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## Intimations of a Spiritual New Age:

# I. The Spiritual Emergence and Personal Tragedy of a Universalized Christian Mysticism in the Life and Work of Simone Weil

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This is the first in a projected series on the envisionings during the crisis years of the 1930s of a future spiritual New Age consequent on the coming globalization of an individualist, capitalist, technologically driven world economy. In very different ways Jung, the philosophers Bergson and Heidegger, the historian Toynbee, and Wilhelm Reich, foresaw an emergent New Age consistent with a post-modern secular culture. Others such as Teilhard de Chardin, Krishnamurti, and Gurdjieff anticipated their own potential universalizing of more mystical aspects of the world religions. Simone Weil's version of an essentialized mystical Christianity is part of the latter attempts, including her proposed synthesis with a mystical Platonism, along with her versions of Buddhism, Taoism, and Hinduism. Eschewing traditional doctrines of Resurrection, after-life, and final judgement, Weil offered her own transpersonal understanding of a "negative theology" of the unknowability of God other than through states of Grace, based on the individual experience of "affliction" uniquely exemplified by Christ on the Cross, and the beauty of the natural order. Her personal struggles throughout her highly original mystical realization, still seen by many as an exemplary guidance toward a Christianity of the future, and its tragic "meta-pathological" inversion in the last years of her short life, attest to challenges entailed in non-traditional transpersonal developments that might anticipate a spirituality of the future.

*Keywords: New Age, globalization, this-worldly mysticism, negative theology, in-existence of God, experience of Grace, affliction, spiritual meta-pathology*

**B**orn to a French secular Jewish family, and dying prematurely at the age of thirty-four in 1943, Simone Weil, well known initially in Europe for her neo-Marxist political writings, underwent a major spiritual opening beginning in 1938. She formulated these experiences in terms of a potentially universalized mystical Christianity, without doctrines of Resurrection, personal afterlife, Annunciation, Apocalypse, or final judgement—blended with Greek Platonism, the Bhagavad-Gita, and aspects of Buddhism into a new kind of "implicit faith." It is a strikingly original "negative theology" based on God's inherent unknowability and felt absence, except for the descent of Grace in moments of total suffering and surrender most purely exemplified by "my God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me" (Matthew 27: 46) of Jesus on the Cross (Weil, 1947/2002, 1951/2005, 1951/2009). The postwar publication of her spiritual essays, letters, and notebooks had a considerable

and still ongoing impact on contemporary religious thought, along with much controversy over her lifelong emotional struggles and their apparent inversion of her earlier spiritual enlightenment in the final year of her life in ways that many, then and now, have regarded as consciously self-destructive and suicidal.

Weil, who considered her experiences as ontologically real and transcendent, would not have agreed with this present approach to the psychology of spirituality as a higher or abstract development of emotional intelligence, in the sense of Max Scheler (1926/1970) and G. H. Mead (1934) on mystical realization as a universalized sympathy, and further developed as a developmental epistemology of the transpersonal by Hunt (2016). Such an approach might offer its own understanding of the suffering and purification inherent to the major spiritual traditions, in that an abstract synthesis of feeling and a decentering

from egocentricity must not only address the broader human condition but will necessarily activate and attempt to assimilate previous affective trauma and unresolved personal issues. This is understood not in the sense of Freud (1930) and some recent versions of attachment theory (Rizzuto, 1979) in which God as spiritual Absolute is reduced to a projection of the primal parents, but rather in the sense of W. R. Bion (1970) and Almaas (2004), in which the all encompassing nature of transpersonal states will resonate with unresolved issues from early childhood in their similar quality of an encompassing totality and diffuseness. Ideally “metabolized” and healed within direct mystical realization, earlier trauma can also imprint and distort subsequent spirituality in terms of what Maslow (1971) saw as the spiritual “meta-pathologies” of despair, grandiosity, and withdrawal, and William James (1902) termed the potential “theopathies” of “geniuses of the religious line”—and which in the extreme, as in the case of Weil, may shut down into an unresolved “dark night” (Hunt, 2007).

### **Simone Weil and a New Age Spirituality**

There is also a broader socio-historical context from which to understand Weil’s version of a universalized mystical Christianity. In hindsight, at least, the 1960s, 70s and 80s might be considered their own circumscribed “era” rather than the beginnings of the New Age many thought at the time.<sup>1</sup> While left with highly specific understandings of psychedelic therapies, Eastern spiritualities, spontaneous ecstatic states, neo-shamanism, and the developing neurocognition of meditation, the longer term planetary “age” of spiritual renewal often anticipated seems inevitably put forward into a more distant future by the narrowing economic impact of globalization and the shrinking of the previously expanding educated, individualistic middle classes that the sociologists Weber (1922/1963) and Troeltsch (1931/1960) thought foreshadowed a futural sensate or inner-worldly mysticism to replace the increasingly secularized Judaic-Christian prophetic religiosity (see Hunt, 2003, 2010). Indeed the recent reactive fundamentalisms within Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and even Hinduism attest to the economic pressures that would postpone any such predictions.

While not in any way to minimize the continuing contributions of an increasingly sophisticated transpersonal movement within the human sciences,

it may be more helpful for any longer term New Age anticipations to look back to the more intuitive and schematic formulations that cluster in the 1930s—perhaps called forth all the more accurately and powerfully out of the diffuse premonitions, in the face of the distorted quasi-religions of Nazism and Stalinism, of an unprecedented carnage to come. It was beginning in this time that a series of seminal figures, including Toynbee, Jung, Heidegger, Reich, Gurdjieff, and Krishnamurti, as well as the Catholic priest Teilhard de Chardin and Simone Weil herself, began to respond to a widely perceived loss of meaning and purpose, only to become more fully obvious in a beginning post-war globalization, with a depth and insight less visible in the more specifically focused era to follow. It may be time for their reconsideration if we are to understand the multiple strands—both religious and secular—that would need to be synthesized in any future planetary New Age called forth to compensate and reconcile a more impersonal technologically driven globalization that seems destined to leave a large portion of humanity superfluous to its administration (Harari, 2016).

There were two major strands in these attempts extending from the 1930s through the 1950s. The one was more secularly conceived and seeking a new postmodern understanding of the spiritual (Jung, Heidegger, Reich). The other was more intuitively religious and seeking the essentializing, universalizing, or right simplification of the mystical or “perennial” center of the major world religions. It is here that Weil becomes central in her insistence on the ontological reality of her mystical Christianity. Convergences among and between these two strands become especially noteworthy in their intuition of any future spirituality that might redeem and balance where the planet seems headed.

To begin with attempts at religious universalization, with respect to Christianity, key figures include not only Weil herself but the Catholic priest and paleontologist Teilhard de Chardin (1959, 1964)—the major works of each only published posthumously. Where Weil would emphasize an individual suffering and grace separated from and transcending society, Teilhard foresaw a future planetary civilization whose pervasive materialism would be best reconciled through Christian versions of a divine incarnation of all persons, whose equality of personhood would be best unified through an Agapic or compassionate love for which an essentialized Christianity could provide the template.<sup>2</sup>

There is the similar and roughly contemporaneous universalizing of Hasidic Judaism by Martin Buber (1949, 1957/1970), and Scholem's (1941/1961) presentation of Kaballah, along with the Gurdjieff-Ouspensky movement (Ouspensky, 1949) and Idries Shah (1964) offering essentialized versions of Islamic Sufism.<sup>3</sup> Krishnamurti's (1971; Landau, 1935/1964) universalizing of Hinduism as ongoing attention/acceptance of the ongoing moment, "without hope or desire," is strikingly similar to Weil (1951/2009) on the transformative power of meditative attention, while the earlier Theosophical movement seems to have been the first to proclaim a coming New Age (Hakl, 2013). Meanwhile Weil herself (1956) was aware of Suzuki's (1933) initial presentation during those years of a generalized Zen Buddhism, seeing its no-self of meditative practice as similar to her own experiences of inner emptiness. She already strongly agreed with the notion of a "perennial philosophy."

Weil would never have cited the more primarily secular psychologist C. G. Jung and his naturalized understanding of an inherent "biological" capacity for numinous-mystical experience in terms of his collective unconscious and its archetypal imagination. Yet Jung (1959, 2009) independently shared with Weil a strong influence from an earlier Gnostic Christianity—for her Marcion and the Cathars—and both were equally preoccupied with the Book of Job as the most direct precursor to Christianity and the Cross (Jung, 1958; Weil, 1951/2009). Jung (1960), in association with the Eranos conferences that grew up around him in those years (Hakl, 2013), also began an interest in tribal shamanisms, dreams, and mythologies, while Weil was developing her own parallel fascination with the "implicit faith" she saw running through cross cultural mythologies and European folk and fairy tales.

The philosopher Heidegger (1919/2004; 1927/1962) in these same years had already derived his ostensibly secular existential phenomenology of human existence, with its inherent opening to a numinous "primordial Being experience," from Meister Eckhart and Augustine. Where Weil analogously utilized Plato and Pythagorus, Heidegger (1938/2012) advocated a return to a radical reinterpretation of the Greek pre-Socratics to herald his "new beginning" and futural "last god." Heidegger saw himself as addressing a crisis of spiritual loss in modernity consequent on the ongoing triumph of a technology and "machination" that

would someday reduce personhood to an economic commodity—a version of Weil (1947/2002; 1951/2005) on the "mechanism" of society that, absent a higher Grace, turns persons into the "things" of an endless dominance. Heidegger and Jung, coming from a political conservatism that saw their brief initial fascination in Nazism (see Hunt, 2003), and Weil, coming from a neo-Marxist left, all became preoccupied in the 1930s and 1940s with a sense of cultural uprootedness and loss of spiritual ground in the modern West. They all tried to foresee its potential renewal—Weil in her final *The Need for Roots* (1949/2002), Heidegger in his *The History of Being* (1940/2015) and *Bremen Lectures* (1949/2012), and Jung in *Modern Man in Search of a Soul* (1933). Heidegger and Jung also shared with Weil an active interest in Buddhism and Taoism (Parkes, 1987; Jung, 1958).<sup>4</sup>

Finally, and to contextualize in hindsight these independently overlapping strands of a future New Age, it was during this time that the historian Arnold Toynbee (1946, 1956, 1957) was formulating his view of pan-regional universal states—Persia, Rome, China, India—producing the similarly inclusive world religions destined to have their still later far broader appeal and impact. Like Weber (1922/1963), Toynbee understood the coming capitalist-technological civilization as the secularization of a Christianity originally based on a divine incarnation into the material world, with a resulting implication of the sacredness and social equality of individual personhood. For Toynbee the extreme materialism and individual isolation of a coming future world order can only be made humanly tolerable through a new and universalizing spirituality, to avoid the danger, strongly felt by Weil (1951/2005) as well, of idolizing the power structure of that society itself. Toynbee concluded that such a spiritual renewal would have to involve a synthesis of the mystical cores of the world religions, especially a Christianity attuned to the sacredness of personhood and the Eastern traditions of meditative realization. He saw their shared emphasis on the necessity of humility and love for fellow humans, along with the inevitability of moral suffering and human limitation before the sense of something beyond and transcendent. Yet such a synthesis would also have to follow naturalistic lines acceptable to such a future technological civilization—a view consistent with Troeltsch and Weber on a future "sensate" or this-worldly mysticism for the West. Here Toynbee, also echoing Jung earlier, followed Bergson's (1907/1944) understanding of mystical experience as

the direct amplification and expression of a spontaneous “life energy.”

While Weil herself (1949/2002) rejected any such Bergsonian/Nietzschean naturalistically understood spirituality as an empty pragmatism—a “pink pill” of vitality (p. 248), it was Wilhelm Reich (1949/1973), the last of these New Age precursors of the thirties and forties, who formalized Bergson’s life energy into a cosmic “orgone energy”—potentially measurable and the “scientific” basis for traditional mystical experience. Reich (1953) would share with Weil an extreme emotional suffering from societal rejection, not to mention his final imprisonment, and so came to his own final identification with the living Jesus, understood with Nietzsche (1888/1954) as a Dionysian affirmation of life itself. Weil herself (1956) saw the parallels between the myth of Dionysius/Osiris and Jesus, and shared with the later Reich a view of a science that should be based not on inner mechanism but on the expressive outward beauty of its patterning and recurring “form constants” at all levels of the physical universe.

These then are some of the spirituality fragments that might be re-activated in a future globalized culture of technology in which many persons would find themselves economically superfluous and so forced into exactly the situation of detachment, passivity, and experiential receptivity that would favor a more interior openness. While many, as increasingly seen today, would drift into patterns of withdrawal and self-destructive drug use, there would be sufficient persons of high creativity to synthesize some or all of these influences into a new more planetary spirituality. Simone Weil’s own original essentializing of a mystical Christianity already shows some of this synthesis, along with the deep personal suffering in attempting its enactment in the world as she found it.

### **The Mystical Theology of Simone Weil**

Consistent with the traditional purification/illumination, death/rebirth structure of mystical and shamanic openings (Laski, 1961; Walsh, 2007), Simone’s opening to the direct sense of an encompassing presence of Jesus, beginning in 1938, came only when the severity of her physical exhaustion and migraines, while recovering from her attempt to bypass neo-Marxist theory with her own factory work, had reached the point where she was contemplating suicide. She concluded that God’s grace and its redeeming joy can only descend in such states of extreme “affliction” beyond ordinary

suffering, where all personal will is surrendered to a “soul killing despair” (Weil, 1947/2002). Only then can God’s emptiness, since God is non-existent within space and time, fill the inner void left of the ordinary self. Her later notebooks (1950/1970, 1956) show her well aware of the resonance here with the Buddhist noble truths of suffering, *no self*, and *shunyata*.<sup>5</sup>

Weil formalized her experiences in terms of a negative theology—itsself evocative of Eckhart, Kabbalah, and Ibn ‘Arabî—in which creation is understood as God’s withdrawal in order that existence could be. Firmly rejecting the implicit pantheism often associated with such understanding, she saw the physical universe and ordinary human life as thereby ruled by a “metallic,” amoral, mechanistic necessity—symbolized by a physics of “gravity.” Our personal self is part of that mechanism, and Grace cannot appear within us if we are attached at all to self or social world, but only when we become emptied, and so mirroring the God of creation. Only with that surrender to non-being, which is forced on us by the direct experience of a dull, despair-inducing “metallic coldness” in the pure mechanism of affliction, can the Godlike emptiness and silence within be loved by the similarly non-existent God of creation, and so be filled with joy.

It is in affliction itself that the splendor of God’s mercy shines . . . . If we fall to the point where the soul cannot keep back the cry “my God, why hast thou forsaken me” . . . we end by touching . . . the very love of God. (Weil, 1951/2009, p. 44)

God can love in us only this consent to withdraw in order to make way for him, just as . . . our creator withdrew in order that we might come into being. (Weil, 1947/2002, p. 41)

Weil, in a way reminiscent of Almaas (2004), insists that we cannot fill the “holes” of suffering with imaginary consolation or religious dogma of any kind, other than complete surrender to one’s pain. Otherwise we do not empty ourselves to be like God, and it is this ultimate unknowability and emptiness that makes ordinary religious belief a “hindrance to true faith”:

In this sense atheism is a purification. . . . Among those men in whom the supernatural part has not awakened, the atheists are right and the believers wrong. (Weil, 1947/2002, p. 115)

Significantly for what will later unfold for her, Weil also insists that we cannot choose the Cross, it must be inflicted. Otherwise it becomes the deliberately sought imaginary consolation of martyrdom, with a false certainty of redemption or afterlife, and so an unconscious “idolatry.” So for Weil the death on the Cross is more divine than any consoling dogma of resurrection. The anticipatory joy and certainty of the martyr is not the despair of the Cross.

Weil (1950/1970) also has her own version of spirituality as intrinsic to the human condition, an inherent capacity that must unfold in some way—idolatrous or not—in ages religious and secular:

One has only the choice between God and idolatry. . . . For the faculty of worship is in us, and it is either directed somewhere into this world, or into the other. . . . If one denies God, either one is worshipping him unknown to oneself or else one is worshipping . . . things of this world [and] . . . imagining the attributes of Divinity in them. (p. 138)

Here would be her echo of spirituality as inherent intelligence, and her rejection of all views of its supposed evolutionary anachronism.

Although Weil’s theological formulation of suffering can sound extreme, it is actually its own version of more recent research on the settings associated with spontaneous ecstatic states and peak experience. Taylor (2013) finds personal crisis to be by far the most frequent setting or trigger for ecstasy. Next in frequency comes the beauty of physical nature, and while it may contradict her views on its coldness and indifference, Weil found a divine beauty in the Greek and especially Pythagorean sciences of physical and mathematical form. While only occasionally mentioning the more tangible beauty central to a Thoreau or Emerson, she understood the beauty of the patterns and forms in nature as inspired by their “obedience” to divine wisdom.<sup>6</sup> The third most frequent setting for ecstatic experience is meditation, and here Weil discusses a “total attention” to one’s unfolding situation, which she also compares to the “suchness” of Zen Buddhism. If that attention is “without memory, hope, or desire” it allows the “I” to disappear into a “thy will be done”—necessary both for the acceptance of suffering and for the awareness of beauty within Creation. Thus in terms of the overview of research on the settings for spontaneous ecstasy (Taylor, 2013; Laski, 1961), Weil offers the framework for a complete mystical system. James (1902) might well

have regarded her as a major example of his spontaneous “genius of the religious line.”

That said, and not surprisingly for time and place, there is a darker, in some sense Gnostic and “world rejecting” aspect running all through her writings—with the world entirely a place of cold mechanism and cruelty. Absent is the traditional Judaic-Christian respect for individual personhood. The personal is also seen as entirely mechanical, based on relations of dominance and self esteem. Closest to the sacred within personal life is “mother love,” but tellingly for an understanding of her own life (below), even it is finally “only an image. [It] wears out if all the conditions for its renewal are lacking” (Weil, 1950/1970, p. 127). It would be the personal that would remain her lifelong difficulty. Accordingly a personal after-life would be pointless, since there is no transcendental reality to the individual life:

The Last Judgement will be like this—the soul . . . becomes suddenly convinced beyond all possibility of doubt that all . . . [its] ends and actions during life were illusions, including God . . . . It re-lives . . . all the actions of its life, after which, in most cases, it is seized with horror, desires to be annihilated, and disappears. (Weil, 1950/1970, p. 152)

Unlike Scheler, Durkheim, or Mead, who saw spirituality as an abstract intelligence based on the inner form of society itself (see Hunt, 2016), Weil (1951/2005) adopts Plato’s view in *The Republic* of society as the “Great Beast,” a barrier to the Divine greater even than carnal desire of the body. For Weil it is the same as Revelations’ “beast of the apocalypse.” Social virtues can seem to approach the truth, but all are ultimately false, apart from humility:

The almost inevitable trap is the social one. Everywhere . . . the social feeling produces a perfect imitation of faith, that is to say perfectly deceptive. (Weil, 1951/2009, p. 129)

We will see below how she might have arrived personally at the extremity of such views, but Weil is definite that nothing offered in the social order is worth living for. Genuine love for others, central to her own personal altruism, must be for the Godlike void within them: “Apart from this kind of love, all human relationships are ghoulish. To love someone means to love drinking his blood” (Weil, 1950/1970, p. 285).

Accordingly it becomes clear why she could not join the Catholic Church, despite her lengthy and agonized discussions with Fathers Perrin and Thibon (1952/2003), and fervent wish to do so. It was for her finally a social organization. In her final writing (1949/2002), she makes clear that despite the inner truths of mystics like Francis of Assisi and John of the Cross and the unjustly persecuted Marcion and Christian Gnostics, the Church of Rome had transformed the Grace of God into the rule of the Roman emperor:

[Rome] adopted Christianity only after emptying it of its spiritual content. Under their rule, every human activity without exception became something servile . . . . God [becomes] the infinite equivalent of a Roman slave-holder. (Weil, 1949/2002, pp. 275, 293)

And slavery for Weil was a social debasement that distorted and deformed the soul, rather than opening to any higher Grace.

Herein emerges an unresolved paradox in this mystical theology that Father Thibon (2003) saw as a conflicted dualism, and which would indeed close in on her in the final months of her life. Weil exalts God while devaluing Creation, and while for Thibon she attempts to resolve this by the paradox of a world empty of God betokening the higher in-existence of God's emptiness, it does not explain the dedication of her continuing social and political involvements after her spiritual opening. She added an exhausting period as a farm laborer to her earlier factory work, replaced her initial pacifism in the face of an emerging Nazism with dedication to the French resistance, celebrated the beginning collapse of the French colonial empire, and finished her widely respected writings of political theory with *The Need for Roots*—written at the behest of the French government in exile as part of its plan for a post war national culture. Why continue to work within the Beast for a social amelioration that can never finally succeed? Her only direct address of this seeming contradiction of her continuing dedication to a social order whose higher value she utterly rejected comes from her notes collected in *Gravity and Grace* (1947/2002):

We must eliminate affliction as much as we can from social life, for affliction only serves the purposes of Grace, and society is not a society of the elect. There will always be enough affliction for the elect. (p. 158)

So Weil separates the spiritual significance of individual person and society. The proper locus for a potential mystical spirituality is the individual and his/her affliction, while economic hardship, warfare, and starvation on the level of mass society can only debase and distort that very potential within each person—including finally herself.

### **The Life of Simone Weil**

It should not be surprising to see in Weil's non-traditional struggle toward a New Age mystical Christianity similar meta-pathological issues also found in related transitional figures such as Jung, Reich, and Heidegger (Hunt, 2003). Weil added her own long term personal issues to the inevitable conflicts stirred up by her highly original spiritual realization.

#### **“An Impression of Strangeness and Melancholy”**

A sequence of early traumas in attachment and basic trust echo forward through Weil's life—only partially and temporarily alleviated in her later openings to Grace. While not in any way explaining what amounts to a highly original universalizing of a mystical Christianity, they reflect continuities of personal meaning that can become all the more destabilizing where genuinely new ecstatic opening must lack institutional support and the longer established safety and security of tradition (see Hunt, 2003). In the end it was the very intensity and ambivalence of her later attempts to join the Catholic Church that show how inwardly alone she had become.

Petrement (1976), her closest long term friend, learned from the family that when Simone was six months old—an especially significant period for early infant-mother attachment—severe illness in her mother caused an abrupt stoppage of nursing, although she continued to be visible at a distance for the baby. The impact seems to have been severe, with Simone, hitherto healthy and developing normally, from then on often sickly, with long term difficulties in sleeping, food aversions, and anxieties over eating which meant that until the age of three solid foods had to be ground up and given by bottle. A second traumatic layering occurred when at four she was hospitalized with appendicitis, leaving a residual and long remembered sense of betrayal over her mother deceiving her over where she was going. Around the age of six she began to deny herself candies and desserts after learning of the suffering of the soldiers in World War I. By itself this would chiefly be evidence of

an early ethical precocity, had it not begun her later adult pattern of anorexia and self starvation over the suffering of workers and the colonized third world.

It is important to remember that very young children who undergo trauma, especially as intensified by heightened emotional sensitivity (Miller, 1997), will blame themselves for their pain, often developing an extreme sense of guilt and inadequacy—perhaps further attested in Weil by her childhood explanation, after hearing about “germs,” for avoiding physical contact “owing to my extreme disgustingness” (Petrement, 1976). At the same time her later childhood family relations, according to Petrement, were unusually warm and full of a playful humor. She became especially close to her older brother, with whom she strongly identified, and with whom she shared a joint mischievousness, and an equal intellectual precocity.

This more idyllic interlude came to an end with a severe adolescent crisis, beginning at age 14, when in contrast to her brother, who later became a gifted mathematician, she failed her initial exam to enter the *École Nationale*, and withdrew into a “bottomless despair.” Despite her later success as a student of philosophy and political theory, she emerged from this period permanently changed. She became strikingly solitary, with what Father Thibon (2003) later called her “impression of strangeness and melancholy”—and a pattern of behavior at least reminiscent of an Asperger’s continuum, with a physical clumsiness, marked social awkwardness, and intensifying food aversions. There was also a rejection of all things bodily in the form of her lifelong genderless clothing, minimalizing of her actual attractiveness, and a seemingly permanent avoidance of sexuality. Once in university, she engaged in her insistent political discussions with a dogmatic inflectionless monotone, and was largely avoided by most fellow students as arrogant and dismissive (Petrement, 1976).

Nonetheless, and of some significance for what was to follow, others, becoming better acquainted, saw the altruism and self sacrifice of a “secular saint.” Certainly many later thought so (Rees, 1966; Petrement, 1976).<sup>7</sup> Yet she also found her own outward social awkwardness extremely painful. She later described the extreme humiliation she had always felt when others found this amusing, comparing it to hens automatically attacking any wounded member of the flock. She wrote to Father Perrin how she would “take a knife and cut out the friendship without warning” whenever she saw

their laughter as a more conscious cruelty—which by implication she was often forced to conclude (Weil, 1951/2009, p. 112). One begins to understand her later view of society as Beast.

Beginning in 1934 Weil shifted from her by then well known neo-Marxist political writings, well regarded by such as Bataille (Suriya, 2002), to her direct engagement with the conditions of factory work. Her physical slowness and clumsiness, combined with a continuing self starvation, and deep upset at the absence of human dignity of such work, led to her exhaustion and collapse, and the first of her mother’s several later interventions and enforced recovery in the family home. Her mother had to intervene again after her abortive insistence on joining a fighting unit during the Spanish civil war, with her fellow soldiers greatly relieved when her severe cooking injury ended her obtuse insistence on endangering their combat missions with her physical awkwardness. It was during these years that her chronic migraines and near-starvation induced exhaustion were so severe that she contemplated suicide. And it was during a recovery trip with her mother to Italy in 1937, now unable to return even to teaching philosophy owing to her permanent exhaustion, that she began to be deeply moved by church liturgy, music, and the passion of the crucifixion. This led to her first mystical openings to the felt presence of Jesus while reciting the Lord’s Prayer:

At times the very first words ... transport [me] to a place outside space. ... Space opens up ... Filling every part of this infinity, there is silence, a silence ... more positive than that of sound ... Sometimes [then] Christ is present with me in person. (Petrement, 1976, p. 439)

By 1942 she had fully articulated her original version of a universalized mystical Christianity, along with its synthesis with Plato, Stoicism, and aspects of Eastern meditative traditions.<sup>8</sup> The sustained inner joy of these experiences at least temporarily alleviated the worst of her migraines.

### **The Gradual Closing of an Original Spiritual Opening**

One would expect that the purification/illumination structuring of major spiritual openings must re- evoke similarly diffuse earlier personal and childhood issues as part of their potential assimilation and



healing. So it is not surprising that in addition to her special fascination with the Eucharist, her writings and notebooks are full of imagery and metaphor based on hunger, food deprivation, an infant crying for its absent mother—all evoking her sense of an absent God who only redeems a deprivation truly accepted:

If a soul cried to God . . . like a new-born child whom its mother forgets to feed . . . . May those cries which I raised when I was a week or two old continue incessantly within me for that milk which is the seed of the Father . . . . Treat the lower part of the soul like a child which one leaves to cry until it is tired and stops. In the whole universe nothing pays any attention to it . . . . When this has been impressed on them many times a note of despair comes into their cries; they are weary before they begin their crying. (Weil, 1950/1970, pp. 99, 230-231)

God's absence here below is the same thing as the secret presence upon earth of the God who is in heaven . . . . [His] very silence as something infinitely more full of significance than any response. (Weil, 1951/2005, p. 199)

Here the presence of God is felt as the void or silence of his absence, just as when an infant's cries for nursing must go unanswered while a loving mother is still both a concerned presence and an absence.

It is important to stress that these themes of early attachment imprinted within Weil's life and writings should not be seen as somehow the cause of her spiritual opening, within which they might rather have been finally reconciled and redeemed. One could remove all such imagery without in any way changing the structure of her mystical theology—while Eckhart and Ibn 'Arabi echo her similarly absent/inexistent God with no reason to posit any particular childhood or social context for them. Where these themes of infant deprivation and childhood abandonment do become causal is not in her spiritual opening itself but in its later closing—such that she rejects all social support and finally starves herself to death.

By the time she had relocated to New York, to escape with her parents Vichy France, and was applying to work with the French government in exile in London, her earlier states of joy and grace shift, along with the increasing severity of her headaches, into the despair of what might be regarded as a premature Dark Night.

She prays for the wisdom to accept God's abandonment "to the pitiless necessity of matter and the cruelty of the devil" (Weil, 1950/1970, p. 103). Father Thibon (2003) would later suggest, based on her letters, that the earlier detachment he had so admired had been replaced by an "indifference from exhaustion" and that her intensified self-preoccupation and unconscious pride in her own suffering had created a "loss of balance" and "vertigo."

Max Weber (1922/1963) in discussing the sort of "this worldly" mysticism Weil is attempting to enact, stresses its characteristic "broken humility"—since heightened openness and sensitivity must unfold not in monastery or wilderness but amidst the frustrations and barriers of everyday social existence. Genuine spiritual humility seems to have a quality of gentleness, humor, and ironic self-acceptance often associated with Taoism (see Giles, 1947). A danger, in terms of the transpersonal psychology of Almaas (2004), becomes the confusion of that humility with a more personal identity of deficiency and inadequacy. Here an earlier sublimation of felt deficiency into the inner emptiness of mystical poverty—as in Weil's view of her "extreme difficulty in carrying out the simplest action" as a gift of Grace (Weil, 1956, p. 300)—can descend back into an unconsciously intensified self hatred. Thus we find what many have regarded as her truly awful prayer of self sacrifice, while waiting to leave for London, in which, to forebear from quoting it directly, she prays for paralysis, loss of all sensation, mental dementia, and loss of any capacity to love or care for others, all in order to become a "nothingness" finally "devoured by God" as "nourishment" for those who are afflicted.

Once in London in 1943, and writing *The Need for Roots* for the French government in exile, her personal issues intensified. Despite her earlier understanding that God's Grace cannot be sought through any deliberate martyrdom, she had conceived a secret mission in which she would be dropped behind enemy lines in France to help the Resistance. Her response to the repeated observation that her social awkwardness and physical appearance would entail not only her own, essentially suicidal, death but that of anyone else involved, was met only by deep hurt, anger, and bitterness.<sup>9</sup> She insisted on buying her own parachute anyway and threatened to kill herself if her carefully worked out plan was ever undertaken without her. Finally she resigned the position, one that had been rather exceptionally granted to her, in protest.

A diagnosis of tuberculosis, which her doctor felt was curable if she would begin to eat adequately, which she refused to do “while France is suffering” (Petrement, 1976), necessitated her hospitalization and growing weakness. In the end she died of cardiac arrest from overall weakness a few days after turning her face away from her visiting friend and former supervisor, saying to him that he “had not been a good enough friend” (Petrement, 1976, p. 533). One gets the sad impression of a kind of attempted emotional blackmail, that in the absence of the rescuing mother forced by the war to remain in New York, became an irreversible and terminal anorexia.<sup>10</sup> In her own earlier terms, she had chosen a lesser martyrdom in an attempt to coerce a higher Grace.

### Conclusions

These considerations of the life and work of Simone Weil raise a complex array of issues: transpersonal, more purely personal and interpretive, historical, and the cognitive and social bases of spirituality—both as an intrinsic human capacity and for any New Age to come.

1) Given the genuine brilliance and widespread influence of Simone Weil’s mystical and potentially universalized Christianity, it is impossible to avoid the conclusion that something truly terrible happened here. Her last years became a startlingly direct illustration of what Almaas (2004) has termed *flight to transcendence* and the transpersonal psychologist Welwood (2000) *spiritual bypass*, in which a major spiritual opening leads to an escape from and even dissociation of personal issues, rather than their assimilation and healing. That would have been the optimal outcome of a spiritual crisis associated with traditional mystical/shamanic development, not for nothing termed purgation/illumination, and often compared to an induced psychosis (Walsh, 2007). Where issues of personal trauma and dilemma are not assimilated the result must be the sort of distortion and shutting down of realization we see at the very end of Weil’s life. This becomes the perpetual risk of any major and original spiritual realization in its larger attempt at the transformation and redeeming of collective human suffering.

2) Still, what if Simone Weil actually was a saint? Perhaps she also needs to be considered in that light, whether in a traditional revelatory sense or in terms of a precocity of the inborn temperament of a later spiritual intelligence, akin to the prodigies of music or mathematics. Many have thought so, both

before her spiritual opening in terms of her ethical and political altruism, and afterwards in the originality of her mystical theology (Rees, 1966; Petrement, 1976). It follows that such a saint—however conceived—will be especially sensitive to human suffering. To the extent that patterns of neurosis and psychosis are the ubiquitous final common pathways of suffering, sainthood will create its own exacerbation of these patterns as its higher by-product—precisely in the sense that Maslow (1971) understood the “meta-pathologies” of self actualization and James (1902) wrote of specifically spiritual pathologies as “theopathies.” Here genius, and Weil as in James’ terms a “genius of the religious line,” will create its own pathologies as much as, and/or attendant with, the other way around.

Weil’s social awkwardness and obtuseness then become less examples of an Aspergers-like continuum than the consequence of a hyper-sensitivity and capacity for attentive absorption in the implicit foundations of social consciousness that, with Wittgenstein (1969) and the social theorist Alfred Schutz (1962), must normally remain as an implied and tacit background if we are to function within the everyday pragmatic social order. Weil (1956) herself seems to have had some such intimation:

The extreme difficulty that I often experience in carrying out the simplest action is a favour that has been granted me. . . . One must not ask that this difficulty should disappear; but on the contrary ardently desire . . . for the grace to be able to make use of it. (p. 300)

Here her social peculiarities and “impression of strangeness” becomes what both allows and is also the result of a rare capacity for a meditative awareness into the roots of social connection, *including* the high price of individual moral rightness in the face of the largely unconscious “might” of social opinion and the tacit actualities of power—as in the reality of Weil’s Beast.<sup>11</sup>

Such an analysis is not to deny, but may even entail, an actual incapacity for personal relations and understanding of specific others, not resolved by her spiritual opening and perhaps intensified. Both her long term friend Petrement (1976) and Father Thibon (2003), while deeply respectful of the altruism of the sustained help she so often offered to those she encountered, also saw her severe limitations in personal empathy. She tended to project her own mentality onto those she assisted, failing to perceive them as separate individuals

in their own right. Indeed, personality and social relations are reduced to “mechanism” within her understanding of a mystical Christianity. This impersonality seems especially ironic if any future syncretism of Christianity with Eastern meditative and naturalistic New Age traditions, while it might reflect Weil in dispensing with a personal after-life, would need to include what many have seen as a uniquely Christian emphasis on the sacredness of individual personhood. Perhaps tragically, it is this respect for the unique individual, so evident in the synoptic gospels (see Hunt, 2012), the Sufi path of return (Toussulis, 2010), and Almaas (2004) on “personal essence,” and for Weber (1922/1963) secularized within his globalized “spirit of capitalism,” that is missing from Weil’s Christianity.

3) In seeking to understand what finally shut down Weil’s essentialization of a Christian mysticism, as its own partial intuition of a spiritual New Age so similarly foreseen by Teilhard de Chardin and Toynbee, it is important to realize that in addition to whatever the distortions of her spirituality that would impinge on Weil from the encompassing diffuseness of early trauma, one must also add, on a societal level, the diffuse foreboding throughout the 1930s created by the disarray and pending destruction leading into World War II. Weil, herself Jewish, is not the only progenitor of a futural New Age during that time to run together and succumb to a confusion of personal and collective passions. Where Weil, on the political left, comes to see her own personal martyrdom as solution to a collective spiritual crisis, Heidegger and Jung, on the more conservative right, at least for a time confused their own personal grandiosity with a mythically romanticized version of National Socialism (see Hunt, 2003). In all three one sees versions of a “flight to transcendence” to escape both personal and social disarray.

Weil herself understood the war as portending a larger spiritual crisis for the West. While still in the south of France, she writes:

What is happening to humanity at the present time is like what happens to a man in whom affliction has, from without, partially killed the “I.” Contemporary events are in process of destroying in mankind as a whole part of the energy available for the transmutation into spiritual energy, and there is no way of repairing this loss. Contemporary events are an affliction, and that is an unalterable

fact. We have got to contemplate this affliction in all its bitterness and without consolation, while loving God as the author of all things—amongst which this very affliction—and at the same time as the author exclusively of good. (Weil, 1956, p. 352)

She goes on to speculate that if these “blind forces” were to destroy Christianity in its present form, “new revelations” would follow, since the historical Jesus should be included with Lao Tzu, Buddha, Krishna of the Gita, and John of the Cross within the framework of any notion of a divinely inspired human incarnation.<sup>12</sup>

4) That conclusion would also follow on the view of spirituality as the abstract level of a basic social-personal intelligence, juxtaposed in all human cultures against an intelligence of physical “things” and technology—Weil’s Grace vs. gravity—whose maximum abstraction is based on mathematics—also with its own sense of infinity and the limitless (see Hunt, 2009, 2016). These two intelligences, in each culture and era of history, are in varying and shifting degrees of balance or imbalance, integration in a unitive world view or secularized separation. These intelligences are both logically distinct—ultimately rooted, with Dilthey (1883/1988) in the separation of causal explanation and empathic understanding—but co-dependent on each other in their inner process.

Given their common roots in Piagetian sensorimotor bases of action, whatever the physical sciences learn of the universe, the technological implications of their methods gear back into a purposive teleological human order of “use.” Correspondingly, it appears from the tradition of holistic cognitive psychology extending from Werner and Kaplan (1963) and Arnheim (1969) to Lakoff and Johnson (1999) that our capacity to represent all levels of feeling, including the inner light of mystical experience, rests on the self-referential re-use of physical metaphor. This re-use is rooted into the etymologies of words for inner experience in all languages and extended into each culture’s ongoing metaphysical reassignment of its understanding, empathically rendered, of the physical universe (see Hunt, 2009, 2016). The metaphoric reanimation of the physical—as in “warm” feelings and hopes “kindled”—on a more abstract level becomes the basis for the “nature mysticism” of traditional shamanism, Emerson and Thoreau, and Weil herself (1968) on the beauty of natural form as God’s wisdom.

Formal religion can thus be understood as each culture's attempt at an encompassing self representation of its version of the human condition—symbolically reflecting the necessarily metaphoric existentials of feeling in terms channelled within its particular socio-economic organization and its understanding of the surrounding physical universe rendered as empathically animated metaphoric mirror. That self representation is all encompassing in intent, but necessarily partial and intrinsically incomplete, since no self-referential formal system can logically encompass itself (Bronowski, 1971; Hunt, 2009, 2016). The necessary cultural relativity of the more specific levels of such religious understanding, in partial contrast to their more universal mystical or numinous felt expressions, means that, with Weber (1922/1963) and Sorokin (1957), the major religions must undergo periodic secularizations, and a loss of their intrinsic function to convey a sense of larger purpose and meaning for human existence. This will occur when socio-economic conditions and a corresponding understanding of the physical universe undergo extensive enough changes to fall outside the self-reflective metaphors of the traditional religion.

These cyclic periods of secularization and loss of any larger felt meaning in human existence, and dichotomous reactions of fundamentalist revival vs. the New Age numinosities of original visionary movements, have until modernity remained centered within the differing ethnic regions of the major world religions of the first “axial age.” However, Heidegger (1949/2012) and more recently Harari (2016) foresee, along with many in the popular media, a new and unprecedented “planetary” era in which previous cultural traditions become the anachronistic residues of a technological explosion that uses both natural and human reality as “commodity” for a globalized and increasingly elitist capitalist economy, its only limitations resting on fast approaching ecological constraints on the planet itself. Meanwhile a digital revolution of artificial intelligence and expert systems has reached the point where many foresee perhaps billions of people as “surplus” and without meaningful function in present socio-economic terms (Harari, 2016).

Given the present view that human spirituality, and its cultural formulation as religion, is intrinsic to human symbolic intelligence, as a more abstract, albeit difficult to achieve and synthesize Piagetian formal operations in affect (Hunt, 2016), such a massively globalized and historically unprecedented intensification

of secular-material values will at some point inspire and require a similarly globalized spiritual New Age. It is this that Weil (1956), Jung (1964), Toynbee (1946, 1957), Reich (1949/1973), and Heidegger (1940/2015) all anticipated. Heidegger (1949/2012) suggested that the future extension of technology and “machination” would in itself eventually give rise to a collective sense of the “uncanny”—since that which had been created by us for our own increasing convenience and control will have come to encompass and control our own humanity. Since the uncanny is itself the most primitive level of numinous feeling, this would betoken a renewed sense of the awe, wonder, and humility basic to Rudolf Otto's (1917/1958) felt core of the spiritual—whose most full development appears in the nondual mysticisms as the most abstract fruition of the traditional religions (Otto, 1932/1962). In short those figures are foreseeing a new axial age on a planetary scale as an inherent response to the growing imbalance of person and thing intelligences in our exaggeratedly material and “sensate” age—in Heidegger's terms a futural “new beginning” and advent of a “last god.”

It may become an irony of the isolating effects of billions of “surplus” persons in a technologized, digitally automated economy that it produces just the conditions, in terms of Weber's typology of religious movements, for the more individualized forms of this-worldly mysticism, transpersonalism, and neo-shamanisms and their emphasis on the direct experience of numinous ecstasy, rather than the more communal prophetic-ethical traditions. While the loss of meaning on a collective level also must create the schizoid detachment and social disengagement that both Sass (1992) and Deleuze and Guattari (1987) saw as the “schizophrenogenic” nature of modern culture, along with widespread social anomie and the self-destructive use of anomie intensifying drugs such as cocaine, heroin, and methamphetamine, it would also allow other individuals to cultivate the more creative meditative, neo-shamanic, and psychedelic methods that would be central to a spiritual New Age.

It is in this more generalized context of a new sensate or this-worldly mysticism foreseen by the later Heidegger (1940/2015), Jung (1964), and Toynbee (1957) that Weil can be seen as foreshadowing the sort of universalizing of Christian mysticism and its incarnating “on earth as it is in heaven” that would go with related universalizings of Hinduism by Krishnamurti, Sufism by Gurdjieff, and Buddhism by much of transpersonal psychology. This would indeed be a New Age whose

actual time of arrival as “age,” not “era,” would be as uncertain in terms of global economics, politics, and ecology, as the pressures toward it—in human sciences terms at least—become a more or less predictive certainty.

One of the great virtues of the life and work of Simone Weil is to show just how difficult that transition would be, and its likely relevance to our own very worldwide crisis and the collective affliction many have seen as well under way.

### Notes

1. The present author may not be alone, based on the major developments in transpersonal psychology and consciousness studies beginning from the 1960s, in anticipating that these would open into the spiritual New Age earlier heralded by figures as diverse as Jung, Heidegger, Toynbee, Reich, and Krishnamurti. But the continued separation of transpersonal and consciousness studies from the mainstream human sciences, with whatever inclusion restricted to more circumscribed neurocognitive and questionnaire methodologies, has left instead a sense of “something was supposed to happen, but did not.”

For this author there has dawned a certain clarity in coming to distinguish the concept of “era,” as in that of the 1960s and beyond, from the longer term concept of an “age.” Any calculation of the latter must be based on the span of centuries and the unknown impact of socio-economic and an unprecedented technological transformation (Harari, 2016). Teilhard de Chardin (1964), anticipating such a futural New Age, suggested that the initial effects of such globalization would be exactly the exacerbation of regional, ethnic, and religious rivalries we see concurrently. The timing of a new planetary spirituality under such conditions must remain intrinsically uncertain, while still fully plausible—to the extent that spirituality is the higher development of a social-personal intelligence needed to convey a larger context of collective purpose and meaning (Hunt, 2016).

2. The Church prohibition of the publication of Teilhard de Chardin’s major works until after his death followed from the biological basis of his New Age speculations on the future “planetization” of a “super-consciousness” or “omega point,” synthesizing the world religions within a broadly Christianized

spirituality. He understood such an omega point as the human evolution of Bergson’s (1907/1944) life energy. Unlike a related usage of Bergson by Wilhelm Reich (1949/1973), de Chardin pictured this naturalization of religion as an actual biological evolution of consciousness—a questionable view also taken up by Wilber (1995), and in contrast to the more parsimonious sociocultural understanding of any such development by Weber (1922/1963), Sorokin (1957), and Toynbee (1946/1957); see also Hunt (2003, 2010).

3. Weil had extensive discussions on the nature of mystical experience, while exiled in the south of Vichy France, with Rene Daumal, one of Gurdjieff’s major French followers (Petrement, 1976).
4. While Jung (1958) and Heidegger (Parkes, 1987) studied Buddhism and Taoism in more detail than Weil’s more impressionistic comparisons with her Christian Platonism, all three fall short of more recent transpersonal studies of these Eastern traditions. The point here would be that their more sophisticated understandings are less likely to translate directly into any future planetary wide spirituality. It would be their more selective “creative misunderstanding” and simplification that may better forecast the broader syncretisms of a more distant future.
5. There has been debate in later discussions of Weil over any cultural “anti-Semitism” in her distaste for the violence and destruction in much of the Old Testament, and her avowedly, albeit original, Christian theology (Petrement, 1976; Yourgrau, 2011). It is important to note, however, that her family, while agnostic, considered itself Jewish, she did not finally convert to Catholicism, and she often cites with deep appreciation the Psalms, Proverbs, and especially the Book of Job, which with Jung (1958) later, she sees as a direct anticipation of the Cross. There is some risk of historical anachronism in applying post-holocaust understandings of anti-semitism to the complexities and range of Jewish identity in pre-war Europe.
6. Anticipating the more recent work of Pierre Hadot (2006), Weil rejected a modern science of “inner mechanism” for a return to a science of pattern and form. For Weil (1951/2005, 1968) this would be a Pythagorean science based on an original Greek understanding of geometry and mathematics.

A case for its plausibility has been addressed by Morgan (2005).

7. In this regard it is interesting to compare Weil, in the years before her mystical opening, to two other secular Jews of that era, Ludwig Wittgenstein (here see also Yourgrau, 2011) and Franz Kafka, both of whom exemplified in conduct and sensibility what one might term the abstract form of Max Weber's "this-worldly" mystical attitude (Shields, 1993; Janouch, 1971), but without the direct ecstatic realizations that would later dominate Weil's life. In all three, one finds a secular mysticism of the sacredness of everyday reality. This recurrence in a secular context of a spiritually oriented life, without any culturally supportive system of belief and ritual, is consistent with a view of spirituality as its own intelligence—a formal operations in affect difficult to fully realize even with traditionally established cultural guidance (Hunt, 2016).
8. The conceptual rigor of Weil's integration of these multiple traditions and the precise logic of her crossrelating of her key concepts of love, grace, suffering, affliction, attention, and existence, along with the non dogmatic force of these writings, has over time attracted the deeply respectful commentaries of Wittgensteinian linguistic philosophers such as Drury (1973), Winch (1989), Phillips (1993), and Rhees (2000). These authors also tend to agree on her personal similarities to the austere intensity of Wittgenstein's own inner spirituality (Shields, 1993).
9. Given her long fascination with the Bhagavad-Gita (Yutang, 1942), wherein a pacific Arjuna struggles with God's will that he go to war, and her commentary from her notebooks (Weil, 1956, p. 145) that an emptiness truly attuned to God's grace will not come from renouncing action itself, but rather from any attachment to the fruits or outcome of that action, it seems plausible to conclude that for her it was not the concrete results of her suicide mission that would matter, but only its value as a gesture to inspire others. Certainly this is the spirit of some more general passages on the war in her final *The Need for Roots*. Yet she seemed happy enough to include the inspiratory deaths of her fellow underground members as well. It is difficult to see her mission as other than her own choice of the martyrdom she had earlier so rejected, hoping instead that her inevitable capture and execution would force a final descent of God's Grace—which she had earlier better understood as beyond either choice or compulsion.
10. Petrement (1976) did suggest that by the time of her final diagnosis, with recovery dependent on a return to normal eating, Weil's progressive anorexia may have made this physiologically impossible during those last weeks.
11. On a personal note, perhaps shared by some readers, who am I to judge? Analogous to research articles that must alert the reader to any vested interest of the author, a life-history analysis such as this should similarly acknowledge any similarly relevant "counter-transference." Accordingly, what I do know is how similar my own childhood and infant traumas are to Weil. My own version of first seeing her Beast of the social seems best epitomized in my stunned watching of several childhood "friends" laughing at and mocking the local "retarded" boy weeping in the street over the death of his just run-over dog. I can certainly see how Weil's early awareness of the suffering within society could leave one "ill at ease," socially awkward, and "detached." So in the spirit of vested counter-transference, this author must also confess his deep personal distress over Weil's final inversion of her spiritual insights and experiences of Grace. It underlines the intrinsic vulnerability of a spiritual intelligence, and, notwithstanding her own more deep seated interpersonal difficulties, makes me fear for us all.
12. Consistent with Weil's mystical Christianity and her rejection of the Roman dominion that had falsely eliminated the earlier diversity of competing Gnostic Christianities, Toynbee (1956) suggested that any universalist revival of Christianity in a civilization of the future would only be fully recognizable to these earliest historical followers. Weil herself had already bypassed the dogmatic exclusivities of both Roman Church and Reformation, which for Toynbee had originally blocked the wider historical acceptance of Christianity by non-Western cultures. It would be the secularized capitalism and individualism of the West that later became the basis for our contemporary socio-economic globalization (Toynbee, 1956), at least outwardly separated from what Weber (1922/1963) famously saw as the Protestant roots of his "spirit of capitalism."

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