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The bad habit of individualistic religion

ABSTRACT

Because of an interpersonal world view, Ubuntu provides a much-needed reference point for navigating contentious issues for both political and spiritual discourse. The intent, in this instance, is not so much a polemic against political individualism as it is a reckoning with how Christian spirituality per se matters in the academy and public spheres. The concept of “Ubuntu” complements Christian spirituality in that the conceptualisation of Ubuntu moves us beyond notions of soteriology based in individualism and vapid understandings of personal salvation. In turn, Ubuntu expands the understanding of communal spirituality, by providing the reader better insight into the deepening paradox in which, by focusing upon community, one gains a deeper significance of self.

1. INTRODUCTION

Archbishop Desmond Tutu’s emphasis on *Ubuntu* provides a reference point for navigating contentious issues for both political and spiritual discourse. However, unlike spiritual discourse, political discourse does not need an apologetic to flourish in academic societies. For the most part, political discourse and social sciences are flourishing in the academy and need no defence that they are vital to universities. This dynamic comes sharply to mind as I write this article in Boston, Massachusetts, that purports to have the largest concentration of higher educational institutions in the world. The intent, in this instance, is not so much a polemic against political individualism as it is a reckoning with how Christian spirituality *per se* matters in the academy and public spheres. *Ubuntu* may help Christian spirituality. The concept of “*Ubuntu*” complements

Christian spirituality in that the conceptualisation of *Ubuntu* moves us beyond notions of soteriology based in individualism and vapid understandings of personal salvation. In turn, *Ubuntu* expands the understanding of communal spirituality, by providing the reader better insight into the deepening paradox in which, by focusing on community, one gains a deeper significance of self.

In this article, I seek to explore this paradox. In my spiritual biography of Tutu (Battle 2021), I enlisted one of my favourite Christian mystics, Simone Weil, to help me make sense of *Ubuntu*'s paradox of the communal individual. This article provides the opportunity to flesh out this paradox in more detail. Weil is valuable to us to understand not only *Ubuntu*, but also spirituality in dialogue with various kinds of human discourse. Her problem, however, is that Western linear methodologies have a hard time with Weil's mystical thought and writing. Henry Finch (1999:14-15), a scholar on Weil, provides the following humour:

Many who attempt to read Simone Weil for the first time have the experience of feeling strongly that there is something important there to understand, yet not actually understanding a word of it.

In this article, I continue to explore this mystery of how community makes better sense of Christian spirituality rather than the continued tropes of personal religion (Battle 2021).

2. SOLITARY SUFFERING

So much of Christianity nowadays carries the burden of the European Enlightenment, in which the sole adjudicator of what is salvageable in religion is given to individual, human consciousness. In such consciousness, individuals interpret their own soteriology of who is saved with no regard to the interdependence of salvation. In a soteriology of personal religion, someone who dies and makes it into heaven has no conflict of being completely happy knowing that someone else is suffering, weeping, and gnashing his/her teeth forever. The position of this article, in light of Tutu's *Ubuntu*, is that such personal religion is immature, and bears witness to the justification for how many Christians live presently with hardly any existential remorse that others live a hellish existence right now on earth.

Weil is helpful, in this instance, in her explanation for how self often goes through purgative experiences in order to mature. Christian spirituality becomes the focal point of this maturity, as Weil makes sense of individuals who suffer in this world. To the afflicted there are agonised cries of "Why me?" Individuals who are caught in the crucible of poverty ask: "Why is this happening?" "Why am I abandoned?" – a cry that was wrenched even from

Christ. But Weil mentions that, if the afflicted nevertheless persists in the orientation toward the good, something more miraculous than the creation of the world will be revealed. In Weil's eyes, Christ became completely human and completely divine only in his cry of abandonment: "Why has Thou forsaken me?". Weil, known to suffer tremendously in her own life, resonated with the silent response to his question and understood something infinitely fuller of significance in the silence than in any response anyone could make in light of the question.

We thus observe Weil's controversial claim that Christianity is something like a science of affliction. This is controversial because she believes that Christianity is the only religion that finds a use for (or meaning in) suffering, instead of trying to escape from it (Finch 1999:14-15). Her insight, in this instance, is not to be intentionally provocative, but to explore the boundaries of violence and suffering. For example, suffering deemed for enemies is often excused or even renamed, in order to justify the perspective of the perpetrator. As the following humor illustrates, such justification of why others should suffer often creates a major barrier for how to engender realities that are more proactive and healing, such as the concept and action of love.

How does the self move through purgative experience in community and still escape the horrors that the extremes of communal existence can produce? Weil describes the extremes of community through her perception of affliction, something in which few can participate and remain alive. Weil (1970:193) writes:

Christians ought to suspect that affliction is the very essence of creation. To be a created thing is not necessarily to be afflicted, but it is necessarily to be exposed to affliction ... Affliction is the surest sign that God wishes to be loved by us; it is the most precious evidence of His tenderness.

Many say that Weil teeters upon, if not falls headfirst into a masochistic and dysfunctional understanding of suffering. Others contend that it may take a saint to fully understand what Weil is saying (and it certainly takes one to practise it), but the logic is sufficiently clear. God can suffer. Affirming divine order in the midst of tragic circumstances such as the death of a loved one, and divine love in the midst of permanent agony and loss, are not what we would expect from human beings, at least not without help (Finch 1999:15). But most of all, we have a hard time with the symmetry between God and suffering.

3. THE PROBLEM OF SELF IN COMMUNITY

As a theologian I am often perplexed when talking about self in community. In short, the discourse of theology struggles to survive in academic circles and theologians no longer garner the authority they once had. This may seem strange but, in a therapeutic culture, theologians take a back seat to therapists and more empirically oriented professionals. Social science (psychology and sociology) and even philosophy, however, cannot fully describe the mystery of self. Weil teaches us a theological language in which messages about a healthy self are messages of grace, received by healthy individuals capable of patience and not by the individuals who are incapable of such patience and who only grasp the immediate, personal circumstance. In this instance, Christian spirituality may be of help to the social sciences.

The very premises of psychology, sociology, and philosophy can often be such that people impose interpretations on the world instead of those who wait and let such interpretations come to them from beyond an individual perspective. Weil's epistemology is more communal than individualistic. For Weil, to open the human being to knowledge, not privately and inwardly, but outwardly predisposed toward the needs of others, that is, to what comes from without, is the one factor that makes possible an encounter with God. This outward predisposition enables the reception of miracles and guards us against solipsistic epistemology. We gain God consciousness every time we wrestle with how self relates to community.

God consciousness gives us insight into the false dichotomy between inward and outward selves. Not only should social scientists heed Weil's warning, but so should theologians and humanistic thinkers who may now, for example, begin to do more interdisciplinary study. Such study could be about the role of spirituality and politics, especially as modelled in recent history (for example, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa). It is my conviction that this Commission, without explicitly reading or referring to Weil, somehow understood Weil's insight that clarity of communal vision, even of past atrocities, is needed to bring liberation for everyone. Weil (1973:75) states:

Christianity should contain all vocations without exception since it is catholic [from Greek *kath'holou*, as a whole, thus *katholikos*, universal]. In consequence the Church should be also. But in my eyes Christianity is catholic by right but not in fact. So many things are outside it, so many things I love and do not want to give up, so many things that God loves, otherwise they would not be in existence. All the immense stretches of past centuries, except the last twenty are among them; all the countries inhabited by colored races.

That is, Weil's communal spirituality helps us notice that no one is fully free until all are free. Therefore, Weil helps us discover that spiritual exclusivism is just as erroneous as atheistic thinking. In this instance, Weil's insight is that the problem of current spiritualities is that we must not fall victim to the fanaticism and delusions that will inevitably come in a world of affliction. We discover such a world when Christian theology rubs up against the deeper principle of all-embracing love. How does such theology reconcile the difference between the punishing God of Job in the Hebrew Bible, and the all-forgiving God of Jesus? The first sanction was in the name of retributive justice and demands intolerance to pagans, heretics, and idolaters. The second advocates non-violence and non-resistance.

4. NON-ZERO-SUM OUTCOMES

In the face of these extreme readings of the Testaments of the Bible, *Ubuntu* provides a valuable way of how individuals can interpret sacred texts as best characterised as against participatory violence. Tutu's *Ubuntu* spirituality invites an epistemology that refuses any concessions to the powers of the world that stoke destructive fires between the individual and the community. In concert with *Ubuntu*, and in Weil's (1958:90) own words, we must be vigilant in this refusal:

The pivot around which revolves social life (now) ... is none other than preparation for war. ... When chaos and destruction have reached the limit beyond which the very functioning of the economic and social organization becomes materially impossible, our civilization will perish; and humanity, having gone back to a more or less primitive level of existence and to a social life dispersed into much smaller collectivities, will set out again along a new road it is quite impossible for us to predict. To imagine that we can switch the course of history along a different track by transforming the system through reforms or revolutions, to hope to find salvation in a defensive or offensive action against tyranny and militarism – all that is just day-dreaming.

Weil's spirituality of non-violence is expressed through her concern for everything and everyone marginalised or excluded. Such exclusion happens not only in the presence of guns or military war, but also in the presence of orthodoxies and establishments, whether they are world religions and heresies or the colonised peoples of the developing world.

At best, Weil's spirituality is defined by the divine need to end all forms of oppression. In this regard, Weil believes that true prayer makes us identify with the most oppressed of the world. There are two great prayers in Weil's life (the Lord's Prayer and the paralytic prayer). In this instance, one encounters

one of the most enigmatic episodes in Weil's life, the so-called terrible prayer for total annihilation in God, considered by her critics to be horrifying:

Say to God: Father, in the name of Christ grant me this.

That I may be unable to will any bodily movement, or even any attempt at movement, like a total paralytic. That I may be incapable of receiving any sensation, like someone who is completely blind, deaf, and deprived of all the senses. That I may be unable to make the slightest connection between two thoughts, even the simplest, like one of those total idiots who not only cannot count or read but have never even learnt to speak. That I may be insensible to every kind of grief and joy, and incapable of any love for any being or thing, and not even for myself, like old people in the last state of decrepitude.

May this body move or be still, with perfect suppleness or rigidity, in continuous conformity to thy will. ... May all this be stripped away from me, devoured by God, transformed into Christ's substance, and given for food to afflicted men whose body and soul lack every kind of nourishment. And let me be a paralytic-blind, deaf, witless, and utterly decrepit. Father, since thou art the Good and I am mediocrity, rend this body and soul away from me to make them into things for your use, and let nothing remain of me, forever, except this rending itself, or else nothingness (Weil 1970:243-244).

Weil invites us to become the Eucharistic feast – a thought that scares us to our core. Weil scholars write that probably nothing she ever wrote has caused more consternation than this prayer. And yet it amounts to a spirituality of non-violence for the liberation of the world, through union with a suffering God. In other words, Weil's greatest strength is when she is stripped of her own will, sensibility, and thought, in order to have nothing else but God's good; to die to self so that God may live in her. As Weil (1956:179) put it elsewhere, this dying is "to give one's flesh for the life of the world, and to receive in exchange the soul of the world".

Whether we like it or not, Weil teaches us to see the dangers of how self often negotiates being in community. Weapons of destruction do not come from beyond, but entirely from individual and collective egos. That is, when the reptilian brain takes over, we are in ourselves, apart from heaven, and cannot make or do anything that is truly good for others. The good is only for self. When the reptilian brain takes over, we have no grace of our own to do or make anything truly well. Thus, Weil (1956:434) writes, "... for us good is impossible".

Weil is correct in challenging the ready assumptions that human beings are in command of the language of what is "good". Ludwig Wittgenstein,

whom some consider to be one of the finest philosophers of the 20th century, once observed that, if a lion could speak, we would not understand her. The reason is not that we would not know the meanings of the individual words, but that we would not know the point of what the lion was saying. Its world and life would be too different from ours (Wittgenstein 1953:II.xi.223).

The word “*Ubuntu*” is similar to the words “good” and “community”. The latter two words are thought to be commonly understood; yet, they are commonly misunderstood and are often used to justify dysfunctional realities such as echo chamber politics or abusive forms of religion that justifies political violence. What *Ubuntu* and Weil describe as “community” is not foreign so much as it is seen from a viewpoint foreign to us, especially, ironically, to western folk. I say “ironically”, because Weil herself was French but often claimed to be marginalised in her culture. Weil helps us notice that true communal understanding is beyond our usual thought and language, even beyond most people’s imagination, and yet true community is in this human world seen as it really is. For Weil, this seemingly contradiction becomes a paradox as human beings encounter God. Since God can provide human beings direct union with the divine, that which is contrary can become confluent. Weil (1970:144-148) writes: “Earthly things are a criterion of spiritual things.” Community is not simply known as something new to human experience, but wholly new for every part is new in its meaning, as in Revelation 21:5: “I am making all things new.” In this instance, we learn the invaluable lesson for the self in Western Christian spirituality that its obsession is with the soul’s drama of salvation, to direct itself toward power. Hildegard of Bingen states from within the mystery of God:

I, the highest and fiery power, have kindled every spark of life, and I emit nothing that is deadly. I decide on all reality, with my lofty wings I fly above the globe, and with wisdom I have rightly put the universe in order. I, the fiery life of divine essence, am aflame in the beauty of the meadows, I gleam in the waters, and I burn in the sun, moon, and stars.

Ubuntu opens the human being, not privately and inwardly but outwardly, that is, to what comes from without, which is the one factor that makes self possible in the community. This brings us to the problem of love. Weil teaches us the strange lesson that love is more than “personal”. At least, God’s love is. The love Weil speaks of is not emotional or romantic or possessive. She strangely calls it impersonal because such love is impartial, unconditioned, and objective. The closest example to this kind of love shown by Christ may be the love of a mother, who unconditionally gives her body to her child, asking

nothing in return.¹ We are not, however, accustomed to thinking of a mother's love in these terms, but Weil notes in this analogy how a mother's love is amazingly impersonal and personal. The little baby already has a name and is unique, not to be confused with his/her brother or sister, who are loved no less. At the same time, the baby has no articulate personality, no ego, nothing to like or dislike; not even resemblance matters. The mother does see the baby as other (Finch 1999:101). This mother's love can be a good analogy to God's love (Job 38:28-29; Isa. 49:15; 66:13; Matt. 23:37; Deut. 33:27; Ps. 121:3; 139:13).

Tutu's *Ubuntu* and Weil's Christian mysticism provide an apologetic model for Christian spirituality in that they both mention that we must not fall victim to the fanaticisms and delusions that inevitably come to human beings. As Christian centuries were increasingly defined by the Western world, concomitantly, there was the inordinate development of concern with the soul's life, the drama of the soul's salvation, to direct itself toward either knowledge or power. The turn inward, which we notice so dramatically in St. Augustine, meant that one listened to a subjective teacher who insists that the inner life is superior to the outer. What an increasingly conscious, interdependent world can no longer accept in this subjectivity is the element of fanaticism and exclusivism. This is especially true with world religions such as the three monotheistic religions of Islam, Judaism, and Christianity. The lack of epistemologies such as *Ubuntu* and Weil's mysticism make monotheism an exercise of war that exacerbates global politics and economies' enemies. Tutu's *Ubuntu* and Weil's Christian mysticism guard against personal religion's tendency toward zero-sum outcomes that inevitably stoke the fire of ultimate domination by one religion over the other.

If we return to traditions of desert spirituality, in which the Abrahamic faiths share, we can notice the fundamental assumptions about human life, namely each religion's narrative assumes that the other two exist. Therefore, any exercise to discount the other inevitably creates deadly zero-sum outcomes. We need more imagination such as Tutu's *Ubuntu* spirituality and Weil's mysticism to exorcise the reptilian world view that fear must come before love in human life, in order to impose the necessary discipline that makes love possible. Justice, so it has been believed, must come before love, and justice is not possible except in alliance with fear and punishment.

1 I am not saying that this is a general example because there may be other examples of conception caused by violence against women.

5. HEALING LOVE

For Christians, healing love shows itself in the middle of history as available for individuals right now, although not for human ethnicities (*ethnoi*) until the end of time (Rev. 22:1-3). For Weil, the vast distance at which human beings appear to exist away from the God of Love requires neither a separate God of power and wrath to have made the material world nor a different aspect of the God of love, but rather an awareness of how this vast distance and absence itself expresses love. In other words, love is not based on justice, but justice is based on love. Similarly, peace does not wait for justice. If this were really the case, we may wait until the end of the world. The beauty of the Abrahamic faiths is that first there must be God's shalom and then justice follows.

In her article *Beyond personalism*, Weil poses the question: What prevents me from gouging your eyes out if I have the power and desire to do it?. The answer in the past may have been the fear of God. Weil goes on to ponder what if this does not deter us, as it has not deterred violence of the past centuries. Weil's answer is that there is only one thing that could deter us, and if it does not, then nothing can. It is the realisation that, although we may not know it, we are, ultimately, all defenceless against force and violence, and have nothing to save us from it but the innocence of expectation in each human soul. Humanity assumes the protection from injustice anywhere, that anyone deserves and expects from another. This is the foundation of our justice and compassion toward one another. However abused, this human trust that others do look after us remains at the centre of our souls for all of our lives.

Both Tutu and Weil help us believe that human dependence is lodged in us, prior to any question of fear and punishment. Whatever our suspicion of the other, it is secondary to our need for others to exist so that we also can. Weil goes on to put this in stronger terms. The abuse from God, from parents, from rulers, from members of other religions and races and nations cannot drive out the need for others completely. Why does Weil regard such an apparently natural human dependence as supernatural? The reason is that dependence is outside the patterns of necessity and causality, ego and pride, power and compulsion.

The bad habit of personal religion is in the disconnect between retributive justice and restorative justice that both Tutu and Weil highlight in their lives and theological work. For both Tutu and Weil, we have failed to translate the *imago Dei* into the holiness and divinity of humanity. Sacred humanity can only exist if culture and the human bond become sacred to us. Weil explains the nature of this bond in her first powerful Christian experience that happened on a visit to Portugal with her parents. She feels torn, and

[i]n this state of mind then, and in a wretched condition physically, I entered the little Portuguese village, which, alas, was very wretched too, on the very day of the festival of its patron saint. I was alone. It was the evening and there was a full moon over the sea. The wives of the fishermen were, in procession, making a tour of all the ships, carrying candles, and singing what must certainly be very ancient hymns of a heart-rending sadness ... There the conviction was suddenly borne in upon me that Christianity is pre-eminently the religion of slaves, that slaves cannot help belonging to it and I among others (Finch 1999:120).

It was during her harrowing period of eight months' labour in a metal-working factory in Paris, when she felt for the first time "the affliction of others enter into my flesh and soul" (Weill 1951:66). She discounts her own suffering, her incessant violent headaches, because these are only "biological" and do not in themselves involve the social humiliation of factory life, although later her own affliction will play a role. Weil (1951:67) states what happened in the factories:

There I received forever the mark of a slave, like the branding of the red-hot iron the Romans put on the foreheads of their most despised slaves. Since then, I have always regarded myself as a slave.²

6. CONCLUSION

Despite the claims of European Enlightenment, it is not true that the freedom of an individual is limited by that of another. A person is really free to the extent that freedom is fully acknowledged and mirrored by the free consent of others who find confirmation and expansion of their own liberty. One is free only among the equally free. The slavery of even one human being violates humanity and negates the freedom of all. This is why slavery is sinful. That is, no one is fully free until all are free. This can also be compared to the Buddhist story of the vow of Dharmakara Amitabha not to enter Nirvana until he enters that Land of Purity with every sentient being, and to save all who call on his name with pure faith. This is an expression of the idea of co-dependent origination (see Weil 1951: 182, 188-189).³

Weil (1958:106) believes that the curse of land contained in Genesis (3:17-19) made the world appear as a convict prison and labour as the sign of servitude and abasement. The human who now obeys God is determined by

2 Language for slavery is a paradox, in this instance, especially in light of the seeming contradictions in the New Testament, for example, Romans 8:18: "... having been set free from sin, you have become slaves of righteousness", and Galatians 4:7: "So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God."

3 See Schuon (1975:249-259); Moses in Ex. 32:32; Paul in Rom. 9:3.

the word of another and now feels consciously inferior. Weil (1958:144-145) astutely observes:

It is impossible for the most heroically staunch mind to preserve the consciousness of an inward value when there is no external fact on which this consciousness can be based.

Every mark of scorn suffered by human beings at the hands of their superiors or their equals confirms this intentional inferiority. Kierkegaard (1967-1978: nos. 386, 991, 4685) is helpful, in this instance, as he states, citing Matthew 11:55:

‘The good news is preached to the poor’: it is for those who suffer and are unlucky, wretched, wronged, crippled, lame, leprous, demonic, who know they are (what all men really are) insufficient dependent nobodies (and would suffer by proclaiming the Gospel truly) ... The more wretched and abandoned, insignificant and unhappy you are, the more God is interested in you.

So far, Weil’s apologetic for God’s foundation of love seems more violent than the premise of violence against which she is arguing. It was beyond her first encounter with Christianity, however, that she makes her fuller claim about God’s love. At Solesmes Abby in France, Weil meets a young English Catholic, John Vernon, who introduces her to George Herbert’s poem *Love*. Weil (1973:68-69) writes:

I learned the poem by heart. Often at the culminating point of a violent headache I make myself say it over, concentrating all my attention upon it and clinging with all my soul to the tenderness it enshrines. I used to think I as merely reciting it as a beautiful poem, but without my knowing it the recitation had the virtue of a prayer. It was during one of these recitations that Christ himself came down and took possession of me.

Such possession by Christ expanded Weil’s Christianity to be catholic [from Greek *kath’holou*, as a whole, thus *katholikos*, universal]. Although Fr. Vernon tried to convert Weil and get her baptised, Weil’s catholicity was not the same as Roman Catholicism. Weil concludes that Christianity is catholic by right but not in fact. So many things are outside Christianity for Weil (1973:75):

... so many things I love and do not want to give up, so many things that God loves, otherwise they would not be in existence. All the immense stretches of past centuries, except the last twenty are among them; all the countries inhabited by colored races; all secular life in the white peoples’ countries; in the history of these countries, all the traditions banned as heretical, those of the Manicheans and Albigenses for

instance; all those things resulting from the Renaissance, too often degraded but not quite without value.

The church falls prey to the abuse of power that forces God's love and intelligence into Constantinian civil religion. This abuse of power is not of God. It comes from the natural tendency of every form of collectivism, without exception, to abuse power (Weil 1973:80, 78).

Weil helps us make sense of how *Ubuntu* fits Christian faith, as she (1973:80-81) states:

Our true dignity is not to be parts of a body, even though it be a mystical one, even though it be that of Christ. It consists in this, that in the state of perfection, which is the vocation of each one of us, we no longer live in ourselves, but Christ lives in us; so that through our perfection Christ in his integrity and in his indivisible unity, becomes in a sense each of us.

In order to move beyond the bad habit of personal religion, Weil (1973:80) states:

Everybody knows that really intimate conversation is only possible between two or three. As soon as there are six or seven, collective language begins to dominate. That is why it is a complete misinterpretation to apply to the Church the words 'Wheresoever two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.' Christ did not say two hundred, or fifty, or ten. He said two or three. He said precisely that he always forms the third in the intimacy of the conversation.

The difficulties involved in this distinction between the language of "I" and the language of "We" are immense, especially when we consider our criteria for success as numbers of people in churches as opposed to deeper community. Jesus spoke as a person to other persons. He used the word "I", "I say unto you". By this single word he separated himself from the indifference of the crowds. Jesus thus enables us to speak both with the interpersonal voice that is sacred in us to the interpersonal that is sacred in others. Through Jesus, we can speak freely and with all the attention we owe to any and every human being; and with all our integrity to each as the very person that he or she is. Perhaps our most interpersonal words are our most personal ones, and the other way around. Weil would say that we are earnestly speaking out of our aspiration for the good to the aspiration for the good in the other. You cannot love God without doing what God pleases (Weil 1970:124, 284).

Christian spirituality, shaped by *Ubuntu*, should produce different habits than personal religion or thinking of self as God. Even more, an *Ubuntu*-affected

Christian spirituality should be a communal ability to practise the image of God in whom three persons are one nature. The image of God is community. Such a communal ability is revealed through our participation in the Spirit of God, who is neither individualistic nor psychotic. Christian spirituality becomes intelligible through God's image of relational personhood: three persons in one nature.

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