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A JOURNAL FOR THE
CONTEMPORARY CHURCH

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October 2021

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All dying within the space of a year during the Second World War three writers of genius, who never met nor knew of each other (although Etty Hillesum and Edith Stein were for seven days in the same transit camp in Holland), yet they have much in common in their *response* to the unprecedented crisis of their time. *All* three were Jewish (although Simone Weil did not like to be categorized with a racial identity that was not part of her own self-understanding). *All* three found inspiration in a Christian world-view (although neither Simone or Etty joined any Church). *All* three were creative and original writers (Etty using the most personal form of a diary and letters, the other two writing essays as well as condensed autobiographies). *All* three dealt in their writings with the terrible situation of the war – such was the violence they faced, not least to themselves as Jews – that their imagery has a strength, drama and passion that can seem out of tune or one-sided in peace times. *All* three died in the war – two in Auschwitz and Simone Weil in exile in England working for the French Resistance. *All* three were women and in their careers were faced with the prejudice of that time (neither Edith or Simone, despite their qualifications, were allowed to teach in Universities). *All* three were *mystics* who had a personal experience of God that transformed their lives and, in moving ways, described their conversion. *All* three found in their faith a source of strength to find peace and live compassionately in a desperate time.

In this essay I will look at their use of *three* images which, because they never read each other's work, shows how common circumstances can lead to similar insights and even similar ways of expressing those insights. Edith (1891-1942) was a little older

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and had more time to come to a complete picture, Simone (1909-1943) and Etty (1914-1943) were the next generation and their lives, like that of Edith, were cut tragically short, and the later diaries of Etty were lost in Auschwitz. Still, in their extant work the images of '*the seed*', '*the hammer*' and '*the cross*' are used by all of them. True, Etty only uses the last of these implicitly, without explicitly mentioning the cross, but as the 'burden' she accepted to 'carry on her shoulders'. Though their imagery can seem harsh for present-day sensibilities and, maybe, over-focused on suffering, the nature of their time brought affliction to the forefront of the search for meaning. When all hope seems stripped away how does one speak of God? Like Dietrich Bonhoeffer these writers felt that Christianity had "come of age" – no longer relying on a seemingly absent 'all-powerful' God but discovering and protecting the God who is present *in* human vulnerability.

Etty and Edith counterbalanced the awareness of suffering with that of joy and hope in a better world to come, a hope which inspired the way they lived and gave meaning to the death they saw was impending. Simone Weil was more stark in her description of 'the way of the cross' yet, such for her was the beauty and truth revealed in affliction that there was no need to posit 'new life' beyond it.

I will look *first* at the writings of Edith and Simone as their use of the imagery of the seed, the hammer and the cross is more theological. Etty did not try to write theology but, we will see, she used the same images to express what she lived through. The framework of Edith and Simone's reflections help explicate what is expressed poetically in the writings of Etty. All three together provide a balance and wholeness on the subject. Edith, taken by herself, could be seen as conventional in her Catholic piety and yet she is original in writings on the gifts of women, on the possibility of carrying a combined Catholic and Jewish identity and on the application of phenomenological philosophy to theology. Simone, taken by herself, could be seen as extreme and one-sided in her use of the mystical '*via negativa*' to the point of being destructive of the human person and yet, her essay on '*Forms of the Implicit Love of God*' shows that God is present in creation and in human relations even if ultimately he is known most fully in his absence. Etty, by herself, could be seen as too personal or psychological, and yet, although she does not get the chance to work out the implications of her insights in theological terms, she holds what she discovers to be true for herself as indeed true for all. The three mystics together, however, are remarkably complementary.

STEIN AND WEIL

An interesting mix of similarities and differences comes to light in comparing the writings of Edith Stein and Simone Weil on the *cross* and *suffering*. Edith and Simone wrote at the crossroads of philosophy and theology, both focussing specifically on what Edith called “the science of the Cross.” In a striking parallel, both envision the cross as a “seed” planted in the soul of those who accept it, entailing a painful process of growth. In this image – which they arrived at independently at the same time – they are both completely original. Numerous Christian writings refer to the cross as a tree, but I have found none that refer to the seed of the cross planted in the soul. In significant contrast, however, Stein understands the process of the seed’s growth to be *formative*, while Weil perceives it to be “*decreative*.”

Edith Stein’s poem *I will Remain with You* written in December 31st 1938 speaks of Christ’s coming and the seed which grows, “how we do not know.”

Full of love you sink your gaze into mine,
 You bend your ear to my quiet words
 And deeply fill my heart with peace.
 Your body mysteriously penetrates mine.
 Your soul unites with mine.
 I am no longer what once I was.
 You come and go but the seed of future glory
 Remains sown within my body and soul;
 A luster of heaven in the glow of my eyes
 And when I sing a new soaring tone.¹

Later Edith relates her image of the seed to ‘the science of the Cross’ which is, for Stein, “a living, real, and effective truth. It is buried in the soul like a seed that takes root there and grows, making a distinct impression on the soul, determining what it does and omits, and by shining outwardly is recognized in this very doing and omitting”.² However, despite the formative character and life-giving power of this seed it does at the same time “grow into the Cross” which, for Stein, symbolizes “all that is difficult and oppressive and so against human nature that taking it upon oneself is like a journey to death. And the disciple of Jesus is to take up this burden daily” (Ibid, p. 17). The hard things in life, even death, are part of that life-giving seed. She says that “when one comes to feel the cross radically we must remember that it is

1 Edith Stein, *The Hidden Life*, ICS 1992, p. 139

2 -----, *The Science of the Cross*, ICS, 2002, p. 9-10

the seed of our future glory. I have been convinced of that and can say from my heart: Hail, Cross, our only hope!"³

Simone Weil relates the crucifixion to her view of "*decreation*" based on the idea that God withdrew himself in order to allow something other than himself to exist, so this world is created out of God's absence. God, however, is pure love and to show this he went the greatest possible distance from Divine nature by becoming nothing on the Cross. "This supreme tearing apart, this incomparable agony, this marvel of love, is the crucifixion." Weil describes this moment of abandonment as an abyss of unfathomable love. Persons beset by affliction are at the foot of the cross, near this greatest possible distance from God, and yet it is they who are able to perceive love. There is no greater good on earth than the privilege of sharing, through our own affliction, in the "union in separation" of the Father and Son. Because it shows that "the cross of Christ is the only source of light that is bright enough to illumine affliction." Weil starkly observes that though "God can never be perfectly present to us" on earth, God "can be almost perfectly absent from us in extreme affliction. For us, on earth, this is the only possibility of perfection. That is why the cross is our only hope."⁴

In order to imitate God we have to withdraw from created selves which are made from nothing, made from God's absence, in order for God to be all in all again. To allow God into our lives, therefore, Weil says, we must "consent not to be any longer," to surrender the 'I' for love's sake. An infinity of space and time separates human beings from God. God's love crosses this infinity in order to possess those who are open to this love. In the person who consents and accepts, God plants a seed and departs. Then the individual must wait and not regret their consent until that seed grows within us, into the tree that will take us back to God, that tree is the Cross. This is not so easy as the growth of the seed is painful. It entails the destruction of whatever hinders its growth:

When the seed of divine love placed in us has grown and become a tree, how can we, we who bear it, take it back to its origin? [...] It seems impossible, but there is a way We are quite well aware of the likeness in which this tree is made, this tree which has grown within us [...] We know what is the most beautiful of all trees [...] Something even a little more frightful than a gallows [...] It was the seed of this tree that God placed within us, without our knowing what seed it was. If we had known, we should not have said Yes at the first moment.⁵

3 -----, *Self-Portrait in Letters*, ICS, 1993, p. 341

4 Simone Weil, *Waiting on God*, Routledge, 1951, p. 71

5 Ibid, p. 76

We can easily regret our assent to the planting of this seed, Weil says, because the tree of the cross is integrally connected with “affliction” (*malheur*). It involves simultaneously social, psychological, and physical suffering which at all levels “pins us down”, “immobilizes us.” “Thanks to this immobility,” Weil writes, “the infinitesimal seed of divine love placed in the soul can grow and bear fruit in patience, [which] means to remain where one is, motionless, in expectation, unshaken and unmoved by any external shock”.⁶

Weil uses dramatic and rather terrifying analogies in order to convey the meaning of affliction; a hammer hitting a *nail* or a butterfly pinned alive into an album. “Extreme affliction,” she writes, “which means physical pain, distress of soul, and social degradation, all together, is the nail. The point of the nail is applied to the very center of the soul, and its head is the whole of necessity throughout all space and time”.⁷ It is necessity which separates God, who is freedom itself and us, who can only act within the chains of natural and social laws. She continues:

Affliction is a marvel of divine technique. It introduces into the soul of a finite creature the immensity of necessity, the infinite distance that separates God from the creature [and] concentrates it into one point to pierce the soul in its centre. Those to whom such a thing happens have no part in the operation. They struggle like a butterfly which is pinned alive into an album. But through the horror they can continue to want to love. There is nothing impossible in that, no obstacle, one might almost say no difficulty.⁸

In Weil’s vision it is this love – forced out of us in circumstances that are beyond our control – which feels “blind, brutal and cold,” which in fact brings the creature back to God. Though God and the creature are completely different (one is completely free and the other is subject to external circumstances) the extreme end of contingency symbolized by the Cross is, in fact, pure love unmoved by anything external. The soul in which the seed of the cross has grown, Weil says, “does not love like a creature with created love. The love within it is divine, uncreated; for it is the love of God for God which is passing through it”.⁹ Loss of self is the soil in which the seed of God’s love becomes fruit for others. Extreme times demand an extreme self-giving. Like the bread and

6 Simone Weil, *Seventy Letters*, Oxford University Press, 1965, p. 137

7 *Waiting on God*, p. 77

8 *Ibid.*

9 *Ibid.*, p. 92

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wine on the alter we must be *transformed* into sacrament. Simone prays, "May all my sensitivity, intelligence and love be stripped away from me, devoured by God and transformed into Christ's substance and given for food to the afflicted whose body and soul lack every kind of nourishment".¹⁰

Though Stein's language lacks Weil's forceful, near violent, expression, it does not lack the depth of her meaning. Stein also speaks of Christ's extreme humiliation, annihilation, and abandonment on the cross. A taste of this "extreme bitterness" or "most intense pain" is given to those who experience the dark night of the soul, which is marked by complete darkness, loneliness, desolation, emptiness, dryness, distaste, trial, fear, and affliction. "*What is the cross?*" Stein writes, "The sign of the deepest disgrace. Whoever touches it is thrust out of the ranks of human beings. Those who once praised them shy away and know them no more, to enemies they are abandoned defenceless. Nothing more on earth remains for them than sorrows, agony, death." In a short essay, *The Love of the Cross*, Stein writes, "The burden of the cross that Christ assumed is that of corrupted human nature, with all its consequences in sin and suffering to which fallen humanity is subject. The meaning of the way of the cross is to carry this burden out of the world".¹¹

In her last piece of writing, *The Science of the Cross*, Stein explains how, although 'sorrow, agony, death' seems the end of all hope, as a way of expiation and through the eyes of faith and contemplation it is the exact opposite. For, through this 'Dark Night' "All that is mortal, all movements that are released in the soul through creatures, is consumed in the fire of eternal love. [...] The human spirit as *spirit* is destined for immortal being." Christ is the model of this process that leads through death to resurrection:

There was nothing in Christ through his nature and his free decision that resisted love. In his incarnation he took upon himself the entire burden of humanity's condition, even sin, embraced it with his merciful love, and hid it in his soul. This '*Fiat!*' [Let it be!] reached the most intense form in the Garden of Olives and the cross, because here his joyful sense of the indestructible union [with God] ceased, subjecting him totally to the human condition, and allowing his Passion to become the experience of the total abandonment by God. In the 'It is finished' (*John* 19:30) the end of the expiation is announced as is the final return into the eternal, undisturbed union in the 'Father, into your hands I commend my spirit' (*Luke* 23:46).

10 Simone Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, p. 244

11 Stein, *The Hidden Life*, p. 91

He will lead us too, as the Liturgy says, "through his Passion and cross to the glory of his resurrection." That is exactly what is experienced in contemplation: passing through the expiatory flames to the bliss of the union of love.¹²

The *centrality* of Christ and his passion is clearly evident in the lives of these two women and suggests a direct correlation between the love of Christ and love of the cross. However, understanding Christ's passion and death is no simple matter. Edith and Simone recognize it to be simultaneously an annihilation, an offering, atonement (at-one-ment), a penal sentence, a confrontation with evil, and a contradiction. Nevertheless, they assert that it is God who expiates humanity's burden of sin, and it is Christ who makes the suffering of others redemptive in such a way that the power of the cross transcends time. Edith and Simone also concur that a person comes to know the cross only by way of a radical experience of suffering, affliction, ignominy, and annihilation.

It is a common experience that suffering is often accompanied by the question "Where is God?" Both women underscore Jesus' felt abandonment by God as the pinnacle of his suffering, described by Simone as "an abyss of unfathomable love" and by Edith as an "unfathomable mystery." They point out that some human beings are granted a *share* in precisely this aspect of Christ's suffering through the dark night of the soul. The emphasis on a *personal* experience of the cross and the relationship between the dark night of the soul and Jesus' felt abandonment by God lies at the heart of their spirituality.

Despite the above areas of convergence in their thinking, Stein and Weil *diverge* in their views concerning the process of the growth of the seed of the cross. For Stein it is *formative*, and for Weil it is *decreative*. Stein sees this spirituality as (albeit paradoxically) life giving, reconciling, a means to self-fulfilment and the way to union with God. For Weil it first a stripping of ourselves, a handing-back of what was created so that only the uncreated remains, an annihilation of the ego into God's love. They also *differ* in their conviction concerning the ultimate goal of participation in Christ's cross. Stein is happy to speak of 'eternal life' while Weil does not commit herself to a belief in the afterlife.

ETTY HILLESUM

The writings of Etty Hillesum deal with the same issues but avoid any reference to Christ or the cross. When we read her writing we see not so much a *Theologos* as a *Theopraxis*. The diary and letter

12 Stein, *The Science of the Cross*, p.165

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form – rather than essays – lends itself to the concerns and events of *daily* life. But it is there that we find God. In the 9th July 1942 she writes,

Such words as ‘god’ and ‘death’ and ‘suffering’ and ‘eternity’ are best forgotten. We have to become as simple and as wordless as the growing corn or the falling rain. We must just be.¹³

And yet she recognizes that, “Living is not the sole meaning of life.” The problem is, she says, that words cannot fit either the circumstances of her times or her inner experience:

When I tell others that fleeing or hiding is pointless, that there is no escape, so let’s just do what we can for others, it sounds too much like defeatism, like something I don’t mean at all. I cannot find the right words either for that radiant feeling inside me, which encompasses but is untouched by all the suffering and all the violence [...] Ultimately what matters most is to bear the pain, to cope with it, and to keep a small corner of one’s soul unsullied, come what may.¹⁴

This small corner of the soul she later describes as “the place of God in ourselves.” God has become something quite vulnerable and powerless in the face of the world. Speaking to God Etty writes, “There doesn’t seem to be much You can do about our circumstances, about our lives. You cannot help us, it is we who must help You”.¹⁵ God is like a seed within us which, Etty says, must be guarded, defended. Etty finds an image that expresses how God has been forced out of the world but has taken up his home in her soul:

The jasmine behind my house has been completely ruined by the rains and storms of the last few days; its white blossoms are floating around in muddy black pools on the low garage roof. But somewhere inside me the jasmine continues to blossom undisturbed, just as profusely and delicately as it ever did. You can see, oh God, I look after You.¹⁶

The seed of God in everyone is their real humanity. Now her job is to let it grow for, she writes, “once the love of mankind has germinated in you, it will grow without measure”.¹⁷

13 Etty Hillesum, *An Interrupted Life*, Holt, 1996, p. 171

14 Ibid, p.171-2

15 Ibid, p. 178

16 Ibid, 179

17 Ibid, p. 181

Ultimately we have just one moral duty: to reclaim large areas of peace in ourselves, more and more peace, and to reflect it toward others. And the more peace there is in us, the more peace there will also be in our troubled world.¹⁸

In the face of a merciless situation she knew her own vulnerability, “O God, times are too hard for frail people like myself” but also expresses a sure hope, “I know that a new and kinder day will come”. Through her own passion and resurrection she shares in the human crisis of her time. “When I suffer for the vulnerable is it not for my own vulnerability that I really suffer”.¹⁹ “I shall become the chronicler of our adventures,” she writes, “I shall forge them into a new language and store them inside me should I have no chance to write things down. I shall grow dull and come to life again, fall down and rise up again, and one day I may perhaps discover a peaceful place around me”.²⁰

Between July and September 1942 in her own account Etty goes through Edith Stein’s “way of the Cross” and Simone Weil’s “affliction.” She starts her service at the Jewish transit camp at Westerbork, the man she loved, Julius Spier dies, she succumbed to acute flu and a haemorrhage of the stomach – social, psychological and physical suffering at the same time. The seed of God’s presence has grown into a tree with the unmistakable shape of the cross. She goes to visit the body of her lover laid out in his old apartment.

I stood beside his bed and found myself standing before one of
Your last mysteries, my God [...] I am grateful to You for that, I
even have the strength to accept it and know there is no answer.
That we must be able to bear Your mysteries.²¹

This bearing of the mystery of death, though not articulated explicitly, takes the form of *the Cross*: “Reality is something one shoulders together with all the suffering that go with it, and with all the difficulties. And as one shoulders them, so one’s resilience grows stronger”.²² This leads to a new resolution and hones her vocation as a writer.

That part of our common destiny that I must shoulder myself, I
strap tightly and firmly to my back, it becomes part of me. And I
shall wield this slender fountain pen as if it were a hammer, and
my words will have to be so many hammer strokes with which

18 Ibid, p. 178

19 Ibid, p. 230

20 Ibid, p. 195

21 Ibid, p. 198

22 Ibid, p. 220

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to beat out the story of our fate and of a piece of history as it is and never was before.²³

During these three months Etty feels the hammer blow not only in her writing but on herself, in the same way Edith felt the ‘Dark Night’ and Simone ‘the mechanism of the Cross. On the 15th of September after a time of not writing she resumes her diary:

I now realise how much You, God, have given me. So much that was beautiful and so much that was hard to bear. Yet whenever I showed myself ready to bear it, the hard was directly transformed into the beautiful. And the beautiful was sometimes much harder to bear, so overwhelming did it seem. To think that one small heart can experience so much, oh God, so much suffering and so much love, I am so grateful to You, God, for having chosen my heart.²⁴

“With a sharp pang,” Etty writes on 24th September, “all of mankind’s nocturnal distress and loneliness passes now through my small heart.”

This process for Etty is *formative* of her character. She writes the day after, “God has moved me up into a more advanced class; the desks are still a little too big for me,” and, a little later, “Somewhere deep inside me is a workshop in which Titans are forging a new world” (29th September). The seed of God that still grows within her ripens her vocation to be a writer – “that little piece of God hidden in me that might grow into poetry [...] I prayed, ‘Let me be the thinking heart of these barracks’”.²⁵ But it is a formation that also asks for a self-loss and enables her to give her life in service to others at Westerbork. She ends her diary in a reflection similar, though milder, to the prayer of Simone Weil, to become a sacrament for others: “I have broken my body like bread and shared it among men. We should be willing to act as a balm for all wounds”.²⁶

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, these three modern mystics give us a *model* as Christians for responding to a time of crisis. Many people in the world today live in as extreme circumstances as they did and our empathy with them means we must address the fact of affliction

²³ Ibid, p. 172-3

²⁴ Ibid, p. 198

²⁵ Ibid, p. 225

²⁶ Ibid, p. 230-1

and seek in ourselves a response adequate to it. We face a looming climate catastrophe unless we can be radical enough in changing our ways. Awareness of extreme inequalities in the world, the starvation of many, the pollution caused by an irresponsible consumer culture, mean that now, as in the time of these mystics, a radical *conversion* is needed. However, these mystics show that we can't rest with an ideological option for the poor. It has to be in practice and, more than that, it has to come not from self-righteousness or even moral indignation, but from a place of compassion and a sense of personal implication in the injustices of the world. We have to allow the *seed* of God's love for all humanity and all creation to grow within us. The spiritual life is a process not an act of will. As Etty says, "It is a question of living life from minute to minute and taking suffering into the bargain".²⁷ The seed will grow, "how we do not know." And when the hammer of life's onslaughts hits us we will be more prepared. "Suffering has always been with us," Etty says, "does it matter in what form it comes? All that matters is how we bear it and how we fit it into our lives".²⁸

The lives of these three mystics are a modern parable of Christ's injunction to "*take up your cross every day*." In every day of our lives the shadow of the cross falls – either *externally* in inconveniences and upsets that befall us or *internally* in our moods, uncertainties and worries. We must carry those in patience. When the shock of a hammer blow comes – and it will in all our lives – we will be readier to respond in compassion. Little by little, by carrying the cross, we will be made stronger and more loving. Gradually we find that we are able to shoulder more of the shadow of the cross that falls across all humanity. We will be called out to respond to affliction. To allow the seed, the hammer and the cross to become one in us is the aim of our faith and the reason for our religious practice. As Edith Stein says, "As for what concerns our relations with our fellow men, the anguish in our neighbor's soul must break all precept. All that we do is a means, but love is an end in itself."

27 Ibid, p. 152

28 Ibid.