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SOTERIOLOGY FROM A CHRISTIAN AND HINDU PERSPECTIVE

This paper makes an attempt to determine the extent of influence of *the Gita* and *the Upanishads* on Simone Weil in her soteriological concepts. It will begin with a summary of these concepts then turn to discuss the role of these Indian texts, in their development.

The concept of detachment plays a major role in Weil's thought. It is closely related to her concept of creation, or to use Weil's term, 'decreation.' Just as God relinquished part of his power in creation, we too, are given a chance to respond by relinquishing the only power we possess in this world, the power to say 'I'.¹ In giving up this power we come to see ourselves as creatures totally dependent on God for our existence or, as 'non-beings.'² In renouncing the 'I', which we believe is our existence, we will emerge from non-being. However, we cannot know this for sure, for with such knowledge the value of our renunciation would be lost.

This knowledge of ourselves as 'non-being' does not weaken our belief in the reality of the existence of other beings. In fact, quite the contrary occurs. In destroying the 'I' we come to see people "as they are related to themselves, and not to me."³ This acceptance of the reality of others, the rejection of the idea that they are no more than creations of our imagination, is an imitation of God's renunciation in creation in that we "accept simply that they should be."⁴

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1. Simone Weil, *Notebooks*, Vol. II., trans. Arthur Wills, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1956), p. 337.
 2. Simone Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, trans. Richard Rees, (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 96.
 3. *Ibid.*, p. 97.
 4. Simone Weil, *Notebooks*, Vol. I., trans. Arthur Wills, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1956), p. 200.

Closely related to the concept of detachment is Weil's view of suffering. Suffering is an inevitable result of necessity and a correlate of attachment. As we seek to sever our attachments we suffer pain "equal in the case of each thing to what we should have to bear if we lost it."⁵ Faced with such suffering, we tend naturally to seek to be rid of it, or if this is not possible, console or explain it. At times we try to pass it on to others, especially to subordinates. If, however, we learn to accept it, we can come to use it as a sort of transcendent lever, a source of redemption.

Especially efficacious, if accepted, is the kind of suffering, called affliction (*malheur*). Weil summarized her thinking on affliction in an essay called "The Love of God and Affliction." Affliction, is a unique form of suffering, which stamps the mark of slavery on the soul of those who endure it. Although physical pain is always present in affliction it is never solely reducible to it unless such pain is 'prolonged or frequent.'⁶ "Affliction is an uprooting of life, a more or less attenuated equivalent of death, made irresistibly present to the soul by the attack or immediate apprehension of physical pain."⁷ Social degradation is always involved in such affliction, with psychological and emotional suffering usually present. Owing to this social degradation, those afflicted seldom engender pity from their fellow humans; in fact quite often, contrary emotions are evoked. "Except for those whose whole soul is inhabited by Christ, everybody despises the afflicted to some extent, although practically no one is conscious of it."⁸ Even worse is the fact that this contempt is turned inward and shared by the person experiencing the affliction. The resulting disgust, defilement, guilt and self-loathing, would appear more logical in the heart of a criminal, where however, it is seldom found. "Everything happens as though the state of soul suitable for criminals had been separated from crime and attached to affliction; and it even seems to be in proportion to the innocence of those who are afflicted."⁹

The experience of affliction always causes the destruction of the 'I'. When one is faced with the diminishment of the 'I' through affliction,

5. *Ibid.*, p. 211.

6. Simone Weil, *Waiting on God*, trans. Emma Crawford, (London and Glasgow: Collins, 1950), p. 77.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 77.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 81.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 81.

the automatic response is to struggle. However, if we ourselves have deliberately begun this process of destruction and "if one refuses to countenance such a struggle out of love for God, then the destruction of the 'I' does not take place from without, but from within."¹⁰ Coming from within, we are able to make it an offering to God. Even if we have no sense of the need for this destruction, we will still experience the destruction of the 'I'. In this case, however the destruction is external, that is, it comes from outside ourselves and has no soteriological value. This is the epitome of evil: "There is nothing worse than extreme affliction which destroys the 'I' from without, for then one is no longer able to destroy it oneself."¹¹

Using the language of St. John of the Cross, Weil labels the most profound experience of affliction as the 'dark night.' The dark night involves the acceptance of our own mortality. We begin in the darkness of ignorance trapped by the illusion of false immortality. Through mortal suffering, the experience of 'necessity,' we become conscious of the illusion of our immortality. Such knowledge causes us to cling to life rather than face the reality of our death, even when death would seem preferable to the conditions we may be living in. It is a state of absolute despair, "a feeling of everlasting evil"¹² as for a time we lose God completely. It is the state of 'Christ upon the cross' when he cried "Why hast thou forsaken me?"¹³ If we accept this knowledge, however, and face the ensuing void, continuing to love God even in his apparent absence we become completely detached, 'cross over death' and 'partake of the immortal.'

This detachment cannot, of course, be achieved without God. The ability to detach, to destroy the 'I' and to accept the void is only possible through God's grace and Christ's act of mediation on the cross. Weil's concepts of gravity and grace are helpful here. According her, the world is ruled by the force of gravity. It is a compelling force pulling all of men's physical, mental and spiritual energy downwards towards that which is low and base. Without God's intervention it would be impossible for humanity to ever rise above or overcome this gravitational pull. However, through the descending action of God's grace, gravity

10. *Notebooks*, Vol. II, p. 563.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 337.

12. *Notebooks*, Vol. I, p. 60.

13. Mk 15. 34.

is overcome. Christ's death upon the cross is the vehicle of this descent. "One can only shed all gravitational weight through the cross."¹⁴

It is only through this sense of void that we can come to a true knowledge of God. Any conception of God we may have prior to this experience, before total detachment, will be in part a creation of our imagination reflecting our desires. As long as we have these conceptions of God, we have no room to receive the reality of God's presence in us.

What should be our next step having begun this process of detachment? The first and foremost, we wait on God with utmost love, keeping our attention fixed on a number of specific ideas and objects. Ultimately these can be roughly assigned to two categories. "To contemplate what cannot be contemplated . . . without running away, and to contemplate the desirable without approaching – that is what is beautiful."¹⁵

The *Notebooks* provides many examples that would fall within the first category, of 'things that cannot be contemplated.' Thus we find strong encouragement to contemplate both our 'stupid mistakes' in academic endeavors¹⁶ and our intellectual limitation in the face of contradiction. Weil encourages us to face the reoccurring obsessive fears which continue to haunt us encompassing as they do "pain, humiliation, blows to self esteem, wounded feelings, all vain sufferings." One must contemplate these only in order to set them aside, wrench them from our minds where they get in the way of our openness to God.¹⁷ In contemplating past injustices, we must be prepared to accept them without seeking compensation, even imaginary. In so doing an unequal balance occurs creating a void and allowing room for grace to enter. We should also fix our attention on the finite nature of the things we desire and the mortality of those we love. We must contemplate both our own suffering, and, even more difficult, the suffering of others. Perhaps most importantly we need to contemplate in both the beauty and suffering it brings. In contemplating we come to see it as the mediator between "the natural part of us and supernatural

14. *Notebooks* Vol. I 299.

15. *First and Last Notebooks*, p. 71.

16. *Notebooks*, Vol. II, p. 420.

17. *Notebooks*, Vol. I., p. 59.

consent."¹⁸ Finally, as discussed above, we must contemplate the void created by the knowledge of our own mortality.

Before turning to the second category, it is important to point out that there are things we should not allow ourselves to think about. Included here is any form of evil. There is a continuity about things which are evil that must be avoided:

If, having allowed one's imagination to dwell on something bad, one meets with other men who render that thing objective through their words and deeds – (when one has already entered into social relations with them) and thus abolish the barrier erected by society, one is already almost lost. And what is easier? No sudden break of any kind; by the time you see the ditch, you have already jumped it. In the case of Good, it is the reverse; the ditch is seen at the moment when it has to be jumped, at the moment of wrenching apart and anguish. You do not fall into Good. The word 'baseness' (*bassesse*) expresses this property possessed by evil.¹⁹

This predisposition to evil includes any kind of idle imaginings centering on curiosity and a desire for power. To allow the imagination to dwell on things of this nature is an act of cowardice. However, not to think about them is an art developed through constant effort.

This is not a suggestion that we ignore evil. To the contrary, it only explicitly states what our role should be in the face of it. We are not to allow ourselves to dwell upon it. When faced with it for ourselves, we must overcome our natural inclination to transmit it and learn to absorb it, halting its circulation throughout the universe. In so doing our soul is split in two, with the higher part of the soul giving consent to the suffering this absorption engenders and the lower, physical part, being unable to do so. This causes "a spiritual pain even sharper than the physical pain that causes it."²⁰ The purer the person, the greater the suffering and the greater amount of evil which can be absorbed: "Every evil stirred up in this world passes from one man to another . . . until it alights upon a perfectly pure being who suffers it in completeness and

18. *First and Last Notebooks*, p. 89.

19. *Notebooks*, Vol. I, p. 110.

20. *First and Last Notebooks*, p. 219.

destroys it."²¹ Here is the reason for incarnation: "God who is in heaven cannot destroy evil; he can only send it back in the form of a curse. It is only God in this world having become a victim, who can destroy it."²² Again it must be pointed out that it is not suggested here that we deliberately seek out evil. This too would be another form of spiritual pride. Few, if any of us, are pure enough to successfully halt the evil which inevitably comes our way, let alone look for more. Nor the suggestion is to complacency in the face of evil done to others. As already stated, we must seek to eliminate anything that would destroy the 'I' in another before they themselves can willingly consent to its destruction.

The second category of things worthy of our attention is centered on beauty. Beauty is God's way of capturing and claiming the unwary soul. Weil uses the myth of Demeter to describe this process. Using beauty as a trap God carries the soul off, transporting it across the threshold to the supernatural. During this experience a seed, a 'particle of supernatural joy' is planted in the soul. Once this seed is planted, the soul faces the possibility of betrayal, a denial of the good. It is again important to note here, that all action is on God's part; the soul's role is passive, it must only wait. The only choice it has is to consent to or deny God.

Beauty has two distinguishable characteristics, namely, first, as alluded to in the preceding discussion, it has an element of the supernatural or divine. It is transmitted by the artist or writer etc. turning his attention beyond this earth, in a state of pure inspiration. We can recognize true beauty by the fact that one does not tire of it: "Only the eternal is immune from time. Only a transcendent inspiration can produce a picture which would continue to sustain a prisoner in solitary confinement."²³ Secondly, "beauty is something that one desires without wanting to devour it. We simply desire that it should be."²⁴ It is like children who, although desiring to eat some 'dainty' resist, knowing that if they eat, it will be lost to them.²⁵ In gazing at beauty, without attempting to possess it we open ourselves to the divine action just described.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 153.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 154.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 71.

24. *Notebooks*, Vol. II, p. 449.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 416.

Once persons have attempted to detach themselves from their desires and increasingly attempted to turn their attention to the divine how should they act? How do they discern the will of God? What should be the motivation for their action? In answer to these and other similar questions Weil seized upon the *Bhagavad-Gita's* notion of 'actionless action.'

The central characteristic of actionless, or non-active action for Weil is that of obedience. It is action performed with no sense of reward, no desire for the 'fruits' or results of the action. One's only motivation for action should be one's love for God, or the good, pure etc. Thus, for example she says, when writing a book of apologetics one should be scrupulous to avoid misquotations, check one's sources etc. not to win praise from one's fellow academics but because one loves the truth.²⁶ Even working for imaginary rewards such as the smile of pleasure one's actions would bring to the face of someone one loves or honors, would destroy the efficacy of our actions. When we perform an action for such a reward, the motive or desire behind the action is increased, bringing a corresponding increase in our attachment to the 'I'. Even if we see that an action would bring benefit to another, we should not perform it, unless we feel internally impelled.

This internal impulsion, or necessity comes from our moments of contemplation where we wait on God with attention and love. Such moments are not necessarily concurrent with our actions. When faced with several actions, some of which will inevitably be evil and others of which will cause pain, we seldom have the opportunity to deliberate for any length of time. For this reason it is of utmost importance that we attempt to keep the attention turned toward God as often as we can. In so doing we become channels for God. When faced with a situation we will feel impelled towards a certain course of action, even though such a course may appear as the least favorable, sensible or even possible at that particular moment. The greater our detachment, born out of this attentive contemplation of the good, the more obedient we will be and the less likely to be fooled by improper, contextually biased 'readings, of the situation. We will have silenced all motives for our actions, allowing the input of 'supernatural energy' to compel us to move in a certain direction.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 436.

Weil is not suggesting that the performance of the 'proper action' will be easy, even if one is responding almost automatically to an inner compulsion. Every action engenders a mixture of good and evil. By constantly reflecting on the good, or God, we come to know our *dharma*, or duty. Such knowledge will forearm us, by helping us to make the right choice in the future when faced with a number of possible actions. However, in previously seeking to know our *dharma*, we have predisposed ourself to a course of action long before the moment of its execution. In doing our duty we may find ourselves having to struggle against the desire perhaps to do the exact opposite. Again we find Weil's concept of the dual nature of the soul. Thus for one part of the soul such obedience is natural, a 'surrender or impulsion,' while to the other part it 'constitutes a violence.'²⁷ Hence one should not seek to lessen the impact of this violence, nor should we feel ashamed of the aversion to perform the good action, that is, to the existence of *tamas* within ourselves. Instead we should acknowledge and accept this aversion and carry out the action in spite of it. By doing this we lessen the energy behind the aversion which springs from an evil desire or motive, and simultaneously open ourselves to the inpouring of grace, which gives energy to the execution of the good action.

Ultimately our goal should be to be 'instruments of God's will,' totally open to and obedient to him. In creating the world God lessened his power here on earth, limiting his ability to act. In the creation of humanity, God, out of love, made his power to act on earth dependent upon our consent, our willingness to allow him to work through us. If we love God, Weil says, we will consent to this use. The purer we are, the more detached from the 'I' and attached to God, the greater will be our willingness and ability to serve God. If we do not allow God to use us in this way we act as screens between God and creation, including other people; "God loves the perspective of creation which can only be seen from where I stand and I obscure it."²⁸ Weil makes a number of powerful analogies in this regard. Our relationship to God is not that of "the girl waiting for her lover" but that of "the tiresome third party who is sitting with two lovers and has got to get up and away, if they are to be really together."²⁹

27. *Notebooks*, Vol. I, p. 263.

28. *First and Last Notebooks*, p. 72.

29. *Notebooks*, Vol. II, p. 404.

To be only an intermediary between the uncultivated land and the ploughed field, between the data of a problem and its solution, between the blank page and the poem, between the wretch with an empty stomach and the wretch with a full one.³⁰

How are we to know if we are open to God's will and serving his needs, not our own selfish desires? Weil specifically addresses this question saying:

The will of God. How to know it? If we produce a stillness in ourselves, if we silence all desires and opinions, and if with love, without formulating any words, we bind our whole soul to think 'thy will be done,' the thing which after that we feel convinced that we should do (even though in certain respects we may be mistaken) is the will of God. For if we ask him for bread he will not give us a stone.³¹

Weil gives further guidance on this question by comparing the committing of a virtuous action to the process involved in true artistic creation. If we can carry out an action while "keeping the attention and intention oriented toward the pure and impossible good, without concealing lies of any kind, either the desirability or the impossibility of pure good," then we will know the action is good and willed by God.³²

As can be seen from the preceding discussion, for Weil, the nature of our salvation is not really our concern. To even wonder whether there is life after death indicates a bondage to self. Out of love and through grace we consent to God, allowing him to act in the world. Completely detached from the 'I', the question of the future ceases to exist. With the attention turned towards God, one is only concerned with the present moment and the necessity impacting upon us in that moment. All we are called to do is to submit to this necessity, acting in obedience through and out of love. If, at the moment of death, necessity appears as annihilation, so be it, Weil says. If the soul is completely detached and truly loves God, such necessity will also be accepted. Our future is not for us to know. All we need be assured of is the reality of God's love for us and our love for God.

30. *Notebooks*, Vol. I, p. 126.

31. *Ibid.*, p. 232.

32. *Notebooks*, Vol. II, p. 416.

In no other area of Weil's thought does the influence of the Hindu texts she read show through more clearly than it does in her view of salvation and its inherent themes of detachment, attention, *dharma* and actionless action. These concepts are central to both the *Bhagavad-Gita* and to many of the *Upanisads*. One finds several instances throughout the *Notebooks* where Weil struggles to understand the teachings of these texts on these themes.

Weil returns again and again to Arjuna's dilemma in the *Gita*. In reflecting on Arjuna's actions on the battle field, Weil grappled with the notion of *dharma*, developing her thinking on antecedent choice. Ultimately, she says, Arjuna on the battle field no longer had a choice. His moment of pity was simply a display of weakness "comparable to the display of weakness at approaching death."³³ Since Arjuna had already decided on war, it was his duty to act on this decision unswayed by whatever feelings the actual moment of battle may have engendered. A person never loses the freedom to change his mind. If one receives further enlightenment, the kind that comes from turning within with the mind focused on God, or the good, one may modify one's position. However, this was not the case, Weil insists with Arjuna:

The action of engaging in battle was in accordance with the light which was within him, since he prepared to carry it through resolutely. He ought to have stuck his decision so long as he had not received more light; otherwise he could only fall to a lower level, not rise to a higher one. For, that pity which enters into him through the visual senses and sweeps away his energy—it is not in that fashion that the light comes to one.³⁴

Arjuna had not yet reached a scale where he no longer deserved to fight. Such a climb can only occur, through contemplation of God and not through action. "We can only descend through our acts," she continues, with our "omitting to perform our duty being an act among others." In performing our duty, we simply remain at the same level: "Acts constitute the pointer of the balance. If we move the pointer, we distort the balance."³⁵ This "seeking good in action" was Arjuna's greatest mistake.³⁶

33. *Notebooks*, Vol. I, p. 56.

34. *Ibid.*, p. 324.

35. *Notebooks*, Vol. II, p. 436.

36. *Ibid.*, p. 436.

The focus on the importance of attention is also largely derived from the *Gita* and the *Upaniṣads*. Weil repeatedly returns to the theme of 'looking and eating' which she derives in part from the *Mundaka Upanisad* 3.1.1. which says:

Two birds, fast bound companions,
Clasp close the self same tree.
Of these two the one eats sweet fruit;
The other looks on without eating.

In the essay "Forms of the Implicit Love of God," she pulls together many of the reflections on this theme scattered throughout the *Notebooks*. When we see something beautiful we desire to possess it. Yet even when we possess it, we are still not satisfied; we want something more. "We should like to feed upon it." However, "the great trouble in human life is that looking and eating are two different operations." It is only "beyond the sky, in the country inhabited by God," that looking and eating are "one and the same operation." Weil draws the analogy of children wanting both to possess and devour their cake already discussed within the context of attention. "Vice, depravity, and crime are nearly always," she adds "in their essence, attempts to eat beauty." Quoting the *Upaniṣadic* passage above, she says "the two birds are the two parts of the soul."³⁷ Coming back to this theme many times in the *Notebooks*, Weil stresses the desirability of this unfulfilled hunger. "Only those can be saved who are held back by something against the impulse to approach what they love; they are those in whom the feeling for beauty has given rise to contemplation."³⁸ Again she refers to the dual nature of the soul, saying that the eternal part of the soul will consume the mortal part if we look without eating.

Another analogy frequently used by Weil, drawn in part from the *Upaniṣads* and the *Gita* is that of the cosmic fig tree. In the *Gita*, it appears to symbolize *samsara*, the endless round of death and rebirth in the Indian tradition. Its "branches straggle out, well nourished by the constituents; sense objects are the twigs."³⁹ Its roots are mixed with the works of men. According to the *Gita*, no "form of it can be comprehended"⁴⁰ and we are enjoined to take "the stout axe of detachment

37. *Waiting on God*, p. 120.

38. *First and Last Notebooks*, p. 286.

39. *The Bhagavad-Gita*, 15. 2.

40. *Ibid.*, 15. 3.

and cut it down."⁴¹ Once one has cut down this tree one is urged to fly to its creator "and then search out that estate to which, when once men go they come not back again. I fly for succour to that primeval person from whom flowed forth primordial creativity."⁴² *Katha Upanisad* appears to have a slightly different conception saying:

Its root is above its branches below-
This eternal fig tree!
That indeed is the Pure. That is Brahma.
That indeed is called the Immortal.
On it all the worlds do rest,
And no one soever goes beyond it.⁴³

Despite the difference, which again appears to be one of complete non-dualism (Brahman is the tree) versus a qualified non-dualism (*Brahman* is both the creator of the tree and the tree) the general ideal remains the same. The tree represents creation and release lies in detachment from it.

Weil appears to meld this Indian conception of the cosmic tree with the tree of knowledge as described in the Judeo-Christian creation story, the barren fig tree of the Gospels,⁴⁴ and the tree of the cross. The fruit of the tree of life is *amrta* (divine nectar, immortality).⁴⁵ For any who are less than divine it is death to eat. Only when it is cut down, hewed with the 'axe of detachment' and made into a cross does it bring salvation. Adam's error lies in eating, and not looking at the forbidden fruit. As a result, we must uproot the vegetative energy in ourselves, "cut down the tree and make of it a cross, and then carry it always."⁴⁶

Weil's analogy here illustrates both her agreement and diversion from the Hindu tradition in her views of detachment and salvation. As can be clearly seen in this paper, there can be no doubt that Weil finds detachment to be of central importance in her religious philosophy. She is in agreement with the *Gita* and the *Upanisads* in seeing it as absolutely necessary for the attainment of the higher, salvific wisdom. There are differences though. For Weil, God remains clearly other, separate from creation. In

41. *Ibid.*, 15. 3.

42. *Ibid.*, 15. 4.

43. Kath. Up. 6.1.

44. Mt. 21.18; Mk. 11. 12-14, 20-25.

45. *Notebooks* Vol. I., p. 104.

46. *Ibid.*, p. 298.

detaching from everything we are creating a void, which we then wait for God to fill. There is an overriding concept of relinquishment, of turning away, separation and reconciliation in her thought. Unlike the Indian texts, Weil sees a huge gulf between human kind and its creator. Her protestation that we are non-beings is not pantheism, it is simply the acknowledgment of our total dependence on God's grace for existence. There is no sense of escape or 'release' for Weil. Even with its strong message of action for action's sake, the *Gita* and to a lesser extent the *Upanisads* still seem to be holding release from *samsara* as an ultimate goal. For Weil, as already discussed however, our only motive or desire should be to 'decreate', that is to offer ourselves as instruments for God's use. Although there is a sense of creation, as a whole, being God's body in the Indian texts (or at least in Ramanuja's interpretation of them), it is not elaborated in the individualistic way of Weil's theology. Ultimately the essential difference here lies in the disparity between the Eastern view of *karma* and the Western view of sin. *Karma* has more of an impersonal element. It is seen in the sense of being the residue of deeds committed in a previous existence. One cannot remember these deeds, thus in a way one is absolved of any guilt in regard to them. The evil associated with *karma* is simply that in predisposing us to reoccurrent 'bad' actions we are kept trapped in *samsara*, the endless cycle of rebirth. In ridding ourselves of our *karma* we are simply seeking release, allowing ourselves to merge into the One, God or *Brahma* from which we came. Or in a more *advaitin* perspective, we rid ourselves of the illusion that we are other than *Brahman* and see the world as it truly is, one without distinction. Sin, on the other hand can be viewed as a misuse of our will, a deliberate act of rebellion against God. It is a refusal to allow God to use us for his own purposes. Thus it is a denial of love. As such it is extremely personal and individualistic. For Weil, as a conscious act, it is the epitome of evil because it is a refusal to imitate God and decreate, thus blocking God's only means of action in the world.

In conclusion however, one can find one overwhelming point of agreement between Weil's thought and that of the author of the *Bhagavad-Gita*. Both uphold as the central reality, God's love for us, and thus as absolute necessity the development through grace of our love for God. Although there may be disagreement both to the nature or even importance of our salvation, there is no dispute as to the centrality of this love.