Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers

Volume 6 | Issue 3 Article 1

7-1-1989

Incarnation in the Gospels and the Bhagavad Gita

Diogenes Allen

INCARNATION IN THE GOSPELS AND THE BHAGAVAD GITA

Diogenes Allen

This article is a venture into a Christian Theology of Other Faiths. In contrast to History of Religions, which seeks to understand a religion from its own point of view, a Christian Theology of Other Faiths seeks to understand another religion from the perspective of the Christian revelation.

Here I present Simone Weil's claim that the Word of God is manifest in human form in other faiths, and that the Gospels are written from the point of view of a victim, and are completed by the *Bhagavad Gita* which is written from the point of view of an agent who wields a sword.

Pluralism—whether racial, ethnic, or cultural—has forced Christians to rethink their understanding of the gospel. One major area in which this is happening is in relation to other religions. There is a pressing need to develop a Christian understanding of other faiths, a way for Christians to make a valid place for them within their own faith.

But when this is attempted, a dilemma is encountered. There is a widespread desire to understand other religions as valid and significant revelations. Christians can go quite far in this direction, but they cannot apparently relinquish the claim that Christ is the savior of the world. If Christ were our savior only, he would be a parochial god; and that for Christians is impossible. He is either the one who died for the sins of the world or he is apparently not a savior at all. So we can either maintain Christ's uniqueness and indispensability for human redemption and thus appear to condemn other faiths as inadequate for salvation—or we can accept others ways to God as equally valid at the cost of giving up Christ as the prime and indispensable mediator of redemption. Both alternatives have been proposed, but neither seems to be satisfactory.

I believe Simone Weil avoids both horns of this dilemma. I attempted to show this in a previous article in which I presented her understanding of how the Cross was universally present in the form of affliction. By focusing on the Cross she was able to take the most distinctive aspect of Christianity and to show a vital connection between it and the faith of other peoples.[1]

In this paper I wish to focus on Weil's claim that there are *two* incarnations: the Word of God as the principle that organizes all creation, and the Word of God

that became man. This focus will enable us to make still another vital connection between Christianity and other religions of the world; for Weil believed that the Word has been manifest in human form in other religions. She maintains, however, that the Word of God that became Jesus Christ differs in two crucial respects from manifestations of the Word in human form in other faiths. In Jesus Christ the Word *becomes* a man and *remains* a man. The Word does not temporarily assume a human form and then discard it. In addition, Jesus suffers and dies. This is not true of other manifestations of the Word of God.

The other manifestations, however, do bring out features that are only *implicit* in the Cross of Christ. They are important for us Christians because they make explicit what otherwise remains hidden in our own religion. They deepen our understanding of the atonement effected by Christ's incarnation and death. We shall illustrate this claim by discussing Weil's understanding of the *Bhagavad-Gita*. The existence of other faiths need not continue to erode our Christian faith, leading some theologians, such as John Hick, to treat the incarnation in a merely symbolic fashion, or to reduce Christ to the status of a savior only for those who follow the route he opened to God (his route being only one of many possible routes). Weil's fragmentary ideas, which I have here reconstructed, do not solve all our difficulties, but they can stimulate us to think in new ways about the problems and opportunities other faiths pose for us.

I. *The Atonement Wrought by Christ*

Weil's method of reasoning in religious matters is to focus on what is contradictory in earthly terms in order to lever ourselves above them into the realm of supernatural truth. She writes, for example, "It is a contradiction that God who is infinite, who is all, to whom nothing is lacking, should do something that is outside himself, that is not himself, while at the same time proceeding from himself."[2] That is to say, God inexplicably creates the universe. Every kind of human and animal motivation—such as lack, need, or instability—is not a reason for God to create something that is not himself, since an infinite, perfect being lacks nothing or needs nothing which cannot be supplied from *within* himself, and as perfect, he is not forced by any instability to act. It is only a contradiction, however, on the plane of human and animal motivation. A contradiction for Weil (as for Plato and Pascal) pressures us to rise to a higher level to gain understanding, which in this instance is the level of grace, which is a supernatural motive. At this level there is no contradiction between motive and action. There is a harmony between the motive of perfect love and the creation of something outside oneself because creation is an utterly free gift.

Frequently Weil focuses on those matters which, because they are contradictory on a non-religious plane, open the mind to receive supernatural or religious truth.

A religious understanding does not remove all mystery, however. For example, the notion of grace—an utterly free gift—enables us to understand God's motive in creating what is not himself. It does not enable us to understand *how* God creates, that is, the nature of the divine *causality* which produces finite existence. None of the forms of causality that exist *between members of the universe*, such as sexual generation or mechanical impact of one thing on another, is the relation between God and the *entire universe*. The relations between the members of the universe and that between God and the entire universe are at best only analogous. They enable us to compare God's creation of the heavens and earth to other kinds of making. But we do not comprehend the nature of divine causality itself; we can think only in terms of likeness or similarities to natural kinds of making. The contradiction, then, between a Being who is utterly complete and who nonetheless creates something outside himself—a contradiction because no human or animal motive could be the reason for an infinite God to create something that is not himself—though resolved by the supernatural motive of perfect love, does not remove the mystery of *how* he creates. Motives or *reasons* for an action do not reveal the *means* by which an action is carried out.

In the same way Weil writes of another mystery, the incarnation. "The supreme contradiction is the creator-creature contradiction, and it is Christ who represents the union of these contradictories."[3] Because we and God are on different levels, contact between us is impossible. The incarnation of God makes it possible. The incarnate God is simultaneously God and yet he is on our level because he is human. In addition, the incarnate one can raise us to the level of the Father, because by making us holy or righteous, he raises us to the level of divine holiness or righteousness. The incarnation, which removes the contradiction that exists in the notion of contact between beings which are on completely different levels—an infinite and holy being and finite and sinful beings—does not enable us to understand *how* God became a man. That an incarnation gives us a mediator—something in between the transcendent God and us which allows for contact between the transcendent and the human—does not reveal to us *how* divinity and humanity are combined in a single being who is both fully divine and fully human.

Contact between God and human beings requires that two chasms be spanned. (1) As we have seen, the infinite creator is a being on a different level from that of creatures. The incarnation of the Word of God brings God down to the human level. (2) God is perfect in righteousness or justice (the Greek word in the New Testament has both meanings). We are not. Christ raises us to the level of God by making us righteous or just. It is this feature of traditional Christian theology—its most distinctive feature—which Weil paradoxically uses to create a vital link with other faiths. Let us first see how she understands Christ's work of atonement and then we shall see how she ties it to a Christian understanding of other faiths.

The key to understanding the way Christ is the mediator between unrighteous creatures and the holy, uncreated source of all is to be found in Weil's pregnant remark, "We must ask that all the evil we do may fall solely and directly on ourselves. That is the Cross."[4] Many Christians are prone to accept *too quickly* Christ as the bearer of our sins and evil. But if we seek to be just, and to demand justice, then we ought in consistency to ask that all the evil we do may fall solely and directly on ourselves. That thought is too horrible to bear, but to think it is to gain access to what the Cross involves. Let us see how.

Contact or atonement for Weil means that we are to be assimilated to God. That is, we are to be made similar or like God. In order to bring together what is so disparate as God and human beings, there must be a mediator. Christ as a perfectly just man or righteous man is like God.

Weil points out that in the *Phaedrus*, Plato tells a myth in which all intelligent creatures partake of food that resides in a realm which transcends the universe. They consume the reality of which this world is but a reflection. They nourish themselves with truth itself, justice itself, reason itself, and the other realities. This is indeed strange language, but I believe that we may say that by justice itself what is meant is perfect justice. Moreover, perfect justice is a divine attribute. No human being, even the most just is perfectly just. Perfection cannot be reached by adding more of the same to what we are.

Weil uses Plato's myth to bring out the fact that there is not merely a *quantitative* difference between the creator and creatures, but a *qualitative* difference.[5] Perfect justice is not achieved by improving our behavior. Perfect justice is not a human characteristic. This may become evident to us if we meditate on the fact that we do not desire that all our evil fall solely and directly on ourselves. We flee from the thought. On the other hand, were God to be incarnate as a human being he would be a perfectly just or righteous man. This is why Weil wrote, "Therefore in spite of the fact that he was on earth, he would belong to those realities which lie on the other side of the sky."[6]

We may find another link to her understanding of the atonement Christ wrought by use of mathematical proportion as an analogy, with Christ as the mean term. We may say that God is to the God-man as the God-man is to us. That is, in relation to God he is perfectly obedient (righteous), and in relation to us, the righteous man is the way we ought to be. We become assimilated to God by becoming assimilated to his righteousness. Through the incarnate Word of God's obedience, we may become perfectly obedient to God.

We do not become assimilated to God without a love of justice itself. When we are treated fairly, we do not love justice itself, because we find the treatment pleasant. Our attention is occupied by pleasure so that we do not attend to the goodness of justice itself. When we are treated unfairly, we are indirectly aware of the good of justice. We realize that justice matters because of the harm we

suffer from injustice. But we do not yet love justice itself. To love it is to desire to become perfectly just, that is, to be assimilated to what we love. A way to test whether we do love justice itself, rather than demanding it because we desire other goods or because through injustice we suffer harm, is to ask God that our evil fall solely and directly on ourselves. That would be to love justice itself. To reflect on this possibility honestly makes us aware of the fact that we also desire to be saved *from* justice. To a person caught in such a contradiction—loving justice and yet fearful of it—the need for a supernatural remedy is apparent.

In suffering there is a place where God and human beings may meet. God, as transcendent creator, cannot suffer *as we do*. He becomes a man so that he is able to suffer as we suffer. The incarnate one saves us from having to bear the full consequences of justice by submitting to an unjust execution. He thus bears the consequences of God's mercy and forgiveness in his own person and he mediates the consequences of our evil into the very being of God; for God endures the separation from himself of his beloved son, the incarnate, crucified Word of God.

To love justice itself, so that we ask that our evil fall solely and directly on ourselves, and yet to shrink in horror from it, is the way we are assimilated to God. Justice puts us into a contradictory situation; it leads us to look to a reality which is on a higher level for relief. Faith is to believe that we can be raised and belong to a transcendent realm by attending to God incarnate, a righteous one who suffers unjustly. Faith is to believe that to love a righteous one, who is justice itself incarnate, makes us just, because we become like what we love. Faith is to believe that a desire for justice itself brings us nearer to it.[7]

II. *The Word of God as the Ordering Principle of the World*

Weil claims that the Word of God is the ordering principle of the world. This is a traditional notion in Christian theology. In Genesis 1 chaos is ordered into a cosmos by the Word of God; and John's Gospel begins with an identification of the Word of God with Jesus Christ. Weil's contribution is to show that the created world can be a medium for contact between God, who is the transcendent creator, and human beings.[8]

Weil (as others before her, notably Leibniz and Whitehead) was struck by Plato's remark in the *Timaeus* that the cosmos is the result of "good persuading necessity." This obscure remark can be understood by means of the Greek notion of "limit." The cosmos—which in Greek means an *ordered* world in contrast to chaos—is the result of limits being placed on things so that we do not have amorphous stuff, but specific things. To be a thing is to be limited, and the relations between things is the result of limitation. For example, the height to which waves wash up onto a shore is determined precisely by several factors,

such as the shape and slope of the coastline. Waves can go only so far and then they reach their limit. The introduction of limitation, which is the introduction of necessity, gives us a cosmos, rather than chaos.

Nature, however, is not to be understood simply in terms of necessary relations between its members. Things in nature have been given their specific limits with the intention of producing a harmonious whole, so that the universe is good as a whole and in every part. This is evident in the beauty of the universe as a whole and in every part, a beauty which is *caused* by nature's laws, but which is not *intended* by nature's laws. For Plato, the beauty of the world points beyond the necessary relations between the members of the universe to a Mind which orders the universe with the intention of producing beauty. (We should also remember that in ancient Greek the word "kalos" means either good or beautiful).

Weil interprets the Christian claim that God creates the world by and through his Word to mean that his Word is the principle of limitation or necessity that structures the world, and orders things so structured into a harmonious whole. His Word is the principle of its overall, harmonious order, which is spelled out in detail by our present-day sciences in the formulation of regularities as laws of nature. Nature's obedience to the Word of God is experienced by us as necessity. Weil calls the principle of nature's order an incarnation of the Word of God, and the beauty of the world its smile.

This is not an incarnation in precisely the same sense that Jesus is the incarnation of the Word of God because the Word of God is not *identified* with the cosmos of matter and energy. The world is not the Word of God; it is the continuous effect of his Word. God is indirectly present to us through and in the world as the principle of its overall order. This implies that he can be experienced by us indirectly or implicitly as we understand the world's laws by our intellects, as we perceive its beauty by our senses, and as we feel the effects of the operations of nature on our bodies.

For indirect contact with God through nature to *elevate* us, that is to mediate his purifying presence (so that we are assimilated to him by being made righteous or just) we must attend to nature in the right way. This is also true with God's presence in Christ. As we have just seen, for contact with Christ to assimilate us to God, we must hunger and thirst for justice.[9] Only so do we love him, the perfectly righteous one who was unjustly slain. For contact with God to take place through nature, we must rise out of our particular point of view and come to love nature as a whole. The natural world for all its beauty and goodness also injures us by its operations, causing pain, suffering, decay, and finally death. In its operations it does not make any allowance for our personal merits or demerits. As Jesus noted, God "makes the sun to rise on the good and evil, and sends rain on the just and unjust" (Matt. 5:45b). Nature operates with complete indifference, making no distinction between people. If we are to have contact

with God through nature, we must rise above an anthropocentric and an egocentric point of view. This means to accept the indifference of nature and the injury it does to human beings and to us personally. This is a bitter truth to accept because nature destroys so much that is precious to us. But to come to terms with our vulnerability to nature is to come to terms with the truth about ourselves: we are natural beings and, like all natural beings, we are mortal and vulnerable to disease, accidents, and natural catastrophes. Were it not for the beauty of the universe, which is the effect of the operation of its necessities, we could not love it. But in loving nature, we are drawn out of our anthropocentricity and egocentricity. We are elevated or purified by our attentiveness to the beauty of the world because by attending to its overall harmony, we are in contact with God. Then "each sensation is like communion, that of pain included."[10]

To understand this more fully we must consider once again Weil's idea that contradiction on one level can enable us to reach a higher, supernatural level, which makes sense of the opposition. In *Gravity and Grace* Weil writes, "The word good has not the same meaning when it is a term of the corelation good-evil as when it describes the very being of God."[11] Necessity or compulsion, which nature exercises on our bodies, is not the divine goodness that orders nature. In fact, compulsion is the very opposite of divine goodness. But we are unaware of divine goodness until we recognize that nature's necessities produce *both* goods and evils. The order of nature is responsible both for sunshine and rain, good health and illness, growth and decay, life and death. Nature in its operations gives us both members of the pair "good-evil." As long as nature gives us good things personally (for example, good health), we do not notice that we are as much subject to compulsion (necessity) in those instances as we are in those in which bad things happen to us (for example, illnesses). We notice nature's necessities or compulsion only in the *negativities* of life, in things which are bad for us. Then of course the problem of reconciling belief in a good God with the existence of evil seems well-nigh impossible, and in addition we then do not have even a notion that divine goodness is not identical with the good in the pair "good-evil," which flows from nature's operation. Only when we see that nature operates by necessity and that it is indifferent to our welfare and causes both good and evil, that we can even conceive of the possibility of one whose goodness is beyond the pair "good-evil." When we face the truth of nature's indifference, and accept our vulnerability to its operations, then we know in our very bones that the good we crave—happiness or well-being—is not to be found in this world.

The conviction that there is a transcendent good arises from actual contact with it. When we are able to love nature as a whole—not just the good parts—we come into contact with the transcendent good. We come into contact with the transcendent good that orders nature's necessities into a harmonious whole when

we look beyond the goods and evils—the sun and rain—which result from the operation of nature. As long as our attention, desires, and hearts are set on the goods which have evils as their counterpart, we are not open to contact with God through nature. Nature is ordered by the transcendent good to lead us to God by our recognition that we are under compulsion from nature and that our good cannot be found in nature but from the creator of nature. God does not give an order to nature which produces an earthly paradise for human beings.

In their treatment of the problem of evil many modern philosophers, especially David Hume in his classic *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, point to pain and suffering to show that a benevolent intelligence did not design the world. Hume claims that it is easy to conceive of a better ordered world than ours. The criterion of "better," however, is one which produces more goods and fewer evils in the pair "good-evil" which flow from nature's operations. The verdict on the goodness of God is determined by the ratio between the members of the pair "good-evil." But it is precisely the contradiction or opposition between necessity, which is the source of the pair good-evil, and God, who is good, that can lift us above nature to a transcendent good. Nature's indifference can lever us upward by breaking our anthropocentric and egocentric perspectives. If we humbly accept the truth that we are under the compulsion of nature, our anthropocentric and egocentric illusions are broken and we are in contact with reality. That puts us into indirect contact with God, the ordering principle of nature, whether we realize it or not.

Contradictions, then, are resolved on a higher plane, but only by *intuition*, that is, by experience, in contrast to discursive argument. It is achieved by facing the contradiction fearlessly. There are moments of horror in facing the indifference of nature's compulsion, since necessity is contrary to the good we seek. In our distress we cannot look for solace to a member of the pair "good-evil," since the pair flows from necessity itself. There is an interval of horror in which we have a sense of being utterly abandoned by all possibility of good. Christ felt abandoned on the Cross as he experienced the compulsion of force and death, and cried out, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" But if we endure the horror of necessity, God becomes present to us. If we patiently wait for good to be done to us, we shall actually find ourselves being purged of evil precisely in proportion to our attentiveness to the necessities of nature. In that attentiveness we are in contact with God through contact with the realities of creation, both human and natural. Contact with God is purifying automatically, and we experience the relief of being rid of the burden of evil and the joy of being filled with charity.

For this reason Weil writes, "The sense of our wretchedness is the sense of reality. For we do not invent our wretchedness. It is true. That is why we have to value it. All the rest is imaginary."[12] Likewise she notes, "The tremendous

greatness of Christianity comes from the fact that it does not seek a supernatural remedy against suffering, but a supernatural use of suffering."[13] For we may use our suffering caused by human actions, whether it be inflicted justly or unjustly, to turn our attention to him who suffered unjustly. Likewise, we may use our suffering at the hands of nature's necessities. To submit to nature as God's creature is to obey God in a fashion that is analogous to the way nature is perfectly obedient to God. The transcendent good (God) orders nature by his Word. Nature operating as it does is being obedient to his Word. We are disobedient when we seek our well-being or fulfillment from the goods that are members of the pair "good-evil," especially when we injure others by acting unjustly. Part of becoming obedient is to consent to or accept nature's indifference by seeing that the good and evil its regularities cause spring from the same necessity. To have contact with necessity is to have contact through it with its Lord. And to seek a good that is beyond the good and evil that the created order—both human and natural—provides, is to desire God. Through experience we learn that so to desire God draws us to him, assimilates us to him. Nature is thus a mediator through the incarnate Word which orders it and we have contact with God by our willing obedience to nature's laws.

That obedience is based not on the good that nature's order throws our way, nor the good that falls our way as the results of the interplay of human actions. The transcendent God, the good that he is, is what we regard, not the good or evil which is tossed our way. By our attention to what is above we rise toward God; we become assimilated to him; we have an "at-onement." We thus belong to a different order from the necessities of nature or the interplay of human action. By our obedience, we belong to his Kingdom or rule. This is not to say that we are indifferent to human pain and to human injustice. Quite the contrary, it is precisely because we are becoming assimilated to God that we can act more truthfully (and hence more fearlessly) in human affairs, since we have a degree of detachment from the pluses and minuses that result from the world's natural and human operations.

III. *Incarnation and Atonement in the Bhagavad Gita*

There are two major sacred epics in Hinduism, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, which tell the stories of the heroes of the Aryan race. Numerous additions and interpolations have been made to both of them. The *Bhagavad Gita* ("the Song of the Lord") is one of the additions to the *Mahabharata*. The *Gita* consists of a long dialogue between Arjuna and his charioteer, who is actually Krishna, an incarnation of Vishnu (the supreme being), just before a great battle. Arjuna sees many of his kinsmen and friends in the ranks of the opposing army and is filled with horror. He does not want to fight but, it is his

duty to fight to protect others of his own people. His charioteer explains that salvation or union with ultimate reality is to be reached not only through asceticism, the renunciation of the world, but also through action that is in accord with *dharma* (which means roughly to fulfill the obligations which go with a person's place in human society), provided that the action is done with detachment and is offered to Krishna in a spirit of devotion or love (*bhakti*). The *Gita* became the most popular of all the sacred Hindu writings because it stresses the love of a personal god and because it opens a path to salvation in addition to that of asceticism and scholarship, the classic paths to salvation in the *Upanishads*.

As we shall see, there are vital differences in the understanding of incarnation and salvation in Christianity and Hinduism largely because there is some unclarity concerning the relation between the Creator and creature in Hinduism. Nonetheless, the incarnation and crucifixion of Christ and the story of Krishna and Arjuna address the same question: How may we rise above the level of the mixture of good and evil to the level of righteousness or purity so that there is union with God? In the Gospels Christ is a victim and, as we have seen, we may achieve assimilation to God with Christ as our mediator by love of that righteous incarnate one who suffers because of our unrighteousness. In the *Gita* Arjuna must wield the sword and slay his opponents—kinsmen, friends, and foes—indiscriminately. Yet Christ the victim and Arjuna the warrior are vitally alike in that both suffer from the effects of force. "Contact with force, from whichever end the contact is made (sword handle or sword point) deprives one for a moment of God. Whence the Bhagavad Gita. The Bhagavad Gita and the Gospels complete each other."[14]

Force or compulsion has the power to turn us into things, that is, for a moment to reduce us *wholly* to items in the flow of causes and effects, both as victims and as users of force. We find ourselves facing cold necessity, which of itself operates blindly. It cuts us off from any contact with good, whether it be the good in the pair "good-evil" or a transcendent good. This is why Christ in Gethsemane and Arjuna before a battle both shrink in horror before it. Just as Christ must submit to the necessity of crucifixion and become integrated into the flow of causes and effects, so too must Arjuna overcome his pity for those whom he must fight, and as a wielder of force, he must become integrated into the flow of causes and effects.

Jesus provoked the religious authorities of his day and, through them, the political authorities. Once events were in train, there was no recourse for him but to suffer penal execution. Christ believed that to submit to this chain of causes and effects, to necessity, was his Father's will, and so he yielded to his will. Arjuna is also in severely constraining circumstances. Whether he fights or refuses to fight, there will be evil consequences. He thus forces the question, How can an individual become righteous when to live in society means that an

individual's actions, whatever they are, will have both good and evil consequences? The pair "good-evil" are produced by human action in a way that is similar to the pair "good-evil" which is produced by the operations of nature. Arjuna's situation is nicely rendered by Reinhold Niebuhr's title, *Moral Man in Immoral Society*.

In the midst of this highly circumscribed situation Krishna brings enlightenment to Arjuna. Just as Jesus consented to necessity, because it was his Father's will, so too Arjuna is to consent to being a warrior. He is to submit to obligation as to a necessity,[15] because *at that moment* there is no other course of action possible.[16]

There is, however, a clear recognition that even should society be altered and made more just, our actions have consequences, which are always a mixture of good and evil. In seeking to fulfill our obligations, we shall be caught in situations similar to the one Arjuna faced. No matter how we act—that is, whether we take part or refuse to take part in society—there will be both good and evil consequences. Thus even when we decide to fulfill our obligations, righteousness cannot be achieved *merely* by meeting our obligations. This does not mean that our obligations are of no significance. Krishna reveals that as we meet our obligations we are to be detached from our actions and devoted to him, that is, as we meet our obligations our aim is to be united to righteousness or justice itself.

To rely on Krishna is to go beyond the domain of moral obligation proper. It is similar to the Christian notion that we rely on Christ's righteousness. But the concept of detachment from the consequences of our actions is unfamiliar to Christians and Westerners. Christians and Westerners recognize that our attitudes and motives are very important, but we do not think that our attitudes and motives are all that matters. We must, therefore, examine Weil's interpretation of "detachment" in the *Gita* to see how she sustains her claim that the *Gita* completes the Gospels by treating righteousness from the point of view of one who wields the sword in contrast to the Gospels which look at righteousness from the point of view of one who suffers the effects of force.

To grasp Weil's interpretation of "detachment" we need first to consider her interpretation of the Hindu doctrine that the self—the atman—is identical with ultimate reality, Brahma. According to Weil, all of us perceive things from our own point of view, which is not only partial but also deeply distorted by our wishes and desires, so that most of our thoughts and actions are not in touch with reality. We do not perceive things as they are. One way to achieve liberation from this false perspective is to recognize and accept nature's indifference. As we have seen, nature in its operations makes no distinction between people. If we accept this bitter truth—accept our vulnerability to nature—we escape from our anthropocentricity and egocentricity. The entire universe becomes like the stick a blind man uses. Through the stick a blind man has contact with that

which is beyond the circumference of his body. With it he is in touch with what is beyond it. He is moreover able to interpret or read the significance of what he touches by means of his stick.

This analogy is a crucial one for Weil. The universe as a whole, when we accept that it operates by necessity, and thus is indifferent to our weal or woe, becomes for us like an extension of our selves. The universe becomes identified with us as an extension of us. We put ourselves in contact with what is beyond the realm of necessity through the universe, as a blind man puts himself in touch with what is beyond himself through his stick. By achieving a detachment from our egocentric and our anthropocentric perspectives our true selves are liberated; our true selves achieve a kind of identity with the universe as a whole. That enables us to have contact with ultimate reality. Our souls thus achieve a union with Brahma. Thus Weil writes,

> The Atman—let the soul of a man take the whole universe for its body . . . Let the whole universe be for me, in relation to my body, what the stick of a blind man is in relation to his hand. His sensibility really no longer resides in his hand, but at the end of the stick . . . We do not become detached, we must attach ourselves to the All. The world is a text containing several meanings, and we pass from one meaning to another by an effort—an effort in which the body always participates, just as when we are learning the alphabet of a foreign language this alphabet has got to enter into our hand by dint of forming the characters . . . Apart from that, any change in the manner of thinking is illusory."[17]

Detachment thus does not mean indifference. Rather it is a freedom from illusions about what the world is and attachment to a reality that is not the world itself.

This identification with Brahma through the universe cannot be sustained. Disruption arises because one must continue to act as an individual and because one is not the only individual. The *Gita* deals with both: our need to act and our relation to other people.[18]

The urge to achieve identification with the universe causes every person and every group of people to feel that they have a just and legitimate claim to be masters of the universe—to possess it.[19] But this possession must be properly understood. Because our body is finite and through it we have identification with the whole universe, many different people through their finite bodies may possess the whole without interfering with each other.[20] But when the urge to possess is misunderstood it puts people at odds. Rather than recognizing the reality of other people's existence—their irreducible points of view—we seek to change their reading.

There are two ways of changing *for other people* the way in which they understand their relation to the universe: force and education. Thus Weil writes, "to force somebody to read himself as you read him (slavery). To force others to read you as you read yourself (conquest)."[21] By force one may degrade other people, but by education one can raise them. They then recognize that each of us has a point of view that is irreducible to that of others (force only destroys a perspective) and that each of us can have an identity with the universe and contact with ultimate reality without our point of view being the only point of view. Thus Weil asks rhetorically, "Is it not perhaps true that conquest is nothing other than a bad way of seeking for the Atman identical with Brahma? Man needs to be alone in the universe in order to be identical with the universe. (But if he is alone thanks to suppressing others, he is the only perspective)."[22]

Weil thus connects war and the various forms of domination and suppression that exist in human relations to a misunderstood urge to find our true selves. We tend to heighten our sense of uniqueness and importance by eliminating other perspectives, that is by having others read us as we would like ourselves to be read, and by reading others as we want to read them. War, the theme of the *Gita*, is an extreme form of forcing others to read as one would have them read.

What is particularly horrible about war is that brute compulsion or necessity utterly deprives us of contact with God, just as suffering from the hands of nature's painful operations for a time snaps our identification with the universe. We are out of touch with our true selves, and even deprived of the good in the pair "good-evil."

> However just the cause of the conqueror may be, however just that of the conquered, the evil caused, whether by victory or defeat, is nonetheless inevitable. It is useless to hope to escape from it. That is why Christ did not come down from the Cross, and did not even remember, at the moment of supreme anguish, that he would return to life. That is why the other one [Arjuna] did not lay down arms and stop the battle.[23]

Under the impact of necessity—whether at the point of a sword or at its hilt—man loses himself, God, the universe, everything.[24]

What is of particular interest is that Arjuna is to make war *even though* he is inspired by God (in contrast, for example, to Joan of Arc who makes war *because* she is inspired by God).[25] At the moment when Arjuna reacts with horror to the situation he is in, circumstances are such that his obligations to his own people mean that he must fight, in spite of the effects of war on himself and on those against whom he must fight. Arjuna encounters in the most extreme form the reality of force and the reality of life in society which obliges us in our actions to cause both members of the pair "good-evil."

There are, however, two different ways to kill: not knowing that those whom

one kills exist, except as "things-to-be killed"; and with detachment, so that one is not present in the action.[26] Detachment requires that one act under *duress* or by necessity. Thus Weil writes, "A harmful action which I cannot avoid accomplishing, except by accomplishing another even greater one—it is not I who accomplish it, it is Necessity."[27] One becomes in effect a thing in the flow of causes and effects, which is ruled by necessity. "We are not defiled by actions from which we are absent in this fashion . . . in spite of the fact that they are mixed up with evil. We must likewise be absent from good. Act not *for* a certain object, but because we *cannot do otherwise*.[28]

Our intentions in war reveal *what* the action is which we perform. Weil mentions three possible kinds of war. One kind seeks to create in the enemy a disposition to obey the wishes of a particular nation, always, and whatever these wishes may be. This is a war to exterminate the reality of others as creatures with a point of view. A second kind of war is one in which one seeks to gain some limited and definite advantage that one has not been able to get by negotiations. The aim is to make the war more costly to the enemy than the loss of the disputed advantage. The third kind of war seeks to create among the enemy the desire for peace. To change the mind of the enemy is the object. The war is to be pursued with restraint.[29]

One may thus fight in a war and be *detached* from the force one wields if three conditions are met: (1) if one acts from necessity; (2) if one's intention is to persuade the enemy to desire peace; and finally, (3) if one pursues the war with restraint. One is then not *identified* with force or possessed by it because one does not seek to exterminate *other points of view*. *How* we are drawn into the chain of causes and effects by participating in social life, including war, determines whether we are present or absent in the action. We are "missing" when our allegiance is not given to exterminating other points of view, though we indeed seek to kill. We, so to speak, step outside the *necessity* in which social situations involve us by recognizing that necessity with utter clarity, and by our restraining ourselves and not intending to exterminate other points of view or to gain a definite good or advantage for ourselves.[30]

To so act does not of itself *raise* one to a higher level. One has merely refrained from evil. But with detachment we have become a self which the ultimate reality can reach. We can be elevated to the level of righteousness through the soul's very love of the transcendent good in the form of Krishna, the incarnate Vishnu. Thus even war, if it is a necessity *endured* properly, can lead us into righteousness. In action, and not just by enduring suffering as a victim in obedience to God, we may find righteousness. In our participation in social life we are to do what we must do, knowing that such actions of themselves do not elevate us to righteousness. Our aim to be righteous thus remains intact. Our aim to be righteous is made evident by our love of righteousness itself, or by our love of righteousness present to us in Krishna.

On this interpretation detachment is not indifference. A person cares about the good in the pair "good-evil." He or she cares for the good of living and wants other people to enjoy life too. This is why the situation is one of duress. One must, therefore, fight desiring to live but with an awareness that one may be killed; and also to kill another with the desire that he live. This complex intention is captured by Weil through posing an imaginary situation.

> Supposing the life of a certain person were linked with our own to the extent that the two deaths had to be simultaneous, would we still wish that that person should die? If with our whole body and soul we desire life, and if nevertheless, without lying, we can reply 'yes', then we have the right to kill that person. Not otherwise. But is that sufficient? We must also desire that the other person should live, although necessity be opposed thereto.[31]

That this complex intention is extremely difficult to realize is no objection to its soundness because what we are talking about is achieving righteousness (or at least to refrain from evil) and righteousness is extremely difficult to achieve. Indeed in the *Gita* and in the Gospels, it is impossible to achieve righteousness without divine grace to raise us to it.

Weil is thus very realistic about what is possible in war. From her own experiences as a combatant in the Spanish Civil War she writes, "Fear and the taste for killing. Avoidance of each of these—How? In Spain, this seemed to me a heart-breaking effort, impossible to maintain for long. Make oneself such, then, that one is able to maintain it."[32]

For this reason Weil counsels us to enter into our hatred fully. "What we now hate, we shall manage to be able to love. We must feel our hate up to the hilt; know what it is we hate. Through each feeling, going downwards, to join up with the Atman."[33] This paradox makes sense when we realize that by their absence we can become aware of good (the good that is a member of the pair "good-evil") and the transcendent good. "Emptiness is the mode of existence of the objects of our desire. We only have to draw aside the veil of unreality and we shall see that they are given to us in this way. When we see that, we still suffer, but we are happy."[34] She tells us that "the remedy is to use the loss itself as an intermediary [*metaxu*] for attaining reality."[35] Reality, which deprives us of good, frees the self of illusions caused by our appetites for that good which is a member of the pair "good-evil." Our hunger for good is a real desire not an illusory one. We touch the reality of ourselves in genuine desire. Thus in feeling hatred fully and being deprived of all good, we release the hunger for good. That desire is one which the ultimate reality may feed or, to put it another way, with that desire we are a self which the ultimate reality may find.

IV. *Concluding Observations*

Throughout her *Notebooks* Weil voices her reservations with the *Gita*. She does not endorse all of it any more than she endorses all the Old Testament. For example, she mentions that dharma "is only suitable in a stable society. Those people did not draw up rules for unstable societies. What becomes of dharma in a conquered country? And what are the duties toward the conquerors? (Must find out)."[36] In addition, she points out that Krishna is not an incarnation in the sense that Christ is because Krishna did not suffer. Krishna is a *manifestation* of deity (Vishnu is present) and so he is a revealer or enlightener. He is even a means of salvation (a *metaxu*). By loving him we can be raised to righteousness. But for justice itself to be incarnate entails suffering, and to be able to suffer requires that the divine become a creature. Among all the instances of alleged incarnations, Christ is the only one who suffered and suffered precisely because of his righteousness. We need not deny that Vishnu is one of the names of God, and that Krishna, as a manifestation of him, inspires, enlightens, and even enables people to reach the presence of righteousness itself in order to continue to maintain that Christ is the righteousness of God *incarnate* and that through Christ's suffering God suffers the separation of the Word from himself.

We must, however, recall that part of Weil's method is to find important analogies or likenesses. We have seen that the universe and Krishna are not incarnations of the Word of God in the same way that Jesus is. On the other hand, Weil calls them incarnations because they are like his incarnation in vital respects. They function as *metaxu* or mediators between God and human beings. Contact between us and God, which is a "contradiction" since we are on different levels of reality, is made possible by God descending to our level. Thus the Word of God descends as the principle of nature's order and in human form in instances such as Krishna. In addition, incarnations such as Krishna's provide a saving revelation, that is, show and mediate a path to righteousness. The prime incarnation, that of Jesus Christ, however, reveals the *full* depths of God's saving mercy since it is the actual endurance of the suffering which is the cost of God's mercy toward human unrighteousness and which is borne by God himself.

One other very serious reservation, which we noted in passing, is that the distinction between ultimate reality (God) and the universe is not clear in Hinduism. Attempts to clarify it have led to several schools of Hindu philosophic and religious thought. This lack of clarity affects the way salvation and incarnation are to be understood. As far as salvation is concerned, it is the difference between assimilation—being made *like* God, namely righteous (as in Christianity)—and *identification* with God (as in Hinduism). In addition, if there is an underlying ontological identity between the ultimate reality and human beings, salvation is

a *realization* of identity, not the gift of an immortal status and participation in the life of God by creatures. So for Weil there is no transmigration of the soul from body to body, a major stress of the *Gita*. As Weil put it, "Plato: assimilation—India: identification."[37] As far as incarnation is concerned, if there is an underlying ontological unity between the ultimate reality and human beings, then an incarnation would not be a change in ontological status. In Christianity the divine and the creature are distinguished by the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*. Only God is a necessary being, who is wholly sufficient in himself, in contrast to all else, which exists contingently, and which adds nothing to God's being. For the Word of God to become man is to change in ontological status. It is a degradation—to move from one grade to another—so that the Word of God now is a human being.

For reasons such as these it is important that the exploration of a Christian theology of other faiths be pursued not only in terms of Christology, but in conjunction with studies such as David Burrell's in his comparisons of Roman Catholic, Jewish, and Muslim medieval philosophical theologians, whose common ground is Being.[38] The two approaches complement and interpenetrate; for were one to seek to study Being only, one would leave out the vital dimension of salvation in various religions. On the other hand, to examine salvation without the ontological dimensions of Being would be to fail to understand the nature of incarnation and salvation in Christianity and other faiths.

This venture into a theology of other faiths raises in a new way the question of the nature of revelation. It is clear that neither Christianity nor Hinduism have faced every kind of human situation for which religious enlightenment is needed. No religion has shed as much light on the significance of being a victim as has Christianity with its claim that God incarnate is a victim. That perspective, however, needs to be complemented, as we have seen, by looking at righteousness from the point of view of one who *acts*. Our investigation thus opens up the possibility of developing new theories about the nature of revelation by allowing us to retain our Christian access to God *in its full integrity* while at the same time finding genuine revelation in other faiths, revelations which complement our own, just as our own complements theirs. But for this enterprise to be religiously and theologically fruitful it is necessary to approach other revelations from the point of view of seeking a *Christian theology of other faiths*. This contrasts with the approaches used by historians of religion, who seek to understand other religions from the inside, so to speak, to understand them as they understand themselves. But theologians and Christians must also seek to understand them from *our point of view*, from how they connect in vital ways to *our* understanding of God's revelation. And we might add that were a Hindu theology of other faiths attempted, we might then find a new appreciation of Christianity by Hinduism. The most ancient Vedas, accepted by all Hindus, has sacrifice as

their foundation. The Christian focus on God as the victim might open new vistas for that ancient faith. Rather than *bhakti* (love) as the place of contact between Christianity and Hinduism, it would lie in the oldest material of Hinduism, the *Riga-Vedas*. But it would also transform the notion of *bhakti* where one to think of love primarily in terms of a divine love that sacrifices itself for our redemption and does so from the very foundation of the world ("The Lamb of God slain from the very foundations of the world") so that there might be a world at all.

Princeton Theological Seminary

NOTES

1. "A Christian Theology of Other Faiths," *Theology Today* (Oct., 1981). A still earlier article ("Suffering at the Hands of Nature," *Theology Today*, July 1980) discussed another aspect of Weil's understanding of the Cross, showing how Christ is the *prime* mediator.

2. *The Notebooks of Simone Weil*, vol. 2, trans. Arthur Wills (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul), 1976, p. 386.

3. *Ibid.*

4. *Gravity and Grace*, trans. Emma Craufurd (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul), 1972, p. 88.

5. Weil does this by connecting the *Phaedrus* to the *Republic*.

6. *The Notebooks of Simone Weil*, vol. 2, p. 384.

7. *First and Last Notebooks*, trans. Richard Rees (London: Oxford University Press), 1970, 306-7.

8. Philo (d. ca. 50 A.D.) was an Alexandrian Jew who was deeply affected by the stress on intermediaries between the Supreme Mind and the world of Middle Platonism. He was saturated in hellenistic philosophy and sought to reconcile the Jewish Scriptures with Plato. As a Jew, he believed God was active in creating and ruling the cosmos, but he also stressed God's transcendence and saw God as acting through various intermediary powers. Philo is vague about the relationship between these intermediaries and God, and he is not consistent in his description of them. Sometimes there are two, sometimes several, but often a single and great intermediary, the Logos or Word.

9. This is only one route for contact with God's mediator, Jesus Christ, who can assimilate us to God. There are others in Weil but reference to only one here is all that is needed to understand her view of nature as a mediator which helps assimilate us to God as well.

10. *The Notebooks of Simone Weil*, vol. 2, p. 394.

11. *Gravity and Grace*, p. 89.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 87.

13. *The Notebooks of Simone Weil*, vol. 2, pp. 386-87.

14. *The Notebooks of Simone Weil*, vol. 1, p. 25.

15. "For things outside our power, 'Thy will, not mine, be done,' is clear. But for things within our power? Not to regard them as such. To read obligations as a necessity." *The Notebooks of*

Simone Weil, vol. 1, pp. 40-41.

16. *At a given moment* one is not free to do anything whatever. And one must accept this internal necessity; accept what one is, at a given moment, as a fact, even one's shame." *Ibid.*, p. 56.

17. *Ibid.*, pp. 19, 21, and 23.

18. *Ibid.*, pp. 23-24. Our relation to other people is different from our relation to the universe. Another person should never play a role in our lives analogous to that of a stick in a blind man's hand, namely an extension of ourselves. Another person is not merely a part of the universe, but also one, who like ourselves, has a conception of the entire universe. How then is one to be properly related to a reality that also has a point of view?

19. *Ibid.*, p. 33-34.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 34.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 43.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 25.

23. *Ibid.*

24. *Ibid.*, p. 27.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 25.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 40.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 55.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 57.

29. *Ibid.*, pp. 32-33.

30. "Arjuna *paused* before action. This is why his action is a good one. To pause is not to hesitate." *Ibid.*, p. 62. Also see *ibid.*, p. 54.

31. *Ibid.*, p. 33.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 32.

33. *Ibid.*, p. 21.

34. *Ibid.*, p. 20.

35. *Ibid.*, p. 28.

36. *Ibid.*, p. 49. It should be noted that her views on war and peace continued to develop, especially as she reacted to the continuing deterioration of the political situation in Europe and the outbreak of the Second World War. See, Simone Weil, *Formative Writings, 1929-1941*, (eds. and trans.) D. T. McFarland and W. Van Ness (Amherst: Univ. of Mass. Press), 1987, pp. 237-78.

37. *Ibid.*, p. 63.

38. *Knowing the Unknowable God* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press), 1986.