weil, and the secondary sources, but also through the ‘spiritual biographies’ that were written about her, keeping in mind the background and the agenda of the authors. The spectrum of these biographies encompasses extremes. Some of them, such as the biography penned by one of her closest friends, Simone Pétrement, manifest a reverential slant towards Weil. Conversely, Sylvie Weil’s work, Simone’s own niece, although not strictly a biography, is noteworthy for its use of humour that attempts to purge herself from a prenatal association with a mystic aunt which seems to have been too heavy a burden for her to carry throughout her life. These varieties allow for more triangulation, and to present a wider scope where the themes being studied can be placed.

Weil was influenced by several authors, especially from the disciplines of philosophy and spirituality. Plato, the Stoics and the Pythagoreans, John of the Cross, Descartes and Kant are part of an inexhaustible list of texts that left a remarkable imprint on Weil, who not only read them and pondered on them in detail, but made them hers, adding to them a distinctive understanding which nowadays forms a constitutive part of Weilian spirituality and thought. Through intertextuality, these writings will be studied and juxtaposed against her spiritual journey.³¹

All these works also need to be placed within a larger context. Weil’s spirituality is not an exclusive one, only applicable to those who have shared a common path with her, but provides a framework that is valid to any human person. Weil’s relevance and legacy lies in the fact that her insights are not only valuable to the philosopher and to the theologian, but to

³¹ To maximise on the correct understanding of the original text, where possible, texts were read in the original language. A Classicist was also commissioned to cite texts in Latin and in Greek in their original format.

a myriad of other realities, such as the reality of the psychologist, the educator, the economist, and the labourer. This study will attempt to reach a balance between inter and intra-disciplinarity. To understand Weilian spirituality the spectrum of reading needs to be broadened to include texts from other disciplines such as mathematics, physics, anthropology and history. This inter-disciplinarity will enrich the study and give the research the necessary grounding in the social and natural sciences that can explain, from their perspective, the themes being explored. It will also create a platform of dialogue between these different disciplines to ensure deeper comprehension. Theology, particularly spiritual theology, will nevertheless be the primary discipline through which the themes will be analysed.

Intertextuality demands an engagement between the researcher and the texts. It creates a space for the understanding of multiple readings of the texts, thus generating a dialogue between the reader and the text.³² In intertextuality, the primary and secondary sources are not analysed in a clinical and objective way, but as experienced through the lens of the researcher. This approach will allow for the experiential and the personal to dominate the research, gaining information which is not restricted to what can be determined through empirical methodology, but transcending it, so as to have a wider understanding. This means that the researcher cannot, and should not, be neutral. It is this engagement that makes the study original and relevant. The objective is to extend this symbiotic relationship³³ to the readers who will follow the journey presented in this study, with the hope that they will also participate in this dialogue that the study purports to convey.

³² Graham Allen, *Intertextuality* (Oxon: Routledge, 2000), 1.

³³ Kees Waaijman, *Spirituality: Forms, Foundations, Methods* (Leuven: Peeters, 2002), 742.

If intertextuality allows for a dialogical experience to occur, it would be correct to speak about a dialogical-phenomenological approach whereby it is possible to establish and acknowledge the ‘process of transformation (phenomenology) as the expression of the lived relation to God (dialogical thinking).’³⁴ It is dialogical to the texts themselves, and so it is as a result of the texts that the spiritual and mystical experience can be penetrated into. Through the engagement with the text, it is possible to enter a space of dialogue which permits an understanding of the depths of the mystical experience. The dialogical-phenomenological element is inseparable from the hermeneutical process in the reading of the texts of Weilian spirituality.³⁵ However, the dialogical-phenomenological approach does not limit itself exclusively to the text. In studying the mystagogical aspect of Simone Weil, other sources need to be referred to so that the research can be valid holistically. The dialogical-phenomenological approach also gives importance to the socio-political milieu, which is frequently depicted in the texts as well, providing an essential contextualisation. The experience of the mystic is grounded in the spectrum of factors that characterised and shaped the historical period that she was living in.³⁶ Weil was also subject to time and space, and her spirituality was lived through time and space. The inter-war period, with all the movements that were developing in this period, left an impact on the spirituality of Simone Weil. This means that in understanding the context, the researcher has to ponder seriously on the *zeitgeist*, that is, the principal trends that influenced and dominated the culture of the time that the mystic lived in.³⁷ It is only by marrying the context with the hermeneutics of her texts, and the texts that influenced her, that a thorough theological, philosophical and anthropological reflection can be made.

³⁴ Ibid., 595.

³⁵ Giovanni Trabucco, *Poetica Sopranaturale. Coscienza della Verità in Simone Weil* (Milan: Edizioni Glossa, 1997), 166.

³⁶ Ibid., 620.

³⁷ Ibid., 653.

1.6 Limitations and challenges

The themes that this study has purported to explore are focal themes in Weilian spirituality. Although these themes cannot be studied adequately without delving deeply into the philosophy of Simone Weil, the study is not of a philosophical nature, and the perspective adopted will be primarily theological. Weil's philosophical thoughts will be referred to, but integrated within her spirituality.

Another challenge and limitation faced in this research was the selection of themes within the scope of Weilian spirituality. The themes of *detachment* and the *relational* permeate all the work of Simone Weil, and feature also extensively in other themes that she delves into. Various attempts will be made to introduce other key concepts of Weilian spirituality *en rapport* with the main themes of this work. Due to the limitations of this study, these concepts in Weilian theology will only be analysed briefly, and the prime focus of the work will be the study of the tension and the integration between *detachment* and the *relational* within the spirituality of Simone Weil.

The reading and the analysis of the primary sources were also a major challenge in this study. A significant number of texts written by Weil were not penned to be read by the public. These include the letters and the *topos* that she wrote when she was a philosophy student. The notebooks (four collections by Gallimard) are personal insights, sometimes written without an evident context, often as separate sentences or paragraphs, but not necessarily linked to each other. They were written quickly, without any form of editing. There is a sense of 'experimentation' in these writings, as though Weil were mapping out her thoughts, to develop them further eventually.³⁸ In spite of the chaotic appearance, there is a consistency

³⁸ Springsted, *Christus Mediator*, 3.

and a coherence in her writings, which the reader needs to appreciate laboriously.³⁹ Weil's fragmentary work is reflective of her thought process, which eventually has to be synthesised by the reader.⁴⁰ In doing so, the reader engages with the texts and makes the experience unique to himself, creating a text of his own.⁴¹ The process of synthesis is facilitated when the reader understands these writings within the context of the rest of the corpus of Simone Weil. These writings can nevertheless be challenging, both in their comprehension, and in the analysis of the philosophical and spiritual insights provided by Weil.

The second problem in the analysis of the primary sources is the issue of language. Weil's use of language frequently pushed the linguistic limitations by making use of imagery and symbolism, making its analysis even more challenging.⁴² In the context of this study, this usage of language is more complex since the texts were studied in their original language, which is not the native language of the researcher.⁴³ There are nuances that might be misinterpreted due to cultural and linguistic differences. Semantic dynamics that influence the understanding of texts, particularly when read in a foreign language, may affect this study and presented a challenge to the process of research.

The secondary sources also pose difficulties. There are gaps in the period between her death and the period when this research was conducted where there was an absence of literature. Although the philosophy and the spirituality of Simone Weil became widespread after her death, particularly in the forties and the fifties, in the sixties and the seventies, the interest waned possibly due to her seeming association with left-wing politics in a period where any

³⁹ Lissa McCullough, *The Religious Philosophy of Simone Weil: An Introduction* (New York I.B. Tauris, 2014), 8.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 4.

⁴³ The translations of the original texts by Simone Weil quoted in this thesis will be provided by the author of this study in the footnotes.

writing that could be associated with extreme socialism was approached with trepidation. This was followed by a notable subsequent surge from the nineties onwards that led to numerous scholars producing interesting and relevant secondary sources. These sources, however, present another challenge: the difficulty of juxtaposing her spiritual insights with her persona. Like other mystics, the depiction of her character can be subject to both extremes: demonisation and glorification. Although she is less prone to the effects of hagiography, since being a twentieth-century figure, documentation is more reliable, the attempt to dehumanise her by justifying, or condemning, all her thoughts and actions can still be of peril to the spiritual theologian. Both extremes need to be avoided. The scholar should not limit himself to the biography, and to the interpretations emerging from biographical facts, but understand these facts within the universe of her thinking. This is not only important to ensure a balanced reading of the life of the mystic, but because it is the way to authentically delve into her spirituality.⁴⁴ It is Weil's humanity which is the key to understanding her spirituality, and it is particularly through her flaws that she nurtured a deep relationship with God that can be studied and serve as a remarkable guide.

Another challenge encountered in this research was the subjective options that needed to be made. Weil was well-read, and her texts are constantly in dialogue with other disciplines. In this research, priorities had to be established to decide which of these inter-disciplinary dialogues would be analysed for the purpose of this study, and which would be disregarded. In this selection, the main criterion of selection was the relevance of the dialogue with the themes being studied. This does not mean that the process was not contaminated by the personal interests of the researcher. As established, the subjective element is a strong feature

⁴⁴ Springsted, *Christus Mediator*, 2.

in the unfolding of this research, and this is reflected as well in the choice of interdisciplinary texts that will be referred to in this study.

1.7 Contributions

The major contribution that this body of research will be offering is the proposal of a model of integration, based on the insights deduced from the life and the writings of Simone Weil.⁴⁵ This model is a framework that can be adapted to a spectrum of lifestyles since it presents a methodology of advanced growth and development which is of particular importance and relevance to the contemporary person. This study will also be treading new ground by applying Weil's concepts on otherness to one-to-one intimate personal relationships. There is a dearth of literature in this field, and this work aims at addressing this lacuna by applying Weil's thoughts into the reality of intimate relationships. Another lesser contribution that this study will be presenting is the development on the concept of alterity in Weilian spirituality through quantum physics and quantum spirituality. By challenging Weil's premise that rejects quantum physics and its proposals, this research will show how this scientific theory can be used as a vehicle to understand Weilian spirituality further.

⁴⁵ The *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* was consulted to verify the originality of the study.

1.8 Structure

This chapter has expounded on the frameworks that will contain the themes discussed in this study, and the methodology that will be used to achieve the objectives set. It will proceed by providing a brief outline of the thesis.

The next chapter will focus on the two main themes of this study: *detachment* and the *relational*. This chapter will provide definitions and frameworks to understand these terms within the context of this study, analysing them not only from a theological perspective, but understanding them too from the perspective of the social sciences, particularly psychology and sociology. The chapter will then proceed by analysing different aspects of both themes, and presenting a literature review taken from the heritage of Christian thought, ranging from Biblical sources to more Classical Christian thought and ending with contemporary writers of spirituality. It will depict and discuss how *detachment* and the *relational* have been manifested in the diverse movements within the history of Christian spirituality by displaying the variety of ways these salient features of spirituality were, and are still being, expressed. It will also examine alterity by studying the relationship with God and with others. The latter will include intimate relationships, as well as the political commitment towards the marginalised. By the end of this chapter, it will be evident that *detachment* and the *relational* can be lived in a myriad of ways. These modes of expression will be referred to in the rest of the study and juxtaposed against the life and writings of Simone Weil. This chapter will conclude by referring briefly to the tension between these seemingly opposite polarities.

The third chapter will examine the theme of *detachment* within the writings and the life of Simone Weil, by selecting a number of sub-themes, and showing how the process of *detachment* can be studied through them. The selected sub-themes, although cardinal in any serious analysis of the life and the writings of Simone Weil, do not cover the whole spectrum of themes that are pertinent to the process of detachment in the works of this mystic, but provide a methodology of how the study of detachment can be approached in the study of Weilian spirituality. This presents a framework that can be easily transferred to any other theme. This framework will be constructed by analysing the diverse literary and philosophical influences that influenced and moulded Simone Weil's spirituality. It will also take into consideration the major significant developments that happened at the end of the nineteenth century, and the first forty years of the twentieth century, mostly in France, attempting to demonstrate how the socio-political, artistic and philosophical movements that arose during this period affected the thought process of Simone Weil. The evaluation of the virtue of *detachment* will be examined within the constant struggle and tension inherent in Weilian spirituality. The first three sub-themes will focus on the *religious* dimension, showing how Weil chose to detach herself from any form of security that religion and spirituality could offer. The rest of the chapter will proceed by analysing how the purification that occurred in the religious dimension of Weil's life happened also in her engagement with the *socio-political* and *psychosocial* realities, and how these also served as a way for spiritual growth. The socio-political process is presented in this study as an extension of the spiritual dynamics. Although chronologically the socio-political process preceded the spiritual, this study challenges this clear-cut and articulated timeframe by showing that the seeds of the spiritual transformation had started earlier, and grew in parallel with the socio-political reality.

The same procedure will be adopted in the subsequent chapter, this time focusing on the theme of the *relational*. This chapter will also examine the dynamics of relationality within Weilian spirituality by enculturing them within the socio-political milieu in which the mystic lived. The spirituality of relationality in the writings of Simone Weil will also be presented in contrast with the practice of detachment. This tension will be used as a vehicle to penetrate more deeply into her spirituality. The different expressions of relationality within the Christian tradition, explored in the second chapter, will also be referred to as a backdrop to comprehend the spiritual heritage that moulded Weil's thoughts. Otherness will be examined throughout the chapter on two levels: intimate one-to-one relationships and social relationships, mirroring the same approach that will be embraced in the second chapter. The rationale behind this decision is to demonstrate that the dynamics of relationality present within the socio-political realm are reflected also within the dynamics of intimate relationships. The chapter offers a framework so that these insights can be transferred from one reality to another. The chapter will commence by exploring the relationship with God and consequently with others, reiterating the fundamental perspective in Weilian spirituality that the two are intimately linked. This dynamic will also create the platform to analyse the concept of *metaxu* which will be used as a methodology to explore the *relation*. The chapter will advance by applying these fundamental principles in selected salient sub-themes in Weilian spirituality. It will focus on the aspect of the beautiful and orderly, and proceed by delving into the more challenging aspects of Weilian spirituality on otherness.

The fifth chapter will depict a model of integration based on the tension between the two main themes of this study, as evidenced in Simone Weil's writings. Weil does not present a model of integration in an articulated and descriptive manner. The model will be inferred through the insights found in her writings. This will be done through her theological

reflections, most of which are based on the mystery of Catholic dogma, without, neglecting the influence that other religions had on her. In this chapter, there will be references to the literature mentioned in the previous chapters, as well as to other scholars in Christian spirituality who have delved deeply in the importance of integration between seemingly opposing polarities. These references will provide the research the required tools to be able to deepen the analysis of this model of integration. The methodology that will be used to understand this model of integration is the spirituality of contradiction. The chapter will attempt to define it and to delve into the aspects that constitute this spirituality, within the understanding of Simone Weil. An analysis of mystical imagery will also conclude the chapter to demonstrate that the mystical transformation experienced in this model of integration transcends human language.

The final chapter will be a reflection on how this thesis can serve as a springboard for further studies within the field of spiritual theology and other related humanistic studies, outlining suggestions for extended research. The conclusion will also demonstrate how the model of integration proposed in this study can become a platform of dialogue with society and with the Institution of the Catholic Church. The voice of Simone Weil, manifested through the tension of the key concepts in this thesis, and through the model of integration, is very relevant to the contemporary scenario and offers valid insights that can be adapted to promote a healthier lifestyle.

CHAPTER II

Detachment and the relational

This chapter will focus on the two main themes of this study: *detachment* and the *relational*. Before exploring how these themes exhibit themselves within the life and the writings of Simone Weil, these themes need to be defined, or at least presented within a framework, and placed within the context of this study. This will be done by delving deeper into the different aspects of how *detachment* and the *relational* have been manifested in the diverse movements within the history of Christian spirituality, thus showing the relevance of these two themes over the centuries, and displaying the variety of ways these salient features of spirituality were, and are still being, expressed. This chapter will conclude by glancing at the major challenge of this study, that is, the tension between these seemingly opposite polarities.

2.1 Definition of detachment

Detachment is a theme that has been studied and explored in various contexts, including non-religious ones. This demonstrates that detachment is also relevant outside the realm of spirituality. The insights provided by the social sciences will also provide a deeper understanding of the term.

In studies on psychological growth, detachment, particularly as opposed to attachment, is given considerable weight. The child needs to learn how to detach from the parent to be able to grow. When the child is still attached to the mother, he will protest every time the mother leaves him to the care of another adult for a lengthy amount of time. Growth occurs when the mother distances herself temporarily and briefly from the child, returning eventually. This

process provides the child with the required security. After a number of times, the child will become comfortable with the mother's departure. The child is learning to become detached and less dependent upon the mother, allowing him to make the first steps in autonomy.¹ The human life cycle can be seen as a struggle between attachment and detachment. The first form of detachment occurs when the umbilical cord is cut off, physically separating the child from the mother. As the growing child struggles with detachment from the parents, reaching its climactic point in adolescence, the individual forms attachments with peers, and eventually, enters adulthood, generally forming an attachment with a significant other. Even in the attachment with a significant other, there is the interplay between the need for detachment, since the individual still requires space for personal growth, and the interpersonal growth in the relationship. Adults who become parents form attachments with their children, but have to experience detachment when the grown-up child forms his own life, resulting for some in the crisis of the 'empty nest syndrome'. Ultimately, detachment is experienced at its intensity in death: death of significant others and finally death of self.² This demonstrates that detachment is an essential human experience, and that human beings are born into the paradox of the struggle between attachment and detachment, growing as a result of the tension that arises between the two in the cardinal stages of the human cycle. A person can progress from one stage to another by going through this paradox and living out the inherent tension.

¹ John Bowlby, *Attachment: Attachment and Loss*, Volume 1 (New York: Basic Books, 1983), 28.

² Bowlby's attachment theory is still considered to be the main model for the study of attachment even in contemporary psychology. More recent research tends to look at cross-cultural differences in attachment, with varying results, some maintaining that the theory transcends culture, others demonstrating that the theory is culturally-bound. Recent critics are also focusing more on the tension between nature and nurture within the attachment theory, arguing that heredity is far more important than the transient effects of early environment, in the way that the attachment is formed between mother and child. There is also more awareness of the fact that in modern and contemporary society the child is not exclusively exposed to a relationship with the mother, and the resultant multiple relationships might, and possibly do have, an effect on the attachment/detachment patterns of the growing individual.

There are also psychological benefits earned through detachment in the adult phase of life. The self-actualised person benefits from the freedom from attachments and fears.³ When this state of freedom is achieved, the individual becomes almost unafraid of the unknown.⁴ Psychology has confirmed that persons who manage to let go, attain serenity and calmness, because even though they are aware of the realities surrounding them, they remain distinct without relying on others to achieve their own tranquillity.⁵ Research also indicates that detachment enables persons to cope with various cognitive and physiological aspects of behavioural problems, such as eating disorders.⁶ Studies in psychology in recent decades, have shown that detachment is beneficial and essential for the growth and the welfare of the individual. Growth is arrested whenever there is fear, particularly of what is deemed to be dangerous or new: a fear that grows out of the fact that generally human beings prefer to remain static and not venture into virgin territory. The state of being static is in direct opposition to growth, and the person can enter into a space that is conducive to growth by letting go of these fears through detachment.

In the social sciences, the importance of detachment is studied from the perspective of the individual: the extent to which the person is going to benefit by pursuing detachment. The prime interest of the social sciences is not the spiritual realm and the relationship with the Divine, and the way detachment affects this rapport. It is towards theology that one needs to turn to be able to examine the interface between detachment and the relationship between the human being and God.

³ Abraham Maslow, *Towards a Psychology of Being* (New York: Van Nastrand, 1968), 107.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 138.

⁵ Kathryn M. Gow, "Letting go: For Physical, Emotional, and Spiritual Health," in *Journal of Religion and Health* 38 (1999): 155-165.

⁶ G. Alan Marlatt and Jean L. Kristeller, "Mindfulness and Meditation," in *Integrating Spirituality*, 79.

The *New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality* defines detachment as being ‘a willingness to give up any worldly value for the sake of a higher spiritual good.’⁷ According to this definition, worldly values are not necessarily perceived as negative or immoral, although the post-conciliar authors speak of detachment in terms of spiritual freedom from sin or disordered inclinations.⁸ The definition does, however, present a hierarchy in which the ‘worldly’ is perceived as inferior to the spiritual.

Another definition, taken from the *New SCM Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, describes detachment as being ‘an act of spiritual freedom...a virtue that allows a person to review competing goods and choose that which most fulfils one’s life ideals or values.’⁹

Both definitions emphasise the ultimate goal of detachment, that is, the highest ideal in life, which is spiritual as opposed to the physical. The first definition accentuates the act of surrendering, whereas the second definition presents an anthropology whereby the human being prioritises the more beneficial options within a myriad of available choices. The first definition highlights the passive elements in the virtue of detachment, that is, the person released from the blockages in spiritual development; and the second definition denotes the human being as an active agent, selecting which channels will allow him to grow towards union with the Divine. Essentially, these definitions both imply that the individual primarily needs to identify a number of mundane attachments that are hindering him from developing spiritually. These attachments can include the desire for objects, people or concepts such as greed, wealth or power.

⁷ George E. Ganss, “Detachment,” in *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*, ed. Michael Downey (Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1993), 269.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 270.

⁹ Howard Gray, “Detachment,” in *The New SCM Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*, ed. Philip Sheldrake (London: SCM, 2005), 234.

The perspective of classical philosophy, as manifested in Platonic thought, and the perspective of the Gospel will provide a deeper analysis of these definitions. This comparison will highlight the difference between the act of detachment in the Christian vision and the detachment advocated by Plato – even though the Platonic concept has also influenced Christian thought in this respect.

In Platonic thought, the removal of the hindrance in the process of detachment is sufficient. The body and the sensory world are the main obstacles to fulfilment, and by detaching from them, the individual can attain truth. The emphasis is not on the relationship with God but on the capability of the individual to free the self from the constraints of the body to reach the spiritual. In fact, Plato, as said through the mouth of Socrates, states in the *Phædo* that:

...if we consort with the body as little as possible, and do not commune with it, except in so far as we must, and do not infect ourselves with its nature, but remain pure from it, until God himself shall release us; and being this pure, through separation from the body's folly, we shall probably be in like company, and shall know through our own selves all that is unsullied – and that, I dare say, is what the truth is.¹⁰

In the perspective of the Gospel, the process of detachment can only occur if the person is engaged in a relationship with Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit. In turn, this relationship is strengthened as a direct consequence of the process of detachment. The more the individual relates with the Divine, the further he delves into the process of detachment which, consequently, helps the relationship to deepen. Within the Christian experience, detachment becomes both the cause and the effect of the relationship with Jesus Christ. The *point de départ* in Christian detachment is the relationship with Christ, as opposed to Platonic

¹⁰...ἐὰν ὅτι μάλιστα μηδὲν ὁμιλῶμεν τῷ σώματι μηδὲ κοινωνῶμεν, ὅτι μὴ πᾶσα ἀνάγκη, μηδὲ ἀναπιμπλῶμεθα τῆς τοῦτου φύσεως, ἀλλὰ καθαρεύωμεν αὐτοῦ, ἕως ἂν ὁ θεὸς αὐτὸς ἀπολύσῃ ἡμᾶς: καὶ οὕτω μὲν καθ' αροῖάπαλλαττόμενοι τῆς τοῦ σώματος ἀφροσύνης, ὡς τὸ εἶκος μετὰ τοιούτωντε ἐσόμεθα καὶ γνωσόμεθα δι' ἡμῶν αὐτῶν πᾶν τὸ εἰλικρινές, τοῦτο δ' ἐστὶν ἴσως τὸ ἀληθές. Plato, *Phædo*, 67a, trans., David Gallop (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 13.

detachment where the interaction between the human and the Divine is not the starting point, but a completion of the act of detachment. In the Christian understanding, the process of detachment cannot be brought to its fruition without the intervention of the Divine since it is the rapport between the human and the Divine that characterises the entire process. In the Christian vision, detachment cannot even take place without the infusion of Grace: it is a gift given by God in His Divine love.¹¹

Another difference between the Platonic and the Christian perspectives is the attitude towards attachments. In the former, they are seen as being intrinsically a hindrance since they deter spiritual growth. In the Christian perspective, they are perceived as being an obstacle if they affect the relationship with the Divine, particularly if the individual attaches more importance to them than to God. In fact, Jesus Christ warns that ‘anyone who loves their father or mother more than me is not worthy of me’ (Mt. 10: 37a). The individual learns how to surpass the dependency on attachments, placing the relationship with God as the essential priority in life, in such a way that fulfilment does not rely on the attachments but on the rapport with the Divine. This process is done out of freedom, without any sense of fear or compulsion. The person embarks on the process of detachment as a result of the loving relationship with Christ, without being coerced or obliged.

In the Christian perspective, attachments are not necessarily considered to have a moral value or perceived as evil. There are specific attachments that are agents of immorality since they damage the relationship with others and with God. Other attachments, however, are not intrinsically immoral *per se*, and some of them may be intrinsically good, but can cause a blockage in the relationship with the Divine if they become more prominent than the

¹¹ Henri Martin, “Epoque moderne et contemporaine,” in *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, tome III, ed. Marcel Viler, Charles Baumgartne and André Rayez (Paris: Beauchesne, 1957), 498.

relationship with God. To recapitulate the Christian is not called to detach – detachment in itself as the destination point is of no concern for the follower of Christ – but to relate with the Divine. Detachment from worldly hindrances is a direct consequence of the relationship with the Divine, a vehicle that leads to the relational.

Over the centuries, many fallacies have prevailed leading to a misunderstanding of the meaning of the virtue of detachment. The oversimplification of the process of detachment led to a misconstrued connotation with aloofness. The isolation of particular mystics from the mundane should not be interpreted as a form of indifference towards the social realm. The Christian tradition can be cited, amongst other religious traditions, to demonstrate how socially rooted mystics are. The deep contemplations of the Desert Fathers reveal an authentic dimension of alterity.¹² In the Middle Ages, the mystic Catherine of Siena was politically involved to encourage Pope Gregory XI to return to Rome.¹³ Ignatius of Loyola in the sixteenth century was a striking active figure in the Counter Reformation,¹⁴ while in the twentieth century, Dorothy Day did not relent from social activism.¹⁵

Detachment is not isolation, but a form of solitude in which the person is relating through the detachment.¹⁶ Detachment is not alienation. It is not a fictitious realm that has no connection with the real world. The detached person is a social being who is progressing spiritually, and for this to happen, must be in resonance with, and grounded in the world, relating to it, without being dependent or attached to it.¹⁷ The detached person is aware and in touch with the present moment, with the persons who are currently in contact with him, and with the

¹² Philip Sheldrake, *Spirituality & History* (London: SPCK, 1991), 45-9.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 96-7.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 123-8.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 183-4.

¹⁶ Martin Buber, *I and Thou* (London/New York: Continuum, 2004), 80.

¹⁷ Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism* (New York: Dover Publications, 2002), 409.

context and the situation he is operating within. The detached person is aware and feels the pain of human existence. He recognises and embraces the present, but, paradoxically, by staying with it, is able to transcend it, not because it is his objective, but because transcendence occurs as a direct consequence of being with the present moment. Detachment is not necessarily abstinence or avoidance. It is not de-attachment, nor the fear of attachment: the detached person practises detachment through healthy attachments, as will be delved into more deeply at a later stage of this work.

2.2 Aspects of detachment in Biblical and Christian spirituality

Over the centuries, the understanding of the virtue of detachment developed, allowing the scholar to comprehend that there are various facets and aspects of this virtue. This section will attempt to delineate these aspects, referring to a number of movements and figures who have contributed extensively to the virtue of detachment within the heritage of Biblical and Christian tradition. In doing so, a brief literature review will be presented, outlining some of the main authors within the Christian legacy that have written about detachment.

2.2.1 The renunciation of worldly goods

The first aspect underlining the virtue of detachment is the renunciation of worldly elements to make a shift from dependency on earthly possessions to dependency on Providence. This process is challenging because human beings are attached to their belongings. The followers of Christ are called to engage in this challenge and renounce their belongings as they relate on a deeper level with the Divine. In this context, the question that needs to be posed is whether renouncing everything is indispensable for spiritual growth. In the Bible, Abraham is a key example that sheds light on the importance of renunciation in the process of detachment. He was asked by God to leave his native country on a journey to the Promised

Land (Gen. 12: 1-3). Abraham's sacrifice was even more significant because his wife was barren. Abandoning his land – his only locus of security – to travel to an unknown territory with an infertile woman was a sign of total detachment and trust in God's Providence. This invitation to surrender from all security and belongings in the Bible was not only offered to individuals but even to a collective: the people of Israel experienced this process of detachment in their forty-year journey in the desert from slavery in Egypt to the land of Canaan. There is an evident parallel with the blessing promised to Abraham in his renunciation since 'it is clear that the blessing to Abraham is to extend to others.'¹⁸ This blessing, and by corollary, the detachment that is required for the blessing to occur, is extended, thereafter, to God's Chosen People,¹⁹ the Hebrews in the Old Testament, and the followers of Christ from the New Testament onwards. In fact, the apostles Peter and Andrew are called to leave their nets – a symbolical representation of their belongings and their securities, being their means of income as fishermen²⁰ – to follow Christ (Mt. 4: 20). The discipleship commences when the letting go of the nets occurs.

The decision to renounce everything finds its meaning in Christ. To a certain extent, what matters in spiritual growth is not how much the person has renounced, but identifying where his securities are, where his source of comfort springs from, and removing them to deepen the relationship with Jesus Christ. This highlights the concept that worldly attachments are not wrong but that in the developing relationship with Jesus, the Christian learns how to prioritise and focus on the essence of the relationship. The renunciation of worldly goods, as understood by the follower of Christ, is not a loss or a removal of belongings and possessions

¹⁸ B. Vawter, "Genesis," in *A New Catholic Commentary on Holy Scripture*, ed. Rev. Reginald C. Fuller (London: Nelson, 1969), 190.

¹⁹ Simone Weil had a strong issue with the concept of the Chosen People. This will be discussed at length in the next chapter. See *infra*, 86-7.

²⁰ Benedict T. Viviano, "The Gospel according to Matthew," in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, ed. Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmeyer and Roland E. Murphy (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1968), 639.

but a substitution for a rapport that is of a superior nature, since it is the relationship with the source of all love: a relationship with the Son of God. Truth can only be achieved by the renunciation of worldly possessions – in much the same manner as Plato had advocated. The sole objective of this process, however, is to experience Christ as *the Way*. The renunciation of worldly goods in detachment is neither a sacrifice nor a loss. Through detachment, the individual realises the superfluity of belongings since Christ is all that the person needs. The process is sufficient for all the demands of the journey; and anyone who travels on it wants for nothing.²¹ The meaning of life attains its fulfilment and climax through the relationship with Christ, showing automatically that other attachments are less meaningful in comparison.

2.2.2 The renunciation of life

The first aspect of detachment gives rise to a number of questions. The main difficulty that arises is that if the individual renounces his possessions to deepen the relationship with Christ, it is not a form of barter or substitution, and not on the same level of weighting. The person will be gaining more than what he is abandoning, even though the renunciation of worldly goods requires a strong sense of sacrifice. There is also an evident paradox: renouncing worldly matters for the Kingdom of Heaven, and yet remaining in the world, can be perceived as a contradiction, and, indeed, has frequently been considered a contradiction in the history of Christian spirituality. This led to movements in the Church that embraced lifestyles which were more radical in their approach towards detachment. These movements emphasised the importance of the totality of renunciation, that is the renunciation of life.

²¹ Origen, *Commentary on John*, trans., Allan Menzies (Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1995), 312.

In the history of the Church, particularly in the first centuries, this form of detachment took two forms. Initially this was expressed through martyrdom. The martyr was not attached to his life, and was ready to surrender it to proclaim the faith. This is clear in the words of Jesus where He invites his disciples to detach themselves by spurring them to ‘renounce themselves and take up their cross and follow me’ (Mt. 16: 24b). This renunciation demanded by Jesus anticipates the teaching on martyrdom: the detached Christian is ready to give his own self for the Kingdom of God.²² The martyr was prepared to surrender his own life because the belief in the relationship with Christ surmounted the trials of the persecutions that he was enduring.

From a spiritual perspective, this form of detachment is problematic, particularly if desired by the individual, for although the Christian is called to detach himself, the value of life needs to be respected. Martyrdom is not an act that a Christian should actively seek. Furthermore, as Christianity established itself as the official religion of the Roman Empire, persecutions dwindled and the possibility of dying for the faith decreased, rendering martyrdom a less frequent occurrence. The ensuing difficulty arose: how could one renounce his life without necessarily becoming a martyr?

This question led to the development of the second form of radical detachment in the early years of Christianity: the monastic movement. This movement emphasised the radical aspect of detachment, denoting that the person needed to detach totally and not partially, by ‘leaving’ the world. Total renunciation is expressed through the abandonment of all the commodities of life. The person does not decide which of his belongings he would like to detach from, but gives his all to God. This calling demands that the person abandons all his

²² Adrian Leske, “Matthew,” in *The International Bible Commentary*, ed. William R. Farmer et al. (Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1998), 1304-5.

belongings and segregates himself away from the rest of society. The person does not have any of the basic attachments, including property of his own, to be able to relate with the Divine exclusively. The focus of the person is not on the mundane life but on the eschatological, and the objective of the process of detachment, according to this model, is soteriological, a means for the salvation of the soul.²³

The rationale of this lifestyle indicates a need to return to the *vita apostolica*,²⁴ a need to go back to the roots. Like the apostles, the early monastics were driven by the call to renounce their former 'life'. As the movement of monasticism developed over the centuries, the drive for detachment from the world, *fuga mundi*, became even more pronounced, although expressed and facilitated in different ways according to the spirituality of the particular monastic tradition. An interesting example that can illustrate this dynamic better is the Benedictine spirituality. The Rule of the Benedictine Order dictates that the monks are not to possess anything to be able to renounce life in the world. In the first Benedictine communities not even basics like pen and paper were allowed. The emphasis of detachment in the Benedictine spirituality is also on soteriology, and every form of renunciation is done for this purpose. Haughtiness, perceived as an attachment to the importance of one's life, is a dangerous impediment to the salvation of the soul, and Benedictine spirituality protects the monk from this pitfall. The illusion that salvation is possible, uniquely through the capability

²³ The salvation of the soul in this context is referring to the afterlife, that is, the participation in the Divine life in the celestial abode. A more modern understanding of soteriology would extend the meaning of the salvation of the soul to include a more holistic welfare of the human being, eliminating the schism between the physical and the spiritual. The person is saved as a whole, and salvation is a process that commences in this world. Adopting this soteriological approach, detachment could still be seen as a means for salvation since detachment is beneficial for the welfare of the human person as a whole entity. As seen in the psychological understanding of the term, the detached person leads a healthier life, and it can be concluded that no matter which approach is embraced in the understanding of the word *salvation*, detachment is still an essential vehicle for the process.

²⁴ Saint Basil (329/330-379) encourages the monks in Letter CCXCV: 'παρακαλοῦντες ὑμᾶς πάντας τὴν ἐπὶ τὸ αὐτὸ ζῶν καταδέξασθαι εἰς μίμημα τῆς ἀποστολικῆς πολιτείας,' Basil The Great, "Letters," in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Series II*, Volume 8, ed. Peter Schaff, (Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1995), 317. '[A]dopt the life in common, after the manner of living of the Apostles.'

of the person, is shattered by a lifestyle where the monk is stripped from any form of attachment or status that the person might have had.²⁵ On entering the monastery the monk loses the right of possession to all belongings including his own body,²⁶ based on the paradigm of the slave²⁷ who renounces everything including his body and life and becomes a nonentity. In Benedictine spirituality, the monastery, the New Jerusalem for the monk who abandons his own city, becomes his only vehicle to salvation: he requires nothing else except what the monastery provides for him. As seen in the introductory chapter, this form of spirituality is known as the City-of-God spirituality.²⁸ In this model of spirituality the creation of a space occurs where God can be present as a result of the emptiness that the lifestyle is based on, and in this space, the spiritual relationship can be nurtured.

Despite its challenging nature, the monastic lifestyle can still be perceived as a second option when compared to the more radical approach present in martyrdom. It fosters a renunciation of the mundane life that is to be replaced by a life grounded in a space that leads to deeper spiritual growth. This model can be accused of being a form of bartering rather than a total renunciation as martyrdom demands. The question that arises at this point is whether total renunciation of one's life is possible, and to what extent, if martyrdom is excluded.

²⁵ A deeper critical reflection is given about this matter by Adalbert de Vogüé who traces the various influences that led to the formation of the *Rule* that shaped Benedictine spirituality, and analyses how the practice of detachment is linked intimately with soteriology. See Adalbert de Vogüé, *The Rule of Saint Benedict: A Doctrinal and Spiritual Commentary* (Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 1983), 209-223.

²⁶ 'Praecipue hoc vitium radictus amputandum est de monasterio, ne quis praesumat aliquid dare aut accipere sine iussione abbatis, neque aliquid habere proprium, nullam omnino rem, meque codicem, neque tabulas, neque graphium, sed nihil omnino: quipped quibus nec corpora sua nec voluntates licet habere in propria voluntate' Saint Benedict, *Regula Monasteriorum* (Alba: CN, 1945), 206. 'The vice of personal ownership must by all means be cut out in the monastery by the very root, so that no one may presume to give or receive anything without the command of the Abbot; or to have anything whatever as his own, neither a book, nor a writing tablet, nor a pen, not anything else whatsoever, since monks are allowed to have neither their bodies nor their wills in their own power.'

²⁷ Simone Weil also believed that by default the human being is a slave, always needing to attach to someone or something. These attachments need to be purified to make way to the only form of slavery that is acceptable for a human being, that is, slavery to God. See *infra*, 255-63.

²⁸ *Supra*, 7.

To gain insight into this problematic question, the spirituality of the Sacramental life will be referred to since the Sacraments are a form of detachment. In the Sacraments of Baptism and Reconciliation, the individual is detaching himself from a past life.²⁹ It is through this detachment, made significant in and through the Paschal mystery, that the person is born into a new life. In Confirmation and in Holy Orders, detachment occurs in the change in lifestyle that these two sacraments initiate the participant into. The Eucharist detaches the person from earthly pleasures by giving him a taste of the spiritual life. This detachment is also rooted in the Passion narrative for it is through the same words used by Jesus Christ and which are repeated in every Mass that the process of detachment is actualised. When Christ says, ‘this is my body given for you’ (Luke 22:19b) and ‘this is my blood of the covenant which is poured out for many’ (Mark 14:24a), Jesus is encouraging His followers to delve into the same process by renouncing attachments and ‘pouring’ themselves out for others.³⁰ The Sacrament of Marriage initiates the spouses into a new life where the two detach from the self to unite into one body.³¹ The Anointing of the Sick is a detachment from the world itself.³² Sacramental life is demonstrating that the Christian is not invited to detach from life itself, as much as detaching from the attachment to life. By opting for a new life, the person is, by default, detaching from a previous lifestyle that was less whole, to a life which is more complete. This, as has been seen in this section, can be done in several ways ranging from the Grace infused in the participation in the Sacramental life, to more radical choices, such as the monastic life or martyrdom. The common factor between these actions, is the act of embracing a form of detachment that opts for a life which is more complete, albeit partially, since any lifestyle on earth can never be totally wholesome, as this is only attained

²⁹ The theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar (1905-1988) demonstrates how baptism is a sacrament of ‘letting-oneself-be-given the form of death and resurrection of Christ for the life of the world as one’s own affirmed form of existence.’ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The von Balthasar Reader*, ed. Medard Kehl and Werner Loser (Breisgau: Herder, 1997), 277-8.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 282.

³¹ This concept is challenged by Simone Weil. See *infra*, 201-2.

³² Martin, “Epoque moderne et contemporaine,” 500.

exclusively after death in the eschatological experience. This choice is pointing towards completion, and consequently, becomes a process towards totality itself. The radicalism is in the approach embraced, rather than in the actions: the Christian is invited to a life of detachment, irrelevant of his vocation, so that detachment becomes the principal calling for all the followers of Christ.

2.2.3 Inner transformation

Hitherto detachment has been examined as being an external manifestation. The objection to these forms of detachment, which nevertheless remain valid, is that detachment becomes equivalent to abstinence. According to these models, the detached person abstains to be able to grow spiritually, and this abstinence is expressed through an external action.

The issue with this dynamic is that it could lead to social elitism within the field of spirituality, emphasising the valour of the individual.³³ This manifestation of the virtue of detachment places the successful person on a pedestal, particularly those whose actions have been performed in an ostentatious manner, as opposed to those who cannot be radical in their outward actions. The accent falls on the action and on the final product. Since society gives more merit to the result than to the struggle of the process, this approach towards detachment can be misread as giving more importance to its final objective, that is, the renunciation, than to the process of detachment itself.

³³ Sheldrake, *Spirituality & History*, 68-70.

The external expressions would be vain unless propelled by an inner disposition of detachment, and this is what lies at the core of the process. Any external action should happen as a natural consequence of this inner transformation, rather than as the primary cause itself. Detachment that is not rooted in an inner metanoia remains a facade, a process that is only superficial and does not reach the depth of the heart. As Christ says, the person will look like ‘whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of bones of the dead and everything unclean’ (Mt. 23: 27b). The renunciation of belongings and commodities should lead to more depth whereby the dispositions and the emotional fluctuations of the individual demonstrate that he does not have attachments with earthly belongings. The Christian should not only practise detachment, but above all, develop an attitude of detachment.

The cardinal question is whether it is necessary to practise detachment externally to reach this inner disposition. Is detachment only possible for those individuals who segregate themselves from the rest of society and from their belongings, or is it possible to be rooted in society without being attached to it, and cultivate detachment internally? Is detachment an external process manifested in the action of abandoning wealth and retreating, or an internal disposition? Is segregation from society and separation from material possessions a guarantee that the individual is genuinely engaged in the process of detachment? The crux of the matter lies in the internal process, in the renunciation of self, since ‘it is certainly less hard to deny what one has, for it is extremely much harder to deny what one is.’³⁴ Attaining the internal disposition is more challenging than practising the external detachment, particularly since the latter is an action, and all actions have a beginning and an end, qualified by a time frame.

³⁴ ‘Minus quippe est abnegare quod habet, valde multum autem abnegare quod est.’ Gregorius Magnus, “Homiliae in Evangelia,” in *Corpus Christianorum Series Latina CXLI*, ed. R. Etaix (Belgium: Leuven University Press 1999), 278.

Internal detachment is a state, and requires consistency and constancy. Internal detachment requires a daily renewal.

Placing the emphasis on inner transformation removes the heroic veneer from the virtue of detachment, making it accessible to any Christian. Detachment is not only reserved for monks and martyrs. It is possible to live in the world and not belong to the world. In times of persecution, Christians felt the need to surrender all their belongings, including their lives. In times of peace, the Christian needs to surrender himself, focusing on an inner form of detachment.³⁵ Martyrdom is an action that occurs once, a radical decision that a person takes at a given point in life. *Au contraire*, detachment is not the manifestation of heroic virtue displayed once, in a grand way, but a constant struggle that requires patience and uniformity. Without undermining the strength of the martyr, internal detachment highlights the need of stamina. Detachment is no longer defined by an episode marked by a decision, such as the acceptance of martyrdom, but becomes a grounded internal attitude. In fact, ‘we are not asked to be flawless, but to keep growing and wanting to grow as we advance along the path of the Gospel.’³⁶ There is a marked shift from the *becoming* to the *being*. It is less correct to state that the individual achieves detachment, at least within the parameters of time and space in this life, than it is to say that a person is in the process of detachment, denoting the constant struggle that is inherent.

³⁵ ‘Certe enim persecutionis tempore erubescere poterant fideles, substantiis denudarsi, de dignitatibus deici, verberibus affligi. Pacis autem tempore quia haec a nostris persecutionibus desunt, est aliud ubi ostendamus nobis.’ Ibid., 282. ‘For certainly in the time of the persecution, the faithful could feel ashamed to be stripped of their wealth, to be removed from their distinctions, to be stricken by scourges. In the time of peace, because these things are wanting from our persecutions, there is something else where we may be exposed to ourselves.’

³⁶ Francis, Pope, Adhortatio Apostolica: “Evangelii Gaudium,” (24 November 2013), III.151, in AAS105, 12 (2013), 1083.

2.2.4 Active and passive approach

The focus on internal transformation in the process of detachment still remains an ambiguous and unresolved dynamic unless another important impasse is brought to the fore, that is, the process of how this internal transformation occurs. Is it an active process where the emphasis is placed on the individual who needs to maximise on his efforts to reduce the sinful inclinations, or is it a passive process whereby the individual focuses on the relationship with God, which leads to the transformation, the ‘new creation’? Should the approach be more on the negative, on the individual who is growing in the virtue of detachment by diminishing his sinfulness, or on the positive, on the development of the relationship that flourishes as a result of this virtue? Ultimately, is detachment a question of *doing* or of *being*? The Fourth Gospel emphasises the notion of rebirth in the conversation of Christ with Nicodemus: ‘no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again’ (John 3: 3). This reference indicates a second birth, a spiritual birth.³⁷ Birth is not an action that the individual can induce: it implies a passive process for the offspring being delivered. The verb ‘to see’ has the same significance as ‘to experience’. The spiritual life cannot be experienced and lived through, unless the person is born again. This ‘re-birth’ occurs through an immersion in the spiritual life, an emphasis on the *being*, because, as Christ explains further in the same conversation, ‘flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to the Spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, “You must be born again” ’ (Jn. 3: 6-7). Within the context of the dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus, Christ is expounding the notion that it is not the natural birth right of being born within the Jewish community that makes a person a child of God, but the supernatural infusion of Grace that each person is born with, and that each individual can nourish if engaged in a relationship with the Divine.³⁸ The flesh, which in this context is not

³⁷ W. Leonard, “The Gospel of Jesus Christ according to St John,” in *A Catholic Commentary on Holy Scripture*, ed. Bernard Orchard (Edinburgh: Nelson, 1953), 985.

³⁸ Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Bangalore: Theological Publications, 2004), 341.

to be connoted with evil or immorality, is tangible and can control external factors: it is an active agent.³⁹ Nevertheless, Christ is demanding a relationship that transcends the physical, and which the senses have no control over. It is a passive process. The insistence is on the transformation, generated through this infusion, rather than on any action on the part of the person, be it to expurgate sin or to perform good deeds.

Conversely, the active and the passive approach need to be understood as opposite sides of the same coin. Detachment is reached through the cleansing of sinful patterns requiring an active approach by opening oneself to this process, and also in the transformation of the person into a new being, that is, the passive approach.⁴⁰ The conversion from sinful patterns is a profound transformation of the individual, one that leads to a deeper metanoia. The struggle between the above-mentioned concepts should not be perceived as schismatic, but as a process in which both lead to each other. There needs to be the willingness and the decision to detach oneself from sinful patterns and become rooted in a relationship with Jesus. This will enable the person to be reborn in Christ, which will eventually result in further openness.

The passive approach is not linear and sequential: perceiving this process in separate and distinct stages is reductionist. Detachment is a virtue that transforms the person into a new being, and simultaneously, is a process that purifies the human being from his sinfulness. These two concepts cannot be divorced because one leads to the other smoothly and constantly. In fact, 'he who has the spirit...refrains from all wickedness and evil desire of this world...then the angel of the prophetic spirit rests on him and fills the man, and the man,

³⁹ Francis J. Maloney, *The Gospel of John* (Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1998), 93.

⁴⁰ In his letter to the Church in Ephesus, Paul admonishes the community to 'give up your old way of life; you must put aside your old self, which gets corrupted by following illusory desires' (Ephesians 4: 22). Simone Weil makes a direct reference to this text when she speaks about how peasants can lead a life of spiritual intensity through the detachment practised within the cycle of nature. She strikes a comparison between the shedding of the old spiritual life with the death of the grain for the wheat to cultivate. See Simone Weil, "Le Christianisme et la vie des champs," in *Écrits de Marseille, vol I*, 265.

being filled with the Holy Spirit, speaks to the congregation as the Lord wills.’⁴¹ This insight sheds light on the fact that the person who detaches himself is transformed to such an extent that he almost becomes an instrument in the hands of God. The person does not decide what to say (or do), for that becomes a decision of the Lord. The faculties of the person become inspired and motivated by the Divine, promoting the passive approach. There is also no clear progression: the person does not necessarily detach from sinful patterns to achieve the transformation, or vice-versa. He needs to have the spirit of God to avoid sin, and yet avoid sin to have the spirit of God. The transformation results in freedom from sin, which leads to further transformation. The process is more spiral than linear. The two approaches intertwine, running simultaneously and concurrently.

The insistence on the passive approach should not imply that the person is a mere puppet in the hands of the Divine. This is not a theology which is based on the concept of the *Deus ex machina*: God does not permute the human situation without the openness of the individual.⁴² The Christian God is a relational God, a God that communicates and acts in accordance with and through the free will of the individual. Mainstream Christianity, as opposed to Quietism, does not perceive the human being as totally excluded from the operation of Grace within his soul. The human being needs to be open to receiving Grace for it to function. Even in the passive approach, the individual has to be willing to co-operate actively with the infusion of

⁴¹ ὁ ἔχων τὸ πνεῦμα ἀπεχόμενος ἀπὸ πάσης πονηρίας καὶ ἐπιθυμίας ματαίας τοῦ αἰῶνος τούτου τότε ὁ ἄγγελος τοῦ προφητικοῦ πνεύματος ὁ κείμενος πρὸς αὐτὸν πληροῖ τὸν ἄνθρωπον, καὶ πληρωθεὶς ὁ ἄνθρωπος τῷ πνεύματι τῷ ἁγίῳ λαλεῖ εἰς τὸ πλῆθος, καθὼς ὁ κύριος βούλεται.

“The Shepherd of Hermas,” in *Apostolic Fathers*, Volume II, trans., Kirsopp Lake (Great Britain: Loeb Classical Library, 1992), 121.

⁴² This concept recalls the 1962 Absurdist theatre play *Exit the King* by the Rumanian playwright, Eugène Ionesco, where the protagonist King Bérenger plays ‘God’ throughout the whole play, instead of accepting his imminent death. In the style of a puppeteer, he attempts to orchestrate the physical movements of his guard, and starts accepting his limited humanity when he fails to do so. In this work, the notion of God is present as the all-powerful who controls all movements, stripping humanity from any form of free will. See Eugène Ionesco, *Exit the King* (London: Samuel French, 1973).

Grace. Detachment occurs in a passive way as a result of the openness that the person has towards this virtue, particularly in the initial stages of development. In the highest state of detachment, it is God who works and operates on the spirit of the individual entirely according to His will. For this level to be achieved, however, in the earlier stages of development the person needs to be receptive, for, ‘in spite of the fact that God is almighty, He cannot work unless He finds readiness or creates it.’⁴³ This is an interesting insight that presents a paradox. On one hand, God respects the will of the individual and requires his readiness to initiate the process of detachment within the spirit. On the other hand, if there is no initiative, God will create it, like in the narrative of the conversion of Saint Paul, whereby the apostle initially lacked readiness, but through the mystical encounter on the road to Damascus, was made receptive to detachment (Acts of the Apostles 9: 3-9). Although Paul was not ready to embark on a relationship with Christ through detachment, he nevertheless had the zeal and enthusiasm necessary in the quest for truth, which was manifested through his active persecution of the Christians, which he felt were destroying the purity of the faith. An aptitude towards detachment is necessary, which is evident either directly, that is, through the desire of the person to detach himself, or indirectly, through the openness, which is manifested in other actions. Detachment is also not necessarily linked with action. The Christian does not need to *do* something to initiate the process of detachment, but merely needs to be ready and open for it. It is an internal attitude, not an external one.

⁴³ Meister Eckhart, “On Detachment,” in *Selected Treatises and Sermons*, trans., James M. Clark and John V. Skinner (London & Glasgow: Fount Publishers, 1958), 163.

2.2.5 Nothingness

The notion of nothingness, or of mystical annihilation, propels the discourse on the process of detachment to a more profound level. It creates a shift from detachment defined in juxtaposition between the self and the lack of attachment to other objects, persons or values, to detachment as a loss of self.

Nothingness is a notion in spirituality that has been often misconstrued. It needs to be understood as an ideal state that can never be attained completely in life on earth. The misunderstanding of the term can also result in unnecessary psychological harm: a person can only experience nothingness in the spiritual life if he has a solid sense of self. Unless the self is well acknowledged and recognised, the person would only be damaging himself in the quest for nothingness, causing an act which is masochistic and not holy. This temporary experience, which is a foretaste of the eternal state, is also a grace given by God, and, cannot be induced by the self. It requires maturity in the spiritual development of the person. If it were self-induced, it would be a contradiction in terms because the induction would be a confirmation of the self rather than an abnegation. The focus should be on the process leading to mystical annihilation rather than on the state itself, a process that is steered by the Divine and which will only be initiated if the person is already at a mature stage of spiritual development. It is not the product or the arrival point that is of prime concern, as much as the process and the struggle of living through the nothingness.

In the journey of detachment, Man loses all attachments and securities, paving the way to annihilation. This involves putting aside all possessions. The deeper stages of the process of detachment result in the state of nothingness. Mystical annihilation is essential because it is only through it, and in it, that Man can surrender himself and become receptive to God, and

engage in the process of divinisation because ‘God cannot do anything more for the detached spirit than to give Himself to it,’⁴⁴ and ‘if man is to become like God...it must be by means of detachment’⁴⁵. God is absolute detachment. It is through detachment that ‘man could become by grace what God is by nature’.⁴⁶ This also consolidates further the notion that detachment is based on free will. Detachment is a passive process but nevertheless requires the co-operation of the human person. This openness to God, is manifested by preparing, through the emptying of the self, a fertile terrain of nothingness for Grace to be active in it.

The notion of the state of mystical annihilation can appear problematic when studied from a psychological perspective, particularly according to the developments that occurred in psychology and psychoanalysis at the turn of the twentieth century, when the social sciences advocated an affirmation of a stronger sense of self. Jungian and analytical psychology describes the process of life as a destination to self-completion,⁴⁷ emphasising a psychology of self. These insights should not be interpreted as contending the experience of mystics and scholars who write about mystical annihilation. In the mystical experience the self needs to be acknowledged before reaching the state of nothingness.⁴⁸ The acknowledgement of self is intimately linked with the state of nothingness. This is even further clarified when the process of detachment is studied against the mystery of the Incarnation. As perceived from the Divine perspective, the world and its inhabitants ‘are like a breath; their days are like a fleeting shadow’ (Psalm 144: 4). God also became nothing to teach humanity through His example, a learning curve that Christ consolidated through His life and death on the Cross. He took up ‘*cette dernière place*’,⁴⁹ this last place. Nevertheless, before God became incarnate, He was

⁴⁴ Ibid., 159.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 159-60.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 156.

⁴⁷ Anthony Stevens, *On Jung* (London: Princeton University Press, 1990), 65.

⁴⁸ Underhill, *Mysticism*, 44.

⁴⁹ Charles de Foucauld, *Écrits Spirituels* (Paris: J. de Gigord, 1933), 54-5.

always God: there was a sense of identity which God recognised ontologically, and yet was willing, out of His love for humanity, to merge with the human state, this '*dernière place*'. In turn, as human beings, it is only by experiencing this state of being the last, what humans consider to be nothing, a state of utter poverty and total detachment, that the individual can approximate the Transcendent. The implication of this insight is that the starting point is the recognition of the person's individuality, before being able to detach from it to reach '*cette dernière place*'. The consequence of this process is the embracing of the Transcendent. The difference between the psychological and the spiritual approach is that in the former, the objective is the self-completion of the individual, whereas in the latter, the acknowledgement of the self is an essential vehicle towards the state of nothingness. Paradoxically, in the nothingness, the person, by detaching from his individuality, reaches completion because he has united with the Divine, the highest state any entity can attain, that is, the Absolute.

In the eschatological experience, nothingness can be perceived as being the union with the Divine, whereby through nothingness, the person is immersed in the Godhead. Ontologically, nothingness is defined according to the theological perspective embraced by the individual. If the Divine is perceived apophatically, as being an experience of absolute nothingness, then by becoming one with the state of nothingness, the person, in losing the self, is becoming one with the Divine. This apophatic insight needs to be juxtaposed against a more cataphatic understanding of God to be able to delve deeper into the reality of the mystical annihilation. In the cataphatic approach, God is perceived as the absolute All, making nothingness a transitory vehicle for the individual to denudify himself to experience totality in eternity. According to this second perspective, the person re-clothes himself anew and afresh in a state

of completeness, after having experienced mystical annihilation.⁵⁰ The most interesting difference between these two schools is that, as opposed to the apophatic model, the cataphatic approach maintains that this state of nothingness is not the final destination in the process of detachment since:

...having renounced all things, yes, even affection for virtue...we must clothe ourselves anew with various affections, perhaps with the very ones we have renounced and given up. But we must put them on again, no longer because they are agreeable, profitable, and honourable to us, and suited to satisfy our self-love, but because they are agreeable to God.⁵¹

The most evident difference between the apophatic and cataphatic models is that in the former case, mystical annihilation is the ultimate state, whereas in the second case it is a means to an end. Assessing which of the two perspectives is more valid is irrelevant to this research since it is dependent on the temperament of the individual, making it a subjective choice. The former model insists on the beauty of the immersion in the Trinitarian experience, whereas the latter still validates the role of the individual, and the sense of completeness after the purgation of attachments. What the tension between the two approaches does bring out and question, however, is the rapport between the state of nothingness and the process of detachment. The essential purpose of detachment is to enable the individual to put aside all hurdles that obstruct the relationship with the Divine. This seems to be in direct opposition to the notion that the ultimate state in the Divine experience is manifested through mystical annihilation, as presented by the first paradigm. If the final goal is relational, how can nothingness be considered the highest level of maturity? Is mystical annihilation a springboard to a deeper relationship with the Divine, or is it the

⁵⁰ The first perspective has its roots in the spirituality of Meister Eckhart whereas the second approach is more in line with the spirituality advocated by Saint Francis de Sales. Although Eckhart was a major influence in the French mystical tradition of the seventeenth century, particularly on the theme of nothingness, there were developments over the centuries, notable in the spirituality of de Sales, that shed light on the different approaches towards nothingness.

⁵¹ Francis De Sales, *On the Love of God*, Volume II, trans., John K. Ryan (Illinois: Tan Books, 1975), 138-9.

ultimate trait that characterises the nature of this relationship, to the extent that the relationship no longer is because it has been enthralled by nothingness? Essentially, this question is the crux that this work is attempting to explore, and it is too early to delve too deeply into the matter. What needs to be noted at this stage is that the two perspectives are not mutually exclusive. The final goal is the relationship with the Divine, and the highest level of maturity is the state of nothingness because the human being can only relate fully and completely with God through mystical annihilation. The nature of the relationship with God in its pure essence is no longer dictated by human parameters, parameters that can be quantified, measured and perceived by the senses. It is possible in the Divine experience to relate in the nothingness, and it transpires that this is the most elevated and perfect form of relating.

Linked intimately with the notion of nothingness is the state of darkness that the soul finds itself in whereby the relationship with God is no longer felt, and the sweetness of past consolations in this relationship are no longer present, to motivate the person in the spiritual journey.⁵² Nothingness becomes a painful state to be in. This is because the closer the soul is in its voyage towards the Transcendent, the more it manages to embrace the void and the

⁵² This experience is captured in a most understandable and yet profound manner in the metaphor presented by Thérèse of Lisieux (1873-1897), in one of the most moving and painful passages regarding the process of detachment in Christian literature. The Little Flower's vision, encapsulated in the image of an insignificant ball that is used when required by the Child Jesus, and then thrown aside when the need subsides, demonstrates the advanced stage of a soul whose purpose is exclusively to please the Lord, and is ready to be detached as well from that relationship, knowing perfectly that the time will come when the ball will not be played with any longer. See Thérèse Of Lisieux, *Autobiography of a Saint*, trans., Ronald Knox (Mumbai: St Paul's, 1998), 124. This image, however, could lead to misinterpretation and is problematic. At first glance, it depicts the image of a God who is capricious, who uses human beings as mere objects to satisfy and gratify His whims: a God who treats human beings as mere *über-marionettes*. This image, however, needs to be read from the personal experience of the saint in her spiritual journey. The metaphor of the ball is a reflection of the willingness of the saint to be used by God rather than the need of God to use human beings. It is a figure of speech that is descriptive of the openness of Thérèse to be of service to her Beloved and is indicative of the maturity of her development. It is a service that transcends ego boundaries and needs, showing that she was ready to be put herself aside when she was no longer required. The willingness of the saint to be 'exploited' is not necessarily an indication of this dynamic from the end of the active agent. It is her as the passive agent who, as a human being, is prepared to sacrifice her own self and experience nothingness to such a painful extent. The Divine, operating through love, cannot be exploitative.

more pain it feels. It is the pain of the desire of uniting with the Beloved and the pain of being so close and yet so distant. This is due to the incompleteness of the human condition: the temporary life experienced on Earth is a struggle which does not allow the total reaching of the union with the Divine.⁵³ The pain is caused by a continuous sense of rejection, of a Beloved who does not seem to reciprocate or quench the flame of love that the lover is feeling, with the ultimate sensation of ‘bones...drying up in thirst.’⁵⁴ It is only by staying in the nothingness of this uncomfortable state and in the pain of not feeling the presence of the Beloved that growth occurs. The presence becomes paradoxically even more reinforced through His absence in the state of nothingness. As human beings, bound by time and space, relationships are seen in terms of presence, of being physically present with a person. Distance is commonly perceived as a threat to any relationship. In the spiritual realm the opposite is true. Depth is reached in the nothingness – and in the pain incurred – of the absence.

2.2.6 Desire

Nothingness needs to be examined closely in connection with the theme of desire. In experiencing nothingness, is it possible at all to detach from everyone and everything including human desire? Should a human being detach himself from desire in the first place, including the desire for the spiritual? Lacanian terminology makes an interesting distinction between ‘desire’ and ‘drives’. What are generally referred to as ‘desires’ are in fact, drives,

⁵³ This struggle of pain is evident in the spirituality of Mother Teresa of Calcutta. The intensity of her spiritual experience reaches its culmination in its emptiness, a detachment from the Divine, plodding on even though she could no longer relate with God, leading to an intimacy which is profound in its pain. She claims that ‘this loneliness – this continual longing for God – which gives me the pain deep down in my heart. – Darkness is such that I really do not see – neither with my mind nor with my reason. – The place of God in my soul is blank. – There is no God in me. – When the pain of longing is so great – I just long and long for God – and then it is that I feel – He does not want me – He is not there.-...God does not want me.’ Brian Kolodiejchuk, *Mother Theresa: Come be my Light* (New York: Rider, 2007), 1-2.

⁵⁴ John of the Cross, “The Dark Night,” (N1,11,1) in *The Collected Works of St John of the Cross*, trans., Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilo Rodriguez (Washington: ICS Publications, 1979), 318-9.

some of which are indications of the sole Desire, which Lacan depicts as being a lack within the self.⁵⁵ This fits in well with the apophatic understanding of the relationship with God, seen as an absence, rather than a presence that can be related with.

In advocating a detachment that leads to nothingness, total detachment of desire, including for the spiritual, seems to be obligatory. Yet, the pertinent question persists. It seems that detachment does need to be radical and synonymous with nothingness ‘for if you desire to have something in all/ your treasure in God is not purely your all./...For in coveting nothing,/nothing raises it up/and nothing weighs it down’.⁵⁶ It is not enough for the person to be detached from worldly goods because he can still be attached to his desires. When the ‘appetites are extinguished – or mortified – he no longer feeds upon the pleasure of these things, but lives in a void and darkness with respect to his appetites.’⁵⁷ The human being needs to transcend desire, detaching himself from the sensory (including the use of the sensory to attain spiritual objectives) through the dark night of the senses, and proceed into the dark night of the soul, whereby the individual becomes detached even from spiritual consolations and desire. If God is the experience of nothingness, this experience needs to be stripped of anything which is not nothing, including the gratifications that accompany the initial stages of the life of perfection. In fact, detachment from spiritual consolations and desire is a sign of maturity in the development of the individual. In response to the issues presented above, it is possible to state, at this stage, that detachment from desire is possible but certainly not possible for all. The Christian is called to strive towards it, but it is only the individuals who have advanced in the life of perfection who will come close to its attainment:

⁵⁵ Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis* (New York: Norton, 1981), 29.

⁵⁶ John of the Cross, “The Ascent to Mount Carmel, AI: 13, 11,” in *John of the Cross*, 104.

⁵⁷ Ibid. (AI, 3, 1), 76.

It [the soul] prefers dryness and affliction to sweet consolation. It knows that this is the significance of following Christ and denying self, that the other method is perhaps a seeking of self in God – something entirely contrary to love. Seeking oneself in God is the same as looking for the caresses and the consolations of God.⁵⁸

Detachment from desire, though, does not imply renunciation of desire. On the contrary, just as much as the former attitude is conducive to growth in the spiritual journey, similarly, the latter is harmful. Even though desires need to be purified and ultimately the person needs to arrive at the stage where he is no longer dependent on them, their existence is paramount to spiritual growth, as they are a channel that enables the person to want to relate with others and with God. What needs to be engaged in is a process of renunciation from ideals which are not grounded as desires are.⁵⁹ Desires are vehicles that lead to reaching out for others and for God. Although growth implies detachment from the dependency on desires, and not allowing them to sabotage any decisions taken, within themselves desires are essential, since they are the impetus that allow the individual to be a spiritual being and to propel him forward: they are the motivating factor. Ideals, as man-made paradigms and structures, are not vehicles of growth. They are illusions created by humans that prevent the attainment of the final goal of union with God. If the Divine experience has been defined as being an experience of *nothingness*, any ideal is *something* (as opposed to nothingness), a tangible, or at least perceived, entity or state. Desires can often be corrupted into becoming ideals. It is these ideals, these false illusions that sway from the Divine experience of nothingness, that need to be renounced. Certainly, and this is the crux of the problem, ideals are often confused with desires. The verification that facilitates the process of discernment is the awareness that desire is rooted in the present moment, whereas ideals pertain to the future. Ideals prevent the human being from living the here-and-now, the God time, since they project him into an

⁵⁸ Ibid. (A2, 7, 5), 123.

⁵⁹ Philip Sheldrake, *Befriending our Desires* (Ottawa: Novalis, 2001), 19.

illusionary future, and in the spiritual journey they need to be avoided. Desire is actually what fuels the person on the journey, and requires detachment only insofar as he does not become dependent on it.

2.2.7 Contemplation

Numerous mystics have made significant associations between detachment and *contemplation*. The act of contemplation cannot take place without the process of detachment. The first step that needs to occur to reach the essence of the spiritual life is the sheering of the faculty of imagination. Imagination is fuelled by the self, making the individual the prime creator. It places the individual as the main agent, the locus of all activity. Imagination could also be used to avoid staying ‘in the moment’, in the God time. It is a realm that trespasses the boundaries of the present instance and defies the reality of the here-and-now. Frequently it could be used to escape from the discomfort of the day-to-day life, the existential *angst*, and ‘to live’ in a fictitious world where the controller of all events and activities remains the self. The human being avoids being in touch with God who is encountered in the silence of the present moment, to become a false god in a realm that does not exist. In contemplation, and in the spiritual life in general, the individual needs to detach himself from imagination, from the clutter and the noise that stifles the way of the relationship with the Divine. Nevertheless, there are times when imagination might be beneficial for spiritual growth, particularly for beginners, who need to use imaginative exercises because staying in silence might be too challenging initially. It is essential, however, to remove eventually all that does not allow the person to progress in contemplation.⁶⁰

⁶⁰ Richard of Saint Victor, *The Twelve Patriarchs, The Mystical Ark, Book Three of the Trinity* (London: Paulist Press, 1979), 59.

Another important aspect linking detachment with contemplation is the notion of internal silence. The removal of ‘clutter’ in the soul can be defined as being internal silence, the creation of an empty space within the person where the encounter with the Divine can occur. The state of contemplation achieved through detachment is ‘silent, quiet, desiring nothing more’ and in this state it can ‘understand nothing of the many things said to it.’⁶¹ It is a space that goes beyond knowledge and language, and whereby the soul finds tranquillity in the nothingness of the silence. It is through this internal silence that the Christian experiences the nothingness, the void that is characteristic of detachment, creating a triangular connection between detachment, contemplation and silence, whereby all elements co-relate with each other, and where one cannot exist at the exclusion of the others. In the *nada* there is the *todo*, and vice-versa. In the maximum there is the minimum, and in the minimum, the maximum. In the minimum of the maximum is the maximum, for the maximum cannot defy its own identity.⁶² The *nada/todo* paradox is the crux that outlines the process of detachment. The Christian reaches the apex, which is the Trinitarian experience, through nothingness. God is experienced as nothingness, as no-thing. As human beings, the word ‘all’ is understood as representing all possibilities, and, therefore, speaking about the ‘allness’ of God can lead to misinterpretations. Human beings quantify ‘allness’. The ‘allness’ of God is seen in His nothingness because God transcends all things, and is no-thing because He cannot be limited within what is tangible, including all material things. This confirms that the word ‘nothingness’ is more accurate in the description of the Divine experience than ‘allness’.

⁶¹ Francisco de Osuna, *Third Spiritual Alphabet*, trans., Mary E. Giles (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1981), 561.

⁶² Nicola Cusano, *La Dotta Ignoranza* (Rome: Città Nuova Editrice, 1991), 84-5.

Contemplation is important to the Christian because it is a process that leads to the hidden truth, the truth of the experience of God.⁶³ The senses are not conducive to contemplation, since the truth is hidden and cannot be seen by the naked eye or understood by the human psyche. The experience of contemplation transcends the reality that is perceptible to the senses. This viewpoint, however, can be misunderstood, leading to the belief that the senses are an obstacle to contemplation. The spirituality of the Eastern Church serves as a model to show how erroneous this perception is. The Holy Fathers of the Eastern Church do not make any reference to the elimination of the senses, but focus on their transcendence, since they believe that the experience of the numinous is possible through the spiritual senses, indicating that there is a deeper level of the senses. Though not immediately accessible to the body, this deeper level can still be penetrated to delve more profoundly into the spiritual experience.⁶⁴ To be in contact with the spiritual senses, the space, however, needs to be empty. Thereby this presents an interesting contradiction: it is by emptying that contemplation is possible, and it is by denudifying oneself, that one can be clothed with the depth of contemplation. It is in this paradoxical space, so full and yet so empty, that the Christian needs to stay in to be able to progress in the spiritual life.

2.2.8 Concluding remarks

This section endeavoured to highlight the main aspects in the study of detachment within the development of the Christian tradition. The themes and the references made are not exhaustive but serve as guidelines to demonstrate how important this virtue has been, and to explore, at least at an initial level, the dynamics and the tension that arise in the practice of

⁶³ Thomas Špidlík, *La spiritualità dell'Oriente cristiano: Manuale sistematico* (Milan: San Paolo, 1995), 302.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 304.

this virtue. The next section will focus on the next important theme that this work will be examining, that is, the relational.

2.3 Definition of the relational

The relational is another significant aspect which is cardinal to the human condition and that has been studied from a variety of angles and perspectives. Both physics⁶⁵ and philosophy give importance to the relational, having constructed what is known as the relational theory. According to this framework, reality can be understood in such a way that the situation and properties of objects or persons are only meaningful in relation to other objects or persons within time and space. In the study of physics, this theory implies that space does not exist unless there are objects in it, nor does time exist without events. In the study of philosophy, Leibniz claims that '[e]very proposition is ultimately reducible to one which attributes a predicate to a subject'.⁶⁶ Subjects exist because they are in relation to other subjects or objects. The self exists in relation to other entities and the myriad of possibilities that the interaction with these entities causes. The reality of the human being is shaped and influenced by his surroundings, by all the persons and objects that he encounters and interacts with. One would not be the same person if any of these factors were altered. This shows that the study of *alterity* or *otherness* is crucial to the human being because it affects his ontology directly. Even from an evolutionary perspective, some scientists and anthropologists give less credit to the Darwinian theory of the survival of the fittest and more emphasis to the hypothesis that it

⁶⁵A major revolution occurred in the world of physics in the twentieth century that defied or somehow challenged the classical view of physics set by the Greeks and consolidated in the modern period by scientists like Sir Isaac Newton (1642-1727) whose view of the universe was that it was structured according to the boundaries of time and space. In fact, quantum theory is based on the belief that on the subatomic level, nature operates in a manner which transcends time and space. This theory also challenged the relational theory as presented till then, and demanded that this should be perceived in an alternative manner. Today, Quantum theory can be read as a scientific theory that is based on the relational, though certainly in a different way than being constrained by time and space. This topic will be explored in greater detail in the fourth chapter since this author believes that grappling with the theory of quantum physics can be an important eye-opener in the study of spirituality, offering interesting and valid insights.

⁶⁶ Bertrand Russell, *A Critical Exposition of the Philosophy of Leibniz* (London: G. Allen & Unwin, 1971), 9.

is the faculty of organisms to interrelate with each other and with their habitat that led primarily to evolution.⁶⁷ The organisms that engaged relationally were the ones that survived and developed.

Relationality is also a major theme in Christian spirituality. All persons are called to grow in love with others, particularly the significant others in their life. In the study of Christian spirituality, however, otherness is not only limited to the human realities that can be perceived by the senses, but extends to the supernatural as well. In Christian theology, there is an intimate link between the love for human beings and the love for God, and these two relationships cannot be separated or seen in isolation. In *The New Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, the term ‘spirituality’ is defined as an expression of the relationship between God, neighbour and self.⁶⁸ The importance that Christian spirituality gives to the relational originates from the dogma of the Holy Trinity. The Three Persons of the Holy Trinity are in a continuous and eternal relationship with each other, and their being is a relational ontology of love. Relationality is not only holy but it is also eternal.⁶⁹ Since human beings were created in the image of God, they need to follow the Trinitarian approach and grow spiritually by relating. In fact, in Ignatian spirituality, relationships are seen as being a means of reaching God: through the process of discernment, the individual identifies the channels (including the relational ones) by which he can grow in love with God.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ Diarmuid O’Murchu, *Quantum Theology: Spiritual Implications of the New Physics* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 2013), 36.

⁶⁸ Mark Pryce, “Relationships,” in *The New SCM Dictionary*, 536.

⁶⁹ Cusano, *Dotta Ignoranza*, 70-1.

⁷⁰ George E. Ganss, “Detachment,” 270.

2.4 Aspects of the relational in Biblical and Christian spirituality

The theme of the relational has evolved and developed over the centuries and was influenced by the various movements that emerged in the history of Biblical and Christian spirituality. This section will delve into different aspects of this theme, and analyse how these aspects enhance the spiritual journey of the individual.

2.4.1 The relationship between God and humanity

The first aspect in the theme of the relational that needs to be examined is the relationship that exists between God and humankind. The essence of the Christian faith is this relationship: the bond of friendship that has been established between God and humanity, since God ‘created mankind in his own image’ (Gen. 1: 27) and the human being was created to relate with God.⁷¹ The objective of the first chapters of the Book of Genesis is to highlight the relational aspect: God created the human being to be in a loving relationship with Him. The rest of the Bible can be read as a journey depicting this relationship between God and humanity, represented by God’s travail with the people of Israel in the Old Testament. When after the Fall, humanity failed to respond favourably to God’s love, the latter intervened once more to rebuild this relationship through the history of salvation.

In Christianity, unlike other religions, the face of God is revealed through the incarnated figure of Jesus Christ, who makes the relationship between the human and the Divine more accessible. The Mystery of the Incarnation is a climactic point in the relationship between God and Man. The Christ event demonstrated that God desired to relate with humankind in such an intimate and immanent manner that He became human. Another apex in the

relationship between God and humanity occurred in the Redemptive Act where Jesus Christ offered His totality to rebuild this relationship with humankind. The experience of the physical and existentialist pain on the Cross created an everlasting bond between God and humanity, whereby God experienced the human condition in its rawest and most afflicted state. The act on the Golgotha surpassed the event in the stable of Bethlehem. It is not only God being human: it is God being human in the abyss of the nadir. It is a God who craved to relate to the extent that He wanted to feel what the human being feels in his deepest pain, even to the extent of becoming nothing on the Cross. It is a God who, ‘being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death – even death to a cross’(Philippians 2: 8).

The important question that needs to be examined is how this relationship can be reciprocal. In his woundedness, is it possible for the finite human being, the same human being who rejected God in the Fall, to engage and peak in a loving relationship with the Infinite? The parables of the Kingdom of Heaven shed light on the complexity of this issue. These parables can be divided into two types. Some of them are eschatological, such as the parable of the Great Banquet (Mt. 22: 1-14), denoting that the full fruition of this relationship is only achieved in the afterlife. The pilgrim people of God⁷² are constantly journeying, through relationships and experiences, to this climactic relationship and experience. The other type of parable is descriptive, such as the parable of the mustard seed (Mt. 13: 31-32), demonstrating that this relationship is also present here on earth, evolving within the parameters of time and space. This relationship can be described as already and not yet, a relationship that is already present and indeed growing as a result of the interaction between the human and the Divine, but which can only be complete in the fullness of the Beatific Vision.

⁷² Constitutio Dogmatica de Ecclesia: “Lumen Gentium,” (21 November 1964), I: 7, in *Acta Apostolicæ Sedis* 57 (1965), 9-11.

Trinitarian theology is also grounded in the relational, and forms the basis of the relationship between God and Creation, including humanity. The paradigm of the Divine Trinity is not only a model that the Christian should follow. His relationship with God is more intimate since he is called to become part of the Trinitarian relationship. 'Relating' in the Christian tradition calls for a depth where the two entities that are in relation reach such a mature level that they become one. This is certainly true in the relationship between God and humankind where the human being is on a journey of divinisation, whose climax is reached in the direct life of the Trinitarian experience. Through Jesus Christ, the person becomes a child of the Father by the power of the Holy Spirit (Romans 8: 14-17). In this life, the Christian immerses into the Trinitarian relationship by developing the relationship with God, reaching its maturity in the eschatological experience.

2.4.2 Relating with other human beings

The spiritual tradition in Christianity has not only emphasised the relationship between God and humankind. It has also given great importance to the relationships with others. The initial relationship that God forged with humankind extends itself in the Christian tradition to relationships with others, becoming a paradigm of the way the Christian should relate. In the Christian tradition even human relationships have a significant value. In the Biblical narrative, God intervened and communicated numerous times through the relationships between people for 'in the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways' (Hebrews 1: 1) and 'whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did to me' (Mt. 25: 40). The more the person grows in love with God, the more he grows in love with others, and, as a corollary, the more one's relationships develop in a loving and healthy manner, the more one's relationship with God grows. Since the relationship between God and humanity historically precedes any other

human relationship, it becomes a model which the individual should try to imitate when engaging in relationships with other human beings. Consequently, the same traits that apply to the relationship between God and humanity are also valid for any other form of human relationship.

The relational aspect in Christian spirituality acquires even greater importance since even Jesus Christ was a relational person, as can be seen in various episodes narrated in the Gospels.⁷³ The events of the Gospels depict Christ as a figure who was engaged in an interpersonal and social way, and whose ministry was well-embedded, albeit in a non-conformist manner, in the dynamics of the Jewish society that He belonged to. Following this model, the spiritual person is a human being who is engaged relationally on a deep and meaningful level. In this light, Karl Rahner describes ‘fraternal fellowship’ as the ‘spirituality of the future’, noting the need, in the contemporary world, of a spirituality, with a sociological and political dimension, that is, a spirituality that focuses on the other. This spirituality of the future, however, is not ‘new’ but is a continuation, not only of the spirit of the Gospel narrative, but also of an ecclesiastical tradition that has been pursued for centuries, thus demonstrating that the relational is at the core of Christian spirituality and is a defining trait of its existence.⁷⁴

⁷³ Jordan Aumann, *Christian Spirituality in the Catholic Tradition* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1985), 77.

⁷⁴ Karl Rahner, *The Practice of Faith: A Handbook of Contemporary Spirituality* (London: SCM Press, 1985), 18.

2.4.3 The communal life

One of the most evident facets in the development of the Christian tradition that has the relational as its foundation is the communal and religious life. It is by living in harmony together and by relating with each other that the members of a community grow spiritually. Ever since the first Christian community was established on Pentecost, the relational aspect became strongly present and marked significantly the spirituality of the community. By focusing on the traits that characterised the early Christian community, and which served as a paradigm for other forms of communal life that were to emerge in the history of Christianity, the relationality of the communal life can be studied. As can be seen in the *Didache*, Baptism was the sacrament of initiation for entering this community and the Eucharist was the communal meal.⁷⁵ This shows that the participation in the Sacramental life is cardinal to the communal lifestyle since, by default, all Sacraments are relational. All Sacraments are a manifestation of the relationship between the person and God, witnessed by the community and within the parameters of the community. A sacrament is never a private enterprise either in its execution (the community is always present either physically or symbolically) or in its fruits (the benefits received by the person receiving the Sacrament enrich the community). The basis of the communal engagement in the Sacraments is a two-tiered reality. Primarily, Sacramental life is relational, and secondly, by investing in this reality, the relationships between community members are strengthened because of the spiritual nourishment that the Sacraments provide.

⁷⁵ “*The Didache*,” in *Apostolic Fathers*, Volume I, trans., Kirsopp Lake (Great Britain: Loeb Classical Library, 1985), 319-323.

Another important aspect that needs to be present in the relational dynamics of communal life is charity amongst its members which is then extended to those outside the community. This is the most pivotal and challenging aspect that enables the communal life to grow. Conversely, its absence leads to barrenness. It is not solely a distribution of wealth and possession, but an internal attitude that is intimately linked to a nurturing relationship with the Divine, emphasising even further that love of God cannot be separated from love of neighbour. Charity denotes that the individual in the community has a strong relationship with God and trusts in His Providence to the extent that rather than hoarding this Providence to himself, the individual can share it with the brethren in the community. This aspect can be seen clearly in the life of the early Christian community. The Acts of the Apostles confirms that the communal life involved a sharing of goods and these were distributed according to the needs of the members of the community (Acts 2: 42-47). This practice, known as *koinōnia*, and referred to also by Paul in his Epistle to the Romans (Rom. 12: 12-13 and 15: 26), consisted of two intimately related aspects: the financial commitment, which consequently reinforced the relational bond. The sharing led to a flourishing in the relationships, both with each other and with God. Unfortunately, this relational aspect, possibly one of the high points of the communal life in the history of the Christian Church, did not last long and was a fluid situation, especially when the numbers started increasing.⁷⁶ This ideal was compromised by the advent of newcomers who were not prepared to lead such a radical communal life, demonstrating how challenging this relational aspect is in the communal life.

⁷⁶ Justin Taylor, "Acts of the Apostles," in *The International Bible Commentary*, 1513-4.

The communal life has focused on the relational and social aspect, and retained it at its core in the development of Christian spirituality. Nonetheless, it has always struggled with a tension, and this struggle has articulated the communal life: all forms of communal life have had to embrace the tension between the active and the contemplative ways of life. Every form of religious communal life has a contemplative dimension, a spirituality that immerses its members in a life of deep prayer. How can this important aspect be married with the apostolic and active life? At the heart of the question is the realisation that inter-relationships between human beings can serve either as a bridge with the Divine if they occur in an integral manner, or as an obstacle in spiritual growth when the relationship is unhealthy. The relational becomes a contemplative expression too, in such a way that there is no schism between the active and the contemplative. The life of contemplation leads naturally to a life which is of service of others, and consequently, service to others becomes a contemplative act.⁷⁷ The emphasis, therefore, even in the contemplative life, remains on ‘the other’. The word *monakhos* (monk), although derived from the word *monos*, meaning ‘alone’, should be read in the context of the contemplative life as signifying ‘one’. The monk, as ‘one’, is called to live in relationship with the other members of his community. The monks need to relate with each other to form one community, and not stand as individual members and be alone in their lives. The possibility of the synthesis between the active and the contemplative, and the importance of the relational, can be seen in Benedictine spirituality, particularly within the culture of the abbeys. Abbeys became establishments managing the life of entire villages.

⁷⁷ This integration between the active and the contemplative can be seen strongly in Augustinian spirituality. The need for this integration is a result of the fact that in his life, Augustine experimented with a number of relationships, and even though not all of them were healthy, he learned how to distinguish between relationships that lead to spiritual growth, and unhealthy ones that arrest or damage the process. By doing so, he demonstrates the importance of the relational in all spheres of Christian life, including the contemplative life. In fact, Augustine admonishes that ‘no man has a right to lead a life of contemplation as to forget in his own ease the service due to his neighbour.’ *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, vol. 2: Augustine: City of God, Christian Doctrine*, trans., Marcus Dods (Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1995), 413. The citation is a translation of the following text: ‘Nec sic esse quisque debe otiosus, ut ineodem otio utilitatem non cogitet proximi.’ Augustine of Hippo, *De Civitate Dei* (Belgium, 1886), 686.

The lives of the monks were the motor of the life of the village.⁷⁸ The village community became an extension of the religious community, and an integral feature of the relationships that existed between the village members. The monk was no longer perceived as a figure in isolation, but as an essential point of reference in the structure of the town or village.

At this stage, it is important to examine another problematic issue. If Christianity has given importance to the relational aspect within the communal life, what about the individuals who feel a calling to the hermit's life? How can this solitary style of life be reconciled to the relational which seems to be so cardinal in Christian spirituality? Monastic life developed in such a way that the Christians who felt a calling towards this style of life, also felt the drive to isolate themselves from society. Yet, in spite of this form of social detachment, even in the early stages of the development of the monastic life, the importance of the relational still emerged significantly. The awareness of the needs of others, in spite of the solitary aspects which crown the lifestyle of the hermit, still proved to be a salient feature of this form of spirituality.⁷⁹ This is because the solitary aspect of the life of the hermit was not an end in itself, but a means to an end, a vehicle that allowed the hermit to grow in a loving relationship, not only with God, but with the external community as well. The latter always needed to be present in the mind, and the life of prayer, of the hermit. Although this lifestyle might seem to be totally detached from the relational, its roots are still embedded in otherness, and its focus is still the desire to reach out to the others in need. The seclusion

⁷⁸ Aumann, *Christian Spirituality*, 82. This 'spiritual motor' comes out strongly in the film *Of Gods and Men* which poetically captures the beauty of the Trappist spirituality in the context of a Muslim village in Algeria during the Civil War. See Pascal Caucheteux and Etienne Comar, *Of Gods and Men*, directed by Xavier Beauvois (France: Why Not Productions, 2010).

⁷⁹ This can be seen clearly in the life of Anthony of Egypt. After twenty years of living a secluded life, Anthony of Egypt was ready to meet those men who felt drawn to lead the life of the hermit and encouraged them to spur each other to a holy life, showing that the outreach to others was more important than the solitary life *per se*. See Athanasius of Alexandria, *Vie d'Antoine*, trans., G. J. M. Bartelink (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1994), 172-179. The saint even demonstrates that the needs of others should be given first priority, and that the life of the hermit should be abandoned temporarily when such needs arise. Anthony quit the hermitage to assist the martyrs, even at the cost of possibly being killed himself, under the persecution of the Emperor Maximinus. Ibid., 258-62.

becomes a space where the person can mature spiritually and be more prepared to be of service to others, indicating that the relational is the crux of the spiritual journey. The lifestyle and spirituality of the hermit can be seen as one of the first attempts in Christian development to integrate detachment with the relational.

2.4.4 One-to-one intimacy

The relational aspect between human beings has been explored so far within the parameters of the communal life, and as a form of lifestyle that in its relational aspect does not encompass the sexual and physical form of intimacy as one of the main traits of the relational. This does not mean that there are no other forms of relationships that Christianity honours, nor does it mean that within Christian spirituality there is no space for sexual intimacy. On the contrary, the Christian faith has always given importance to the relationship between the spouses, and advocated this form of relationship as a key element in the salvation of the individual. Saint Paul shows that the love between husband and wife makes the spouses holy (Eph. 5: 25-26). The word ‘holy’ denotes that it is the love between the spouses that fosters spiritual growth, and that the individuals become whole and complete, as they journey towards spiritual maturity, as a result of the love in the marital relationship. The ‘married life becomes a visible sign that they are imitating and sharing the invisible action of Christ’⁸⁰ when spouses relate with each other in a loving manner, The relationship becomes triangular, modelled on the Trinitarian paradigm, with husband, wife and God being the three points of the triangle, each one feeding love to the other. The love of the spouse towards God is affected directly by the love towards the married counterpart, in such a way that within the marital relationship, one cannot exist without the other.

⁸⁰ Joseph A. Grassi, “The Letter to the Ephesians,” in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, 349.

The relational aspect, expressed through the sexual act in the married life was perceived as less important in Christian spirituality for many centuries. The physical and the mundane, which are essential aspects of the relationship of the married couple, were seen as obstacles to the spiritual life in later movements in the development of Christianity. In Medieval spirituality, one can observe a trend for married couples to separate, make a vow of celibacy, and leave the world to live in a cloister or hermitage. In this case, the relational aspect of the married life was side-lined to lead a life of complete sexual abstinence.⁸¹ The tension between these diametrically opposite polarities, the sexual and the spiritual, emerged strongly. One of the reasons for this struggle, and for this fear of the physical, particularly in the early Middle Ages, but which continued to permeate even in subsequent centuries, is the influence of Augustinian thought that resulted in the mentality that the carnal is an obstruction to spiritual growth. Augustinian thought was wrongly associated with the concept that the physical and the sexual are evil and prevent the human being from relating with the Divine. The cardinal mistake is that Augustine's struggle, which might have been relevant to him, became the struggle of all Christianity. The spiritual journey of a person cannot be applied in its totality to anyone else since each journey is unique. It is also essential to understand the Augustinian struggle within the context Augustine lived in, his own experiences and the influence of Platonic and Neo-Platonic thought that emphasised the schism of body and soul, perceiving the soul as imprisoned by the body.⁸² If one delves deeper into Christian spirituality, and if one returns to the roots, one would notice that the sexual and the physical were not intended to be obstacles to the spiritual but vehicles of union with the Divine. The Old Testament presents striking imagery in the Book of the Song of Songs that portrays the sexual as a bridge between human beings and God. Despite being interpreted generally as a metaphor for the relationship between Jesus Christ and His Church,

⁸¹ Aumann, *Christian Spirituality*, 90.

⁸² Eugene TeSelle, *Augustine the Theologian* (London: Burns & Oates, 1970), 196-7.

at a literal level, the book describes the loving relationship between two human beings, the Bride and the Groom, and celebrates the physical, sensual and sexual aspects of this relationship.⁸³ The author makes no distinction between the sexual and the spiritual experience of the love-making of the couple, demonstrating that the sexual can be a vehicle to the spiritual, and that it is in the sexual union of the couple that the climactic point of the union of this relationship is achieved.

The sexual expression, manifested through the body, cannot be divorced from the relational in Christian spirituality. As long as this expression occurs in proper and healthy relationships, the sexual element becomes a vehicle enabling the couple to grow and mature in their love towards each other, and towards the Divine. The importance of the sexual and the physical in spirituality, particularly in the relational dimension, is evident in the development of the Christian heritage in the sensual and sexual imagery used in the writings of particular mystics. An example that highlights the importance of the sensory within the relational can be found in Post-Tridentine spirituality, particularly in the poetry of John of the Cross.⁸⁴ These sources demonstrate that Christian spirituality is holistic: there is no schism between the physical and the spiritual. *Au contraire*, the person is perceived holistically, and since the journey in holiness is a journey in wholeness, the individual can only mature when the integration between the physical and the spiritual occurs.

⁸³ Roland E. Murphy, "Canticle of Canticles," in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, 463.

⁸⁴ John of the Cross compares the encounter of the soul with God with a bride seeking her bridegroom. In *The Dark Night*, the language used is once again sensory and sexual, particularly when John of the Cross describes the physical contact established between the bride and the Bridegroom on entering the garden. See John of the Cross, "Dark Night," 295-6.

One criticism that can be directed towards the depiction of the relational in Christian spirituality is the impression of a smooth journey, of a relationship where the attraction of the two individuals is ever-growing. Upon closer examination, however, and by studying in depth the spirituality of the relational based on the experiences of particular individuals, one realises that the difficulties and challenges are present in the journey and that it is through these difficulties encountered in relationships, and at times posed by the relationship itself, that spiritual (and psychological) development can occur. It is by acknowledging and facing the inner demons that growth can take place. Relationships within Christian spirituality should not be perceived as a form of escapism into a rosy world.⁸⁵ The relational is not always linear or unhindered by difficulties. In certain phases and particular circumstances, the individual is faced with the difficult question whether there is validity at all in struggling further along the journey, since the hardships seem insurmountable and the situation futile and barren. Undoubtedly, the answer is not clear-cut. It takes wisdom for the individual to analyse whether the particular relational path should be pursued or not, and such decisions need to be weighed thoroughly and carefully. Frequently, however, confronted by these challenges, the Christian is encouraged to engage in this journey of pain, knowing that through discernment, and in the process of waiting, it could be that these obstacles enable the person to delve deeper into the relationship with God. The obstacles in a relationship can be the vehicle of growth as much as love itself.

⁸⁵ The spirituality of Elizabeth Leseur highlights this point. Her husband lost his faith and made life challenging for her in an attempt to draw her towards atheism. It was by engaging with the difficulties posed by her relationship with her husband that Elizabeth grew in her relationship with God. See Aumann, *Christian Spirituality*, 271. It also demonstrates that for a relationship to serve as a bridge linking the human with the Divine it is not necessary for both counterparts to be engaged in it spiritually. As in the case of Elizabeth Leseur, the husband was an atheist, and as far as we know, was not engaged spiritually. On the contrary, he attempted to dissuade his wife from pursuing the road of perfection.

The references to one-to-one intimacy in the discourse on the relational in Christian spirituality do not limit themselves to the sexual expression between the male and the female. The relational in Christian spirituality is not only exclusive to the love between the man and the woman but extends itself to all forms of relationships. For example, the beauty of friendship is depicted as a vehicle of spiritual growth,⁸⁶ and this is the way God's relationship with human beings is often expressed in spiritual literature. In the same way, the friendship between God and humanity is reflected in the relationship between humans in their friendship with each other. It is through friendship that the individual reaches God, demonstrating the sanctity of this relationship,⁸⁷ and showing the important place and the high level it occupies in the spiritual world. Friendship is a holy relationship in which two individuals become one,⁸⁸ almost placing the relationship of friendship on the same level of holiness as the Sacrament of Marriage wherein the spouses become one.⁸⁹ This concept also attempts to integrate the relational with detachment. It is by relating that the person loses his self to merge with the other. It is a spirituality wherein intimacy is holy whenever it leads to the sacrificial giving of the self and to spiritual growth, whether this happens with members of the same or opposite gender. Certainly, this model does not necessarily advocate sexual intimacy as forming part of the friendship. Even though throughout the history of the Church sexual practice between members of the same gender was frequently discussed,⁹⁰ the concept of the gay identity as a distinct sexual orientation is a recent phenomenon, in wider circles

⁸⁶ As shall be seen in the fourth chapter of this work, Simone Weil gave more importance to friendships than to sexual relationships in her analysis on spiritual development. See *infra*, 148-54; 274-8.

⁸⁷ Aelred of Rievaulx, "De Spirituali Amicitia," in *Opera Omnia* (Belgium: Turnhout, 1959), 303-4.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 304.

⁸⁹ 'Ut virgineum caput virginei pectoris floribus fulciretur, ac thalami caelestis odorifera secreta fragrantiam spiritualium unguentorum virgineis affectibus quanto vicinius, tanto copiosius instillarent,' Aelred of Rievaulx, "De speculo caritatis," in *Opera Omnia*, 159. 'So that the maidenly head would be upheld by flowers of the maidenly bosom, and the fragrant secrets of the celestial bedchamber would pour, more closely as much as more abundantly, the scent of spiritual ointments over those who are maidenly disposed.'

⁹⁰ In Chapters 6, 8, 10 and 11, the historian John Boswell presents and analyses a number of documents, treatises and other forms of writings that demonstrate that throughout the history of the Church, same-sex sexual practice was a matter of debate. See John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century* (Chicago/London: Chicago Press, 1980).

and within the ecclesiastical reality.⁹¹ The concept of exclusive homosexuality is a concept which was quite unfamiliar to the pre-modern world.⁹² It is essential to speak about sexual intimacy juxtaposed against the backdrop of sexual orientation. This is a reality that still needs to be explored in further depth within Catholic theology, particularly in spirituality.

2.4.5 The marginalised

Another important aspect in the study of the relational within the Christian tradition is the emphasis that has always been placed on the outreach to the marginalised. This is so central and at the core of Christian spirituality that when Jesus Christ was asked to define the *other*, He did so by referring to the outcast in the narrative of the parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk. 10, 25-37). Within the vision announced by Jesus Christ, the *other* is the person rejected by the parameters of society. It also calls for a personal involvement in a particular situation or context motivated by a care or concern for the marginalised person. The relational in the Christian perspective is not only limited to the significant others in life, but extends to all individuals who feature in the daily experiences of the person, particularly the ones who are outcasts. The Church, as an institution, has often been accused of not having honoured the standards of the philosophy of the parable of the Good Samaritan⁹³ since it promoted the segregation of the outcast, as was the case with the Jews⁹⁴ and homosexuals,⁹⁵ through its actions.⁹⁶ One cannot ignore, however, that throughout the history of the Church there have always been individuals who have responded to the calling to relate with the marginalised. This is particularly evident in the spirituality advocated by the Mendicant Orders, particularly

⁹¹ William Stacy Johnston, *A Time to Embrace: Same-Sex Relationships in Religion, Law, and Politics* (Michigan/Cambridge: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2012), 61.

⁹² John Boswell, *Same-Sex Unions in Premodern Europe* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 91.

⁹³ Samuel Oyin Abogunrin, "Luke," in *The International Bible*, 1407.

⁹⁴ See David I. Kertzer, *The Popes against the Jews* (New York: Vintage Books, 2002).

⁹⁵ See Boswell, *Christianity, Tolerance and Homosexuality*.

⁹⁶ In fact, as this work will reveal in the third chapter, this was also a major concern for Simone Weil in her relationship with the Catholic Church. See *infra*, 91-4.

the Franciscan Order, whose apostolate to reach out to the marginalised in society was cardinal in the lifestyle of the friars.⁹⁷

More notable figures, such as Oscar Romero, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and more recently, Pope Francis, have embraced the approach of relating with the marginalised in the manifestation of their spiritual life, and this trend, emerges strongly in modern spirituality. There is also an interesting shift in modern spirituality in which the spiritual becomes connected to the political, thus embracing the contemplative with the active life. Social issues become prime concerns for those who are engaged in the spiritual life. A particular issue which features extensively in modern spirituality is the desire to create interfaith dialogue, particularly with members of religions who might be perceived as marginalised in Western culture.⁹⁸ An evident journey can be observed in the history of Catholic spirituality, which was marked by a transition from an attitude wherein this interfaith dialogue was happening for the purpose of conversion, to a more mature attitude in which ideas are exchanged and where the focus is not on dominance but on the relational. The power dynamic transforms itself into a profound conversation where the depths of the spiritual experience are explored through the diverse religious channels.⁹⁹

⁹⁷ John R. Tyson, *Invitation to Christian Spirituality* (New York: Oxford Unity Press, 1999), 141.

⁹⁸ One of the notable figures in this respect is certainly Charles de Foucauld. He worked for the conversion of the Arabs by living in the Sahara. His aim was to take the Tabernacle to the non-Christian peoples. He introduced a new type of contemplative life, whereby in silence, his community could share in the sufferings of the marginalised people around it. According to Foucauld, 'Our Lord has come to this world to seek those who are lost...he leaves aside some sheep who are in the fold to run after those who have lost their way...let us follow His example'. Foucauld, *Écrits Spirituels*, 12. 'Notre-Seigneur est venu pour chercher ce qui est perdu. Il laisse quelques brebis qui sont au bercail pour courir après celle qui s'est égarée...Faisons comme Lui.' Although the approach of Foucauld portrays the Muslim as being the one who is astray, and the Christian as the harbinger of the exclusive truth, thus creating a seemingly power dynamic between the two religions, the urge to reach out by living with the outcast is certainly noteworthy in the vocation of Foucauld, particularly considering the fact that this was way before Vatican Council II and its issuing of *Nostra Aetate*.

⁹⁹ Thomas Merton is one of the figures in the history of Christian spirituality who is associated with the building of bridges in interfaith dialogue. He sought to explore the common ground between Christianity and the Far Eastern faiths. In fact, although a Trappist contemplative, Merton's spirituality went beyond the four walls of the monastery. By relating with another religion, Merton explored the notion of nothingness present in Zen Buddhism. It is by relating and entering into a discourse with another religion that Merton delved deeper into the spiritual life.

Modern spirituality was also preoccupied with, and felt the responsibility to assist, the poor and the oppressed. Perhaps the horrors of the twentieth century, and the growing awareness of the suffering of particular social entities, created a more acute awareness of the need to relate with the marginalised.¹⁰⁰ The option for the marginalised and the poor became indeed a salient feature of twentieth century spirituality, and the drive to integrate personal spiritual development with an active concern for the needy, is evident in the practice of the spiritual masters of the twentieth century. Spirituality was no longer perceived as something that could be practised in a secluded area but required the individual to leave his comfort zone, and venture into more unorthodox venues to share the spiritual life with the marginalised.

The mystic of the twentieth century rediscovered this call which made it impossible for him to remain secluded in the monastery. The spirituality of the twentieth century is characterised by a realisation that the relationship with the Transcendent should spur the mystic to be engaged on a socio-political level.¹⁰¹ A movement that is highly associated with the merging of the spiritual with the political in the twentieth century is the Theology of Liberation that declares that the Christian cannot live the Gospel unless he reaches out to the oppressed and becomes an agent of social change. Spiritual life cannot be authentically lived unless embedded in the relational, particularly in the option towards the poor. The Christian who is endeavouring to flourish in his relationship with the Divine cannot be indifferent to the needy.¹⁰²

¹⁰⁰ Contemporary followers of Foucauld felt the need to take Christ into the slums and the factories, following in the tradition of their founder to reach out to sectors in society that are more vulnerable. See Aumann, *Christian Spirituality*, 266-7.

¹⁰¹ Sheldrake, *Spirituality & History*, 173-5.

¹⁰² Gustavo Gutierrez, founder of the Theology of Liberation, explains that 'only in this kind of commitment to the poor is it possible to live spiritual poverty.' Gustavo Gutierrez, *We drink from our own wells: The Spiritual Journey of a People* (New York: Orbis Books, 1984), 123.

2.4.6 Concluding remarks

The final contribution that will be mentioned in this section is a reference to the spirituality of Pope Benedict XVI that summarises the journey of relationality within the Christian tradition. According to him, ‘man is the more himself the more he is with ‘the other’....Only through ‘the other’ and through ‘being’ with ‘the other’ does he come to himself.’¹⁰³ Pope Benedict’s anthropology, reflecting the Christian heritage over the centuries, denotes that contemporary Man can only find meaning and fulfilment in life through relationships. This can be defined as being the fulcrum of the spiritual life. It is also a spirituality that gives importance to commitment and that is ultimately based on the virtue of charity. In fact, ‘human beings are relational, and they possess their lives – themselves – only by way of relationship. I alone am not myself, but only in and with you am I myself. To be truly a human being means to be related in love, to be of and for.’¹⁰⁴

2.5 Dialectical tension

These two notions, namely, *detachment* and the *relational* can be perceived as diametrically opposed to each other. If a person is called to renounce everything, how can he be in a relationship with self and others? There seems to be a dialectical tension, that is, there seems to be two incompatible dimensions in opposition to each other. This dialectical tension has been a cardinal theme that has been investigated extensively. On one hand, Christian spirituality has been accused of having emphasised interiority to the detriment of the outer life: the detached life dominated over the relational aspect.¹⁰⁵ On the other hand, if detachment were divorced from the relational, ‘the essence of Christianity would be detached

¹⁰³ Josef Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), 234.

¹⁰⁴ Josef Ratzinger, *In the Beginning: A Catholic Understanding of the Story of Creation and the fall* (New York: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), 72. Other authors that will be referred to and studied within this work, who focus extensively on the notion of alterity are: Jacques Lacan, Martin Buber, Søren Kierkegaard and Emmanuel Levinas.

¹⁰⁵ Owen Thomas, “Interiority and Christian Spirituality,” in *The Journal of Religion* 80 (2000): 41- 60.

from the vital relations fundamental to human existence, and would become a world apart, admirable perhaps, but decisively cut off from the complex fabric of human life.’¹⁰⁶ The person ‘only becomes himself by moving away from himself’ so that he can relate with others.¹⁰⁷ The human being can only attain fulfilment by detaching himself so that a space can be created to relate with others. This paradox underlines the dialectical struggle between detachment and the relational.

This study will attempt to demonstrate that the dialectical tension between the inner and the outer life should not be seen as problematic or destructive, but on the contrary, should be perceived as creative, and at the heart of Christian spirituality.¹⁰⁸ It is by grappling between these two polarities, and giving importance to both, that the Christian grows. These two polarities are compatible and can be integrated. Through detachment, the hindrances in relationships that impede spiritual growth can be identified, leading to the embracing of the elements and the persons that will enable the spiritual development through relationality.¹⁰⁹

This chapter has evaluated the principal developments in the Christian tradition that have shed light on the dynamics characterising the themes of *detachment* and the *relational*. The work will proceed by focusing on the former, analysing it within the life and the writings of the French mystic, Simone Weil. A selection of aspects will be studied, demonstrating the struggle that allowed Weil to mature as a result of the tension that arose as she struggled with the practice of detachment.

¹⁰⁶ Benedict XVI, Pope, Litteræ Encyclicæ: “Deus Caritas Est,” (25 December 2005), I: 7, in AAS 98, 3 (2006), 223-224.

¹⁰⁷ Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, 234.

¹⁰⁸ Philip Sheldrake, “Christian Spirituality as a Way of Living Publicly: A Dialectic of the Mystical and the Prophetic,” in *Minding the Spirit: The Study of Christian Spirituality*, ed. Elizabeth A. Dreyer and Mark S. Burrows (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2005), 283.

¹⁰⁹ Gray, “Detachment,” 234.

CHAPTER III

Detachment:

The struggle for growth in Weil's life and writings

This chapter will focus on the process of detachment as seen in specific themes that are present in Weilian literature. The first three themes will focus on the *religious* dimension, showing how and why Weil not only responded to the call to detach from religious institutions but also opted to detach as well from any security that religion and even spirituality could offer. The rest of the chapter will then focus on how the purification that occurred in the religious dimension of Weil's life is equally mirrored in her engagement with the *socio-political* and *psychosocial* realities, and how these also served as a way for spiritual growth. The rationale behind this choice was to commence by expounding on Weil's spirituality on detachment through her views and thoughts on the religion and the religious experience, which characterise her mysticism, and to proceed by applying these insights on detachment within the social and political realities.

The selected themes, although cardinal in any serious analysis of the life and the writings of Simone Weil, do not cover the whole spectrum of themes that are pertinent to the process of detachment in the works of this mystic, but provide a methodology of how the study of detachment can be approached in the study of Weilian spirituality. This presents a framework that can be easily transferred to any other theme.

3.1 Detachment from Judaism

Simone Weil's relationship with Judaism, and her need to detach from it, has been a point of contention for the past few decades amongst scholars, and many academics have analysed the matter at length, arriving at different, and often contrasting results. This chapter starts specifically and intentionally from this dilemma, not only because of its importance in Weilian studies, but also because of the fact that the issue is so intimately linked to the life, and, therefore, to the writings of Weil. The ethnic origins of a person are very significant in the analysis of the spirituality of a person, no matter how much he embraces or rejects them. The rejection can offer insights into the nature of the person as much as the embracing of ethnic origins. Simone Weil was born into a Jewish family, even though her immediate family was agnostic and did not practise the Jewish traditions. It is, therefore, appropriate to start this analysis by studying the perception of Judaism by Weil's family, and how the socio-historical milieu might have effected this perception.

3.1.1 Family background in the light of the socio-historical setting

It seems that Simone actually discovered that she was Jewish at the age of eleven, denoting that there was no reference to this faith or ethnicity in her childhood. This is perplexing, particularly when one considers that her paternal grandmother, like most other devout Jews, did not eat shrimp, and probably read her prayer book in front of Simone in Hebrew.¹ Weil's grandmother observed these traditions devoutly and quite obsessively. It could be surmised that Weil's dismissal of the Jewish traditions, and her 'forgetting' them, particularly if examined from a psychoanalytical perspective, might be due to the rejection of these strict observances that she witnessed as a child: the act of 'forgetting' was a defence mechanism from the oppression that these customs were associated with. This hypothesis, however, is

¹ Sylvie Weil, *At Home with André and Simone Weil* (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2010), 170.

completely discarded by Weil's niece who maintains that if Simone were to be traumatised by any compulsive behaviour in her childhood, this would have more likely been due to the fixation that her parents had on medical and health issues² than on the religious one which seem to have been given less importance in the family.³

The family's decision to refute their Jewish roots⁴ is not such a surprising element – within a culture of assimilation such a decision was perfectly understandable. In fact, there was no strong sense of a Jewish community at the turn of the century in France. In comparison to other European countries, there were not many Jews. This was essentially since in 1394, Jews were expelled from France, and the few that remained were assimilated in French society as a result of the full emancipation brought about by the 1789 French Revolution, much before the process of assimilation commenced in other countries. At the turn of the century the number of Jews living within French society had dwindled drastically.⁵ The attitude towards the Jewish question was also affected by the explosive polemics of the Dreyfus Affair,⁶ that consequently reflected and amplified anti-Semitism in France. In spite of the coverage of the media on this episode, and the number of people who were involved in defence of or opposition to the situation, the majority of French Jews preferred to remain silent about the

² Ibid., 44.

³ This argument can be considered weak for it is possible that Simone Weil could have been affected by both forms of compulsion: her parents regarding health, and her grandmother regarding Jewish practices. There seems to be, however, a dearth of literature directed towards the possible influence of the grandmother on Simone's refusal of her Jewish roots, a subject which could be of interest to future researchers.

⁴ This ambiguity persisted even at a later stage of Weil's life. When Weil was in the South of France, and her parents came to visit her, her father cracked anti-Semitic jokes. See Francine du Plessix Gray, *Simone Weil*, (New York: Lipper/Viking Book, 2001), 171.

⁵ Michael R. Marrus, *The Politics of Assimilation: The French Jewish Community at the Time of the Dreyfus Affair* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 3-6.

⁶ The Dreyfus Affair was a political scandal that happened in France, based on the accusation of treason of Captain Alfred Dreyfus, a Jewish French officer, sentenced to life imprisonment for having allegedly sold military secrets to the German army. This episode split the country in two and led to an increase in anti-Semitism. The left-wing entities favoured the Jewish question, whereas the right-wing partisans reacted heavily against. Eventually, Dreyfus was freed of the accusations since most of the evidence was based on false documentation. It is also interesting to note that one of the principal minds behind the Zionist movement, Theodor Herzl (1860-1904) decided to work in favour of this movement since he had been affected by the Dreyfus case which he had covered as a journalist.

matter, probably not to be singled out in public, and to assert their French identity more than their Jewish heritage. Nonetheless, a significant minority of Jews still felt the need to defend their position in French society, and this led to the rise of Zionism in France.⁷ By the end of the nineteenth century, even though the notion of the ghetto was relatively insignificant, the concept of the Jewish race, which was not necessarily focused on religious practice, was growing in France. This was fuelled further by the number of Jews that migrated from Eastern Europe, mostly from Russia, in the 1880s,⁸ and who deemed their Jewishness as being important and needed to express their identity as opposed to the smaller number of native Jews in France who were assimilating in the French set-up. The historian Marrus concludes that the 'Jewish identity was something about which some Jews were proud, others indifferent, and still others ashamed'.⁹ There was a tension between a decline in the number of assimilationist Jews in France, versus an increase in Jewish Nationalism, or at least a surge in the expression of Jewish identity. A parallel with this ambiguity can be seen on a national level. There was a section of the French population that could be defined as progressive, liberal and republican, and this was the side that defended the Jewish cause in the affair, whereas the other side was reactionary, nationalist and monarchist and felt threatened by the Jewish presence.¹⁰ It is not easy to place the Weil family within the social dynamics of French society at the turn of the century, although essentially they leaned more towards the first faction, even though they had little interest in defending the Jewish cause. It is against these contrasting social developments that the reaction and approach of Weil's family towards Judaism needs to be understood, and it is against these historical dynamics that Simone Weil's detachment from her Jewish roots should be examined.

⁷ Marrus, *Politics of Assimilation*, 163.

⁸ Thomas R. Nevin, *Simone Weil: Portrait of a Self-Exiled Jew* (North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 238.

⁹ Marrus, *Politics of Assimilation*, 26.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 201-2.

The most surprising aspect is not the assimilation of the Weil household within Parisian society, but Simone Weil's utter, and seemingly extreme, rejection of her Jewish roots, approximating a state of denial of what should be part of her identity. Before abandoning the effect that the family had on her, however, it is pertinent to look at the relationship between Weil and her parents, and how this could have shaped her vision on Judaism. Ironically, it could be said that Weil associated Judaism with her parents. She was Jewish as a result of her ancestry, particularly from her mother's side, since according to the Judaic tradition, the Jewish religion is passed on from the maternal side. Consequently, Weil's need to detach from Judaism might be attributed to her need to detach from her parents. They were overprotective both in her childhood – suffice to mention the rules and regulations of hygiene that characterised the Weil household – and in her early adulthood when her mother followed her and made sure that she was living in good conditions every time she was transferred to a new teaching post. Likewise, this overprotective attitude can be observed when the Weils went out on a 'hunting expedition' to save her from the horrors of the Spanish Civil War. If her stifling parents represented Judaism, then it is no wonder that this subconscious process led Weil to detach herself totally from its religious practice.

The political sphere, as well as the social milieu, might have also played a part in the development of Weil's attitude and resulted in the need to detach herself from her Jewish roots. In the 1930s, the anti-Semitic wave that was noticeable at the turn of the century increased dramatically, particularly since the French felt disturbed by the increasing number of German Jews who were flocking to France for refuge. The unsuccessful government of Léon Blum, an assimilated French Jew who chose to have an entourage of Jews in his political circle, did not help matters either. In reaction to this situation, a *numerus clausus* was proposed whereby the attainment of political and administrative positions by Jews was

limited.¹¹ Furthermore, the interim period between the two World Wars was laden with a strong wave of anti-Semitism in France. This is particularly evident when popular culture is examined. The image of the Jews was perceived negatively in the literature of the end of the nineteenth century and the first forty years of the twentieth century. Authors like Maupassant, Zola, Bourget, Daudet and Céline depicted the Jewish characters in their literary works ambiguously. Hideously anti-Jewish caricatures were drawn by cartoonists such as Willette, Jean Forain and Emmanuel Poiré. There was also a popular general fear of Jewish migrants entering France and contaminating the purity of the French race, a view that was shared not only by the man in the street, but also by notable figures such as the playwright and politician Jean Giraudoux.¹²

Simone Weil also opposed any form of Nationalism and ardent fervour towards a race. Her interest in particular races, such as the Annamites, originated from the fact that these peoples were rejected, oppressed and exploited. Her interest towards them was not a nationalistic one, but a humanitarian and spiritual one. Like Thérèse of Lisieux and Charles de Foucauld, her French predecessors, Weil was interested in a spirituality of universal brotherhood. This contrasted distinctly with the prevailing movements in her lifetime. The years before her birth, a few decades after the unification of Germany and of Italy, right up to Weil's adulthood and death, which witnessed the growth of the movements of Nazism and Fascism in the same two countries, highlight a strong sense of Nationalism. The emphasis was on the glory and the grandeur of the country. This movement was, however, not solely pertinent to the two mentioned countries but was extended across the European continent. In her outreach, Weil condemned any form of Nationalism, including Jewish Nationalism. She did not condemn the Jews as individuals, as human beings, as can be seen in her work in

¹¹ Giniewski, *La haine de soi*, 45.

¹² Robert S. Wistrich, *Anti-Semitism: The Longest Hatred* (London: Thames Mandarin, 1991), 130-2.

Southern France during the Second World War, whereby she secured false identity cards for refugees, including the Jews.¹³ Her criticism was aimed at the dangers of the ever-increasing movement of Nationalism.

Weil's belief in universal brotherhood, and her zeal to work for the marginalised and the oppressed, might be perceived as a contradiction when juxtaposed against the reality of the Jewish Holocaust in the Second World War. Why does there seem to be an absence of interest in a people who were being oppressed so harshly during this period? In accordance with her beliefs, the fate of the Jews should have been one of the main concerns of Weil. This is a delicate and sensitive matter that requires deeper pondering, and is not the main focus of this study. It is important not to fall in the pit of reading an event that happened in history through the lens of contemporary thought. The Jewish Holocaust has been spoken of, examined and analysed in the last few decades, unfortunately to the exclusion of the other Holocausts engineered by the Nazis, such as the extermination of homosexuals, gypsies or people with a disability. The awareness towards the suffering of the Jewish Holocaust has become an integral part of popular understanding, particularly as a result of the extensive amount of literature and films produced to emphasise the brutalities endured by the Jews in the concentration camps. This is a sensitivity that is true to contemporary man, examining the happenings in hindsight. This awareness, however, was not so evident during the war years, with the full picture of the atrocities committed by the Nazis in the 'final solution', only made fully available after the war, beginning with the Nuremberg trials.¹⁴ Weil's reactions cannot be examined by the contemporary understanding and knowledge of the issue. It would be unfair to put Weil on the tribunal bench and place on her shoulders the responsibility based on the awareness that contemporary society has towards the matter. If Simone Weil is to be

¹³ Nevin, *Portrait of a Self-Exiled Jew*, 32.

¹⁴ See Paul Johnson, *A History of the Jews* (London: Phoenix Giant, 1997), 423-517.

put to trial, for the sake of justice, this needs to be done within the framework and the limited knowledge of what was happening that any person in the early 1940s had.

3.1.2 Weil's perception of Judaism

The mapping of the different social, historical and political factors that could have influenced Weil will be followed by an examination of her understanding of Judaism. This is important since Weil did not simply conceal her Jewishness as a number of French Jews did, but reacted strongly against it. What was she reacting against precisely? Why did Weil feel the need to react to this belief which formed, or seemed to have formed, part of her identity? This is even more perturbing since Weil's political philosophy was essentially left-wing, and the Socialist party favoured zealously the Jewish question. However, when she was not offered a teaching post during the Second World War, Simone wrote a letter to the Minister of Education to ask him to give her a clear definition of what it meant to be a Jew, and whether she fell in that category.¹⁵ This was certainly not due to her fear of the consequences of being identified as a Jew, but out of the desire of dismissal of any tie with the Jewish community. Weil considered herself to be culturally French and Christian. In her writings, Weil attacked Judaism and had harsh words about the Hebrew tradition, completely divorcing the development of Christianity from it.¹⁶ This is bewildering, particularly since Weil seemed to ignore totally the spiritual dimension that is so inherent in Judaism, including the Hassidic movement or the richness of the Kabbalah,¹⁷ which translates words into numbers to delve

¹⁵ Pétrement, *Vie*, 591-2.

¹⁶ This is in sharp contrast to Paul's affirmation of the intimate link between Judaism and Christianity where the former is compared to an olive shoot, and the latter to a branch from the same tree (Rom. 11: 17-24). This image was reinforced again in the fourth section of the document *Nostra Aetate* in Vatican Council II in discussing the Judeo-Christian relationship. See Declaratio "Nostra Aetate," (28 October 1965), 4, in AAS 58 (1966), 742.

¹⁷ See Jacques Cabaud, *Simone Weil: A Fellowship in Love* (London: Harvill, 1964), 274. Cabaud refers to a particular occasion when Weil witnessed and appreciated a Hassidic ritual, and this was in Morocco, on her way with her family to New York, after they had to leave the country due to their Jewish identity. Weil was particularly intrigued by the high-pitched voices and constant swaying of this Jewish ritual that she saw when she was in the camp in Casablanca.

deeper into supernatural phenomena, ironically, in a similar manner to the Pythagoreans that Weil admired so much. It also seems that Weil was in total oblivion about the origins of the *Our Father*, a prayer to which she was so devoted, believing that it was impossible for anyone to recite this prayer meaningfully without change occurring.¹⁸ She did not seem to know that this was a rehashing of a Jewish prayer called the Kaddish.¹⁹ She also seemed to be unaware of the movement of the Essenes, a branch of Judaism that grew in the period of the Second Temple.²⁰ The Essenes mirrored extensively Stoic philosophy, which influenced Weil deeply, and probably left an impact on early Christian development. In an almost obsessive manner, Weil insisted and criticised elements of Judaism, to the exclusion of anything else.

In spite of Weil's criticism, there are also particular aspects of Jewish spirituality that are surprisingly and paradoxically similar to key concepts in Weilian spirituality. The most evident one is the importance attached to the Shema Yisrael²¹ prayer in Judaism, a prayer which Simone must have heard her grandmother reciting numerous times and which helps the Jews to focus constantly on their belief in one God. The resemblance with the spirituality of attention which is characteristic of Weilian spirituality is particularly striking. What difference is there between the concept of attention as presented in *The Bhagavad Gita*,²² that Weil embraced, and the spirituality of the Shema Yisrael, which asks the person to focus on God constantly during the day? There is also an uncanny parallel between the concept of *tsimtsum* (diminution) in Tsafad mysticism, a branch of Jewish mysticism, and Weil's theology on Creation, whereby both claim that the act took place through the withdrawal of

¹⁸ Simone Weil, "A propos du Pater," in *Marseille*, vol I, 345.

¹⁹ Giniewski, *La haine de soi*, 182.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 180.

²¹ The Shema Yisrael is a prayer that the Jews recite every morning and evening: 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord is our God, the Lord is One.'

²² *The Bhagavad Gita* instructs the person in his relationship with the Divine to 'think of me therefore at all times; remember thou me and fight. And with mind and reason on me, thou shalt in truth come to me.' See Juan Mascaró, VIII: 7, trans., *The Bhagavad Gita* (London: Penguin, 1962), 39-40.

the presence of the Almighty.²³ It may well be that Weil did not know about this aspect of Jewish spirituality and that this parallel is a mere coincidence, but it certainly demonstrates that unlike the image that Weil projected, there were many aspects in Jewish spirituality that were valid and bore a strong resemblance with her personal spirituality, which may, or may not, have had latent roots in the spirituality passed on by her grandparents.

Essentially, Weil condemns Judaism because of the insistence posed on the communal identity.²⁴ In her vision, the Jews hijacked and sabotaged God, making Him their own, fitting Him into their culture and way of being. Weil even attacks the Catholic Church for being Jewish in its approach, whereby God is perceived as being the exclusive property of the Church, an attitude which, according to Weil, is due to the Jewish influence within Catholicism, and which is not Catholic at all.²⁵ It is, however, her own contradiction of her tenet of inclusion that sheds light on the erroneous fallacy that she falls into. By being exclusive herself, and by reading Judaism as being uniquely orthodox and mainstream, she discredits all the other branches of the religion, some of them more liberal in their approach, that have given less importance, or at times even rejected or ignored, the insistence on the communal identity that Orthodox Judaism seems to give. Yet, although Weil accuses Catholicism of having fallen into the same reality,²⁶ that of being exclusive in its approach, she herself takes into consideration a spectrum of movements in the Christian tradition and does not limit herself to mainstream teaching uniquely. While she justified the sustained interest in the Catholic spiritual tradition in its inherent variety, she did not read Judaism in the same way, probably due to her limited vision. Had Weil embraced a more inclusive

²³ Waaijman, *Spirituality*, 656.

²⁴ Coles, *Modern Pilgrimage*, 159.

²⁵ Weil, *Lettre*, 49.

²⁶ Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace* (London: Routledge, 2002), 160.

understanding of Judaism in its various facets, her approach to that religion might have been different, or at least, more nuanced.

There is also another interesting argument presented by Giniewski that questions Weil's understanding of the theology of the Old Testament, and her difficulties in reconciling with its portrayal of the exclusive nature of the relationship between God and the Hebrews.²⁷ According to Weil, the Hebrews considered themselves to be the chosen and elected people of God. The term used in the Old Testament, however, is *am quadoch* which does not mean an 'elected race' but a 'different race', and, therefore, the term does not indicate any form of superiority.²⁸ Nevertheless, the implication of difference still implies a sense of exclusion, which Weil would have refuted equally. Different or elected, in the eyes of Weil, the Jewish people still placed themselves on a separate plane, a plane of superiority towards the rest of humanity, and it is this distinction that Weil perceived as problematic.

3.1.3 De-rooting or detachment?

Apart from her misconceptions, or what seem to be misconceptions on Judaism, it is also possible that Simone Weil was reacting to her Jewishness because she perceived it as a practical hindrance. Anna Freud claims that Weil was denied permission to be parachuted back into France to help with the *Résistance* in the Second World War because she looked too Jewish.²⁹ It was also her surname that led to her departure from France when the Vichy government was established. It was her connection to her Jewishness that prevented her from fulfilling her mission and relating with the marginalised around her, or at least, this must have

²⁷ In spite of her issues and rejection of most of the books of the Old Testament, Weil enjoyed the Negro Spirituals when she was in New York, some of which related the episodes of the Hebrews in the Old Testament and showed the dynamics of their relationship with God. See Simone Weil, "Spirituals," in *Marseille, vol II*, 662-681.

²⁸ Giniewski, *La haine de soi*, 164.

²⁹ Coles, *Modern Pilgrimage*, 58.

been her interpretation. In fact, her comments about the Jewish issue increased significantly from the onset of the Second World War. It is at this point that the Jewish issue became a hindrance to the reality of Simone Weil. This implies that she recognised her Jewishness, and understood it as a point of contention that could not be transcended in her effort to reach out to a wider world. Weil only mentions two Jews whom she admired and these were the philosopher Spinoza, and the cinema director Charles Chaplin. The former was rejected by the Jewish community, whereas the latter evaded answering the question whether he considered himself a Jew. Likewise, Weil only walked into a synagogue once in her life, and this was during her stay in New York, towards the end of her life. The synagogue was administered and attended by Ethiopian Jews, giving the impression that Weil's motivation in attending was rooted in her interest for the black population. The fact that these black people were also Jews was secondary, if not insignificant.³⁰ Weil could only admire the Jewish identity when this identity was rejected or doubted, or somehow camouflaged.³¹

In her annihilation of self, Weil also had to include an annihilation of her roots, thus destroying anything Jewish in her.³² In this light, it would be more correct to speak of a de-rooting from Judaism rather than a detachment. Detachment presupposes an acceptance of a particular trait before the individual can actually transcend it, and is often a passive process. Her endeavour to disassociate herself from Judaism is definitely an active process. Nothingness, in this case, is not stemming from acknowledgement but has its roots in denial, which is destructive, and results in not being nothingness. Authentic nothingness leads to God, and the attitude displayed by Weil towards her Jewish origins does not permit spiritual growth. An essential and important distinction can, and needs to, be made, between *de-*

³⁰ Giniewski, *La haine de soi*, 42.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 31.

³² David Tracy, "Simone Weil: The Impossible," in *The Christian Platonism of Simone Weil*, ed. E. Jane Doering and Eric O. Springsted (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004), 234.

rooting,³³ a destructive approach, which does not originate in any act of love, and *detachment*, which has, as its starting point the acknowledgement of self and any entity surrounding the self. Detachment values love as its prime, and possibly sole, vehicle of contact, leading to nothingness. Detachment is not destructive, but on the contrary, is creative. In her rapport with Judaism, what is strikingly absent is the tension, so present in other aspects in this chapter, between the call towards detachment and the willingness ‘to relate’.

In Weil’s perspective on Judaism, there seems to be limited evidence of the openness to ‘relate’. Yet, claiming that Weil was not capable of detaching herself from her Jewish roots and that her attitude towards them was destructive, can be seen as reductionist. Although it is evident that Weil was not comfortable with her Jewish roots, and that her attitude towards Judaism was essentially negative, it might be that by doing so, Weil manifested that she was more Jewish than she seemed to be. To understand this concept, it is important to refer to the same dynamics present in the Fourth Gospel, a Gospel that Weil contemplated upon deeply. The Fourth Gospel is often accused of being anti-Semitic, almost depicting Jesus Christ as not being a Jew,³⁴ emphasising that what mattered was not the roots of Jesus, but the belief in Him as the Christ, the Son of God: a belief that transcends His Jewishness. This depiction of Christ in the Fourth Gospel is contrasted with the fact that the text is immersed in Jewish culture, referring to an extensive number of rituals, traditions and locations which are Jewish. Ironically, the most seemingly anti-Jewish Gospel is actually the most Jewish of the four

³³ Weil’s last work is entitled *L’Enracinement* (1943), written in the last year of her life, where her spirituality on detachment reached its peak. Rooting oneself is not adverse to detachment, but actually reinforces it, whereby de-rooting is directly opposed to detachment.

³⁴ There are numerous references in the Fourth Gospel that have been read as anti-Semitic. The Jews are accused as not keeping the Torah (Jn. 7: 19); of not understanding their own Scriptures (Jn. 5: 39-40; 10: 31-39) and of being responsible for the death of Jesus (Jn. 18: 12; 19: 12). The harshest accusation, a quotation that was frequently borrowed during the Nazi period in Germany, and still unfortunately misused nowadays in contemporary society by Neo-Nazis, is Jn. 8: 44 where Jesus accuses the Jews of being ‘the children of the Devil’.

inspired Gospels. It could be that the author/s, in placing the plot and the protagonist in a strongly Jewish setting, did so intentionally, to show that even though Jesus was a Jew, as the Son of God, He transcended His roots. Throughout the Gospel there is an evident tension between a Jewish Jesus and a Jesus who seems to defy Jewish traditions and enters into continual conflicts with the Jewish authorities. It is within this tension that the transcendence occurs. The same concept could be used for Simone Weil. This tension is evident in her life. Like the Jesus of the Fourth Gospel, the roots are Jewish, and yet, like the same Jesus, the reaction against them is present too. In combating her roots, her Jewishness emerges even more strongly. Had she simply ignored her roots, and not made any antagonistic references to the Jewish religion, possibly the issue would have been less discussed. By being so averse, she makes the reader even more aware of her roots, and read her writings within the context of the Jewish tradition. By defying Judaism, she emphasises it further. The tension is undoubtedly present, and it might have been a matter of time for her to manage to mature in the discourse on this delicate argument.³⁵

3.1.4 Final remarks

It is very difficult to determine what led Weil to detach herself from her Jewish roots. This is an argument that requires further development and more serious reflection. What is relevant to this study is that Simone Weil felt the necessity to break away from her Jewish roots, and that this struggle needs to be seen in the light of what was happening to her in her personal journey, and must be read and studied against the diverse realities that characterised the period she lived in. By engaging in this struggle, and allowing the reader to participate in the dynamics, Weil is not only posing the question of what the Jewish identity is and refers to, a

³⁵ Anna Freud discusses this possibility particularly in the hypothetical scenario of a Weil who survived the Second World War, and who would have reflected on the atrocities of the Holocaust. See Coles, *Modern Pilgrimage*, 60.

question that remains topical even to the contemporary world, but moreover, makes the committed reader question the attachment that one's ethnic or national roots could possibly create, and how much of a hindrance these could be to the spiritual development of the individual.

3.2 Detachment from the Catholic Church

Simone Weil's relationship with Catholicism was more ambiguous and less clear-cut than it was with Judaism. On one hand, it is evident that Weil perceived the Church as being totalitarian, and that it was denying its own 'catholicism', that is, its universality, by not embracing all realities. On the other hand, Weil undoubtedly had a deep-seated desire to relate with the Catholic Church and pondered extensively on the possibility of being baptised and becoming a member. Although she eventually decided against, the internal struggle persisted, and it is only by staying in the tension of the paradox of this struggle that Weil's relationship with the Catholic Church can be appreciated.

3.2.1 Exclusivity

Weil's major criticism towards the Catholic Church, and what swayed her against the possibility of initiation into the Catholic community, was the notion that the Church was exclusive, and because of such an attitude, had not penetrated into all the realms of society. It remained aloof, only embracing those who adhered to its core principles. This rejection prevented the Church from enriching itself through the wealth of the wisdom offered to it through other forms of spirituality that it had rejected in the course of its history.³⁶ Weil expressed these concerns clearly with the Dominican priest, Father Perrin, who can be defined as having been her spiritual director, or certainly someone who had accompanied her

³⁶ Simone Weil, "Formes de l'amour implicite de Dieu," in *Marseille*, vol I, 298.

intimately in her spiritual walk. Simone shared with Father Perrin the issues that prevented her from being baptised, such as her belief that the Incarnation did not solely happen in Bethlehem,³⁷ or her disagreement with the *anathema sit* statements issued by the Church authorities against those they deemed heretical, such as the Gnostics or the Cathars.³⁸ She believed that the truth did not reside totally or exclusively in the Church, but that the Church was journeying towards the *Logos*, a concept that was to characterise the theology of Vatican Council II, and which Weil anticipated by over thirty years. In Weil's perception, the problem with Roman Catholicism is that it became more 'Roman' than 'Catholic'. Weil makes a direct connection between the staunch Nationalism, exhibited in Imperial Roman absolutism, and the exclusive attitude of the Catholic Church. According to Weil, the Roman influence contaminated Christendom in its first centuries, and corrupted its essence.³⁹ In the course of history, the Church gave more prominence to the Roman identity, which Weil associates with the Social Beast, a consequence of the decadence of the Roman Empire, than to the universal qualities that define Catholicism. Through the words of Ivan Karamazov:

...when the pagan Roman state desired to become Christian, it inevitably so happened that, having become Christian, it merely included the Church in itself, but itself continued to be, as before, a pagan state in a great many of its functions.⁴⁰

Weil's detachment from the Catholic Church also sheds light on her perception of soteriology. She had issues with accepting the Church as the sole vehicle of salvation. Weil could never embrace the strictly narrowly understood interpretation of the principle of 'extra Ecclesiam nulla salus', commonly accepted in her time, not only because Weil believed in the validity of any spiritual experience, but also because she opposed the notion of exploiting

³⁷ Weil, *Lettre*, 22-4.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 70.

³⁹ In stating so, Weil pre-empted the theology presented by Moltmann who felt that the imperialism exhibited by the Catholic Church was a form of idolatry. See Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology* (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1974), 250.

⁴⁰ Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov* (London: Everyman's Library, 1990), 62.

one's membership in the Church as a passport to eternal life.⁴¹ For her, the desire for salvation is not necessary for a person who is in a relationship with the Divine, since the individual is purified from this desire. Weil presents a theology, emphasised and brought back to the fore by Vatican Council II, that advocated that the eschatological experience is not posthumous but starts in this world. Humanity is being saved in every instance of its life as it is journeying towards wholeness, as opposed to salvation being an event occurring after death.

Weil's vision between the difference between the Church as an 'institution' and the Church as 'Kingdom of God' needs to be distinguished. Even though there should be no schism between the two, since both are intimately linked, Weil had an issue with the former, since this claimed to be the sole holder of absolute truth. Weil totally embraced the second eschatological vision. The metaphor of the Kingdom of Heaven is more inclusive and universal, as Catholicism by default ought to be, incorporating all possibilities and scenarios. The Kingdom of Heaven is not an edifice, a headquarters that dictates (or attempts to dictate) to the millions of followers all over the world, but an entity which includes and harbours the beauty of all existence as found in the here-and-now. In Weil's understanding, the Kingdom of Heaven is not only reserved for human beings (or for Catholics only), but is a rich experience that embodies within it all realities, including the splendour of nature too. It is not exclusively human bound but embraces all elements that enter into a relationship with God, 'so that the birds come and perch in its branches' (Mt.13: 32b). The Kingdom of Heaven unfolds in the context of the beauty of the world. Weil accuses the Catholic Church of not giving due importance to one of the major keys that allow humanity to relate with the Divine:

⁴¹ Cabaud, *Fellowship in Love*, 242.

the beauty of the order of the world in nature.⁴² Ultimately, Weil recognises that growth can only take place when the Christian succeeds in breaking the attachment with the Institution, when the person is freed from that thin thread, an image borrowed from Sanjuanist literature,⁴³ that nevertheless enslaves the person, because it turns the Church into an idol and prevents him from deeply engaging in a community that embraces all. Whenever the Church, as an Institution, fails to direct humanity to the depths of the spiritual experience, it becomes an obstacle to spiritual maturity. Weil invites the reader to challenge his vision of the Church, and through the process of detachment, to purify his perception so that the Institution may be transformed into the Kingdom of God. In Weil's experience, this required her to detach from the Institution of the Catholic Church.

3.2.2 Dilemma between manifestation and hiddenness

Weil's attitude towards the Roman Catholic Church also needs to be juxtaposed against what was occurring internally in France in the realm of Church-State relations. The end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century were characterised by the law of separation, whereby the Church in France lost most of its benefits and power, particularly in the field of education. This law was the result of a long-standing division in the country between the conservative and Right-wing side that tended to be ultra-Catholic, and the progressive Left which was liberal and anti-Catholic. This division was manifested by the Dreyfus Affair.⁴⁴ Reconciliation did not seem possible, and this led to tension and

⁴² Simone Weil does point out a few exceptions, notably Francis of Assisi and John of the Cross, who saw in nature a reflection of the beauty of God. See Weil, "Formes de l'amour," 301.

⁴³ 'Cet attachement est peut-être pour vous ce fil presque infiniment mince dont parle saint Jean de la Croix, qui, aussi longtemps qu'il n'est pas rompu, tient l'oiseau à terre aussi efficacement qu'une grosse chaîne de métal. J'imagine que le dernier fil, quoique très mince, doit être le plus difficile à couper, car quand il est coupé il faut s'envoler, et cela fait peur.' Weil, *Attente*, 78-9. 'To you this attachment might be that extremely thin thread, spoken about by Saint John of the Cross, that unless snapped, will hold the bird to the ground just as much as a heavy metal chain would. I would imagine that this last thread, even though very thin, must be the most difficult one to cut off, because as soon as it is cut off, one needs to fly away, and that is frightening.'

⁴⁴ *Supra*, 79.

expressions of violence.⁴⁵ Eventually, this wave of anticlericalism was transformed into an attempt to turn France into a totally secular state.⁴⁶ The emphasis shifted from an attack on the Institution to a process of secularisation.

It is amid this cultural shift that Simone Weil was raised. As an adult, being politically sympathetic to the Left, Weil was exposed to a mentality that fostered a secular approach, and this explains why Weil had an ambiguous relationship with the Church hierarchy. Consequently, it was this popular perception, this concept of the disempowerment of the Catholic Church, that might have influenced Weil's attitude towards the Institutional Church. Weil's theology consolidated furthermore this attitude. Her understanding of the Church differed from the image that was being projected by the Church herself in the period in which Simone lived. Weil's profundity as she struggled with a definition of the nature of the ecclesiastical Bride of Christ is in stark contrast with what was going on in the diplomatic relationships between the Vatican and the rest of Europe. Whereas Weil's spirituality highlights the journey into nothingness, the Pontificate of Pius XI, a Pope remembered as the Pope of concordats, was more concerned with solving the Roman Question,⁴⁷ thus establishing its sovereignty, but simultaneously creating ties with the Italian Republic, and making the French clergy submit to the authority of the papacy.⁴⁸ This was a Pontificate that seemed to be more concerned with restoring and consolidating the ostentatious side of the Vatican, emphasising the right of power that it thought it ought to have. The politics embraced by the Institution of the Catholic Church, and, moreover, the methodology practised, created the tension in the Church that attempted to reveal a hidden God through

⁴⁵ Hubert Jedin and John Dolan (ed.), *History of the Church, vol IX: The Church in the Industrial Age* (London: Burns & Oates, 1981), 507-8.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 517.

⁴⁷ Frank J. Coppa, *The Modern Papacy since 1789* (London: Longman, 1998), 173.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 174.

manifestation. Weil, conscious of such a dynamic, realised how misleading it was,⁴⁹ not only in her time, but throughout the history of the Church. The God of nothingness, the hidden God, the God who reveals Himself through the invisible and the miniscule, the God who annihilates Himself on the Cross, and reveals the mystery of the Resurrection through the emptiness of the tomb, this same God is revealed through a Church that throughout the centuries was declamatory and did all that was within its power to put itself on the political and social map. Weil could not fathom the image of a militant and triumphant Church, especially since the Christ that the Church, as well as herself, worshipped, was neither militant nor triumphant. It is this paradox of the ‘absence-presence’ that characterises the Christ mystery, which Weil perceived as being missing in the Institution. Simone Weil had an issue with the Church as a social institution.⁵⁰ According to Weil, there is an inherent inconsistency between the Gospel maxims, and the function of the Roman Catholic Church as a social institution. To her, this is a struggle between the ‘spiritual’ – a Church that should endeavour to create bridges with the Divine – and the ‘political’ – a Church that is solely interested in its own splendour.

Weil’s encounter with Catholicism happened in a very different way, in a hidden manner, away from the ostentatious dynamics of the political life. For a relatively long time, Weil did not even talk to anyone about her mystical experiences, the first occurring in the chapel of Santa Maria degli Angeli in Assisi, where Weil was compelled to fall to her knees and pray. Her second experience, deeper in nature, was even more confined since it took place in the obscure village of Solesmes. Secluding herself from the rest of society in the silence of the

⁴⁹ Patrice Rolland, “Simone Weil et la politique au XXième siècle,” in *Simone Weil, Lectures Politiques*, ed. Valérie Gérard (Paris: Editions Rue d’Ulm, 2011), 79.

⁵⁰ ‘Ce qui me fait peur, c’est l’Eglise en tant que chose sociale. Non pas à cause de ses souillures, mais du fait même qu’elle est entre autres caractères une chose sociale.’ Weil, *Attente*, 23-24. ‘I am frightened by the concept of the Church as a social entity. This is not because of its stains, but simply because it is, amongst other things, a social entity.’

Benedictine monastery, and trying to detach herself from the physical pain that was making her focus on herself, Weil had a profound spiritual experience. There is a triangulation between Weil's mystical experience, her theology (motivated by her mysticism) and the popular perception of the Church in France that did not correspond with the image of the Church as a social institution.

3.2.3 Catholicism: a model of action

Simone Weil dreamt of a Church that offers a space for the Transcendental mystery to be explored in its entirety, a shift from an established government to a mystical body. This needs further clarification: by advocating a non-triumphant Church, Weil is in no way encouraging a passive one. The significance that Weil attributes to hiddenness, when speaking about the Church, should not be connected erroneously with passivity. What Weil is depicting is an interesting paradox, and by delving deeper into the paradox, Weil's model of the Church can be understood more clearly. Weil maintains that for the Church to be complete, it needs to be hidden. The composite Church, however, comprises in it all aspects, including the institutional. The complete Church is contemporaneously material and spiritual, making it equally manifested and hidden, in such a way that it is fully human and fully divine. The completeness found in what Weil claims to be 'the hidden trait of the Church' is the same completeness that requires the Church to be publicly manifested and actively engaged. It is the ostentatious aspect, as has been seen before, that Weil opposes. Weil believes in 'action', and it is in the hiddenness, and only through this hiddenness, that authentic action, stripped of any form of glamour, can occur. She strongly opposes a religion that is intent only on a philosophical form of theology, since 'religious faith should not belong to the realm of

thought, but to action.’⁵¹ It is action that leads to God, and it is through any form of work, that actions can occur. The function of the Church, or any religious institution, is to unite people together and to engage them actively together. This line of thought, however, can give the impression that Weil is being inconsistent. On one hand, she is attacking the Church for being a collective, imitating the Social Beast, but on the other hand, she encourages religion to unite its members into groups of action. Possibly the main difference in Weil’s vision is that the function of religion will prevent it from succumbing to the same errors committed by the Social Beast, since its members will not fail to be attentive to the needs and to the suffering of the individual. The collective becomes evil when this objective is not respected, or when the collective itself is the agent that causes the suffering. The Church has a choice: either to forget the individual and transform itself into the Social Beast, or to gather people together in one flock of harmony and love. If loyal to the philosophy of the Gospel, it is the Church’s mandate to choose the former. It is within this uncomfortable paradoxical space between action and hiddenness that Weil recognises, and is attracted to, the beauty of the Catholic Church.

The tension apparent in this difference is also evident in the political events that Weil witnessed, particularly in the period of the Vichy Government. On one hand, Vichy supported the Catholic Church and promised to restore it to its former glory. This was precisely the image of the Church that Weil opposed. Within the *Résistance*, however, there were entities, such as the *Témoignage Chrétien*, who believed that the role of the Church was to combat the oppression of Vichy actively. This was the Church that Weil believed in.⁵² This dual reality accurately encompasses the schism that was at the core of the relationship that Weil had with

⁵¹ ‘La foi religieuse n’appartient pas au plan de l’entendement, mais de l’action.’ Simone Weil, “Fragments Brefs,” in *Œuvres Complètes: Premiers Écrits Philosophiques* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), 403.

⁵² Nevin, *Portrait of a Self-Exiled Jew*, 270.

the Catholic Church and its multiple realities, some of which drew her closer to it, and others being a source of repulsion and distance.

The spirituality of action that Weil advocated in the Church can also be clearly seen in the socio-political theology advocated by Pius XI, and can be compared with Weil's engagement with the working class. The encyclical letter *Quadragesimo Anno* is of particular interest since it condemned the disrespect that employers displayed towards their workers.⁵³ Although possibly not radical enough in comparison with Weil's viewpoint and endeavours on the matter, however, it certainly aimed at raising awareness and being proactive towards the condition of the workers, a proactivity that Weil engaged in herself by quitting her job as a lecturer of philosophy and seeking employment in the factories.⁵⁴ Weil's decision can be perceived as the most radical application and embodiment of the principles of the encyclical issued by Pius XI. The encyclical also stated that socialism was not a solution to the condition of the worker, pre-empting Weil's similar conclusion on the matter.⁵⁵ Another trait that defined this Pontificate is the attack on Nationalism,⁵⁶ and the denunciation of Nazism, since the politics adopted by the Third Reich opposed the fundamental principles of Catholicism. This corresponds with Weil's fear of Nationalism, the Social Beast.

3.2.4 The tension: To be or not to be (baptised)?

The reasons that led Simone Weil to detach herself from the Church are not only due to the praxis of the Institution. There may have possibly been a more 'egocentric' reason to Weil's decision. Perhaps she did not want to give the Institution the possibility of casting her out.⁵⁷

By remaining outside the Church, she could write whatever she believed in. By becoming

⁵³ Pius XI, Pope, *Litteræ Encyclicæ*: "Quadragesimo Anno," (15 May 1931), in AAS 23, 6 (1931), 209-210.

⁵⁴ Cabaud, *Fellowship*, 105.

⁵⁵ *Infra*, 160-4.

⁵⁶ Coppa, *The Modern Papacy*, 177.

⁵⁷ Nevin, *Portrait of a Self-Exiled Jew*, 265.

part of the Church, she either had to abide by the teachings of the Magisterium, a decision that she was not ready to compromise on, or else be 'rejected' as a result of the voicing of her thoughts. This shows that there was a drive within her that instigated her to become a member of the Catholic Church, or at least, encouraged her to explore this possibility seriously. It also reveals a torn psyche between wanting to belong and needing to stay out. Essentially, she preferred being a liberated voice on the periphery than a suffocated one at the core.

This leads to the second point of the argument, that is, Weil's profound interest in Catholicism and her desire to become part of the Church which was clearly manifested in her final years. Considering the critique she had towards the Institution, this desire seems peculiar. Yet it was certainly present. Which aspects of the Church attracted her or what was the new definition that Weil proposed for the Church? Her devotion to the Sacramental life was particularly strong, and her yearning to become part of the Catholic Church is rooted in this desire. The desire, and the struggle, become more acutely intense in Weil's warning to all believers about Sacramental life, making her desire even more contradictory. According to her, it seems that most participants in the Sacramental life are engaged socially: their partaking in the Sacraments is ritualistic and ceremonial, performed at a superficial level. It is only the minority that manages to penetrate the mystery of Sacramental life, allowing it to deepen the relationship with the Transcendent.⁵⁸ Weil is arguing that having access to Sacramental life does not necessarily imply that the person is benefitting from it. In this light, would it have been worth the 'compromise' of renouncing all the principles that prevented

⁵⁸ 'Les sacrements ont une valeur spécifique qui constitue un mystère, en tant qu'ils impliquent une certaine espèce de contact avec Dieu, contact mystérieux, mais réel. En même temps ils ont une valeur purement humaine en tant que symboles et cérémonies....Je crois que la plupart des fidèles ont contact avec les sacrements seulement en tant que symboles et cérémonies.' Weil, *Attente*, 16. 'Sacraments have a specific value in their mystery, since they involve a certain contact with God, a mysterious contact, but real. At the same time they also have a purely human value since they are symbols and ceremonies....I think that the majority of believers partake in the sacraments as symbols and ceremonies.'

her from joining the Church to become part of a soulless ritual? It is ironic that Weil who had the desire of, and the openness to, this depth, was excluded, or excluded herself from the Sacraments, whereas so many millions of others who were born into the Sacramental life never ponder on the mystery of the experience. The question that ensues is who is the person relating better with the Divine: the one who is detached from Sacramental life, or the one who is involved in it but without authenticity? Is it possible to say that by detaching herself from the Sacraments, Weil experienced the depth of Sacramentality more than most of the baptised? Is it also possible to conclude that the Sacramental experience is not only present exclusively in the Seven Sacraments administered by the Catholic Church?⁵⁹ Weil never managed to answer these questions, and a clear-cut reply might be reductionist, and not faithful to the spirituality of the French mystic. It is by staying in the uncomfortable space of the paradox, a paradox that led Weil to remain outside of the Institution, that the truth can be experienced, or at least grappled with.

3.2.5 Final remarks

The struggle between detachment, and at the same time the desire to relate with the Church, is clearly evident and interestingly mirrored in the friendship between Weil and Perrin.⁶⁰ Weil felt a deep connection to this priest, considering him to be one of her truest friends, but at the same time feeling a distance separating them in this friendship, possibly because he was representing the same institution Weil was contending with. It is, however, this same struggle that intensified the relationship. The depth of the spiritual union was felt mostly in discussions on the doctrinal points where the two could not agree upon.⁶¹ It is within the uncomfortable space of the paradox of the struggle that growth took place. This struggle can

⁵⁹ The theology of sacramentality will be discussed in further detail in the next chapter when discussing the concept of *metaxu*. See *infra*, 212.

⁶⁰ Palle Yourgrau, *Simone Weil* (London: Reaktion Books, 2011), 82.

⁶¹ Cabaud, *Fellowship in Love*, 253.

also be seen as an extension of Weil's internal conflicts: she desired to relate to the Church as an institution, but on the other hand felt the need to remain detached, a conflicting pain that led her to numerous religious people, asking them for advice on how to deal with this matter. Weil's struggle manifested in her discussion with Perrin about the Church resulted in the evolution of a deeper friendship, as well a deeper understanding and reflection on the Catholic Church. Paradoxically, her resistance to become a member of the Church, led her to learn more about it, grow to understand it, and possibly to love it, certainly from afar, and probably subconsciously.

Weil's pull away from the Catholic Church should not only be seen as a struggle between detachment and the relational, but as a form of detachment that conducts to the relational. This section has examined the social, political and philosophical reasons that led Simone Weil to detach herself from the Institution. It will proceed by examining the deeper spiritual reality of this decision. Weil felt that it was her vocation to remain outside the Catholic Church so that she could be closer to the pariahs, to those who either due to personal reasons, or due to reasons of exclusion and non-acceptance, were not members of the Catholic Church.⁶² Weil seemed to be in the uncomfortable space between the desire to relate with the Church, in spite of all the critique she had towards the Institution, and the desire to relate with the 'outsiders'.⁶³ The pull is even more acute, since Weil believed that her relationship with the 'outsiders' was a vocation, a calling by God. Weil considered her detachment from the

⁶² 'En tout cas, lorsque je me représente concrètement et comme une chose qui pourrait être prochaine l'acte par lequel j'entrerais dans l'Eglise, aucune pensée ne me fait plus de peine que celle de me séparer de la masse immense et malheureuse des incroyants. J'ai le besoin essentiel, et je crois pouvoir dire la vocation, de passer parmi les hommes et les différents milieux humains en me confondant avec eux.' Weil, *Attente*, 19. 'However, even though I perceive myself as being an individual that would like to come close to the act of entering the Church, nothing pains me more than being separated from the immense and unfortunate mass of unbelievers. I have a deep need, and can even say a vocation, to be with these people and within their different contexts, struggling with them.'

⁶³ The notion of the outsider, the pariah on the periphery of society, is a common theme of the literature written during the life of Simone Weil. Possibly the most evident work would be Albert Camus' *L'Etranger* (The Outsider), published just a year before Weil's death. The writings of Weil had a profound effect on Camus, whose last action before flying in for the Nobel Prize in 1957 was to make a pilgrimage to her writing room.

Church as a ministry,⁶⁴ rooting the decision in the relational. She affirms her mission in discovering the truth of the *Logos*, a mission that can only be found in the periphery through deeper detachment, even towards what is religious, confirming the process engaged in by Weil towards embracing the nothingness of God. Could this be defined as being a form of detachment that enables a deeper, and possibly more significant, form of relationship? Is it possible to describe Weil's decision to detach from the Church as a form of martyrdom, a renunciation of a possibility in life? ⁶⁵ Her choice was to deny herself from a life in the Church to be able to reach out even further to those who were in need, particularly those who are on the periphery. These concluding questions, left unanswered, reflect the complexity of the struggle of the Weilian search.

3.3 Detachment from spiritual consolations

This study, so far, has explored Weil's detachment from religious practice. Weil, however, considered detachment to be more profound and more painful. It was an innermost process that demanded that the individual embarks on the journey of detachment even in his spiritual life. Simone Weil's discourse on detachment advocates total and complete detachment, and so, in her spirituality on detachment, Weil also incorporates detachment from any spiritual gratification and consolations. It is not enough for the person to be detached from the material and religious world: the spiritual could also become a form of attachment that prevents the pilgrim from focusing on the point of arrival in the journey, the union with God.

⁶⁴ 'C'est pour le service du Christ en tant qu'il est la Vérité que je me prive d'avoir part à sa chair de la manière qu'il a instituée.' Weil, *Attente*, 66. 'It is as a result of my service to Christ, who is the Truth that I deny myself becoming part of the body in the way that he founded it.'

⁶⁵ *Supra*, 35.

3.3.1 Out of the comfort zone

Individuals who are engaged actively in the spiritual life may erroneously measure their progress in their spiritual growth, often doing so by basing their judgement on their emotional state, and using it as a barometer of where they are in the spiritual journey. This need of measuring progress might be a result of the anxiety – and the accompanying lack of trust – that the person experiences in the unknown. By placing oneself in a specific stage of spiritual development, the person acquires a degree of reassurance by identifying what the next immediate steps of the journey would be. The spiritual journey, however, is characterised by the unknown, and one of the essential lessons that the pilgrim needs to learn as he delves deeper into the Divine is the need to stay with the unknown rather than explain it or rationalise it, even though the unknown can cause anxiety. As in Taoist spirituality, the beginning and the end points in the spiritual journey are claimed to be fixations that deter the person from the actual process.⁶⁶ The person needs to stay with the anxiety of the unknown and trust the process of the dynamic of the relationship with the Divine, a process that cannot be rationalised since it transcends human boundaries.

Another form of harm that can ensue by giving too much importance to the models of spiritual growth is that the person could feel a sense of gratification and satisfaction stemming from the progress that would have been attained. This should serve as a warning signal to the Christian to make him realise that one should not focus on where one is in the journey,⁶⁷ because by doing so, the person is living an illusion, by placing the self as the focal point. The person focuses on the satisfaction gained in having progressed on the path, or becoming anxious about having regressed, more than on loving God. In this matter, it is

⁶⁶ Waaijman, *Spirituality*, 675.

⁶⁷ Daniel A. Dombrowski, “Saint John of the Cross and Virtue Ethics,” in *Mystics Quarterly* 30 (2004): 11.

evident that Weil is influenced by Sanjuanist spirituality.⁶⁸ A common mistake made on the road of perfection is to read the works of mystics and to interpret them as scientific manuals to gauge in which stage one has arrived on the journey. The real aim of these works is to share a deeply personal experience with the Divine⁶⁹ that cannot be measured or assessed by human standards.⁷⁰

3.3.2 Embracing the void: the presence of the absent God

Being detached from spiritual consolation does not only imply impeding oneself from measuring where one may be on the spiritual path. It is not merely a passive decision, a lack of dependence on established paradigms. Being detached from spiritual consolations is also an active decision, a decision that the individual makes to opt for actions of love without feeling any sense of reward for them, or expecting any form of spiritual consolation.⁷¹ Weil's reading of Sanjuanist spirituality proposes a step further, by not desiring any gratification even in actions of love towards others. According to Weil, this desire could be the point of contention and the idol that fills the necessary void, creating an illusion that prevents the individual from relating with God.⁷² The Divine is the experience of nothingness that

⁶⁸ John of the Cross clearly warns that, 'those who are inclined towards these delights have also another serious imperfection, that is, they are weak and remiss in treading the rough way of the Cross.' John of the Cross, "Dark Night, NI: 6, 7," 309.

⁶⁹ 'A wise man is concerned about the substance and profit of a work, not about the delight and satisfaction it yields.' John of the Cross, "Ascent, AIII: 29, 2," 266.

⁷⁰ 'Knowing these steps in themselves naturally is impossible, since this ladder of love is, as we said, so secret that God alone is He who measures and weighs it.' John of the Cross, "Dark Night, NII: 18, 5," 37.

⁷¹ 'Celui qui donne du pain à un malheureux affamé pour l'amour de Dieu ne sera pas remercié par le Christ. Il a déjà eu son salaire dans cette seule pensée.' Weil, *Attente*, 139. 'Whoever gives bread to any famished and deprived person for the sake of the love of God will not be gratified by Christ. He has already received his reward in the mere thought of the action.' This reference also manifests the way Weil married Stoic philosophy with Christian theology in her lifestyle. The influence of the writings of Marcus Aurelius is clear. He also insists that when an act of generosity is done, a reward should not be sought after, like the vine that bears fruit without expecting anything in return.

ὁ δέ τις τρόπον τινὰ οὐδὲ οἶδεν, ὃ πεποίηκεν, ἀλλὰ ὁμοίως ἔστιν ἀμπέλῳ βότρυν ἐνεγκούσῃ καὶ μηδὲν ἄλλο προσεπιζητούσῃ μετὰ τὸ ἅπαξ τὸν ἴδιον καρπὸν ἐνηνοχέειν..., Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, *The Communings*, V: 6, trans., C. R. Haines (London: Loeb Classical Library, 1953), 103-5. Weil transforms this philosophical maxim into a Christocentric concept, explaining the need to detach from the sense of reward because of the relationship with Christ.

⁷² 'On peut croire qu'on pense à Dieu alors qu'en réalité on aime certains êtres humains qui nous ont parlé de

excludes anything else, even spiritual consolations. The challenge posed by Weil implies that spiritual consolations could actually be dangerous, and on the same lines as John of the Cross, warns against the desire of them. The emptier the void is, the more possible the transcendence into the authentic spiritual realm.⁷³ The word ‘authentic’ indicates that the spiritual consolations might be inauthentic, leading the individual to compromise by working for the sweetness of the consolation as opposed to the entrance into the void which is the only authentic space of encounter with the Divine.⁷⁴ It is this form of detachment that needs to occur in the spiritual journey so that the soul is purified even further to realise that its only essential need is God, and not the sweetness that is felt by being in His presence. As a result of this detachment, a distinction is made between the effect (the sweetness) which can be found in other earthly sources, and the Source itself, with or without the sweetness.⁷⁵

This presents another important problematic issue which seems contradictory and challenges the reader who is grappling with the spirituality of Weil. On one hand, Weil seems to be advocating a spirituality which is devoid of desire – one should not even desire God. On the other hand, there are numerous references that indicate her deep desire for the Absolute. How

lui, ou un certain milieu social, ou certaines habitudes de vie, ou une certaine paix d'âme, une certaine source de joie sensible, d'espérance, de réconfort, de consolation. En pareil cas la partie médiocre de l'âme est en complète sécurité; la prière même ne la menace pas.' Simone Weil, "Réflexions sans ordre sur l'amour de Dieu," in *Marseille*, vol I, 275. 'One might believe that he is thinking about God whereas in reality other human beings who have spoken to us about him are being loved instead, or a particular social context, or a certain life-style, or a certain peace of heart, or a certain inner joy, of hope, comfort, consolation. In any of the mentioned cases, the mediocre part of the soul is in total security; not even prayer can threaten it.' Weil is clearly demonstrating that spiritual consolations, or feel-good emotions, can be of serious peril to the spirit.

⁷³ J. M. Perrin and G. Thibon, *Simone Weil: As we knew her* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 144.

⁷⁴ In Hinduism, non-attachment to the fruit of one's action is called Karma Yoga. It is described as the path of consecrated action. As Francis of Assisi confirms, these challenges are a sign of maturity in the spiritual life. He claims that 'as I see it, you should consider everything that makes it difficult to love God as a special favour.' Francis of Assisi, "Letter to a Minister," in *St Francis of Assisi, Writings and Early Biographies: English Omnibus of the Sources for the Life of St Francis*, ed. Marion A. Habig (Illinois: Franciscan Herald Press, 1983), 110.

⁷⁵ This experience is described specifically in one of the anecdotes of *The Little Flowers of St Francis* whereby Friar John of Alverna is detached from spiritual consolations in his mystical experience. See *The Little Flowers of St Francis*, trans., E. M. Blaiklock and A.C. Keys (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1985), 137. Although Weil does not refer to this anecdote in her writings, however, the influence of Franciscan spirituality is clearly evident in her way of thinking and in her spiritual journey.

can these two stand-points be reconciled, particularly when one considers that in Weilian thought, detachment from spiritual consolations is synonymous with detachment from God? Whereas most other mystics emphasise the detachment from consolations, Weil is more demanding and advocates that the individual should not even desire or seek the Divine, making it seem as though it is futile or even preposterous to do so. The paradox can be embraced by referring to the influence that *The Bhagavad Gita* had on Simone Weil. The Hindu text distinguishes between ‘the desire to have’ and ‘the contemplation of being’. ‘Having’ is part of the finite, it is the desire to possess, to capture the other and make him part of oneself. ‘Being’ is infinite. It is an oneness that does not destroy through possession. Indeed, ‘even as all waters flow into the ocean, but the ocean never overflows, even so the sage feels desires, but he is ever one in his infinite peace.’⁷⁶ According to *The Bhagavad Gita*, infinite peace is obtained when the desirer of the desire is renounced. It is no longer the desire to possess, and consequently to destroy, but it is the ‘desire’ to be, to gaze and contemplate the beauty of the desired. The paradox of the struggle of the desire is the essential theme that characterises spiritual development. Weil is aware that the human being will always desire, and it is this desire that ultimately propels the person towards the Absolute. In detaching from the desire, even though he is aware that this will never occur totally, the person is purifying himself and entering the nothingness that this pure(r) form of desire will lead to.

The greatest challenge in the spiritual life is the detachment from the quest for God, a quasi-suspension in the belief of God. This goes beyond not depending on feeling the need of God. This is the realisation that God cannot be sought, because by seeking God, the human being is placing the self as the protagonist, as the active agent of a mission that he does not possess

⁷⁶ *Bhagavad Gita* II: 70, 16.

the faculty of fulfilling. Weil clearly warns that the human being can only search horizontally, that is, in the space around him, and even though in His absence, God is present in this space, the likelihood of mistaking other persons or elements for God is high. The real God is 'above' humanity. The human person can only cry out in pain, like the abandoned Christ on the Cross, and wait. The cry should not be for someone since that someone is not known. The cry should be a cry of hunger because 'as long as we have not eaten yet, it is not even necessary or useful to believe in bread. What matters is that we are hungry.'⁷⁷ In the process, in the claiming of being in a state of hunger, paradoxically, the person frees himself from all illusions, and in the void brought about by the hunger, the possibility of the encounter can occur.

Another 'paradox' can be detected in Weilian spirituality. The same woman who advocates that the individual should not search for God and should not engage in a personal relationship with Him, is the person who also states that 'to those who implore, often, over a long time, arduously, He [God] will not hesitate to come down towards them.'⁷⁸ In this case there seems to be a remarkable difference between what Weil did and what Weil wrote. The Writer encourages the reader to pray for the descent of the Lord into necessity, but the Mystic never did so. She remained in touch with necessity, and the Lord visited her without her imploration. Are Weil's expectations for herself higher than her maxims for others in her spiritual writings? Or is she perhaps being human enough to understand that ideally God should not be sought, but the human condition will stimulate the person to crave for Him, and this craving, like hunger, needs to be externalised? It also depends on the notion of the Divine that is embraced. Is it the notion of a personal God with whom humanity enters into an

⁷⁷ 'Tant qu'on n'en a pas mangé, il n'est pas nécessaire ni même très utile de croire au pain. L'essentiel est de savoir qu'on a faim.' Weil, "L'amour de Dieu," 278.

⁷⁸ '...et ceux qui demandent souvent, longtemps, ardemment, Il ne peut pas s'empêcher de descendre vers eux.' Weil, *Attente*, 91-2.

intimate relationship, and can converse with, and express its longings to? Or is it the concept of an impersonal God, who is distant from the realities of the human condition? Weil maintains that it is not possible to have a clear notion of God because the limitations of the human psyche cannot fathom what is beyond it. Even though Weil tends to insist more on the concept of an impersonal God, it was a personal God who seized her, and in some of her later spiritual writings she does refer to the notion of a personal God. Furthermore, her discourse on an absent God implies a personal God: absence requires personhood.⁷⁹ It seems that finally Weil accepted to be in uncomfortable space between the notion of an impersonal and a personal God simultaneously.⁸⁰ As Weil progressed in her spiritual journey, she struggled with the tension existing in these two notions, realising that the experience of the impersonal God does not exclude the relationship with the personal God, and that it is possible to integrate these two aspects. Even in Greek philosophy, the integration between the personal and the impersonal notion of God is evident, since in Platonism, the personal term *God* is used, whereas in Stoic philosophy, the impersonal term *Logos* expresses the notion of the Transcendent.⁸¹ This is part of the ontology of the Trinitarian experience, as Moltmann describes it. Weil's struggle is reflective of the transcendence of the Father, who in His distance is experienced as impersonal, as opposed to the immanence of the Son, who through the Incarnation, became one in the human reality. Moltmann concludes this argument by underlining that this tension, revealed in the Spirit, is the path to the future of history.⁸² It is this paradox between the impersonal (the Father) and the personal (the Son) that characterises the relationship between the Divine and the human, that shapes the dynamics of the spiritual

⁷⁹ Levinas, "There is: existence without existents," in *The Levinas Reader*, 30-1.

⁸⁰ 'L'amour de Dieu doit être impersonnel, tant qu'il n'y a pas encore eu contact direct et personnel; autrement c'est un amour imaginaire. Ensuite il doit être à la fois personnel et de nouveau impersonnel en un sens plus élevé.' Weil, *Attente*, 197. 'The love towards God needs to be impersonal, as long as there has not been any direct or personal contact; otherwise it would be an imaginary form of love. From then onwards it needs to be personal and impersonal simultaneously but in a more elevated sense.'

⁸¹ Edwin Hatch, *The Influence of Greek Ideas and Usages upon the Christian Church* (Leipzig: Forgotten Books, 2012), 181.

⁸² Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 256.

life, by allowing the person to relate with the personal God, but simultaneously draws the person as well towards the encounter with the impersonal God.

3.3.3 Doubt: the avoidance of an *ersatz*

Simone Weil's notion of atheism as a means of purification will provide further insights on the detachment from spiritual consolations. Humankind has created God in its own image, transforming the God of nothingness, into a God of a limited reality, the reality that human beings can perceive. Weil's insistence that God should not be searched for stems from the fear that the desire of humanity is not for the real God whom it does not know and can never know, but for an illusion, an image of God that does not correspond to reality.⁸³ In fact, in spite of the influence that Descartes had on the thoughts of Simone Weil, her notion of God is not in the least Cartesian. She does not conform at all to the God of perfection that Descartes depicts,⁸⁴ since the explanation of the notion of perfection is a man-made construct. Weil explains that it is important to detach from these illusionary projections since she is extremely weary of the fact that human beings re-create God in their own image. She advocates that the individual has to empty himself from the false notion of Divinity that he is born with. She was probably referring to the archetype that is inherited through the social unconscious, and continually reinforced by society. Even Christ, in his *kenosis*, detached from His Divinity, through the Incarnation,⁸⁵ since he 'did not consider equality with God something to be used to his advantage; rather, he made himself nothing' (Phil. 2: 6b-7a). Within Weilian theology, God remains mostly unknown to the human reality and perception. Frequently, false images of what God is imagined to be, are projected. Even though in Christianity the Incarnated Son

⁸³ Simone Weil, "Textes rassemblés à l'Intention du Père Perrin," in *Marseille*, vol II, 370-1.

⁸⁴ 'Et il est évident qu'il n'y a pas moins de répugnance que la fausseté ou l'imperfection procède de Dieu, en tant que telle, qu'il y en a que la vérité ou la perfection procède du néant.' René Descartes, *Discours de la Méthode* (Paris: Larousse, 1972), 72. 'Saying that falsity or imperfection derive from God is equally repulsive as saying that truth or perfection derive from nothing.'

⁸⁵ Simone Weil, "Cahier VI," in *La Science et l'Impensable*, 313.

of God has been revealed to humanity, the truth remains that the experience, albeit inspired, is contaminated by several mitigating factors. These include the socio-political milieu in which the authors of the Sacred Scriptures lived, the literary genres through which they were operating, and the subjectivity, in certain cases, of their own experiences, or of the communities they were living in. The Christian God is a revealed God but not totally. This is the essence of the eschatological journey that both as individuals, and as an ecclesial community, humanity has embarked on, a journey towards the Truth, the *Logos*.

According to Weil, the atheist is ‘purer’, because he begins *tabula rasa*, without any prefabricated constructs, and so is closer to the void of the encounter with God than is the believer. In her perception, not even believers can love God: as human beings, a relationship with the real God is impossible. The real God does not exist totally within the human reality. The individual is either relating to a constructed God, that bears little or no resemblance to the authentic one and that is slightly better than an ersatz, or else the person can choose to relate with God implicitly, by engaging in the preparatory phase for the encounter in the void.⁸⁶ This argument, however, presented by Weil is nonetheless flawed since she is forgetting that even an unbeliever has a prefabricated image of God. The notion of God is an archetype, and whether one is a believer or not is irrelevant since archetypes are images that human beings are born with through the collective unconscious, and which in turn are nurtured through the experiences and the social encounters in life. As Vergely argues, the atheist is not an atheist, since he is still a believer in the rejection of his perception of God.⁸⁷ The atheist will not be able to start *tabula rasa*, and would still need purification from the images that the archetype carries with it, whether he believes in them or not.

⁸⁶ Weil, “L’amour implicite de Dieu,” 285.

⁸⁷ Bertrand Vergely, *Le silence de Dieu: face aux malheurs du monde* (Paris: Presses de la Renaissance, 2006), 86.

In the next section, this study will examine how Weil detached herself from the need of knowledge, and influenced by the Cartesian principle,⁸⁸ she believed that the journey towards truth could only be initiated by doubting everything. Weil applied this epistemological concept to her spiritual journey by embracing an apophatic approach. The journey towards the *Logos* is not initiated through the cataphatic approach, by learning about God, because the human condition will never allow anyone in his lifetime to fathom the God experience. It is by doubting, that is, by challenging and deconstructing one's affirmed beliefs, including the ones provided by the Institution, that the person can begin the spiritual journey *tabula rasa*, devoid of any humanly made constructs, and in this empty space, freed from the constraints of rationality and emotional upsurges, the voyage towards divinisation can begin.

3.3.4 Devotionalism

The theme of detachment from spiritual consolations also needs to be studied against the socio-religious background of the 1940s. The tragedy of the Second World War increased heightened religiosity in France. This was due to the psychological humiliation and the experience of fear and hunger that the French endured under Nazi occupation and the collaboration with the Vichy Government. The French people sought supernatural solace when faced with all this despair, a despair that remained unanswered. The cults of Thérèse of Lisieux, Jeanne d'Arc and Our Lady of Lourdes flourished: most people were ready to seek for any form of consolation amid so much darkness.⁸⁹ The image of Jeanne d'Arc restored a belief that God was on the side of the French people whereas the simplicity of the spirituality of Thérèse and Lourdes offered the people a connection with the Divine that was always

⁸⁸ 'Le premier était de ne recevoir jamais aucune chose pour vraie, que je ne la connusse évidemment être telle...et de ne comprendre rien de plus en mes jugements, que ce qui se présenterait si clairement et si distinctement à mon esprit, que je n'eusse aucune occasion de les mettre en doute.' Descartes, *Discours*, 42-3. 'First of all, never accept anything as being true, unless one knows for certain that it is so...and not to understand any of my judgements, if they are not presented so clearly and distinctly to my mind, in such a way that I do not have any reason to doubt them.'

⁸⁹ Nevin, *Portrait of a Self-Exiled Jew*, 264.

ready to intercede for the welfare of the French. It was this puerile, yet understandable, form of spirituality that Weil was reacting against. Her position was not rooted in imploration, but in the acceptance of the pain of necessity in her own life whilst still being attentive to the pain of those around her.⁹⁰ Yet, does Weil's seeming indifference towards the religiosity of the French people imply a lack of sensitivity to their pain? On the contrary, it seems that the more the war advanced, the more Weil became concerned about the pain of the French, thus making her revisit her pacifist stance and become more proactive towards the injustice that the war was creating. Still, Weil was not prepared to compromise on her beliefs: religion was not to be exploited to soften the feelings of hardship that are experienced in war, or any other form of tragedy. Weilian spirituality never seeks for a more prosperous future, but is always ready to delve deeper into the pain of detachment, not only, or exclusively, in the relationship with the spiritual, but also on the physical level.

3.3.5 Final remarks

Weil's detachment from spiritual consolations reflects her belief in grounding herself in a reality that could bring her closer to the Divine. There cannot be any hindrances that clutter the space for encounter. This may be evident in relation to material objects but is more challenging when the only form of motivation is the consolation of the relationship with the Divine. Weil's relationship with the Divine is a relationship with nothingness and does not accept any form of compromise. It is a radical journey towards the totality experienced in the nothingness.

⁹⁰ A word of caution in this aspect: Weil's line of thought can never be studied in a simplistic way. This does not mean that Simone allowed herself to be influenced by Nationalism, whether political or religious. Although she wanted to help the French in their strife, and her love for her country developed intensely in her last years, Simone still felt the need to help the 'outcast', even if, in this context, this would mean the hated invading Germans. During a meal with her parents, she asked them what they would do if a German soldier had to be parachuted onto their terrace. Her father answered that he would hand him over to the police. Simone replied by saying that she could not eat with people who reasoned in such a way, and left the table immediately. See Pétrement, *Vie*, 514.

3.4 Detachment from intellectualism

Detachment from knowledge, which results in growth through the ‘unknowing’, is another important concept in Weilian thought. The acquisition of knowledge can become an illusion in life without growth through unknowing: by knowing more, a person can believe that this knowledge places him at a superior level, a level which is higher than other people who have not had access to the insights that the knowledge offers to the erudite.⁹¹ The acquisition of knowledge can also lead to gratification.⁹² Weil warns against this form of acquisition of knowledge, and proposes another way of learning. Before discussing the methodology of learning that Weil embraces, however, one needs to understand what the mystic meant by ‘knowledge’, particularly the ‘process of unknowing’.

3.4.1 Weil’s epistemology: knowing through unknowing

One of the influences that contributed to the development of the thought on detachment from knowledge in Weil was Sanjuanist literature, and, therefore, it is important to turn to the influence of John of the Cross on Weil to comprehend this form of detachment better. Initially, this concept, present in the thought process of Weil, is particularly interesting and surprising since the writings of Simone Weil can be seen as being very rationalistic. As Weil grapples with the various themes that constitute her universe, she grounds her arguments in a number of philosophical ideas, referring to a vast corpus of scholars. How can her views have

⁹¹ A source of influence in this matter might have been Franciscan spirituality. In one of the anecdotes of *The Little Flowers of St Francis* a certain Friar Minor by the name of John of Sciacca is cursed by the Poverello – and the anecdote maintains that this curse was confirmed by Jesus Christ Himself – for having founded an institute of study in Bologna. See *The Little Flowers*, 150-1. Although this anecdote must be read in the context in which it was written, the detachment from knowledge is certainly one of the hallmarks of Franciscan spirituality, confirming that the vow of poverty is not only the renunciation of worldly goods, but also encompasses in it anything that does not allow the relationship with God from being the top priority in the individual’s life.

⁹² This is a warning that even Francis of Assisi, a great influence on Weil’s spirituality, admonishes his followers about. He states that, ‘a man has been killed by the letter when he wants to know quotations only so that people will think that he is very learned and he can make money to give to his relatives and friends. A religious has been killed by the letter when he has no desire to follow the spirit of Sacred Scripture, but only wants to know what it says so that he can explain it to others.’ See Francis of Assisi, “The Admonitions,” in *Omnibus of Sources*, 81.

been influenced by a mystic who claimed that maturity is only attained through the purgation of knowledge, and that the Divine experience can only be savoured through the unknowing, through the *via negativa*? The term ‘unknowing’, as used by John of the Cross, needs to be explained carefully to clarify the above-mentioned question, since this concept could lead to a misunderstanding. One will also comprehend better what Weil’s insistence on detachment from knowledge means by understanding this term. In no way is John of the Cross implying that knowledge is wrong, or that the human being should not invest in education.⁹³ Suffice it to say how well-read John of the Cross himself was, particularly in Classical and Scholastic Philosophy, and in the Sacred Scriptures. Green explains that in Sanjuanist language, ‘unknowing’ is a state of understanding everything and all without thinking of anything in particular.⁹⁴ It should be more accurately interpreted as being a state superior to any epistemological state that a human being can muster with his own natural faculties rather than a destruction or an absence of knowledge. This superior state can only be attained through the intervention of Grace, paradoxically through the letting go of human knowledge. It is by emptying from the need of human knowledge (which needs to be attained so that it can be emptied) that the individual can have glimpses of the superior state of ‘unknowing’. Unknowing is not the avoidance of learning. On the contrary, it is learning without becoming dependent on it. It is the seemingly contradictory state of having the knowledge without needing to retain it, without having to rely on it. It is the struggle of the tension of acquiring

⁹³ Detaching from one’s thoughts and intellect could prove to be the most challenging step in the spiritual process. John of the Cross connects this facet in the process of detachment with the journey of faith. He warns the person engaged in the spiritual journey that faith does not provide clarity to the intellect. On the contrary, it challenges the intellect and leaves it in a state of darkness because faith goes beyond the limitations of the intellect. John of the Cross explains how the person needs to detach himself from the dependency of the intellect and of the rational. The ultimate objective of this process is union with God. Anything that does not lead to this union is irrelevant. This must have been seen as a controversial challenge considering that the reflections of John of the Cross were written at the height of the movement of Scepticism and at the dawn of the awakening of Rationalism in Philosophy. Science was celebrating the rise of the power of the human being expressed through the power of the mind, and one of the most important masters of spirituality was encouraging a journey into the dark night. See John of the Cross, “Ascent AII: 6, 1,” 119.

⁹⁴ Deidre Green, “St. John of the Cross and Mystical ‘Unknowing’,” in *Religious Studies* 22 (1986): 32.

the knowledge, and yet being in a state of detachment from it. In this respect, the influence of the Spanish mystic prevails in the mentality of Weil.

This section has clarified what Weil means by detachment from the intellect, and demonstrated that Weil affirmed that knowledge should never become the *raison d'être* of an individual. It is also important to understand what she meant by the acquisition of knowledge, and which form of learning she endorsed. The difficulty with the acquisition of knowledge is when it becomes an end in itself. On the contrary, it is valid and important, when it becomes a means to an end. When knowledge is perceived and used as a vehicle to deepen the spiritual relationship, it frequently leads the scholar to realise the limitations of human existence, and how much more lies beyond the human grasp, a limitation that makes him reach out for completion, found in the Transcendent. Influenced by the Platonic image of the cave, Weil describes the 'acquisition' of knowledge as being more of a passive process. It is the shedding off of the illusory that leads to the truth, rather than the adding of further layers of illusions based on preconceived ideas which are man-made. Paradoxically, though, the person needs to learn and have an adequate knowledge of the man-made ideas as a preliminary step. The shedding off cannot occur unless the layers are present. The passive process cannot happen without the active process occurring beforehand. As these layers are being deposited the person develops the awareness of the illusory nature of these ideas, and is conscious of why he needs to go through the process of purification.

3.4.2 The wisdom of simplicity

Knowledge should lead to the truth, and knowledge that does not lead to the truth is irrelevant, and often harmful. Knowledge that leads to the truth will be manifested through acts of love, shifting the focus from the need to learn, which is self-centred, to the expression of loving others, thus demonstrating that the person is on the right path, and that the learning process is truly a genuine one. It becomes dangerous when its purpose is to gratify the self, alienating it from being in contact with the reality of life and not living the present moment.⁹⁵ Knowledge is ‘a learning to die and ... a wisdom that is self-involving.’⁹⁶ Weil perceives learning to be valid when it is mystical, that is, when it allows the human person to transcend the human condition and connect with the Infinite, when the shift is made from the human to the Divine, present in the *other*.

Simone Weil does not present the academic as a role-model to show the importance of the healthy acquisition of knowledge. She seemed to have less sympathy for the academic class, particularly in certain contexts. This emerges strongly in her second teaching post at the Lycée in Auxerre. Weil avoided her colleagues and barely spoke to them.⁹⁷ Weil’s biographer, Simone Pétrement ascertains that Simone radically opposed the privileged intelligentsia and was more attracted to the simplicity of the working class.⁹⁸ The former were perceived as considering knowledge to be the sole objective of their lives,⁹⁹ whereas the

⁹⁵ Marcus Aurelius, a strong influence on Weilian thought, detached himself from erudite knowledge so that ‘thou mayest die not murmuring but with a good grace, truly and from thy heart grateful to the Gods.’ Marcus Aurelius, *The Communings*, II: 3, 29. ‘ἵνα μὴ γογγύζων ἀποθάνῃς, ἀλλὰ ἴλεως, ἀληθῶς, καὶ ἀπὸ καρδίας εὐχάριστος τοῖς θεοῖς

⁹⁶ Eric O. Springsted, “I Dreamed I saw St Augustine...,” in *Christian Platonism*, 218.

⁹⁷ Cabaud, *Fellowship in Love*, 74.

⁹⁸ Pétrement, *Vie*, 112.

⁹⁹ Weil still believes that there is an intimate link between the intellectuals and the figure of Christ, as much as there is a link between Christ and all strata of society, making Christ a figure that is universally applicable to all walks of life. She states that ‘les étudiants et les “intellectuels” de toute espèce ont pour lien avec Lui la parole “Je suis la Vérité”. (Ce n’est pas une petite responsabilité.)’ Weil, “Le Christianisme et la vie des champs,” 270. ‘Students and “intellectuals” of all kinds hold His words in common with Him “I am the Truth”. (It is certainly not a small responsibility.)’ Weil is acknowledging the weight that the intellectual life has and the responsibility of the scholars engaged in it. By propagating detachment from the intellectual life, Weil is not advocating

latter appreciated the beauty of the present moment since they were not enslaved to the need of knowing more. One cannot, however, generalise and connote such an attitude with all the intellectual or professional class. Weil had numerous friends who identified themselves as being intellectuals or professionals, and she had close relationships with some of them. It could be that although Weil can be accused of being fairly inconsistent in her attitude towards intellectuals and professionals, in reality, she decided to detach from the intelligentsia as a class, but overrode this prejudice in one-to-one relationships with intellectuals who she perceived as being genuine.

The ambiguity that Weil expressed towards the intelligentsia is counterbalanced by her strong desire to experience the wisdom of the workers of the fields.¹⁰⁰ In the period she spent at Marseille during the Second World War, Father Perrin introduced Weil to Gustave Thibon who was an owner of fields. Thibon gave Simone the opportunity of working with the harvesters at Saint-Julien-de-Peyrolas – an opportunity that allowed her to live the beauty and simplicity of this lifestyle, which was close to the state of unknowing. Weil insists that intellectually only illusionary paradigms can be conceived from the human perspective, particularly in theological aspects. She was remarkably influenced by Franciscan spirituality – ‘for the working of the Holy Spirit will choose uneducated young men, and unsophisticated ordinary persons who are looked down upon’¹⁰¹ – and believed that knowledge can be perceived as a hindrance to spiritual growth.

ignorance: on the contrary, she is attacking the attitude of the scholar who is aloof, under the illusion of being superior to others. Conversely, tapping into knowledge demonstrates the limits of humanity and accentuates the responsibility of the individual who is exploring further, and hopefully cautiously, what belongs to the Supreme.

¹⁰⁰ As Underhill states, ‘this characteristically immanent discovery of the Absolute occurs chiefly...in unlettered men who have lived close to Nature, and to whom her symbols are more familiar than those of the Church or the schools.’ Underhill, *Mysticism*, 191.

¹⁰¹ *The Little Flowers*, 173.

Weil's depiction of the workers, particularly of the field workers, could be criticised as being romantic.¹⁰² Even though they were shielded from the dangers of knowledge, they were still exposed to learning, albeit not the academic type.¹⁰³ The learning of the field workers happens in a different way from the learning of the scholars: the indirect experience of the library is replaced by the direct experience of contact with nature. Weil might not have taken into consideration that the worker can be attached to the gratification of his knowledge, in much the same way that the intellectual can feel attached to his insights. Nobody is spared from the temptation of attachment to one's achievements. There still needs to be a shedding off of the dependency on knowledge and success. Perhaps the advantage of the field workers, at least in the eyes of Weil, lies in the fact that they do not have the presumptuous attitude that scholars might have. A process of purification is, nonetheless, still essential.

Weil implies that those who do not possess academic knowledge are in a superior position since they start their journey with the Divine *tabula rasa*, or closer to that point. Conversely, she had to 'unlearn' before attaining the wisdom that the uneducated people had. The obvious question that follows is, therefore, why she pursued her investment in academic readings. This question is difficult to answer. There is no documentation demonstrating that Weil decided to abandon her studies. It seems, however, that the more Weil matured spiritually, the more her studies transformed into acts of contemplation. There seems to be a shift from learning and acquiring knowledge, to reflecting in a more profound way and contemplating through her readings the insights that the working class and the people who worked in fields might have had immediate access to. She was possibly influenced by Pascal, who claimed that the intellect functions efficiently only when all the adequate conditions for it to operate

¹⁰² This would be challenged eventually. See *infra*, 157.

¹⁰³ Weil was not contrary to the fact that they should also have access also to academic knowledge, as can be seen through the numerous classes that she used to organise in the evenings. See Georges Hourdin, *Simone Weil*, (Paris: Editions la Découverte, 1989), 88.

are present, and this generally takes a long time, whereas the heart is always proactive and ready to operate.¹⁰⁴ Weil clearly went through a similar transition in the latter phase of her life, possibly as a result of her experience in the factories. This led her to break with the Kantian tradition,¹⁰⁵ shifting from intellectualism to focusing on love. It was this shift that allowed her to engage with academic material in such a way that not only facilitated her intellectual growth, but also, and most importantly, deepened her relationship with God and with the other. The mysticism of Simone Weil is a mysticism of love. As Paul writes, ‘Those who think they know something do not yet know as they ought to know. But whoever loves God is known by God’ (1 Corinthians 8: 1). Weil could intensify her relationship with the Divine through her contemplative readings, in a less direct and effective way than through the natural vehicles that the field workers used. Thus, both John of the Cross and Simone Weil believed that knowledge was valuable in the relationship with God, and both kept investing in reading and researching. Both of them also knew that there is a point in the journey where knowledge has to be shed off because the Divine is far beyond any concept that the person can fathom, and all that remains is the awe before the immensity of the mystery of God.

3.4.3 Imagination

This section will close by examining why knowledge can be dangerous. Indeed, intelligence and the inquisitive mind, if not used well, are a hindrance to spiritual growth in Weil’s understanding. This is because it can activate imagination which feeds into illusions. Imagination is deemed perilous because it has coerced modern scientists to create technology that facilitates life, and promote in contemporary society a culture of instant gratification and of an immediate avoidance of discomfort or pain. The desire of facilitating life, however, is

¹⁰⁴ Blaise Pascal, *Pensées* (Paris: Librairie Générale Française, 1962), 235.

¹⁰⁵ Lawrence A. Blum and Victor J. Seidler, *A Truer Liberty: Simone Weil and Marxism* (London: Routledge, 1989), 181.

never totally quenched, and so, when an invention is produced, or a strategy created, the solution is short-lived: the problem soon surfaces again, and the struggle of combating it recommences. The imagination starts to operate again to seek a new mechanism to make life easier. When imagination propels knowledge to search for means to prevent the human being from staying in the uncomfortable zone of the void of human existence, imagination becomes a form of evil. Paradoxically, knowledge should only be propelled by unlearning: truth is only attained through death, through the process of not knowing, epitomised in the figure of the Christ-God on the Cross.¹⁰⁶ This does not imply, however, that science should not serve to improve the world. Weil is not contesting the validity of progress but the use of technology to transform the Earth into an idyllic and fictitious place where the illusion of comfort is promoted. The main objective of science and knowledge should not be the facilitation of the life of a person by the advances in technology, but to act as a bridge to God, and this can only occur through the annihilation of the self. By corollary, the prime function of knowledge should be the destruction of the 'I'.

Influenced by Pascal, Weil feared that imagination can amplify matters to an unrealistic proportion,¹⁰⁷ in such a way that the clutter that fills the void increases further, making the encounter with the Divine more difficult. Pascal presents imagination as being the necessary evil that serves as a vehicle to sustain order in society, even though he refused to embrace this necessary evil. There would be no order in society without imagination. Order requires the need of dignitaries in a position of power. The *modus operandi* of these dignitaries, that is, the way in which they are meant to perform and behave in the eyes of society, is qualified not through natural law, but through imagination. It is a convention that has been created

¹⁰⁶ Nevin, *Portrait of a Self-Exiled Jew*, 217.

¹⁰⁷ Pascal, *Pensées*, 72.

imaginatively to secure power through order.¹⁰⁸ Thus, imagination sustains an illusion that permeates into the very fibres of society. This is a concept shared in common by Pascal and Weil, although the former perceives this order as a necessary evil that human beings in their vulnerable, fragile and fallen state cannot refute, except through the Grace of God that can ‘heal’ the flaws in the order of human society. Weil, on the contrary, decides to become a promoter of an order that is rooted in justice, and devoid of any form of imagination and illusion. Essentially the difference is that Pascal divorces the political from the spiritual, presenting them as distinct from each other, whereas Weil’s political action is imbued with the spiritual, integrating both aspects. Both thinkers seem to view God as being an external agent, outside the political and social world, although Weil differs from Pascal by proposing and restructuring the political sphere in a way that even though God might be absent, the evangelical values can still be present. The antidote against imagination, is, therefore, not what Pascal envisages, that is, escaping from the corruption of politics and searching directly for Him, but as Weil proposes, creating a fertile terrain where one can wait for Him. The Kingdom of God, a kingdom devoid of imagination, begins in this world. There is no *fuga mundi* for Weil.

Weil is opposing imagination, and not creativity, in her process of detachment from knowledge. Her interest in the arts, in their various forms, albeit selective,¹⁰⁹ proves that she never opposed the creative process, although she never specifically clarified the difference between imagination and creativity. The creative process can bring the person closer to the Divine, the Divine Himself being the *summus creator omnium*. Weil’s theology on

¹⁰⁸ Pascal is referring to the social structure and behaviour of the political and aristocratic dignitaries of the seventeenth century, but the same could be said of our contemporary authorities.

¹⁰⁹ Weil categorised the works of art that offered a spiritual experience, and the rest that she explicitly abhorred. See David Anderson, *Simone Weil* (London: SCM Press, 1971), 70-1.

Creation¹¹⁰ helps in the understanding of her understanding of the creative act. The *summus creator* serves as a paradigm of creativity to all artists. He created by withdrawing, by generating a space which allowed human beings to be. The artist is called to follow the same procedure, to withdraw and allow the artistic space to be a space of encounter where the audience can relate. Like in the Grammarian tradition in Hindu spirituality, the artist attempts to retrace Divine truth that has been forgotten rather than expressing his thoughts.¹¹¹ It is not a space of gratification, where the artist can outshine. If that happens, creativity is transformed (and destroyed) into imagination, into an illusion whereby the artist is erroneously playing god, and where no genuine encounter with God can happen because encounters only happen in the void. Weil speaks of ‘creative attention’ – the faculty of creating that which does not exist.¹¹² It shifts the attention from the subject to the object. If the artist ‘creates’ an *other* that is already in existence, he can only do so by referring to his own perception, therefore regurgitating an extension of the self. The other is in existence because of the acknowledgment of the self, and so, in such a case, the artist is simply externalising his experience of the other, through the self. Imagination is the tool that allows contact through one’s own perception of the other. The crux of the problem lies in the fact that in spite of the contact, it is still an illusion. The artist has revealed his image of the other, and not the real other.¹¹³ He who creates what does not exist enters the void,¹¹⁴ where the self no longer occupies a place, discovering new possibilities of expression that were unknown to him, that are not an extension of the self, but can be found in the beyond. In a genuine and deep work of art, following the paradigm of God’s creative act, the artist is completely

¹¹⁰ Supra, 85-6.

¹¹¹ Harold G. Coward, “The Reflective Word: Spirituality in the Grammarian Tradition of India,” in *Hindu Spirituality: Vedas through Vedanta*, Volume 6, ed. Krishna Sivaraman (New York: Crossroad, 1989), 214.

¹¹² ‘L’attention créatrice consiste à faire réellement attention à ce qui n’existe pas.’ Weil, *Attente*, 136.

¹¹³ Simone Weil, “Sciences et perception dans Descartes,” in *Philosophiques*, 202.

¹¹⁴ Weil, “Dieu dans Platon,” 125.

absent, as much as the product was absent prior to its creation.¹¹⁵ If the ‘work of art’ is a manifestation of the ‘ego trip’ of the artist, it is an illusion, an attempt of grandeur, a form of imagination.

The same concept applies to the scientist who works in the laboratory for the illusion (through imagination) of self-gratification. This illusion reinforces the imagination of the scientist that leads him to believe that his practice of science is the source of all knowledge and can enlighten humanity from the darkness of superstition. Equally criticising societies where power rested entirely in the hands of the priests and cultists, Weil explains that in the modern world, this power was invested into the hands of scientists, making them believe that they were the harbingers of truth.¹¹⁶ Intellectualism is fuelled by illusion when one believes that he is the possessor of absolute truth, whereas truth is a virtue that can only be journeyed towards, but never totally attained, not even through science.

3.4.4 Final remarks

Weil’s attempt to detach from intellectual thought is not only rooted in spiritual reasons. Her motivation is also philosophical, showing that there is no schism in Weil’s life between the spiritual and the physical. According to Weil, the rational does not encompass the total truth.

As the yogic spirituality claims, the mind ‘can infer or quote authority or make hypotheses or

¹¹⁵ The movements that were developing in the artistic field in the times of Simone Weil also seem to be in line with this thought in her spirituality. A movement that promoted detachment in Europe during the inter-war period, possibly because of the delusion that the Great War, and its aftermath, had caused, was Dadaism, which claimed in its art that it seeks nothing, apart from the calming of the soul through this expression of nothingness. See André Maximov, “Dadaism in French Literature,” in *The Sewanee Review*, Volume 39, No. 3 (Jul. - Sep., 1931), 269-27. This line of thought resonates with Weil’s eventual journey into the void to experience the nothingness of God by becoming nothing herself. It is interesting, though, that later on in her life, Weil actually attacked and criticised the movement of Dadaism, claiming that it annihilated all forms of value. See Plessix Gray, *Simone Weil*, 162. This demonstrates how unique and original Weil’s line of thought was. Influenced by the movements around her, she was still able to transcend them. Although a product of the futility that characterised the years after the Great War, Weil realised that recognising this futility and stopping there was as futile as futility itself. Weil felt that the recognition of the void had to lead to a higher realm: to the spiritual realm.

¹¹⁶ Simone Weil, “En Marge du Comité d’Études,” in *Engagement Syndical*, 69.

speculate about the nature of reality, but it cannot see the objects directly, from the inside, as it were, as they really are in themselves.’¹¹⁷ Likewise, intellectualism on its own cannot lead to wholeness in life. Influenced by Descartes, Weil knew that as much as the sensory was deceitful, even the mind could not ever understand complete truth, no matter how much it endeavoured to do so.¹¹⁸ As a faithful student of Alain,¹¹⁹ Weil realised that ideas are futile unless they are translated into experiential engagement. Alain believed that philosophical jargon should not be used to express oneself, but rather one should focus on the search for truth through everyday language and experience.¹²⁰ This is precisely what Weil did when she resigned from her post as a lecturer in philosophy to work in the factories, or when she decided to enrol in the army in the Spanish Civil War. She did not want to fight for an ideal from her comfortable lecture room, but by being present with the afflicted at grassroots level. Weil maintained that knowledge is not found in the library but in the wisdom found in contact with people, and moreover, in contact with the land.¹²¹ Weil’s approach to knowledge is holistic, incorporating in it not only the intellectual but more importantly the experiential. Her invitation to detach from intellectualism is a challenge to apply knowledge in practice in the real world, that is, in one’s daily encounter with the other.

3.5 Detachment from the physical

The next section will focus on the Weilian vision on the body. Weil advocated a detachment from the physical, particularly the pleasures that the body offers. This section will attempt to demonstrate where this attitude developed from, rooting it not only in the literature that influenced Weil, but moreover in her personal history, as well as the socio-political factors

¹¹⁷ Ravi Ravindra, “Yoga: The Royal Path to Freedom,” in *Hindu Spirituality*, 179.

¹¹⁸ ‘...nos pensées ne pouvant pas être toutes vraies, à cause que nous ne sommes pas parfaits.’ Descartes, *Discours*, 73-4. ‘...our thoughts cannot be all true, because we are not perfect.’

¹¹⁹ Alain also exposed Simone Weil to the philosophy of Lagneau. See Houdin, *Weil*, 44.

¹²⁰ Nevin, *Portrait of a Self-Exiled Jew*, 41.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 44.

that might have influenced this belief. The section will also analyse in depth what Weil sought for in her struggle to detach from the physical and from its expression. One also cannot speak about the body without referring to gender: Weil's womanhood was embodied in her female body, a body and a gender she seemed to have issues with. It would, however, be reductionist to attribute Weil's discomfort to the fact that she was a woman exclusively to the problems that she had with her own body. Ultimately, Weil was also a product of her time, and giving a brief look at the wider picture and developments on gender in the period can shed light on the matter.

3.5.1 Gender: the concealed woman

The popular images of 'womanhood' that emerged in Europe after the Great War, and that up to a certain extent characterised the rise and development of feminism, reveal that the messages being conveyed were enigmatic. Such images created a tension between the image of the free and emancipated woman, juxtaposed against (or should one rather say merged with?) the depiction of a concealed feminism, where the image of femininity was somehow blurred and less visible. In this image, the salient features of the female body were deemphasised, as though they were not present. If perceived dualistically, that is, in the male-female dyad, where being male is studied against the notion of being female, the body of the woman might have been considered (and perhaps still is) to be weaker, and hence needed to be concealed and protected, since unlike the male body, its mind cannot control its bodily functions, as can be seen in the act of menstruation which creates messy situations of fatigue.¹²² The notion of the concealment of the female body emerges clearly in the image typical of the period in which Weil lived, an image that can be described as androgynous,

¹²² Penelope Washborn, "Becoming Woman: Menstruation as Spiritual Challenge," in *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion*, ed. Carol P. Christ & Judith Plaskow (New York: Harper San Francisco, 1992), 254.

incarnated in the German actress Marlene Dietrich,¹²³ or the new fashion designs advertised by Coco Chanel. This was the emergence of the *nouvelle femme*, the emancipated and liberal woman, who could comfortably talk about sex in society, and paraded a boyish-looking haircut. The development presented by Margaret Mead in the social sciences is also in parallel to these fashion trends. According to Mead, there are natural or innate differences in nature between the character traits of men and those of women,¹²⁴ insisting that there was, therefore, no need to distinguish between one gender and the other in the external and cultural expression. The paradox lay in the fact that the price that women had to pay for their liberation was to compromise on their physicality.¹²⁵ Emancipation required women to disguise their feminine physical traits and to transform themselves into men. This ‘concealment’ could also be an unconscious expression of the reality that, in the first decades of the twentieth century, women still had to embrace their physicality and integrate it with their expression in society. In spite of the rise of the feminist movement, the figure of the woman in European society in everyday life remained latent, lacking power and authority, and possibly this concealment showed that women were still not on an equal footing with men in society. In France, for example, women’s suffrage was not introduced before 1944 (a year after the death of Simone Weil) – a strikingly ironic detail for a woman who immersed herself in the political sphere.

This popular image, however, should not be over-romanticised, and made to seem as though it offered the key to the understanding of the struggle for women’s rights. The dynamic was more complex, thus revealing the ambiguity that affected Weil’s relationship with womanhood. The complexity of this dynamic is evident if other images are considered in

¹²³ Gisela Bock, *Women in European History* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 180.

¹²⁴ Margaret Mead, *Male and Female* (New York: New American Library, 1959), 16-7.

¹²⁵ Roberta P. Seid, “Too ‘close to the bone’: The Historical Context for Women’s Obsession with Slenderness,” in *Feminist Perspective on Eating Disorder*, ed. Patricia Fallon, Melanie A. Karzman and Susan C. Wooley (New York, London: The Guildford Press, 1994), 6-8.

reaction to the androgynous one. Suffice to compare the image in the film *The Blue Angel*¹²⁶ to the image of the voluptuous woman glorified only a few years later in the same Germany by the Nazi regime. This new image of the more traditional woman could be attributed to political factors, but this explanation cannot be used in relation to the ever-growing icons of Hollywood of the era, such as Bette Davis and Greta Garbo, who oozed charm and sexiness in their more classical outfits. Feminism in France in the thirties and forties is also embodied by Simone de Beauvoir, incidentally a college peer of Simone Weil herself, displaying an image of a woman who is well-dressed, all made up.¹²⁷ These images correspond with the cry in the movement of feminism that encouraged women to mark their position in and contribution to society, beyond the narrow confines of the family, struggling to free themselves from the oppression of a male dominated society. Women in the 1930s engaged in work that defied the traditional gender stereotypes, such as employment in the bank and in the transport industry,¹²⁸ thus extending their presence in sectors that previously were totally dominated by men. The concluding insight that can be made is that these mixed popular and political images that existed simultaneously are indicative of the tension that characterised the position of women in society. It also shows that it was possible to be a 'woman' and to have a recognisable position in society without needing to conceal the female body. The meaning of the word 'woman' and what the image of woman represented, and whether it was at all possible to define the word in clear and set parameters summarises the whole argument presented in this section. The answer remains ambiguous.

¹²⁶ Carl Zuckmayer, Karl Vollmöller, Robert Liebmann and Josef von Sternberg, *The Blue Angel*, directed by Josef Von Sternberg (Germany: Paramount Pictures, 1930).

¹²⁷ Yourgrau, *Simone Weil*, 19.

¹²⁸ Bock, *Women in European History*, 175.

Theologically, the same dynamic is also visible, particularly in the patriarchal system that prevails in the hierarchy in the Catholic Church, reflected in a language that depicts God as an authoritative male.¹²⁹ The female is ‘hidden’, present and represented by the congregation as opposed to the male Christ who is represented by the celebrant priest.¹³⁰ The male is the protagonist, whereas the female is the passive recipient, unable to be of any influence in the gestation of the Institution, whether it is participation in the liturgy, or policy making.¹³¹ Vatican Council II challenged this concept and was revolutionary in its approach¹³², but in the 1930s, this duality was still strongly evident, leaving hiddenness and absence¹³³ as the only possible expression for the female, a dynamic that has been overridden by specific women in the history of Catholicism that could only leave an imprint by hiding their femininity even further, and projecting a male image such as the case of Joan of Arc and Teresa of Avila. This duality that reinforces the unequal power dynamic between the genders was retrenched by the Church Magisterium in the Encyclical Letter *Casti Connubii*, published by Pius XI in 1930, that reflected this schism, typical of the mainstream theological thought of the time. The Encyclical states that ‘this order includes both the primacy of the husband with regard to the wife and children, the ready subjection of the wife and her willing

¹²⁹ Leon J. Podles disagrees strongly with this premise, stating on the contrary that the Church has become feminised, a phenomenon that he attributes mostly to the spirituality of Bernard of Clairvaux and the Medieval female mystics, that, according to Podles, swayed Catholicism from its original spirituality by infusing it with the erotic. It seems that Podles fails to notice the richness that these mystical traditions have brought to the Catholic heritage. Podles does, however, make an interesting association between the feminisation of the Church and the concept of passivity. Medieval pietism, possibly also in reaction to Scholasticism which separated the learned theologians from the devout practitioners, emphasised the traits of the anima in the congregation, placing it as a passive recipient to the authority of a select number of males in authority. See Leon J. Podles, *The Church Impotent: The Feminization of Christianity* (Dallas: Spence Publishing Company, 1999), 102-112.

¹³⁰ In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul presents the paradigm of the Church as the bride, and Christ as the Bridegroom. (Eph. 5: 25-27).

¹³¹ Mary Daly, “After the Death of God the Father: Women’s Liberation and the Transformation of Christian Consciousness,” in *Womanspirit Rising*, 55.

¹³² Constitutio Dogmatica de Ecclesia: “Gaudium et Spes,” (7 December 1965), 9:, in *Acta Apostolicæ Sedis* 58 (1966), 1031-2.

¹³³ What is disturbing in this argument is that whereas Simone Weil always repudiated the ostentatious and embraced the hidden, as can be seen in the way she related with the Church or with the intellectual movement, in the case of the feminist movement, she embraced what is manifested, that is the masculine, and put aside the hidden feminine. Unlike the other aspects discussed in this chapter, Weil did not manage to transcend the socio-political milieu, but conformed to the perceptions that prevailed in society, as shall be seen later on in this section of the chapter.

obedience’¹³⁴ reconfirming the hidden absence of the woman, locked up in the kitchen and fulfilling her *raison d’être* solely as wife and mother, rather than on the basis of being a woman, irrespective of whichever other roles she carries. This concept is also present, but expressed and explored differently, in the spirituality of Edith Stein,¹³⁵ a contemporary of Weil’s, who believed that the natural function of the woman as wife and mother is not a concealment of the female body but a manifestation of the uniqueness of the woman. She is different to man precisely due to her body and the functions that it has. In Stein’s vision, these roles so inherent to the female condition, allow her to reach out to society in multifarious ways, even if her calling is not for the married life and motherhood. Her vision – unlike the one presented in *Casti Connubii* – is not of a wife and a mother, hidden, lost and buried within a kitchen, but a wife and a mother who recognises and uses these aspects of her femininity for the welfare of society at large. Undoubtedly, for Stein, the concept of wife and mother needs to be understood in a more metaphorical and spiritual sense than in an exclusively biological one since she also analyses the spiritual function of woman. The paradigm she presents is the Marian one. Mary is a virgin, and therefore, not biologically impregnated by a man but still fulfils her function naturally and supernaturally. She does this through her female body, transcending the traditional function of wife and mother and by retaining her virginity, showing that these roles are not dependent solely on sexual praxis,¹³⁶ and distancing herself from the social stereotypes of women. These diverse and often opposing viewpoints demonstrate that even within the Catholic framework the beliefs regarding the role of women were not homogenous, in much the same way as the paradigms in society and popular culture were often contradictory.

¹³⁴ Pius XI, Pope, Litteræ Encyclicæ: “Casti Connubii,” (31 December 1930), in AAS 22 (1930), 549.

¹³⁵ Edith Stein, *Essays on Woman*, ed. L. Gelber and Romaeus Leuven (Louvain: Carmelite Publishing Centre, 1998), 45.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 198.

The cardinal question at this point is whether or not the body defines the gender. Is a person a woman uniquely because she has the physical traits of a woman? Although the answer is not clear-cut, it is true that a considerable percentage of persons would consider their physicality as being a vehicle to express their gender, even though this might be a cultural imposition that has survived from generation to generation.¹³⁷ Gender theory contests this perception, even though most people are still influenced by the medieval paradigm that ‘we exist in a body and with a body; not simply that we have a ‘body’ but that we are a body.’¹³⁸ The person is an embodied spirit, and it is through the body that the beauty of the mystery of the Divine, as well as the mystery of being human is revealed, albeit partially.¹³⁹ It can be concluded that the bodies define personhood. In the 1930s, this premise was challenged to the extent that the image of the female physicality fused with the male form, almost giving the impression that it is not the physicality that defines or portrays the gender. A few decades later, feminists were contesting that, ‘women, as well as men, are not defined by their biology and reproductive capabilities but by the call to discipleship and sainthood.’¹⁴⁰ As Simone de Beauvoir’s famous maxim puts it, ‘One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.’¹⁴¹

Butler insists that “‘reality” is not as fixed as it is generally assumed to be,’¹⁴² since the schism between body and mind is the remnant of the Cartesian split. It is this split that denotes the body as the sole marker of gender, and this legacy has been rejected by modern and contemporary social sciences. Over the years, society has created paradigms and standards that define what is ‘male’ and ‘female’, and up to a certain extent the grey area in

¹³⁷ See Kathleen Canning, *Gender History in Practice: Historical Perspectives on Bodies, Class, and Citizenship* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2006).

¹³⁸ Bernard of Clairvaux, *The Twelve Steps of Humility and Pride and On Loving God*, trans., Halcyon C. Blackhouse (London: Hodder & Staughton, 1985), 104.

¹³⁹ Christopher West, *Theology of the Body for Beginners* (West Chester: Ascension Press, 2004), 6.

¹⁴⁰ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, “Feminist Spirituality, Christian Identity, and Catholic Vision,” in *Womanspirit Rising*, 140.

¹⁴¹ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (London: Vintage Classics, 1997), 295.

¹⁴² Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1999), xxv.

the image of the woman that was typical of Weil's time, was a reaction against this restrictive categorisation.¹⁴³ The word 'woman' cannot be defined by one image, and despite the attempts to define or to portray the word, the attempts are still not exhaustive, and probably never will be, since gender is affected, and in turn affects, other factors such as race, ethnic roots and culture.¹⁴⁴ Therefore, if one embraces this perspective, the popular androgynous image of the 1930s should not be read as the concealment of the female body but a new manifestation of it, whereby women felt free enough to express themselves in any manner they wanted, even by transgressing stereotypical gender images.

The analysis being made so far compares womanhood to manhood. The questions that were raised in this section examined and compared the role of woman in society to that of man, and the body of the woman was juxtaposed against the male one. Particularly at the beginning of the twentieth century, and possibly even in contemporary society, at least in particular contexts, the feminist movement is often placed, in a most binary and schismatic fashion, against the notion of masculinity. It almost earns its definition and its ontology from a need to liberate itself from the oppression of a patriarchal society, almost to the extent that if society were not patriarchal, feminism would never have been born. Such a position is contestable: the importance of women in society should not stem from a reaction towards oppression, but should exist in its own right. This voice, however, is a contemporary Western one, and might fail to take into consideration the struggle that feminism in the West was facing in the light of the social dynamics throughout the first half of the twentieth century.

¹⁴³ Particularly interesting is Butler's insight that seeks to distinguish 'sex' from 'gender', claiming that the first is biological whereas the second one is cultural. Society often confuses them, and does not separate one from the other. A separation, however, would allow for the possibility of 'man' being signified by a female body, and 'woman' by a male body. See *ibid.*, 9. As claimed in the main text, however, in popular culture and perception, the body is still synonymous with the gender: there still is no separation between sex and gender.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 4-5.

It is against this struggle that one needs to examine the tension between the attempt of women, on one hand, to assert their identity in a society that did not offer much space and possibility, and, on the other hand, the reality of women masking themselves and being masked. The tension between being part of society, and yet so absent, made women realise that it was essential to embrace their physicality and its expression. It was the exploration of this tension that led women to claim their position in modern society as women, and this happened much later after Weil's death. It is within this context that Weil's battle with her own gender identity and body need to be examined.

3.5.2 Gynocritical theory: the woman-author and her (missing) pen

In studying the socio-political milieu which might have influenced Weil's notions on the body and gender, it is essential to remember that Simone Weil was not only a woman, but also a female writer. Gynocritical theory will shed further light. This theory indicates that nineteenth century female writers felt that they were excluded from literary circles and that their only way of being included was to masculinise themselves, often by adopting male pseudonyms. This threat was felt even more intensely because the tool of the writer is a pen, a phallic symbol,¹⁴⁵ accentuating even further the seemingly masculine role of the writer as perceived by the culture of the nineteenth century society.¹⁴⁶ Weil belongs to a different category – the female writers and philosophers of the twentieth century who had already started reaping the first fruits of the movement of feminism. This does not mean that the situation changed suddenly or drastically. Until the first half of the twentieth century, the male presence still dominated and possibly overwhelmed the literary circle. The female voice had increased, but was still a minority. It is within the struggle of this context that Weil's actions and reactions need to be examined. In fact, Weil herself used a male pseudonym for

¹⁴⁵ Allen, *Intertextuality*, 145.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 145-6.

her articles – and considering the fact that women were not credited to the same extent as male writers, Weil's decision can be justified.

Weil's de-feminisation is in part also due to her rapport with her brother André, and her repulsion towards her body could be associated with the esteem that she had towards him. Simone Weil admired her brother intensely, and craved the respect and acknowledgment that he was given, both as an intelligent young boy, and as an accomplished mathematician as an adult. As a little child, she insisted on not being treated any differently from her brother simply because she was a girl. She would sit down in the cold snow and object to her brother being given the heavier bags to carry because he was a boy.¹⁴⁷ In imitation of her brother André, as a young girl, Simone decided to stop wearing socks and walked barefoot in the cold streets.¹⁴⁸ This decision, which was only the first of a number of austere decisions that were to characterise her life, not only show a certain repugnance towards the body, avoiding any form of excessive caring for the physical, but moreover demonstrates that the young Weil wanted to prove that if the male body of her brother was capable of endurance, her body was not any different. Could it be that Simone's desire to defeminise herself knows its roots in her wish to be like her brother, to have a male body like him? The issue presented here is certainly debatable, but the truth remains that Simone always lived in the shadow of the genius of her brother, and always feared that she would never attain the same heights that he did.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁷ Yourgrau, *Simone Weil*, 22.

¹⁴⁸ Pétrement, *Vie*, 28.

¹⁴⁹ Nevin, *Portrait of a Self-Exiled Jew*, 2.

The need of defeminisation in Weil knows older roots that are not solely limited to her relationship with her brother. The second important and influential character was Madame Selma Weil. Simone's mother did not want to raise her daughter as a stereotypical girl since the mother 'loathes little girls and their little poses and pouts in the presence of company', being adamant on 'nurturing a boy's uprightness...instead of a little girl's charm.'¹⁵⁰ By the time Simone was five, the mother was already making certain that the boys would not woo this young girl.¹⁵¹ Indeed, Madame Weil was not lavish with any compliments towards Simone. She eventually even pulled her out of the school system and insisted that Simone should be given private tutorship at home, since she was afraid that her daughter was being given too many compliments by her teacher, and thus softening her.¹⁵² It almost seemed as though Simone's mother was transmitting the message to Simone that she could not be loved unless she masculinised herself.

Ironically, one of the most intimate moments of physical contact in Weil's life happened when she was a child. In the Great War, a 'friendship' developed between her and a soldier who was on leave. The two used to go out for walks daily, holding each other's hands. Shortly after, the soldier died, shot in battle.¹⁵³ Interestingly enough, after that episode, the moments of physical contact diminished and almost completely vanished in Weil's life. Was this due to a realisation, formed at such a vulnerable age, that the body is ephemeral, and that these moments of tenderness are too fleeting to invest in, leading to a fear of intimacy? Was there the possibility of a fear of a happiness that is so elusive? Would not this be, however, in sharp contrast with the philosophy of a woman who constantly defied and stoically embraced necessity and suffering, and was not in the least afraid of the repercussions? Or could it be

¹⁵⁰ Weil, *At Home*, 107.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 109.

¹⁵² Coles, *Modern Pilgrimage*, 147.

¹⁵³ Nevin, *Portrait of a Self-Exiled Jew*, 191.

that the influence of her mother, and of the socio-political milieu in which she lived, had not yet impacted her when she had encountered that soldier, and the genuineness of this physical contact could still transcend the anti-feminine statements that were to influence Weil shortly afterwards? Nonetheless, even though this need of physical contact was suppressed, and rarely manifested, a few occasions reveal that the desire was present but deeply buried, such as when Simone cried when mocked by a friend as she recounted how a coal-miner in Barcelona kissed her.¹⁵⁴ It shows that at deeper level, Weil felt a drive towards human affectivity expressed through the physical, and craved for others to desire her.

The issues with gender and the body persisted and manifested themselves in adulthood in the attire that Weil selected for herself. Weil was determined to conceal her femininity by dressing as a man,¹⁵⁵ which as seen already, reflected a popular image in contemporary culture. The expression of masculinity was also advocated and consolidated by the fact that her parents often called her 'Simon', to the extent that when she grew older, Simone used to sign her letters to her parents by saying: 'Your respectful son.'¹⁵⁶ It seems that Simone Weil chose to 'detach' herself from her own gender, and from her own feminine identity, if she ever did relate with her identity as a woman.

Another interesting aspect that sheds light on Weil's relationship with her body and gender is her interest and participation during her student life in the female rugby team, even though she was not very successful in this endeavour, due to her clumsiness. This choice of sport is particularly fascinating and simultaneously perplexing. On one hand, the sport requires constant physical contact – a strange option for a person who reacted negatively every time

¹⁵⁴ Yourgrau, *Simone Weil*, 110.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 18-19.

¹⁵⁶ Plessix Gray, *Simone Weil*, 19-20.

she used to be touched.¹⁵⁷ On the other hand, particularly if studied from a Freudian point of view, Weil's decision to join the rugby team, alongside her unrelenting smoking of cigarettes, could be read as being a destructive force, a form of *morbido* (the death instinct) since rugby involves rough play. It could be that Weil subconsciously opted for this sport to be engaged in an activity where her body was 'endangered' and where the preservation of the body did not matter since the physique of the player was used in an abrasive manner. It is also a sport that is more commonly practised by males, and by choosing this sport, Weil may have been choosing an activity that was atypical of her gender, once again following her mother's vision that her daughter should be kept away from all the 'poses and pouts' that are associated with girls. It seemed that rugby was the ideal sport for her to conceal, and possibly put at risk, this frail female body, that she had difficulty embracing.

Certain decisions made later in her life still make her relationship with her gender less clear-cut and ambiguous. The one that will be examined is her request to volunteer as a nurse on the front line during the Second World War.¹⁵⁸ On the one hand, this request could be read as a feminist one – even though on a conscious level it is unlikely that Weil would have seen it in this manner. It could have been an attempt for her to bring womanhood at par with manhood: men were dying at the front and women should not be treated as weaker and protected by being kept safe in the comfort of their kitchens.¹⁵⁹ Perhaps Weil was attempting to penetrate into society by giving herself, and other women, the same 'opportunities' that men had. On the other hand, this request could be interpreted as a form of fulfilment incarnated in self-annihilation: by helping on the front line, Weil would have placed herself in a more vulnerable and perilous position than she had done in her early years by playing

¹⁵⁷ Yourgrau, *Simone Weil*, 110.

¹⁵⁸ Nevin, *Portrait of a Self-Exiled Jew*, 190.

¹⁵⁹ Weil failed to realise that this was not the scenario of the Great War: there were no trenches and front lines in the Second World War.

rugby. Was this female body so unworthy of consideration that she was ready to sacrifice it so easily by exposing it to such danger? Could she not have engaged in the same noble act without the possibility of going to the front line, by being of assistance slightly further away without endangering herself extensively? Did she have to fulfil her *raison d'être* by relating with necessity in its extreme, at the cost of annihilation, an annihilation nevertheless fuelled by the constant and the total attention of the other, but possibly rooted in a dissociation (rather than detachment) from her body?

It is within this context of her life experiences that the questions on Weil's de-feminisation need to be studied. Her efforts to masculinise herself are not uniquely due to her need to assert herself in a male dominated world, but are also rooted in her childhood experiences that could be a cause of what appears to be a repugnance towards her female body. One question that merits attention is whether this repugnance was due to the desire of the phallus, or conversely, the fear of the phallus. Did she desire possessing a phallus, or was she afraid of being penetrated? Was Simone Weil overtaken by the presence of the phallus in the act of penetration, or was she desirous of the need to penetrate, by being actively engaged? It appears that Weil had no intimate relationships, physical or sexual, with any man (or woman) in her life. Yet it seems that Weil's desire to penetrate goes far beyond the sexual. It is important to understand where her desire, or fear, of penetration stems from.

Psychoanalytical theory can provide some noteworthy insights, particularly if placed against the notion of nothingness, a theme that is a cornerstone of Weilian spirituality. From a psychoanalytical angle, nothingness can be read as being a form of castration. The male sexual organ defies castration since through the penetrative act it has the faculty to fecund and create – to produce 'something'. The castrated man is the absolute paradigm of

nothingness since he is incapable of reproducing and lacks the erotic function of the tool to create. This leads one to question whether Weil's desire for nothingness, especially when juxtaposed with what seems to be a fear of her body, is indeed a desire or a fear of the phallus.¹⁶⁰ Is she motivated to become nothing by penetrating into the nothingness of the nature of the Divine,¹⁶¹ or is she rather propelled by her fear of being penetrated by 'something' and seeking refuge, and possibly escapism, in nothingness? The two hypotheses may not be as contradictory as they might seem initially.¹⁶² It seems that there is a strong element of truth in both assertions. Despite Weil's endeavour to penetrate into the depths of the human condition, nevertheless, her fear of contact, stemming from the repulsion of her body, contributes to her dissociation with her physicality. More influential factors, however, need to be explored before conclusions can be established.

¹⁶⁰ Simone Weil, "Cahier IX," in *Œuvres Complètes: Cahiers, Volume VI: La Porte du Transcendant (février 1942-juin 1942)* (Paris: Gallimard, 2002), 169.

¹⁶¹ It is interesting to observe that the notion of nothingness was the *point de départ* of some of the feminist theologians in the 1970s, who also perceived and contemplated the notion of Godness, through the *via negativa*, as nothingness. Their objective, however, totally differed from Weil's. The latter, as seen already, avoided any human projection on the notion of the Transcendent, whereas the feminists, or at least a number of them, started from nothingness to be able to remove any patriarchal projection, and to eventually acknowledge and celebrate the feminine in the Godhead. See Mary Daly, "Why speak about God?" in *Womanspirit Rising*, 215-6. Another interesting viewpoint in Feminist Theology maintains that the female condition is inherent to the state of nothingness. This is due to the fact that the stories and the myths that exist in Western civilisation have been created and designed by men for men to explain the dynamics of the male condition. Not having any adequate myths, the female starts off from the state of nothingness and needs to create her own stories. See Carol P. Christ, "Spiritual Quest and Women's Experience," in *ibid.*, 228-231. In this context, Carol Christ experiences nothingness as being negative, a void that needs to be filled in and that has remained empty due to a subjugation by a patriarchal society, unlike Weil who perceives nothingness as being an optimal state for spiritual growth. In opposition to Weil, Beattie recommends that the process of kenosis is only applicable to men as it is based on a patriarchal theology. Ultimately, how can a woman empty herself and embrace nothingness in a culture where the self is not affirmed and not allowed to be expressed? See Tina Beattie, *New Catholic Feminism: Theology and Theory* (London: Routledge, 2006), 72-3. Another cardinal aspect of Weilian spirituality that will be discussed in the next chapter - the notion of waiting - also seems to be linked with gender differences. Waiting is also seen as being integral to the female condition, typified by natural cycles such as menstruation and the gestation period. Theologically, feminists also argue that the female model in Christianity as presented by Mary is a model of waiting for the *fiat* of the Lord to be accomplished within herself. Mary waits in silence for the Mystery of Human Salvation to be incarnated and given to the world through her acceptance of the will of God. See Carol P. Christ, "Why Women need the Goddess: Phenomenological, Psychological, and Personal Reflections" in *Womanspirit Rising*, 283-6. In spite of the fact that Weil did not embrace her 'womanhood' totally, she still seemed to be attracted to aspects of spirituality that are more associated with feminist spirituality.

¹⁶² Allen, *Intertextuality*, 144-54.

3.5.3 Plato on trial

This sub-chapter has discussed the social and phenomenological factors that might have shaped Weil's attitude towards the body and gender. It is also crucial to study the literature that propelled Simone Weil further in this direction. It is imperative to understand that the perception of Simone Weil was influenced by Platonic thought which treated the body in opposition to the soul. However, a word of caution before proceeding: it can be concluded that Weil was a devout Platonist, and it can also be agreed that Plato perceived the soul as being entrapped within the body, with all the connotations that such a statement implies. Yet attributing extensively and placing the 'blame' for Weil's seemingly negative attitude towards the body to the Platonist perspective would be a reductionist approach. The attitude towards her body and gender was already ingrained before Weil read Plato, and so, what Weil did was to place the beliefs that she had already embraced against the philosophical writings that appealed to her, and delve into them further by examining them within the philosophical framework of Plato (and other authors). It would also be unjust since Plato could easily be misread and misinterpreted,¹⁶³ particularly in the light of other influential movements in philosophy, such as Neo-Platonism that heightened to a greater degree the 'antagonism' to the body found in Plato. Plato does insist that the person needs to abandon what belongs to the body to devote himself to mental activity, and not be afraid of the loss of the body through death. Nevertheless, when describing the philosopher king, Plato is not advocating a hatred of the body as much as repudiating a mentality where the physical is considered to be more important than what he considers to be more superior dimensions of the human person.¹⁶⁴ Taking into account all these factors, it might not even be correct to

¹⁶³ In fact, Plato, in *Timaeus*, advocates that balance and harmony are reached by taking care of both the body and the soul, thus showing that even he gave importance to the somatic. In translating this text, Weil shows that she might have embraced a similar approach. In her translation, the words *équilibrés* (balanced) and *sains* (healthy), referring to the body, were underlined twice by Weil, denoting the emphasis attributed to the education and welfare of the physical. See Simone Weil, trans., "Le *Timée* de Platon," in *Marseille*, vol II, 537.

¹⁶⁴ Plato, *The Republic*, 485c-486d, 191-2.

attribute Weil's apparent destructive attitude completely and exclusively to Platonic influences, or to give overdue credit to her engagement with Platonic readings. Nonetheless, a brief glimpse into Platonic thought on the body is still required to complete this section on Weil's relationship with physicality.

An important Platonic thought that influenced Weilian spirituality is the importance of detachment from pleasure. The body, through the senses, provides the individual with pleasure, and in the process of detachment, pleasure needs to be parted from. The dynamic that seems to stem out of this discourse is that the vision is clearly schismatic. The struggle is evident. On one side of the struggle, there is the physical and the sensory providing pleasure, and on the other side, there is the soul that discards any form of pleasure to transcend the limitations of the senses. One can also deduce that Plato perceived pleasure as being an illusion. Human beings mistake pleasure, with its immediate gratification, for the quest for goodness, since they are driven by a desire to reach absolute good, even though they are in reality victims of sheer ignorance. This reinforces within the human being the importance of the sensory. Pleasure becomes an illusion, distracting the person from attaining the 'real' absolute.¹⁶⁵ Plato, through the mouth of Socrates, claimed that 'the soul of every man, when it is greatly pleased or pained by anything, is compelled to believe that the object which caused the emotion is very distinct and very true; but it is not.'¹⁶⁶ Pleasure clouds the rational part of the individual from distinguishing between what is real and what is imaginary. A person who is engrossed in pleasure will not know whether the sensation received is illusionary or else a vehicle that leads to growth. It is only by detaching from pleasure that the person can truly evaluate the validity of the experience. It is imperative for the person to

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 505c-506a, 215.

¹⁶⁶ Ὅτι ψυχὴ παντὸς ἀνθρώπου ἀναγκάζεται ἅμα τε ἡσθῆναι ἢ λυπηθῆναι σφόδρα ἐπὶ τῷ καὶ ἡγεῖσθαι, περὶ δ' ἂν μάλιστα τοῦτο πάσχη, τοῦτο ἐναργέστατόν τε εἶναι καὶ ἀληθέστατον, οὐχ οὕτως ἔχον· Plato, *Phædo*, 83C, trans., Harold North Fowler (Cambridge: Loeb Classical Library, 1943), 291.

detach from pleasure, particularly physical pleasure, to avoid being disillusioned. Within the Platonic vision, pleasure is intimately linked with the sensory since it is the senses that provide pleasure to the person, and hence cause the illusion. This same dynamic is observable in the Weilian universe. Influenced by Platonic thought and the Cartesian division, she perceives the sensory in opposition to the rational that leads to the Absolute. Weil's analysis thus reaffirms the schism, separating the person into two clearly distinct dimensions.

In the Weilian universe, this Platonic insight is also reiterated by the influence of Eastern spirituality, demonstrating that Plato cannot be solely 'accused' of having shaped Weilian thought. The *Gita* states that 'when in recollection he withdraws all senses from the attractions of pleasures of senses, even as a tortoise withdraws all its limbs, then his is a serene wisdom'¹⁶⁷ and that 'the man whom these cannot move, whose soul is one, beyond pleasure and pain, is worthy of life in Eternity.'¹⁶⁸ In a parallel manner, in Western spirituality, or in the way it has been interpreted over the centuries, pleasure has been connected with lust, and particularly the female body has been associated with carnal gratification. Christian spirituality has contrasted this with the image of the Virgin Mary, reinforced by the 1950 dogma that affirmed that she was assumed bodily to Heaven, proving that the female body is good. This, however, still conveys the notion that the female body needs to be celibate to be good and, therefore, indirectly still presents physical pleasure as negative.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁷ *Bhagavad Gita*, II: 58, 14.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, II, 15, 11.

¹⁶⁹ Christ, "Why Women need the Goddess," 278-80.

3.5.4 The body and the flesh

The sub-chapter has analysed the different influences that had an impact on Weil's outlook towards the body. The study will proceed by studying closely her thoughts on the subject. In line with Plato, Weil claims that pleasure intensifies the experience of the person to the extent that the individual loses the faculty of focusing on what matters. The experience acquired by the senses can be a referent that leads to God, since ultimately the body, in all its dimensions - including its capacity to offer pleasure - is the tangible manifestation of the spiritual dimension.¹⁷⁰ If the experience, however, is so strong that the referent becomes the reference itself, the purpose of the referent is totally lost, and within Weil's vision, this is a grave error, a serious sin.¹⁷¹ In understanding this concept, one needs to consider that like Paul,¹⁷² Weil seems to distinguish the flesh, σάρξ (*sarx*) from the body, σῶμα (*soma*), and her critique lies against the flesh, not the body. The body is neutral since it is part of the human reality. It is the flesh that can subside from being a referent and become the reference itself. Weil cannot be accused of perceiving the body as being negative, or of being necessarily in opposition to the mind or the soul, even though she seemed to have an unhealthy relationship with her own body. She does not seem to have ever mortified her body with harsh acts of penance. She did refuse to be extravagant on fine food, actually reducing her dietary intake drastically in her

¹⁷⁰ West, *Theology of the Body*, 121.

¹⁷¹ 'C'est pour cela que les péchés dans ce domaine sont graves. Ils constituent une offense à Dieu du fait même que l'âme est inconsciemment en train de chercher Dieu. D'ailleurs, ils se ramènent tous à un seul qui consiste à vouloir plus ou moins se passer du consentement.' Weil, *Attente*, 163. 'It is for this reason that the sins in this domain are serious. They offend God because of the very reason that the soul is unconsciously in search of God. Indeed, they all lead to the same sin which consists of wanting, more or less, to by-pass this consent.' This echoes strongly with the writings of Marcus Aurelius, another important influence on Weil, who claimed: 'ὁ δὲ κατ' ἐπιθυμίαν ἁμαρτάνων, ὑφ' ἡδονῆς ἡττώμενος, ἀκολαστότερός πως φαίνεται καὶ θηλύτερος ἐν ταῖς ἁμαρτίαις.' Marcus Aurelius, *The Communings*, II: 10, 33. '[H]e that does wrong from lust, being mastered by pleasure, seems in some sort to be more incontinent and more unmanly in his wrong-doing.' Although Marcus Aurelius does not link sins of lust with the search for God, he does state, like Weil does, that the gravity of the sins of lust stems from the propelling of a need to fulfil, and that the sin lies in the illusionary nature of this fulfilment.

¹⁷² 'For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever you want' (Galatians 5: 17). Paul chooses the word 'flesh', as opposed to the body. In Pauline theology, it is the flesh – and not the body which is good since it is created by God, that is considered to drive humans towards evil, and is seen as being in conflict with the spirit.

last weeks of life, and she always opted for the simplest of accommodation where possible, preferring to sleep on the floor rather than on a bed, but she never inflicted intentional harm onto her body. Essentially, what Weil seems to be propagating is not oppression, but an education of the body whereby the individual can have complete mastery over it,¹⁷³ in such a manner that it can be used adequately as a vehicle to reach the absolute referent.

A clear difference also needs to be made between Weil and her body, as opposed to Weil and the body. The woman who underfed her body is also the woman who admired the beauty of the sculptures of the human anatomy in Florence. Furthermore, and on this point Weil's thoughts differ distinctly to Pauline theology, she not only admires the beauty of the human body, but also does not seem to perceive the flesh as being intrinsically evil. In her vision, it is not the flesh *per se* that hinders the person from loving God, but rather it is his fear from loving God that constrains him to use the flesh in a way that prevents him from relating with the Divine.¹⁷⁴ Weil is not vilifying the flesh in itself but rather the way that the flesh is used to create an illusion. Illusions are created since the pleasures that the flesh offers and gratifies with are much stronger, more immediate and more tangible than the love of God which is so overwhelming, distant, and frightening. Human beings prefer to exploit the immediacy of the pleasures of the flesh in an effort to distance themselves from the challenge that the love of God demands. Weil's approach to the body cannot be considered to be negative if seen from this perspective. On the contrary, Weil's understanding of the body almost prefigures Beattie's presentation of the (female) body as sacramental.¹⁷⁵ The body can serve as a bridge uniting the human with the Divine, demonstrating that it is a 'graced relationship'.¹⁷⁶ Her

¹⁷³ 'L'homme doit, au contraire, se rendre maître de son corps par sa propre activité.' Simone Weil, "L'Habitude," in *Philosophiques*, 384. 'On the contrary, Man needs to be the master of his own body through his own activity.'

¹⁷⁴ Weil, "Réflexions sans ordre," 276.

¹⁷⁵ Beattie, *New Catholic Feminism*, 46.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 48.

approach is rooted in a Theology of the Incarnation that is reminiscent of Meister Eckhart. The Divine became flesh, and so, it is through the flesh that mankind becomes Divine, since, as Tertullian states, ‘Caro salutis est cardo’ (The flesh is the pivot of salvation).¹⁷⁷ Furthermore, Pope John Paul II, in his Theology of the Body presents the body as being a sacrament, leading the human being to God.¹⁷⁸ Weil’s issue with the pleasures of the body lies in their erroneous use as a form of acceleration, which defies the arduous process of waiting, fundamental to the journey towards God. Ultimately, physical love becomes problematic when, instead of being a connection to reach the Divine, it assigns the other person falsely with the traits of the Divine, transforming him into an idol.¹⁷⁹ In this sense, the sin of the flesh is rooted in the illusion that through physical pleasure in its gratuitous and gratifying manner, God can be reached. It is a sin of ignorance, since the pleasures of the body on their own do not bridge the human with the Divine. In other words, detachment from pleasure is essential not because pleasure is wrong in itself, or because the senses are deceitful, but because it prevents the person from using the senses appropriately as a medium to relate with the Divine. Weil recommends detachment from anything that hinders spiritual growth, including the intellectual, clearly indicating that her vision is not schismatic, and also demonstrating that the body is not perceived necessarily as being superior to the mind, since ultimately both can become hurdles in the relationship with the Divine.

¹⁷⁷ Tertullian, “De Resurrectione Carnis,” in *Bibliotheca Patrum Ecclesiasticorum Selectissima*, Fasc. II, 8, 3 (New York: Dörrfling & Franke, 1858), 10.

¹⁷⁸ West, *Theology of the Body*, 5.

¹⁷⁹ Weil, “L’amour implicite de Dieu,” 307.

Pleasure cannot be spoken about without reference to desire, since the two are intimately linked and both affect each other. The *Gita*, however, makes an interesting and valid distinction between the two, offering an inspiring insight. It recognises that desire is innate to personhood, that even the person who is spiritually advanced will feel desire,¹⁸⁰ and that the human being can merely detach from pleasure, but not from desire. The detachment from desire requires supranatural intervention. It states that ‘pleasures of the sense, but not desires, disappear from the austere soul. Even desires disappear when the soul has seen the Supreme.’¹⁸¹ Nevertheless, this process of detachment should not be done by annihilating the senses, but by being detached from the pleasures caused, for it is ‘the soul that moves in the world of the senses and yet keeps the senses in harmony, free from attraction and aversion, finds rest in quietness.’¹⁸² The objective behind detachment from desire needs to be questioned in the light that detachment from desire is not humanly possible, and that the flesh can be a medium to the Divine. It is also important to investigate why the Divine in His relationship with humanity should expect such a heightened level of purification that transcends the human reality. In the works of John of the Cross, who also influenced Weil in this aspect, desire is important and is perceived as a gift from God because without it, the human being would not be motivated to relate. On the other hand, desire can be so powerful, that it can lead to the illusionary in situations when the desire is so overwhelming, surpassing the relational.¹⁸³ The need for desire becomes stronger than the actual relationship. Therefore, it is essential to decrease the objects of desire in our lives, since they can be a form of illusion, to have the space and the energy to focus on the one and true Desire.¹⁸⁴ Detaching

¹⁸⁰ *Bhagavad Gita*, II: 70, 16.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, II, 59, 14-15.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, II, 64, 15.

¹⁸³ Reference is made here to the argument presented in the previous chapter where the distinction is made between ‘desire’ and ‘ideals’. See *supra*, 53. It is when the energy of the desire degenerates into an ideal that illusions are formed.

¹⁸⁴ Stoic philosophy warns us that if the jar is too full, the hand of the child will try to reach out for too many sweets with the risk of having the hand stuck in the jar. See Epictetus, *The Discourses as reported by Arrian*, the

from desire is important because ‘all is clouded in desire’,¹⁸⁵ and desire turns reality into an illusion. This resonates intimately with Weil’s philosophy whereby she claims that:

We cannot prevent ourselves from desiring; we are desire; but if we totally put it forward in our plea [to God], we can use this desire that nails us to the imaginary, to time, to egoism, as a lever to strip us away from the imaginary and leads us to reality, from time to eternity, and freed from the prison of the self.¹⁸⁶

The discourse on pleasure needs to be accompanied by the discourse on pain. Being detached from pleasure is challenging for a human being, but being overwhelmed by pain, be it physical or existentialist can prove to be even more daunting. Weil experienced both physical and existentialist pain. She uses two terms in her writings, *douleur* which is exclusively physical, and *malheur* which is an existentialist pain that marks the soul. The physical aspect was evident in her migraines, a condition that she had to endure throughout most of her life, and that in spite of various medical interventions, kept on plaguing her till the very end. Her endurance emerges strongly in her second mystical experience in the Holy Week of 1938. Weil persisted in attending the liturgical ceremonies on a regular basis despite her invasive headaches. Her diligent attention enabled her to transcend the physical pain she was going through, and this led her to a profound moment. Detachment within Weilian spirituality advocates embracing the pain, be it *douleur* or *malheur*, recognising its existence and its effects, and acknowledging it as part of the human condition. Like Marcus Aurelius, Weil believed that ‘he that hath chosen before all else his own intelligence and good ‘genius’, and

Manual, and Fragments, Volume II, trans., W. A. Oldfather (London: Loeb Classical Library, 1952), 71. This approach can be summarised by a maxim used by Epictetus himself:

‘πὼς ἐνδέχεται ἀπαρ᾽ ἀποδίστως ὀρέξει χρῆσθαι καὶ ἐκκλίσσει’ (III 14, 10), *ibid.*, 99. ‘[It is essential] to employ desire and aversion without hindrance’, that is the Stoic disciple needs to be selective in what he classifies as objects of desire so that the quest becomes meaningful and successful.

¹⁸⁵ *Bhagavad Gita*, III : 38, 20.

¹⁸⁶ ‘Nous ne pouvons pas nous empêcher de désirer; nous sommes désir; mais ce désir qui nous cloue à l’imaginaire, au temps, à l’égoïsme, nous pouvons, si nous le faisons passer tout entier dans cette demande, en faire un levier qui nous arrache de l’imaginaire dans le réel, du temps dans l’éternité, et hors de la prison de moi.’ Weil, *Attente*, 216-7.

to be a devotee of its supreme worth, does not strike a tragic attitude or whine'.¹⁸⁷ This does not imply that Weil is promoting resignation – a common misinterpretation of this spirituality. By embracing the pain, Weil experiences transformation, and it is through this transformation that wholeness can be attained.

3.5.5 Sexual intimacy

Another issue that surfaces in Weilian writings, in the light of the discourse on physicality, is the notion of complementarity in relationships. In her writings as a student, Weil describes the sexual union as the attainment of the double aspect of love. On one hand, she claims that, through sex, the two physically become one. On the other hand, she also states that the male unites through insertion. An important analogy sheds further light on the latter aspect – the analogy of breastfeeding. The eater, that is the baby, becomes one with the mother, through the substance, the milk, by allowing the breast to be inserted into his mouth.¹⁸⁸ Likewise, the woman becomes one with the man through the semen, ejaculated in penetration.¹⁸⁹ The sexual act is paradoxically an assertion of the male action over the female receptivity, and simultaneously the union of two bodies. There is the desire of union, reflected in the first aspect, but there is also the desire of becoming part of the other, through penetration. It is as a result of this paradox that beauty is achieved, or at least, sought after. This perspective resonates with the theological belief that pervaded Catholic theology prior to Vatican Council

¹⁸⁷ ὁ γὰρ τὸν ἑαυτοῦ νοῦν καὶ δαίμονα καὶ τὰ ὄργανα τῆς τούτου ἀρετῆς προελόμενος, τραγωδίαν οὐ π οιεῖ, οὐ στενάζει... Marcus Aurelius, *The Communings* III: 7, 57. Another possible influence could be Franciscan spirituality, particularly considering the exposure she had to it in Assisi just prior to her experience in Solesmes. Weil read the *Fioretti*, which also stress the importance of the endurance of pain, perceiving it as a key vehicle to salvation. The writings state that 'since our blessed Father Francis, along with his companions, had been called by God to bear the Cross, he and the pioneers of his Order seemed, as indeed they were, men truly crucified.' *The Little Flowers*, 25. This reaches its climax with the anecdote about Perfect Happiness, where allegedly Francis of Assisi exhorts one of his friars, Brother Leo, that in the endurance of pain, particularly unjust pain, lies perfect happiness. Ibid., 31-3. The merging of Stoic philosophy with Christian thought was of significant validity to Simone Weil.

¹⁸⁸ Simone Weil, "Sur Freud," in *Philosophiques*, 278-9.

¹⁸⁹ Refer to the female domination in the sexual act. See *infra*, 198.

II,¹⁹⁰ and which up to a certain extent still has echoes in certain schools of contemporary theology, particularly those movements that have followed in the footsteps of Balthasar's theo-drama, that is, that the role of a woman is for 'man's complement and completeness',¹⁹¹ and that this is achieved in its totality in the sexual act.

Simone Weil's approach towards complementarity was modified after her mystical experiences. Weil started challenging the belief that two human beings attain completion through the relationship that ensues between them, which reaches its crowning moment in the sexual act. She questioned whether completion could be found in, and through, another human being. Although her *point de départ* was the speech of Aristophanes in the *Symposium*,¹⁹² in her paradigm shift, Weil showed that it is erroneous to seek completion in another human being. Undoubtedly, in this thought process, Weil was not exclusively influenced by her readings on Plato, but more eminently by her lecturer at the Lycée Henri IV, Emile Chartier, better known as Alain.¹⁹³ Alain was not married, and only got married at an old age, many years after he had lectured Simone Weil. His views on intimate relationships were influenced by his admiration for the Stoic philosophers. Alain believed that:

¹⁹⁰ A relevant theologian that discusses the notion of gender complementarity in Church history is James V. Brownson. He presents complementarity not as a combination of two becoming one, as though there were two pieces fitting into each other to form a jigsaw puzzle, but as the enriching that occurs in the encounter and the relationship of the two. See James V. Brownson, *Bible Gender Sexuality* (Michigan/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2013), 16-38. In addition to this, the Weilian interpretation gains an extra layer whereby one can conclude that the enrichment serves as a bridge that leads the two to a deepening of their relationship with God. The complementarity is a means, and not an end within itself.

¹⁹¹ Beattie, *New Catholic Feminism*, 113.

¹⁹² In the speech, Aristophanes speculates that originally human beings were double their size, with each person having two faces and a double set of limbs. On revolting against the gods, the human beings were punished by Zeus who split them into two, thus not allowing them to be whole. Each human being is searching for the other half that will lead to completion. See Plato, *Symposium and Phaedrus*, 189d-193d, trans., Tom Griffith (London: Everyman Publishers, 1986), 32-9.

¹⁹³ It is difficult to exclude that Alain's teachings led to a paradigm shift in Weil's thinking on the sexual act, since the essay referred to was actually written after Alain taught Simone. One can speculate that the diverse influences, including Alain's lectures and her reflections on Plato, as well as her mystical experiences, must have led to a development in the way Weil expressed herself on sex.

The desire of the flesh...can easily arouse a sort of passion; this passion needs to be understood carefully; although this passion is certainly not love...The most serious error would be to denote the animal instincts within us as being love.¹⁹⁴

This attitude is also reflected in Weil's own life and her constant refusal to get married. She was not averse towards marriage. She had a remarkable fondness towards couples, and had a significant amount of couples that she established a friendship with, most notably the Coulombs who she befriended during her last teaching post in Bourges. Weil, though, never considered marriage as an option for her. This decision was taken at a young age, before she entered her teenage years. In fact, Pétrement speaks of a role-play game in which Simone and her girlfriends organised a confraternity of the Knights of the Round Table. Simone refused categorically to impersonate any of the married knights.¹⁹⁵ The relationship that Simone Weil had with the other students, particularly male students, during her college and University years is revealing and demonstrates the complexity of the situation. Simone Pétrement, who knew Weil on a personal level, particularly in her student years, claimed that she had strong feelings towards Pierre Letellier, a fellow student at the Lycée Henri IV. Years later, she confessed to Pétrement that she did love one of the students in their course, but she did not specify the name of the person.¹⁹⁶ According to Pétrement, Simone considered a one-to-one love story to be a vocation, and she felt that she should only embrace it if it were her calling to do so. The same biographer also admits that Weil could not accept the likelihood of

¹⁹⁴ 'Le désir de chair...peut bien donner lieu à une sorte de passion; c'est à voir; mais cette passion n'est pas l'amour...L'erreur la plus grave serait de vouloir expliquer l'amour par les désirs animaux.' Alain, *Éléments de Philosophie* (Paris: Gallimard, 1990), 269. Alain seems to distinguish the difference between the carnal desire and love, in much the same way as the Stoics and Plato did. Although Alain is not stating that the sexual or the carnal is wrong or immoral, he is certainly implying that it could be deceptive. Like the Rationalist school in philosophy, Alain is warning his students about how unreliable the sensory and the carnal is, for what seems to be, in this case, the pleasure provided by the flesh in bodily contact, is not always what is. In this case the deception lies in the erroneous belief that the pleasure is equivalent to love. Simone was a motivated student and an avid follower of Alain's, and developed his philosophy even further, as can be seen from what has already been discussed above.

¹⁹⁵ Pétrement, *Vie*, 36.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 82.

anyone being attracted to her.¹⁹⁷ An evident tension can be noted. On one hand, Weil praised the beauty of the sexual act, almost glorifying it and desiring the possibility of being intimate with someone else. On the other hand, this desire was numbed by ideals that were very strong, and clouded the possibility of the expression of intimacy, particularly sexual intimacy in her life. This was because she held the belief that love is a high virtue, a gift that has to be treated carefully and with a sense of awe, as well as due to the fact that she had an uncomfortable rapport with her own body. Weil prevented any situation that could lead to physical contact with a man, possibly because she was not at ease with her own body. It seems that Simone Weil felt more comfortable and inclined to build friendships with the opposite sex, rather than intimate relationships. Some of these friendships lasted for a number of years. In these friendships her boundaries were extremely clear, showing her male friends that her intention was not romantic or sexual.

An interesting episode that sheds light on Weil's relationships with males was an evening in Saint-Etienne whereby after a conference, she spent the night with her male politically-engaged comrades. After a long night of singing, sharing jokes, smoking and reading poetry – demonstrating that Simone was not so morose or rigid around men – the comrades went to bed. Weil shared a room with a female friend, and the men slept on the floor. She needed to wake up early to catch the first train to Lyons, and had to walk out cautiously amongst all the men sleeping on the floor. Her male friend, probably Duperray, who was lying down but awake, caught her from the leg to prevent her from leaving. His gesture was undoubtedly friendly, and there was no reason to suspect any intention of a sexual advance in his action. Weil's spontaneous reaction was to hit him in the neck with the back of her hand.¹⁹⁸

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 51.

¹⁹⁸ Hourdin, Weil, 107-8.

There are several interpretations to this episode. In subsequent years, Duperray asked Simone Weil several times why she had behaved in such a brutal manner, and her answers were constantly evasive. When Duperray eventually suggested that her impulse might have been connected to her migraines, Weil declared that the pain did cause her to strike violently.¹⁹⁹ Her biographers, however, do not give any indication that Weil might have had a migraine, other than the fact that she had barely slept that night. Another interpretation could be Weil's discomfort with physical contact, particularly with males. Although Weil did not mind physical contact in sports, the contact was contextualised, desexualised, and above all, with females. She had less problems establishing physical contact with women, even though she had less lasting friendships with them. On one occasion, when she went to the cinema with her friend Albertine Thévenon, Weil wrapped her arm around her shoulders.²⁰⁰ It seems that in her relationships with males, Weil always wanted to remain at par with them: hence her numerous male friends and her masculinised attire. Nonetheless, she clearly never wanted to submit herself relationally to a man. As long as there was no threat of submission in the friendship, and that there was no indication of blurred boundaries, Weil felt that she could establish a strong and deep relationship with men – suffice to mention her friendship with Joë Bousquet or with Gustave Thibon. As soon as there was any *faux pas*, or anything that she perceived as being so, Weil would raise her defences. The episodes described might shed light on the fact that there may have been an element of fear or of repression, but this interpretation cannot be conclusive since the literature is limited and, therefore, any insights about Weil's personal feelings towards intimacy and sexuality would be mere speculation.

¹⁹⁹ Pétrement, *Vie*, 83.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 285.

The aim of this section of this is not to present a psychoanalytical explanation of the mystic's life, but to examine her views from a spiritual perspective, and to discern what relevance these could have, even though they might be flawed from a psychological understanding.²⁰¹ The most illuminating insight is that human person is subject to original sin, and hence, to the human condition, and so will never be capable of providing the sense of completion. Human beings believe the illusion that through physical contact this completion can occur, but completion can only happen when there is no schism between the subject and the object, that is, when the subject is object, and when the object is subject. In human relationships, the encounter is distinctly between the subject and object, that is the object of the desire of the subject. The human being can never integrate the subject with the object since the human being is always either a subject or an object of an action. It is only the Divine who transcends the distinction between subject and object, and so, completion can take place uniquely when the Divine integrates with the human being.²⁰² The sense of beauty that Weil perceives in the sexual act is hence transferred to the Absolute. Weil is not stating that the body is evil, or that sexual contact is immoral. *Au contraire*, in a truly loving context, the sexual act could be a bridge leading to the Divine, albeit a bridge that Weil never seems to have made use of. This, however, demonstrates a development from her initial paradigm on sexual union: Weil opted for the stance of gazing, rather than eating,²⁰³ lest by becoming one with the male other, she could be overwhelmed to the extent of losing her focus on her journey to the Absolute. Being a true disciple of Plato, she maintains that the body cannot provide the same fruit that the spirit can. The Divine is different from the human, and it is only through recourse to the

²⁰¹ It is important to be aware that from a spiritual perspective important insights can still be concluded even though psychologically the motivation of the person may be seen as damaged or unhealthy. This is because the spiritual theologian examines the particular phenomenon from the relationship that ensues between the human being and the Divine. Although the former is flawed, and carries with him the baggage of his personal history, the Divine is not affected by any external factors, and operates in spite of, and through, the baggage of the individual. By using this methodology, the spiritual theologian, nevertheless aware of the psychological component that characterises the spirituality of the individual, can still deduce valid and healthy insights that are of significance to his study.

²⁰² Weil, "Intuitions pré-chrétiennes," 183-5.

²⁰³ Yourgrau, *Simone Weil*, 107.

Divine that the limitations of the human – the physical – can be transcended, and can reach their fulfilment and completion.

3.5.6 The cult of the female body

Simone Weil was fascinated and had a deep respect towards pre-Judeo-Christian traditions, namely the mysteries at Eleusis, or ‘heretical’ movements within the Christian development such as Gnosticism or Druidism. This is a fascination that emerges strongly in the writings of a significant number of feminine theologians, who refer to the same movements and civilisations that Weil speaks highly of because of the matriarchal structure that they embraced and the return that they made to the cult of Mother Earth.²⁰⁴ These movements tended to recognise the beauty of the female body and to celebrate it as part of their cult. It was a reality that was not hidden, but fully expressed. Although Weil does not emphasise the ‘feminist’ aspect that clearly seems to unite most of these movements, it is relevant that she felt spiritually closer to these feminine-endorsing cults than to the more male regulated Catholic hierarchy, giving the impression that she wanted to celebrate her femininity but was not capable of stating it clearly, and instead concealed this deep-rooted instinct behind her intellectual interest. She never connects the cults with femalehood, and in her analysis of these spiritualities she conveniently ignores the evident feminine aspect in them.

²⁰⁴ Sheila Collins, “Reflections on the Meaning of Herstory,” in *Womanspirit Rising*, 71.

3.5.7 Final remarks

The Bhagavad Gita states that ‘when one sees Eternity in things that pass away and Infinity in finite things, then one has pure knowledge. But if one merely sees the diversity of things, with their divisions and limitations, then one has impure knowledge.’²⁰⁵ This paradox, where the infinite, that is the spiritual, and the finite, the physical, are no longer perceived as being in opposition to each other sums up this section. On reading Weil’s writings, it can be erroneously concluded that her relationship with the body was a destructive one. This bold statement is challenged when juxtaposed against all the factors that characterised the period in which Weil lived. Furthermore, Weil recognised that the body is a vehicle of growth and comprehended that the senses are not immoral since they serve as a channel for the person to capture and appreciate the beauty of the natural world. She was also aware that they are limited and possibly misleading, and it is important for the human being in his perception of the world to keep this limitation in mind, provided that one wants to approximate a more holistic and complete revelation of the truth. In her process of detachment, Weil acknowledged the role of the body, not without warning the reader to be cautious, for often the beauty of the human body can dazzle and prevent one from focusing on the Absolute.

3.6. Detachment from politics

Simone Weil is a figure who was immersed in politics to the extent that she can be defined as being an activist. At a specific point in her life, however, it became clear that Weil became disillusioned by the political scenario, and detached herself from it. Although this is true, and the demarcation line is possibly her experience in the Spanish Civil War, one cannot be reductionist. Weil did not terminate her political activism abruptly in 1936. Her ‘participation’ in the Spanish Civil War accelerated and brought to completion a process that

²⁰⁵ *Bhagavad Gita*, XVIII: 20-21, 81.

had much deeper and older roots. In reality, Weil always seemed to display a degree of detachment from politics, particularly rejecting ideologies, even at the height of her activism. Since the beginning of her involvement in politics, Weil was engaged in a process where she had to dissociate herself from her ideals. It is also equally limiting to claim that Weil became disinterested in politics after her mystical experiences. Her political activism did not ebb but deepened, probably as a result of her spiritual maturity, even though it ceased to be as explicit as it was before. The culmination of her integration of the political with the spiritual realm is particularly evident in her last piece of public writing, entitled today as *L'Enracinement* (The Need for Roots). This section will attempt to consider all these dynamics, and discuss them further, in the analysis of Simone Weil's detachment from the political sphere.

3.6.1 The Spanish Civil War

The first question that needs to be raised is to what extent was the experience of the Spanish Civil War the real reason in determining Weil's shift in attitude towards politics. Nevin contests this premise by remarking that her participation in the Spanish Civil War was driven by a desire for sacrifice²⁰⁶ and by an attraction towards nothingness and self-annihilation. Following this hypothesis, Weil was already totally detached from the political world by 1936 to the point that her decision to volunteer in the Civil War was less motivated by her political beliefs and more determined by her *morbido*. Although this theory is worth discussing, it nevertheless portrays Weil as an egocentric person whose sole aim in going to Spain was self-destruction. Her writings and her activism prior to Spain, although revealing a degree of detachment, portray a woman whose political perspective, albeit challenged, was still present and influential. Weil's prime motivating factor in her decision to fight in Spain

²⁰⁶ Nevin, *Portrait of a Self-Exiled Jew*, 104-5.

was not egocentric but was rather driven by constructs that are essentially political in nature, particularly her interest in left-wing politics.

The Spanish Civil War was nevertheless a watershed in Weil's life, and it is important to understand the factors in this experience that impacted on the spiritual development of Simone Weil. She ventured to war with a romantic attitude. Like the soldiers in the Great War described in Wilfred Owen's poem *The Send-Off*, Weil was not aware of the complexities of the dynamics of the world of war. In spite of being a declared pacifist, she felt compelled to fight in the name of justice and her belief in the socialist cause. This romanticism was abruptly shattered when in Spain she experienced the murkiness and brutality of the reality of the situation. The atrocities she witnessed and heard about made her aware of the harm and damage that politics can incur, and made her comprehend that the world is not as dualistic as she initially perceived it to be. She realised that the peasants did not only hate the wealthy, but frequently displayed sentiments of hatred towards the poor as well,²⁰⁷ treating them as scapegoats and shifting onto them the burden of being the underdogs. Her attitude towards the proletariat was also challenged, realising that the working class, can, and does commit the same crimes as anyone else when assigned any form of power. The anarchists and the socialists behaved in the same brutal manner as the traditional elite. Spain became a battleground for ideologies competing against each other, ideologies that when translated in practice cared less for the values that they proclaimed and more for the acquisition of power. This was the case of the Republicans, the left-wing faction of the Civil War, who were so divided in their political philosophy and in its implementation, that a rift was created between them, with the result of tearing them apart. Furthermore, in the name of ideology, massacres occurred on both sides. By the end of the war three-quarters of a

²⁰⁷ Ibid., 101.

million people had lost their lives.²⁰⁸ The killing of 1600 civilians in Guernica, portrayed dramatically by Picasso, was possibly the most horrific ravage.

The next step after having demonstrated that the Spanish Civil War challenged Weil's attitude towards politics is to examine the political journey of Simone Weil, with the intention of establishing how the process of detachment developed. The aim will be twofold. It will show how these political beliefs were questioned well before her experience in the Spanish Civil War, and how the process was intensified afterwards. It will also examine how the process of detachment from the political enabled Weil to delve deeper into the spiritual realm with the result that it made her more mature 'politically' than before. The *modus operandi* that will be used is a brief and selective examination on Weil's views on the principal ideologies that were strongly present in Europe in the 1930s.

3.6.2 Fascism and Nazism

The 1930s witnessed the rise of Mussolini and Fascism in Italy, and the upsurge of Nazism under Hitler in Germany. One of the main traits defining Fascism and Nazism was irrationalism: the rejection of objective truth and an embracing of a politics that focused on the stirring of emotions.²⁰⁹ Both leaders revelled in megalomaniac speeches that triggered strong emotional reactions in the crowds listening to them, and in the fabrication of myths that portrayed a sense of racial superiority and a staunch sense of Nationalism. This attitude is in stark contrast with Weil's notion of hiddenness and the quest for Platonic truth. The development in Weil's spirituality, especially after her mystical experiences, contrasted acutely with the political propaganda that Fascism and Nazism were promoting. After 1936,

²⁰⁸ Jack Watson, *Success in 20th Century World Affairs* (London: John Murray Publishers Ltd., 1984), 108.

²⁰⁹ Leon P. Baradat, *Political Ideologies* (Boston et al: Longman, 2012), 246-7.

Weil consolidated a spirituality that had earlier roots, and that propelled her to detach herself from the right-wing political dynamics that were strongly present in Europe.

3.6.3 Socialism

Weil's relationship with left-wing politics is less clear. Simone Weil could be perceived as leaning evidently towards the Left since she was actively involved in the socialist cause and was an engaged reader of Marxist texts. By the age of eight, Weil was already able to identify herself as a Bolshevik, and at the age of ten, she marched alongside the workers as they protested in favour of better conditions,²¹⁰ a trend that she kept throughout her adult life. The climax of her dedication to the cause of the workers was her resignation from her teaching post in order to work incognito in the factories so as to have direct experience of the conditions of workers.²¹¹ This can be described as being the most radically 'socialist' decision that she made in her life. Even though, however, her dedication to the working class persisted as an adult, Weil never became a registered member of the Communist Party.²¹² Like Rousseau, she was against political parties,²¹³ embracing an attitude that was not too dissimilar to the one of Doctor Stockmann in *An Enemy of the People*²¹⁴ who claimed that all politicians are like hungry wolves, intent on devouring others.²¹⁵ She was even ready to defy Trotsky, when he was hosted in her parents' apartment, because she confronted him about how a system that claimed to be safeguarding the interests of the oppressed had transformed

²¹⁰ Plessix Gray, *Simone Weil*, 9.

²¹¹ Cabaud, *Fellowship*, 105-7

²¹² Nevin, *Portrait of a Self-Exiled Jew*, 8.

²¹³ Pétrement, *Vie*, 658-9.

²¹⁴ A political drama penned by the Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen in 1882 about the hypocrisy of the political system and how people endorse political decisions without any reflection.

²¹⁵ Henrik Ibsen, *An Enemy of the People* (New York: Dover Publications, 1999), 82. Weil's distrust of the political parties led her to sympathise with the growing movement of the Revolutionary Syndicalism. This sympathy sheds light on Simone Weil's emphasis on the relational. This movement believed that the hope of the workers do not reside in the political parties but in the trade unions. By collaborating together in the unions the workers could act in a direct way to improve their working conditions and establish a better social order. Simone believed that oppression and exploitation, manifested in the pain of the working class, can only be fought against through solidarity, through the oneness of a group of people who are working together to attain one objective.

itself into a system of oppression.²¹⁶ It can be argued that her disagreement with Trotsky emerged from the fact that she felt that Russia was betraying the Socialist ideal. Her deeds appear more socialist than the actions of the leading political figures in the left-wing parties of her time. Weil's political detachment seemed to imply a detachment from left-wing party politics rather than from Socialism itself. The point in question was the manner the Socialist principles were 'translated' in practice, particularly in Russia. Her issues with the application of Socialism seemed to have been present well before the Spanish Civil War, although they intensified in the aftermath.

Socialism promotes 'the social as against the selfish'.²¹⁷ The emphasis, according to Socialist beliefs, should never be the welfare of the individual, but the common good of society. Nobody should be privileged or advantaged in a way that he could grow and develop at the expense of others, particularly the weak and the poor. This corresponds with Weil's spirituality: in her years as a teacher, she was ready to spend less money on food to be able to help the underprivileged. As soon as she settled in her first teaching post at Le Puy, Weil decided that she would only use 600 francs out of her salary, this being the amount of money that workers used to receive during a strike.²¹⁸ Weil embraced wholeheartedly the principle of the common good but she had an issue with ignoring the welfare of the individual. She could not fathom a scenario where the individuality of the person would disappear to make a system function.²¹⁹ She could never tolerate the view that the existence and welfare of the individual depended upon how effectively the social system worked. Weil unwaveringly

²¹⁶ Coles, *Modern Pilgrimage*, 89.

²¹⁷ Bernard Crick, *Socialism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 29.

²¹⁸ Pétrement, *Vie*, 138.

²¹⁹ Simone Weil, "Le problème de l'U.R.S.S.," in *Engagement Syndical*, 310.

opposed the practice of basing the efficiency of the social system on the strength of the political party, attacking this practice adamantly as far back as in 1933.²²⁰

The system in the Communist model is clear: the individual is dependent on society, which in turn, is dependent on the governing party. This could be nonetheless criticised as being a deflection of the Marxist model. If Russia had to be taken as an example, it was clear, according to Weil, that the most remarkable difference between Marx on one hand and Lenin and Stalin on the other, was that the former gave importance to the notion of a movement, whereas the latter were interested in and advocated party politics above all.²²¹ Weil was influenced by Marx who believed that ‘political power...is merely the organized power of one class for oppressing another.’²²² Anyone who does not adhere faithfully to the political power is ousted, or often, even annihilated. To Weil, the focus should be on the dignity of the individual and not on party politics or other needs that sustain the success of the party such as effective production.²²³ In the same manner as the Catholic Church prior to Vatican Council II claimed that there is no salvation outside the Church, similarly Stalin insisted that the only real and valid activity of the workers could only be done from within the party.²²⁴ Like the Catholic Church, Lenin and Stalin claimed that truth could only be found within the political institution, a maxim that Weil rejected whether claimed by a religious or by a political entity.²²⁵ History has shown clearly the fate of those who dared to contradict this line of thought under the Stalinist regime.

²²⁰ Simone Weil, “Faisons le point,” in *Engagement Syndical*, 220.

²²¹ Crick, *Socialism*, 61.

²²² Karl Marx, *The Communist Manifesto*, trans., Samuel Moore (London: Penguin, 1985), 105.

²²³ Blum and Seidler, *Truer Liberty*, 175.

²²⁴ Crick, *Socialism*, 62.

²²⁵ Blum and Seidler, *Truer Liberty*, 233.

It follows that Weilian spirituality, and the values that she endorsed, were more in equivalence with Marxist thought than they were with the practice of Communism in the political arena. Weil felt more of an affinity with the theory presented by Marx than with the practical exigencies that the Communist leaders faced (and took advantage of) in making Marxism a reality. Marxist theory, however, was also scrutinised by Weil, who, in the process of detachment, refused to embrace any ideology or school of thought as an absolute. Weil's strongest criticism of Marxism is that in spite of the fact that it condemned all forms of ideology, it resulted in becoming an ideology itself.²²⁶ Weil recommended a form of purification, that is a return to its roots, as well as a critical analysis, of Marxist principles. The concept of alienation in Marxist theory can be used an example to illustrate the dynamic further. In the subject-object dyad, where the worker is the subject, Marx feared and condemned the object, that is the other, whether it is God, the employer or the machine, or any other factor that overwhelms the individual, leading to alienation and loss of self.²²⁷ Throughout history, the intense exploitation of the workers led Marx to encourage and demand that the workers should overhaul this dyad in such a way that they are not threatened or ill-treated in the dynamic. Weil agreed with this line of thought in Marxist philosophy, particularly in the dynamic that ensued between the worker and the machine. Weil, however, 'purifies' the argument by showing that it cannot be taken as an absolute, and that the reverse is true in the relationship with the Divine. In Marxism, the dynamic is reversed, placing Man as the measure of himself without any reference to the Divine, making the former supreme.²²⁸ In the spirituality of Simone Weil, the individual is absorbed by the Transcendent, whether through the experience of violent irruption or by nullifying oneself, so that the space can be returned to God. This process was not a form of alienation according to Weil, but on the

²²⁶ Simone Weil, "Le Marxisme est la plus haute expression spirituelle" in *Œuvres Complètes: Écrits historiques et politiques, Volume II : L'expérience ouvrière et l'adieu à la révolution* (Paris : Gallimard, 1991), 120.

²²⁷ David McLellan, *The Thought of Karl Marx: An Introduction* (Macmillan: Edinburgh, 1971), 111.

²²⁸ Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 251-2.

contrary, it was the detachment necessary to enable the person to interact with the only reality that matters, the Reality of the Other.

Another perspective that creates tension between Marxist philosophy and Weilian spirituality is the insistence that Marxism places on the economic revolution, a revolution which according to Marx was due to come. Marx can be criticised that by persisting upon the economic revolution, he was giving Marxism an eschatological dimension.²²⁹ The ideal that he was putting forward was not rooted in the here-and-now but shifted to a new chapter in the (near) future. It seems that the Christian heaven was replaced by the Marxist utopia. Weil portrays this revolution as an illusion, thus not only criticising Marxism, but, furthermore, challenging the dream that the generation of her time was depending upon. The discontentment and sense of futility that was being felt across post-war Europe needed hope for its survival, and this hope was manifested in the support given particularly by the young to the political parties who offered to challenge the existing system which had failed the people. The promises for a better future proposed by these radical parties were being felt all over Europe, including France, where the extreme Left, steering the factory strikes in the urban areas, became an anchorage of hope to a dissatisfied France.²³⁰ Unlike Marxism, Weil's political methodology does not consist in journeying towards a dream, but in being a reflective individual whose thoughts lead to concrete action.²³¹ Weil did not promote the consolation that the working class would one day be the powerful class in society since having justice on one's side was no guarantee of a successful future.²³² Besides, she felt that this illusion did not serve to acknowledge the reality of their lack of power. She believed in

²²⁹ Simone Weil, *Œuvres complètes: Écrits de New York et de Londres, Volume II- L'Enracinement : Prélude à une Déclaration des Devoirs envers l'Être Humain* (Paris: Gallimard, 2013), 134.

²³⁰ Plessix Gray, *Simone Weil*, 54.

²³¹ Huguette Bouchardeau, "Désarroi de notre temps, une leçon de lucidité et de courage," in *Simone Weil*, ed Emmanuel Gabellieri and François L'Yvonnet (Paris: L'Herne, 2014), 235.

²³² Simone Weil, "Réflexions sur la Barbarie," in *Œuvres complètes: Écrits historiques et politiques, Volume III: Vers la Guerre* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), 223.

rooting for the working class, not in offering them a dream, as much as she did not want to focus on a promised heaven, but preferred to work to improve this world in a concrete manner. To Weil, the workers' cause was a moral issue that needs immediate action, unlike Marx who perceived it as a historical one which can only be resolved through revolution when the right conditions for this to occur will arise,²³³ and who totally shunned the moral and spiritual dimensions. There is a remarkable and important difference between the Marxist insistence on economic determinism, and the Weilian perseverance on addressing the force of power, accruing from the tension between the oppressors and the oppressed. The spirituality and political philosophy of concrete actions underlies all of Weil's work,²³⁴ and sets her apart from Marxist theory, even before her participation in the Spanish Civil War. This is evident in an article penned in 1933 where she criticised Trotsky for instilling a false hope in the people that capitalism was on its final stages.²³⁵

3.6.4 Nationalism

Weil's greatest fear in political ideology seems to have been Nationalism. In fact, Weil's most acute problem with Stalinism is that it was rooted, in spite of its socialist claims, in Nationalism, an ideology that she opposed strongly. In 1933, three years before the Spanish Civil War, Weil had already remarked about this aspect in Stalinism, writing about the perils of such a dynamic, and how this had become a source of oppression to the proletariat itself.²³⁶ Stalin wanted to consolidate the socialist 'ideal' in Russia before embarking upon defeating

²³³ Blum and Seidler, *Truer Liberty*, 74.

²³⁴ Although Weil was always a sharp critic of Marxism, there have been points in her life where a certain belief in the Marxist Revolution does arise. In 1932, while delivering a lecture, she claims that the Revolution is the only solution to allow the worker to regain power over the conditions of work, without disturbing the productivity of work introduced by the capitalist. See Simone Weil, "Le Capital et l'Ouvrier," in *Engagement Syndical*, 94. However, even in this lecture, it is already evident that Weil was diffident about, and departing from, pure Marxist thought.

²³⁵ Simone Weil, "Réflexions concernant la Technocratie, le National-Socialisme, l'U.R.S.S. et quelques autres points," in *Engagement Syndical*, 214.

²³⁶ Weil, "Faisons le point," 221.

Capitalism in other countries. In his vision, this could only be done through Russian Nationalism.²³⁷ The issue with Nationalism was that it created an illusion, giving a false perception to the people of the nation that they were superior to other nations. This illusion was instilled into the collective ego. Nationalism is frequently ‘justified’ on the basis that it ensures the welfare of the particular nation, ignoring the needs of the rest of humanity.²³⁸ It imbues the country with aggression that, according to Weil, becomes part of the temperament of the nation.²³⁹ This ‘justification’ needs to be challenged because it resulted in numerous horrific episodes in history. Suffice to notice how it led to the Second World War and the heinous crimes committed in the name of Nationalism. The craving for vengeance exhibited in the clauses of the Treaty of Versailles (1919) humiliating Germany, triggered off a reaction in that country that clutched with all its might to the equally nationalistic promises of the Führer. In part, this not only responded to the perceived injustices suffered at Versailles, but also reaffirmed Germany’s historical right to the *lebensraum*, echoing earlier themes of pan-Germanism in Wilhelmine Germany. The logic apparently justifying this extreme form of Nationalism purports that if a nation is superior, or given more focus than the rest of humanity, any form of behaviour that sustains this illusion will not only be excused, but furthermore encouraged. Any minority population that is perceived to interfere with or differs from the national image projected by these ‘nationalists’ is considered a threat, and is often dealt with by excluding it, leading to racism and xenophobia. Through Nationalism, the State absorbs other smaller units too, such as the province, promoting a culture of centralisation. Weil demonstrates that through this *modus operandi*, Nationalism shows that it does not have a soul, since everything and everyone is focused on the State, and the State steers everyone and everything, thus confirming its illusion of superiority, and, consequently, cannot be

²³⁷ Baradat, *Ideologies*, 203.

²³⁸ Ibid., 52-3.

²³⁹ Simone Weil, “Quelques réflexions sur les origines de l’hitlérisme,” in *La Guerre*, 215.

loved.²⁴⁰ Weil also criticised Nationalism because it is also less interested in seeking the truth since it insists that the citizen should swear total allegiance to the State, superseding any form of moral accountability.²⁴¹ ‘Truth’ is presented as being objective, and as being in the possession of the State. She warns that Nationalism frequently leads to totalitarianism, and that unless society is purified from the dynamics of Nationalism, particularly the trait of grandiosity, humanity could give rise to other political leaders who would behave in the same manner as Hitler did.²⁴² Time has proven how prophetic she was.

Simone’s approach to Nationalism can be gleaned in her determined opposition to join the rest of the Weil family when they decided to move south, following the Nazi occupation of Paris. Her decision seems to also be strongly rooted in her values of detachment and the love for others. She was prepared not to follow her family, even though her parents went through considerable pains to convince her to join them, possibly knowing that she might never see them again. In the same period of her life, she decided to start sleeping on the floor – a decision that she kept on practising till her death – in solidarity with the sufferings of the French in the war.²⁴³ The ascetic practice of detachment of Weil was intimately linked with the love she had for her country. This clearly shows that rather than embracing the skewed expressions of Nationalism, she preferred to focus on the love for her country, but this was not rooted in the knowledge that they were Frenchmen, but rather that they were human beings, living in her same shared space. She was part of a community of sufferers and she wanted to empathise with their pain. She did not embrace the pre-war euphoria and nationalistic fervour of the French in the days and weeks prior to the war with Germany. In the later 1930s the country was ecstatic with the illusion of potential victories and

²⁴⁰ Weil, *L’Enracinement*, 204.

²⁴¹ Baradat, *Ideologies*, 62.

²⁴² Weil, *L’Enracinement*, 293.

²⁴³ Plessix Gray, *Simone Weil*, 152.

celebrations, evident in the gaiety of the Parisian nightclubs, which were thriving more than ever before.²⁴⁴ Her pacifism contrasts drastically with this jubilant mode, which might initially seem to be rooted in defeatism. Simone's *point de départ* was different. For Weil, her pacifism transcended the nationalistic agenda. Her eventual stance against Nazism was not an expression of French Nationalism, but was grounded in her commitment to solidarity to the oppressed, irrespective of their nationality. It was the relational, and her desire to be of assistance to the ones in pain, that motivated her to detach herself from her family and from her own comfort zone. In fact, she was even ready to organise a troop of parachutists to land in Czechoslovakia to help the people rebel against the Nazis. In this project, Simone was not going to be solely the organiser, but a full participant, knowing that her life would be endangered by such an action.²⁴⁵ All these episodes show that Weil's rejection of political ideologies led her to become even more politically active by reaching out to the grassroots rather than simply embracing a political philosophy.

By condemning Nationalism, Simone Weil was not advocating unresponsiveness towards one's country. Weil's patriotism and love towards France, even though critical, was evident throughout her life. The obligations towards the country were still paramount. She did not recommend in any way that the person should 'disappear from the face of the earth',²⁴⁶ but on the contrary to be rooted in a reality that transcends the close-minded attitude that Nationalism fosters. The rejection of the illusion of the superiority of one's country was not to be replaced by indifference, but by a profound sense of compassion, like when Jesus Christ wept over Jerusalem (Lk. 19: 41-44).²⁴⁷ The decision to be of service to the country should not be motivated by a drive to be ostentatious, to project an image of a country that ranks

²⁴⁴ Ibid., 139.

²⁴⁵ Ibid., 139-40.

²⁴⁶ '[S']effacer du paysage'. Joël Janiaud, "Simone Weil et le déracinement du moi," in *Lectures Politiques*, 47.

²⁴⁷ Weil, *L'Enracinement*, 250.

above the rest, but by a deep desire to heal the wounds that ail the soul of the country. Ultimately, ‘we need to love the silent, anonymous and vanished country.’²⁴⁸ Weil is proposing a form of detachment, where the person’s actions still reflect a commitment towards one’s duty for the country, but without the emotional attachments that result in forms of aggression towards any other entity that does not fall within the remit of one’s culture.

Weil was seriously preoccupied about this illusion which prevented the people from being aware of the inhuman treatment that the natives of the colonies were being subjected to by the French authorities. Weil also linked Nationalism with colonialism, a practice that was glorified amongst the European Powers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and that Weil opposed strongly. Nationalism in France was intensified by the Scramble for Africa (and in Southeast Asia) where the Great Powers were trying to conquer as much territory as possible. By acquiring more colonies, France was not only growing stronger politically and economically, but was also feeding into the popular illusion of reliving the days of grandeur of the might of the Napoleonic Empire, as well as gaining political prestige in the eyes of the other conquerors. According to Weil, this was a distorted and disturbing dynamic of violence. Weil compares it to the Marxist illusion, whereby the people are deceived into believing that their nation is strong enough to conquer the world.²⁴⁹ It is a dynamic where the human being escapes into a fantasy of being the most supreme. Colonialism also leads to de-rooting. The colony often enough is under threat of losing its own cultural roots, since the coloniser imposes his language, system of beliefs and traditions. The soul of the colonised country is stripped, and forced to wear a dress that does not fit it. Ultimately, the exploitation of other nations leads to the killing of their soul.²⁵⁰ Weil’s critique extended also to the effect of colonialism on French soil itself, present in the

²⁴⁸ ‘Il faut en aimer la patrie muette, anonyme, disparue.’ Ibid., 297.

²⁴⁹ Ibid., 235-6.

²⁵⁰ Ibid., 115.

indifference that the French had towards the suffering of the inhabitants of their colonies and of the pain that the migrants from the colonies were enduring in France. Without reducing the culpability of the individual, Weil warns that the State is also accountable for all forms of racism (including indifference). Racism is a moral crime for all: the issue of migration is not exclusively the responsibility of the individuals, but becomes the plague of the country that needs to be addressed for the country to be able to heal:

Every time an Arab or an Indochinese is insulted without being able to reply, struck without being able to retaliate, made to suffer hunger without being able to protest, killed with impunity, it is France that is being dishonoured. Unfortunately, she is dishonoured in this way every single day.²⁵¹

The concept of the Social Beast is at the root of the problem of Nationalism. A country that promotes Nationalism is endorsing the Social Beast which gnaws at the soul of society at its core, and de-spiritualises it. Weil analyses this process in depth to avoid oversimplification. According to her, there are two aspects that require attention. First of all, the enslaving relationship with the Social Beast within Nationalism is unconscious, and anyone who brings it to consciousness is frequently confronted by the myriad of illusions that serve to reinforce this enslaving relationship. Its influence is deep-rooted. It is part of Original Sin – the human being is born into it, and without the intervention of Grace, cannot escape from it. As with the Platonic image of the cave, it is only through contemplation of the infusion of Grace that the human being can realise how his nature is intrinsically rooted in the enslavement of the Social Beast. This discovery does not lead to a release, but to a further realisation of how

²⁵¹ ‘Toutes les fois qu’un Arabe ou Indochinois est insulté sans pouvoir répondre, frappé sans pouvoir rendre les coups, affamé sans pouvoir protester, tué impunément, c’est la France qui est déshonorée. Et elle est, hélas, déshonorée de cette manière tous les jours.’ Simone Weil, “Qui est coupable de menées antifránçaises?” in *La Guerre*, 129.

many more layers of illusion, comfortably created and placed by society itself, a human being needs to combat against.²⁵²

The second problematic aspect that needs to be analysed is the fact that the Social Beast often promotes what is good. Classifying what is evil as being social, and what is good as spiritual would be an erroneous dichotomy, that could result in the temptation of attempting to live outside the reality of the social. The rootedness that Weil refers to implies that the person needs to work in the context of a collective:

The rooted person is not a 'plant': he participates actively in the rooting of the collective that he belongs to and works to accomplish these 'intuitions of a future' which are not destiny but a possibility.²⁵³

The collective can operate appropriately when it becomes a source of nourishment: the difficulties arise when it oppresses and crushes the individual.²⁵⁴ This demonstrates that the collective is not an absolute evil. Following the Ignatian principle of *Tantum Quantum*, the collective could become evil depending on its performance. Weil does not promote a reductionist binary and acknowledges that the collective could serve a good purpose. Her sense of balance emerges in stating that the collective can grow through its past, and feed into its future, as long as the needs of the individual are safeguarded.²⁵⁵ The collective needs to be of service to the people, and not the other way round. Like Albert Camus,²⁵⁶ Simone Weil recognised that the angst of the human condition could only be contained through solidarity, and this cannot occur in a vacuum, but within the remit of the collective. This dynamic becomes even more complex when one remembers that society clearly chooses the good

²⁵² Janiaud, "Le déracinement du moi," 43.

²⁵³ 'L'homme enraciné n'est pas vraiment un 'homme-plante' : il participe activement à accomplir ces 'pressentiments d'avenir' qui ne sont pas un destin mais des possibilités.' Ibid.

²⁵⁴ Ibid., 46.

²⁵⁵ Weil, *L'Enracinement*, 116.

²⁵⁶ See Albert Camus, *La Peste* (France: Gallimard, 1999).

because it is in its own interest: it is not at all a spiritual endeavour. The action starts and ends at the same point. The *point de départ* of the collective is its own gratification, and its *point d'arrivée* is its own welfare. In this sense, when society chooses to do good, in spite of the action being objectively good, it is not by default a spiritual decision since it does not intend, implicitly or explicitly, to strengthen the relationship with the Transcendent.²⁵⁷ The dilemma is evident: if the social is not evil by default and, furthermore, can engage in actions that promote good, even though its intent is not spiritual, the individual who is in a relationship with God will have difficulties functioning within a society where the demarcation between what is good, evil and spiritual is often so blurred. The key that allows him to discern correctly is the spirituality of *metaxu*, which will be explained at a later stage of this work.²⁵⁸ In brief, the person needs to discern whether the good promoted by society can be transformed into a form of mediation that allows the person to reach closer to the *Logos*, or whether it is a Machiavellian act where the end justifies the means. This was the dilemma that challenged Weil throughout her process of detachment from the social and the political, and likewise, such a tension should also be present in the life of the disciple of Christ who is engaged in society.

3.6.5 Reactionary or revolutionary?

This section will examine the dynamics that led Simone Weil to embark on a process to detach from the political. The main reason was possibility Weil's realisation of, and insistence on, the need to refuse the illusion that history could be changed when people controlled nature. The duty of the political figure is not to manipulate history or society but to renounce the self and to be of service to the others, particularly the marginalised, a dynamic

²⁵⁷ Weil, "Dieu dans Platon," 87.

²⁵⁸ *Infra*, 207-15.

that Weil failed to observe in her contemporary political leaders. To a certain extent, Weil recognised a sense of powerlessness and futility in the political world,²⁵⁹ arriving to the conclusion that neither Capitalism nor Communism could emancipate the workers, or reach out for the outcasts.²⁶⁰ Many authors, including Rolland,²⁶¹ believe that this sense of futility towards the political parties extended to a sense of self. Particularly after her experience in the factories, Weil realised that she could not do anything to improve the condition of the workers. She concluded that politics is a manifestation of force and hence needs to be evaded.²⁶² This crisis, however, proved to be temporary, or rather went through a transformation, as is evidenced by her post-factory writings of a political nature, that reveal a Weil who still values the well-being of the worker, and has the ardent desire to work for justice. After the transformation, the channel for change became the supernatural: Weil realised that it is not through political ideology or through the work performed by the person, but only through Grace that socio-political development can, and should, occur.

Another factor that paved the process of detachment was the ever-growing tension experienced by Weil. On one hand, there was the need for structure²⁶³ and the hierarchy, aspects that she considered vital for the soul and for the healthy development of society. It could even be that the depiction of the bourgeois system of governance, as presented and criticised by Marx, must have fascinated and offered a sense of security for Weil since it advocated structure and order.²⁶⁴ On the other hand, there was the pull to defend and ensure the rights of the workers as well as the underprivileged, and to challenge the structure, often

²⁵⁹ In spite of the numerous texts cited to show that Weil was rejecting political ideologies, there were still moments where Weil still hoped in the possibilities that the political world offered. Such a moment can be witnessed in one of her writings dated December 1933, where Weil stated that the only way forward would be the domination of society. See Simone Weil, "Notions du socialisme scientifique," in *Engagement Syndical*, 316. Eventually, Weil rejected this stand-point.

²⁶⁰ Simone Weil, "Le Sang coule en Tunisie," in *La Guerre*, 129.

²⁶¹ Rolland, "La politique au XXe siècle," 75.

²⁶² *Ibid.*, 77.

²⁶³ This will be developed in more detail in the next chapter. See *infra*, 226-8.

²⁶⁴ Marx, *Communist Manifesto*, 84-5.

political in nature, that prevented this from occurring. Weil can be perceived as a reactionary in her love of order and structure or as a revolutionary in her crusade to promote the rights of the workers. It could also be that Weil perceived the Marxist revolution as an illusion because of a subconscious fear of change. The tension present in her thought process could be summarised by stating that like ‘the true conservative, any kind of order is preferable to the risk of anarchy’ but like ‘the true revolutionary, obsessed with the injustice and suffering of an old order, almost anything is worth trying.’²⁶⁵ Ultimately, her spirituality seems to be based on the hypothesis that she was neither, and both simultaneously. It could be that her detachment from the political scenario was due to the fact that none of the available models presented this tension that characterised her work. Weil was considered as being too orthodox in the eyes of the rebellious, and too rebellious in the eyes of the orthodox. In this tension, Weil discovered a way of being that could only materialise by detaching herself from either side. The reality seems to have been that she was neither Left nor Right: she was more attached to the hierarchy and order than the conservatives, and more devoted to the people than the socialists.²⁶⁶ In this light, it can be concluded that her renunciation of both Socialism and Capitalism²⁶⁷ was an act that led to an authentic spiritual search.

It is also important to state that the rejection of political ideologies and political parties, whose abolition she strongly advocated,²⁶⁸ led her to mature even on the political level, and this is evident even before 1936. Weil’s decision was not devoid of an internal struggle, and the challenge of the struggle motivated her to deepen and modify her political perspectives. In a similar manner to her dilemma concerning her baptism, a dilemma that instigated spiritual growth, Weil was torn between joining or excluding herself from the Communist

²⁶⁵ Crick, *Socialism*, 19.

²⁶⁶ T.S. Eliot, “Préface à la traduction de *L’Enracinement*,” in *Simone Weil*, 281.

²⁶⁷ Weil, *L’Enracinement*, 173.

²⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 132. She was probably strongly influenced by Alain on this matter of the abolition of political parties.

Party. Her brother claimed that he once found an unsent letter demanding membership.²⁶⁹ Her main concern was that in the political world, the social aspect overwhelmed and overhauled the individual. This led Weil to shift her interest and place her trust in the trade unions, showing that Weil did not detach politically by discarding all that is evidently political in nature, but kept on searching for a vehicle that would allow her to perform her political work, following what she considered to be the appropriate principles. The trade-unions offered her this possibility, for at least a number of years,²⁷⁰ because she believed that the way forward was decentralisation, that is, working in small units so that the cohesion of the more contained working groups could allow change in a more productive manner. It is not the purpose of this work to analyse the validity of trade-unionism, but Weil's choice shows that not only did she never abandon the political world, but that through a developing process of detachment, she kept on maturing in this field too.

3.6.6 Political spirituality

The final, and possibly most important, question that needs to be investigated is how the detachment from the political sphere enabled Simone Weil to grow spiritually. On one hand, it could be that her disillusionment at a number of political ideologies and the way they were translated into practice compelled her to abandon the political field, and to invest her energy into the spiritual and the mystical. On the other hand, it is possible that by rejecting these ideologies, Weil spiritualised the political, and by doing so, delved deeper into political matters in such a way that her political engagement allowed her to deepen her relationships with God and with other. Plessix Gray seems to agree with the first perspective when she

²⁶⁹ Blum and Seidler, *Truer Liberty*, 14-5.

²⁷⁰ Weil, however, was also sceptical about the efficiency of the trade-unions and questioned clearly whether they were sufficiently equipped to be of use to the workers' cause. See Simone Weil, "Tendances de notre Fédération," in *Engagement Syndical*, 226.

questions the authenticity of Weil's mystical experiences, connecting it with her disappointments in the relational field, including the political aspect. She points out Weil's disenchantment with Marxism, even though in her later years, Weil also grew to believe that the writings of Karl Marx offered valid insights for the Christian.²⁷¹ According to Plessix Gray, there were many young intellectuals in the 1930s who, disillusioned by the political scene and materialism, searched anxiously for a new form of spirituality.²⁷² The same author, however, confirms the authenticity of Weil's mysticism by comparing it to the profound experience of other mystics such as Teresa of Avila or Julian of Norwich. The marker of authenticity²⁷³ is that the experience, that originated unexpectedly and without any inducement, was preceded by a process of the effacement of self-will, and consequently followed by feelings of submission and joy.²⁷⁴ In her demeanour, Weil did not replace the spiritual with the political in her life, but on the contrary seemed to have discovered a methodology of integrating them.

The theology of Jürgen Moltmann will serve to explore further the questions posed so far. His theology presents an important distinction between being apathetic and being detached. Apathy, or alienation, is the illness of contemporary society that, being overwhelmed by its struggles and personal pains, copes through indifference. The soul is damaged to such an extent that the most effective manner to deal with the suffering is to be indifferent to the

²⁷¹ Blum and Seidler, *Truer Liberty*, 265. This can also be connected with the reflections of Slavoy Zizek on Christianity. Zizek is a contemporary philosopher who departed from Marxist thought. He believed that Christianity is the only path to atheism due to its radicality since, unlike Judaism, it rejects the notion of the 'Big Other', captured in the cry 'Eli, Eli, lema sabachtani' (Mt. 27:46). Zizek shows great admiration for the radical traits of Christianity. See Tony Myers, *Slavoy Zizek* (London: Routledge), 2003.

²⁷² Plessix Gray, *Simone Weil*, 55.

²⁷³ *Ibid.*, 129-30.

²⁷⁴ Another account that indicates the authenticity of these mystical experiences, and which shows that these did not occur as a reaction to her disillusionment to the political sphere, is the sweetness in character that Simone acquired henceforth. This is testified by two friends, shedding light on the consistency and endurance of the effect of the experience, showing that it was caused by the action of the Holy Spirit. See Pétrement, *Vie*, 533. In fact, Paul confirms that, 'the Spirit produces love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, humility, and self-control' (Gal. 5:22).

political sphere, and to escape into a world of illusion. Therefore, it would be more precise and accurate to state that Weil was unattached to (rather than detached from) political ideologies, while simultaneously practising detachment from politics. The ideologies were rejected since they were not a vehicle enabling her to grow deeper. The political, though, was embraced, as part of the process of detachment. By detaching from the political, Weil deepened her understanding of politics, achieving transformation and maturity. Her attitude was not *fuga mundi*. On the contrary, Weil related with the social and with the political as a form of contemplation.²⁷⁵ She detached from the political scene so that she could reflect more profoundly on it, and be able to engage with it more deeply.

This refusal of a form of politics that celebrates the superiority and the ostentatious is consolidated in the theology of Moltmann, whose starting point in the analysis of the Christian faith is the Crucified Christ. If the Christian God is the fragile and helpless crucified Christ, his followers need to partake in this fragility. The model that the Crucifixion presents is not the image of a glamorous God,²⁷⁶ but of a seemingly defeated dying man. It is not a model based on action, propaganda and power, but on de-creation and *kenosis*. It is through the process of emptying that God manifests Himself. It is a ‘model’ (for lack of a better word) that frees humanity from power dynamics. The onlooker frees himself from the desire to have power and domination over others by gazing on Christ who, guilty of not having obeyed the law, was crucified and thus rendered totally powerless.²⁷⁷ The crucified Christ challenges and subverts any form of political or social order because as Paul says, ‘that there were not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, but God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong’ (1 Cor. 1: 26-27). Unlike the Jewish vision,

²⁷⁵ Weil, *Gravity*, 166.

²⁷⁶ Coles, *Modern Pilgrimage*, 123.

²⁷⁷ Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 69.

where the Messianic intervention was to be a violently political one, and therefore, visible and ostentatious, the salvific act of the Crucified Christ can be perceived as being an internalised and hidden mystery.²⁷⁸ Nevertheless this hiddenness does not reduce the political significance that happened in the event on the Cross. The Romans executed Christ since he was condemned as a rebel, making the act a political one.²⁷⁹ The Crucifixion is also a political act because of theological reasons. God refuses to side with the celebrating victorious by submitting to the Crucifixion. The image of the triumphant Christ entering Jerusalem in a Messianic manner is totally transformed a few days later into the image of the rotten and tortured corpse of a reject. God joins the marginalised, the wounded, the criminals, and all those who belong to the periphery, in their anguish of a society that considers them as losers:

The crucified God is in fact a stateless and classless God. But that does not mean that he is an unpolitical God. He is the God of the poor, the oppressed and the humiliated. The rule of the Christ who was crucified for political reasons can only be extended through liberation from forms of rule which make men servile and apathetic and the political religions that give them stability.²⁸⁰

In such a manner, the Cross becomes a strong political and social statement. As followers of the Crucified Christ, the Christian has the duty, through his Baptismal vows, to strive to participate in this dynamic, and hence become politically active with those who are rejected. This denotes that the disciple of Christ has the obligation of being co-active with God in struggling against injustice, implying that he cannot be disinterested in the milieu he is living in. The Christian is obliged to be politically and socially active. It is part of the essential framework that gives the right to a person to define himself as a follower of Christ. The Christian cannot remain indifferent – it is a crime, both from a spiritual and from a

²⁷⁸ Ibid., 101.

²⁷⁹ Ibid., 326.

²⁸⁰ Ibid., 329.

humanitarian perspective.²⁸¹ Weil develops this thought further by claiming that if spirituality and politics are separated, they will lead to idolatry, demonstrating that the Christian cannot be apolitical. A spirituality that is not rooted in the social and the political becomes an illusion.²⁸² The non-political Christians are not following the Crucified Christ if they are oblivious to the pain around them. The God they worship becomes an idol since it does not bear any resemblance to the Christ who nailed Himself in order to be at the core of the anguish that constitutes the periphery. It is in this same periphery, that the Christian needs to be present, to be able to give a voice to the afflicted. There should be no polarisation between the beliefs of the Christian and political engagement. By corollary, the political person also needs to be a spiritual person, since, according to Weil, the political sphere has an obligation to fulfil the supernatural.²⁸³ Indeed, ‘it is through it that all the good can descend’.²⁸⁴ The political person has a responsibility to be the vehicle of the spiritual. He has the calling to pursue the mission that Christ commenced on the Cross, by engaging politically. In the Weilian reality, the political mission becomes a vocation, whereby the spiritual needs to be incarnated in the political for it to be accomplished. Although the *modus operandi* of the City of God is completely different from the one of the city of the world, the City of God, in the paradigms presented by both Weil and Moltmann, can only be found in the reality, albeit at times the periphery, of the city of the world.

This approach confirms the vital importance in the Christian life for the person to engage in a process of detachment from the political sphere, understood in this context as refinement and purgation. It is only in this way that one can be genuinely political. The notion of political involvement is transformed into an act of self-emptying. The Christian is invited to detach

²⁸¹ Simone Weil, “Études pour une Déclaration des Obligations envers l’Être Humain,” in *Londres II*, 100.

²⁸² Ibid, 99.

²⁸³ Ibid.

²⁸⁴ ‘C’est d’elle que descend tout le bien qui peut exister dans ce monde.’ Ibid., 95.

from ideologies and idealism to be able, through the process of self-emptying, to venture into non-identity, for the welfare of others.²⁸⁵ Restricted and limiting classifications, that frequently serve the function of confining people into models, are eliminated, and an emptier and possibly chaotic space is allowed to exist where what ultimately matters is the relational, in this case, the political. This mirrors the relationship with the Transcendent as portrayed in Moltmann's and Weil's Crucified Christ. The challenge is the consistency. In the political field, many abandon traditional ideologies, only to eventually create a new form of belief, under the name of other entities, whether this is religion, an artistic movement, or a personal crusade. Indeed, 'political hermeneutics of faith is not a reduction of the theology of the cross to a political ideology, but an interpretation of it in political discipleship.'²⁸⁶ Unless the kenosis in the political sphere is total, it will never be Godlike. Unless it is characterised by the feeling of Godlessness and abandonment, it will never serve to lead the supernatural into this world. It should also be a reaffirmation of the loss of the self, where the politically involved Christian is not glorifying himself. In parallel with the annihilation of self, this can only occur through the silencing of the self to allow the voice of the other, the vulnerable other, to be.²⁸⁷

3.6.7 Final remarks

Weil's distancing from the political scene highlights and deepens the relationality with the marginalised, whereby her silent and latent operation makes the oppressed the locus of attention rather than her presence in the action. The reaching out becomes more hidden, but definitely a purer act of love. Love became the politics of the spirituality of Simone Weil through the process of detachment.

²⁸⁵ Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 15-16.

²⁸⁶ Ibid., 318.

²⁸⁷ Martine Leibovici, "L'Injustice sociale et les figures du refus chez Simone Weil : Révolte, révolution, revendication, résistance," in *Lectures Politiques*, 107.

3.7 Conclusion

This chapter attempted to analyse the theme of detachment in the writings and the life of Simone Weil, by selecting six themes that were cardinal to her, and that can be used to understand better how she engaged in the process of detachment. Although there are striking differences between these six themes, and in spite of the fact that there are evident and concrete differences in the way Weil grappled with each of them, three common factors emerge clearly.

First of all, the radicalism of the approach of Weil is striking. Weil never did anything unless she could invest all her energy into the matter, and this can be seen clearly in the way she detached herself, often enough, in a most austere manner. Her methodology might frequently be interpreted as controversial, and has led many critics to question how healthy this was. Her radicalism still provokes multiple debates in contemporary academic circles that focus on Weilian studies. Nevertheless, Weil's commitment is most definitely admirable.

The second aspect that underlies all the chosen themes is the tension that characterises the radicalism of her approach. The character profile of Simone Weil might erroneously lead one to believe that her decisions were easy for her to take and that the radical traits in her actions were simply an externalisation of her personality. Weil's fascination and admiration of Stoicism might even reinforce the above statement. The reality of the experiences of Simone Weil seems to challenge these assumptions. All of the themes discussed were accompanied by a struggle. Her writings demonstrate, in a most articulate way, that to each push that propelled her towards detachment, there was a contrary force, at times equally strong, that pulled in the opposite direction. Weil was not the anti-establishment figure that some

depicted images carve her out to be, and the conservative side in her was strongly pronounced. She was no rebel without a cause.

The third, and possibly most important aspect, was that this tension led to the relational. There is a parallel growth between her detachment and the development of her openness towards others and/or the Other. She detached from Judaism, partially because she disapproved of the Jewish mentality that according to her, sabotaged God, not allowing others to relate with Him. Her detachment from Catholicism was connected with her vocation to be present with the outcasts. The detachment from the intelligentsia was also an attempt to connect with the people living outside the élite circle of society. The detachment from spiritual consolations and from the physical enabled Weil to deepen her relationship with the Transcendent, whereas her detachment in the political field allowed her to reach out to the marginalised. Detachment is the gift given by God to humanity to be able to relate.²⁸⁸ This is reflected in the life and the writings of Simone Weil: in spite of the dialectical tension, there seems to be no schism in Weilian spirituality between detachment and the relational. However, before understanding the model of integration that Weil presents, it is essential to examine how the relational manifests itself in the writings and the life of Weil. This will be the objective of the next chapter.

²⁸⁸ Emmanuel Gabellieri, *Être et Don: Simone Weil et la Philosophie* (Louvain/Paris : Editions Peeters, 2003), 498-9.

CHAPTER IV

The relational:

The interaction with the ‘other’ in Weilian spirituality

This chapter will explore another key concept in Weilian spirituality, even though it may not be so evident in the writings and in the life of Simone Weil. The first two chapters of this work established that relating with others is a cardinal aspect in Christian spirituality. Weilian spirituality is a deeply-rooted Christocentric spirituality, and consequently it should foster a strong sense of otherness. This statement might be perplexing initially, especially due to the seemingly solitary and independent life that Simone Weil led. She even seemed to have a fear of intimacy. Nevertheless, even though Simone Weil was never in an intimate relationship, she gives practical and valid insights on relationships. Her sense of otherness, in spite of her fear of intimacy, was very acute. Relationality is also strongly present in the socio-political engagement of Simone Weil. She maintained that the individual needs to be present in society, in spite of her constant criticism on the Social Beast, and not escape into the ‘wilderness’ since this would be a form of escapism.¹ Influenced by Stoic philosophy, Weil adhered to the belief that:

...a thing is drawn towards that for the sake of which it has been made, and its end lies towards which it is drawn and, where its end lies, there lie also its interest and its good. The Good, then, for a rational creature is relationship with others. For it has been made clear long ago that we are constituted for fellowship.²

¹ Simone Weil, “Cahier I,” in *Œuvres Complètes: Cahiers (1933 – septembre 1941)* (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), 117.

² πρὸς ὃ φέρεται δέ, ἐν τούτῳ τὸ τέλος αὐτοῦ· ὅπου δὲ τὸ τέλος, ἐκεῖ καὶ τὸ συμφέρον καὶ τὰγαθὸν ἐκάστου· τὸ ἄρα ἀγαθὸν τοῦ λογικοῦ ζῴου κοινωνία. ὅτι γὰρ πρὸς κοινωνίαν γεγόναμεν, πάλαι δέδεικται
αι Marcus Aurelius, *The Communings*, V: 16, 117.

The relational also features prominently in Simone Weil's life and writings due to the fact that she was a mystic. The mystic is a person whose heightened experience of the Divine leads to deeper and stronger relationality not only with the Divine, but also with the persons encountered. The mystic cannot withhold the impetus of sharing this experience of goodness with others after having experienced, albeit partially, absolute Goodness. This is why all mystics in all traditions highlight the importance of alterity. This process is then translated into actions that are enculturated in the socio-political reality in which the mystic lives, and so the relational in Weilian spirituality must always be examined and understood within the specific milieu in which she lived. This chapter does not question its presence in the life and the writings of the mystic but attempts to comprehend its manifestation and expression.

The insistence of a spirituality of the relational in the writings of Simone Weil can be perceived to be in sharp contrast with her all-important concept of detachment. Particular core concepts might even seem to be inconsistent with each other. Undoubtedly the tension is strongly present, but rather than seeing it as a hindrance, it can be used as a key to enter into the depths of the spirituality of the mystic. It is only by exploring this tension that the concept of otherness in Weilian spirituality will be understood more profoundly. Hence, this chapter will proceed by juxtaposing this dynamic against a number of salient themes that emerge strongly in Weilian spirituality, thus exploring the tension that arises particularly when contrasted with the theme of detachment.

There is also an evident connection between interpersonal relationships and the relationship with God in Weilian spirituality, in such a manner that the former exists to lead to the latter. This should not be interpreted in such a manner that interpersonal relationships only serve as a purpose. This is not a functional or utilitarian approach whereby interpersonal relationships

are used for the purpose of salvation. The two are related because one affects the other. It is essential not to refrain at the human level in experiencing relationships since if this happens, the relationship with God will never develop,³ and vice-versa. Hence, the insights provided by Weil on interpersonal relationships have the purpose of informing and leading the person to nurturing the relationship with the Transcendent. Interpersonal relationships become the pathway of the journey of humanity into nothingness, the nature of the Divine,⁴ which in turn strengthen further the human relationships. The challenge commenced in interpersonal relationships finds its culmination in the Transcendent. Weil's psychology and anthropology are by default spiritual.

It is the interwoven triangulation between the self, the other and God that makes the relationship a loving one. God is the motor of the love between the three entities which would otherwise be dictated by egotism, gratifying the desires of the self.⁵ Weil also grounds this triangulation in the human reality: by referring to the Golden Rule, Weil claims that one cannot love everyone equally since the individual does not love all parts of the self equally either. Man does not have the faculty of loving equally. Weil's challenge does not lie in setting an impossible task, but in encouraging humanity to love in totality, that is, to transcend the limitations of the inequality of human relationships (as well as the gratifications of the ego), and within that reality to attempt to give all the self to the other.⁶ This transcendence is only possible through Divine intervention, thus reaffirming the triangulation.

³ Simone Weil, "Cahier XVI," in *Œuvres Complètes: Cahiers (juillet 1942-1943: La Connaissance Surnaturelle, Cahiers de New York et de Londres* (Paris: Gallimard, 2006), 297.

⁴ Levinas reinforces Weil's belief that in the relationship with the Divine there is no schism between subject and object. See Levinas, "Existence without existents," 30.

⁵ Cabaud, *Fellowship in Love*, 246.

⁶ Weil, "Cahier III," 295.

This chapter will focus more on an analysis of one-to-one relationships *en rapport* with the relationship with God, even though in her writings and in her life, Weil devoted herself extensively to the relational dynamics in the social sphere, particularly in her support of the rights of workers. This choice is not only based on a personal interest of the researcher but particularly due to the slightly more limited literature on the subject in Weilian studies. This does not minimise the need to study further the contribution that Weil gave to the social and political implications of the relational and this chapter will attempt to address these implications, albeit partially. Nevertheless, the analysis that can be extracted from the writings of Weil and applied to intimate one-to-one relationships can prove to be of particular significant value to the contemporary person.

The chapter will commence by exploring the relationship with God and consequently with others, reiterating the fundamental perspective in Weilian spirituality that the two are intimately linked. The first two sections need to be seen as introducing the basic fundamentals of the spirituality of alterity as expressed by Simone Weil. This dynamic will also provide the appropriate platform to expound upon the concept of *metaxu* which could be perceived as a methodology proposed by Weil to explore relationality. The chapter will proceed by applying the fundamentals of alterity and the key methodology in selected salient themes in Weilian spirituality. It will focus on the aspect of the beautiful, embodied in a number of expressions, including order and numbers. The study will then delve into the more challenging aspects of the Weilian spirituality on otherness, namely the theme of waiting and the violent in relationships. The chapter will conclude by analysing also the theme of friendship through which all the aspects explored in the chapter can be summarised in what Weil considers to be the most superior form of human relationships.

4.1 Relating with God

4.1.1 *Mysterium Fascinans*

Simone Weil roots her theology about the relationship between the Divine and the human being in the avoidance of idolatry that can occur by projecting man-made constructs of God. This belief reasserts the mystery of the nature of God: human beings can speculate on the nature of God by stating what He is not, and possibly what He might be. The fascination of the mystery of the Divine resides in the fact that He transcends human logic. God does not follow the grammar of science, and does not operate through cause and effect since he is not subject to time and space.⁷ This is diametrically opposite to the way human beings relate with each other. Human relationships develop through cause and effect. The dynamics are originated by a spectrum of causes – what in psychology is known as ‘nurture’ – which in turn shapes the relationship. The parent – the first point of contact in the journey of an individual – and the manner how the parent relates with the child, is going to impact the personality of the child. This pattern is furthermore consolidated or challenged by the subsequent relationships that the individual forges in life. In turn, the individual, in relating, is also affecting the other entity in the relationship, and this dynamic does not only leave an imprint on both parties, but on the relationship as well. In the relationship between God and humanity, this dynamic is not applicable since no entity can have an effect on the nature of God since He is constant. His constancy makes Him unknown, unrecognisable and not attributable to any factor.

⁷ Weil, “Cahier VI,” 38.

The dynamics of this fascination portray the complexity of the myriad of aspects that define the relationship that God establishes with mankind, a complexity that transcends language and can never be captured, unless in the limitations of the phenomenological experience, which is always constrained by the finitude of human knowledge. It is the state of being in awe that humbles the human being in his relationship with God, and the dynamics of this situation, even though allowing the human being to grow in the relationship, will never allow him to comprehend it.

4.1.2 The hidden God

Simone Weil's insights on the relationship between humanity and the Divine are particularly challenging since she anchors this discourse in the notion of the hiddenness of God.⁸ Her theology is a struggle to delve deeper into the mystery of the reality of the hidden God. Weil challenged the traditional understanding of the notion of Providence, that is, the active interference of God in the dynamics of life and nature. She even claims, possibly influenced by her readings in Gnosticism and Catharism,⁹ that the notion of Providence in Catholicism is rooted in idolatry,¹⁰ especially as it presents the notion of a God whose function is to be of service to humanity.¹¹ Like the Pascalian God, the Weilian God is hidden,¹² the same God who in the Gospel of Matthew is described as 'unseen' (Mt. 6: 18). Unless God was hidden, the human person would confuse Him with the imaginary,¹³ not making a distinction between

⁸ Weil does not only base this notion on principles taken from the Catholic heritage. Hindu spirituality, which, as claimed earlier, left an impact on Weil's spirituality, presents a notion of the Divine whereby the entity is not manifested by the word, but the word is manifested through Him. Brahma is understood by those who do not understand him, and not understood by those who understand him. See Weil, "Textes rassemblés," 366. The atman cannot be seized. See *ibid.*, 388-9.

⁹ Pétrement, *Vie*, 537.

¹⁰ Weil, "Cahier VIII," in *La Porte du Transcendant*, 56.

¹¹ This, however, is in sharp contrast with Weil's belief that God became part of the human experience since as the Apostle's Creed states 'qui propter nos homines et propter nostrum salutem descendit de cœlis' (who for us men and for our salvation came down from Heaven.) This leads one to question whether in her critique on Catholicism she was also including and referring to this core principle.

¹² Pascal, *Pensées*, 175.

¹³ Weil, "Cahier VI," 328.

human projections and the God reality. The language used to portray the hidden God is a language rooted in the mystery and that avoids the sentimentalism that occurs when God is humanised through human projections.¹⁴ It is by being aware of the hiddenness of God, resulting in the longing for Him, that the desire to know the real God is born.¹⁵

This notion of a distant or a transcendent God, who is unrelated to the events that are occurring to humanity, seems to place God in a position of indifference. The human being, therefore, becomes helpless, and in fear of a seemingly malignant God who cannot be bothered with human pain. This makes it impossible, or somewhat challenging, to relate with such a God. It creates a chasm that separates the reality of humanity from that of God in such a manner that it can never be reconciled. Weil's notion of God might seem unreliable, in such a manner that the Divine is consistently and constantly aloof from humanity. On the contrary, in spite of her insistence on a hidden and impersonal God, Weil does not depict the Divine reality as being totally hidden nor as being totally impersonal. She believes that God's presence can be felt through necessity,¹⁶ reaching its culmination through the Incarnation. This might come across as being a contradiction since it seems that the distance of God cannot be reconciled with His presence in necessity. It is actually this contradiction that allows humanity to relate with God. As Sartre claims, absence too discloses being – not to be there means still to potentially be.¹⁷ If God were not distant, there would be no space for the relationship to occur. By being absent, God leaves a space within necessity wherein the loving relationship between the Divine and the human being can occur.¹⁸ In the absence, the

¹⁴ Paul Tillich, *The Eternal Now* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1963), 91.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 88.

¹⁶ Miklos Vetö, *The Religious Metaphysics of Simone Weil* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1994), 15.

¹⁷ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* (London/New York, Routledge, 2003), 5.

¹⁸ Mario Von der Ruhr, *Simone Weil: An Apprenticeship in Attention* (London/New York: Continuum, 2006), 127.

presence of God emerges, and in recognising Him as being impersonal, He becomes a personal God.¹⁹

Placing Weil's spirituality within the context of the theme of *diminution* could be the required key to understand this struggle better. The God that Weil attempts to relate with is not the majestic and haughty God. Weil's God is present in His smallness. His presence amongst humanity is expressed in an infinitesimal way, compared by Weil to Grimm's *Snow White*. The analogy of the protagonist eating scantily from the tiny hands of a dwarf²⁰ can be compared to the nurturing, yet miniscule, presence of God. Like in Perrault's *Cinderella*,²¹ God's beauty is only revealed for a short duration of time.²² Weil perceives the epiphany of God through detachment. The detachment of God in His revelation to humanity, characterises, and is the core constituent of, the relationship. This can be witnessed in the Sacrament of the Eucharist where Weil describes this manifestation as being a form of withdrawal: the omnipresent God diminishes Himself into the miniscule wafer.²³ The Allness of God that cannot even be contained by the immensity of the universe contracts itself to the tiny confinements of the Eucharistic bread, which is consumed and disintegrates in the stomach of the human being.²⁴ This can also be seen in the Mystery of the Incarnation where the immensity of the nature of the Divine encloses itself in the limited womb of the Virgin, and is brought forth to the world in the forlorn, tiny village of Bethlehem. It can also be seen

¹⁹ Weil, *Attente*, 197.

²⁰ Simone Weil, "L'Héraklès Égyptien et folklore," in *Marseille, vol II*, 455.

²¹ The psychoanalyst Bruno Bettelheim compares Cinderella to Mary since both can claim that 'he has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble' (Lk. 1: 52). See Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment* (London: Penguin, 1991), 64. Bettelheim also explains that Cinderella's beauty appears temporarily because she wants the Prince to love her for what she is. *Ibid.*, 264. This can be compared to the *diminution* of God whose absence makes us long for His reality rather than a fabricated and arrested false image that humanity might have created.

²² Weil, "L'Héraklès Égyptien," 457.

²³ This concept is also found strongly in Franciscan spirituality, a spirituality that had a strong impact on Simone Weil: 'Every day he humbles himself as he did when he came down from his *heavenly throne* (Wis.18:15) into the Virgin's womb; every day he comes to us in abjection, when he descends from the bosom of the Father into the hands of the priest at the altar.' Francis of Assisi, "The Admonitions," 78.

²⁴ Weil, "Cahier VIII," 54.

in the presence of God experienced in the abandonment on the Cross.²⁵ The manifestations of God are not grandiose but are conveyed within minute parameters that are hardly noticeable.²⁶ It is this paradox of the absence-presence that is the crux of the relationship with God. God is present in His strongest manner when He ‘reduces’ Himself, in the act of *kenosis*. Weil is never concerned that the human being cannot perceive God in His totality, and to her, this absence does not in any way pose an argument disproving the existence of God. The ‘reduction’ of God is the pinnacle of a loving experience, since through this experience, humanity is being taught the dynamics of a relationship. It is only by creating spaces that intimacy can occur. This leads Weil to the conclusion that God exists since love cannot be denied.²⁷ The nature of the human being does not allow for this ‘reduction’. The egocentrism that human beings are imbued with makes them crave to conquer all the space around them. It is only the Divine that creates space and allows the other to enter it. The experience of love is an experience of the Divine, and the reality of the Divine is conveyed through its absent smallness.

Following this model of spirituality, the way of relating with God is through the *via negativa*.²⁸ Essentially, the individual has to learn how to become nothing in the relationship with God because any other position would place him in an unjustified place of superiority.²⁹ Weil defines God as being emptiness,³⁰ since love can only take place in the empty space. If

²⁵ Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 27.

²⁶ Francis of Assisi refers to the hiddenness of the Divine – without using the same word – when he speaks about the hidden Christ in the womb of the Virgin, the hidden and forlorn Christ in the tomb and the hidden Christ in the Eucharist. The veneration and the awe of the physicality of Christ is emphasised in these references, almost denoting a tension between an admiration for the Body of Christ – captured on a quasi-sensual level – and this need to keep restrained, in much the same manner as, according to the Poverello, John the Baptist trembled at the possibility of touching the head of the Saviour. See Francis of Assisi, “Letter to a General Chapter,” in *Omnibus of Sources*, 105. This admiration of the Body as vehicle to the Divine is crucial in the vision of Francis but tends to be absent in Weilian spirituality.

²⁷ Weil, “Cahier IV,” 126.

²⁸ Weil, “Dieu dans Platon,” 119.

²⁹ Weil, “Cahier IV,” 117.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 68.

the Christian God is the God of nothingness, anyone engaged in a relationship with Him has to imitate His procedure. Nothingness, however, should not be confused with negativity. According to Vetö, there is a profound difference.³¹ Using numbers, an analogy Weil would have approved of, he highlights the difference by stating that in the relationship with God, the status needs to be pitched at zero, and not below.³² This distinction is imperative lest it leads to a misinterpretation that promotes an unhealthy psychology: Weil is in no way encouraging human beings to lose their esteem, but on the contrary is urging a realistic perception of the self, devoid of any fantasies. Weil's approach is not destructive. By insisting on the spirituality of attention in the realm of the relational, Weil implies that the self needs to be present since a relationship demands the contact between two entities, and cannot occur if one side is destroyed. What Weil is suggesting is the presence of the self in the relationship without any embellishments or over inflations. It is the self that relates at the neutral point of zero to allow space for the Other to relate. Nothingness is the totality of being since through denial the potential of the being is implied,³³ and it is this potential of being that creates a relational space, rather than the protective and futile layers of illusion that block all forms of contact. As Janiaud explains, to detach from the self, one needs to have a strong sense and recognition of the self initially.³⁴

A crucial element in the relationship with God in Weilian spirituality is obedience. The individual needs to surrender his will to follow God. In the context of the absence-presence paradox, this might seem impossible. It seems difficult to obey a God that is absent, or whose presence is so small that He cannot be perceived. This challenge is answered by Weil through another seeming contradiction. According to her, obeying God reaffirms the impossibility of

³¹ Supra, 47.

³² Vetö, *Religious Metaphysics*, 27.

³³ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 38-40.

³⁴ Janiaud, "Simone Weil et le déracinement du moi," 48.

the action, since it is a form of obedience that cannot be conceived, but can only happen through supernatural intervention.³⁵ Paradoxically, this means that the person obeys by not doing anything.³⁶ In common parlance, obedience denotes action: obeying a superior is translated into an action, whereby instructions are followed through. In Weilian spirituality this concept is reversed. This is due to the fact that this ‘impossibility’ cannot happen unless initiated and sustained by God Himself. It is God that allows humanity to obey and love Him. It is not possible to be totally certain about the will of God, in spite of the process of discernment engaged in. This means that it is futile asking God to show humanity the path towards the good, by indicating the actions that need to be executed, but it should suffice to ask Him (as the *Our Father* does) to ‘deliver us from all evil’.³⁷ This approach denotes a total surrender to the Divine which is not action-based but focused on the immersion in the darkness witnessed in the absence of the love of God.

4.1.3 The problem of evil

This section will proceed by examining the metaphysical issue that has preoccupied theologians and philosophers throughout the centuries: the position of God in the midst of the evil that reigns in the world and how the presence of evil and suffering in the world affects the relationship between humanity and the Divine. The absence of God provides a partial answer to this question, even though unsatisfactory. If God is absent, He cannot be held responsible for the atrocities committed in the history of mankind. Influenced by Stoic philosophy, Weil believed that evil does not derive from God, and anything in the course of events that does follow the order established by the Divine is due to the folly of human beings who do not conform to the harmony. Evil is a concept that lies outside the Divine

³⁵ Weil, “Cahier VI,” 337.

³⁶ This will be discussed in relation to non-action. See *infra*, 318-25.

³⁷ Weil, “Cahier VIII,” 103.

reality, to the extent that when the universe was created, evil appeared because God withdrew from the space to allow humanity to exist,³⁸ and this actual distance, and all the implications that arise from it, pains God.³⁹ The human being needs to live out this harmony, transforming his life into a reflection of the Divine order.⁴⁰

This interpretation does not solve the issue. If pain exists due to the withdrawal or the *diminution* of God, this might mean that God is no longer present in the painful reality of the human experience. In such a context, the suffering of the innocent or the death of the blameless child creates a problematic situation.⁴¹ If Christian God is a transcendent God, this means that He is totally isolated from the human existence and resides in a safe haven where pain and affliction do not exist. If the God of the Good News is an immanent God, a God who became flesh and suffered the affliction that is integral to the human condition, this depicts Him as being powerless in the face of suffering. Anselm of Canterbury's theodicy provides insights by arguing that goodness cannot be destructive.⁴² Goodness can only provide life, and God is Absolute Goodness, implying that God cannot eliminate evil.⁴³ God cannot be the cause of not-being because if He were, He would be the cause of the destructive. Anselm proceeds by explaining that nevertheless God can be the absent cause of not-being.⁴⁴ By stepping aside, evil occurs. Evil is understood as being a privation of God.

³⁸ 'Le mal que nous voyons partout dans le monde sous forme de malheur et de crime est un signe de la distance où nous sommes de Dieu.' Weil, "Réflexions sans ordre," 273. 'The evil that we see all over the world in the form of affliction and crime is a sign of the distance that separates us from God.'

³⁹ A. Rebecca Rozelle-Stone and Lucian Stone, *Simone Weil and Theology* (London/New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 39.

⁴⁰ A. A. Long, "Epicureans and Stoics," in *Classical Mediterranean Spirituality: Egyptian, Greek, Roman*, ed. A.H. Armstrong (London, Herder & Herder: 1986), 149.

⁴¹ This dilemma has been presented by a number of artists in the history of literature. Worth mentioning in the context of a study on Weil is Albert Camus' *La Peste* (1947). In the novel, the Jesuit Paneloux used to believe that the plague was a punishment due to the lukewarm attitude of the people of Oran towards religion until he was confronted with the death of the son of the judge Othon. See Camus, *La Peste*.

⁴² Anselmo d'Aosta, "De Casu Diaboli," in *Opere Filosofiche* (Bari: Editori Laterza, 1969), 215-7

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 223-25.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 215-7.

Anselm's theodicy can be further supported by Weil's notion of the vulnerable God,⁴⁵ the God that requires the forgiveness of humanity for having created it and given it a space that it should not have had.⁴⁶ The notion of the vulnerable God was developed in more depth by the feminist theologian Dorothee Soelle, whose theology will be referred to in order to grapple with the issue. Soelle's image of God is one of a God who is so immanent that He needs the assistance of humanity.⁴⁷ She makes an interesting difference between an 'intentionist', meaning a God who makes His will manifest, and an 'interventionist', denoting a God who imposes His will.⁴⁸ The vulnerable God is an intentionist who clearly communicated His will to humanity, a communication that reached its culmination through the Incarnation, the most immanent and vulnerable moment in the relationship between God and mankind. As a loving God, He 'decides' not to be an interventionist. Like in Anselm's theodicy, He steps back. In this light, Providence can be seen as the recognition of the dynamics and the manifestations of the order of the world, and not the deliberate, thought-out actions of a God who enjoys being the puppet master, altering the circumstances in the lives of human beings.⁴⁹ It would be more accurate to say that God opts for vulnerability, and it is this very option that allows for the loving relationship to take place between the two entities. He does this, not only because by doing so, God endows humanity with free will, but, moreover, because He gives mankind the 'opportunity' of being part of this loving relationship, by protesting, and where possible engaging actively, against the misery. This places humanity in the same position as Saint Paul where one can claim that 'in Him we live and move and have our being' (Acts 17: 28). The vulnerability of God, that allows humanity to relate lovingly, reaches its epitome in the historical moment of the Crucifixion where the crucified God:

⁴⁵ Weil, "Cahier VI," 395.

⁴⁶ Simone Weil, "Cahier X," in *La Connaissance Surnaturelle*, 299.

⁴⁷ Dorothee Soelle, *Theology for Sceptics* (London: Mowbray, 1995), 14-5.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁴⁹ Weil, "Intuitions pré-chrétiennes," 178.

...can only take upon itself grief at this contradiction and the grief of the protest against it, and manifest this grief in protest. This is what happened on the cross of Christ. God is unconditional love, because he takes on himself grief at the contradiction in men and does not angrily suppress this contradiction.⁵⁰

This corresponds with Weil's vision that maintains that God does not want to make use of suffering as a means of purification. On the contrary, God does not desire suffering and 'needs' the relationship with humanity as a means to eradicate it. Weil challenges the popular and populist belief that suffering is specifically sent by God as an opportunity to make humanity holier or as a redemptive act for its misdeeds. In such an erroneous belief, the focus is being redirected to the self, giving the ego a false heroic significance by consoling it and depicting it as the victim of the suffering that was imbued by an external authority.⁵¹ Suffering is part of necessity and also part of the mystery of the human condition, which challenges any form of reductionist rationalisation.

Another metaphysical issue that is closely connected is the issue of sin. Evil is believed to be the effect of the decision of mankind to turn away from God. Sin is a choice to reiterate this action committed by humanity's forefathers. Weil claims that sin is caused by the intention to avoid God because of the fear of facing Him face to face, since as the Bible says 'no man may see me and live' (Exodus 33: 20). The death that is being referred to is the death of self. Human beings are afraid of this death and prefer eliminating this reality by straining their relationship with God.⁵² Consequently, though, if sin is the ultimate rupture in the relationship between the human and the Divine, it may be difficult to juxtapose it against the Pauline writing that states that 'where sin increased, grace increased all the more' (Rom. 5: 20). Weil asserts that sin can be an opportunity for the human being to develop awareness of

⁵⁰ Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 248.

⁵¹ Weil, "Cahier VI," 367.

⁵² Simone Weil, "Cahier XI," in *La Porte du Transcendant*, 351.

his imperfections in the relationship with God.⁵³ The distance that is created can be actually transformed, through the power of Grace, into a situation that is beneficial. This is the Divine paradox of the crucified Son of God, epitome of Goodness and Beauty, laden with the horror of sin, in which ‘God made Him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God.’ (2 Corinthians 5: 21). Paradoxically, this awareness of the distance created places the human being in a situation that can be used as a medium to acknowledge and accept one’s nothingness enabling the person to approximate, albeit minimally, the authentic God.⁵⁴ Weil correlates the act of Creation with original sin, denoting that the latter is a direct consequence of the former rather than a form of resistance, a theology which might seem to be more akin to Hinduism than to Christian theology. If God created through withdrawal, existence is by corollary outside the God reality, placing the human being in a state of sin due to the fact that he was created.⁵⁵ It is this distance that confirms the existence of the self, clearly demarcating the two entities, the person and God, separated through the sinful state. The relationship with God requires this separation to be overcome as a result of the person becoming one with the nothingness of God. It is only by returning the space to the Creator that sin can be surmounted, reaffirming the *felix culpa* through which harmony can be achieved. Weil is less preoccupied with sins in which the person turns against God than she is with sins that the human being commits in his ignorance. She presents her belief that distance from God can also occur, often unknowingly, when He is approached in the wrong way. Possibly this distancing is more harmful since it is done in good faith. Whenever the individual relates with God through a power dynamic that reinforces his own being, the ‘relationship’ is not based on love, and hence, it ceases to be a relationship. Several examples can be quoted to explain this dynamic, but possibly the most

⁵³ Simone Weil, “Cahier VII,” in *La Science et l’Impensable*, 424.

⁵⁴ Weil, “Cahier VI,” 399.

⁵⁵ Cabaud, *Fellowship in Love*, 282.

common ones would comprise those scenarios where one implores his needs to God, showing Him that he knows what his necessities are, and that he has the right to impose his request on God. The person can only relate with God through non-being.⁵⁶

4.2 Relating with others

4.2.1 From two to zero?

This section will commence by focusing on Weil's insights on one-to-one relationships, even though this might not be the most evident aspect when discussing the relational in the spirituality of Simone Weil. Nevertheless, there are a number of traits and aspects which emerge that reveal strong paradigms that can be applied to all forms of human relationality.

Simone Weil's depiction of one-to-one relationships, in spite of her lack of personal experience, shows a deep understanding of the human psychology. She was very aware and concerned about the challenges of committed relationships. As film director François Truffaut is quoted to have said: 'Monogamy is impossible; anything else is worse.'⁵⁷ If not nurtured adequately, human 'love' could turn into hate, and the excitement of the initial stages of the relationship could easily turn into a negative experience. Frequently the initial stages are driven by self-centredness, disguised by the excuse of having fallen in love. The person is enthralled by the novelty of the other, and is gratified by this encounter. It is in this light that Simone Weil is suspicious of sexual intercourse in relationships for the sexual act could often become a filling in of the void of nothingness with the presence of the self. The consequence is mutually destructive for the couple when the gratification of the self is the motivating factor for the sexual in the relationship. The female is eating the phallus by

⁵⁶ Weil, "Cahier X," 249.

⁵⁷ David Parkinson, *History of Cinema* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1997), 187.

allowing it to penetrate into her body, and thus creating a form of castration,⁵⁸ while the male asserts his superiority through the act of penetration. According to Lacan, any form of otherness can be a destructive and aggressive act, motivated by the narcissistic *libido*.⁵⁹ The reality of the relationship begins when the initial emotions diminish. The closeness experienced at the beginning, if not nurtured, can disappear and change into distance, which at times can even become antagonistic. The relationship can only mature if it is transformed into otherness, if the locus changes from the 'I' to the 'you'.⁶⁰ The 'I' can only prove the existence of the other by loving him, and this can happen through the experience of nothingness.⁶¹ This requires the person to persist in loving the other even though the strong initial feelings have dwindled and even though the image of the other is different to the image perceived at the beginning of the relationship. Weil confirms this, albeit in a drastic manner, by saying that it is better to die than to 'love' someone by projecting onto him an imaginary role.⁶² In attempting to satisfy the gratifications of the ego, often 'imaginary partners' are created to fulfil this role, and energy is wasted to sustain this illusion, until the moment possibly arrives when this becomes too laborious, resulting in a crisis. The person has to be mature enough not only not to cease loving because of the faults of the other but to actually love through the faults.⁶³ Weil was aware that to attain this maturity, the intervention of Grace is required. The person needs to allow God to operate in the dynamics of the relationship.

⁵⁸ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 633-4.

⁵⁹ Jacques Lacan, "The Mirror Stage," in *Ecrits: A Selection* (London/New York: Routledge, 1989), 7.

⁶⁰ Weil, "Cahier IV," 67.

⁶¹ Jacques Lacan, "Subversion of Subject and Dialectic of Desire," in *Ecrits*, 350-1.

⁶² Weil, "Cahier VI," 381.

⁶³ Steffens, "<<Par le renoncement, nourris-toi.>>," 379.

Weil proposes that the I-you dyad in relationships needs to be challenged in order that relationships can mature. This has already been discussed in the previous chapter in her reflections on sexual intercourse.⁶⁴ This line of thought needs to be extended to the more holistic dynamics of intimate relations, juxtaposing it as well to other theories about relationships that were developed in the same timeframe when Weil was developing her views. This will be done by studying these dynamics against the writings of Jean-Paul Sartre on the same matter. It is precisely by placing Weil's philosophy against this backdrop that will enable the contemporary reader to validate her spirituality on the subject.

In the Weilian universe, growth is a movement towards nothingness, in which the relational is not a point of contention, but a primary tool that fulfils the process. Weil perceives relationships as being the annihilation of the 'I'.⁶⁵ Unless the annihilation occurs, there will be tension between the two entities attempting to dominate the space in the relationship. The binary schism between *subject* and *object* is challenged by Weil who replaces it with a model where there is no dependency or power dynamic. Indeed, 'love, on the contrary, is the experience of wanting to close the gap between the subject and the object.'⁶⁶ This model aims to transcend the dualism by imitating the Trinitarian model wherein there is no schism between the loved and the lover because they are both Divine.⁶⁷ This is the culminating point in human development, expressed in Yoga by the term *kaivalya*, defined as the highest point of liberation through detachment. In this culmination, there is no separation between object and subject. The somatic and the psychological are not annihilated but integrated and become whole through the Divine.⁶⁸ The influence of Japanese philosophy on Simone Weil can also be observed. She believed that when the distinction between the subject and the object is

⁶⁴ Supra, 148-4.

⁶⁵ Vetö, *Religious Metaphysics*, 22.

⁶⁶ Rozelle-Stone and Stone, *Simone Weil and Theology*, 31.

⁶⁷ Weil, "Cahier VIII," 129.

⁶⁸ Ravi Ravindra, "Yoga: The Royal Path to Freedom," 186-7.

eliminated, *satori*, a state of enlightenment, is attained, leading to peace.⁶⁹ By rooting this belief in a number of different religious traditions, ranging from Christianity to Eastern belief systems, Weil is not only reinforcing the cardinality of the concept, by demonstrating that it appertains to a number of different religions, thus transcending cultural boundaries, but furthermore accentuating the eminence it has in her own spirituality.

Sartre embraces a completely different approach. He explains that the conflict between the 'I' and the 'you' is due to the fact that the self experiences itself as an object for the Other⁷⁰ and wants to assimilate him into its reality, whereas the Other does not identify with the self.⁷¹ Both entities are struggling for the same space, trying to dominate by absorbing the Other into their own space to remain in control and have mastery of the relational dynamics. Sartre also maintains that in relationships, there is never a state of equality: it is either a form of *trans-descendence*, that is looking down at the person, or *trans-ascendence*, looking up at the Other.⁷² It is by choosing one or the other, that the spatial conflict is solved. A decision needs to be taken to resolve who is going to dominate. Hence, in Sartre's vision, the more a person feels loved, the more his being is lost.⁷³ Sartre believes that 'I do not choose to be for the Other what I am, but I can try to be for myself what I am for the Other, by choosing myself as I appear to the Other'.⁷⁴

⁶⁹ Weil, "Cahier VIII," 75.

⁷⁰ Sartre uses a capital letter to define the other but is not referring to God. Apart from the references to Sartrean theory, in the rest of this work, the 'other' written with a capital first letter is a reference to the Divine.

⁷¹ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 388.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 430.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 399.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 550.

In Weilian spirituality, this is totally reversed since the person ‘disappears’ so that the other can become ‘I’.⁷⁵ If the two become one, the person will ultimately love himself, reflected in the union with the other.⁷⁶ Hence, she strongly advocates the process of nullification. The subject is now, using Lacanian terminology, ‘depersonalised’, so that the demands and the desires are not transferred.⁷⁷ In Lacanian theory, the issue is language: it is language that offers the structure for the relationship to develop, but simultaneously it is also language that prevents relating. This is due to the fact that each subject uses signifiers (words) that are construed differently by the object. It is language that causes the hurdles that impede communication, although it is the same language that allows the communication of the relationship to occur.⁷⁸ Language and ideas become the imposition of the self onto the other. Weil blames any form of experiential baggage, linguistic and non-linguistic, of encumbering the relational dynamics. She is aware of the games that are played in the field of relationships and proposes the plunge into the darkness of nothingness, thus defying and breaking free of these power dynamics, that although might be inherent to the nature of relationships, are not growth-inducing.

This fundamental Weilian concept presents a theological difficulty. Initially, Weil’s insight seems to clash with Christ’s words in reference to holy matrimony, whereby ‘the two will become one flesh’ (Mk. 10: 8), which was examined in the second chapter⁷⁹. Weil includes all relationships in her advocacy to relate through nothingness. The union between man and woman should follow the same model. This issue can be explained by understanding that the oneness alluded to in the Gospel is the union of the couple with God. God is One, and through the sacrament of holy matrimony, the man and the woman have an experience of the

⁷⁵ Weil, “Cahier VII,” 418.

⁷⁶ Weil, “Cahier V,” 270-1.

⁷⁷ Jacques Lacan, “Aggressivity in Psychoanalysis,” in *Ecrits*, 14.

⁷⁸ Jacques Lacan, “Function and Field of Speech in Language,” in *Ecrits*, 14.

⁷⁹ Supra, 38.

mystery of this oneness. To experience this mystery, the two persons need to annihilate their selves and become zero. The ‘one flesh’ referred to in the Evangelical text is not an addition of two entities, but a new reality, that can only be achieved through the giving of the self. The section on mathematical concepts presented later on in this chapter will elucidate in more depth Weil’s spiritual understanding on numbers and their significance to relationality, and will show the sacrality of the number zero within the relational.⁸⁰

The loss of the ‘I’ can be considered to be unhealthy and thus Weil’s proposal deemed to be dangerous, leading easily to abuse. This is concerning particularly if only one person is open to the process of nothingness, and this results in the other taking advantage of the situation. Buber presents individuality and total relationality as two extremes. Although these extremes are never actualised in reality, the individual tends to lean towards one or the other. The individualist leads an illusory life,⁸¹ whereas total relationality would lead to an unhealthy state of dependency or possessiveness,⁸² a dynamic that even Weil recognises as unhealthy when discussing the imbalance in relationships between the states of domination and servitude.⁸³ She warns that dependency on another person⁸⁴ can lead to hatred because it generates a sense of imbalance.⁸⁵ Both Weil and Buber agree that it is through Grace that the balance can be attained. However, Buber warns that the ‘I’ should not be lost in the process of reaching balance in a relationship, and that on the contrary, in a relationship there should be a midpoint reality in which the two entities encounter each other.

⁸⁰ *Infra*, 239-42.

⁸¹ Buber, *I and Thou*, 53. This can also be compared to Sartre’s notion of *bad faith* which designates the illusory roles people play to fit into society as they relate with each other through gazing. See Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 74.

⁸² Buber, *I and Thou*, 63.

⁸³ Weil, “Cahier I,” 119.

⁸⁴ Winch challenges whether the fear about dependency that Weil admonishes about is to be feared, since it is that particular depth that makes relationships, in spite of the pain incurred, so beautiful. See Peter Winch, *Simone Weil: “The Just Balance”* (Cambridge/New York/Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 188.

⁸⁵ Weil, *Attente*, 207.

The divergence between the approach endorsed by Weil and the one embraced by Buber can be reconciled by analysing them in the light of Ignatian indifference.⁸⁶ The *modus operandi* in the relationship is neutral in value, that is, in its essence, it is neither good nor bad. What matters is the destination point, arriving to God. The two are advocating a loving relationship that leads to the Divine. Buber's approach leads to the Divine by providing a safe distance to avoid immersion but at the same disallowing the gratification of the self. Weil's methodology also leads to God, but through nothingness. The process of de-creation in Weilian spirituality occurs through the agency of Grace.

This tension in the methodologies presented by Buber and Weil facilitates the process in understanding Weil's approach. The key to unravel this dynamic is the importance that Weil attributes to truth, which is found in the Divine experience, since that is the destination in the spiritual journey. Relationships are only valid if a person is loved for what he really is. This is humanely impossible because, as explained before, human beings project their illusions, desires and fantasies onto the other. The only possibility to attain this state of truth is through anonymity, thereby preventing one's identity from destroying the truth of the relationship.⁸⁷ The emphasis, and the struggle, that Weil places on the impersonal is overarching in the philosophical approach that she embraces in her spirituality. Truth is found in the universal and the impersonal, and the difficulties that humanity faces are due to the fact that it operates differently from God, that is, it operates through the particular, and thus leading to idolatry. It is only by focusing on the impersonal that healthy and solid relationships can be established.⁸⁸ The impersonal allows the person to concentrate on the other in the present moment⁸⁹ whereas the personal carries with it all the experiential baggage of the past and all

⁸⁶ Ignatius of Loyola, *The Spiritual Exercises* (Gujarat: Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, 1995), Article 23, 32.

⁸⁷ Weil, *Attente*, 19-20.

⁸⁸ Weil, "Cahier XVI," 296.

⁸⁹ Emmanuel Levinas, "Reality and its shadow," in *The Levinas Reader*, 138.

the anxiety of the unknown future, creating barriers between the I and the other. This anonymity, or humility, achievable only through the intervention of Grace, is not destructive or humiliating: it is a question of not having an opinion at all of the self.⁹⁰ It is the highest point of identity, that is, nothingness. It prevents the risk or possibility of harming the other entity in the relationship. The relationship ceases being a threat or becoming the cause of damage and abuse, but instead becomes an opportunity and an adequate vehicle for completion to occur. Like Levinas,⁹¹ Weil believes that *ipseity* achieves completion through otherness, but in her philosophy, this completion is read as nothingness. The self has a call by and to the other,⁹² but in Weil's spirituality, this is a call to nothingness. Nothingness becomes a fundamental aspect in the relational as understood by Weil, and should be perceived in a positive and fostering manner.

The metaphor of the reaper that is used by Weil explains the dynamics further since initially Weil's approach might not seem psychologically recommendable. The reaper does not have an opinion of his field, but just knows the procedure of the work in the field as it is and labours within that framework.⁹³ In relationships, the dynamics and the constituents of the field, that is, the self and the other, need to be known, but instead of using these dynamics to influence or hinder the relationship, one needs to operate relationally. A state of balance and equality is reached between the two persons in the relationship because they can both meet in truth in this reality.

⁹⁰ Weil, "L'Habitude," 386.

⁹¹ Levinas, "Substitution," 97.

⁹² Ibid., 104.

⁹³ Weil, "L'Habitude," 386-7.

4.2.2 The afflicted

Simone Weil does not focus exclusively on one-to-one intimate relationships. Most of her writings focus more deeply on social and political relationships, as opposed to intimate ones. Her interest in this field dates back to her childhood, thus predating her mystical experiences. At a tender age, Weil showed concern for the needy, even those she did not know on a personal level. In the Great War, she used to send all the sugar and chocolates to other children. Her awareness of the pain of others was noteworthy. When a cousin of hers lost her mother and came to live at their house, Simone turned to her brother and advised him that they had to be kind to her since she had become an orphan.⁹⁴ As a teenager, Weil showed a special inclination towards the socially underprivileged. In June 1925, when on holiday at Challes-les-Eaux, Simone developed a special friendship with the ancillary staff at the hotel.⁹⁵ Weil attempted to immerse into the psychology of the underprivileged, by living as closely as possible to them, and by spending her time with them.

Weil was particularly interested in the relationship with the afflicted, especially the de-rooted, that is those who have been deprived from the elements that form their basic identity. These peripheral social groups are frequently rejected even further because their pain makes them react to the refusal. Weil identified an opportunity in this aggressive reaction to participate in and experience the affliction of the other, leading into a journey of nothingness.⁹⁶ It is important not to simplify this insight presented by Weil: she struggled extensively in her life experiences, and she admitted that the pain was so intense that sometimes it was difficult to

⁹⁴ Pétrement, *Vie*, 26.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁹⁶ Weil, "Cahier VI," 356.

witness the love of God in this dynamic.⁹⁷ She believed that reaching God through the pain caused by others was more difficult than doing so through one's own pain.⁹⁸

Weil dealt with this struggle by understanding that relating with others transcends the discourse on human rights. She does not believe that one should relate with the afflicted on the basis that everyone has rights. A person's entitlement to rights should not be related or proportionate to his social behaviour. If that were the case, every time an afflicted person had to behave in a socially inappropriate manner, the respect for that person by society would diminish proportionally. Weil also criticises strongly the notion of rights since they can create delusions.⁹⁹ They can easily become the cause of an illusion in the power dynamic, that in turn creates an imbalance where the underprivileged is given the role of 'the powerful', placing him in the situation whereby he can transfer his vengeance to another scapegoat. History has shown amply that the underprivileged or outcasts that were given their rights eventually became the oppressors of another minority group. Weil is not stating that the underprivileged should remain at the bottom of the social echelons, but that the philosophy of rights is not the appropriate means to help the marginalised and the outcast. Affliction can also befall in situations that are not caused by social dynamics, such as personal tragedy and health issues, although affliction generally occurs due to social factors, and in such a context, rights might ensure that the welfare of the person is catered for. Weil's notion of relationality transcends social conventions and focuses on the duties of the individual. It is the duty of the person to relinquish space, irrespective of the social context being lived in,¹⁰⁰ to enable the afflicted to have a space to live in. Relating with the marginalised and the afflicted is an obligatory duty that every human being should be responsible for.

⁹⁷ Weil, *Attente*, 72.

⁹⁸ Weil, "Cahier VI," 360.

⁹⁹ Chantal Delsol, "Une société dotée d'une âme: la finitude et la grâce," in *Simone Weil* (2014), 290.

¹⁰⁰ Weil, *L'Enracinement*, 111.

Weil's prudence in her analysis of the relationality with the marginalised is remarkable. She is aware of the fact that relating with the afflicted can lead to a power dynamic in which the helper feels superior because he is being of service to the 'inferior' person in pain. She recommends that acts of charity are done in a particular spirit to prevent this dynamic. The soul needs to be divided into two. A part of the soul needs to act through compassion so as to empathise with the pain of the other, but the other part needs to be detached to avoid any form of contamination of the power dynamics.¹⁰¹ These two parts of the soul need to be balanced. Any form of imbalance would lead either to condescension or to inhumanity. It is the right dosage of the impersonal and the anonymous that ensures that the self does not seek gratification in the act of helping and relating with the marginalised.

4.3 *Metaxu*

The chapter has explored the importance that Weil gives to the relationship with God and with others. It will proceed by examining relationality in the spirituality of Simone Weil within the framework of the notion of *metaxu*. This notion is so cardinal that it explains, determines and qualifies the vision that Weil had of the relational, and it can be said that the *modus operandi* that the mystic engaged in her relationships totally stemmed from this Platonic concept. Weil describes *metaxu* as being the stick that the blind person can use to be able to touch eternity,¹⁰² emphasising that in the limitations of the human condition, *metaxu* can offer humanity the possibility of attaining wholeness.

¹⁰¹ Simone Weil, "Cahier XIII," in *La Connaissance Surnaturelle*, 124.

¹⁰² Weil, "Cahier VI," 357.

4.3.1 Definition

Metaxu is a term that is described and elaborated upon in Plato's *Symposium*. Diotima, one of the characters at the banquet refers to *metaxu* when describing what love is. She explains it as being the space in-between the reality of the Divinities and of mankind, depicting it as the middle ground between these two polarities and a bridge between them.¹⁰³ Inspired by Plato, Weil develops this concept by portraying this space as a separation that can unite humanity with God and as an attempt to integrate seemingly opposing polarities such as *necessity* and the *good*. In other words, this in-betweenness, that initially, might seem like a space that emphasises the essential difference between these two realities, can be transformed into a means of unity. Weil refers to prison walls which essentially divide the prisoners from each other, but which can be used as a channel of communication when prisoners tap on them to relay messages to the other inmates as an example to clarify this concept.¹⁰⁴

4.3.2 The grey in between

This concept has a profound implication in spirituality since it challenges the nature of a situation or of a reality as being ontologically or fundamentally good or evil. The contradictory nature of the realities that are experienced in life and that fall in the ambiguous greyness of the betwixt should prevent any form of reductionism. In fact, the notion of contradiction will be amply developed in the next chapter since it features intensely in the spirituality of Simone Weil.¹⁰⁵ In the relationship that is established between the individual and the Transcendent, this space of contradiction needs to be discerned to be able to understand whether the reality being experienced is a form of *metaxu*. If the situation being lived, the encounter being made or the person being related with is a form of *metaxu* to bridge

¹⁰³ Plato, *Symposium and Phaedrus*, 203b-c, 54-5.

¹⁰⁴ Weil, "Cahier IX," 197.

¹⁰⁵ *Infra*, 291-304.

the space that separates, this clearly indicates that the particular reality is an agent of spiritual growth and should be embraced. In Weil's vision, the material - what Weil classifies under the term *necessity* - is not evil or immoral since it has the potential, and the actualisation, if used adequately and appropriately, for spiritual growth. This means that not only is the material world the connection, and possibly the sole connection, with the Divine, but is simultaneously a mode of evaluating the relationship with the Divine. The fulcrum of Christian theology is also built on this concept, as can be seen in the Mystery of the Incarnation, where the Divine incarnated Himself in the material world.

Weil delves deeper into the concept of *metaxu* since she was aware that this approach could be misinterpreted and promote a culture of relativism. *Metaxu* is not an excuse to justify convenience in life. On the contrary, at the core of the notion, is a reaction towards any form of opportunism, since the focus in this methodology is never on the individual but on the relationship with God. In Weilian spirituality, the starting point is neither the welfare nor the convenience of the individual. The well-being of the individual would be the result of *metaxu*, and not the cause for it. The *point de départ* is the desire of the person to connect with God, without using this bridge as a form of consolation or compensation.¹⁰⁶ If a situation is justified exclusively on the premise that it gratifies the person or provides the individual with a source of happiness, it can be concluded that this particular situation is not a form of *metaxu* since the objective of the situation places the human being as the centre of the action. Weil is not denying that the consequence of the situation could still provide the person with a strong sense of joy, but the focus should be on the end and not on the individual. Weil's precaution is informed by the fact that frequently even noble actions are clouded by a need to gratify the ego. She criticises Malraux's *La Condition Humaine* due to the fact that it seems

¹⁰⁶ Weil, "Cahier VI," 320.

to depict the suicidal act of one of the main characters, Kyo, as heroic.¹⁰⁷ The act reiterates the gratification of the ego since in the narrative of the novel the character remains the focal point of the action. ‘If I live for someone else, and someone else for me, I am living for myself’.¹⁰⁸ In Simone Weil’s understanding of *metaxu*, there is no room for any personal agenda.

Weil’s weariness in her analysis of *metaxu* can be reinforced by referring to Pauline theology. In his letter to the Galatians, the Apostle provides a form of discernment to recognise when the material world is genuinely a form of *metaxu*, even though he does not use the actual term. Any action or activity in which the fruits of the Spirit are manifested is by default coming from the Divine (Gal. 5: 22). Plato claims that ‘beautiful things are beautiful through beauty’.¹⁰⁹ In the same way, in relating with God by using the appropriate *metaxu*, the person is adorned with the fruits of the Spirit, offering the individual a paradigm to be able to recognise the will of God in his engagement with the material world and with others. Springsted emphasises that Weil never attempted to establish specific criteria to determine what *metaxu* is since she presented it as an ambiguous reality, possibly to avoid any reductionism. The only recommendation given to identify it, corresponding strongly with the Pauline concept, is that the action or the experience should enable the individual to direct his attention from the self onto God.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁷ André Malraux, *La Condition Humaine* (France: Gallimard, 1972), 296-304.

¹⁰⁸ ‘Si je vis pour lui, et lui pour moi, je vis pour moi.’ Weil, “Cahier IX,” 197.

¹⁰⁹ ...τῶ καλῶ τὰ καλὰ καλὰ Plato, *Phædo*, 100e, (1943), 345.

¹¹⁰ Patrick Allen Diogenes and Eric O. Springsted, “Winch on Weil’s Supernaturalism,” in *Spirit, Nature, and Community: Issues in the Thought of Simone Weil* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 81.

The analysis of the concept becomes challenging when it is applied to negative or painful experiences. In Weilian spirituality the negative and the painful can also be forms of *metaxu*, as her mystical experiences demonstrate. In Solesmes, it was through the intense pain of her migraine that she connected with Divine love.¹¹¹ They are not caused by God, but can be transformed into connections with the Absolute. Being in touch with the angst of the human condition, present in the soul of each individual, is a bridge with the Divine. It is in moments of existentialist pain, in the realisation of one's own nothingness, that the human being can approximate the Divine existence, or at least make a leap in the gap that separates the human from the Divine.¹¹² In the Christian vision, according to Simone Weil, a supernatural remedy should not be sought to cope with suffering, but suffering should be dealt with in a supernatural manner to transform it into being *metaxu*.¹¹³ This philosophical approach was confirmed during her factory experience, which she embarked upon to have a direct experience of the life of the workers. Weil's heroic act was not as unique as it might seem. George Orwell had already anticipated her by living the rough areas of London and Paris, and Dorothy Day settled down in the slums of New York.¹¹⁴ Weil's action is distinctive due to the impact that the experience had on her spiritual development, since it developed her insights on affliction, serving as a bridge to the Transcendent. This event marked Weil profoundly and can be considered to be the first major milestone in the mystical phase of her life.

¹¹¹ Weil, *Attente*, 43.

¹¹² The influence of Stoic philosophy is evident. Epictetus maintained that all negative experiences could be converted into experiences of happiness. See Epictetus, *The Discourses*, 121. In Stoicism this conversion leads to the acquisition of happiness. Weil was influenced by the Stoics in believing that the negative experiences of life could be a springboard for a more elevated realm, the Divine.

¹¹³ Weil, "Cahier VIII," 64.

¹¹⁴ Plessix Gray, *Simone Weil*, 82.

This leads to the exploration of a more delicate issue in theology. If the material world can be a bridge to the Divine, can it be concluded that it also has the potential of being sacramental? The sacramental perspective in Catholicism, particularly in post-conciliar theology, emphasises:

...the divine in the human, the infinite in the finite, the spiritual in the material, the transcendent in the immanent, the eternal in the historical. For Catholicism, therefore, all reality is sacred...human existence is already graced existence.¹¹⁵

Weil's vision anticipated this post-conciliar vision. Forty years earlier, Weil was already maintaining that *metaxu* is not only a sign, but an instrument to connect with the Divine,¹¹⁶ revealing His presence. It does not only indicate the way, but it is also the vehicle that makes the connection happen. This implies that not only is the experience of *metaxu* a sacramental experience,¹¹⁷ but, furthermore, it highlights the fundamental Catholic concept that 'Grace is everywhere',¹¹⁸ defying the unhealthy schism that developed over the years whereby the spiritual was placed in contrast with the material. Without falling into pantheism, Weil believes that necessity has the potential of bridging the gap with the Divine, allowing the human to interact with the Transcendent and for the Transcendent to abide with the human.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁵ Richard P. McBrien, *Catholicism* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1994), 9-10.

¹¹⁶ Eric O. Springsted, "Formes de l'amour implicite de Dieu: S. Weil et l'interprétation du monde comme sacrement," in *Simone Weil* (2014), 333.

¹¹⁷ Simone Weil, "Esquisses et Variantes," in *Marseille, vol II*, 690.

¹¹⁸ Georges Bernanos, *The Diary of a Country Priest* (New York: Da Capo Press, 2002), 298.

¹¹⁹ It is interesting that Weil reconfirmed that the human is a form of *metaxu* by indirectly referring to herself as being so. Her nickname, in fact, was Antigone, due to the love that she had for Sophocles' play. The character of Antigone is *metaxu* par excellence, mediating with the Divine by asking questions of an existentialist nature. See David Tracy, "Simone Weil: le masque et la personne," in *Simone Weil* (2014), 305.

4.3.3 Crossing the bridge?

Weil emphasises that *metaxu* is a vehicle. It is a ‘bridge’ that leads to the other side, enabling the person to experience the Divine.¹²⁰ The ‘bridge’ loses its function if the person remains static on it and does not proceed in his journey.¹²¹ There is no validity in staying on a bridge, staring at the stream passing by underneath. It becomes yet another attachment, another illusion. The lack of recognition of the identity of the bridge can be perilous: the person might idolise the bridge for its value, forgetting that this value is futile unless it serves its objective, that is the transportation to a higher realm. The most challenging hurdle that prevents the individual from relating with the Divine is the attachment to the bridge, to the recognition that one has identified the instrument, but in doing so becomes attached to it, to the exclusion of what lies on the other side. It is imperative to be aware that the bridge is an intermediary. In this context, the concept of *metaxu* stresses the point that ultimately the relational is a vehicle, and not an end in itself.¹²² Necessity, including relationships, can be the bridge leading to the Divine experience of nothingness.

The next difficulty that ensues is whether it is possible and healthy to abandon the bridge completely. In the spiritual journey, the person is invited to reach the other side of the bridge, but life is also experienced on the bridge, and this experience cannot, and should not, be denied.¹²³ This paradigm summarises the tension that characterises the life and writings of Weil, struggling between the state of immanence and transcendence.¹²⁴ The challenge faced

¹²⁰ Louis Dupré, “Simone Weil and Platonism: An introductory reading,” in *Christian Platonism*, 12.

¹²¹ Anderson, *Simone Weil*, 100.

¹²² A likely influence on Weilian spirituality in this context could have been Stoic philosophy, particularly the writings of Epictetus. See Epictetus, *The Discourses*, 205.

¹²³ This tension of being in the world and not belonging to the world echoes beautifully with the farewell speech given by Christ to His apostles in the Fourth Gospel. Christ clearly articulates that ‘I sent them into the world, just as you sent me into the world. And for their sake I dedicate myself to you, in order that they, too, may be truly dedicated to you’ (Jn. 17: 18-19). The tension of immanence and transcendence is felt strongly in this passage.

¹²⁴ Michael Ross, “Transcendence, Immanence, and Practical Deliberation,” in *Christian Platonism*, 49.

is the difficulty to transcend and yet be rooted in this world¹²⁵ since the very reality of transcendence seems to imply the absence of the immanent. The solution lies in a spirituality which is as immanent and rooted to the world, as much as it is transcendent and reaching out to the Divine. The sacramental value of *metaxu* enables it to present this contradiction of transcending through the immanence. It is the attachment to the bridge that can hinder spiritual development: it is this attachment that needs to be transcended, and it is only by staying in this paradox that growth can take place.

4.3.4 The *Logos* as *metaxu*

The concept of *metaxu* reaches its culmination in the Christological experience, not only through His Incarnation and the Redemptive Act but also through the interface that the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity has with the world of necessity. The intervening years between the birth and the death of Christ cannot be overlooked or perceived in a reductionist manner as the beginning and the ending of a chapter in human history. The entire life of Christ was an integral part of the experience of the Incarnation and the Redemption. The Incarnation and the Redemptive acts are not only specific moments, but on the contrary, are a process that has two specific climactic points. Christ relates with necessity throughout His whole life, demonstrating the potential of the sacredness of the material world.¹²⁶

The figure of Christ has a double purpose which presents an interesting contradiction. It is the perfect *metaxu*, and yet all forms of *metaxu* lead to Him since all forms of *metaxu* were created for Him, as is reaffirmed daily in the Eucharistic doxology: ‘through Him, and with Him, and in Him.’ Saint Paul states that it is ‘through him to reconcile to himself all things,

¹²⁵ Perrin and Thibon, *As we knew her*, 142-3.

¹²⁶ Hans Urs Von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory II: Dramatis Personae: Man in God* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990), 147.

whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross' (Colossians 1: 20). By corollary, anyone who is Christ-like becomes *metaxu* too, even though the person will not be the purest mediator because in the terrestrial life he can only approximate becoming another Christ. However, this does not impede the person, even within the limitations of this approximation, to serve as a bridge to the Divine. This contradiction is reiterated when Weil speaks about love which she presents simultaneously as a mediator (the vehicle) and the ontology of the Divine (the destination). Love is the *Logos* that connects the human with the Divine, leading to the *Logos* itself¹²⁷ for it is through love that the presence of Christ is experienced.

4.4 Beauty

Another key concept in the Weilian spirituality of the relational is the Platonic notion of beauty. According to Weil necessity is beautiful.¹²⁸ Influenced by the Stoic *amor fati*, as well as by the Franciscan love of nature which Weil also extended to comprise the reality of the world, relationships and the world of art, she perceived the beauty of the universe as being a form of *metaxu*. According to her, the mystery of beauty hides within it the mystery of the Divine, who is Absolute Beauty. Through beauty, God is seeking to merge with mankind, creating a two-way relationship. It is as a result of beauty that human beings can relate with God as much as God has selected beauty as a medium to relate with human beings.

¹²⁷ Weil, "Intuitions pré-chrétiennes," 203.

¹²⁸ Weil, "Cahier V," 244.

The consequence of the contemplation of the beautiful results in love since the fruit of entering into the mystery of the Divine leads the individual to love his neighbour more intensely. This initiates a transformation in the individual, as the natural leads to the supernatural.¹²⁹ It is through the recognition of beauty that the human person can attain what cannot be attained naturally.¹³⁰ It is a transition from the senses to the absolute, which ultimately matures in the act of loving others. This section of the study will examine in more depth how in the experience of Weil, God's immanence is present through beauty, in all its different forms, and how this understanding can impact on the welfare of human relationships.

4.4.1 Tension between polarities

This section will commence by clarifying a seemingly problematic dynamic. Placing the theme of beauty within the scope of the spirituality of the relational can be misleading initially when examining Weil's writings since she seems to make a direct association between beauty and detachment.¹³¹ According to the mystic, beauty is lost as soon as attachment or possession occurs.¹³² In a form of imagery commonly used by Weil, non-possession is compared to food that is desired without being eaten since as soon as it enters the digestive system the food ceases to be,¹³³ for as the Apostle admonishes 'if you bite and devour each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other' (Gal. 5: 15). Eve's sin was to eat the fruit, that is, to possess what she was not meant to possess. Humanity's redemption lies in the opposite action: the avoidance of 'eating'.¹³⁴ Beauty should not be

¹²⁹ Springsted, "Formes de l'amour implicite," 332.

¹³⁰ Miklos Vetö, "Qui était Simone Weil: continuités et nouveauté," in *Simone Weil* (2014), 43.

¹³¹ Weil, "Cahier VII," 443.

¹³² This perspective was already mentioned when speaking about the relationship with the Divine and is now being extended to the relationship with others. See *supra*, 106-7.

¹³³ Weil, "Cahier VII," 459.

¹³⁴ Weil, "Formes de l'amour," in *Marseille, vol I*, 304.

contaminated by the needs of the ego of the perceiver¹³⁵ because this contamination alters the object, thus annihilating its ontological beauty. This does not imply that a relationship is a harmful act. By referring to contamination, Weil is suggesting that the person needs to purify himself of any personal advantage, and not use the relationship for any form of gain. It is the egoistic driving force in the relationship that needs to be addressed.¹³⁶ A deeper reading of Weil shows that this dynamic is a relational one, and not an invitation to avoid relationships. It actually gives us a *modus operandi* for healthy relationships. Through imagery, Weil shows that the beauty of the relational occurs when the sense of taste is purified by being transformed into the sense of sight. It is the attentive gaze which sustains the beauty of the relationship.¹³⁷ The person who is relating needs to be present at a distance, attentive to the other person, without invading the space of the individual, accepting the person as is without demanding change or transformation. Balance is required for the encounter not to transform itself into a devouring and harmful experience, thus destroying the beauty of the relationship. Like the tight rope-walker, the beauty lies in the tension of being attentive enough not to be coldly distant and yet simultaneously too confidently close. This insight needs to be understood in the light of the tension of the innate contradiction present in all persons between the desire to be with the beloved and yet the need that real love requires distance for it to grow.¹³⁸ It is the tension of this paradoxical struggle that animates the beauty of the relational. Over-distance is as dangerous as under-distance.¹³⁹ If a person is too detached in a relationship, the nurturing aspect will suffer, leading to a lack of growth, and possibly regress in the relationship. However, any invasiveness and lack of respect towards the space of the other is stifling. Any form of imposition will annihilate the being of the other, transforming him into the same image of the one who invaded, in the same way as food is disintegrated or

¹³⁵ Weil, "Cahier XI," 368.

¹³⁶ Springsted, "Formes de l'amour implicite," 331.

¹³⁷ Weil, "Cahier IV," 66.

¹³⁸ Levinas, "Substitution," 98.

¹³⁹ Rozelle-Stone and Stone, *Simone Weil and Theology*, 42.

rejected as superfluous waste.¹⁴⁰ Immersion could lead to the self not losing itself but metamorphosing into the other. This would be sinful since it would be deifying the other through incarnation, that is, becoming the other.¹⁴¹ A relationship is an encounter, not a fusion or a cloning, and the void for this encounter to occur can only happen through detachment.¹⁴² Indeed, ‘growth and freedom go with the dependence and the dependability of maturing love.’¹⁴³ Similar to the relationship with the Divine, it is frequently through the pain of the distance that the beauty of the relationship can be witnessed. Beauty exists when the ‘I’ ceases to be.¹⁴⁴ In relationships, the struggle of experiencing the beauty through the distance of the gaze is essential. The absence of this struggle will lead to a demeaned and severed relationship.¹⁴⁵

It is not possible to gaze at a person from a distance and not invade the space of the other, unless complete attention is given. Attention is a hallmark in the building of healthy relationships, an aspect that is frequently ignored or misunderstood. Weil clearly demonstrates that being attentive is neither physical nor active. Without being misled into associating this with Quietism, Weil explains that the most crucial aspect in relationships is the openness and availability to the other: the being there. Only Grace can transform attention

¹⁴⁰ This approach corresponds with Sartre’s notion of being-for-itself which is the desire to reach completion by acquiring beauty, a desire that Sartre warns against since this completion cannot be attained since in attempting to do so the role of God is being enacted. See Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 218.

¹⁴¹ Taken to an extreme such behaviour would be pathological as is the case of the character of Tom Ripley in the novel *The Talented Mr Ripley*, in which the protagonist embodies to the least detail his object of attraction, the fascinating Dickie Greenleaf, with dangerous repercussions. See Patricia Highsmith, *The Talented Mr Ripley*, (London: Vintage, 1999). The process of ‘incarnation’ should happen only in the relationship with the Divine as demonstrated by the final words of the character of Saint Claire of Assisi in the 1989 film *Francesco*. In this scene, Claire, in referring to Francis of Assisi, says, ‘I realised that love had transformed his body into the body of his beloved. I wondered whether I would be ever able to love to that extent.’ Giulio Scanni, *Francesco*, directed by Liliana Cavani (Italy/Germany: Ital-Noleggio Cinematografico, 1989). (‘Pensai, pensai che l’amore aveva reso il suo corpo identico al corpo del amato. Mi chiesi se io sarei mai riuscita ad amare così tanto.’)

¹⁴² Jean-Marc Ghitti, “L’année du Puy : l’esprit d’un professeur, l’âme d’une militante,” in *Simone Weil* (2014), 66.

¹⁴³ David E. Jenkins, introduction to *Theology and Joy*, by Jürgen Moltmann (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1973), 6.

¹⁴⁴ Martin Steffens, “<<Par le renoncement, nourris-toi>>,” in *Simone Weil* (2014), 381.

¹⁴⁵ Weil, *L’Enracinement*, 285.

into love, although it requires the human being to use his intellect to pay attention.¹⁴⁶ This alertness is challenging, and in the light of this Weil proposes that the intellect can be trained through exercise, particularly geometry. These exercises should not be accomplished with the objective of attaining a final product, but for the sake of the experience itself.¹⁴⁷ Furthermore, these exercises can only make a person more receptive. It is only through Grace that by being attentive, the individual can ‘see’ what is invisible, that is the angst of the human condition, manifested or hidden in the other.¹⁴⁸ The state of being attentive demarcates a twofold journey: from the illusory known to the uncharted territory of the unknown, and from the self to the other.¹⁴⁹ The person detaches from the securities of his known yet confined world, often composed of fabricated illusions and created for the gratification of the self, to focus on the reality, often unperceived and unbeknownst, of the other. It is attention that leads to the beautiful.

4.4.2 The Attractiveness of Beauty: Nature

Nature, and the beauty of the universe, is a frequent theme in Weil’s writing, since Weil considers nature to be a manifestation of Absolute Beauty. Nature is a reflection of the beauty of the Divine since as the Prophet Isaiah exclaims: ‘Sing for joy, you heavens, for the Lord has done this; shout aloud, you earth beneath’ (Isaiah 44: 23). Weil’s fascination with nature lies in its order and harmony, in the simplicity that everything has its right place in the web of the cosmos. She also considers the order and harmony that are inherent in nature¹⁵⁰ as a means of spiritual growth. This is due to the belief that harmony and proportion lead to the

¹⁴⁶ Vetö, *Religious Metaphysics*, 42-5.

¹⁴⁷ Weil, *Attente*, 88.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 136.

¹⁴⁹ Vetö, *Religious Metaphysics*, 46.

¹⁵⁰ Von der Ruhr, *An Apprenticeship in Attention*, 95-6.

purification of the soul.¹⁵¹ The laws of nature offer the wisdom of the structure that the human being needs to embrace to be able to develop spiritually since these laws are already in unison with the will of God, their Creator. Influenced by Advaita Vedanta, Weil shared the belief that the ‘individual Self breaks through the confining sheath of the empirical and social ego and harmonizes with the universal Self, the immanent God in the world, by virtue of which he comes to comprehend the nature of the Supreme Lord of the universe.’¹⁵² The epitome of the beautiful is the state of absolute harmony.¹⁵³

The influence of the French philosopher Pascal on Simone Weil sheds further light on her notion of the beauty of nature. It is the differences, as opposed to the similarities, in their outlook, that is of particular interest in this study. Weil perceives the beauty of nature as being one of the few realities of the manifestation and immanence of God in the presence of necessity whereas Pascal presents its purpose as being an indicator towards a higher value. Nature should reflect the beauty of the universe so that in turn this leads the person to grapple with the grandeur of the Creator. The main difference in their approaches is that Weil perceives the beauty of God in the harmony of the order of nature as opposed to Pascal who seems to consider the order of nature as being incomplete. In front of this mystery, anticipating Otto’s concept of *mysterium fascinans* and *mysterium tremendum*, the human being can only stand in awe.¹⁵⁴ He can only remain ‘incapable of seeing the nothingness where he derives from, and the infinity that swallows him up.’¹⁵⁵ This creates within him the tension between the immensity of the experience of the beauty of the universe, and yet the fear that this brings with it. The focal question that needs to be explored is whether nature is,

¹⁵¹ Simone Weil, “Lettres à André incarcéré,” in *Œuvres Complètes: Correspondance, Volume I: Correspondance Familiale* (Paris : Gallimard, 2012), 459.

¹⁵² Rajendra P. Pandeya, “The Vision of the Vedic Seer,” in *Hindu Spirituality*, 25.

¹⁵³ Weil, “Dieu dans Platon,” 121.

¹⁵⁴ Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958)

¹⁵⁵ Pascal, *Pensées*, 50 ‘...incapable de voir le néant d’où il est tiré, et l’infini où il est englouti.’

as Weil presents it, a proof of God's presence in the necessity that surrounds humanity, or whether it is a mystery, an incomplete harmony that serves as a means for human beings to contemplate the love of God.

It is in the beauty of the stillness of the universe that the Divine is experienced through the loss of the self. Simplicity is the prime factor in this experience. Weil's vision of nature, certainly influenced by Franciscanism,¹⁵⁶ is not an intricate and complicated one. Its simplicity also implies a loss: the human being stands in wonder at the beauty of these phenomena which transcend the human mind. It is the wonder of the awareness that the universe is self-sufficient and nothing else is required than what is already provided for humanity.¹⁵⁷ The human being is invited to disregard his limitations to take in the depth of the simplicity of the beauty of nature to deeply appreciate this experience. By acknowledging his nothingness, the person empties the self from all pretensions to be able to create a space for the beauty to resonate. It is in doing so that joy can also be experienced in the soul. The same experience is equally valid for the beauty of God, which is reflected in the beauty of nature.

This leap requires the perceiver to engage with this beauty in its stillness, without disturbing it, without altering it, and moreover, without questioning it.¹⁵⁸ In awe of the grandeur of its beauty, Man can only align himself with the overwhelming strength of the beauty of nature, even though at times this cannot be understood or does not seem to be in conformity with the needs of humanity. By submitting to the beauty of the order of nature, human beings are also

¹⁵⁶ Weil, "Cahier XI," 398. It also resonates intensely with Rossellini's masterpiece *Francesco: Giullare di Dio*. In this film, the depth of the beauty of nature is juxtaposed against its stark simplicity embraced by the loss of self that Francis and his fellow companions endorsed in their lifestyle. See Angelo Rizzoli, *Francesco: Giullare di Dio*, directed by Roberto Rossellini (Italy: Joseph Burstyn Inc., 1950).

¹⁵⁷ Margaret R. Graver, *Stoicism and Emotion* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007), 58.

¹⁵⁸ Simone Weil, "'Le Sentiment de la Nature chez Vigny'," in *Philosophiques*, 114.

surrendering to the will of God,¹⁵⁹ thus participating in an act of love. Disorder is generated in the necessity present in nature when humankind interferes with the process. Influenced by the Stoics, Weil's standpoint was clearly that necessity in nature should be respected and accepted for harmony to occur, but it should never be imitated.¹⁶⁰ It is by participating in this mystery that the authentic experience of beauty is made, precisely as in the anecdote quoted frequently by Simone Weil when Alexander the Great was offered a helmetful of water in the stifling heat of the desert, and not having enough water for his soldiers as well, refused it.¹⁶¹ It is in the stillness of the moment that the beauty of the action was achieved, in which the alignment of the realities of the king and his soldiers became one with the harmony of the adversity reflected in nature.¹⁶² Engagement with the beauty of the world can only occur when humanity submits to it and is prepared to obey necessity, in all of its manifestations.¹⁶³

The beauty of nature in Weil's writings also presents the theological discourse exposing the tension between the notion of the personal and impersonal God, leading to a form of integration since it shows that these polarities are not diametrically opposed to each other. On one hand, the creation of nature highlights the presence of a personal God, the author of the masterpiece. However, in the same masterpiece, the signature of the author is missing, giving its beauty a degree of anonymity. This paradox shows that God is neither personal nor impersonal, or rather simultaneously both.¹⁶⁴ It is through the manifested presence of the beauty of Creation that the hidden and impersonal God can be loved.¹⁶⁵ The presence-absence of the Divine manifested in the act of Creation reiterates the mystery of the beauty of pain in

¹⁵⁹ Anderson, *Simone Weil*, 67.

¹⁶⁰ Nevin, *Portrait of a Self-Exiled Jew*, 136-139.

¹⁶¹ Simone Weil, "Le Beau et le Bien," in *Philosophiques*, 68.

¹⁶² Von der Ruhr, *An Apprenticeship in Attention*, 58.

¹⁶³ Weil, "L'amour de Dieu," 363.

¹⁶⁴ Weil, "Cahier VI," 341.

¹⁶⁵ Weil, "Cahier VIII," 124.

the mystery of nature, for the beauty of the presence of the loving Creator merges with the pain of the absence in such a way that one cannot be divorced from the other.

Weil's love for nature is indirectly an eschatological matter. This is because Weil is aware of the fact that the abode of humanity is a celestial abode, but it is impossible to love it since humanity does not have an experience of it and, therefore, loving it could easily lead to an illusion based on a figment of the imagination. According to the mystic, it is more advisable to love the terrestrial abode, in spite of all the challenges that it offers.¹⁶⁶ Humanity has a responsibility towards it, a responsibility that the Christian cannot discard by dissociating himself from it by focusing exclusively on the afterlife. Weil's preoccupation and care towards nature is an invitation to return to the roots of Christian anthropology, by fulfilling the duty of stewardship entrusted to humanity (Gen. 2:15; Ps. 104: 113). It is this stewardship that will pave the way for the eschatological experience, by challenging the erroneous schism between the terrestrial life and the heavenly one, demonstrating that the former leads to the latter.

4.4.3 The Attractiveness of Beauty: Art

In her letters to her parents, Weil speaks at great length about the profound experiences of the beauty of art she witnessed in the Italian cities of Milan, Florence and Rome.¹⁶⁷ These were subconsciously preparing her for the culmination of the mystical experience of beauty at the Portiuncula in Assisi, thus showing that art is a bridge to the Transcendent. Prior to her mystical experiences, it is clear that since her early years, Weil was aware of the spiritual implications of art. As long as it is purified from egotistic gratification, art, in its pure

¹⁶⁶ Weil, *Attente*, 171.

¹⁶⁷ Simone Weil, "Lettres d'Italie," in *Correspondance Familiale*, 208-225.

nakedness, leads to God.¹⁶⁸ This happens when a work of art is not attempting to be didactic in its approach, but when in its silence envelops the person in the mystery of its beauty.¹⁶⁹ When a ‘work of art’ has a clear meaning or interpretation, it loses its beauty. The purpose of art is its ‘purposiveness that excludes purpose.’¹⁷⁰ The beauty is not any longer in the act of perception, or in the grandeur of the work, but is found in the empty space established, an empty space whose beauty leads to the Divine.

The notion of beauty in art reaffirms that the relation between the perceiver and the work of art can only occur at a distance. It is generally forbidden to touch the painting. Another distinct trait of this relation, that can be extended to human relationships too, is the uniqueness of the moment found in the here-and-now. As soon as the moment of connection is established, through the distance, it is lost forever and can never be retrieved in spite of any human effort. The notion of newness is a distinctive trait of a real and genuine work of art according to Weil.¹⁷¹ This is particularly true in theatrical art where the action can never be captured or repeated. However, even in music or cinema or any other art form, the moment is unique because although the image is crystallised, the experience is not, and no two reactions are ever the same. Trying to possess through invasion will only highlight the loss even further.¹⁷² It is when depersonalisation occurs that newness through Divine intervention is displayed in the beauty of the work of art. The limited human personality is replaced by the impersonality of the newness of the Transcendent.

¹⁶⁸ Nevin, *Portrait of a Self-Exiled Jew*, 157.

¹⁶⁹ Simone Weil, “‘De la Perception ou l’aventure de Protée’,” in *Philosophiques*, 137-8.

¹⁷⁰ Vetö, *Religious Metaphysics*, 100.

¹⁷¹ Rozelle-Stone and Stone, *Simone Weil and Theology*, 149.

¹⁷² Steffens, “<<Par le renoncement, nourris-toi.>>,” 378-9.

4.4.4 The Attractiveness of Beauty: Liturgy

Another aspect present in the human reality that Weil perceives as beautiful is the Catholic liturgy. She believed that the beauty of Mass lay in the fact that it transcended intelligence and rationalisation:¹⁷³ it is the experience of the celebration, with the poetry of its words, that allows the participant to immerse himself in the beauty of this prayer to be able to reach God and to be able to engage deeply in relationality. As Sartre says through the words of the self-knowing man in his novel *La Nausée*, ‘The real mystery of mass lies in the communion amongst men.’¹⁷⁴ In spite of this fascination, Weil is still critical of the way how the liturgy is expressed, since in practice she notices that there is a disconnection between the beauty of the liturgy and the beauty of the nature, even though the potential is evident. Whenever this disconnection occurs, for Weil, the true beauty of the liturgy is lost. Weil shows how the liturgy of the Word is rooted in a rural setting, and that potentially the celebrant can easily create links between the reality of the analogies presented by Christ and the realities of the workers in the contemporary rural world, thus transcending the fictitious separation between life within the Church walls and life outside.¹⁷⁵ Beauty can only be expressed when it is relevant. This applies not only to the beauty of the liturgy, but to any form of beauty, and, by extension to all human relationships. If each entity fossilises itself in its own reality without discovering the *points de rencontre*, the space for beauty will not be nurtured.

¹⁷³ Weil, “Cahier VII,” 459-60.

¹⁷⁴ Jean-Paul Sartre, *La Nausée* (Paris: Gallimard, 1938), 165.

¹⁷⁵ Weil, “La vie des champs,” 264-5.

Weil's deepest fascination was with the liturgy of the Eucharist. She believed that if engaged with this beauty is so profound that it becomes transformative. Weil strongly claimed that it is impossible to gaze at the Consecrated Host without absorbing its goodness within oneself.¹⁷⁶ As stated above, Weil does not create a dichotomy between the experience lived during the celebrated liturgy and the experience outside. On the contrary, in her vision, this is seen as one seamless occurrence. To Weil, every particle of matter is Eucharist.¹⁷⁷ Weil reaches this conclusion by starting from the belief that on a regular and daily basis, God becomes matter as well through the act of Consecration.¹⁷⁸ If matter has been divinised, matter can also be *metaxu*. Each particle of nature can be a form of thanksgiving, as the etymology of the word Eucharist reveals. In Weil's vision, the experience of beauty is not a momentary one, isolated from the rest of life, giving it a quasi-surreal out-of-body occurrence, but on the contrary a unified process that energises the relational within the human.

4.5 Order and harmony

Order and harmony are aspects that have already emerged as being essential components of the definition of beauty in the perspective of Simone Weil since beauty can only be found in perfect order.¹⁷⁹ According to her, order is perceived as being a web of independent relationships that unite in perfect beauty. Weil believes that necessity is the order that God established to contain chaos.¹⁸⁰ Weil is portraying her notion of God as a God of order.¹⁸¹ The Grecian influence is evident in her perception.¹⁸² Plato directly links what is godlike to what is orderly.¹⁸³ In corollary to this, Weil goes to the extreme of saying that order is the most

¹⁷⁶ Weil, "Cahier VII," 450.

¹⁷⁷ Weil, "Cahier VII," 447.

¹⁷⁸ Weil, "Cahier IV," 90.

¹⁷⁹ Weil, "Cahier VI," 342.

¹⁸⁰ Vetö, *Religious Metaphysics*, 15.

¹⁸¹ Weil, "Cahier VI," 331.

¹⁸² Weil, *L'Enracinement*, 117.

¹⁸³ Plato, *The Republic*, 502 a-e, 211.

important element required by the soul,¹⁸⁴ without which all the other needs cannot function. She also considers disorder to be a crime. It is not only order that is essential for spiritual growth, but moreover, according to Weil, chaos is a perilous hindrance that arrests and damages the relational.

Weil recognises the hazards of disorder in society and advocates the supremacy of harmony. She still gives credit to the importance of order in the social context, even though Weil harshly criticises the Social Beast. She insists on the importance of the hierarchy on the grounds that it functions in a just manner. Peace and welfare are essential traits in this quasi-utopic image depicted by Weil in her last writings. The tension underlying this dynamic, the tension between the resistance towards the Social Beast juxtaposed against the spiritual and social need for order, is also reflected in the narrative of Prince Arjuna who cannot comprehend why he needs to enter the battlefield for the sake of harmony and order.¹⁸⁵ The same tension is evident in the dilemma faced by the British agent T. E. Lawrence, who in promising the Arabs a kingdom, knew perfectly well that he was an agent of deceit. The decision of both Arjuna and Lawrence¹⁸⁶ was the wise action that needed to be executed to ensure order, even though it seemed immoral.¹⁸⁷ The main objective in her vision was the need to establish structure and order, so that the welfare of the other could occur, even at the expense of operating within the parameters of social dynamics. Influenced also by Stoic

¹⁸⁴ The importance attributed to order might be the result of Weil's upper bourgeoisie family. Indeed, discipline, order and education were important values in the Weil family.

¹⁸⁵ In Hindu Spirituality order and harmony are pillars. The person is asked to fulfil his duties to *dharma* (order), and in so doing liberation can be attained, reaching absolute truth. Harmony is reached as the person progresses from the natural to the spiritual order through living an ethical life – the concept of *rta*, a doctrine that underlines the importance of the harmony of the moral and physical dimensions. In *The Ramayana* the struggle between Rama and Ravana symbolises the struggle between harmony and chaos. This is because Ravana disturbs the harmony by directing evil actions towards the gods: he is attacking his own order. All the elements of nature support Rama in the battle to restore harmony in the cosmos. This Hindu narrative shows that evil originates whenever the order of nature is disturbed, in much the same way like Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. See Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein* (London, The Folio Society), 2015. Rama represents harmony and obedience as he willingly consents to go into banishment when his stepmother demands it.

¹⁸⁶ Weil, "Cahier III," 331.

¹⁸⁷ Valérie Gérard, "Les contradictions du pouvoir politique," in *Lectures Politiques*, 124.

philosophy,¹⁸⁸ Weil believed that it was the duty of the individual to contribute to the welfare of society. In an apparently Machiavellian manner, it seems to be that this is a case of the end justifying the means. However, Weil's scope is wider, and transcends the egocentric attitude that is inherent in Machiavellian philosophy. To her, the orderly is not the end, but is a methodology that needs to permeate the process constantly and uncompromisingly. Weil believed firmly that 'when unrighteous disorder prevails...there is disorder of castes, social confusion'¹⁸⁹ and 'this disorder carries down to hell the family and the destroyers of the family.'¹⁹⁰ Nevertheless, this approach is problematic. It can easily be abused and exploited. The interpretation of the concept of the orderly can be intentionally misinterpreted to justify heinous acts, which discard, if not annihilate, the needs of individuals, particularly the vulnerable and the unprotected at the periphery of society.

4.5.1 Quantum physics

Weil understandably criticises the trends that were developing in the world of science in her time, making her an acute sceptic of quantum physics. Weil's point of contention was that quantum physics defied and challenged the logic and order of nature at the level of atomic structure in matter, by stating that the law of cause and effect was no longer applicable in this dimension. In line with Stoic philosophy, Weil's credence maintained that anything outside harmony and order should not be the concern of the human being who should discard any form of haphazardness.¹⁹¹ Basing her belief on Plato's Theory of Forms, the human being could only reach the Absolute through order, and, therefore, scientists who were contesting

¹⁸⁸ 'That which is not hurtful to the community cannot hurt the individual.' Marcus Aurelius, *The Communings*, V: 22, 119. "Ο τῇ πόλει οὐκ ἔστι βλαβερὸν, οὐδὲ τὸν πολίτην βλάπτει. Furthermore, Aurelius also states that 'the intelligence of the Universe is social. It hath at any rate made the lower things for the sake of the higher, and it adapted the higher to one another. Ibid., V: 30, 123. 'Ο τοῦ ὅλου νοῦς κοινωνικός. πεποίηκε γοῦν τὰ χείρω τῶν κρείττονων ἕνεκεν· καὶ τὰ κρείττω ἀλλήλο ις συνήρμοσεν.

¹⁸⁹ *Bhagavad Gita*, I: 42, 7.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., II, 70, 7.

¹⁹¹ Long, "Epicureans and Stoics," 150.

the possibility of sheer chaos at an atomic level were perceived as proposing a thought which was contrary to the Divine blueprint.¹⁹²

Paradoxically, quantum physics provides an opportunity for further deepening of Weil's spirituality. The proposed way forward, on the contrary to what Weil thought, lies in embracing this theory rather than in rejecting it. On further reflection, this proposal should not be startling. Weil had an attraction towards randomness, which she might not have been completely in touch with. This is evident in the way she presented her thoughts in the written format. Her writings in the notebooks seem chaotic. It is also evident in the life-changing journey in the Italian peninsula. Simone Weil was immediately 'seduced' by the Italian sense of spontaneity and felt deeply attracted to the Italian lifestyle that embraces a less rigid and mechanical approach to life.¹⁹³

¹⁹² It is interesting that Weil rejects chaos in favour of harmony particularly since order and structure are associated with the animus, the masculine, whereas chaos and confusion are associated with the anima, the feminine. See Beattie, *New Catholic Feminism*, 168. Weil is embracing once again the masculine within her, discarding the feminine, a dynamic which has already been studied at length earlier on. It is equally fascinating to notice that in retaining her conservative approach, Weil was also going against the grain of the times she was living in. The political milieu of a Europe in between wars and deluded by the sad events that were rampaging the continent, further reinforced the developments in the world of science. Weil was born in a Europe which was at the end of the *Belle Epoque*. Beneath its tranquil facade was a great deal of political tension. The relations between the Great Powers were not stable. Europe was a melting-pot, on the verge of defying its existing structures and entering into a phase where peace and tranquillity were going to be shattered. Post-war Europe was barely recognisable from pre-war Europe. This transition period brought with it a state of confusion and tension as Europe was attempting to redefine itself in the light of the political crisis that it was facing. Furthermore, these dynamics are also reflected in the philosophical movements that developed concurrently. French Existentialism questioned the established order, and the Absurdist movement that ensued two decades later, particularly reflected in the theatre, presented an existence devoid of meaning. As Sartre claims in his novel *La Nausée*, 'I see it, this nature, I see it...I know that its submission is laziness, I know that it does not have any laws: what is taken to be her consistency...It only has routines that can change tomorrow.' Sartre, *La Nausée*, 223-4. 'Je la vois, moi, cette nature, je la vois...Je sais que sa soumission est paresse, je sais qu'elle n'a pas de lois : ce qu'ils prennent pour sa constance...Elle n'a que des habitudes et elle peut en changer demain.'

¹⁹³ Hourdin, *Weil*, 133.

Quantum physics proposes a more profound understanding of matter that operates outside the constraints of time and space. This, within itself, offers a challenging perspective since human beings and their immediate environment function through time and space, and cause and effect, and it is precisely these paradigms that create the necessary and orderly structures for the world to operate smoothly and efficiently. Even spiritually, human beings have attempted to relate with God through time and space, because these are the only dimensions known to humanity. Since time and space condition and define human reality, anything that transcends this, is attributed to the Divine. Quantum physics challenges this paradigm by proposing that at the core of the human reality there is another dimension which functions in a way that is not observable because it operates beyond the perceived dimensions. This implies that the more internal part of the human reality might transcend the known conditions. Never was the Augustinian maxim of the ‘indwelling God’¹⁹⁴ as closely explored as with the insights proposed by quantum physics,¹⁹⁵ preceded in Stoic philosophy by Marcus Aurelius, and indicating that the human being ‘needs but to associate himself with the divine ‘genius’ in his bosom’.¹⁹⁶ Even Hindu spirituality, which has been referred to earlier as advocating the importance of order and harmony, expresses through its Vedic myths, that the cosmos is governed by the tension between order (*rta*) and chaos (*antra*).¹⁹⁷

The cardinal question that needs to be explored at this stage is how this ‘discovery’ can blend with Christian theology. This can be challenging since quantum theory expounds the philosophy that nothing is predictable and rejects the notion of any form of determinism in life.¹⁹⁸ If the subatomic realm reflects the way the Divine operates, it could be concluded that

¹⁹⁴ Augustine of Hippo, *The Confessions*, 1.1, trans., E.M. Blaiklock (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1983), 15.

¹⁹⁵ ‘There is in all things a “within” forever yearning to connect with a “without” which, in fact, is itself a larger “within”, already described as a realm of belonging.’ O’Murchu, *Quantum Theology*, 79.

¹⁹⁶ τῷ ἔνδον ἑαυτοῦ δαίμονι. Marcus Aurelius, *The Communings*, II: 13, 37.

¹⁹⁷ Wayne Whillier, “Truth, Teaching, and Tradition,” in *Hindu Spirituality*, 42.

¹⁹⁸ O’Murchu, *Quantum Theology*, 37.

God is a God of confusion who transcends, and possibly defies, all logical structures. This is not the vision of a God who has a master plan for each human being that eventually will be revealed. This is a God whose actions remain incomprehensible to the human mind, and whose encounter can only occur by staying in and bearing with the confusion. Additionally, within the context of this study, it is important to clarify how the insights of quantum physics and quantum theology can shed light on relationality, particularly since so far, relationality has been depicted through clear and logical parameters.

The starting point to plunge into this exploration would be the premise that according to quantum physics ‘nature does not show us any ‘isolated building blocks’, but rather appears as a complicated web of relations between the various parts of the whole.’¹⁹⁹ This shows that quantum physics does not deny the relational, but on the contrary, considers it as a cornerstone in its approach. Quantum physics perceives the universe not as a collection of independent physical objects, but as an interface of the relations between the various parts that constitute it.²⁰⁰ Its aim is not to dissect and to examine entities in an individualised manner, because at its deepest level, nature functions through relationality. Even the approach embraced by the scientist in quantum physics is relational: the experimenter is considered to be a participant whose involvement will alter or affect the subatomic structures.²⁰¹

¹⁹⁹ Fritjof Capra, *The Tao of Physics: An Exploration of the Parallels between Modern Physics and Eastern Mysticism* (London: Flamingo, 1992), 78.

²⁰⁰ Ibid., 150.

²⁰¹ Ibid., 152.

It is possible to extend this insight to the Divine reality since nature has already been defined as a mirror of the beauty of God, showing that there is a strong parallel between the *modus operandi* in quantum physics and in the Trinitarian reality. Individualism is not present in the supernatural realm. The Trinitarian reality is the loving relationship of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, manifested through the presence of the nothingness, invisible to the perception of the naked human eye, in the same manner as the subatomic world is invisible and absent to the perception of the naked human eye. This is a relationship which is not governed by the laws of time and space, but by the love manifested in the eternal now, devoid of any structures and predictability. If the Trinity is the absolute prototype in the understanding of the relational, since the Christian God is the only God whose ontology is rooted in relationality, it is the ‘chaos’ of the subatomic world (and of the Trinitarian experience) that can provide further insights into human relationships.

The ultimate paradigm of relationality is Jesus Christ Himself, who, in His life on Earth, mirrors the Trinitarian relationship, thus demonstrating the importance of the transcendence of structure. His experience in the human community defied all forms of structure. If His life is examined closely, a transition from structure to a total lack of it can be observed. In the first years of His life, there is a sense of structure. He was born in a family and He abided by the traditions of His religion such as being presented to the Temple (Lk. 2: 22-24). However, even at this stage, the structures are defied. He was born in a stable since there was no spatial structure available to welcome the Son of God (Mt. 1: 18-25). His family had to escape to Egypt because King Herod threatened the structure of the household Christ was born in (Mt. 2:13-15). At the age of twelve, He returned to the Temple, forsaking the structure and order of the ritual of travelling back to Nazareth with His parents (Lk. 2: 43-50). In His apostolic life, this lack of structure became even more evident. Jesus did not conform to the official

religious structures and traditions instituted by the Jewish authorities (Mk. 2:23-28). He even seemed to have lacked a sense of permanence, since He did not have a house to live in (Mt. 8: 20), and died as an outcast on a cross (Mt. 27: 45-56). However, it is the hypostatic union of Jesus Christ that makes Him the perfect embodiment of quantum theory. He is human, therefore subject externally to the rules of cause and effect, yet simultaneously Divine, transcending these same rules. As the particles in quantum physics are present and absent at the same time, a concept that the human mind cannot comprehend, so is Christ fully human and fully divine, another construct that cannot be understood since these two states are perceived as diametrically opposed. Like the innermost human reality, Christ is bound to structure as a human being, but simultaneously and paradoxically transcends it.

This study has succeeded in juxtaposing quantum theory and its insights with the fundamentals of Christian theology, but the same process cannot be extended necessarily to include the spiritual approach of Simone Weil. The basic aspects that define both standpoints seem to be too diametrically opposed for any form of reconciliation. It would have been totally unfathomable had it not been for the development of the S-Matrix Theory,²⁰² two decades after the death of the mystic. This development demonstrates that the subatomic level might not be exclusively ‘ruled’ by chaos and confusion. The subatomic level is not totally arbitrary, but seems to have clear and definite patterns, such as the distinct groups particles belong to.²⁰³ There are also symmetric patterns in the particles that have led physicists to claim that patterns reflect the fundamental laws of nature as presented in Classical Science.²⁰⁴ This corresponds with the belief shared by the Greek philosophers and eventually Simone Weil. The S-matrix theory accepts the notion of order, and, even though this theory is not yet a proof, it is one of the most commonly accepted theories that have developed in reaction to

²⁰² The S-matrix replaces the notion of space and time with abstract mathematical properties of the S-matrix.

²⁰³ Capra, *The Tao of Physics*, 273.

²⁰⁴ Ibid., 284.

quantum physics. According to this theory, order is understood as being the interconnectedness of the subatomic processes, which can then be categorised into patterns of confusion.²⁰⁵ There seems to be a tension in the atomic particles between, on one hand, a system that is characterised by haphazardness and does not follow the logic of cause and effect, and, on the other hand, fixed patterns and designs within a structure that can be partially established. It is within this tension that the spirituality of Simone Weil needs to be studied. Although she was a firm believer in the importance of structure and order, the mystic encourages the journey into nothingness, an experience of the Divine which seems to reflect this greyness between the clear-cut laws of cause and effect and the chaos of unpredictability.

4.5.2 The God of chaos or the God of harmony?

It has been established that human beings need to imitate the nature of the Trinitarian God in ensuing healthy relationships and that the indwelling God does not follow the laws of cause and effect, thus transcending any form of logic. However, the notion of structure in the haphazardness of the atomic world does not address clearly the issue of whether the Christian God should be perceived as a God of chaos or of harmony. This issue is important since it will also reflect on the relational dynamics that human beings should foster.

Weil presents a God who is partially present in the human reality through the mirroring of His perfection in beauty. This is the God of harmony and order. Yet, this is only an aspect of the Divine reality. God is also absent, and the human being needs to transcend necessity to encounter this reality, for the force of the world is a hindrance to the goodness and beauty of God. This is the God of chaos and darkness, the God who is illogical and cannot be found. In Weilian spirituality, this tension is the crux. It is by living in this paradox of the present-

²⁰⁵ Ibid., 35-1.

absent God, of the harmonious-confusing God, that the spiritual life can be lived. This needs to be done by keeping constantly in mind the complexity of the Divine reality. It also accentuates that what is diametrically opposite in the human condition, in such a way that the existence of an aspect defies the possibility of the other, might, and seems to be, integral in the nature of the Divine. Presence and absence in the human reality are opposites, as much as order and confusion are, but Plato claims that ‘the abstract concept of an opposite can never become its own opposite, either in us or in the world about us.’²⁰⁶ The Divine reality transcends these dynamics of polarity. If God is sought exclusively through order and harmony, the real God is not found, since this leads to the experience of only an aspect of the nature of the Divine. A fuller experience of God can be savoured by living through the darkness and the confusion as well.²⁰⁷

The principles of quantum theology, that emerge from quantum physics, provide a spirituality that in reality is closer to the spirituality of Weil than Euclidean science is. Primarily, it depicts a God who is immanent and simultaneously transcendent, a God that is present in the marvels of the universe, yet so transcendent to humanity, and a God who is evident and immanent in the confusion of the atoms that compose the essence of matter.²⁰⁸ As the Upanishads manifest, this is Brahman who is simultaneously within, and yet outside, of the universe.²⁰⁹ Secondly, the recognition of the principles of quantum are beyond human grasp. Quantum theology, in much the same manner as apophatic spirituality, does not attempt to limit the Divine within a definition, to prevent any form of idolatry.²¹⁰ This is the paradox of accepting that, in not understanding, one understands, and that in believing that one

²⁰⁶ αὐτὸ τὸ ἐναντίον ἑαυτῷ ἐναντίον οὐκ ἂν ποτε γένοιτο, οὔτε τὸ ἐν ἡμῖν οὔτε τὸ ἐν τῇ φύσει. Plato, *Phaedo*, 103b, (1943), 353-5.

²⁰⁷ Weil, “Réflexions sans ordre,” 274.

²⁰⁸ O’Murchu, *Quantum Theology*, 56.

²⁰⁹ Simone Weil, “Extraits d’*Upanisad* à l’Intention de Gustave Thibon,” in *Marseille*, vol II, 358.

²¹⁰ O’Murchu, *Quantum Theology*, 56.

understands, one does not. The human condition will continue to struggle with the concept of order and confusion. Like Sisyphus, it is destined to keep on rolling the boulder up the hill, thinking that at last a solution has been found for this existentialist question. Yet as soon as the ‘discovery’ is made and an explanation is reached, the system fails, and the boulder falls down the slope, and Sisyphus is obliged to start pushing it up once again. In spite of accentuating the belief in structure and order, Stoic philosophy, does admit that certainty cannot be guaranteed, and in reality, the only solution that remains for mankind to be able to function cohesively, is to accept the tension of the mystery:

There must be either a predestined Necessity and inviolable plan, or a gracious Providence, or a chaos without design or director. If then there be an inevitable Necessity, why kick against the pricks? If a Providence that is ready to be gracious, render thyself worthy of divine succour. But if a chaos without guide, congratulate thyself that amid such a surging sea thou hast in thyself a guiding reason.²¹¹

Pauline theology can offer insights to understand this dilemma better. According to the Apostle, ‘the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength’ (1 Cor. 1: 25). Paul implies that concepts can only be defined through the human experience. If applied to the concepts of order and chaos, the Pauline insight demonstrates that the only way of discussing this notion is through the man-made dictionary definitions, which may not correspond with the Divine interpretation. It could be equally valid to change the words written to the Corinthians to ‘the confusion of God is more organised than human order’. This demonstrates that the human vision is a blurred one, which

²¹¹

”Ἡτοι ἀνάγκη εἰμαρμένη <καὶ> ἀπαράβατος τάξις, ἢ πρόνοια ἰλάσιμος, ἢ φυρμός εἰκαιότητος ἀπροσάττητος. εἰ μὲν οὖν ἀπαράβατος ἀνάγκη, τί ἀντιτείνεις; εἰ δὲ πρόνοια ἐπιδεχομένη τὸ ἰλάσκεσθαι ἄξιον σαυτὸν ποιήσον τῆς ἐκ τοῦ θείου βοηθείας. εἰ δὲ φυρμός ἀνηγεμόνευτος, ἀσμένιζε, ὅτι ἐν τοιούτῳ [τῷ] κλύδωνι αὐτὸς ἔχεις ἐν σαυτῷ τινα νοῦν ἡγεμονικόν. Marcus Aurelius, *The Communings*, XII: 14, 329.

is limited by what is categorised as being orderly or chaotic for ‘what’s non-apparent is much vaster than what’s apparent.’²¹² This leads to a refusal of the man-created schism between harmony and confusion, for the two are in reality intertwined and dependent on each other since one leads to the other. Although the starting point is the appreciation and the acknowledgement of the beauty of the order of nature, the beauty of which bridges the gap with the Transcendent, it is only by crossing the liminal space of confusion that Absolute Beauty and Harmony can be reached, a harmony in which confusion and order are indistinguishably one.²¹³ It also denotes a transition that needs to occur from the order perceived in the human reality to the order of the Divine truth. This is a passage that needs to occur through the liminality of disorder.

Interestingly, even Weil refers to the bridging between order and harmony, since she admits that the constellations function through order so that in that orderly space, the disorderly can occur,²¹⁴ thus anticipating the developments of the S-Matrix theory by admitting that the orderly cannot be divorced from the disorderly. In spite of her glorification of order, Weil’s life cannot be classified as being orthodox. Her lifestyle, similar in a way to the one adopted by the influential Francis of Assisi, defied social constructs. She did not get married, she stopped working at an early age and defended the outcasts that were uncared for by society. It seems that her life was also a journey from the known to the unknown, from the structured to the unstructured. It could also be that the Weilian paradox lies in the fact that she sought the

²¹² Carlo Rovelli, *Seven brief lessons on Physics* (London: Penguin, 2016), 60-1.

²¹³ This passage from human order to Divine order is presented vividly in Egyptian mythology, a mythology that influenced Weil’s spirituality. In Egyptian mythology, as in Judaic spirituality, the sea represents chaos since its waters are uncontrollable and can be dangerous due to excessive flooding. However, it is through the chaos of the flooding that the growth of the crops can occur, thus leading to life and prosperity. See Joyce Tyldesley, *Myths & Legends of Ancient Egypt* (London: Penguin, 2011), 40. Similarly, the same paradox is present in Hindu spirituality. As stated earlier, *dharma* and *rti* are essential notions in Hindu spirituality, fostering a strong sense of respect towards harmony and order. It is only through *dharma* that *moksha*, the ultimate release from worldly attachments, can be attained. However, in the battlefield, Krishna exhorts Arjuna to detach from all *dharmas*. See *Bhagavad Gita*, XVIII: 66, 82. It is as though order can only be achieved through disorder first.

²¹⁴ Simone Weil, “Expérience de la vie d’usine,” in *Adieu à la révolution*, 304.

structure within the unorthodox, in much the same way that quantum physics claims a structure of confusion to be present within the chaos at the subatomic level of matter. This is also reflected in her spiritual writings: on one hand, Weil insists that the encounter with God occurs through the obedience to necessity and by conforming to structure.²¹⁵ On the other hand, the experience of God takes place in the empty space where cause and effect do not operate any longer. There seems to be a contradiction in her thought process, and it is this precise paradox that demonstrates that Weilian spirituality is less based on the love of order than on the integration between order and chaos. Ultimately, although ‘God is not a God of disorder but of peace’ (1 Cor. 14: 33a), it is equally true that Jesus Christ came ‘to bring fire on the earth’ (Lk. 12: 49a) and that He did not ‘come to bring peace on earth...but division’ (Lk. 12: 51).

4.5.3 Relating in chaos

These insights need to be applied to the relational dynamics. The harmony and the order felt once a relationship is established, are in contrast with the complexity of subsequent stages of any human relationship. Relationships need to mature, and in a similar way to the dynamics of the relationship with the Divine, they need to enter the world of confusion to be able to do so. This is the confusion of the unknown, where structures cease to offer any security. An intimate experience transcends measurements and any form of prediction. Following the Trinitarian model, this is a deep experience where the structures of the individuals, as individuals or as a couple, need to be eradicated so that the focus is on the relationship, and not on those who compose it.²¹⁶ It is only through interaction that reality can be reached,²¹⁷ denoting that unless structures are abandoned, the depth of reality is not attained. This is a

²¹⁵ Weil, “L’amour de Dieu,” in *Marseille*, vol I, 354.

²¹⁶ Rovelli, *Physics*, 41.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 18.

reality in which ‘there is no longer space which ‘contains’ the world, and there is no longer time ‘in which’ events occur.’²¹⁸ It is only by traversing and living this liminality, that a deeper order, in which the unknown and the known merge, evolves in such a way that a relationship can reach fruition psychologically, and above all, spiritually. Since the notions of time and space influence human life and society, this state can never be achieved in its entirety: only brief and sporadic glimpses can be experienced. It is towards these glimpses, albeit infrequent and rare, that human relationships need to be steered towards.

4.6 Mathematics

Weil’s edification of order and beauty reached its zenith in her fascination with the order found in the numerical world. She describes the latter as being both a paradigm of the Divine realm, as well as being an intermediary to an impersonal God.²¹⁹ Simone Weil, as well as other numerous scholars preceding and following her, perceived mathematics as a language that delves into the truth of the Divine. Mathematics has a dual role, for it does not only lead to God but actually becomes a methodology to grapple with this process. Like Plato, she believed that mathematics is ‘a knowledge of what eternally exists’²²⁰ and that it ‘draws the soul upwards, and compels it to reason.’²²¹ This is due to the fact that numbers are not conditioned by the subjectivity of the senses. A number is factual, operated and perceived by reason.²²² Therefore, it becomes a pointer to the Absolute. The Pythagorean influence is also very clear: the Pythagoreans believed that numbers proceeded from the Divine and produced the existent world.²²³ In other words, numbers have a Divine source and are a key to decode

²¹⁸ Ibid., 42.

²¹⁹ Weil, “Cahier VI,” 341.

²²⁰ Plato, *The Republic*, 525a-d, 238.

²²¹ Ibid., 240.

²²² This is totally opposite to Wittgenstein’s belief that mathematics is a man-made language attempting to explain realities that transcend the limitations of the human being. See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1922).

²²³ J.A. Philip, *Pythagoras and Early Pythagoreanism* (U.S.A.: University of Toronto Press, 1966), 52-3.

the building blocks of the world, thus understanding the Divine operation, accentuating the belief inherent in Pythagorean thought that the universe is ordered.

4.6.1 God as mathematics

The starting point in mathematics and in the search for an understanding of the Divine, particularly the Christian God, is the number one (although it is not the only number that reveals the nature of God). In mathematics, this number has a special function, since all other numbers emerge from it, making it neither a composite nor a prime, but a unit. All positive integers are an addition from one onward. It is also its own square, cube and factorial. This oneness is also an essential trait of the nature of God²²⁴ from whom all entities are generated. In referring to the word ‘Christ’ Ἰησοῦς, Weil shows that when the Greek letters of the word are used as numerals, they add up to 888. Consequently she explains how the number 8 is composed of 7, which represents humanity, and 1 which represents the Divine,²²⁵ thus not only showing the dual nature of Jesus Christ, but also indicating the oneness of the nature of God. Like the number one, God is the genesis of all and everything owes its existence to Him.²²⁶ As Carson insists ‘the square root of God is God every time’.²²⁷

Any number multiplied by the number one results in itself, a fact known as the multiplicative identity in mathematics. This also parallels a fundamental belief in Christian theology. Although Man is called to Divinisation, in history it is God who made the first step and became Man in the Mystery of the Incarnation. It is God who has ‘multiplied’ with humanity and became part of the human reality, an event that still happens daily in the Mystery of the Eucharist. This corresponds with the Weilian concept of *diminution*. It is the hidden God that

²²⁴ Weil, “Cahier XVI,” 275.

²²⁵ Weil, “Cahier XVII,” 325.

²²⁶ Carson, *The Square Root of God*, 10-3.

²²⁷ Ibid., 22.

disappears to allow the human reality to be. Yet his presence is even more evident in his hiddenness, in much the same way as the number one is considered to be a hidden number, found in any other positive integer, although not necessarily graphically manifested.

Geometry also supplies more information about the nature of the Transcendent. The most interesting shape, considered as the perfect shape, is the circle for ‘the circle is...the projection of Divine truth.’²²⁸ In brief, this closed shape consists of a circumference, which is composed of a set of points in a plane situated at the same distance from the centre. The circle is the locus of its points. All distinct points are equidistant from the centre, even though on the circumference they have distinct coordinates since each point has its own particular spatial reality. The Divine is the centre of the circle of the human reality: the centre remains constant, another important characteristic of the Divine, and essential in spiritual dynamics, since it is this constancy that makes the ephemeral nature of the human being whole. The radius of the circle is an analogy of Grace, the gravitational pull that enables and facilitates the relationship between the human and the Divine.²²⁹

The geometrical figure of the circle can also be interpreted in a different manner. When a circle is inscribed in an equilateral triangle, the centre coincides with the three medians of the equilateral triangle, known as the centroid. This divides the median in a ratio of 2:1. The Trinity has frequently been compared to an equilateral triangle, with the three equal and separate sides being one triangular reality.²³⁰ A comparison can be made between the space created by the sides of the triangle, which is the area of the circle, and the relationship between humanity and the Divine. The circle is in relation with each side of the triangle, and to the triangle as a whole entity. In this analogy, the space is the human being that exists

²²⁸ ‘Le cercle est... la projection de la vérité divine.’ Weil, “Cahier XIV,” in *La Connaissance Surnaturelle*, 168.

²²⁹ Carson, *The Square Root of God*, 25.

²³⁰ Cusano, *Dotta Ignoranza*, 93.

within the relationship of the three members of the Blessed Trinity, which can only attain fulfilment through being in relation with the Trinity. Its centre is dependent on the centroid. Furthermore, the area of the circle is an empty space, highlighting the Weilian paradigm of being in relation with the Divine through the clearance of any hindrances to be able to enter the void.

The concept of absolute value in mathematics can also be read as an analogy of the obedience to God.²³¹ The absolute value of a number is its distance from zero, always written as a non-negative number. The number zero has a vital function in mathematics since it gives an additive identity to all integers. It is by working out the absolute value that the absolute difference can be calculated. One of the mathematical traits of the absolute value is its non-negativity and positive-definiteness. This concept can be compared to the dynamics of spirituality. It is through obedience to the will of God,²³² as a result of the relationship with the *Logos*, that zero is reached. In this analogy, zero denotes God, not only because God is the operational source for humanity, but also due to the fact that zero refers to nothingness which has been established as an essential trait of the Divine nature. It is through the spiritual relationship, like in the calculation of the absolute value, that the person acquires positive-definiteness, denoting that spirituality is an essential component of the wellbeing of the individual.

²³¹ Von der Ruhr, *An Apprenticeship in Attention*, 46.

²³² Weil, "Cahier XI," 330.

4.6.2 Mathematics in time and space

According to Weil, mathematics²³³ has an ambiguous relationship with time and space. She considers it to be an art as opposed to a science since, according to her, mathematics is an expression. It expresses necessity but it is not affected by it, making it one of the purest and most direct forms of *metaxu*. In its spectrum, it can express unity and order, but simultaneously can portray diversity.²³⁴ This approach coincides with the analysis made in the last section, showing that spiritual growth is only possible when the individual can stay with the contradiction of the order/chaos paradox. Furthermore, mathematics, particularly geometry, expresses necessity through the relational. Geometry explores the relationships between different entities, expressed through points of contact. It demonstrates that reality is not dictated by the perception of the ego but expressed through the relational.²³⁵ Mathematics becomes a means of purification, showing the route from an egocentric existence to an other-centred way of being.²³⁶ It is only through the relational that time and space can be explored and expressed, and simultaneously transcended. Mathematics is a reliable channel to embark on this process since numbers are immanent, by being present in the world, and transcendent, by leading to the Divine.²³⁷ As the Pythagorean axiom states: all (reality) is number. Since reality has been defined as being relational, it follows that the dynamics of numbers are the prime key to understanding and living a healthy spirituality.²³⁸

²³³ When referring to mathematics, Weil mainly focuses on the branches of arithmetic and geometry and most definitely excludes algebra, which she abhorred due to its symbolic aspect and its lack of numbers. Instead of expressing necessity, according to Weil, algebra uses symbols to denote necessity.

²³⁴ Simone Weil, "Cahier II," in *Cahiers*, 233.

²³⁵ Winch, "The Just Balance", 145.

²³⁶ Von der Ruhr, *An Apprenticeship in Attention*, 44.

²³⁷ Ibid., 41.

²³⁸ Simone Weil, "Trois projets de réponse," in *Correspondance Familiale*, 466.

4.6.3 Jesus Christ, the perfect number

Mathematics expresses the reality of relationships, and the insights deduced can serve to improve relational dynamics. The first insight provided by Weil, is based on the mathematics of ratio and proportionality, highlighting the assertion made earlier in this work that Jesus Christ is the perfect *metaxu*.²³⁹ A ratio A:B is a relationship between two numbers A and B, that determines how often one of the numbers is contained by the other. This ratio can be represented by the quotient A/B which is exactly the number of times B is contained in A. The ratio of two non-zero integers results in a quotient which is rational. As shall be seen later, it is also possible to have a ratio between two incommensurable numbers, where the number of times one of the numbers is contained by the other is an irrational number. Ratios also need to exhibit the relationship between quantities of the same type.

The word 'ratio' owes its etymological roots to the Greek word *logos*, the same word used in Christian tradition for Christ, showing that Christ is a mediator, bridging humanity with the Divine, both of which can be classified through geometry as being extremes that 'require' a means in the terms of this continued proportion. Christ can be identified with the proportional mean as expounded by Pythagoras. If the ratios A:B and B:C are taken into account, it can be concluded that in the duplicate ratio A:C, B is the mean of the extremes A and C. Weil takes the extremes to signify God and humanity, two extremes that initially are seen as not being identical quantities, thus making the ratio invalid. However, through the intervention of B, that is Christ, the hypostatic union makes it possible for this proportional relationship to happen.²⁴⁰ A base-line dividing the two sections of the line needs to be drawn to work out the mean of incommensurables. Each section represents one of the two numbers in relation to each other. A semi-circle is drawn surrounding the base-line. The line joining the semi-circle

²³⁹ Supra, 214-5.

²⁴⁰ Von der Ruhr, *An Apprenticeship in Attention*, 46.

to the point where the two sections of the base-line meet is the mean. The semi-circle is outside the realm of numbers, showing that the incommensurable realities that are encountered in human existence can only be integrated by what exists outside the human reality.²⁴¹

Simone Weil's particular contribution to the study of the interface between mathematics and the spiritual domain is her analysis on irrational numbers, based on the first proofs developed by the Pythagoreans. As it is possible to discover the ratio or mean between irrational numbers through geometry, it is also equally possible for the human being to have a relationship with the Divine, in spite of the former's flawed nature.²⁴² In fact, an irrational number is a number that cannot be expressed as a fraction of two integers, showing a lack of completion, in the same manner that the human entity is flawed. This analogy is important since it explains how the connection can be made between the infinite and the finite, and the perfect with the imperfect. It was believed that a relationship could not be established between irrational numbers until the Pythagoreans made a discovery that disproved this. Likewise, the union between the human and the Divine was deemed to be equally impossible until the Incarnation proved that this 'impossibility' is possible. It was by directing her attention to the science of numbers that Weil discovered that such a seeming impossibility is actually realisable.

It is the relationship formed between the Second Person of the Holy Trinity with humankind through the act of the Incarnation, that deepens the connection with the Divine, by unravelling the mystery of the nature of the Father. The same dynamic can be seen in the analogy of the circle that has been established as representing the Divine. It is in the

²⁴¹ Anderson, *Simone Weil*, 102-4.

²⁴² *Ibid.*, 101-3.

mathematical constant pi (π), considered in fact to be a transcendental number, that the mystery of the circle is unlocked. It allows mathematical calculations about the circle to be operated, in much the same way as the relationship of humanity with Jesus Christ unveils, albeit partially, the nature of God.²⁴³ The symbol used for ‘pi’ in mathematics was derived from the first letter of the Greek word meaning ‘circumference’. It is in the circumference, that is, in the human reality, that the relationship with God is established, and not the other way round, for He is ‘Immanuel (which means “God is with us”)’ (Mt. 1: 23). It is this intervention that allows humanity to attempt to make sense of a truth that is so diametrically opposite to its ontology,²⁴⁴ for ‘God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ...so that in him we might become the righteousness of God’ (2 Cor. 5: 19a-21b).

4.7 Waiting

The concept of *attente* is central to the spirituality of Simone Weil. Like the wise virgins in the Gospel (Mt. 25: 1-13), the Christian is called to be in a state of waiting, always attentive and alert to what is happening around him, and what might possibly happen ‘because you do not know the day or the hour’ (Mt. 25: 13). The individual should not attempt to seek or approach God but wait for Him to arrive,²⁴⁵ for what is being waited for, is far too overwhelming²⁴⁶ and cannot be captured or moved into action by the human person:

...the most precious goods should not be sought after, but waited for. Since man cannot find them with his own power, and if he set off on their quest, he would find instead false goods whose falsity he would not be able to discern.²⁴⁷

²⁴³ Carson, *The Square Root of God*, 35.

²⁴⁴ Ibid., 39.

²⁴⁵ Weil, “Cahier VI,” 380.

²⁴⁶ Ibid., 295.

²⁴⁷ ‘Les biens les plus précieux ne doivent pas être cherchés, mais attendus. Car l’homme ne peut pas les trouver par ses propres forces, et s’il met à leur recherche, il trouvera à la place des faux biens dont il ne saura pas discerner la fausseté.’ Simone Weil, *Attente*, 93.

Weil also considers waiting as an integral aspect in healthy interpersonal relationships. It is the wisdom of being in the space, always alert to the needs of the other in order to intervene when and as necessary. This implies not intervening prematurely and not invading the space of the other, but being attentive to reach out when the call is made. At times, waiting also implies the need to retract and wait for an action to happen, without forcing it before it ripens. She describes the dynamic of waiting as being a correlation in which both parties are growing relationally through the process.²⁴⁸ It is through the distance of the waiting that the relationship grows, because in the interim period, the dependency of the attendee on the other is purified, whereas the superiority of the helper is diminished. It is in the space of the waiting, rather than in the helping action, that the encounter between the two happens.

4.7.1 The fear of waiting

Weil is appreciative of the difficulties of this state and how painful this can be. This is particularly evident in the last phase of her life. Politically, Weil was waiting for the opportune moment to intervene, hoping that after leaving her homeland for the United States of America, she would be sent back to France after her short stay in the United Kingdom. In spite of the waiting, Weil never touched French soil again. Her spiritual darkness was running in parallel. After a number of strong mystical moments, Weil entered a more arid phase in her spiritual life, in which she wrote extensively about the notion of waiting. She was waiting for the God that she had already deeply experienced. The barren feeling that enveloped her experience was overwhelming. Like other mystics, Weil was going through the dark night in which she could not feel the intensity of the beauty of the experience that she had once had, knowing (and possibly accepting) that the intensity would never be savoured again. The lover

²⁴⁸ Ross, "Transcendence, Immanence, and Practical Deliberation," 46.

in the attic of her mystical experience ²⁴⁹ left without leaving any sign of return.²⁵⁰ The more Weil was detached from the intensity of the spiritual consolations of her mystical experiences, and the more acute this desert experience was, the more rooted the love for the Divine became. It also seems that in the life of the mystic, love flourished more intensely in the seeming absence of the Beloved than in the evident contact. This indicates a high level of spiritual maturity, whereby the absence kindled the love further, and there seemed to be no longer any difference or distinction between absence and presence, or light and dark, for the one becomes the other in this paradox. This, however, does not lessen the pain of the experience.

Waiting is challenging and creates discomfort in the human reality, whether in a secular or in a religious context. The wounded state of the human being is affected by his existence within time paradigms: one of the effects of original sin was to make the human being subject to the passage of time,²⁵¹ and the anxiety that this can provoke. The ego is prone towards action, towards the need of achievement to glorify the state of the 'I'. The ego is stilled through the process of waiting. Weil calls this the 'condemnation to death' of the 'I', which rebels by fabricating illusions to prevent it from waiting.²⁵²

²⁴⁹ In Marseille, Simone Weil also had her third mystical experience. According to Cabaud, this experience was an 'awakened dream' whereby Simone saw a mysterious host, possibly Christ, entering her room. She was led to a church and asked to kneel down before the altar even though she was not baptised. Afterwards she was taken to an attic where he nourished her and promised to teach her, even though eventually no instructions were given. Then suddenly one day he asked her to leave, and she could never find the attic again. See Cabaud, *Fellowship in Love*, 239.

²⁵⁰ Perrin and Thibon, *As we knew her*, 83.

²⁵¹ Weil, "Cahier XIII," 104.

²⁵² 'condamnée à mort,' Weil, "Réflexions sans ordre," 275.

The state of waiting is an aspect that many contemporaries or near contemporaries of Simone Weil grappled with, demonstrating the fears that are associated with this process. Simone de Beauvoir points out in her novel *Les Mandarins* that, ‘waiting when you know what you’re waiting for isn’t bad,’²⁵³ indicating that it is the unexpectedness of waiting that makes it unbearable for the human condition. It is a waiting which is projected in the future, hoping that the reason for the waiting will be discovered since it will eventually render the expected fruit.²⁵⁴ Beckett, a few years later, incarnates the fear of waiting in his play *Waiting for Godot* (1948/9) by showing that waiting is the essence of the relational. The play also demonstrates that the human being evades waiting because of fear, possibly showing that in spite of the innate desire to relate, the human being also fears the relational, or else removes the waiting from the relational, with tragic (or rather absurd) consequences.²⁵⁵ The individual would rather relate in the way he wants to relate, that is, quickly and with immediate gratification. This is a reality that is characteristic of contemporary society that demands and expects results at the touch of a button. Relating without staying in the discomfort of the lack of clear timeframes is not a relationship built on a strong foundation.

The fear of waiting can be damaging because it can lead to violence, for violence is often a reaction to the inability to wait. Waiting is the ability to live the here-and-now, the God time. In Weilian spirituality, it is the eternal that matters,²⁵⁶ that space where time parameters no longer exist. This discomforts the human person to the extent that in the stillness of the waiting, the identity of the individual is tested. It is the reason that may lead people to resort

²⁵³ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Mandarins* (London: Harper Perennial, 2005), 13

²⁵⁴ Anurag Sharma, “Waiting for Godot: A Beckettian Counterfoil to Kierkegaardian Existentialism,” in *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd’hui* 2 (1993): 277.

²⁵⁵ There are a number of interesting episodes in the play to demonstrate this fear of waiting in connection with relating, such as when Vladimir refuses to listen to the narration of the nightmares of Estragon or when Pozzo states that he cannot wait for Godot with the tramps because of his busy schedule. See Dan O. Via, Jr. ““Waiting for Godot” and Man’s Search for Community”, in *Journal of Bible and Religion*, 30 (1962):33-34.

²⁵⁶ Simone Weil, “En quoi consiste l’Inspiration Occitanienne,” in *Marseille, vol II*, 415-16.

to violence since the uncomfortable space of waiting brings them face to face with their inner demons. The human being prefers to escape and attack violently, to displace the energy of waiting onto someone or something else, instead of waiting and embracing what lies beneath.²⁵⁷ There have been numerous episodes in history, where powers lashed out against each other, rather than waiting to negotiate a form of agreement. The same macro-reality is also paralleled in the micro-context, where in daily relationships, people act violently towards each other by leaping to irrational conclusions, rather than taking time to ponder carefully on the dynamics of the situation, and this leads to irascible reactions. The violence could also be exhibited in a less overt manner: any untimely intervention, particularly if inclusive of invasion of personal space, is a form of violence.

4.7.2 Waiting for, with, and through God

Simone Weil acknowledges the tension present in the process of waiting and recognises that it could potentially lead to despair. It is precisely at this point where nothing else is expected that the process of waiting is purified, resulting in what Weil describes as a gift of pure joy.²⁵⁸ It is only when the body experiences total exhaustion in the process of waiting that the process would have reached its objective.²⁵⁹ The difficulty of this process is that the human being cannot achieve such a state on his own. The dual challenge is evident: waiting, by default, is a passive process since no action is involved. It can be defined as being a double passive action because the human non-action of waiting needs to be purified further by supernatural intervention which requires a deeper form of passivity. It does not only imply

²⁵⁷ The Passion Narrative in the Johannine account gives us two opposing scenarios, juxtaposed against each other, to convey this process. On one hand, the Fourth Gospel presents the figure of Christ who is waiting in the Garden of Gethsemane. In this uncomfortable space, His identity is tested: the soldiers enter the Garden and ask for Jesus of Nazareth. Instead of fleeing from His identity, Christ assertively states 'I am He' (Jn. 18: 4-5). On the other hand, when Peter enters the courtyard of the High Priest to wait for the verdict, and in the uncomfortable silence of waiting is challenged by a number of people to discover whether he is a follower of Christ, he denies his identity by saying that he does not even know the man (Jn. 18: 17).

²⁵⁸ Weil, "Cahier IX," 233.

²⁵⁹ Cabaud, *Fellowship in Love*, 284.

that the person needs to refrain from any action (human component) but he also needs to surrender to the will of God (supernatural component). Waiting is a challenging process for human beings, due to the fact that in the process, the human being is no longer the main agent and cannot initiate the action.²⁶⁰

The invitation of God is to transcend these human restrictions, and to live with Him and in Him in eternity. Waiting is an important dimension of this eternal relationship of love where the time factor is surpassed. When discussing waiting in this relationship, it is frequently the waiting for God that is referred to since as finite human beings, bound by time, this aspect is a painful struggle. However, the waiting of God is often not referred to in the analysis of the relationship. God is also waiting for humanity since He desires to complete the act of Creation beyond the limitations of time by bringing humanity back to Him. Waiting is a process which the Divine engages in too, and which the human realm has difficulties with, and it is within this reality that the relationship with the Transcendent needs to occur. It is also in this context that one can understand Weil's belief that God feels obliged to respond to the patient person, as is manifested in the Parable of the Persistent Widow (Lk. 18: 1-8). This is the image of a God who can relate with the pain of waiting that Mankind endures, but it is also a God that relates with Mankind through the waiting. In the process of waiting the person is living the God experience, annihilating the dimension of time which is cardinal to the human condition but which hinders the encounter with God.²⁶¹

²⁶⁰ 'If a person should desire to do something himself with his interior faculties, he would hinder and lose the goods that God engraves upon his soul through that peace and idleness.' John of the Cross, "Dark Night, NI: 10, 5," 318. Although the Buddhist influence can be traced – the notion of *samadhi*, the narrowing down of the will to the point of being sharper in one's receptivity is similar to Simone Weil's concept of waiting- the concept of Weilian *attente* is clearly rooted in the influences of the readings on John of the Cross.

²⁶¹ Cabaud, *Fellowship in Love*, 286.

Weil develops further the theme of waiting by transcending the notion of passivity. She speaks about active passivity since she is influenced by Sanjuanist literature. The individual should not be indifferent but needs to be attentive, open and alert. The eyes of the soul need to be ‘fixed only upon God’,²⁶² waiting patiently for the Bridegroom to make His abode.²⁶³ In its passivity, it requires attention and an active interest on both sides: the attendant and the attendee.²⁶⁴ It is also a process that in its dynamics with the other requires perseverance, a virtue, as seen in the Parable of the Persistent Widow that is not associated with total passivity. The etymology of the Greek word denoting the state of waiting (ὑπομονή) implies staying strong in the waiting, in spite of the difficulties and challenges experienced in the process. This underlines the perseverance that is inherent in waiting.²⁶⁵ Therefore, waiting is relational, and in its relationality, it is loaded with action, possibly potential action. Waiting requires attention, so that when the moment of encounter occurs, the person is prepared and ready.²⁶⁶ The person needs to wait for the right moment, for the *kairos* (καίρος), the crucial time when the action can take place.

4.7.3 Waiting without hope

..I said to my soul, be still and wait without hope, for hope would be hope for the wrong thing; wait without love, for love would be love of the wrong thing; there is yet faith, but the faith and the love are all in the waiting. Wait without thought, for you are not ready for thought: So the darkness shall be the light, and the stillness the dancing.²⁶⁷

²⁶² John of the Cross, “Dark Night, NI: 3, 2,” 303.

²⁶³ ‘Il faut continuer à penser à Dieu avec toujours plus d’amour et d’attention, et obtenir par ce moyen d’être pousé toujours davantage’. Weil, *Attente*, 15. ‘One has to continue thinking about God with more love and attention, and through this medium be pushed even further.’

²⁶⁴ Ross, “Transcendence, Immanence, and Practical Deliberation,” 46.

²⁶⁵ Perrin and Thibon, *As we knew her*, 83.

²⁶⁶ Another notable influence in Weil’s spirituality about attention is the writings of Epictetus on the same subject. Epictetus writes that if the person pays attention to what he is doing, he can avoid all faults in his actions. See Epictetus, *The Discourses*, 429.

²⁶⁷ T. S. Eliot, “East Coker,” in *The Four Quartets* (Florida: Harcourt Books, 1971), 26.

Weil's spirituality challenges further the aspect of the unknown by referring to the uncomfortable possibility of waiting in vain, waiting for the Godot that never arrives. This is beautifully and painfully reflected in the poetry of Eliot, influenced directly by Weilian spirituality, in which the process of waiting is stripped from the expectation of what one is waiting for. In the human reality, waiting is only endurable because it is linked directly with hope. Otherwise it results in the anguish of uncertainty, since the person never has a guarantee that completion will ever occur,²⁶⁸ producing 'the nothingness that separates me from what I shall be.'²⁶⁹ In the same novel quoted earlier, Simone de Beauvoir claims that 'as soon as I start waiting, it seems that I'll never see the person I'm waiting for',²⁷⁰ emphasising the fear of the possibility of futility in the process. The person who hopes for something that cannot be, is deemed to be either irrational or is perceived to be in a state of pathos. For Weil, however, this is not pathetic, but essential.²⁷¹

The concern that arises is the fear of waiting in vain. There seems to be no merit at all in the process of waiting that transcends the satisfaction of attainment. Weil responds to this by maintaining that the energy saved up in the waiting is not lost.²⁷² Scientifically, this is confirmed by the law of the conservation of energy, that is, that energy can never be created or destroyed but transformed from one form to the other. The energy that Weil is referring to is love. In learning how to wait, the individual is engaged in an apprenticeship of love since in doing so, he is imitating God who waits for humanity constantly,²⁷³ like a beggar waiting for a piece of bread.²⁷⁴ This process achieves its maturity when it is transformed into a

²⁶⁸ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 60.

²⁶⁹ Ibid., 61.

²⁷⁰ Beauvoir, *The Mandarins*, 200.

²⁷¹ Simone Weil, "Petit Carnet Noir," in *Cahiers*, 405.

²⁷² Ibid., 400.

²⁷³ Vetö, *Religious Metaphysics*, 47.

²⁷⁴ Weil, "Cahier XIV," 184.

‘repose which would be *being* and no longer a waiting for being.’²⁷⁵ The focus is purified from the egocentric need of the gratification achieved by the encounter, to a state of love which is synonymous with the waiting, irrespective of the end result of the process. It implies waiting obediently to receive orders without any personal agenda or interest attached to the process.²⁷⁶ Sartre makes a linguistic difference between the verbs *s’attendre* (the reflexive mode) and *attendre*. Both mean ‘to wait for’ although the former verb denotes that the person is ‘certain’ within the uncertainty, transcending whether the action will in fact occur, whereas the second verb emphasises that the action reaches its fruition by the arrival of a determined person or aspect.²⁷⁷ It is the former that needs to be embraced, demonstrating that attention in spirituality focuses on the process and not on the final product.²⁷⁸ This virtue is reflected beautifully in the image of the women waiting patiently by the tomb of the Christ, not knowing when or if anything was going to happen (Mt. 27: 61).²⁷⁹

Weil also advocates that the individual needs to wait because eventually Grace will arrive.²⁸⁰ This might seem contradictory to the viewpoint held previously stating that it is important to wait even though there is never any certainty. It seems to be a fluctuation in thought on Weil’s end and a glimpse of hope in an otherwise absurd situation. As usual, Weil does not provide clearly delineated instructions, but in accordance to her spirituality Weil does not opt for any form of relief or comfort. On the contrary, this viewpoint actually reinforces what has been previously stated. By Grace, Weil is referring to the loving relationship with the Divine. She is not necessarily referring to the ultimate encounter with the Divine, but to the growth

²⁷⁵ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 559.

²⁷⁶ Vetö, *Religious Metaphysics*, 137.

²⁷⁷ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 556.

²⁷⁸ Von der Ruhr, *An Apprenticeship in Attention*, 26.

²⁷⁹ The Għaqda Biblika Maltija translation of this reference in Maltese is particularly interesting. ‘Izda Marija ta’ Magdala u Marija l-oħra baqgħu hemm bilqieghda biswit il-qabar.’ The alliteration of the letter (B) accentuates the importance of the virtue of waiting.

²⁸⁰ Weil, “Etudes pour une Déclaration,” 97.

that occurs through Grace in the process of waiting. This confirms even further the validity of the process of waiting since the presence of Grace is already there in the waiting for it.

4.7.4 The image of the slave

The image of the slave is an image that Weil frequently refers to in her writings and which can be identified with her spirituality of *attente*. Weil perceives the slave as being the epitome of the person who is detached and who has no restrictions or hindrances in serving the master, always ready to wait on Him and wait for Him. Weil demonstrates, by referring to the parable of the servant and the master (Lk. 17: 7-10), that human beings need to be alert and attentive, by detaching from illusions, and focusing their attention on the Divine.²⁸¹ Her discourse on the image of the slave reveals two important aspects in her spirituality. Weil, possibly influenced by John of the Cross,²⁸² perceives the human being as enslaved to

²⁸¹ Simone Weil, “Réflexion sur le bon usage des études scolaires,” in *Marseille*, vol I, 261.

²⁸² Weil was exposed to the writings of the Spanish saint sometime in 1934 when her brother André gave her the books of the Carmelite mystics. John of the Cross also became a major influence in Weil’s life from 1940 onwards when she started meditating profoundly on his writings. It is doubtful to what extent the notion of the slave in the spiritual life of Simone Weil was influenced by John of the Cross. There are already references to the image of the slave dating to an earlier period in Weil’s writings. In fact, in her years at the École Normale Supérieure, commencing in 1925, Professor Alain reinforced in Simone’s mind, the importance and necessity of reacting against oppression and tyranny, insisting on the need and obligation to be on the side of the ‘slave’, a word that extended its meaning to include anyone in society who was marginalised. See Pétrement, *Vie*, 48. Certain works of art that Simone wrote about show how strongly the image of the slave left an impact on her. One of them was the film *Modern Times*. The film narrates the story of a tramp who is trying to cope with life in a modern world dominated by machines. Apart from showing the exploitation of workers, a theme that Simone had an interest in, it also portrays them as being slaves to an oppressive system. Weil reached the same conclusion during her years as a factory worker. See Charles Chaplin, *Modern Times*, directed by Charles Chaplin (USA: United Artists/Janus Films, 1936). Another influential work was André Malraux’s novel *La Condition Humaine* (1933). The plot-line focuses on the revolt in China in 1927, and the issues of an existentialist nature faced by a diverse group of people within this socio-political milieu. See supra, 209-10. Plato also harps on the image of the slave, and the Platonic influence cannot be underestimated. Plato also perceives the soul as being a slave of the body since ‘we are slaves to its service.’ Plato, *Phaedo*, 66d, (1943), 231. ‘δουλεύοντες τῇ τοῦτου θεραπείᾳ’. Liberation from this enslavement within Platonic thought can only occur through death. The concept that was developed in the last years of Weil’s life whereby the enslaved condition of the human being needs to be purified to become a catalyst for spiritual growth is not taken from Plato. Weil might have been influenced by Plato prior to the Sanjuanist influence, in Plato’s use the image of the slave to depict the intimate relationship of the soul with the Divine, in much the same way as Weil propagates that the individual is in a relationship of slavery with God. ‘Therefore the soul will not, if it can help it, be left alone by the beautiful one, but esteems him above all others, forgets for him mother and brothers and all friends, neglects property and cares not for its loss, and despising all the customs and properties in which it formerly took pride, it is ready to be a slave and to sleep wherever it is allowed, as near as possible to the beloved.’ Plato, *Phaedrus*, 252a, trans., Harold North Fowler (Cambridge: Loeb Classical Library, 1943), 489. ‘ὅθεν δὴ ἐκοῦσα εἶναι οὐκ ἀπολείπεται, οὐδέ τινα τοῦ καλοῦ περὶ πλείονος ποιεῖται, ἀλλὰ μητέρων τε

attachments and encourages the release from these attachments. However, rather than halting at the importance of freedom from spiritual slavery, as the Spanish mystic does, Weil presents a second layer, whereby the human being is seen as being a slave to God, transiting from being a slave to worldly attachments, to becoming a slave to the Divine. It almost seems as though Weil is resigning herself to the fact that slavery is an integral part of the human condition, and it is impossible for a human being not to be a slave. She presents a process to depict how the notion of slavery is present in the human condition, and how it develops and transforms itself in the spiritual life. Like Lacan,²⁸³ she believes that initially the human person is so deluded by illusions that he grows to deny this state by believing the opposite, that is, that he is the master. The state of slavery needs to be purified by transferring it to the relationship with the Divine, after having embracing the uncomfortable truth of the nature of the human condition.²⁸⁴ The fact remains, therefore, that in spite of the illusions of mastery that the person so skilfully deceives himself to believe in, the human being remains a slave.

The notion of slavery to God becomes strongly apparent in Weil's understanding of the spiritual realm after her first mystical and religious experiences. The first experience occurred in August 1935 in Portugal. The witnessing of the fishermen's religious ritual on the evening of the parish feast of the local saint moved Simone and made her realise that Christianity was

καὶ ἀδελφῶν καὶ ἐταίρων πάντων λήλησται, καὶ οὐσίας δὲ ἀμέλειαν ἀπολλυμένης παρ' οὐδέν τίθεται, νομίῳ δὲ καὶ εὐσχημόνων, οἷς πρὸ τοῦ ἐκαλλωπίζετο, πάντων καταφρονήσασα δουλεύειν ἐτοίμη καὶ κοιμᾶσθαι ὅπου ἂν τις ἐγγυτάτω τοῦ πόθου.' In much the same way that the influence of John of the Cross on the notion of slavery in Weilian thought can be contested, likewise the impact of Franciscan spirituality is even more doubtful. Weil came in contact with this spirituality in the last phase of her life. Francis of Assisi seems to distinguish between 'servant' and 'slave'. Indeed, the word 'servant' is used more frequently, denoting the vow of obedience that is cardinal in Franciscan spirituality. However, in his "Letter to all the Faithful," Francis uses the word 'slave'. Unlike Simone Weil's usage, in the writings of the Poverello, slavery indicates the state of the soul that is subject to sin, 'being slaves to the world and of the desires of their lower nature.' Francis of Assisi, "Letter to all the Faithful," in *Omnibus of Sources*, 97. Within the Franciscan context, slavery is synonymous with sinfulness, whereas servitude is synonymous with a lifestyle that is rooted in the footsteps of Our Lord Jesus Christ.

²⁸³ Lacan, "Function and Field," 88.

²⁸⁴ 'Weil understood that the true wretchedness of humanity must include not only sin (she is always clear how real and pervasive *that* is) but also tragedy, that is fate (as in her words) the necessity of suffering in life. She sometimes refers to the consequences of sin as tragedy – the curse of fate in Oedipus and even, in the way of innocent substitutionary redemption, the fate of Christ.' Tracy, "Simone Weil: The Impossible," 236.

indeed the religion of slaves.²⁸⁵ This was a direct continuation of her experience in the factories. In the reality of the industrial setting, Weil felt that she had become brandished as a slave, having experienced the affliction of the workers who are deprived of their humanity and scarred in their spirit, and often enough, even in their bodies.²⁸⁶ In the Portuguese procession, Weil realised that Christianity was the appropriate medium to express the affliction of slavery. According to Weil, affliction needed to be recognised and expressed, and Christianity seemed to be the perfect vehicle for this expression.²⁸⁷

The image of the slave is problematic when analysed from a spiritual perspective. If, in the relationship between the human and the Divine, the former is perceived as being a slave, by default the latter will be a master. Weil seems to be interpreting this relationship in terms of a power dynamic, portraying God as being the absolute controller of events and situations, and denying free will to the individual. Weil's approach seems similar to the concept of Insha'Allah in Islamic spirituality, where everything that happens in the life of an individual has been determined from all eternity by Divine decree, making God the playwright of human lives, and human beings mere puppets in His hands. This would imply that if the grand plan has been written and established since eternity, the human being simply needs to consent and accept all the events that have been fated for him.

These arguments reduce the relationship between God and humankind in a reductionist manner, and do not reveal the depth of the dynamics of this relationship. By underlining the image of the slave, Weil was not attempting to simplify these dynamics by presenting them in an articulated dualistic manner. She was aware of the existentialist pain that human beings endure and understood that this aspect affects the relationship with the Divine. Weil

²⁸⁵ Cabaud, *Fellowship in Love*, 115.

²⁸⁶ Weil, *Attente*, 42.

²⁸⁷ Anderson, *Simone Weil*, 44.

recognised that human beings can only relate with the Divine with all the limitations and flaws that humanity is composed of. It is through this incompleteness that the relationship with the Divine can develop. The human being is called to engage relationally within this incompleteness, but this does not denote that he needs to submit himself to the state of a mere puppet. Humanity relates with God through its existentialist wounds (represented in Weilian literature by the metaphor of the slave), and in all its daily struggles. The wounds will remain, even though any excessive chains are removed and detached from, since the human being cannot erase them or detach himself completely from them. They form part of the human condition, and it is through these wounds, that the relationship needs to be nurtured.

The second petition of the Lord's Prayer can provide more insights into the relationship between God and humanity as presented in Weilian spirituality. The father-son relationship referred to in the Our Father needs to be contextualised within Jewish culture, whereby the son is perceived as being the servant of the father. The Christian, following the model presented by the Lord, is called to obey the Father in the same manner as the servant is called to obey his master.²⁸⁸ The second petition also sheds light on the fact that this relationship involves waiting – the waiting for the Kingdom. Weil speaks about obedience through the spirit,²⁸⁹ a waiting upon, that is, not abusive, but consensual. According to Weil, the notion of obedience does not oppose freedom since she does not perceive it as an imposition.²⁹⁰ There is an essential difference between 'acceptance' and 'submission',²⁹¹ the former implying a degree of freedom in which the individual is accepting to be the obedient slave, waiting for the Master and for His Kingdom. This means that in Weilian spirituality, there is a choice: to remain a slave to worldly attachments or to relate with the Master. Weil maintains, following

²⁸⁸ Andrew Murray, *With Christ in the School of Prayer* (Norcross: Trinity Press, 2013), 20.

²⁸⁹ Vetö, *Religious Metaphysics*, 35.

²⁹⁰ Weil, "L'Inspiration Occitanienne," 422.

²⁹¹ Simone Weil, "Journal d'usine," in *Adieu à la révolution*, 218.

Paul's advice, that 'the one who was free when called is Christ's slave. You were bought as a price; do not become slaves of human beings' (1 Cor. 7:22-23). Slavery is part of the human condition due to its wounds, but the human being can choose his master. The choice of the Father as a master is a choice for a master who loves humanity.

Weil's frequent use of the imagery of the slave can incriminate Weil of being a Jansenist. Pascal, who was also deeply influenced by Jansenism, uses the same image to denote an attachment whereby the individual is dependent on the flattery provided by the people around the person.²⁹² Weil, can be accused, like Pascal, of claiming that the intensity of evil within the human being enslaves him to the extent that only the select are called for salvation. This would imply that the individual has to labour and that only attrition can save a person, leading the individual to a life of severe austerity and penance. However, Weil does not connect the notion of slavery with evil: her paradigm of slavery is not a moral one, but a spiritual one, denoting that attachments are not perceived as being evil, but as being impediments in the relationship with God. In the Pascalian vision, the human being who does not operate with Grace is a slave, since slavery is part of the sinful condition of humankind. In Weil's universe, slavery also becomes an intricate part of the human condition: the redeemed person is still in a state of slavery in his relationship with God.²⁹³

Within the Christian tradition it is God Himself who becomes a slave in the relationship with mankind,²⁹⁴ for He took 'the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness' (Phil. 2: 7). This reference does not only confirm that the status of a slave is inherent within the human condition, but also indicates that since Jesus Christ embraced that state, His followers need to imitate the same dynamic. It continues to endorse the fact that in Weil's perception

²⁹² Pascal, *Pensées*, 87.

²⁹³ Coles, *Pilgrimage*, 100-1.

²⁹⁴ Weil, "Cahier XVI," 294.

slavery is not associated with moral dynamics but with spiritual ones. Pauline theology confirms that the slave-master relationship is a characteristic trait of the rapport between humanity and the Divine, and that the Christian needs to reverse the situation initiated by Christ, by now becoming a slave to his Master.

A controversial aspect that also needs to be considered in the analysis of this frequently occurring image in Weilian spirituality is its relationship with masochism. In this section the image of the slave has been interpreted within the dynamics of a social construct of a person enslaved to his master, leading to the latter's gratification. However, research shows that in the human condition, the role of the slave in fantasy or in role-playing, particularly within the sexual reality of sadomasochism, can be enjoyable and sought after. Adults allow themselves to suspend the reality of their daily lives to be able to engage with each other in a role that offers sexual enjoyment.²⁹⁵ Indeed, 'the illusion of an explicit power differential is crucial to the enjoyment of play.'²⁹⁶ It is the enjoyment of allowing oneself to be in the position of powerlessness.²⁹⁷ It is also a position that stimulates a sense of efficacy: the person feels that he is accomplishing the objective that was assigned to him by serving, thus feeling competent. Furthermore, the person savours a sense of triumph by venturing into what previously was considered to be fearful or anxiety-ridden by challenging and extending the limitations of the normal and the mundane. There is the pride of having been courageous and successful in leaping into the dark and the unknown.²⁹⁸ The question that ensues is whether this 'darker' reality of the human condition can also be attributed to Simone Weil. The participant in sadomasochism enjoys the act because it is personally crafted by himself, and

²⁹⁵ Staci Newmahr, *Playing on the Edge: Sadomasochism, Risk, and Intimacy* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2011), 60.

²⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 69.

²⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 75.

²⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 92-4.

the pain incurred is sometimes actually desired. If the same argument is applied, Weil could be accused of enjoying the playing of the role of the slave with God, and that this was a form of *jouissance* for her, rather than a journey to enter the truth of the Divine nothingness.

There are major differences between this interpretation and Weil's spiritual approach that can be used to defy this argument. Firstly, the sexual enjoyment of masochism derives from the body, even though the psychological component is strongly evident too. In Weil's submission to God, there is no physical expression: it is never embodied through practices such as flagellation. Secondly, in the practice of masochism, there is often, although not necessarily always, a sense of negotiation. The participants negotiate the boundaries of what can or cannot occur, including at times even 'safe words' as indicators to stop the play at any given moment. In the spiritual experience, these boundaries do not exist. The submission to God's will is a leap into a deep and dark abyss, which is uncharted, unsafe and obscure. Finally, in masochism, 'powerlessness' is a construct that a person agrees to create. At times it is actually the 'bottom', that is the person who is submitting, who determines the conditions and who gives the other person the power to make decisions. He becomes powerful by creating the construct of the 'bottom'. In the spiritual relationship, the powerlessness is real and no terms and conditions are discussed prior to the establishment of the relationship,²⁹⁹ for this is not a performance or an action, but a life-committed engagement.

The principal objective in this section should not be to disprove or prove the sexual association in submission, but to show that even if there was a displacement of the sexual pleasure onto Weil's relationship with God, this does not in any way diminish the depth of the relationship. In her spirituality, the role of the slave is part of the human condition. In

²⁹⁹ Ibid., 75-6.

parallel, psychology has also demonstrated that the role of the slave can offer pleasure. Weil could have been, unconsciously, also transferring the desire and the pleasure from the human to the Divine in choosing to shift this dynamic from human relationships to the relationship with God. It is precisely this illusion of enjoyment that Weil is challenging and trying to purify from. She has always been aware that in the relationship with the Divine, there are many hurdles that taint the dynamic, and has never denied that the process of purification, that is, of attaining nothingness, is a process that moves towards an objective which never reaches completion within this life because of external factors that hinder it. Pleasure could also be one of these hindrances.

Weil condemns the slave-master relationship on an interpersonal level because the paradigm should only define the relationship with the Divine. A person cannot be enslaved to another, In this context 'enslavement' is not only referring to the legal dimension but also to the deliberate, although often unconscious, decision to reproduce dynamics of enslavement in relationships. The other is divinised, thus being turned into a false idol, every time that the slave-master dyad is enacted. Waiting is imperative in any form of relationship but the image of the slave is only adequate and should be embraced in depicting the relation between the human and the Divine.

4.8 Violence in the relational

Another controversial issue in Weilian spirituality is the concept of violence. In her vision, the spiritual cannot be divorced from the violent. Weil explains that the most harmful decision that a person can do is to avoid wrestling with God. This is reminiscent of Jacob's fight with the angel (Gen. 32: 22-31). The next worst scenario would be wrestling with Him and not being beaten.³⁰⁰ The struggle with the Divine is a necessary step in spiritual growth, a step that is not devoid of pain.³⁰¹ The person needs to endure the suffering of the turmoil of the experience, which often features resistance from the human being to accept the defeat. This endurance results in the required spiritual development. The Christian needs to allow God to 'break' him as the relationship ensues, for unless this hardship occurs, there will be no form of maturity.³⁰² The intervention of the Divine to ensure that there are no excessive attachments is a violent one, mirrored in the episode narrated in the Gospel in which Christ violently cleared out all the merchants to empty the space in the Temple (Mt. 21: 12). The violent irruption of God is clear in two sources that Simone Weil refers to: the experience of the light at the entrance of Plato's cave and the dark night of the senses and of the soul in the poetry of John of the Cross.³⁰³ According to both sources, the person will initially (and frequently for a lengthier duration of time) fight against the Divine 'interference' to comfortably prolong the illusionary cocooned scenario of the cave. The person will purge from these illusions and experience the light outside of the cave only after he allows the violent action of the cutting off of the umbilical cord.

³⁰⁰ Anderson, *Simone Weil*, 68.

³⁰¹ In Kazantzakis' novel, Saint Francis tells Friar Leo that there are three kinds of prayers: 'Lord, bend me, or else I shall rot...Lord, do not bend me too much, for I shall break...Lord, bend me too much, and who cares if I break.' Nikos Kazantzakis, *God's Pauper: St. Francis of Assisi* (London: Faber & Faber, 1999), 181. Weil's prayer would have certainly been the third one.

³⁰² Weil, "Cahier XVI," 301.

³⁰³ Weil, "Dieu dans Platon," 99.

Weil unconventionally compares the mystical union with a consensual rape, where the Divine penetrates the soul and manipulates it in the way that He desires.³⁰⁴ She refers to this as the spiritual death, in the same way as the moment of orgasm is referred to as *la petite mort*, the loss of self. The soul needs to be violently broken down so that Christ can live in it, like the wheat that is broken down to be changed into bread. As the Apostle claims, ‘I no longer live, but Christ lives in me’ (Gal. 2: 20a). The disciple is following the master: Christ in the Eucharist is destroyed by digestion to become part of the body of the communicant.³⁰⁵

The cardinal question is why an all-loving God should operate with such seeming brutality. It is even more perplexing in the light of the established paradigm that the relationship between humanity and God is founded and spurred by love. Paul Tillich, a Protestant theologian, who was influenced by Weilian spirituality, delves into this contradictory notion that defies all human logic. It is, in fact, this Divine brutality that crowns the love of God for the soul, because through it, the person detaches from any other reality to realise that only the Divine can provide meaning to life.³⁰⁶ The protective layers of illusion need to be shattered. It is not so much the irruption which is violent, as much as the resistance caused by the illusion as a reaction to the Divine intervention. It is in the pain of the removal of these layers that the profound meeting is experienced. As Mother Teresa wrote, capturing what many other mystics lived in their deep experience of Christ:

...I have His darkness – I have His pain – I have the terrible longing for God – to love and not to be loved. I know I have Jesus – in that unbroken union – for my mind is fixed on Him in Him alone, in my will.³⁰⁷

³⁰⁴ Weil, “Cahier XVI,” 280.

³⁰⁵ Ibid., 303.

³⁰⁶ Tillich, *Eternal Now*, 108-11.

³⁰⁷ Kolodiejchuk, *Mother Theresa*, 223.

The etymology of the word *violence* is the Latin word *violentia* which primarily signifies vehemence. The violent irruption that Weil is referring to is more akin to the vehemence of the sexual act that although painful and penetrative is the most climaxing act of love. It is forceful and dynamic, and ‘sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow’ (Heb. 4: 12a). Violence within the Divine experience is hence not synonymous with evil or any form of harm, but with vehemence and energy.

God’s violence does not permit any human being to be in turn violent with God. Frequently in the relationship with the Divine, human beings attempt to be violent in their expression. Whenever idolatry is practised, the person is violent with God, replacing the mystery of the Divine with a fictitious golden calf. This does not only occur in instances when the person chooses the mundane over the spiritual, or opts for evil over good. The violent actions of the human being are subtler, often manipulating religion as a violent reply in the relationship with God. Any tactic used by the human being to avoid the uncomfortable actuality of the moment is a violent reply to the *modus operandi* of God, including the embracing of an eschatology that is projected to the future.³⁰⁸ God is experienced in the void of the here-and-now, and any reaction that does not conform to this experience is violent.

³⁰⁸ Rozelle-Stone and Stone, *Simone Weil and Theology*, 105.

4.8.1 A taxonomy of violence³⁰⁹

In her writings, Weil refers to what can be classified as stages or phases of violence in the relationship between the soul and God. Initially, Weil insists on the importance that the Divine destruction needs to occur internally before any external violence by human factors takes place. It is healthier if Grace operates violently first, rather than allowing human factors to create the cavity,³¹⁰ even though external violence can create the empty space for the process of spiritual growth to occur. If the latter happens first, the person will be damaged.³¹¹ If this is preceded by internal violence, according to Weil, no external factors can harm or scar the body. This demonstrates that the Divine violence, in spite of the pain incurred, is not detrimental. Furthermore, for this internal purification to occur, even though the mechanics of the process are supernatural, the person, consciously or unconsciously, would have nurtured an openness or willingness for this operation to happen.³¹² The ‘presence’ of the person is always needed: the rape cannot take place unless the person is physically present in the required space.

Following this, there is an interim stage that sheds further light on the tension highlighted earlier between the seemingly ruthless Divinity as opposed to the loving God. The irruption of God’s mystical love is violent but the process of de-creation, that is, the reply of the soul to God’s invitation to fuse with Him through annihilation, can only happen through the willingness of the individual because, according to Weil, God is non-violent. This paradox is central to the dynamic which is being explored. It is not only the setting of the fertile terrain in the first stage that makes the mechanics possible, but also an acceptance of the soul in the second stage, indicating that the human element has a part to play in this violent process.

³⁰⁹ This taxonomy should be ‘read’ as a reference point, and not as a manual that might create the risk of simplifying the profundity of spiritual and mystical experiences.

³¹⁰ Weil, “Cahier VI,” 286.

³¹¹ Vetö, *Religious Metaphysics*, 25.

³¹² Supra, 44-5.

Hence, it is the action of God that can be described as violent but not God Himself.³¹³ In fact, Balthasar refers to Divine intervention as being more of a ‘persuasion’ than a ‘compulsion’.³¹⁴ Furthermore, the effect of the accepted action becomes nourishing to the soul, spurring it to a deeper form of love, thus reconfirming that the violent irruption is not evil or harmful. It is this contradiction, defying human logic, which invites the beloved of the Divine to be transported into a new experience.

The most extreme form of internal violence happens in the final stage of this taxonomy. In this stage, the soul is deprived of God, an experience that Weil herself endured. She describes this dynamic in her mystical experience by using a most disturbing image, that of being thrown down the steps and chased away.³¹⁵ This form of violence is essential in the relationship with the Divine since it leads to more intense spiritual growth.³¹⁶ The soul is assaulted by the Divine to be abandoned afterwards, reiterating further the metaphor of sexual violation used earlier on in this section. It is in this arid space of deprivation that the soul craves for the presence of the Divine, and realises how dependent it is on Him. It is at this point, once the soul has lived through the whole cycle of violence, that it can be purified enough to launch itself into the nothingness of the Divine experience, thus reaching the culmination of the relationship with the Transcendent.

³¹³ Weil, “Cahier X,” 255.

³¹⁴ Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, 144.

³¹⁵ Weil, “Cahier XI,” 370.

³¹⁶ Weil, “Cahier III,” 297-8.

4.8.2 Violence in interpersonal relationships

Simone Weil's belief that violence is a prominent feature in the relationship with the Divine, particularly in the more advanced stages of growth, is also the basis for her insistence that violence is not justified in the relationships between human beings. Violence is unacceptable in human relationships since this act is a mimicking of the nature of God.³¹⁷ The violator is stripping the personality of the victim to inflict his. This is an action that only God should do. The act of violence transforms the person into a false idol. In the Weilian universe, violence should not be read in a narrow manner to signify uniquely physical aggression. On the contrary, it focuses mostly on affliction: the affliction that is caused by others, and the affliction that is part of the human existentialist condition. Any form of affliction that causes an oppressive power dynamic is a form of violence that harms the relationship. Weil also includes passive forms of violence, which are equally damaging in interpersonal relationships. In this context, the harm is instigated by the oppressed person who assigns the other a violent role in a power dynamic. Whenever a person places another human being at the centre of his imagination, the approach is a violent one.³¹⁸ Passive violence is also manifested whenever a required action does not occur.³¹⁹ Ignoring affliction, or being inattentive to the suffering of others, is the most serious form of violence that humanity can be accused of. Like in the myth of the ring of Gyges,³²⁰ the person becomes 'invisible' and does not perceive the evil around him and the harmful effect of his indifference which is caused by a lack of attention.

³¹⁷ Weil, "Cahier VIII," 67.

³¹⁸ Rozelle-Stone and Stone, *Simone Weil and Theology*, 105.

³¹⁹ This should not be confused with the process of waiting which is the space where physical action is not needed to occur.

³²⁰ The Myth of Gyges is a Greek narrative in mythology that refers to a magical ring, which once worn makes the person invisible. Weil was particularly interested in this myth. See Weil, "Cahier VII," 473.

Weil fears that both victims and victors suffer in violence.³²¹ The suffering of the victim is evident, but the suffering of the oppressor is not reflected upon sufficiently. In acts of violence, the oppressor is sustaining an illusion that is harmful to himself. Psychologically and spiritually, any person who is engaged in unhealthy dynamics in a relationship is not only preventing growth, but, furthermore, endorsing a state of being that is dangerous to one's wellbeing. Ultimately, violence leads to deterioration in relational dynamics.

4.8.3 Justice

The tension in the relationship between violence and justice is another important dimension explored by Weil, and whose roots lie in the Greek tradition, particularly Plato and Pythagoreanism. Frequently, society links the two together, depicting the false belief that justice cannot be established without violence. In popular culture, justice often requires violent retribution that is perceived proportionally to the severity of the crime, following the principle in the Old Testament: 'an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth' (Ex. 21: 24). This has been the argument to validate capital punishment and the notion of the just war. Weil opposes this perspective strongly. Violence within interpersonal dynamics is synonymous with evil, or to use Weilian language, with force. Although violence unfortunately is strongly omnipresent, it needs to be rejected. This requires courage.³²² Violence is a non-being since it is based on an illusion, on what is not.³²³ It is diametrically opposite to justice, which is equivalent to truth. The former cannot be separated from the latter and anything that attempts to distance justice from truth is malignant.

³²¹ Winch, *"The Just Balance"*, 146.

³²² Weil, "L'Inspiration Occitanienne," 419.

³²³ Cyril O'Regan, "Counter-mimesis and Simone Weil's Christian Platonism," in *Christian Platonism*, 186-9.

Justice, and the power that ensues from positions of persons who are designated to ensure that justice occurs, should, therefore, not be the imposition of the stronger over the weaker, even though natural law operates in this manner.³²⁴ The survival of the strongest in nature has been believed to be the primal evolutionary concept that has ensured that organisms develop further. Authentic justice disrupts this power dynamic in natural law, and questions the survival of the fittest, by safeguarding that the unfit survive as well. By nature, human beings are outside justice because they are outside God,³²⁵ and frequently function through the Machiavellian political dictum that might is right. The person who seeks justice is transiting from the natural sphere into the realm of the Divine, for injustice is separation from the Divine.³²⁶ If human beings opt to strive to relate to God and be Godlike, they need to follow the Divine model. This model portrays a God who has the faculty of playing this power game, as has been depicted and presented in numerous religious texts, but clearly does not. It is the absent God who operates amongst humanity in secret, without resorting to an imposition of power.³²⁷ Imitating the Justice of God is not only a matter of reversing the natural power dynamics, but, moreover, of doing so in secret, since any other manifestation would be the fruit of original sin. Justice loses its salient quality, and identity as soon as the deeds of the just man are manifested or expressed, thus becoming part of the realm of force.³²⁸ It becomes ostentatious and vain, glorifying itself with a sense of achievement. Justice is silent, latent and vulnerable. This is not the ‘justice’ that is promoted by society,

³²⁴ This tension is portrayed dramatically in a famous scene from Steven Spielberg’s film *Schindler’s List*. In this scene, Oskar Schindler and Amon Goethe are having a conversation in the middle of the night on a veranda overlooking the concentration camp, discussing the issue of power. Schindler argues that, ‘Power is when we have every justification to kill, and we don’t...That’s what the Emperor said. A man steals something, he’s brought in before the Emperor, he throws himself down on the ground. He begs for his life, he knows that he’s going to die. And the Emperor...pardons him. This worthless man, he lets him go.’ In spite of the advice, and the constant repetition of these words in Goethe’s head, he still kills, almost compulsively, the next Jew, when the situation arises. See Steven Spielberg, Gerald R. Molen and Brank Lustig, *Schindler’s List*, directed by Steven Spielberg (USA: Universal Pictures, 1993).

³²⁵ Weil, “Esquisses et Variantes,” 699.

³²⁶ Ibid., 692-3.

³²⁷ Weil, “Formes de l’amour implicite,” 290.

³²⁸ Weil, “Intuitions pré-chrétiennes,” 220.

and this approach is often considered as unsuccessful. However, following this model, it is important that ‘one continues to work towards justice or the mitigation of oppression even if one has no historical evidence that such justice is to be achieved.’³²⁹ It is the only path that can lead to the truth.

4.8.4 Political violence

Weil applied the philosophy of non-violence to her political enterprise. She perceived the post-Versailles tension between France and Germany, a tension which was one of the factors that led to the outbreak of the Second World War, as being a violent struggle of inequality.³³⁰ Weil compared the rapport between France and Germany with the binary of the boss-worker paradigm. She warned that the oppression imposed by a violent France was going to leave its repercussions (as it did eventually), and that violence only breeds further violence. This line of thought led Weil to insist on a reconciliatory approach, an approach which was eventually heavily criticised. Weil believed, like Neville Chamberlain, that to maintain peace, Europe had to ignore the political manoeuvres of expansion that Hitler was formulating.³³¹ Yet in ignoring Hitler’s strategy to expand the Germanic presence in other European countries, Weil could also be criticised for failing to practise her beliefs. Weil faced a challenging dilemma that required a lengthy process of discernment. She had to choose between her belief in a non-violent approach or an intervention, possibly through violence, to prevent the weak from being afflicted.

³²⁹ Blum and Seidler, *Truer Liberty*, 23.

³³⁰ Simone Weil, “Conditions d’une révolution allemande <<Et Maintenant?>>, par Léon Trotsky,” in *Engagement Syndical*, 109.

³³¹ Nevin, *Portrait of a Self-Exiled Jew*, 114.

Simone Weil was not the only one who had initially not suspected the extent of Hitler's malevolent ambition. She realised, *a posteriori*, that non-violence is only realistically possible when it manages to prevent further violence.³³² This realisation might conflict with the non-violent approach which Weil embraces in her spirituality. One needs to understand better the process that resulted in Weil's rejection of non-violence in her political stance, and how this was reconciled with her non-violent approach which she maintained as being essential in interpersonal dynamics. *The Bhagavad Gita* sheds light on this dilemma, advocating violence in the name of dharma. In this text, order is seen to be more important than non-violence, particularly since the former is a universal truth and the second is subject to the situation,³³³ thus indicating that violence can be justified and encouraged in particular contexts.³³⁴ The text, however, cannot be referred to explain adequately the transition in Weil's political philosophy. Within the context of *The Bhagavad Gita*, the battle needs to be read as a powerful metaphor for the eradication of falsehood. The dilemma is not about violence *per se*, demonstrating that there is a deeper reality than the initial reaction to the violent *façade* in the text.

The crux of the problem is essentially a terminological one: Weil did not transit politically from a person who rejected non-violence to compromise with violent interventions, but on the contrary, from a pacifist to a person who assimilated the non-violent approach to her political philosophy.³³⁵ Her transition was a reluctant one, in which she still shouldered the responsibility and the onus of the infliction of harm.³³⁶ It was not an easy decision for her to

³³² Weil, "Cahier IV," 87.

³³³ Arun Kumar Mookerjee, "Dharma as the Goal: the Mahabharata," in *Hindu Spirituality*, 141-2.

³³⁴ Catholic theology has also been concerned with moral issues that present such dilemmas. In its tradition, the moral system of probabilism states that whenever there are good reasons on both sides of the moral dilemma, the person can follow his conscience. Another system which developed is probabiliorism, which advocates the more lenient option over the stricter one. See McBrien, *Catholicism*, 907-8.

³³⁵ Christine Hof, "Kénose et Histoire: La Lecture de l'Hymne aux Philippiens," in *Simone Weil* (2014), 395.

³³⁶ Rozelle-Stone and Stone, *Simone Weil and Theology*, 44.

part with her idealistic stance. This detachment demonstrates the mature development of the relational aspect in Weil. She grew to comprehend that what mattered was the human person in the reality of the here-and-now without denying her core values: her transition of thought within this context enables the scholar to comprehend fully Weil's viewpoint on non-violence. As a pacifist, Weil was less interested in human welfare than she was in maintaining the ideal of peace. In becoming non-violent, Weil's locus shifted to the protection of the person, in which the avoidance of violence was used as a methodology which gained preference, provided it remained effective and safeguarded the weaker person. All measures had to be considered to stop violence towards the weak, even if that included 'aggressive' intervention. This approach requires more reflection and maturity, since by placing the other at the centre of the plan of action that needs to be taken, one needs to discern what the other genuinely needs, as opposed to gratifying one's philosophy, irrespectively of how benign this philosophy might be. This transition demonstrates two cardinal aspects. Primarily, Simone Weil was capable to use philosophical paradigms as tools to reach out to others, treating each context and situation as unique. Secondly, she matured in her spirituality of attention, by retracting and waiting to discern when intervention was required, and by acting when this step was appropriate and beneficial to the other.

4.9 Friendship

4.9.1 An experience in contradiction

One of the starting points of Weil's analysis on human friendship is that this relationship can never be based on equality but on harmony, thus criticising Aquinas' perspective on the matter.³³⁷ Friendship is initiated through the tension of the contradiction between necessity and freedom.³³⁸ This is the tension of the need of the individual to live autonomously, basing his decisions exclusively on the requirements of his reality, and the innate desire to relate intimately.³³⁹ It is this tension that prevents healthy and authentic friendships from becoming a form of attachment. In Weil's perspective, in a friendship the two entities remain separate to each other, ensuring detachment. However, a deep friendship also requires a loss of the person. Paradoxically, this is achieved by becoming zero, hence avoiding any form of enmeshing. Although a friendship is composed of two distinct individuals who never immerse into each other's reality, the two decide to become nothing for each other. It is in the midst of this balancing act that the harmony of the healthy dynamics of a friendship can grow:

...For Weil what is astounding about friendship, the reason she says it is a miracle, is precisely that it combines opposites: the need for the good found in each other, and at the same time a desire for the autonomy of each other.³⁴⁰

³³⁷ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Volume III, Q.114 (New York: Christian Classics, 1948), 1670-1.

³³⁸ Vetö, *Religious Metaphysics*, 151.

³³⁹ This concept was possibly influenced by Alain's attitude in class during Weil's student years. In fact, in spite of the warm rapport that Alain had with his students, he still maintained a distance, and avoided any form of confidence and disclosure because he did not want to fulfil the role of a parent with his students. See Nevin, *Portrait of a Self-Exiled Jew*, 44.

³⁴⁰ Allen Diogenes, "The Love of Particulars," in *Spirit, Nature, and Community*, 118.

Weil believes that equality can never be the starting point of a friendship but she affirms that equality can be established once the friendship matures spiritually, through the intervention of Grace.³⁴¹ It is also at this point that the love in a friendship becomes unconditional.³⁴² Equality, in turn, results in further harmony. According to Weil, the Blessed Trinity is the perfect model of the harmony and equality of friendship.³⁴³ The second best model is the friendship between God and man, and a slightly lesser, and therefore, less perfect model, due to the flaws of the human condition, is the friendship between human beings.³⁴⁴ Human friendships, albeit in their imperfections, need to follow the Trinitarian model. These imperfections in the human condition make it challenging to attain equality and harmony in friendships. One should not be deluded into believing that the achievement can be total or permanent when equality and harmony are acquired. In spite of the maturity of the friendship and the intervention of Grace, the needs of the ego, even though tempered, are still present, and often, strongly determining.

4.9.2 Simone Weil and ‘friends’

In her life, Simone Weil forged a number of remarkable and deep friendships, and it was clear that in her own way, she felt a deep inclination to bond in significant friendships. However, there still seemed to be a distance between her and some of her friends, particularly the female ones, even though she gave friendship importance in her life. Female friends were almost perceived as a threat, like a barrier for her to establish herself in a male-dominated society. In fact, in her first encounter with Urbain Thévenon at his house, she elbowed his

³⁴¹ Simone Weil, “Carnets de Londres,” in *La Connaissance Surnaturelle*, 384-5.

³⁴² Weil, “Cahier XIV,” 170.

³⁴³ Weil, “Intuitions pré-chrétiennes,” 263.

³⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 267.

wife Albertine away.³⁴⁵ Suzanne Aron, a school friend of Weil, declared that ‘she always had a deep desire for tenderness, communion and friendship, and although she desired it so strongly, she never found the secret of how to obtain it.’³⁴⁶ She almost idealised the notion of friendship to the extent that she made it unattainable.³⁴⁷ It seemed that Weil was experiencing an external struggle between, wanting and possibly needing to relate significantly and intimately – albeit not in a sexual manner – with particular people around her, and yet not knowing the grammar of how to do so, or feeling that she should detach herself from friendships.

This perplexing attitude towards female friends becomes even more bewildering when juxtaposed against Weil’s envy for unmarried mothers who raised children without the presence of a man, or her admiration for prostitutes who did not have a stable man in their lives.³⁴⁸ A sense of idealism can be observed here, particularly towards women who did not observe the social norm. It was almost as though for a woman to acquire status in her life, she needed to prove herself by doing something out of the ordinary. Simone Weil was very selective in her friendships with women, and those who managed to merit the friendship were reserved a special place in her life. Possibly the two most significant ones were both called Simone: Pétrement, who later on would write her biography, and Deitz, who returned to England with Weil after her stay in New York in the hope of contributing to the *Résistance*. The depth of these friendships is evident from the nature of the spiritual topics she often discussed with them.³⁴⁹

³⁴⁵ Hourdin, *Weil*, 62.

³⁴⁶ ‘Elle avait un désir éperdu de tendresse, de communion, d’amitié, et ce qu’elle désirait si fort, elle ne trouvait pas toujours le secret de l’obtenir.’ Pétrement, *Vie*, 44.

³⁴⁷ Christiane Rancé, *Simone Weil: Le Courage de l’Impossible* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 2009), 62.

³⁴⁸ Pétrement, *Vie*, 553.

³⁴⁹ Cabaud, *Fellowship in Love*, 279-81.

These contrasting perspectives make it difficult to evaluate fairly Weil's perspective on friendship. This becomes even more complex since Weil insists on the supremacy of friendship in the hierarchy of relationships, placing it on a deeper level than marital intimacy. This study will not attempt to analyse whether her glorification of friendship was rooted in fear since its aim is not a psychological assessment of the mystic. The scope of this work will endeavour to understand the spiritual dimension of Weil's line of thought, particularly in contrast with Evangelical principles. In Weil's case, the importance attached to friendship seems to emerge from the Pythagorean influence. The essence of the Pythagorean view on friendship is the insistence on life-commitment.³⁵⁰ Friendship is stripped of any frivolity: this is not the 'friendship' which is based on regular, or often enough, less than regular, social events where individuals enjoy themselves with the occasional opportunity of sharing some deep thoughts. In this framework, friendship is a commitment on the same grounds of holy matrimony.³⁵¹ It is a promise 'till death do us part'. The praxis of friendship is at par with, and even transcends, the matrimonial vocation, since in Weil's perception, friendship is superior because it cannot become a form of idolatry. In friendship, immersion of realities can be avoided more than they can be in the marital state.³⁵² Crick states, 'friendship is not a total identification with another and it is rarely, if ever consistent with trying to make another over into some other image than their own.'³⁵³ Immersions can be dangerous, not only because they could lead to idolatry, but furthermore, because they create an illusion in which the person can easily neglect the duties and responsibilities towards others due to the fact that all his energy is entirely projected onto the beloved. The friend does not lose the self, thus maintaining the faculty of attention towards others.³⁵⁴ Weil is not denying the sacredness of the nuptial union blessed by Christ Himself. Suffice to see the numerous references that Weil

³⁵⁰ Philip, *Pythagoras and Early Pythagoreanism*, 142-3.

³⁵¹ Supra, 67-9.

³⁵² Simone Weil, "Question de l'égalité des esprits," in *Philosophiques*, 283.

³⁵³ Crick, *Socialism*, 99.

³⁵⁴ Weil, "L'égalité des esprits," 283.

makes in her writings to intimate one-to-one relationships which are referred to extensively in this work, and most of which can be applied to friendships. However, she does place friendship on a higher plane than any other form of relationship. This is also based on the words of Christ Himself who proclaimed that ‘greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends’ (Jn. 15: 13).

4.10 Conclusion

As established initially, relationships in the Weilian universe acquire significance if they lead to the Divine. Her love for humanity is rooted in a deep love for the Divine, a love that can only be expressed through a journey into nothingness. It is this journey into nothingness that Weil deems as being beautiful, and any vehicle that allows humanity to proceed further is *metaxu*. Weil clearly indicates the depth of this process, never depicting it in a reductionist manner. This chapter did not avoid studying the themes associated with the relational in Weilian spirituality which incorporate seemingly contrasting aspects. Harmony was juxtaposed against chaos; non-violence against action; waiting as opposed to despair; and friendship with autonomy. All this highlights the tension between the *relational* and *detachment*, ultimately demonstrating that this tension is a fundamental dynamic in spiritual growth, and that these two aspects cannot exist without this tension. The acknowledgement and awareness of this tension allows for healthy relationships to grow. The tension is also the path that leads to spiritual development and maturity.

The next chapter will focus on how these two polarities can, and need to, be integrated. It is possible to transcend the tension of the two polarities through integration, after having recognised and embraced this tension. This will eventually lead to comprehending more deeply how the *relational* is dependent on *detachment*, and how a deeper sense of *detachment* can be attained through the *relational*. Moreover, it will also pave the way to depicting the integrated state that the human being attains in his spiritual growth when integration occurs.

CHAPTER V

Integration:

The encounter between detachment and the relational, and beyond

Detachment and the *relational* should not be seen exclusively as two binaries in opposition to each other. They should neither be seen as running parallel to each other. The two are more intimately linked since it is through relating that detachment is attained, and through detachment that relationships are possible. Detachment on its own leads to exclusiveness which is spiritually dangerous since it is distancing, leading to a state of hate towards the other.¹ The state of detachment in isolation can be idealistic and is not grounded. It requires the relational to provide a balanced situation, and it is this balance that leads to spiritual maturity. Indeed, ‘maturity does not mean becoming an experienced, resigned or even cynical realist who merely smiles sympathetically’.² Shifting the balance exclusively to the relational is also perilous to spiritual growth. A monistic or a quietist approach, in which everything is left in God’s hands, can cause the welfare of the individual to deteriorate, whereas a pantheistic approach in which the reality God is extended and incorporated into all the worldly matters is equally dangerous.³ In relational moments, particularly in moments of intimacy, the person feels the need to return to a state of aloneness. This aloneness is essential for the relational. It is only through detachment that the person is able to perceive what is beyond his immediate physical reality, and this process will actually lead to stronger

¹ Dupré, “Simone Weil and Platonism,” 17. The Semitic parallel found in languages such as Maltese between the words *bagħad* (to hate) and *bogħod* (far away) is of particular interest. Both having the same consonant roots b-gh-d, appearing to show a direct relationship between the two concepts.

² Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 313.

³ Anderson, *Simone Weil*, 100.

relationships,⁴ for the detachment will allow the space for a profound and effective evaluation of the relationships that one engages in. God Himself cannot free humanity from its aloneness,⁵ showing that the person needs detachment as much as the relational. It is this wholeness that forms the salvific plan for every individual who is invited to be ‘perfect, therefore, as your Heavenly Father is perfect’ (Mt. 5: 48). Integration entails this perfection. It is the journey towards wholeness and the culmination of one’s potential, and every person is called to it. The aim of this chapter is to examine how this integration between these polarities can occur.

The challenge which this chapter will endeavour to examine is how to prove the presence of this integration within the writings and life of Simone Weil. This work has already established that both *detachment* and the *relational* are essential aspects in Weilian spirituality but her writings do not seem to evidently provide a model of integration, particularly in the light of her seemingly eccentric and non-conformist actions and approach. Nonetheless, this chapter will attempt to demonstrate that Weil was ‘concerned to bring us in relation with necessity so that we can combat an inflated and egoistic sense of self’,⁶ and that in doing so, she presents a healthy model of integration to the contemporary person. She was also aware that ‘plants live on light and water, not on light. It would be a mistake to depend only on grace.’⁷ Her spirituality is as Christocentric as it is strongly grounded in social justice, each aspect being intimately intertwined. In spite of her insistence on detachment and her admonishments on the harm of the ‘collective’, Weil believed that the detached human being needed to be rooted in a social context, mirroring the paradox of indwelling presented

⁴ Tillich, *Eternal Now*, 24.

⁵ Ibid., 17.

⁶ Blum and Seidler, *Truer Liberty*, 279.

⁷ ‘...une plante vit de lumière et d’eau, non de lumière seule. Ce serait une erreur de compter sur la grâce seule.’ Weil, “Carnets de Londres,” 377.

in the Fourth Gospel whereby the disciples ‘do not belong to the world’, but have been ‘chosen out of the world’ (Jn. 15: 19).

This chapter will also shed light on the argument presented in Weilian studies that challenges the extent of the Platonic influence on Weil’s thoughts. Although Platonism is dominantly present in her philosophy and spirituality, Weil rejects the schismatic division which is typical of Plato, and embraces an approach that transcends this division. The chapter will also question the degree to which Weil’s spirituality is totally apophatic, or whether there are also strong elements of affirmative theology in her praxis. Although essentially Weil embraced the *via negativa*, it cannot be denied that contrastingly, the affirmative way is also clearly present in her spirituality, in such a manner that one cannot be divorced from the other. Her belief in the importance of non-action will provide a valid paradigm to comprehend how the *via negativa* was integrated with an affirmative form of pastoral work. All this will be finally placed within the context of her mysticism.

Weil’s approach should be studied cautiously and critically in presenting and discussing this model of integration, without glorifying or justifying all the elements in it. Her thoughts can provide a model of integration, but like any other humanly fabricated model, it has its flaws. Her life also might be perceived as an attempt to integrate, but there are various misdeeds, for even the righteous man falls seven times a day (Proverbs 24:16). Some of the decisions made, based on her belief in detachment, did not take into consideration the strife that she was inflicting on her significant others, particularly her parents.⁸ It might be argued that her extreme behaviour was never badly-intentioned, but nonetheless she must have been frequently the cause of the anxiety for those surrounding her. Furthermore, some of her

⁸ Pétrement, *Vie*, 570-1.

insights (even though she strived to practise them in her life) are in direct contrast with her temperament. The impatient Simone Weil who insisted unnervingly with the authorities to be parachuted to France during the Second World War is the person who also promoted a spirituality of waiting,⁹ and the Simone Weil who preached inclusivity is also the one who categorically rejected the Roman and the Hebrew culture. As her spiritual director Perrin witnessed, ‘although she had a clear idea of this ideal, but she was also conscious of the distance which still separated her from it.’¹⁰ The aim of this study is not to analyse a perfect model that should be replicated, but to offer reflections that the reader can digest and ponder upon. Weil should be read as a guide to the path towards God and not understood as a rigid structure that is to be copied meticulously.¹¹ Ultimately the subject being studied is not Simone Weil but the insights of her spirituality.¹²

5.1 Defining integration

This study will be referring to the term ‘integration’ as opposed to the more commonly used word in spirituality ‘integrity’. ‘Integration’, more frequently referred to in the study of psychology, is the process of becoming whole, particularly in the light of the tension of diametrically opposite polarities. Hence, the selection of this word in the lexicon used in this study was more appropriate. ‘Integrity’ also denotes wholeness but emphasises the moral

⁹ Cabaud, *Fellowship in Love*, 252.

¹⁰ Perrin and Thibon, *As we knew her*, 77.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 143.

¹² The integration which this chapter alludes to can be applied to other polarities apart from *detachment* and the *relational* for the tension associated with these two themes belongs to a broader picture. Indeed, the tension forms part of the human condition at large. In gender archetypes, for example, detachment tends to be associated with the animus, with the release (detachment) of sperm from the male body, whereas the relational with the anima, the acceptance (relational) of the sperm in the female body. See Stein, *Essays on Woman*, 95; Podles, 41-2. In the polarity between the sexes, it is this union of contraries through the sexual act that leads to the creation of a child, showing that the integration of seemingly opposing entities is a creative force. See Weil, “Cahier X,” 293.

aspect by highlighting values such as honesty and consistency. The word ‘integration’ captures more fully the dynamics being explored in this context.

Further clarification is required to explain what type of integration is being referred to within the model advocated by Simone Weil. Integration could be understood as the transformation resulting from the merging of the two polarities, but it could also be seen as a compromise between the two. This raises the question whether the detached person is still a relational person, or whether he should fuse these two aspects to the point of transforming himself. Weil does not provide a clear answer. For her, ‘the right balance consists in reality not satisfying either of the contrary needs. It would be a caricature of genuine balance if both opposing needs are satisfied in their fullness’¹³ and the ‘the point of balance is presented to the human being as the most extreme conceptual possibility, that which cannot be seen for what it is, but which however gives meaning to all.’¹⁴ It seems that in Weil’s perception, it is not the opposing polarities that need to be reconciled or changed. In the integrated state, the essence of each polarity is not destroyed. Her philosophy clearly demonstrates the existence of duality, and the difficulty that is needed to embrace this duality.¹⁵ Yet her approach cannot be defined as dualistic since she does not concur with the opposition of binary polarities,¹⁶ but in the emerging of a third reality which prevents the other two from controlling and annihilating each other.¹⁷ The enigmatic crux is to decipher what this third reality could be, in order to be able to understand the concept of integration.

¹³ ‘...le juste milieu consiste en réalité à ne satisfaire ni l’un ni l’autre des besoins contraires. C’est une caricature d’un véritable équilibre par lequel les besoins contraires sont satisfaits l’un et l’autre dans sa plénitude.’ Weil, *L’Enracinement*, 119.

¹⁴ ‘Le point d’équilibre se présente à l’homme comme l’extrême possibilité de concevoir, ce qui ne peut être vu comme tel, mais qui pourtant donne sens à tout.’ Christine Zyka, “L’Esthétique de Simone Weil. La Terre et le Ciel: une double origine de l’œuvre d’art,” in *Simone Weil* (2014), 189.

¹⁵ Springsted, *Christus Mediator*, 8.

¹⁶ McCullough, *Religious Philosophy of Weil*, 214.

¹⁷ Giulia-Paola Di Nicola and Attilio Danese, “Personne et impersonnel chez Simone Weil,” in *Simone Weil* (2014), 260.

Weil's understanding of Hindu philosophy can offer a valuable path into the matter, by highlighting the tension in question. Advaita Vedanta believes that there is no duality: moksha is attained because all is atman, transcending any form of duality.¹⁸ In his presentation of a non-dualistic model, Srikantha, founder of Shiva Advaita philosophy, refers to the analogy of the fire and the heat, whereby one cannot be separated from the other.¹⁹ Furthermore, the notion of *svaraj* (selfhood) integrates with *viraj* (otherness). The self needs to move into the other, and be in harmony together.²⁰ However, not even Vedanta is totally categorical about the nature of this tension. For example, the theologian Ramanuja presents a different perspective, insisting that when moksha is attained, although the atman is one with the Divine, it is still separate in its individuality.²¹ This demonstrates that even the Hindu influence on Weil is not enough to provide a distinct framework to the understanding of the concept.

A number of Christian theological models and paradigms can be referred to in order to understand the dynamics resulting in integration in the process of maturity. Grün refers to four essential steps that take place in this process. Initially the person has to be willing to be in a relationship with Jesus Christ. The second stage is the phase of awareness and acceptance, including of negative traits of one's personality. This leads to the third stage which is a deepening of the relationship which results in the final stage of transformation.²² Hauser describes this final stage as a state of balance between the external actions and the internal motions. It is a state where the outer reflects the inside, and the inside mirrors the outside, creating a new reality, without discarding any of the two polarities. Hauser explains

¹⁸ Krishna Sivaraman, ed., "Introduction," in *Hindu Spirituality*, xx.

¹⁹ Krishna Sivaraman, "The Sivadaita of Srikantha: Spirit as the Inner Space within the Heart," in *Hindu Spirituality*, 285

²⁰ Pandeya, "The Vision of the Vedic Seer," 20.

²¹ S.S. Raghavachar, "The Spiritual Vision of Ramanuja," in *Hindu Spirituality*, 262.

²² Anselm Grün, *Trasformazione: La via Cristiana per cambiare se stessi* (Milan: Edizione San Paolo, 2018), 9-11.

that in this state there is consistency in both the actions and the internal motions of the person. This consistency is possible within the Christian framework of spirituality because externally and internally the individual is guided by the Holy Spirit.²³ This balance could be referred to as the new transformation that the encounter with Christ generates. The Christian tradition also demonstrates that the human being is born with this potentiality of transformation, and that everyone has the faculty of experiencing it, each person according to his unique reality. The human person is conceived as a spiritual being, implying that the potential is present for him to mature in Christ through the intervention of Grace. It is Christ that propels the transformation through the willingness and the desire of the person to gaze at the mystery of Christ.²⁴ As Paul indicates, ‘And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-lasting glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit’ (2 Cor. 3,18).

The Bible presents also a number of models of transformation, clearly indicating that the mystical union leads to newness when the frailty of the human condition is embraced. The mystical experience of Moses occurs on Mount Horeb in the burning bush. Moses is asked to remove his shoes to be able to approach the bush (Ex. 3, 1 - 4, 17). This implies that he needs to be grounded within his human condition. It is only by being aware and embracing the aspects within the self that might be perceived initially as deprecating that the process of transformation can commence.²⁵ The image of the wood that purifies the water in the desert (Ex. 15, 22-24; Ex. 17, 1-7) also reiterates the same concept. The wood can be interpreted as being the fossilised aspects of the human personality that can only be transformed through the

²³ Richard J. Hauser, *Moving in the Spirit: Being a Contemplative in Action* (New York: Paulist Press, 1986), 19-20.

²⁴ Grün, *Trasformazione*, 35-6.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 39-40.

salvific purification of the encounter with Christ.²⁶ It is not a question of destroying these fossilised aspects, but of accepting and integrating them through the relationship with Christ.

In the Christian tradition, one of the most frequently cited models of spiritual growth is the Triple Way. This method of spiritual growth is divided into three stages: the purgative, the illuminative and the unitive. The final stage is the point in the journey when integration occurs. This model was formulated originally by Pseudo-Dionysius in the fifth century, but was developed further by various theologians and scholars. Weil's model of integration shares common factors with Aquinas' vision on the unitive way, even though she is not a Thomist. This will be juxtaposed against John of the Cross' insights on mystical union. In a way, Aquinas can be considered to be the precursor of John of the Cross in the 'science of love',²⁷ that 'enamors the soul, elevating it step by step unto God, its Creator.'²⁸ Aquinas also insists that the mystical union occurs by gazing one's attention onto the figure of Christ, thus demonstrating that it cannot be induced by the human being.²⁹ The soul and the Divine are united 'by the communication He made of Himself to her, by freely offering her the breast of His love'.³⁰ The emptying of the space is the only movement that the human person can invest in is for this encounter to occur,³¹ 'with no other light or guide/than the one that burned in my heart'.³² In this empty space, the person presents himself in the nakedness of his human condition to meet God. Aquinas also consolidates the fact that each person is born with a natural orientation towards God,³³ and that it is through the mystery of the Incarnation

²⁶ Ibid., 54-5.

²⁷ Heather McAdam Erb, "“Pati Divina”: Mystical Union in Aquinas," in *Faith, Scholarship, and Culture in the 21st Century*, ed. Alice Ramos and Marie I. George (Washington: American Maritain Association, 2002), 74.

²⁸ John of the Cross, "Dark Night, NII: 18, 5," 372.

²⁹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Volume IV, Q.180, A.1 (New York: Christian Classics, 1948), 1924.

³⁰ John of the Cross, "The Spiritual Canticle, C27: 3," in *John of the Cross*, 518.

³¹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Volume II, Q.61, A.5 (New York: Christian Classics, 1948), 849-50.

³² John of the Cross, "Ascent," 69.

³³ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Volume I, Q.93, A.4 (New York: Christian Classics, 1948), 471.

that the friendship between humanity and the Divine is possible.³⁴ The encounter leads to the mystical union which makes the human person a participant in the Divine nature,³⁵ and a new creation in Grace.³⁶ In the union of love, the soul is transformed into a new reality, into the reality of nothingness, the reality of love.³⁷

In Western thought, Jungian analytical psychology can be used as a tool to understand better the notion of integration.³⁸ Jung recognises the human being's struggle with opposing polarities and perceives integration as an essential component of the healing process. It is the only path that the human being can experience to access the deeper levels of spiritual life. A polarity is part of the human psyche and has a function that needs to be understood and embraced. A polarity can never be considered as wrong: it should never be annihilated or suppressed. In nature, opposites are attracted to each other, and, the angst that is generated between polarities is only a human fabrication, caused by the attempt of the person to simplify the depth of the natural (and supernatural) process, by eliminating one of the polarities. The conflict arising between polarities that do not seem to be complementary to each other, needs to be given attention, since the presence of the polarities in the psyche is required for the healthy development of the individual.³⁹ This does not imply that the process is devoid of any form of conflict. Jung maintained that this process, at least in certain cases, could be a once in a lifetime process, since only few individuals who can face it more often.⁴⁰ He defined the integration of opposites as a 'shared death',⁴¹ whereby the individual needs to

³⁴ Aquinas, *Summa*, Volume III, Q.1, A.2, 1164.

³⁵ Ibid., Q.62, A.1, 1448-9.

³⁶ Aquinas, *Summa*, Volume I, Q.93, A.4, 471.

³⁷ John of the Cross, "The Living Flame of Love, F3: 78," in *John of the Cross*, 641.

³⁸ Grün also bases his spiritual theology about transformation on Jungian analytical psychology and marries it with Biblical narratives since he states that there is a dearth of literature in Christian theology on the spirituality of transformation. Ibid., 15.

³⁹ Karl Gustav Jung, "Mandalas," in *The Essential Jung* (London: Fontana Press, 1983), 236.

⁴⁰ Karl Gustav Jung, "Introduction to the Religious and Psychological Problems of Alchemy," in *The Essential Jung*, 269-71.

⁴¹ Karl Gustav Jung, "The Conjunction," in *The Essential Jung*, 290.

part from the constructs of the self that he possessed before embarking on the process of integration to be able to grow. This journey is not linear, adding to the struggle inherent in the process. Jung describes it as being spiral, requiring the revisiting of its dynamics and causing the feeling at times of regress or ‘stuckness’. This is part of the natural process that needs to be respected for integration to be attained, and the dynamics cannot, and should not, be accelerated.⁴²

The presence of the shadow causes part of the conflict that Jung refers to. In analytical psychology, the shadow is the component in one’s personality that the individual is afraid of embracing, often as a result of social or personal issues. Integration is dependent on the recognition of the shadow.⁴³ Frequently, the perception that the individual has on one of the polarities can be a barrier that halts growth and integration, particularly if perceived as negative or as something that should not be nurtured. This leads to an overemphasis in the dyad on the polarity that the person acknowledges, and a suppression of the other polarity. The result is both an imbalance in the personality, as well as an unnecessary strain on the system of the individual. This deprives the person from absorbing the energy of the shadow and leads the other polarity into an overload in compensation for this lack. Maturity is fostered through the laborious struggle to embrace the shadow.

Jung rejects the word ‘complementarity’ and replaces it by ‘compensatory’ in his description of the process of integration. He clearly demonstrates that in the process the two aspects are not struggling to co-exist. This is not a compromise between polarities. It is rather a question of the two acting together, creating a form of modification.⁴⁴ Both can instruct and enrich each other. Denying the existence of one will deprive the person of wholeness. Nevertheless,

⁴² Jung, “Problems of Alchemy,” 278.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 280.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 273.

wholeness should not be interpreted as merging one polarity into the other. It is rather a 'melting into' that allows the opposite polarity to enhance itself by the presence of the other for it 'places it into the proper perspective,'⁴⁵ becoming something new. This model seems to be more akin to the spirituality of Simone Weil. In fact, similarly, she distinguishes between reconciliation and integration.⁴⁶ The former implies a compromise, trying to find a medium between concepts that are antagonistic to each other. This approach is not radical enough for Weil since it is an easy option.⁴⁷ The Bible strongly demonstrates that: 'I am making everything new' (Revelations 21: 5a). Indeed, 'progress of the spirit does not consist in prolonging but in renewing.'⁴⁸ The promise is not towards a compromise but towards novelty, something that did not exist before. This promise also entails a challenge, almost impossible to accomplish, for the human being struggles to rely on what transcends his immediate perception. This notion is captured strongly in the Biblical episode of the Transfiguration of Christ on Mount Tabor. The apostles were so terrified of the beauty of the experience of the 'newness' of Christ that they threw themselves on the ground (Mt 17, 1-8). As Campbell says, this episode from the Bible 'displays in a single image the mystery of the ready transit.'⁴⁹ It is precisely the impossibility of integration that is of interest to Weil. It is this spirituality of contradiction that this study will explore, in order to be able to wrestle further with the issue, and define integration within Weilian spirituality.

⁴⁵ Henri du Lubac, *Paradoxes of Faith* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987), 11.

⁴⁶ Vetö, *Religious Metaphysics*, 2.

⁴⁷ McCullough, *Religious Philosophy of Weil*, 39.

⁴⁸ Lubac, *Paradoxes of Faith*, 101.

⁴⁹ Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (London: Fontana Press, 1993), 229.

5.2 A spirituality of contradiction

Weil is aware that humanity strives to avoid contradictions but nevertheless she maintains that contradictions should never be discarded, since it is only through contradiction that truth and integration can be attained.⁵⁰ She is also aware that truth is fleeting and elusive, making it difficult for the person on the spiritual journey to discover it easily. The paradox lies in the fact that as soon as the person thinks that truth has been unveiled, he realises at the same point that the path is much longer.⁵¹ The more it is discovered, the more the person becomes conscious of how much more the truth needs to be sought for.⁵² Hence, it is precisely this contradiction that characterises the search for truth, this finding in the non-finding.⁵³ Completeness, which can be classified as being another word for the absolute, is reached through contradiction.

Springsted remarks that Weil's understanding of the term *contradiction* is very 'loose'. He clarifies that it is remotely connected with the standard logical meaning of contradiction. In Weilian understanding, *contradiction* is an opposition between perceptions, ideas or thoughts that can lead to growth. The paradox which is inherent in contradiction does not imply that it is devoid of meaning since it challenges the person to deconstruct all his securities, resulting in change.⁵⁴ Contradiction is not a state, since this would infer that being a static reality, development cannot occur. It is a rapport between two polarities, through which maturity can be attained.⁵⁵ Contradiction spurs the person to grow by journeying towards the truth. The person is either obliged to search for the truth when faced with the hindrances that contradictions evoke, or else to seek for a way to remove the contradictory aspects. The latter

⁵⁰ Blum and Seidler, *Truer Liberty*, 278.

⁵¹ Lubac, *Paradoxes of Faith*, 14.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 48.

⁵³ Weil, "Cahier V," 189.

⁵⁴ Springsted, *Christus Mediator*, 85.

⁵⁵ Gabellieri, *Être et Don*, 442.

is a misapplication of energy that Weil strongly recommends against since it leads to the creation of further illusions. Weil also links the notion of contradiction with the notion of incommensuration⁵⁶, frequently interchanging the two terms. This demonstrates that for Weil contradiction can never be resolved, and should never be resolved. It is intimately connected with the sense of mystery and awe. According to Weil, the notion of mystery requires two terms which are in contradiction with each other, in such a manner that when one term is suppressed, this leads to the negation of the meaning of the other term.⁵⁷

Weil also insists on the importance of facing contradictions that are encountered in life and not to attempt to change them. Her approach is not Hegelian. She does not resolve the complexity of issues by presenting a synthesis of two opposing ideas. The *for* is never transformed into an *against*.⁵⁸ According to Kempfner, her approach is based on Platonic dialectics which embrace contradiction as a means of journeying from the oppression of the cave to the contact with the Divine light.⁵⁹ Weil does not fear opposing forces and is not willing to compromise on their identities by synthesising them. According to her, this would be a blatant lie.⁶⁰ On the contrary, she perceives opposing forces as being a point of encounter with others and the Transcendent since ‘bridges depend on the balance of opposing forces, not to their mutual destruction but to create a positive force.’⁶¹ In fact, Weil presents a list of contradictory aspects juxtaposed against each other in the needs of the soul that she presented in her manifesto for a liberated France.⁶² It is only by living out this contradiction that freedom, and integration, can be attained, hence arriving at a new reality:

⁵⁶ Supra, 244-5.

⁵⁷ Springsted, *Christus Mediator*, 85-89.

⁵⁸ Lubac, *Paradoxes of Faith*, 11-2.

⁵⁹ Gaston Kempfner, *La Philosophie Mystique de Simone Weil* (Paris : La Colombe, 1960), 131.

⁶⁰ Pétrement, *Vie*, 652.

⁶¹ Eric O. Springsted, “From words to the Word: Weilian resources for a new Christian humanism,” in *Spirit, Nature, and Community*, 205.

⁶² See Weil, *L’Enracinement*.

Oddly enough the paradox is one of our most valuable spiritual possessions, while uniformity of meaning is a sign of weakness...Non-ambiguity and non-contradiction are one-sided and thus unsuited to express the incomprehensible.⁶³

Simone Weil's spirituality of contradiction is embedded in her philosophical perspective. Weil can be considered to be an existentialist more than an essentialist.⁶⁴ Actions in life do not necessarily have a purpose, or if they do, it is not important to discover their objective. Man exists, and a vital part of the reality of his existence is contradiction. His journey should not focus on unravelling the contradictory to search for the latent purpose. There is no guarantee that there is a latent purpose, and if there is, this could only be recognising and accepting that there is none.⁶⁵ The human being needs to embrace the contradictory, and invest his energy in living the paradox of life, which by default is beyond his comprehension. His existence is within the contradictory, and it is contradiction that allows him to grow and mature.

The starting point to understand the relevance of the contradictory lies in the finitude of the human condition. There are layers of wisdom that still need to be discovered, and which are considered to be a contradiction to the contemporary scientist, in spite of the advances that science and technology have made. Sanatana Dharma⁶⁶ believes that the limitations of empirical knowledge can be surpassed only by embracing these contradictions.⁶⁷ Furthermore, scepticism has shown that what is perceived by the sensory is not necessarily a reflection of reality. What may initially seem to be contradictory might actually not be a

⁶³ Jung, "Problems of Alchemy," 265.

⁶⁴ Erich Przywara, "Edith Stein et Simone Weil. Essentialisme, existentialisme, Analogie," in *Les Etudes philosophiques* Volume 3 (1956), 459-62.

⁶⁵ McCullough, *Religious Philosophy of Weil*, 20.

⁶⁶ Sanatana Dharma is the traditional name for Hinduism. The term means 'real service'. It is an ethical practice, by which enlightenment can be reached. Thanks are due to Prof Michael Zammit for his advice on the use of this term.

⁶⁷ Whillier, "Truth, Teaching, and Tradition," 47.

contradiction at all. For instance, the shadow is produced by the illumination of the light, and yet is registered optically as being dark.⁶⁸ It is only by surpassing the initially seeming contradiction that the reality can be understood. The contradiction in the eyes of the human being is not a contradiction for God.⁶⁹

In this section, contradiction has been presented as being a cause of humanity's limitations. This perspective induces the person to endeavour to diminish the contradictory. It is also a perspective that presents contradiction in a negative light and invites humanity to eradicate contradiction by pursuing deeper in scientific knowledge, in an attempt to explain and resolve the contradiction. This has been the mission of science from the Renaissance onward. Weil challenges this perspective by examining whether God works through contradiction, presenting it no longer as negative but as one of the tools that the Divine operates with. In doing so, Weil contests the Thomist assertion that 'whatever implies contradiction does not come within the scope of divine omnipotence, because it cannot have the aspect of human possibility.'⁷⁰ Contrarily, she asserts that contradiction falls under divine omnipotence since it does not have the aspect of human possibility, 'for what is impossible with man is possible with God' (Lk. 18: 27) for 'my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways' (Is. 55: 8). In her spirituality of contradiction, Weil is not referring to a 'God of the gaps', that is, the abusive usage of exploiting the notion of God to fill in the gaps of what cannot be accounted for through human knowledge. The 'contradictory' nature of God transcends human logic. It is only a God that operates through contradiction who is able to reconcile His loving nature with His silence.⁷¹ Hence, Weil is referring to 'irreconcilable

⁶⁸ Weil, "Cahier IV," 69.

⁶⁹ Simone Weil, "Cahier XVII," in *La Connaissance Surnaturelle*, 316.

⁷⁰ Aquinas, *Summa*, Volume I, Q.25, A.3, 138.

⁷¹ The silence of God is a theme that has been explored amply in literature and in theology. A striking novel is Shusaku Endo's *Silence* (1966) that presents the narrative of two Jesuit young priests in the seventeenth century who venture into Japan to discover whether their admired mentor really apostatised in front of the torture of the

contraries', contradictions that are present, not due to lack of scientific expertise, but because they are meant to be irreconcilable.⁷² She also states that God works through *koan*,⁷³ a story, statement or question, popular as a format in Zen Buddhism, whose intention is to raise a doubt to spur growth. Hindu spirituality was also influential in the development of the belief of the importance of paradox in Weilian spirituality, particularly the Vedic school of spirituality. The *rishi* (sage), as Weil understands the term, reaches a stage in the spiritual journey where all polarities are contradictorily converged,⁷⁴ where ignorance is blended with knowledge, and becoming with non-becoming, to form a new experience.⁷⁵ Weil's affinity with Pythagoreanism is also at the core of this philosophy. Pythagoreanism leads her to believe that harmony exists in the space between entities that are pure,⁷⁶ even if these seem to be contradictory to each other. Heraclitean philosophy was also influential in the development of this spirituality. According to this philosophy, contradictions should not be opposed to each other since truth is attained in the tension of their integration.⁷⁷ Harmony can only be achieved through the embracing of contradiction.

persecution, only to discover the brutality of the silence of God: '...What he could not understand was the stillness of the courtyard, the voice of the cicada, the whirling wings of the flies. A man had died. Yet the outside world went on as if nothing had happened. Could anything be more crazy? Was this martyrdom? Why are you silent? Here this one-eyed man has died – and for you. You ought to know. Why does this stillness continue? This noon-day stillness. The sound of the flies – this crazy thing, this cruel business. And you avert your face as though indifferent. This...this I cannot bear.' Shusaku Endo, *Silence* (London: Peter Owen Publishers, 2007), 194-5.

⁷² Anderson, *Simone Weil*, 105.

⁷³ Weil, "Cahier IX," 182.

⁷⁴ Pandeya, "The Vision of the Vedic Seer," 6.

⁷⁵ Weil, "Extraits d'*Upanisad*," 358.

⁷⁶ Weil, "L'Inspiration Occitanienne," 421-2.

⁷⁷ Ted Honderich (ed.), *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 351-2.

Weil roots her argument about contradiction essentially in Christian thought⁷⁸ by referring to the Mystery of the Consecration where the relational transformation of love for humanity by the omnipotent God is revealed through a transformation into nothingness. It is further reinforced by the Mystery of the Incarnation and of Creation. The former is an embodiment of a contradiction: the essence of the Divine becomes flesh, a reality which is diametrically opposite to the God reality since it is finite and limited.⁷⁹ The same can be applied to the act of Creation, which can be described as the supreme contradiction of the creator-creature.⁸⁰ The infinity of God did not require anything, and human logic indicates that acquisition stems always out of necessity. Indeed, God does not need to be in a relationship with humanity. He cannot even be loved by humanity since only the Divine can love itself in a Godly manner.⁸¹ However, He chooses not to be God without Man, almost creating a seeming dependence on the relationship with humanity.⁸² It is contradiction that spurred the Divine to create something outside of Himself. The contradiction is also reiterated through the absence of God: by withdrawing and forfeiting His space, He created a reality where humanity has the possibility of engaging in a relationship with Him.⁸³ The creation of this reality resulted in yet another contradiction, which permeates the spirituality of Simone Weil, the contradiction between necessity and the good, that is, the tension between the natural and the supernatural, both simultaneously present.⁸⁴ This paradox is possible since God works through contradiction. This ontological contradiction inherent in the nature and *modus operandi* of God is love.⁸⁵

⁷⁸ McCullough, *Religious Philosophy of Weil*, 40.

⁷⁹ Jean-Luc P rill  , "Le Pythagorisme de Simone Weil," in *Simone Weil* (2014), 150.

⁸⁰ McCullough, *Religious Philosophy of Weil*, 15.

⁸¹ Vet , *Religious Metaphysics*, 114.

⁸² Jenkins, Introduction to *Theology and Joy*, 5.

⁸³ Kempfner, *Philosophie Mystique*, 97.

⁸⁴ McCullough, *Religious Philosophy of Weil*, 42.

⁸⁵ Weil, "Cahier VIII," 63.

The contradiction in the act of Creation is intimately entwined with the mystery of the Redemption, when the climactic point is reached where the all-powerful Father is integrated with the broken Christ on the cross.⁸⁶ The Father, creator of all being, is juxtaposed against the Son, who embodies the renunciation of all being.⁸⁷ Contradictorily they are one God. Indeed, the distance between the Father and the Son becomes the height of the loving experience.⁸⁸ It is a height that remains inexplicable and transcends all forms of rationality, reaching the harmony of the integration between the questioning of Christ and the silence of the Father.⁸⁹ No answer was given, and no expression of emotion was manifested except for destructive images of pathetic fallacy that highlight even more the hollow abyss of annihilation.⁹⁰ The Crucifixion, which Weil perceives geometrically as being a union of two contraries (the vertical against the horizontal), incarnates the historical moment of the absent God being so contradictorily present, in such a way that absence and presence become a new experience – the act of redemption.⁹¹ It is precisely in this moment of total surrender, when the questioning ceases and no answer is any longer expected, that the most elevated form of love ever in human history occurs – the historical moment that has captured in its perfection the integration between detachment and the relational, and in which the totality of its inclusiveness (the redemption of the entire human race) becomes one with the totality of exclusiveness.⁹² It is a contradictory moment that defies any form of logic for ‘we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Gentiles’ (1 Cor. 1: 23). This contradiction is reflective of the ontology of the relationship between the Father and the Son: the indwelling of the Son with the Father – ‘I am in the Father, and that the Father is in

⁸⁶ Weil, “Cahier X,” 249.

⁸⁷ Weil, “Cahier XIII,” 130.

⁸⁸ Weil, “Cahier XI,” 398.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 406.

⁹⁰ ‘At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. The earth shook, the rocks split and the tombs broke open. The bodies of many holy people who had died were raised to life.’ (Mt. 27: 51-52).

⁹¹ Weil, “Cahier VIII,” 89.

⁹² Buber, *I and Thou*, 64.

me' (Jn. 14: 10a) makes them one and yet distinct – 'No one comes to the Father except through me' (Jn. 14: 6b). The seven last phrases of Christ on the Cross also present this contradiction in the relationship with the Father. It is only possible to relate with God and be in union with His Spirit – 'Father, into your hands I commit my spirit' (Lk. 23: 46) – through the abandonment, vulnerability and surrender required by the detachment from others – 'woman, here is your son' (Jn. 19: 26b) and of the Other – 'My God, why have you forsaken me?' (Mt. 27: 46b). It is precisely the 'contradictory' nature of this relationship that is central to the spirituality of Simone Weil. Her spirituality of contradiction is deep-rooted in the Bible,⁹³ whereby 'every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain' (Is. 40: 4). This demonstrates further that contradiction is the *modus operandi* of the Divine, clearly manifested in what Przywara defines as the 'triple folie de Dieu', that is the Creation, the Incarnation and the Redemptive Act.⁹⁴ The human being is asked to follow in the same footsteps and to embrace contradiction because it is 'the lever towards transcendence.'⁹⁵

Weil also refers to the liturgical life of the Church, apart from using the Bible as a source to sustain her belief in the spirituality of contradiction. The beauty of the liturgy is within the contradiction itself. In the Sacraments, the impure is mixed with the pure. This seemingly contradictory action brings forth powerfully the splendour of the sacramental life, where through this paradox, the participant, in spite of his impurity and incompleteness, enters into a new life with, and through, the completeness of Christ.⁹⁶ A new reality is created in the sacramental life for the person who is transformed beautifully through the encounter with Christ.

⁹³ Weil, "Cahier IX," 160.

⁹⁴ Przywara, "Edith Stein et Simone Weil," 470.

⁹⁵ 'La contradiction est le levier de la transcendence.' Weil, "Cahier XIV," 177.

⁹⁶ Weil, "Cahier XI," 407.

Christianity can also be read as a belief system that is based on contradiction. Its core principles are essentially contradictory, at least in the human mind, such as the Trinitarian mystery or the Virgin birth.⁹⁷ It is the religion where the Alpha and the Omega are incarnated in the One. Contradiction is an essential part of the vision presented by Christianity where ‘the wolf and the lamb will feed together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox, and dust will be the serpent’s food’ (Is. 65: 25). Christ and Saint Paul also used paradoxes and never attempted to explain them (Mt. 10: 39; 2 Cor. 12: 9).⁹⁸ The institutional and political aspects of the religion are also contradictory, for the conservative operates with the revolutionary, since the established power of the hierarchy is rooted in a radical belief that does not compromise.⁹⁹ The revolutionary will accuse Christianity of not being sensitive towards his ideals, whereas the conservative would feel that the depth of the Church escapes his requirements for absolute order. The reason for this is that the Church does not belong to Mankind, but belongs to God, whose *modus operandi* is contradiction.¹⁰⁰ The most mysterious paradox in the reality of the Catholic Church is the fact that it is composed of sinners who are constantly erring, and yet it is spurred on constantly by the Holy Spirit.¹⁰¹ In this light, one can understand why although Weil was influenced by other faith systems, which also promote contradiction, she referred mostly to Christian dogmas to develop this spirituality further.

Weil also shows that the embracing of contradictions is not merely a spiritual or a philosophical phenomenon, but has roots in the natural world too. Indeed, nature itself leads towards contradiction. In nature, there is a contradictory juxtaposition between the push towards life, that is, the development and evolution of change in the life cycle, as opposed to

⁹⁷ Jung, “Problems of Alchemy,” 265.

⁹⁸ Lubac, *Paradoxes of Faith*, 11.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 88-9.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 90-1.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 233.

the pull towards stability and the *status quo*, which is epitomised in death, also an integral part of the life cycle.¹⁰² The laws of thermodynamics in nature are another relevant example of the contradictory. These laws dictate that air needs to descend before it can rise.¹⁰³ The polarities of rising and descending are integrated in this scientific notion, paralleling the theological concept¹⁰⁴ that ‘no one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven’ (Jn. 3: 13). This corresponds with Weil’s belief that whenever contradiction is not integrated, it leads to more suffering, not only due to the fact that such resistance prevents growth,¹⁰⁵ but also because in doing so the person is wasting his energy in opposing the process of nature.

Integration through contradiction presents its challenges, even though it is present in the natural process. Weil acknowledges the pain or confusion that this causes,¹⁰⁶ but she also perceives the human attitude to oppose what is contradictory as very regressive, since according to her, the person has a duty to embrace contradiction.¹⁰⁷ Frequently, human beings find this process daunting and believe that they have a right to alter these opposing forces, since they can seldom comprehend them or value the importance of their integration. The issue of reality is at the core of the challenge. The human being needs to embrace contradiction in his life within his experience, but if these two aspects of reality seem to be in contradiction with each other, the perception of the person will be contested. A distinction needs to be made between reality and truth to grapple effectively with this difficulty.¹⁰⁸ Reality is dependent on human perception, particularly through the senses or human logic.

¹⁰² Lacan, “Function and Field,” 111.

¹⁰³ Weil, “Cahier VI,” 318.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 335.

¹⁰⁵ Weil, “Cahier X,” 290.

¹⁰⁶ Robert Chenavier, “Simone Weil,” in *Christian Platonism*, 72.

¹⁰⁷ Blum and Seidler, *Truer Liberty*, 297.

¹⁰⁸ Emmanuel Gabellieri, “Le donné et le mystère: Notes sur phénoménologie, métaphysique et révélation chez S.Weil,” in *Archives de Philosophie* Volume 72, 4 (2009): 642.

Truth transcends this dependence. Truth is absolute and is not bound by any form of perception. Reality requires an entity to claim its existence and is totally dependent on otherness. Truth is not. As previously stated, truth is attained through otherness, but in the hypothetical assumption that otherness did not exist, truth would still be persist. Spiritual maturity is the attainment of truth and not of reality.¹⁰⁹ It is nurtured through contradiction, even though the latter might contrast with the person's perception of reality, leading to a process that is challenging and disturbing. The human being is 'used to the real. The truth we repress.'¹¹⁰ Truth cannot be explained but can sustain contradiction.¹¹¹ Jesus Christ Himself did not capture its meaning in words when confronted by Pontius Pilate with the question (Jn. 18: 38). The search for the truth requires the search for the contrary.¹¹² It is through contradiction that humanity can penetrate the depths of existence.¹¹³ Frequently, in her texts, Weil uses the word 'independent reality' to mean 'truth', that is the acceptance of a multi-faceted and contradictory state, devoid of all illusions. In fact, she makes a distinction between the reality of the world, as opposed to independent reality. It is the latter which denotes the purification of all attachments that blur the truth. Anything which is uni-faceted is reductionist and does not encompass the truth of the experience. There is always one contradiction, or more, associated with what is being immediately perceived, and unless that contradiction is recognised, and, furthermore, embraced, the experience being made will remain shallow, and will never be a device to lead to the Transcendent. Only the contradictory can be *metaxu*.

¹⁰⁹ Sivaraman, "The Sivadaita of Srikantha: Spirit as the Inner Space within the Heart," 293.

¹¹⁰ Jacques Lacan, "Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious," in *Ecrits*, 187.

¹¹¹ Weil, "Cahier IV," 65.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 118.

¹¹³ Stanislas Breton, *La Passion du Christ et les Philosophes* (Paris: Cerf, 2011), 85.

Weil reiterates the importance of attention as she demonstrates the challenges that this spirituality presents, since the mind, the rational component within human personality, will dissuade the person from focusing on contradiction.¹¹⁴ The person cannot understand contradiction, and in the awe of this mystery, can only attempt to channel his attention towards it. Weil is not expecting the person to desire contradiction because she knows that this opposes human nature. She is merely asking humanity not to discard it and to pay attention to it.¹¹⁵ This requires surrendering. It is by ‘giving in’ that attainment is reached. It is in the loss that the victory is made. In Taoist spirituality, the Wise Person avoids having desires, and in doing so, attains the objective of his desires.¹¹⁶ Likewise, in Christianity, ‘whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it’ (Mt. 16: 25). Weil completes the argument by presenting yet another contradictory development. As stated above, attention is needed to be able to detach oneself from one’s needs to focus on the other in the relational. This practice will lead to the process of integration where the person is prepared to accept and focus on contradictions so that harmony is attained. However, to be able to do so, more attention is required, which comes from further detachment. Weil’s model of spiritual growth can be defined as being spiral rather than linear - a spiral process that revolves around itself.

One also need to reflect upon whether by default the union of contraries will always lead to an integrated state in humanity, and whether the mere presence of a contradiction in the path of a person is a guarantee of the potentiality of development. On the contrary, Weil clearly indicates that discernment is essential in this process too. The ‘wrong’ union of contraries (which is not what Weil means by ‘contradiction’) leads to a lie,¹¹⁷ and anything that deviates

¹¹⁴ Weil, “Cahier VIII,” 64.

¹¹⁵ Weil, “Cahier XIV,” 203.

¹¹⁶ Simone Weil, “Textes chinois,” in *Marseille, vol II*, 434.

¹¹⁷ Weil, “Cahier XI,” 329.

the person from the truth, cannot be considered as a vehicle of growth. Any ‘union of contraries’ that promotes an illusion, or that is not rooted in the eternal now, does not lead to spiritual maturity.¹¹⁸ The union of contraries can also be damaging if it is coerced.¹¹⁹ Grace only can lead to this transformation which is beyond the human faculty, and Grace operates and functions differently to the *modus operandi* of the human being. It cannot be forced nor compelled. Therefore, even in this aspect, Weil strongly recommends caution. It is a process that requires patience and reflection. In Weilian spirituality, contradiction is presented as a medium for development, and so, by default, is dependent on the wisdom of prudence.

This section has analysed the importance of the spirituality of contradiction in the thoughts of Simone Weil. The study will proceed by examining its correlation with the themes being explored in this work. Detachment is achieved by focusing one’s attention on the contradictory. It occurs when the person ‘attaches’ or rather shift his attention to what is incompatible to the original attachment.¹²⁰ This evolution leads the person to enter the space for deep relationships to occur. Paradoxically, the relational can only happen through detachment, by embracing the contradictory. It is precisely within this tension in the human experience that maturity is reached, as demonstrated above with reference to Vedic spirituality. The contradictory tension between independence and dependence is paralleled in the same tension between *dharma*, the law of the universe that makes humanity subject and dependent on the cycles of nature, and *moksha*, independence from all worldly ties.¹²¹ The emancipation of the other leads to completeness, and yet this completeness requires the other for it to be reached.¹²² Weil supports this concept with references from the Gospel. Christ instructs His disciples to ‘love your enemies’ (Lk. 6: 27) where He is encouraging His

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 344.

¹¹⁹ McCullough, *Religious Philosophy of Weil*, 226.

¹²⁰ Weil, “Cahier VIII,” 96.

¹²¹ Whillier, “Truth, Teaching, and Tradition,” 53.

¹²² Ibid., 54.

followers to be relational beings, and yet to ‘hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters’ (Lk. 14: 26)¹²³, promoting the practice of detachment.¹²⁴ In Christ’s words, there is no compromise between these two aspects: the Christian needs to live the paradox of the contradictory state.

The integrated state can only be defined by understanding the spirituality of contradiction endorsed by Simone Weil. This is the space of liminality, which neither appertains to one side, nor to the other, but can be found in the contradiction of the twixt. The meaning of the term *Upanishad* captures perfectly the dynamics of this space: the person is sitting devotedly nearby, in proximity to the nevertheless Transcendent Being.¹²⁵ This space of liminality describes the contradictory nature of the integrated state, a state that a person cannot cope with, unless sustained by Divine intervention. The person can choose to use his intellect to resolve the contradiction, but this will result in him being overwhelmed by the struggle. In Weil’s words, ‘either the person submits himself to opposing forces (through Grace), or else the person is submitted to these opposing forces.’¹²⁶ Wisdom lies in not allowing the key to integration to become a tool of destruction. Weil seems to be insisting that the process cannot be explained, but can only be grappled with, since these contradictory phenomena pertain to the lived experience. They can never be analysed from a distance and rationally because the person who opts for this methodology is also refraining from living the contradiction. Integration is experienced in the tension of this paradox.¹²⁷

¹²³ It is important to clarify that the verb ‘hate’ in this context does not depict the opposite of love, but a distancing, or rather, detachment.

¹²⁴ Weil, “Cahier VIII,” 96.

¹²⁵ John G. Arapura, “Spirit and Spiritual Knowledge in the Upanishads,” in *Hindu Spirituality*, 65-6.

¹²⁶ Weil, “Cahier VIII,” 73.

¹²⁷ Diogenes and Springsted, “Winch on Weil’s Supernaturalism,” 90.

5.3 Joy

Weil indicates that one of the characteristics of the integrated state is a sense of joy. She claims, almost in a Leibnizian manner, that the person needs to choose joy in life because anything that is incompatible with joy will not persist.¹²⁸ The Christian perspective sustains this belief. Christ promises joy to His disciples, and by extension to all his followers (Jn. 15: 11). Pauline theology also clearly shows that one of the fruits of wholeness is joy (Gal. 5: 22a). It is the apophatic tradition that Weil belongs to that seems to be in contrast with her belief. One question that arises is whether joy could feature in such a seemingly ‘dark’ spirituality, in a spirituality that emphasises the nothingness of God and the annihilation of the person in spiritual growth.

Essentially this is a linguistic problem, which could possibly have roots in the difficulties of the process of translation. It requires the reader to make certain distinctions between words such as *bonheur* and *joie*. Weil opposes the former, and states that although society attempts to draw humanity towards it, the person should not desire it. The person should desire goodness.¹²⁹ Happiness (*bonheur*) is illusionary, often a shallow and ephemeral trait that Weilian spirituality rejects. She disagrees with the Aristotelian concept of prosperity, a happiness that is dependent on external factors and circumstances.¹³⁰ Weil opposes the notion of happiness as a purpose, whereby the person performs an action to be happy, and is the agent who can solely determine his happiness. Weil is conscious of this linguistic misperception and the inaccurate interpretations that words have in common parlance. She

¹²⁸ Weil, “Cahier IV,” 131.

¹²⁹ Simone Weil, “Cahier XV,” in *La Connaissance Surnaturelle*, 214.

¹³⁰ Aristotle, *The Nichomachaen Ethics* (Glasgow: University Press, 1998), 17.

addresses this issue by using the Platonic term *bien*,¹³¹ although she frequently refers to joy (*joie*) in her texts.

The use of the term *bien* still does not resolve the perplexing situation of how joy features in the writings of Weil, and it also causes a theological dilemma. This dilemma is manifested in the tension inherent in Christianity between the Platonic and Stoic vision of an apathetic God, a God that is bereft of all human emotions, and that does not care about human welfare, with the Jewish image of a God who is emotionally charged and who relates with His people directly and expressively. Christianity does not fully embrace either of these visions, and is ontologically characterised by the struggle of this in-betweenness. In her understanding of Christian spirituality, Weil tended to approve of the former, totally rejecting the latter. As her spiritual journey deepened and she experienced Divine love, her perspective was challenged, even though the Stoic elements remained strongly present. It is against Weil's Christianised Stoic philosophy that the definition of *joie* needs to be studied.

Weil painstakingly explains what joy is at great length. In her understanding of the word, Weil insists that joy is a *state*, as opposed to a *feeling*. It is not euphoric or explosive, but a state that is generally quiet, calm and consistent, devoid of the impulsive.¹³² Joy is the experience of the fullness of the Divine Other. There can never be any space for any other possibility, including feelings, since integration is the encounter between the human and the Transcendent. It is a shift from an anthropocentric understanding of happiness to a theological perspective of joy, where the focus changes from the human to the Divine, and reaches its total culmination in the eschatological reality.¹³³ It moves from the finite to the

¹³¹ Weil, "Cahier XV," 221.

¹³² Graver, *Stoicism and Emotion*, 204.

¹³³ Giuliano Agresti, *Teologia della Gioia* (Rome: Città Nuova Editrice, 1966), 182.

infinite. Joy is contact with God,¹³⁴ the only source of this state. It is, indeed, the struggle between detachment and the relational that leads to joy, to the state of integration. An emotion is perceived by the self, and joy cannot be reached unless through the negation of the self and its perceptions.¹³⁵ This can be only be experienced after the soul endures the journey of the dark night,¹³⁶ reaching a state of total loss which is equivalent to the ultimate contact with the Divine. The state of nothingness frees the person who is no longer hindered from the experience of any feeling for, as the Apostle says, 'I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation' (Phil. 4: 12b). The most common mistake that can be made in the spiritual life is to seek an experience or a feeling instead of being open to the relationship with God. This can never be measured by the sensory experience of a feeling which is so ephemeral, and hence rooted in the human (and not Divine) dimension of time. Grace transcends the limitations of time.

Joy is also a state characterised by silence, by the dearth of words, thus reinforcing the quietude that is associated with it.¹³⁷ It is the same silence that mirrors the silence of God. This does not imply that joy does not have a voice. Silence exists because words do, and silence is to be interpreted as being the potential for sound.¹³⁸ It is the space that allows for the economy of words, that once uttered are adequately strong and full of joy. Silence is the space for joy, leading to an action which becomes an action of joy. It is the 'death' of the words (which is also the death of the self) in the silence that paradoxically leads to the birth

¹³⁴ Weil, *Attente*, 69-70.

¹³⁵ Weil, "Cahier V," 251.

¹³⁶ Weil, "Cahier IX," 166.

¹³⁷ Agresti, *Teologia della Gioia*, 169-74.

¹³⁸ Weil, *Attente*, 48.

of joy in the words.¹³⁹ It is ‘only the silence of the world that allows silent meditation, freed finally from all desires, fears, hopes, from all that within us raises its voice to trouble us.’¹⁴⁰

The implication of this perception on joy implies that this state cannot be fully reached in this terrestrial life. In this world, the individual is on a journey towards joy, at times experiencing glimpses of it, but albeit never in its fullness or permanence. The person cannot attain complete joy as long as he still desires, even if this desire has been purified. Joy denotes fulfilment, a state where nothing else can be desired. It is only when Divinisation occurs, and the self becomes part of the experience of nothingness, that all forms of desire, including absolute Desire, are annihilated, and, hence, joy can be complete.

Joy cannot be threatened by suffering. If joy is the epitome of the integrated person, that is, if the person has reached a deep level of maturity in the relationship with Christ, suffering cannot be a hindrance for, ‘who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?’ (Rom. 8: 35-38). On the contrary, suffering could become a vehicle towards joy, provided that it is experienced in the quest for truth.¹⁴¹ It is what Agresti refers to as *la gioia rossa*,¹⁴² the red joy, red being a reference to blood which symbolises pain. The Tabor experience cannot be divorced from the road to Jerusalem. The Tabor was dependent on the Golgotha. Weil challenges the erroneous impression that pain should be divorced from joy, even though it is a result of original sin. In

¹³⁹ This is the paradox that Pope Paul VI speaks about when stating that in spite of suffering, the joy of God can paradoxically transform the person into a beautiful new being. See Paul VI, Pope, *Adhortatio Apostolica: “Gaudete in Domino,”* (31 May 1975), in AAS 67, 5 (1975), 310.

¹⁴⁰ ‘...le silence du monde est ce qui seul permet la méditation silencieuse, délivrée enfin des désirs, des craintes, des espoirs, de tout ce qui en nous-mêmes élève la voix pour nous troubler.’ Weil, “‘Le Sentiment de la Nature chez Vigny,’” 112.

¹⁴¹ McCullough, *Religious Philosophy of Weil*, 20.

¹⁴² Agresti, *Teologia della Gioia*, 91.

Weilian spirituality pain and joy cannot be separated and are intimately entwined in the relationship with God:

If one perseveres in love to the point that the soul cannot retain any longer the cry 'My God, why have you abandoned me', if one remains in this state without ceasing to love, one ends up touching something which is no longer pain, which is no longer joy, but which is the central, essential, pure and not perceptible essence, common to both joy and suffering, and which is the love of God.¹⁴³

According to Weil, pain can lead to joy, since it shifts the focus from the self to the other.¹⁴⁴ This shift liberates an egocentric reserve of energy which is transformed into joy. Unless this painful shift occurs, joy will never be experienced since the essence and main constituent of alterity is joy itself.¹⁴⁵ Pain is experienced through the body, which is then transmitted into the soul to be transformed into joy.¹⁴⁶ This defies the Cartesian split and shows an intimate and holistic collaboration between the body and the spirit to attain integration. De Lubac shows the intimate link between pain and joy by explaining that the optimist (who attempts to camouflage pain) cannot experience joy.¹⁴⁷ It is the experience and the contemplation of human misery that can lead humanity to joy.¹⁴⁸ Human beings have the potential to contemplate upon misery, and this distinguishes them from the rest of the animal kingdom. It is the human spirit, the same spirit that makes the human being able to relate with the Divine, that gives the person the faculty of reflecting on pain and misery. The more misery is contemplated, the greater the possibility of relating with God,¹⁴⁹ and this leads to joy. Suffering itself becomes a form of contemplation. It is precisely the loss of self through this

¹⁴³ 'Si on tombe en persévérant dans l'amour jusqu'au point où l'âme ne peut plus retenir le cri 'Mon Dieu, pourquoi m'as-tu abandonné', si on demeure en ce point sans cesser d'aimer, on finit par toucher quelque chose qui n'est plus le malheur, qui n'est pas la joie, qui est l'essence centrale, essentielle, pure, non sensible, commune à la joie et à la souffrance, et qui est l'amour même de Dieu.' Weil, *Attente*, 69.

¹⁴⁴ Weil, "Cahier X," 273.

¹⁴⁵ Emmanuel Gabellieri, *Être et Don*, 248.

¹⁴⁶ Weil, *Attente*, 116-7.

¹⁴⁷ Lubac, *Paradoxes of Faith*, 39.

¹⁴⁸ Weil, "Cahier VI," 331. In this case, Weil does not use the word *joie* but *félicité*, an even more heightened experience of joy.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 335.

contemplation that distinguishes joy from sorrow. A sorrowful person is an individual who places himself at the centre of the pain, living the illusion of being the protagonist of the narrative. The joyful person, whether in pain or not, transcends this illusionary narrative to recognise the state of nothingness that he belongs to.¹⁵⁰ He is capable of transcending ego boundaries to be able to empathise with whoever he encounters since all, or at least, most of the obstacles that hinder relationality are thus removed from the space of the encounter.¹⁵¹ Sorrow (which in this context is being associated with self-centredness) and joy cannot be experienced together, whereas pain and joy can. As Aquinas states, ‘the joy of charity is incompatible with an admixture of sorrow.’¹⁵² The Thomist psychological explanation on tears reinforces the notion of self-centredness by presenting tears as a means of externalising sorrow.¹⁵³ By emitting tears, the sorrow does not remain suppressed within the human psyche, and allows the individual to move from a self-centred attitude, to a clearance of the internal clutter that prevents alterity. The episodes when Christ wept in the Gospels – over Jerusalem (Lk. 19: 41) and at the death of his friend Lazarus (Jn. 11: 35) – were both occasions of alterity. In the first episode, Jesus admonished the city prior to its eventual destruction, whereas in the second episode, His tears preceded the act of raising Lazarus from the dead.

Weil roots the concept of pain in the Mystery of Transubstantiation to reinforce it even further. Historically, the first time that this event occurred was in the Last Supper, on the eve of the most intense pain that Christ endured. The event is repeated regularly in the daily Mass, where the congregation witnesses the suffering of God who transforms and lessens

¹⁵⁰ Vetö, *Religious Metaphysics*, 105.

¹⁵¹ Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology and Joy* (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1973), 52.

¹⁵² Aquinas, *Summa*, Volume III, Q.28, A.3, 1306.

¹⁵³ Aquinas, *Summa*, Volume II, Q.38, A.3, 754.

Himself to the almost non-entity of a piece of bread.¹⁵⁴ This is the *apogée* of the integrated state. The Divine is encountering the human being in the most intimate of ways. This mystical moment, when contemplated in its depth, presents a clear model, demonstrating that joy in integration can only be experienced when the loss of self happens, thus linking this with the aspect of pain, both being essential traits of the Weilian understanding of joy.

All expressions of love emanate from the Divine. Pain can be transformed through love, by transcending itself, leading to joy, and going beyond it. This oxymoron is cardinal in the process. It is a dynamic that knows both joy and pain, and none at all, simultaneously since the unexpected transformation happens for brief and fleeting moments in life, marking the human spirit in an intense manner in its brevity.¹⁵⁵ The presence of the absent God imbues the human being with both joy and pain, the joy of the presence which is intimately intertwined with the pain of the absence. It is the pain of being in the middle of the journey: too far in to see the beginning of the journey, but not close enough to see the light at the end of the tunnel. It is also the pain of being detached from the world, and yet not united with the Divine,¹⁵⁶ of being far away from Christ and yet so close to Him through pain.¹⁵⁷ The culmination of a loving relationship with God can be reached by staying with this paradox and incomprehensibility. This should not lead to any misunderstandings: Weil is not implying that God is found in pain or suffering. On the contrary, His absence is even more remarkable in these moments. Pain can only be transformed into a possibility of relating with the Divine through love.

¹⁵⁴ Weil, "Cahier X," 279.

¹⁵⁵ Domenico Canciani, *L'Intelligence et l'Amour: Réflexion religieuse et expérience mystique chez Simone Weil* (Paris:Beauchesne, 2000), 119.

¹⁵⁶ Weil, "Cahier VI," 311.

¹⁵⁷ Weil, "Cahier IV," 127.

Weil also rejects any frivolity that has often been attributed to joy, by connecting it directly to fear rather than to pleasure. She totally discards the aspect of pleasure that Aristotle associates with happiness.¹⁵⁸ Paradoxically it is the intensity of joy that generates a fear of death. Weil explains this contradiction by describing the scenario of a mother who has been separated from her child. Initially she feared that he was dead, but eventually discovers that he is still alive. She now fears that the joy which she will experience in the encounter would be so overwhelming that it could lead her to death.¹⁵⁹ This is the same joy exhibited in the encounter with God. It is a joy which cannot be divorced from fear, particularly the fear of death. Joy, fear, death and awe are all ingrained in the same experience. Zechariah was startled with fear at the apparition of the angel (Lk. 2: 12) and Moses was told by God that he cannot see the face of the Divine, lest he die (Ex. 33: 20). It is an overwhelming state of detachment in the relational that is so intense and heightened that it can only be compared to the fear of death, to that moment where the ultimate detachment occurs, leading to the ultimate relationship. The human being realises his limitations, and is enwrapped in a state of fear, enthralled by Beauty, Truth and Goodness.¹⁶⁰ Joy can be experienced by staying with this fear.

In her analysis on joy, Weil insists that this needs to be grounded in independent reality.¹⁶¹ Truth, or independent reality, is the destination of the spiritual journey for ‘when, he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth’ (Jn. 16: 13). The same source that provides joy as one of His fruits is the same source that leads to truth. This means that the process of truth, or else, the experience which is grounded in independent reality, leads to joy as a consequence. The truth is the absolute *metaxu*, experienced in the person of Jesus Christ

¹⁵⁸ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 17.

¹⁵⁹ Weil, “Cahier XI,” 368.

¹⁶⁰ Simone Weil, “‘Le Sentiment’,” in *Philosophiques* 396.

¹⁶¹ Weil, “Cahier V,” 256.

who is ‘the way and the truth and the life’ (Jn. 14: 6a),¹⁶² and whose words are ‘a joy and a delight of my heart’ (Jeremiah 15: 16a). The truth is attained through the way and the life in Christ. The actual search for truth, however, is not necessarily construed with joy,¹⁶³ even though it leads to it. The disciple who is prepared to engage in this challenging process is on the way to joy, although it is not experienced in the process. In the words of John the Baptist, ‘the friend who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for him, and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom’s voice. That joy is mine, and it is now complete’ (Jn. 3: 29). This essentially also means embracing contradiction, as the way in which the Divine operates, and growing spiritually by changing one’s understanding of the Divine from an entity that solves problems to provide happiness, to a God of mystery who leads to joy. It is the leap from attempting to exploit God to experiencing God through the contradiction of independent reality that creates the framework for joy to reside in the soul of the person.¹⁶⁴

The independent reality that features in the encounter with alterity, is the reality of the moment, which at times is too challenging and bitter for the person to experience in an intense and focused manner. The person prefers depriving himself from joy by living an illusion because it is easier than savouring the sour taste of the actual moment. Both joy and pain are perceived as being ‘endless’, demanding a commitment that the contemporary person might feel reluctant to engage in. In fact, ‘the art of suffering is in a large measure the art of making the past and the future healthy as they are being lived in the instant of pain.’¹⁶⁵ The major hurdle that the human being encounters lies in the fact that he is subject to time, which frequently can serve as a distraction from focusing on the now. The integrated person is faced with this challenging factor and confirms his commitment to the virtuous life, by

¹⁶² The three nouns in the modern transcription are not separated by commas, indicating that they are deeply connected one to the other.

¹⁶³ Lacan, “Agency of the Letter,” 187.

¹⁶⁴ Moltmann, *Theology and Joy*, 80-3.

¹⁶⁵ Lubac, *Paradoxes of Faith*, 179.

living the totality of the moment which leads to joy. Integration implies living in the present, focusing on the actual moment, and not concentrating on actions projected in the possibility of a close or distant future.¹⁶⁶ In a sense, ‘joy is the highest form of time experience in its intensity’.¹⁶⁷ It denotes the state of loving in the now, without any attachments to the past, or any link to the future. In this state, the God time is entered, and the person becomes part of the process of Divinisation. The present is real as opposed to the past which cannot be retrieved and so remains a memory and no longer a reality, or the future, which is a fantasy or a potentiality. The person has two options when he does not engage with the past or the future: either to become spiritless matter, or else to enter this void.¹⁶⁸ It is at this point that pure and raw joy is experienced, overshadowing any glimpse of happiness experienced previously. This is comparable to the *petite mort*, the heightened state of being in the sexual act, in which present and past seem to cease to exist. The challenge of the human being is to transform every encounter with otherness into an orgasmic moment, in which the other is allowed to penetrate the reality of the self in the eternal now by relating through detachment. In the experience of joy there is no time factor, or as worded by Weil, joy is the relationship between past, present and future.¹⁶⁹ Joy is the God-time, the eternal now. It can be experienced by detaching from the constraints of time.¹⁷⁰

The time dynamics present another problematic situation, for, on one hand, the person experiences joy in the eternal now, but on the other hand, it has also been established that this is a process that only reaches its culmination in the Beatific Vision. The legitimate query that arises is whether joy is rooted in the actuality of the moment, or if it is a forward-looking

¹⁶⁶ Graver, *Stoicism and Emotion*, 52-3.

¹⁶⁷ Moltmann, *Theology and Joy*, 57.

¹⁶⁸ Weil, “Cahier V,” 203.

¹⁶⁹ Weil, “Petit Carnet Noir,” 404.

¹⁷⁰ Weil, “Cahier XIII,” 105.

expectation. It is paradoxically both, operating on a parallel binary system, as this reference from the Book of Isaiah shows:

...the people walking in the darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned. You have enlarged the nation and increased their joy; they rejoice before you at the harvest, as warriors rejoice when dividing the plunder.

(Is. 9: 2-3)

This reference is written in the past, as though the event has already occurred. However, in the Biblical context in which it is found, the event is forward-looking. It is an invitation for the Jewish people to wait for their salvation. The preceding verse is in the future tense: 'there will be no more gloom for those who were in distress' (Is. 9: 1). The joy promised (forward-looking) is a joy actualised (current moment), although not in its full completion. Joy is an attribute of the Divine, and as already established, is God-given. It transcends the limitations of time, where past, present and future are no longer in conflict, since the past and the future no longer exist.

Joy can be correlated with goodness by connecting it with the transcendence of time. This is the term *bien* that Weil prefers using in connection to joy. Weil, influenced by Stoicism, roots it in the virtue of attention rather than in action. Her spirituality is not product-based but centred on the relational process. If it were product-based, then perfect joy could be totally captured in life. It would be a matter of identifying and accomplishing the tasks that lead to joy. However, as Aquinas correctly indicates, joy can only attain completion in the Beatific Vision, demonstrating that it is a process,¹⁷¹ embedded in the eternal now. The virtuous person is not necessarily the one who performs good actions, for it could possibly be that the

¹⁷¹ Aquinas, *Summa*, Volume III, Q.28, A.3, 1306-7.

locus of these actions is the gratification of the self, but the person who is training to be more attentive. Joy is ingrained in the focusing on the *bien*, and the participation, or rather, the relational engagement with the *bien*, the Divine Good.¹⁷² Attention is the epitome of love, conforming to the Thomist belief that joy is the effect of charity.¹⁷³ This also implies an anonymous form of love, where the interests, and possibly the actual presence, of the self, dissolve to make way for the joy inherent in the presence of the Divine.¹⁷⁴ Weil is not oblivious to the difficulties that arise in this process. It requires stamina, perseverance and painful endeavour. Attention can only be sustained through this pain, and the efforts of the human person can only endure it for a limited amount of time. The human person finds it challenging to be genuinely attentive to the other, to the extent that this is only totally possible through the intervention of Grace.

Weil analyses the state of joy and its characteristic traits, without delving deeper into the details of the *modus operandi* of this attainment. The only indication given is that detachment is the path that leads to joy, without describing the path explicitly. On the contrary, she advises that joy should not be sought, and that the individual should not focus on his welfare.¹⁷⁵ Joy should never be expected nor desired: the only focus of the Christian should be the attention required to ensure that justice reigns, as the prayer of the Our Father shows, a prayer in which none of the supplications instructed by Jesus Christ is a plea for joy.¹⁷⁶ This is the reason why Aquinas insists that joy is not a virtue, but the result of charity, denoting that it is not something that can be attained directly by the prowess of the human being.¹⁷⁷ Weil concludes by recognising how difficult it is to experience genuine joy, and seeks

¹⁷² Aquinas, *Summa*, Volume III, Q.28, A.3, 1306.

¹⁷³ Ibid., Q.28, A.1, 1305.

¹⁷⁴ Agresti, *Teologia della Gioia*, 143.

¹⁷⁵ Weil, "Cahier V," 492

¹⁷⁶ Lubac, *Paradoxes of Faith*, 202.

¹⁷⁷ Aquinas, *Summa*, Volume III, Q.28, A.3, 1307.

recourse in the fact that since the human being cannot attain it in its totality, one's consolation lies in knowing that perfect joy is present only in the nature of God.¹⁷⁸ Gabellieri, however, extracts a model of progression from Simone Weil's life to present a paradigm of growth. In Portugal, Weil experiences pain through the witnessing of the religious ceremony of the fishermen. In Assisi, the sense of joy compels her to pray. Integration between the two occurs in Solesmes whereby through her migraines Weil endures pain in the moments of joy as she is savouring the beauty of the Gregorian chanting. When the two are integrated, both are transcended.¹⁷⁹ This model demonstrates that pain needs to be experienced first in the attainment of joy. The person will not taste the joy of the Divine unless the angst of the human condition is embraced, through alterity. This leads to maturity where transcendence occurs through the integration of pain and joy.

The theology of Buber and the philosophy of Sartre can also provide insights to proceed further. Both insist that joy is achieved through integration, by integrating being and becoming,¹⁸⁰ which in a certain measure reflect the discourse of integrating the present (being) with the future (becoming). The integrated person does not divorce any polarities, be it the internal from the external, the ontological from the active, and the emotional from the physiological. These binaries are eradicated, or rather integrated. The sole purpose of the integrated person is to love. Jenkins summarises this analysis aptly when he observes that this truth is incarnated in the figure of the crucified Christ:

...who is the man who is God and God become man, is the reality who represents to us that struggle and joy, suffering and transcendent calm, interpenetrate into the life of God and in human life, as we seek the fulfilment of our being and becoming in the image of God.¹⁸¹

¹⁷⁸ Weil, "Cahier VI," 375.

¹⁷⁹ Gabellieri, *Être et Don*, 258.

¹⁸⁰ Buber, *I and Thou*, 77.

¹⁸¹ Jenkins, Introduction to *Theology and Joy*, 23.

If according to Weil, joy is achieved through a loss of self, but nevertheless, through an integration of being and becoming, as presented by Buber and Sartre, the question that ensues is how can Weil's viewpoint be merged with the one described by Buber and Sartre. This question can only be answered if the concepts of being and becoming are understood in more detail. In Weil's spirituality the journey to nothingness in the pursuit to reach God is essential. If the Supreme Being is nothingness, and Man's voyage is leading him to that state, then it follows that the epitome of being is in its loss, to the extent that being reaches its zenith in nothingness. This reveals that being and nothingness are intimately integrated by becoming the same. In the Weilian universe, being and becoming are integrated through relationality that annihilates the self to focus on the other. The comprehension of the procedure is completed by embedding it in the spirituality of non-action that Weil embraces. The starting point of a relational action is not the action itself. On the contrary, in a relationship, the attention to the other is significant is: the non-action. The attention may, or may not, lead the agent to physicalised action, to an embodied expression to reach out to the other person. Hence, *becoming* is synonymous to *non-action* and *attention*, reinforcing even further Weil's belief that joy is not to be sought after.¹⁸² The person does not need to be in an active quest for it. It is this process, in line with Buber's and Sartre's way of thinking, that leads to the joy that can be experienced uniquely through integration.

5.4 The spirituality of non-action

The spirituality of non-action is one of the cardinal aspects of the integrated model since Weil believes that it is the embodiment of goodness.¹⁸³ It is surprising that a person who studied the activity of work, and its spirituality, at such depth, should encourage the embracing of non-action. In fact, Weil believed that work is a vehicle that helps the human being to access

¹⁸² Von der Ruhr, *An Apprenticeship in Attention*, 85.

¹⁸³ Weil, "Cahier IV," 126.

the complexity of the universe¹⁸⁴ and to read the meaning of life,¹⁸⁵ and this seems to be in direct opposition to the spirituality of non-action. It is also in contrast with Weil's political spirituality.¹⁸⁶ It is only by challenging these initial reactions, and by linking Weil's notion of work and political spirituality with the spirituality of non-action, that a profound understanding of the integrated model can be established. The starting point needs to be a more intense analysis of Weil's perception on work, so as to demonstrate that the spirituality of non-action is a deepening of the spirituality of work that Weil is commonly associated with.

According to Weil, the main objective of work is to act as a medium to attain truth,¹⁸⁷ by creating a space where imagination can be removed and contact with independent reality is established,¹⁸⁸ in the context of time and space.¹⁸⁹ This enables the person to start the procedure towards transcendence. The experience of work requires the person to discard his illusions of grandeur and to be other-centred, allowing God to intervene.¹⁹⁰ Work is *metaxu* since 'a man attains perfection when his work is worship of God'¹⁹¹ and 'when a man does the work God gives him, no sin can touch this man.'¹⁹² It is an experience that can lead the human person to live independent reality in its profundity. Furthermore, it is also connected with joy, showing that it is a cardinal trait in the process of integration. Moltmann presents this connection when speaking about the importance of the playfulness of work.¹⁹³ Work is,

¹⁸⁴ Weil, "Petit Carnet Noir," 410.

¹⁸⁵ Weil, "Cahier III," 295.

¹⁸⁶ Supra, 174-9.

¹⁸⁷ Weil, "Cahier IV," 118.

¹⁸⁸ Weil, "Cahier V," 237.

¹⁸⁹ Weil, "Cahier IV," 63.

¹⁹⁰ Weil's references to work seem to focus on manual labour and academic work. She fails to discuss in depth managerial work and the illusions that many people in leadership positions fall into, due to their position. In such a context, unfortunately, work becomes a reinforcement of illusion, a creation of a fictitious power dynamic, whose narratives are reinforced by the hierarchy, created by the infrastructure of the work place.

¹⁹¹ *Bhagavad Gita*, XVIII: 46, 83.

¹⁹² Ibid., XVIII: 47, 83.

¹⁹³ Moltmann, *Theology and Joy*, 75.

or should be, a space where the individual can thrive in creativity, contributing to the welfare of otherness through his labour. Integration can be attained within this creative and playful process through the dynamics of the interactions with others, in a context which covers a significant high percentage of the years of adulthood. Weil does not refer to the ludic element of work, but on the contrary, emphasises the uncomfortable endurance required by it. Like Moltmann, nonetheless, Weil still presents it as an opportunity to experience the living of the eternal now that leads to joy.

Weil bases the concept of work on the image of God depicted by most civilisations. He is perceived a worker, and as having a special mission to accomplish.¹⁹⁴ In the Judeo-Christian tradition, the sanctity of work emerges even stronger, because after the Fall, work becomes an obligation, that is a medium to obey God. Weil sees this medium as humanity's consent to attempt to build bridges with the Divine, rather than a form of chastisement.¹⁹⁵ Like Heidegger,¹⁹⁶ it might seem that Weil focuses on the functionality of the being, and it is this functionality that defines the ontology of the individual, and which becomes manifested through work. This presents work as a product-based experience, a concept which seems to defy overtly what has been established about integration in Weilian spirituality. If one delves deeper, however, it becomes clear that according to Weil, work is not merely the execution of a number of actions that would reduce the worker to a mere programmed machine. Work, rather, should be a process much akin to the art of sculpting, that is, an endeavour through which the excess is removed. Weil defies the Aristotelian notion of purpose in work, and perceives it as being a means to transmute time into eternity. The person is tasting partially the eternal experience of nothingness by removing the excess.¹⁹⁷ The concept is transformed

¹⁹⁴ Weil, "Etudes pour une Déclaration," 360.

¹⁹⁵ Weil, *L'Enracinement*, 363-5.

¹⁹⁶ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 78-89.

¹⁹⁷ McCullough, *Religious Philosophy of Weil*, 212.

from a product-based mechanical activity to a process of deconstruction. Weil interprets the word ‘doing’ as a medium that fosters the relational, where the focus is shifted from egocentrism to the needs of the other, which is discovered in, and through, work. The political spirituality of Weil also needs to be comprehended in this light. The focus is on the duty that the person engaged politically has towards the other, and not on the action itself, which is merely a vehicle. The ontology of the functionality of work is the dignity that the person ought to have. This dignity releases the worker from the constraints of the ego, allowing him to transcend through, and into, the relational. Work, according to this approach, is a means, and not an end, in itself. This corresponds to the same mission that God, the Eternal Worker, has.

Non-action can be considered to be synonymous to Weil’s understanding of work. By non-action, Weil is not referring to a lack of action, since this would not correspond to her spirituality which is ingrained in a constant outreach towards the other. On the contrary, Weil, who was influenced by Taoist spirituality, believed that non-action is full of action.¹⁹⁸ Action is opposed to inaction whereas non-action transcends both. This is a spirituality that is in line with the Chinese notion of Wu-wei and focuses on *not striving*, and not on *not doing*. This implies that the person ceases from performing the action guided by his personal motivation, and removes any hindrances to allow the space for the ‘action’ of the Divine to occur,¹⁹⁹ which mirrors Weil’s Platonic vision of work as a removal of excess material. The ‘Tao’ (path) of the Lord is laid for action to happen. It should not be perceived in negative light nor connoted with any form of idleness. Indeed, the person adopting this philosophy has to avoid ‘the difficulties that damage one’s spirit and wear out one’s body.’²⁰⁰ Within this

¹⁹⁸ Weil, “L’Inspiration Occitanienne,” 416.

¹⁹⁹ Weil, “Textes chinois,” 436.

²⁰⁰ Edward Slingerland, *Trying not to try* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2014), 21.

empty space, the person reacts to the stimulus through spontaneity rather than premeditation, to become one with the action of the Divine. It challenges the person to surrender his intention and trust in God. There is a shift from achieving the objectives of the person to being a consensual player in the wider picture that transcends the limitations of the ego. The person is ready to withdraw and take the risk of returning the space to the Divine, thus practising also the spirituality of waiting.²⁰¹ The locus becomes the Cosmos (or the Divine, if adapted to Christian Theology) and not the individual. The person ceases to be a protagonist.²⁰² The purpose of the individual is not his personal ambition but a genuine connection and intuition with the Divine Life with its constant flux and myriad of variables. This is given the space to take its course, and the individual is never to interfere with the wisdom of the cycle of life. The person begins the journey of undoing²⁰³ and unlearning, not because nothing is happening or being done, but due to a revolutionising paradigm shift. It is not simply a change in action or behaviour: the external factors do not determine this shift. It is an internal transformation. In the light of this, it might be more accurate to define it as a spirituality of being a non-actionist. This is a spirituality where the person detaches himself from the glamour of the action in such a manner that he becomes only the executioner of the action, renouncing the limelight of the effect. It is a descending movement: the Divine makes use of the human energy to be able to perform the action,²⁰⁴ so that the person merely, but willingly, becomes only the cause of the action.

²⁰¹ Supra, 246-55.

²⁰² Weil, "Cahier III," 302.

²⁰³ Slingerland, *Trying not to try*, 99.

²⁰⁴ Weil, "Cahier VI," 371.

The approach inherent in this spirituality is very holistic since it requires the individual to be integrated at all levels, that is, physically, emotionally, and spiritually.²⁰⁵ It can be described as a process of surrendering, whereby the person becomes indifferent to the self, both physically and emotionally, to shift the focus onto alterity through the action that bridges the self to the other. This does not imply that the person should neglect his wellbeing. On the contrary, paradoxically, it is through this indifference that the person is growing in a healthier manner since, by focusing on the self, the person is actually stifling the process of growth. An interesting and recent study, mentioned by Slingerland, shows that when baseball players focus on their performance, their achievement dwindles drastically. The standard of performance soars considerably when the player is indifferent to his aim, that is, when he does not focus on self-centred goals.²⁰⁶ The spirituality of non-action is also beneficial from a psychological perspective since it instils the human person with a strong degree of tranquillity equalled with effectiveness. This lessens the anxiety and the pressure of constantly having to take the 'right' decision. It is also intimately connected with joy, since the integrated person who has embraced the spirituality of non-action, knows 'the contentment of contentment',²⁰⁷ that is, he does not actively seek to do anything to attain joy.

There are aspects in the Wu-wei philosophy that need to be examined prudently. The reliance on the flow of the natural cycle is one of the challenging aspects in this philosophy. Spontaneity implies that one's intuition is accurate. This approach, if taken in a reductionist manner, does not take into account the flaws that the person is born with, due to the woundedness ingrained in humanity through original sin. Intuition is also subject to the imperfections of the human condition, and may not always be correct. In fact, even within Wu-wei spirituality, there are different strands that have conflicting opinions about the

²⁰⁵ Slingerland, *Trying not to try*, 7.

²⁰⁶ Ibid., 148-9.

²⁰⁷ Ibid., 90.

reliance on instinct. The Laotian version of this spirituality believes that although human beings were originally virtuous, virtue was lost,²⁰⁸ and so instinct became flawed too.

An answer can be provided by juxtaposing this discourse against a Christian framework. Christianity, recognising totally the frailty of the human condition, expounds on the importance of Grace that assists the human being, not only in surpassing his shortcomings, but, furthermore, in becoming whole and learning how to be whole. The spontaneous person, in his journey towards integration, needs to allow Grace to cooperate with the self in order to harmonise the instinct with the will of God, a process that requires a lengthy and constant process of discernment, as well as psychological and spiritual maturity. The person develops a genuine and authentic self by embracing spontaneity in conjunction with the cooperation of Grace. The person, hence, is allowing the Spirit to operate through him. This cooperation also results in the fruits of the Spirit. The fruits of the Spirit are also an indicator that can be used to measure and evaluate the process of the cooperation.

Non-action also needs to be studied with reference to the dimension of time. Action is determined by time since it happens in given circumstances and in a particular timeframe. In language, when an action is spoken about, it is attributed to the past or to the future. An action has happened, or will be happening. It cannot happen in the present because, otherwise, it would be eternal. Since an action has a beginning and an end, it cannot stay in the present, but quickly shifts to the past. If it is planned for the future, it has the potential of being an action, but is not yet, and once this potential is activated, it immediately becomes past. The spirituality of non-action invites the human person to live the present, a space which is devoid of action and transcends the limitations of time.

²⁰⁸ Ibid., 95.

Applying this spirituality to the themes of this study will present the relational in detachment as being a non-action, as opposed to the relational without detachment, where the emphasis falls on the action. In the latter, there is the exhausting and constant need to possess. In the former, there is the repose of the person, committed to a relationship, and yet tranquil enough to be ‘free’ of its attachments,²⁰⁹ through non-action, where the self no longer remains the protagonist of the narrative. A relationship cannot be dependent on the projected fantasies, spurred by the needs of the individual, or on the social concerns and pressures that prevent the living of relationships in the here-and-now: these should be purged through detachment. The relationship can transcend time and space, since through integration, emotion is transformed into a pure state where loving a person entails loving the existence of the other, without any form of acquisition or gratification through the relationship.²¹⁰ Weil presents a further challenge by stating that the relational can only happen by renouncing the idea of its actualisation. Nobody can be forced to leave Plato’s cave and to detach from the illusions within it to enter into a relationship, because this would result in a coerced relationship, devoid of any form of authenticity.²¹¹ The individual needs to stay in this ambiguity to experience the eternal now in the empty space. Non-action cultivates a terrain which is genuinely, and possibly, exclusively, conducive to growth and maturity. In a sense, it is eschatological, predisposing the person to the beyond.

²⁰⁹ Underhill, *Mysticism*, 206.

²¹⁰ Weil, “‘Le Sentiment’,” 397.

²¹¹ Rancé, *Le Courage de l’Impossible*, 35.

5.5 Mystical experience as a model of integration

In the context of this work, Weil's mystical experiences can serve as a platform to analyse further this model of integration. Weil's awakened dream, which is one of her mystical experiences, is particularly interesting for this study. The mystic claims that He (Christ is never mentioned by name in the narration of the awakened dream), promised to teach her but taught her nothing. He then chased her away at the end of the 'relationship' and she never found Him again, and, although she was convinced that He did not love her, she still hoped that He did.²¹² This form of mysticism was an experiential form of learning where Weil was invited to integrate detachment with the relational. In the context of this awakened dream, the two entities, the human and the Divine, are in an intimate and deep relationship together. In spite of the intimacy, the human element longs for more, longs to be totally possessed, and perhaps to possess the Other too. However, the Divine does not operate in this manner. God loves and relates through distance and absence. The experience of God emerges through this distance and absence.²¹³ Contradictorily, it was also the distance and absence that transformed Weil into a new person, as a result of the mystical union with Christ.²¹⁴ In the transformation she learnt that the promised teaching is the distance, and the zenith of the love is the absence. Weil's understanding, and moreover, her relationship with God, is simultaneously and paradoxically both transcendent and immanent, very present and yet extremely absent. Hence, in the Divine experience, these polarities are not in the least contradictory, but are ontologically one.

²¹² Weil, "Cahier XI," 70.

²¹³ Ibid., 420.

²¹⁴ Maria Clara Bingemer, *Simone Weil: Mystic of Passion and Compassion* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2015), 71-6.

The Divine invites the human person to follow this model not only in his relationship with the Transcendent but also with other human beings. Ultimately, the person needs to love others in a hollow abyss of annihilation. In Christ, Weil beholds the strongest ‘image’ of integration, a belief that was further consolidated by her mystical experiences: Christ embraces the reality of relationships through detachment, and through detachment deepens the relational,²¹⁵ as can be seen throughout His public life. This is the Christ who formed significant relationships with the persons around Him, particularly the apostles, with whom He experienced strong moments of intimacy and shared personal revelations (Mt. 17: 1-8; 16: 13-20; 26: 17-30; Jn. 17: 6-18). However, this is the same Christ who required His moments of seclusion (Mk. 1: 35) and who was not afraid to challenge the Twelve to leave if they were not prepared to relate with Him in the depth of His mystery (Jn. 6: 67). Weil’s mystical experiences, and her life as a whole, reflect this Christocentric tension that leads to integration, rooted totally in an experience of love for others, and mostly for the Other, through the process of detachment.

5.5.1 Imagery

The imagery used in Simone Weil’s writings, particularly in her personal notebooks, sheds more light on the integration inherent in Weilian spirituality. Imagery is a useful tool to understand more fully the complexity of the mystical experience, and consequently, the model of integration that is being presented. Words are limited, and being subject to semantic interpretation, do not approximate the profundity of these experiences.²¹⁶ It is the symbolical that captures the eschatological experience that words fail to describe.²¹⁷ As Paul states clearly, ‘No eye has seen, no ear has heard, and no mind has imagined what God has prepared for those who love him’ (1 Cor. 2, 9). Furthermore, the linguistic frameworks do not express

²¹⁵ Dupré, “Simone Weil and Platonism,” 18.

²¹⁶ Cusano, *Dotta Ignoranza*, 63.

²¹⁷ Trabucco, *Poetica Soprannaturale*, 13.

precisely aspects which are central to the spirituality of Simone Weil, which being rooted in contradiction, defy semantic paradigms.²¹⁸ Simone Weil's use of imagery can serve as a résumé, and an elaboration, of the salient points of this model of integration.

The concept of polarities featured extensively in the analysis on integration in this study. Weil refers to polarities within spirituality without using the word. Instead, she presents the powerful image of the mountain, an image which is frequently found in mystical texts, particularly in the Bible (Ex.19-20; 1 Kings 18; Mt. 17: 1-9). The traveller will start the journey upward, and will only initially perceive the lake. He will need to ascend further to notice that there is also a forest beneath the mountain. It is only at the higher echelons of the mountain that both the forest and the lake will be seen.²¹⁹ This shows that the spiritual journey has its phases. The person on the journey will first encounter a polarity, and at a later stage the opposite polarity. This will generate confusion, possibly a crisis, and certainly fear. This was the case with Simone Weil in her adolescence when she rejected the exploration of the existence of God.²²⁰ In her adult life she had a deep experience of God. Yet, at both points in her journey till then, she was not ready to integrate polarities. It was only through the process of waiting that she reached a loftier stage where integration could take place, and both the mountain and the lake could now be seen in a new way in her life journey.

Simone Weil also uses imagery to portray the spirituality of contradiction, particularly images drawn from Taoist literature. She refers to the image of the person discovering the world by not leaving the house, and reaching the destination point by not walking.²²¹ These images show that what is perceived to be logical is a hindrance to maturity. Another strong

²¹⁸ McCullough, *Religious Philosophy of Weil*, 39.

²¹⁹ Weil, "Cahier VIII," 122.

²²⁰ Perrin and Thibon, *As we knew her*, 27.

²²¹ Weil, "Textes chinois," 437.

image used is the one of the wheel. This image captures the integration between detachment and the relational, by showing that the empty space at the centre of the wheel allows the relationship between the spokes to make the wheel function. The wheel is neither the spoke, nor the empty space, but a new entity whose wholeness, as a result of the two elements, gives the wheel its full completion. Likewise, Weil also uses the image of the emptiness of the rooms that creates the space to insert doors and windows in a house to make it habitable.²²²

The most striking imagery that Weil uses to illustrate integration is taken from one of her earliest writings on psychoanalysis. She presents the image of the suckling child who becomes one with the mother by nurturing upon the milk emitted from the breast, and yet simultaneously detaching from her by causing pain through the biting of the nipple. The same source of the relational also becomes the same source for detachment. Yet this contrasting action is vital for the welfare of the child.²²³ The child needs to separate from the security provided by the breast of the mother to be able to develop. It is as a result of the integration of this tension that the child can mature, growing towards the new reality of his next phase in life.

Another image that depicts the spirituality of contradiction is the image of the mask. David Tracy explains extensively how this image serves to capture salient concepts in Weilian spirituality.²²⁴ In Greek tragedy, the mask, the *prosopon*, is the device that the actor uses to relate through hiddenness.²²⁵ It is by concealing the face that the real soul of the character is transmitted to the audience, engaging them in a deeper relationship. Similarly, the same can

²²² Ibid., 435.

²²³ Weil, "Sur Freud," 278.

²²⁴ Tracy, "Simone Weil: le masque," 303-6.

²²⁵ Glynne Wickham, *A History of the Theatre* (London: Phaidon Press Ltd., 1993), 39.

be said of the use of the mask in Japanese Noh theatre.²²⁶ The form of concealment becomes also a form of representation. The two are intimately connected with each other, like the darkness of the night and the light of the day, beautifully depicted in Weil's poem *A Un Jour*.²²⁷ In the theatre, the mask emphasises the distinctiveness of the character being played, as well as his essential traits. The character enters in a relation with the audience through the concealment. It is the contradictory nature of the mask that, through detachment, makes it a relational vehicle.

Biblical imagery can also be analysed to understand the integrative model present in Weilian spirituality. Weil's niece compares her aunt to the principal character of the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk. 10: 25-37). Weil can be identified with both the man robbed and left isolated on the way to Jerusalem – symbol of detachment – and simultaneously the Samaritan who entered into a healing relationship with the Jewish traveller.²²⁸ There is no separation between the two roles. It is by integrating the two persona that a new person, transformed in the mystical experience of Christ, is born, for 'if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here' (2 Cor. 5: 17).

The wide spectrum of imagery used by Weil, or by secondary sources, to explain the mystical process of integration in her spirituality, can be condensed in the ultimate rationale behind the usage of the symbolical in her writings. It is a key that facilitates the understanding leading to the Truth, that is, to Christ. The images and the symbols used are Christocentric.²²⁹ The symbolical loses all its validity unless the imagery presented serves as a vehicle to deepen the relationship with Christ. This approach is fundamental in Weilian spirituality. It is another

²²⁶ Ibid., 27.

²²⁷ Simone Weil, *Poèmes: Suivis de Venise Sauvée, Lettre de Paul Valéry* (Paris: Gallimard, 1968), 25-30.

²²⁸ Weil, *At Home*, 153.

²²⁹ Trabucco, *Poetica Soprannaturale*, 237.

form of *metaxu* that bridges the gap between the human and the Divine in the journey towards the experience of nothingness.

5.6 Concluding words of certainty?

The only concluding word of ‘certainty’ that the mystic offers is doubt. This is a journey of faith, and faith can only be reached through doubt. If there was certainty, there would be no purpose for faith. Weil herself had doubts on her own mystical experience, demonstrating her prudence and humility in an experience that transcended her human limitations.²³⁰ Doubt spurs the person towards a deeper and more mature experience that certainty tends to arrest.²³¹ It shatters the certainty of one’s belief system, leading to a more profound spiritual experience.²³² As Zen Buddhism claims, ‘when there is faith, there is doubt’.²³³ Doubt becomes the ‘certainty’ of the process of integration. According to the Cartesian model, it is only doubt that spurs the journey towards truth, propelling towards the next step, until more doubt emerges to stimulate the person to advance further.²³⁴ The illusion of certainty can only be superseded through patience and by embracing the prolonged doubt.²³⁵ Certainty promotes permanence and never challenges the *status quo*. Doubt requires strength, for only the strong can cope with the challenges of growth.

²³⁰ Canciani, *L’Intelligence et l’Amour*, 71.

²³¹ Marie-Magdeleine Davy, *Introduction au Message de Simone Weil* (Paris : Librairie Plon, 1954), 42.

²³² McCullough, *Religious Philosophy of Weil*, 47.

²³³ Weil, “Cahier VIII,” 76.

²³⁴ Alain, *Éléments de Philosophie* (Paris: Gallimard, 1990), 258.

²³⁵ Rancé, *Le Courage de l’Impossible*, 212.

Initially, Weil's approach can be overwhelming and harrowing, for a person will find it challenging to live constantly in doubt. Most people would consider this state an impossible situation to live in. It is precisely this impossibility that Simone Weil is advocating. Impossibility is the only path to God.²³⁶ This impossibility, however, does not imply that the person should not venture on the path. The essence of the spirituality of contradiction is the willingness to strive for the impossible and the mysterious.²³⁷ It is the beauty of finality without an end, a finality that does not have a purpose, or if it does, the human being should avoid seeking it.²³⁸ It is the acceptance of a why that remains unanswered for there is no perceptible answer.²³⁹ Simone Weil refers to this process as the journey towards non-satiation. Satiation will never occur because the process is aiming at a reality, which, by default, is beyond human grasp.²⁴⁰ As Gabellieri proffers, in Weilian spirituality, there is no division between revelation and mystery. On the contrary, revelation occurs through, and within the mystery.²⁴¹

This approach might initially also seem to be pessimistic, but, paradoxically, it provides a beacon of hope in the midst of doubt. Knowing that complete satiation is unattainable within the human reality frees the person from excessive expectations that burden the traveller on the journey. It liberates the individual from deprecating himself for his lack of success: the prize at the end might not be reached, so whether one 'fails' to obtain it or not, is immaterial. This attitude might demotivate the person from even participating in the process, but this temptation can be surpassed when he realises the importance of the process within itself. As

²³⁶ Weil, "Cahier VIII," 118.

²³⁷ Simone Weil, "Quelques réflexions autour de la notion de valeur," in *Marseille*, vol I, 475.

²³⁸ Weil, "Cahier X," 314.

²³⁹ Weil, "Intuitions pré-chrétiennes," 291.

²⁴⁰ Weil, "Cahier III," 339.

²⁴¹ Gabellieri, "Le donné et le mystère," 628.

the person matures, he will grow to understand that the end result should not be his foremost priority, and that the process becomes the end product itself. As Jung states:

...in every adult there lurks a child – an eternal child, something that is always becoming, is never completed...but unattainability is no argument against the ideal, for ideals are only signposts, never the goal.²⁴²

The person learns how to avoid focusing on the end product and trust in the work of God by engaging deeper in the process, and surrendering more to the Divine will. This can only happen when the person is open to the infinity of the love of the Divine. Accepting this impossibility makes integration an unexpected gift.²⁴³ Integration can take place once a person refrains from actively attempting to achieve it. This is reminiscent of the Buddhist anecdote that Weil refers to, in which the miser was entitled to ask for a coin every time he mentioned the name of God. Eventually the miser became so enthralled in thinking about God that he forgot to collect the coins.²⁴⁴ Likewise, the person on the journey needs to focus on God, that is, on the state of nothingness, and forget the process of integration. The leap can only occur in this state of ‘forgetfulness’. Ultimately, ‘to be truly in relation means being only relation, never being oneself.’²⁴⁵ The integrated state is a relational state in which the self no longer is, and hence, cannot detach. The person also ceases to be and so cannot be in a relationship, for a relationship implies the self in relation with the other. This is the point where the truth of integration ontologically takes over.

²⁴² Karl Gustav Jung, “The Development of Personality,” in *The Essential Jung*, 194-6.

²⁴³ Rozelle-Stone and Stone, *Simone Weil and Theology*, 182.

²⁴⁴ Simone Weil, “Textes bouddhistes,” in *Marseille, vol II*, 443-4.

²⁴⁵ Vetö, *Religious Metaphysics*, 152.

CHAPTER VI

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to present a model of integration between the seemingly opposing polarities of *detachment* and the *relational*, by using insights taken from the life and the writings of the French mystic Simone Weil. It demonstrated that it is only through this integration that the person can develop spiritually and become capable of transcending the world, without fleeing from it, but on the contrary, by remaining grounded in its reality.¹ The crux of Weilian spirituality is found in the rapport between the world and the supernatural,² a rapport that can be lived through in the integration between *detachment* and the *relational*.

The point of departure in the introductory chapter was the exposition and analysis of the *modus operandi* adopted in this thesis. This chapter established that the spirituality of Simone Weil was going to be examined within the religious framework of the Catholic heritage, without excluding the other belief systems that also left an indelible imprint on the spirituality of Simone Weil. The chapter also explained the decision to root the study in the apophatic and apostolic school of spirituality and presented these schools of spirituality against the anthropological framework that characterises the thought process of Weil. Another objective of this chapter was to expound on the methodology used in this thesis. Intertextuality created a platform for dialogue with the texts written by Simone Weil and about Simone Weil that allowed deeper probing into the themes selected for this study. The chosen method of analysis was the hermeneutic approach, with the main locus being the interpretation of the key themes, through an engagement with the texts.

¹ Gabellieri, *Être et Don*, 203-4.

² Ibid., 336.

The objective of the second chapter of the thesis was to define and to analyse the key themes of this study in the light of extant literature in the Christian tradition. This chapter demonstrated the importance of the themes of *detachment* and the *relational* in a wider manner, demonstrating that these themes are pivotal not only within the field of spirituality, but holistically in the development of the human personality. This within itself highlighted the main approach endorsed in the subsequent chapters of the thesis, that is, that the human person needs to be studied in an integrative manner, avoiding any form of fragmentation. The chapter also examined contentious issues in the study of these key themes, which paved the way for their understanding within the scope of Weilian spirituality. It illustrated the tension between the active and the passive dynamics of the virtue of detachment, showing the interdependency that these two aspects have on each other. It also presented the debate in the field of spirituality on whether the growth of a virtue occurs internally or else as a result of the actions practised by the person, revealing that detachment is a process that the individual engages in by committing to and by embracing an internal attitude. The chapter also emphasised the different expressions of relationality within the Christian tradition. The follower of Christ is called to be a relational being, and all vocations are relational. The relationality embraced by the Christian also implies that he is a political creature and has an obligation to contribute towards the wellbeing of society, particularly in the attention given to the vulnerable that lie at the periphery. The insights on these two key themes permeate the spirituality of Simone Weil and were used to embody further the line of thought that was examined in the following chapters.

The third chapter developed the discussion on the theme of detachment by placing it within the context of the reality of the life and the writings of Simone Weil. The tension between the internal and the external, as well as the tension between the active and the passive, were explored within the struggle that Weil experienced as she deepened in the process of detachment. The chapter demonstrated that though Weil took deliberate external steps such as her decision not to be baptised or her withdrawal from the political scenario, all these actions were spurred by an internal transformation. It also accentuated the fact that detachment is a passive process: Weil entered the void of nothingness as her relationship with Christ matured. The relationship with Jesus Christ compelled her to venture further into the practice of detachment. This approach still implies that the active element is present since the person needs to engage in the relationship with Christ. The chapter outlined other factors, such as the socio-political milieu, that were also pivotal to the forms of detachment evident in the life of the mystic, but it nevertheless attributed the depth of this virtue to her spiritual growth. This emerged potently in the radicalism displayed: her relationship with Christ was a fully committed relationship, devoid of any form of compromise. It was also a commitment embedded in a painful struggle, and it was this dire tension that propelled Weil into the relational. The chapter demonstrated clearly that the tension present in the detachment is healthy since through it, the Grace of God leads the person into fulfilling his vocation to relate profoundly with others. The intimacy of God thrusts the soul to an inner metanoia, which is then translated and expressed through radical service.³

³ Bingemer, *Simone Weil*, 123.

The study proceeded to a reflection in the next chapter on relationality, showing that relationships can be healthy when they lead to the Divine, since ‘all that a person really desires in vain down here is perfect and real in God.’⁴ There is an intimate rapport between relationality with the Divine and relationality with others. This constant interface is reflected in the spirituality of Simone Weil, even though this interdependency does not imply that the dynamics are identical. The chapter thus offered a methodology in the analysis of relationships, based on the fundamental Weilian principle of *metaxu*, providing a key in the process of discernment to determine the relationships that foster spiritual growth. Human relationships constitute the principal vehicle that enables the person to develop in his love for God. It is an invitation to journey, through human relationships, into the God reality, that is into the experience of nothingness. It is also a process that is characterised by a tension between opposing polarities, reflecting the struggle that is inherent in relationality. In Weilian spirituality, this struggle is not perceived as negative but is an indicator of maturity in the relationship. It is the ‘living out’ experientially of these seeming contradictions that becomes the essence of a healthy relationship.

The fifth chapter integrated the two key themes within the reality of Weilian spirituality. It presented this integration, or transformation, as rooted in contradiction. The tension between the relational and detachment was presented as a fundamental dynamic in spiritual development to the extent that these two aspects cannot exist without the tension. The polarities were not perceived as being antagonistic since ‘the source of all heresies lies in not perceiving the harmony between two opposing truths and believing that they are so incompatible.’⁵ The chapter demonstrated succinctly that these polarities provide a platform

⁴ ‘Tout ce que l’homme désire vraiment ici-bas est parfait et réel en Dieu.’ Weil, *Attente*, 55.

⁵ ‘La source de toutes les hérésies est de ne pas concevoir l’accord de deux vérités opposées et de croire qu’elles sont si incompatibles.’ Pascal, *Pensées*, 414.

for the creation of a new entity, an entity which Weil considered to be *metaxu* – a bridge leading to the Divine. This mystical state of transformation in the Divine transcends the limitations of human language but can be discerned through a number of distinct traits that Weil presented in her writings as indicators of this process. In the transformation the person is enthralled by a profound desire for the truth which is characterised by joy and non-action. It is a state where the soul surrenders itself to the depth of the Divine reality of nothingness by being penetrated, within the void, by the mystical annihilation of relationality. As a result of this insight, the thesis reached its culmination point by not only bringing to light the dynamics of the spirituality of Simone Weil but by depicting the traits of the transformative and integrative state of her mystical journey. This analysis will possibly open up new pathways for a deeper understanding of Weil's spiritual experience and writings.

6.1 Relevance of the study

The insights provided on the integration between detachment and the relational lead to important and pertinent questions: what has Weil's experience to say to the contemporary world? Is her spirituality still relevant and conducive to the quest for God in the context of a secularised world, seventy-five years after her death? These questions will be explored through particular present-day currents and themes in spirituality as expounded upon by modern and contemporary authors, displaying the significance of the themes explored in this study to today's world, and demonstrating the importance of further studies in Weilian spirituality to delve deeper into her acumen. This will be done in a two-tiered manner. The first part of the section will demonstrate the bridges of communication that Weil's spirituality can create with a secular and a Godless society by focusing on common factors, that is, the rights of the individual; how these rights impinge on work ethics; and how these rights are expressed in the notions of beauty and harmony. Weil provides contemporary society a

modus operandi, embedded in the Christian experience, which is open to plurality and in dialogue not only with atheism and agnosticism, but also with other religious traditions and a diversified scope of academic disciplines including philosophy, literature, sociology and psychology.⁶ This presents a platform of communication between the humanities and the study of theology.

Weil's insights also create a space of encounter between the right-wing conservative and the left-wing liberal, where opposing thoughts can be shared and appreciated through the integrative methodology deduced from the writings of Simone Weil. The bridging between these two political viewpoints is not an easy process. Weil generates waves of discomfort to the reactionary as well as to the radical, even though her writings facilitate the creation of a space for an encounter. This discomfort instigates the reader to either demonise her, or to commit to a deeper search for meaning. The liberal or the secular person will empathise with Weil's critique of the Institution of the Catholic Church but will struggle to relate with her insights on the slavery of the human condition, the experience of the dark night and the importance of detachment. The conservative will relate with Weil's insistence on order and harmony, but will perceive her as being harsh on specific traditions and practices in the Church.⁷ This section will respect this dynamic by recognising that Weil presents a praxis which differs to the approach advocated by society, and yet contrasts also with the more orthodox philosophy endorsed by the Institution of the Catholic Church. The latter will emerge more strongly in the second part of the coming section, which proceeds by giving an analysis of Weilian spirituality in the relationship between the Catholic Church hierarchy and

⁶ Bingemer, *Simone Weil*, 122.

⁷ Giulia-Paola Di Nicola and Attilio Danese, *Abissi e Vette: Percorsi spirituali e mistici in Simone Weil* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2002), 111-2.

present-day society. This discourse is presented within the context of the spirituality of an integrated form of relationality that this work has explored.

6.1.1 Dialogue with the secular world

Simone Weil serves as a paradigm model for self-reflection to contemporary society. The Europe that she was living in had already experienced for over a century the tension arising from the deep division between the modern secularist ideologies and discourse as against the deeply rooted values exhibited in traditional conservative society. In the contemporary world, the same tension is still manifested, in particular through the emergence of new waves of traditionalism, apparently reacting to the immanent secularised and materialist culture pervading the globalised world.⁸ It is in this context that Weil's writings still have much to offer, creating a bridge between these two realities. The 'authentic witness' that cultivated a dialogue in the twentieth century between 'culture and holiness'⁹ still stimulates the same form of dialogue in the twenty-first century, through the model of integration presented in her writings.

T.S. Eliot lauds the final work that Weil wrote during her brief stay in the United Kingdom by stating that 'her study on human rights and human obligations exposes the falsity of some of the verbiage still current'.¹⁰ The statement that Eliot makes is still valid, even though his appraisal of Weil's work was published over six decades ago. In a society that focuses on rights, Weil's insistence on obligations still sounds uncomfortable, and, indeed, it is intended to be so. Weil challenges the contemporary person to make the needed shift from an emphasis on rights to attention on duties. As seen in this study, focusing too intensely on rights might

⁸ See Darrell Jodock (ed.), *Catholicism contending with Modernity: Roman Catholic Modernism and Anti-Modernism in Historical Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

⁹ Bingemer, *Simone Weil*, 1.

¹⁰ T.S. Eliot, "Preface," in Simone Weil, *The Need for Roots: Prelude to a Declaration of Duties towards Mankind* (London: Routledge, 2009), xiv .

lead the person to being egotistic.¹¹ The locus is the needs of the self, and all the decisions taken and all the actions executed stem from an innate desire to gratify these needs. Weil's spirituality of relationality, which she extends to her approach to political matters, is a remarkable volte-face. The centre of attention becomes the other and the duty of the individual is to be of service. This engagement purifies the individual of the egotistic attitudes, transforming him into the Divine reality of nothingness.

The struggle between rights and duties is manifested in the work reality. Weilian thought promotes a relevant work ethics to contemporary society, based on her understanding of duties. Contemporary society has recognised the importance of work for the wellbeing of the individual. Work gives the person meaning, considering the fact that the place of work is the space where most people spend the majority of their weekly hours. Structures and policies have been established so that workers function within a space that maximises on their potential, and ensure that the highest range of productivity is achieved.¹² This model fosters healthy interpersonal relationships, but is devoid of what Weil would consider as the inherent spiritual nature of work.¹³ Work offers a scaffold for the person to reach nothingness. The focus shifts from a philosophy which emphasises the self for the benefit of productivity, to an experience of growth in the love for the Transcendent. The shifts happens through the annihilation of the self, required by the constant attention in the process of work, as well as through the giving of the self to the other encountered at work. This is a keystone aspect in the integrative model of Weil where relationality and detachment operate together in the process of spiritual growth.

¹¹ Supra, 206.

¹² John Arnold, Ray Randall and Fiona Patterson, *Work Psychology: Understanding Human Behaviour in the Workplace* (Harlow: Pearson Education Limited, 2010), 132.

¹³ Trabucco, *Poetica Sopranaturale*, 105-6.

The contemporary world is also concerned with balance and holistic welfare, probably since it has recognised the damage caused to humanity by the absence of these aspects. Humanity's quest for joy has in the world of today become synonymous with the need to discover an equilibrium which the conundrum of the everyday routine deprives it from. The notion of the beauty of the image is equally important to contemporary society. From the glamour of Hollywood to the ever-sprouting gyms and beauty parlours, the contemporary person is all too aware of his or her image, and always strives towards becoming more beautiful externally. 'The body is not only an individual material asset but also a site of cultural and political struggles...The commodification of women's bodies, in accentuating their sexual differences, has generated "sexiness" as an imperative for women.'¹⁴ Contemporary society does not only exploit the female body. Male bodies are also equally displayed. With the advent of the sex revolution which allowed women to express their sexual desires, the male body was also sensationalised in the popular media.¹⁵ Simone Weil's journey also highlights harmony and beauty as kingpins of her spirituality. This resonates with the direction that contemporary society has fostered, but the methodology endorsed by the latter to attain these objectives differs from the *modus operandi* adopted by Weil. The image industry thrives on the glorification of the self. This is in sharp contrast with Weil's vision that beauty and harmony can only be attained through negation. Weil's spirituality on the beautiful demonstrates that 'Beauty is the disinterested one',¹⁶ anticipating the theology of Balthasar by over thirty years. The harmony that she is referring to is not comfortable since it is only achieved through embracing contradiction, an essential component of her integrative framework. Her notion of harmony is Pythagorean. It is the 'right equilibrium of contraries.

¹⁴ Meeta Jha, *The Global Beauty Industry: Framing 21st Century Social Issues* (London: Routledge, 2015), 2.

¹⁵ Michael Ferguson, *Idol Worship: A Shameless Celebration of Male Beauty in the Movies* (Sarasota: Starbooks, 2004), 171.

¹⁶ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord. A Theological Aesthetics, I: Seeing the Form* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press/T&T Clark, 1982), 26.

This is a solution that humanity thirsts for today.’¹⁷ The development in the philosophical school of thought of meta-modernism complements Weilian spirituality, by nurturing the integration of contraries such as doubt and hope, revealing that the welfare of society can only be achieved in the liminality of these seeming contradictions.¹⁸

Simone Weil’s reflections on the beauty of the human body are challenging since she does not exclude the frailty of the human being in discussing its beauty. Contemporary society glorifies the strength of the human body and mind, portraying an image of invincibility. In the neoliberal model, power is synonymous with wealth or strength, be it physical or intellectual. This fallacious popular belief is shattered every time a tragic event occurs, highlighting the innate fragility of the human condition. Contemporary society is perturbed by such occurrences since they defy the inept reassurance that the advances in society and technology will protect mankind against all forms of malaise. Weil demonstrates that the human person is fragile: it is only through love and the penetration of the mystery of nothingness that strength is sought. Contrary to contemporary belief, within the Weilian integrative model, it is annihilation that leads to strength, and not the ‘invincibility’ of the human body.¹⁹ Weil proposes one approach as an antidote to the neoliberal model: the transformation of illusionary power into acts of love and service.²⁰

¹⁷ ‘...juste équilibre des contraires. Cette solution est ce dont les hommes ont soif précisément aujourd’hui.’ Weil, *Attente*, 55.

¹⁸ See Robin van der Akker, Alison Gibbons and Timotheus Vermeulen (ed.), *Metamodernism: Historicity, Affect, and Depth after Postmodernism* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2017).

¹⁹ Di Nicola and Danese, *Abissi e Vette*, 231-2.

²⁰ Bingemer, *Simone Weil*, 112.

Weil's thoughts on personhood encompass also her spirituality on the relational, another aspect that is of prime concern to society. In 2015, a systematic review of 1336 peer-reviewed articles concluded that for a highly significant amount of people 'others matter, and that happiness and welfare in life depends on positive relationality.'²¹ Relationality has a fundamental importance in Weilian spirituality since relationships allow for change and growth in the human person.²² However, the contemporary insistence on the rights of the self is in dissonance with the philosophy of relationality practised and advocated by Weil. The method proposed by Weil to strengthen the relational is the annihilation of self, provided that this is understood in the proper context of spiritual and psychological maturity. This methodology can safeguard the egotistic needs of the self from destroying the other. Weil ultimately offers a spirituality of love, real love, different from the one oft portrayed by the media. It is a love that, according to Lonergan, fosters 'the efficacious ground of all self-transcendence',²³ which can only occur when the self is annihilated. Weilian spirituality is nevertheless a spirituality of joy, in spite of the darkness generally associated with annihilation. Her insistence on joy is reminiscent of the same concept emphasised in the Renaissance and the Italian Post-Tridentine spirituality.²⁴ Weil's insights on joy have the potential of offering the contemporary person a *renaissance* because the integrative state in spiritual growth leads the person to a new birth. The journey into nothingness generates joy, as opposed to contemporary thought that bases itself on the edification of the self and the acquisition of material.

²¹ Meg A. Warren and Stewart I. Donaldson (ed.), *Toward a Positive Psychology of Relationships: New Directions in Theory and Research* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2018), 2.

²² Simone Weil, "A Priori et Expérience," in *Philosophiques*, 368.

²³ Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 240-1.

²⁴ Aumann, *Christian Spirituality*, 208-9.

6.1.2 Dialogue with the Catholic world

This study also demonstrates the relevance of Weilian spirituality to the dynamics inherent in the Catholic Church. Her spirituality offers a challenge to the Institution, inviting it to deepen further spiritually and to be more inclusive, particularly towards all those realities that perceive themselves as being excluded by the Catholic Church. It is a demand for the Church to return to its roots, to be more Catholic and universal in its approach.²⁵ It is also a request for her to be more inspiring and stimulating, without being dominating or imposing.²⁶ Particular minority groups, such as the LGBTI community feel that they are not embraced by the hierarchy.²⁷ Weil's plea for inclusion is strongly pertinent and significant to contemporary society and its search for total inclusion on all levels, especially in its dialogue with the Catholic Church. Weil's request extends itself as well to other Christian denominations and other Christocentric entities. Her strong condemnation of the phrase *anathema sit* is a reminder of the Church's commitment to ecumenical dialogue and to providing channels and structures for communication, even if faced with ideas and discourses that seem to be heterodox to its traditional teachings.²⁸ Weil's writings can be described as having transcended time, and were possibly considered to be *avant garde*, and disturbing, in her own times. The realities that she explores in her analysis of the inter-relationality between the Institution and other entities are strikingly pertinent to the contemporary scenario. Weil anticipated the paradigm shift caused by Vatican Council II,²⁹ a shift that the Catholic Church is still internalising, even though the Council closed in 1965. The theological insights that she offers are as interesting as they were seventy-five ago and her audacious voice still needs to be listened to.

²⁵ Trabucco, *Poetica Soprannaturale*, 235.

²⁶ Canciani, *L'Intelligence et l'Amour*, 186.

²⁷ See Patricia Wittberg, *Catholic Cultures: How Parishes can respond to the Changing Face of Catholicism* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2016).

²⁸ Trabucco, *Poetica Soprannaturale*, 237.

²⁹ Supra, 92, 93, 161.

Simone Weil is also a representational figure for those who experience conflict in a culture that is hostile to belief. Her spirituality offers a form of ‘hope’ to those who still maintain that religion has an important role to play and to fulfil in today’s society, but who also think that this role needs to be revised to address the changing signs of the time. Simone Weil offers them the courage to question and to seek for approaches that make religion more relevant to the contemporary reality, by returning to the roots of faith. Weil also serves as a stimulating role-model to the believers who remain stagnant in their faith, not prepared to release themselves from the structures that they have endorsed throughout their lives, to able to reflect on them. In this context, religion lacks depth and maturity, since it becomes a ‘comfort zone’ and does not challenge the person to grow. Weil’s spirituality spurs these individuals towards purification from these structures by embracing a spirituality of contradiction. This vocation to a deeper spiritual engagement, addressed through the insights offered by Simone Weil in her integrative model, can also be observed in the experience of the American novelist Flannery O’Connor, and the influence that Simone Weil had over her. O’Connor refers to Weil as one of ‘the two twentieth century women who interest me most’, the other being Edith Stein,³⁰ and that their lives overshadow ‘anything they may have written.’³¹ The indelible effect that the writings of Weil left on Flannery O’Connor to explore her spirituality further, is multifaceted. Both women, in their own way delved into the mystery of the presence of Christ in the Catholic Church, as well as its dogmatic teachings. They both investigated profoundly metaphysical and existentialist polemical issues such as suffering in the world, particularly the suffering of the innocent, an issue that still confounds contemporary society.³² Both women sought for a reply in the mystery of the Crucifixion of

³⁰ Flannery O’Connor, *The Habit of Being: The Letters of Flannery O’Connor* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1971), 93.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 98.

³² In 2017, the year when the first draft of this thesis was written, one of the most haunting images in the social media was the one of the Aleppo child, Omran Daqneesh, in the Syrian war, covered in dust with blood on his face and clothing.

Christ, perceiving evil as a vehicle that thrusts the person to embrace contradiction through the Grace of God.³³ Weil pondered on these issues through her philosophical and spiritual writings, and O'Connor incarnated this expression through the dilemmas encountered by the characters in her novels.³⁴ It is this evergreen quest that needs to be appreciated, studied, and lived in order to deepen the dimensions of one's faith.

Weil's methodology and analysis of diverse religious and spiritual sources also offer an important message to those, who in the contemporary world, either embrace syncretism, easily reducible to relativism, or else have narrowed down their worldview by embracing fundamentalist notions. She explores the wealth of the spiritual experience beyond Christianity, whilst also showing the different nuances that constitute the human existence. Her methodology also highlights the need of transcending mere religiosity and defies skewed up stereotypes that are not grounded enough in the journey of mankind. Her emphasis on non-action, another salient component of her integrative model, is also a stark challenge to those factions in the contemporary world who advocate religious violence, proselytism or propaganda as a solution to the greater existential and political problems.³⁵ These tactics are in direct contrast and opposition with the dynamics of the Spirit. The religious experience is a gift that cannot be coerced, but embraced in its profundity.

³³ Ralph C. Wood , “ ‘God may strike you thisaway’: Flannery O’Connor and Simone Weil on Affliction and Joy.’ ” *Renascence* 59 (2007): 186.

³⁴ John F. Desmond, “Flannery O’Connor and Simone Weil: A Question of Sympathy,” in *Logos: A Journal of Catholic Thought and Culture* 8 (2005): 2-3.

³⁵ Di Nicola and Danese, *Abissi e Vette*, 200.

6.2 Interdisciplinarity

Interdisciplinary studies or research projects can be embarked on to deepen the reflections on Weilian thought on integration in a more holistic manner. Interdisciplinarity can create a platform whereby the thoughts and ideas of Simone Weil can be synthesised and comprehended deeply by allowing different disciplines to dialogue with each other. This will not only ensure a wider readership of the works of Weil, but will also enrich the understanding of her writings by examining them through a spectrum of lenses, since each academic discipline analyses the world with its own particular lens. Each discipline embraces different methodologies of analysis through which a deeper evaluation can be made. This will also lead to a more thorough understanding of the complexity of the issues and themes being examined. It will also serve to confront questions that may otherwise not arise. Each discipline will pose questions of research that are relevant to its own reality, and these questions can be examined in a cross-disciplinary manner.

Weil's approach in her writings facilitates interdisciplinarity. Her written contributions range across a vast number of academic disciplines including theology, philosophy, political theory, economics, mathematics, physics, sociology and literary theory. Weil's writings are already embedded in interdisciplinarity, since she was well-read in a wide range of subjects, particularly in the humanities. It would be interesting to refer to her reflections on a particular discipline, and apply them by using the methodology of another discipline. This was attempted in this research project, where for example, mathematical concepts were applied to spiritual theology. The cross-fertilisation that occurred through this process resulted in interesting insights on the spirituality of Simone Weil, presenting another facet to the depth of her writings.

6.3 Final thoughts

Simone Weil's spirituality is a spirituality for the contemporary world, and offers a creative and challenging path for anyone who would like to deepen his spirituality. Some of her insights might not have survived the test of time and are nowadays considered obsolete, redundant, or simply statements that are too generic. Other aspects of her writings come across as disturbing and controversial. In spite of these restrictions, the contemporary scholar needs to look beyond and delve deeper into the process of the mechanics of Weilian thought rather than focus on the statements in isolation. Challenging some of them, as this study did when it analysed her reaction to quantum physics, might prove to be the key to develop further the application of her thoughts. Through this thorough and meticulous process, the contemporary person can appreciate the myriad of depth that the writings of Simone Weil have to offer, not only in the theme of the integration between detachment and relationality, but in all the aspects that her spirituality expounds upon.

Simone Weil offers the same challenge to the secular world too. The person who claimed that the atheist might be closer to the Divine than the believer is,³⁶ has indeed relevance to the person who rejects religion and the spiritual dimension. This is because her insights have strong philosophical, psychological and anthropological components that even though they emerge from her spirituality, a spirituality which is essentially Christocentric, contain a wisdom that is applicable to all. In fact, the first writings of Weil precede her mystical experiences, and have barely any references to Christ, and yet, still pave the way to the framework of her spirituality.

³⁶ Weil, "Textes rassemblés," 370-1.

This work will conclude by referring to two insights that Simone Weil wrote in her *Cahiers* in the last years of her life, highlighting the tension between detachment and relating:

..If the completion of joy is found in the thought that God is, the same completion needs to be found in the knowledge that one is not, since it is the same thought.³⁷

...Without necessity we cannot comprehend the divine, nor grasp nor engage with him in any other way.³⁸

It is this same contradiction that steers the person towards integration.

³⁷ 'Si on trouve la plénitude de la joie dans la pensée que Dieu est, il faut trouver la même plénitude dans la connaissance que soi-même on n'est pas, car c'est la même pensée.' Weil, "Cahier VI," 402.

³⁸ 'Sans la nécessité on ne peut concevoir le divin seul ni le saisir ni y participer de quelque autre matière.' Weil, "Cahier III," 345.

Chronology

This chronology is a selective one. It focuses on events in the life of Simone Weil which are directly or indirectly related to the themes studied in this thesis. It also includes all major landmarks in her life.

3rd February 1909: Birth of Simone Weil in Paris.

April/May 1916: Cousin Raymonde is lodged at the Weil's and Simone insists on being kind to her since she is an orphan.

1917: Establishes a friendship with a World War I soldier.

1925-6: Studies at the Lycée Henri-IV in Paris.

1928-31: Studies at the Ecole Normale Supérieure in Paris.

1930: Reads the Gospels in Classical Greek.

October 1931: Post of lecturer at Le Puy.

December 1931: Initial contacts with trade unions.

March 1932: Reaching out to the workers in the strike.

Summer 1932: Trip to Germany.

October 1932: Post of lecturer at Auxerre.

End of 1932: Beginning of friendship with Boris Souvarine.

October 1933: Post of lecturer at Roanne.

December 1933: Participation in the workers' march.

December 1933: Confrontation with Trotsky at her parents' home.

May 1934: Participation in workers' annual demonstration in Roanne.

December 1934: Starts working in the Alsthom factory.

April 1935: Starts working in the Boulogne-Billancourt factory.

June 1935: Starts working at the Renault factory.

August 1935: Experiential contact with Christianity in Portugal.

October 1935: Post of lecturer in Bourges.

March 1936: Works on a farm in Carron de Gron in Cher.

August 1936: Departure for the Spanish Civil War.

Spring 1937: Trip to Italy.

June 1937: Mystical experience in Assisi.

October 1937: Post of lecturer at Saint-Quentin.

April 1938: Mystical experience in Solesmes. Reading of poetry by George Herbert.

1940: Reading of *The Bhagavad Gita*.

Early 1940: Drafts a plan for the formation of a Front-line Nursing Squad.

February/March 1940: Awakened dream.

September 1940: Departs to Marseille because of the threat of the Second World War.

December 1940: Volunteers to help with the *Témoignage chrétien*. Commences her friendship with the Honnorat couple.

June 1941: Develops a friendship with Father Perrin, who becomes her spiritual director.

August 1941: Develops friendship with Gustave Thibon.

September-October 1941: Works on the farm at Saint-Julien-de-Peyrolas.

March 1942: Visits to Joë Bousquet.

May 1942: Departs for the United States of America.

September 1942: Birth of Sylvie Weil.

November 1942: Departs for the United Kingdom.

January 1943: Lodges with Mrs Francis, and assists her children in their school work.

April 1943: Hospitalisation in Middlesex.

August 1943: Moves to Grosvenor Sanatorium in Ashford, Kent.

24th August 1943: Dies at the Grosvenor Sanatorium.

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