

1. THE BAPTISM OF SIMONE WEIL

SIMONE WEIL both in her writings and her person, appears to be a woman of the deepest spirituality. Although often heterodox in particulars, her basic vision is profoundly Christian. She herself claimed that she was Catholic. But there is something puzzling about that claim, for it has always been assumed that she never was baptized. We know that she discussed the issue at length with Fathers Perrin, Coutourier, and Oesterreicher, as well as other priests. Nevertheless, it has always been thought that her relationship to the Church depended strictly on intellectual, spiritual, and cultural sympathies, and not on ritual factors.

Some writers have made a great deal of this fact, although not all have come to the same conclusion. For some, Simone Weil has become as it were, a secular saint, able to draw upon the spirituality of Christianity without being officially a part of it. For others, such as Thomas Nevin in his *Simone Weil: Portrait of a Self-Exiled Jew*,¹ Weil is seen as one who was simply trying to “pass” as a Christian, remaining permanently and unalterably outside Christianity.

There is reason, however, to reassess the assumption that Weil was never baptized. Beginning in the 1960s evidence to the contrary has trickled in. Jacques Cabaud in his second book on Weil in 1967 offered hints, based on still unpublished testimonies, of a baptism *in extremis* by a nonordained hand.² Cabaud, however, was not any

more specific than this and did not identify his source. Thus tantalizing as the suggestion was, it offered little to go on.

In 1971, however, Wladimir Rabi, editor of the Jewish journal *Les Nouveaux Cahiers*, published an astounding article in which he told the story of such a baptism.³ Rabi had originally heard the story from a Michele Leleu, who had heard it from a person identified in the article only as X. This occurred while both she and X were attending a congress of the International Association for French Studies in Paris in 1965. X was the person who performed the baptism. Rabi in his article not only retold Leleu's story but also printed the results of an extensive search for information on the subject. Rabi, who died a few years ago in an auto accident, believed the story but doubted the baptism had any significance.

Simone Pétrement in her biography of Weil in 1974 brought the story to public attention again. She dismissed it as unlikely. Since then it has received little attention.⁴

I bring it up once again for a very simple reason. Like most Weil scholars, I knew the story primarily from Pétrement. But in May, 1981, after the first annual meeting of the American Weil Society, I received a telephone call from Simone Deitz, who, as all familiar with Cabaud's biography are well aware, was Weil's close friend first in New York and then again in London when both were with the Free French. Deitz had just that day learned of the meeting from its announcement in *Cahiers Simone Weil*. In the course of our conversation about all sorts of matters, Deitz told me that she had baptized Weil. We talked at some length about it.

Later that summer, I was fortunate to be able to spend an afternoon with Deitz. It was at that time that she lent me her copy of Rabi's article (which had on it an inscription to her by Rabi and an identification of herself with X noted in the margin in her handwriting). I had not seen the article before and was therefore able to acquaint myself with numerous details of the story that were not in Pétrement's account. What was even more important than seeing Rabi's article, though, was the time Deitz and I spent going through Pétrement's account while I held the English text in hand and she commented on it.

Three years later I presented her account at a meeting of the American Weil Society at the University of Notre Dame in 1984. Since then even Deitz herself has told the story at a meeting of the American Weil Society held at Harvard University in 1988, which presentation was videotaped. The following is Deitz's story with

an assessment of the evidence.⁵ Added to the story are my comments on how this story is significant for our understanding of Simone Weil.

THE STORY

The story of Weil's last days and her baptism *in extremis*, at the center of debate, is this:

On April 15, 1943, Deitz, who was Weil's good friend in both New York and London, noticed Weil had not appeared at work and went to her apartment, only to find her unconscious on the floor. Deitz had Weil taken to Middlesex Hospital in London, where she was diagnosed as having tuberculosis, a condition Deitz claims Weil was well aware she had, even at the time she left New York.

It was while at Middlesex that Weil asked to speak to a priest. Deitz asked Abbé de Naurois, chaplain of the Free French Forces in London, to visit her, which he did three times in the spring of 1943. The visits did not bear much fruit. According to Deitz, Weil said of the meetings: "I said to him I want to receive baptism but I want to do it only under certain conditions. I don't admit that unbaptized infants are excluded from Paradise and it is necessary that my attitude in that not be in contradiction with Catholic dogma." The abbé responded: "That will never do. You are a proud one!"⁶ Furthermore, Deitz reports that Naurois said Weil appeared "too feminine," "too khâgneuse," and "too Jewish."⁷ Thus the question of baptism went by the boards, at least insofar as it involved any ordained person. (It should be noted that Naurois denies having made these statements, although he does admit to having been irritated by his discussions with Weil.)

It was after these visits that Deitz herself asked Weil: "And now, are you ready to accept baptism?," to which Weil replied, "with much warmth" "Yes." Deitz then took some water from the tap and pronounced the formula, "I baptize you in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit." Although Deitz is not exactly sure what the date of the baptism was, she is confident that it did take place at Middlesex.

On August 18, Weil was transferred to Grosvenor Sanitarium in Ashford, Kent. On August 24 Simone Weil died in her sleep. She was buried on August 30 in Ashford in the section reserved for Catholics. Seven or eight persons were in attendance, including Deitz. The priest missed his train and Maurice Schumann therefore read the prayers (being, Deitz claims,

conveniently ready with Catholic prayers for the occasion). Deitz claims the priest was supposed to be Naurois and she believes he missed deliberately.

THE EVIDENCE

What are we to make of this story and how are we to judge its veracity? Of course in the end it comes down to whether one accepts what Deitz has to say or not, as well as accepting whether people—even strong willed people such as Weil—can make religious decisions that are unexpected. Yet if this is where we must come to in the end, there are nevertheless a number of points that bear investigation before we do so.

Rabi has done the majority of the work in ferreting out the accounts. He brings at least four people into play—Michele Leleu, who was the first to hear the story and repeat it; Maurice Schumann; a Dr. Kac, who was a doctor with the Free French and who knew both Deitz and Weil; and finally Deitz herself, with whom Rabi communicated at least twice by letter. The rest of the evidence offered here is what has been told me by Deitz. Finally, there are some conclusions offered by Pétrement that may be relevant although she offers no new evidence one way or another. (Deitz, although invited to do so, declined to assist Pétrement in her biography, which also explains why she is not named at numerous crucial places in it.)

Before looking at the evidence itself, a word about what is evidence in a case like this is appropriate. Richard Swinburne has argued that we ought normally to believe personal testimony with only the following exceptions: (1.) when the person habitually lies, particularly in the type of case being considered; (2.) when the event could not possibly have occurred on independent logical grounds; (3.) when the description of the event and the event itself can be explained as actually having been something else, but which under certain conditions could have been mistaken by the observer, and thus reported in error.⁸ Since there is little chance that Deitz could have mistaken what she was doing, if she did anything, we will confine ourselves to asking whether it could have happened, and whether Deitz is normally the sort of person we ought to believe. I note at the outset, however, that I see no reason to doubt her veracity on this sort of event, which does not depend much on personal interpretation.

The Evidence Against

The evidence against the story is counted on one hand.

1. Naurois denies the allegations that he called her "too proud as all Jews are."⁹ This gives us a weakness in consistency, as he gives a different version of his visit. He does, though, admit to the visit and to having been irritated by his discussions with Weil.

2. A much larger problem is that such a baptism would seem to be out of character for Weil. This is the most oft voiced objection to the story. A number of texts are important here. There are, of course, her letters to Father Perrin in *Waiting for God* in which she voices her objections to being baptized. Her reasons there are various: there is first what she saw as the dangerous social nature of the church; second, her own unique vocation to remain outside the church; and third, her objections to the intellectual constraints put on believers. This last objection is dealt with expansively in her "Letter to a Priest," where she asks Father Coutourier whether one can be baptized if one holds certain beliefs. It is there that she then lists a number of beliefs, many of doubtful orthodoxy, to which she has had varying degrees of attraction. This objection is then brought forth one more time in the so-called "Last Text" where she refuses to "recognize that the Church has any right to limit the operations of intelligence or the illuminations of love in the domain of thought"(GTG 72). She further claims that because of the dogmatism and her belief that such dogmatism illicitly confines the intellect, were she to be granted baptism, "a break [would be] made with a tradition which has lasted at least seventeen centuries"(GTG 73). She then adds: "For this reason and others of a similar nature, I have never up to now made a formal request to a priest for baptism. And I am not doing so now"(GTG 74).

3. Maurice Schumann, in writing to Rabi, said that Deitz's story is not impossible. Yet, he added, his own personal memories and the texts of which he was the owner as well as published texts "don't accredit the thesis."¹⁰ Thus Schumann regards this as out of character.

4. Pétrement adds the same sort of argument in her discussion of the story. She argues, based on the "Last Text," that even if a priest consented to baptize her, it would not have been what Weil wanted, since it would not have involved the whole church—that is, a change in its dogmatism. Pétrement then goes on to argue that one of the major reasons Weil would have wanted to be baptized would be so that she could partake of the eucharist, and this she

never asked for. Pétrement says: "This proves that, in my opinion, she did not consider the baptism a valid one."¹¹ Furthermore, Pétrement indicates that Weil did not sign herself into the sanitarium with any religious preference which, Pétrement argues, she surely would have done if she had considered the baptism valid.

5. Finally, there is the problem of Deitz's own silence. Why did she wait twenty-two years to tell anybody the story? (It was not told to Leleu until 1965.) Furthermore, why even after that did she remain so reticent about saying anything more for so long?

The Evidence For

1. Deitz's silence can be easily explained by a matter she mentioned to Michele Leleu when she first told her the story in 1965. The reason for the silence, she said, was because of Madame Weil, Simone's mother, who told Deitz "I don't want anybody to speak of that while I'm living"¹² (Madame Weil died in 1965). Although the family was not religiously Jewish, apparently it was not particularly keen on any members actually converting to Christianity, a not particularly unusual attitude in families such as the Weil family. It is significant that when the grave marker for Weil's grave was placed in 1958, although she had been buried in the Catholic section of the cemetery and her writings on Christian subjects were well known, the marker had no Christian symbolism on it. The family, of course, was ultimately responsible for its choice.

This may explain why the story was not told until 1965. But why the reticence to say much publicly since then? Here things are less clear, since they are Deitz's own personal reasons for not coming forward. Essentially, they are, as related to me, because she has felt that there is an image—nay, an icon—of Weil that has hardened in many people's minds that such a story challenges. The reaction to the story, particularly in France, has not always been amiable. Deitz simply felt that she had been personally hurt by having her credibility called into question. She has also felt that everybody wants all sorts of information from her for their own opportunistic reasons. Here there is good reason to believe her on the point that it is an image that is being challenged, since most of the arguments against the story have been based on its being out of character. Deitz is challenging the perception of the character. It is, of course, possible that a person can appear in two very different lights (and Deitz thought Weil was very capable of this); but to admit this is also to be forced to admit that neither light is privileged and incapable of modification.

2. Pétrement has suggested, beyond the “out of character argument,” two lines of argument against the baptism—that Weil never asked for the eucharist and that she had not signed herself into Grosvenor Sanitarium as a Catholic. Deitz, in a letter to me in 1984, sheds light on these problems, showing that they are not at all insuperable anomalies in the account, even if most other people do not encounter them in their religious lives. She noted that she herself was baptized in a similar fashion (she was of Jewish heritage, too)—that is, by a nonordained friend, and then later when in a *clinique* in Paris in 1941 did not register as a Catholic. She also pointedly noted, “Do you think Simone would have asked for the host if she didn’t want to bring the baptism in [*sic*] the open?” Also, “Don’t forget before dying *it may have been a sacrifice on her part to deprive herself of what she wanted most.*”

3. Rabi introduces the testimony of a Dr. Kac, a Free French doctor in London, who had examined Weil in January 1943, and who also knew X, who was in the Free French. He wrote to Rabi: “Knowing the state of permanent exaltation of Simone Weil and the zeal that X . . . could display in order to gain a soul, the fact of Simone Weil being baptized with tap water appears to me more than possible . . . more than probable.”¹³ I note here, however, that Deitz in response has said, “*I have never been a zealous person (religiously speaking). I’ve never thought to bring a soul to God without her or his consent. I am not that dumb! It is not my type.*” Thus, although zealousness and manipulation would support the story, they seem not to have played a role. Given Deitz’s own experience, it seems far more likely that she and Weil were able to reach a common understanding due to their own very similar circumstances, an understanding that Deitz for many years in fact tried to keep a strictly private matter. And to wish that it remain a private matter *does* seem to be in line with Weil’s character.

4. Finally, there is Weil. As we have seen in numerous places such as her letters to Father Perrin and in “The Last Text,” she does not want anyone to be sanguine about the possibility of her baptism. Why she was reticent about baptism is quite clear—namely, she believed that to join the Church was to submit illegitimately to a blockage of the free flow of her own thought. It is important that this issue be kept in front of us as the reason why she did not enter. Her other criticisms of the Church are exactly that—criticisms—and are only brought up by her as reasons to avoid entrance in connection with the free thought issue. The only possible exception is that she also thought it a vocation, and thus a matter

of obedience to remain outside. Yet she clearly conceived her vocation as having large intellectual dimensions.

Nevertheless, despite this attitude Weil allowed herself a reservation on the matter. In Letter IV to Father Perrin, she says she believes it to be God's will that she stay outside the Church in the future "except perhaps at the moment of death"(WG 75). In other places she allows that if her being outside the church is a vocation and a matter of obedience to God's will, that, should God's will change, she would join the church. She says in the fifth letter in *Waiting for God*: "It is for the service of Christ as the Truth that I deprive myself of sharing in his flesh in the way he has instituted. . . . I am as certain as a human being has the right to be that I am deprived in this way for my whole life; except perhaps—only perhaps—if circumstances make intellectual work definitively and totally impossible for me"(WG 86).

I, with Deitz, note this latter reservation, but also note that at the time that the baptism did take place, Weil probably had *not* given up on the possibility of future intellectual work or on living longer than she in fact did. Not everything rests on it, however, for there is also the fact that Weil apparently thought often about baptism. Once raised as a possibility, it never seemed to be far from her mind. For example, she asked, in a conversation with Father Perrin, "And if a child baptized me, would it be valid?"¹⁴ Later on she pointed to the Mediterranean on which she was to embark on the risky voyage to New York from Marseille, and said to Perrin: "Don't you think that would be a beautiful baptistery?"¹⁵ (Namely, if the boat were to sink). We also know at least five occasions when she discussed the question of "if one believed so-and-so could one be baptized?" with priests. (Perhaps significantly a number of them were Jewish converts.) Finally, in writing to her brother when his first child was born, she advised him to have her baptized, saying: "I would not hesitate for a second if I had a child to have it baptized by a priest."¹⁶ The evidence here is that although Weil might not have been seeking baptism, nevertheless, she did not refuse it categorically. Indeed, apparently she entertained the idea of baptism regularly. Thus it would not seem to be completely out of character at all for her to consent to be baptized.

THE JUDGMENT

Well, then, are we to judge this story to be true or not? It does come down, as do all singular historical facts, to accepting

testimony. And on this basis I do not see any reason not to accept it. Deitz has been consistent in the telling of the story over the years. Moreover she has no reason to lie, nor can I tell from an association that goes back to 1981 that she has ever shown herself to be given to deliberate untruths. She herself has made not attempt to gain from the story—on the contrary, she has consistently avoided attempts to get her to become more public about it. Finally, she has not been at all interested in contributing to a hagiography. She has always been concerned that people see Weil as she really was; on that account, Deitz thinks, she was *not* a saint. She has no special case to plead. Thus there is no reason to think Deitz would lie.

This means that the only other possible way to discredit the story is to argue that it is inconceivably out of character for Weil to have consented to being baptized. Yet there is plenty of evidence to show that Weil did *not* categorically reject baptism; indeed, she inquired about it regularly. Although her major personal reasons against baptism are important—namely, that she believed baptism would involve submission to the Church and an undue restriction of thought—she may have, in the end, reached a personal accommodation on this issue (she was, after all, a bit overscrupulous in her concerns expressed in “Letter to a Priest”), although we will probably never know what finally went on in her mind on this issue.

ASSESSMENTS

If, then, the story is true, what are we to make of it? The answer is not necessarily one that simply leaps out at us, and with respect to analyzing Weil’s standing as a philosopher and, perhaps to a large degree, even as a theologian, it may make no particular difference. But there are still important issues to be considered and reconsidered in light of this story. Just what they are can be seen first by looking at what Rabi made of the story and then examining how it affects a recent retelling of Weil’s life.

Rabi believed the story of the baptism. He even agreed that on the Church’s own definition that the baptism was valid. But this gave him cause to offer a very astounding conclusion. He claimed that while valid, the baptism was of no significance since it was performed while Weil was unconscious or nearly so and that, therefore, she did not consent to it. The fact that the Catholics had such a hard time believing the story, and why they had made no attempt to publish it, was because, Rabi said, Weil was such a theological “hot potato” (*charbon ardent entre les mains*)¹⁷ and the baptism

took place under such irregular circumstances. Rabi concluded, despite her anti-Jewish sentiments, that Weil was “actually one of us,” a point he had been trying to make for some years in other publications.

Rabi’s conclusion that Weil was unconscious or did not consent to the baptism is forced and scurrilous, I think. It can be easily disputed. As Michele Leleu responded in a letter printed in the next issue of *Les Nouveaux Cahiers*,¹⁸ how did Rabi know if Weil was unconscious or not? He was not there. Moreover, Rabi was not even consistent on this issue insofar as at the same time he has Weil no longer in control of her faculties, he also has her in his article saying some very lucid things. Yet while Rabi’s conclusions should be dismissed, they do point out that this issue is not unambiguous. And one of the chief foci of the issue is the one he brings up: Weil has been a hot potato for both Judaism and Christianity. Indeed, for many people she seems to be a touchstone for many of the issues surrounding the relations of the two religions. Just how can be seen by looking at Thomas Nevin’s *Simone Weil: Portrait of a Self-Exiled Jew*.

Nevin’s supercilious presentation of Weil is a master exercise in dismissing his subject by marginalizing her, a strategy he does not hesitate to spread around the history of Christianity: Augustine becomes a “hatchet man against heresy,” and Protestants are put to the side as apparently having “a horror of comfort.” More to the point, Weil is marginalized by being treated as woman, sickly, and finally Jew. In Nevin’s presentation Weil apparently was merely trying to “pass” as a Christian. His evidence is his own peculiarly uninformed theological judgments about her theological opinions, but also a repeated insistence that she is best characterized as Jewish. Her religious experiences in the mid-1930s are described as examples of a shekinah, for example, despite her own description of them as having personally experienced Christ. This is not simply a matter of subjective feeling, either; let us recall that that experience occurred after reciting Herbert’s explicit christophanic poem, “Love” (see chapter 7 below). Why Nevin assumes himself to be capable of judging what she saw and did not see in 1937 is not clear, except to the degree that he may believe that there was nothing to see anyhow.

Nevertheless, Nevin certainly has a point that bears stressing. Weil’s background was Jewish and even in the assimilated, free-thinking family in which she grew up, that background undoubtedly caused her to look at the world differently than a Catholic *paysan* or *bourgeois* would. But, oddly, Nevin does not mine *this* point. Rather

he insists that her Judaism is something she simply could not escape. To wit: "Having been born a Jew, a Jew by ancestral destiny, she did not have the freedom to choose to be a Jew."¹⁹ Or, apparently, to choose not to be one. To be a Jew, Nevin adds, is to belong to a club "one does not quit."²⁰ It is clearly an essential quality, and Nevin uses it as such to discover "Jewish" traits in Weil such as "vagabondage," a "passion for justice," and "independence." She had, he suggests, "an *anima naturaliter judaica*."²¹ (Nevin is clearly comfortable with gross racial and religious characterizations as "essential.")

What could possibly be the point of claiming that someone had a "natural Jewish soul?" Although few people speak that way any more, the least obnoxious point would be to use her Jewish background as a way of explaining Weil's distinctive and often unorthodox contributions to Christian thought. To the degree that Nevin does this, however, almost the entire stress is upon the "unorthodox" part, with a consequent and implicit recommendation that Christianity see Weil as a foreigner and no contributor at all to Christian thinking. Preying upon latent Christian anti-semitism, he thus can cause Weil to be dismissed from Christian halls. But that is not to claim her for Judaism, as Rabi wanted to do; it is to deliver the wayward daughter who had so many unkind things to say about Judaism to the town elders for chastisement. Thus she becomes exiled at Nevin's decree from both Christianity and Judaism. She is not a person to be taken too seriously, as she is little more than a brilliant fraud whom Nevin has ferreted out.

Now the point of looking at Nevin here in the context of the story of the baptism is this: if the story is true, then Nevin's characterization is plain and simply wrong. But it is wrong in a very particular way: that if Weil was baptized—and because the baptism is valid by Christian lights—then Weil was not "passing." She died a member of the holy, catholic Church. She may have been weird, misguided, heterodox, or any number of things; but none of them matter on this issue. She could have been all of those things and still be a member of the Christian Church. And this seems to have been the valid part of Rabi's point; to accept the story would be to admit to full membership a person whom, Rabi thought, the Catholics would themselves have *preferred* to see as an outsider.²² In this respect one of the real challenges that the story of the baptism raises is the challenge *to the Church* to admit that people such as Weil really are a part of it, that by its own doctrine, it has admitted them, "hot potatoes" or not. That is precisely the

point that Nevin has missed on a grand and systematic scale. It is a point that others miss on a smaller scale.

More, though, needs to be said, for simply noting that the baptism is valid, thus making Weil actually a Christian does not take away all ambiguities. It even increases some.

The first thing that needs to be added is a theological point. This last-hour baptism, like every other one, is a demonstration that grace can be present at any moment of our lives. Weil herself says that someday she might ask for baptism for “the action of grace in our hearts is secret and silent”(WG 50). Here the baptism may be an experimental proof of what she has written on grace. This decision, as all such decisions, is singular, and not a conclusion deduced from universally valid premises. It is the result of a movement of the will, a movement that began in a spiritual journey many years before. We know Weil often characterized her life in terms of a journey, and spirituality in general in those terms. There is no reason to think she did not know what she was talking about. This does not mean, of course, that everything in that journey is sanctified, as Augustine knew when he described his journey. It does mean that God directs it to a conclusion, often startling to the one undertaking it.

There is another side to this movement of the will, though, beyond the fact that it led her to be baptized. Given that the decision was a singular movement of will that completed a personal journey, we are obliged to take Weil’s own personal motives seriously in such a decision. We need to see where they are precisely that: personal and not universal. Thus we cannot take Weil to be providing a universal example for those who will not consider entrance into the church, and, who would consider Christianity within and without the Church all of a piece. If we had not taken it seriously before, given her baptism, we are obliged now to take seriously Weil’s insistence that her remaining outside the Church was a personal vocation, and one of obedience, for that matter.

There are also a number of more unsettling things to see as well. For example, we cannot claim that her particular objections to the Church ever really changed. And on this score her objections to the Church are not entirely unexceptionable.

Weil thought that entering the Church would mean complete subscription to everything it taught, and, so it seems, she thought that meant pretty much in the verbal form in which it was taught. She could not give that subscription, because she regarded most of these formulations as simply commentaries on the faith which

the church has imposed as an object of belief. "Thus," Weil says, "she exercises her power to deprive people of the sacraments" (GTG 72). Weil certainly understood that in actual practice catechumens were not and could not be expected to know *The Manual of the Decisions and Formulations of the Councils* and that "it is impossible to discover by asking priests what is and what isn't 'the strict faith'" (GTG 74). But what is actual practice, she thought, ought to be official practice. Therefore the Church ought only to provide judgments "on a few essential points . . . but only as a guideline of the faithful" (GTG 72).

In part, there is a naivety in assuming that the church really is as inflexible on doctrinal formulations as Weil thought, although her own era and her contacts with Dominicans may have encouraged her in this. She, in this sense, is just not very savvy on the inner workings of the Church. But, on the other hand, she was also quite aware of what she was doing. Father Perrin in an interview in 1979 said that while Weil was constantly seeking a priest who would admit baptism without insisting on such and such a teaching, the real question at issue was whether Christ left a teaching authority to his own, or whether Christians are left to their own to fabricate their faith. "I believe," he said, "therein lies the true problem. She never posed it to herself that way."²³ Perhaps she did not pose it to herself that way, but the outcome might not have been any different if she had. It is easy to imagine her admitting the authority in the abstract, but still disputing the particulars. Weil, who claimed she would not pick up her salvation if it were lying on the table in front of her if doing so meant disobedience, understood obedience quite well and must have understood how far subscription might have to go. She wanted a clear answer on this point before she found herself in a position of compromise.

It is exactly this sort of issue that is not changed by the fact of a baptism *in extremis*. And, of course, none of what she wrote before the baptism is changed either—and that is everything she wrote. It may change the way we read some of those writings, of course, on issues such as whether she categorically refused baptism and the consequent image we have of her, but that is another matter. There is, however, another interesting question that the baptism raises and that is the personal nature of Weil's claim that the Church's many formulations are an obstacle to the free play of the intellect.

We might note first her point about the Church's social nature. In her second letter to Father Perrin she says she is frightened of the Church as a social structure, because it is so tempting to be

“influenced by anything collective”(WG 52). Pointing to saints who approved of the crusades, she writes: “If I can think that on this point I see more clearly than they did, I who am so far below them, I must admit that in this matter they were blinded by something very powerful. This something was the Church seen as a social structure”(WG 53). She goes on to say that if it blinded them, how much more likely would it blind her? And, of course, clarity of vision was what she wanted.

But when she writes this, she is not giving just a general answer; she is giving a very specific and personal one. And here the story of the baptism may give us some cause to speculate on some of the reasons why she, Simone Weil, saw the social nature of the Church as such an obstacle.

The fact of the matter is that when Weil complains about the social nature of the Church, she is not doing so by making the gripe of the discontented. To be discontented you have to be on the inside. She says she realizes the saints had a profound love for the Church and that she sympathizes with it, but, she adds, “they were nearly all born and brought up in the Church”(WG 50). She was not brought up in it and was not on the inside. She, in other words, did not elect to go outside; rather, she chose to stay there.

Father Perrin has said that when he first met Weil, she knew nothing about the Church, and he is correct in one sense. If she had known it from the inside, perhaps she could have been more flexible in her thinking about doctrine. In that regard, her thoughts on the matter are a theological hot potato for people on the inside because she raises issues based on half-truths and objections on hypothetical cases that are unlikely to arise. But once again this is only half the story. For at the same time we say this we must also say that she knew the Church in a way that Perrin and most of us do not—and that is as an outsider.

It is here that both Rabi and Nevin have a real point in wanting to claim Weil as a Jew. Pétrement tells us that her maternal grandmother once said that she would rather see Simone dead than see her marry a gentile. Her mother was the one who forbid mention of the story of the baptism, although she spent long hours typing Weil’s writings on Christianity and seeing that they were published. Weil herself was reminded of her ethnic heritage by people on the street, by the anti-Jewish laws of Vichy France, and by those to whom she applied to be parachuted into occupied France.

Now we must be more than a bit subtle here in assessing the influence of this background. Weil, in considering baptism, would

not have thought herself as about to betray Judaism by going over to a group that had consistently persecuted Jews. It is clear that she had little, if any, sympathy with Judaism. I do not think we can even say, with Giniewski,²⁴ that her anti-Jewish feeling was a form of self-hatred. Simply, Judaism was a dead issue for her. Nevertheless, she was associated with a group that had never fared well with the Church. She would have been well aware of criticisms of the Church that come from outsiders. As with all subordinate groups, this one can sometimes see the dominant group a lot more clearly on certain issues than the dominant group sees itself. In this regard, Weil's fears about free thought being stifled in the Church may not have been just a general worry, but the result of looking at the enclosed nature of the Church and what it has actually done to those on the outside. This is not because of having a "natural Jewish soul;" it is because of having Jewish experience. It was this that undoubtedly caused her sympathies to lay with groups such as the Albigensians who did not fare well with the Church.

Weil was a person who looked very carefully at the Church from the outside and who had cause to look at it carefully. It would have been with a great deal of personal trepidation that she would consider entering it, because she could easily feel that it would involve a major alteration of what she was doing. In this sense her objections were not entirely matters of overscrupulousness and half-baked notions. They were rooted in a definite understanding of the Church and what she might be required to give up in order to enter. This, combined with the certainty of faith, which was hers by mystical dispensation, could easily allow her to say that her refusal was not a matter of pride but was a refusal of what she saw as an unnecessary capitulation.

An outsider's perspective cannot fully define what it is like to be on the inside and in this respect some of what Weil says about the Church is half-baked and does not a convincing objection to those on the inside. Nevertheless, the outsider can have objections that are not just the result of ignorance of the insider's knowledge. One place that this seems to have been true in Weil's case is when she noted that the Church is Catholic by right but not in fact. In turn, the perspective she offers in the difficulties she had in coming to baptism may be helpful, if we pay attention to them, in helping it to be Catholic in fact.

For the difficulty in accepting the story of Weil's baptism may, in the end, mainly may be the difficulty of accepting an outsider, with valid and invalid criticisms. And there may be a great irony

here. Weil criticized the Church for not being catholic in fact, and for nearly all her life preferred to stay outside it formally, in solidarity with those who are excluded. But by her baptism *in extremis* she may force Christians to accept that, like it or not, the Church in fact also includes all sorts of outsiders, including Jews, and all sorts of journeys that are not forgotten after arrival.