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Rebecca Rozelle-Stone and Lucian Stone, *Simone Weil and Theology*, London and New York, Bloomsbury Academic, 2013. 238 + x pages. Notes. \$100.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-56753-724-9; \$29.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN: 978-0-56745-383-9.

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The title of this very insightful book is somewhat misleading as it has little to do with theology proper; no theologians, living or dead, are ever cited, no theological texts discussed. Where the title is appropriate is that the Stones give the reader a series of connected meditations on Weil's claim in her notebooks: "The Gospels contain a conception of life, not a theology." What Weil means by that is pretty obvious; it is similar to Wittgenstein's frequent claims that religion shouldn't be a theory, for it is a way of life. In this regard, theology then is largely taken as a metaphor for systematizing, and trying to glide over what Wittgenstein called the "rough ground."

For the Stones, then, Weil's thinking needs to be seen as a sort of atheology, something that is a sort of mysticism and that will genuinely open up a conception of life, and that will not be neatly tucked into a system. This is an atheology that is done in the interests of smashing idols, but it is also done with the hope of finally seeing something true and rewarding, something seen without the filter of the ego; it opens onto Weil's very positive sense of grace. With the exception of the second chapter of the book, where they take Weil to task for violating her own dictum with respect to certain religions, what they therefore seek to show is the conception of life to which Weil is pointing us. While I have certain reservations about the critique of "theology" and the charge that Weil was blindly systematic in the area of certain religions, reservations that I will take up below, what the Stones do show is wonderfully insightful and refreshing, not only with respect to Weil's thinking, but with respect to understanding the possibilities of life.

Ironically, though, while their approach therefore is not theological, and is instead philosophical, the ultimate insight here is a conception of life that opens onto the divine, and that sees life as a gift. As such, Weil can be seen as one who, like so many French phenomenologists such as Jean-Louis Chretien, Jean-Luc Marion, Michel Henry, Paul Ricoeur and Jean-Francois Courtine (many of whom have been astute readers of Weil), has pushed philosophy to take a "theological turn." Now, the Stones do not follow this lead as such, but in the end that is where the theology of this book actually lies. The conceptual similarities between Weil and these authors is one that would be well worth a reader's time to investigate further.

At the heart of the Stones' approach is a focus on a few key notions in Weil. They choose well. Above all, these include, first, her conception of "decreation," the unmaking of the social self so that it faces the void out of which it was created. Decreation is a notion for which Weil has often been criticized; it has been seen as witnessing to a pathological view of the self that may even bespeak self-hatred. But the Stones, who read Weil particularly well, see the self that Weil is critiquing and that she sees as needing decreating as a sort of false, untruthful, self-absorbed self, one that has been created by some very unhealthy forces and that maintains itself by these social forces. This is a self that is a distracted self; standing on its own autonomy, it tries to fill up its emptiness with noise and distraction, just as Pascal suggests. (One is also reminded of Christopher Lasch's *The Culture of Narcissism*.<sup>[1]</sup>) Second, they pay a

particularly close look at Weil's notion of attention—a way of looking and being present to what is in front of one, such that one does not anticipate it, project onto it, or force it into a pre-existing way of understanding. As Weil puts it simply, attention consists of “suspending our thought, leaving it open, detached and available, ready to be penetrated by the object.” Paying attention is ultimately a remaking of the self, a self that is now given as a gift and not as something that is seized. Attention and that to which it is given is then a grace, a matter of seeing a world, and of recreating and developing a far different self.

But, of course, for this decreation to happen, and for one to pay attention to the world and what is in it, one is going to have to encounter and welcome various interruptions in life—contradictions, paradoxes, oppositions to one's projects. These, Weil knew, were vitally important. In this regard, her suspicion of systematization, in both theology and philosophy, is a suspicion that one is missing life itself. But the willingness to entertain interruption is not all. One also has to be willing to discipline one's self, to apprentice it to something higher, so that whatever insights might strike may not be ephemeral and episodic. In this regard, then, as the Stones see quite well, Weil's project ultimately involves a wide-ranging social critique. They ask, and this is at the heart of the book, “What counts as interruption in a cacophonous and amplified milieu? What arrests the gaze in a landscape of billboards and brightly flashing advertisements? What, moreover, can still our self-defensive imaginations, depose our stubborn senses of false sovereignty, and resist our greedy assimilations of phenomena into a self-preserving symbolic order and nexus of meanings?” (p. 163). The question moves into the area of education, for example, and the Stones conclude the book with a series of pointed questions about education. It is not, for example, about acquiring a set of skills, but “[f]or Weil, the sole purpose of education is the growth and cultivation of attention that may one day contemplate (the absent) God” (p. 188).

Two things need to be said in praise of this book and its ability to uncover Weil's depth, leaving a good deal of her cutting edge insights about human selves intact, and not muted. Far too often, readers are struck when reading Weil by those insights. There is a certain lightning-like quality to them that forcefully strikes one, lightens up the horizon, and lets one see what had been hidden in the dark. Unfortunately, when one then tries to write on her, and explain her, those qualities get lost. Sometimes that is simply the problem of producing secondary literature. But with Weil, it can also sometimes be a matter of subtly resisting those insights, and protecting our selves. Then it becomes a matter of cherry-picking her works. Many years ago, Susan Sontag suggested that what attracted readers to Weil was her seriousness, but that, perhaps, we shouldn't follow her too closely. That happens too much. This book fortunately keeps a strong sense of Weil's edge. But this is because, second, in talking about Weil's issues, it does so by itself engaging those issues in some wonderfully concrete, contemporary ways. The use of studies, contemporary philosophical literature, including feminist philosophy, and the illustrations used to support those points are all exceptionally to the point. There is a sharp eye for where the particular lies in what Weil is saying, and an ability to draw that out and put it in front of the reader makes the case especially convincing. The chapters on attention, and the disease of modern distractedness and its damaging qualities, are well worth the read by themselves as an essay on the modern condition.

Finally, there is also something satisfyingly constructive about the case. A lot of contemporary philosophy is deconstructive and sharply critical, unmasking power and deceptions in writing and thinking. This book does that, and as such seriously engages the post-modern. However, rather than the often nihilistic remainder that the reader is faced with at the end of such unmaskings, in this case, that unmasking is the result of attention, and it opens onto a positive sense of mystery, without falling back into a system. Here is where this book also has Weil taking the “theological turn.”

But to say that is to say something that this volume does not say itself. That it does not is where the one criticism of it lies. Theology is taken here to be an illegitimate suppression of mystery, and a worldly systematization of the unsystemizable transcendent. Fair enough. There is plenty of theology that has been that, and in her encounters with a lot of priests in the France of the 1930s and 1940s, Weil had good reason to worry about it. The neo-Thomism she heard from Father Perrin, her first prolonged contact

and correspondent on matters of faith, would have encouraged her to believe this, and it is also probably even what she got out of Maritain, whom she criticizes in some of her later works. But to leave it at that is ultimately to produce a caricature, even of the efforts of the misguided. There is a lot that Weil wrote that has some very significant theological overtones, and that bears similarities to the *nouvelles théologiens* such as Henri de Lubac and Yves Congar, who also thought that neo-Thomism had serious deficiencies. The centrality of Christ's incarnation, passion and crucifixion as historical acts also give a genuine theological core to her work, one that is not simply symbolic. In this regard, Weil still has a lot to contribute to current theological discussions, which also are aware of the way in which thought can domesticate and falsify transcendent grace. She is, in this regard, most valuable for her insights and depth, not because she is original in eschewing a certain way of doing theology.

And here is also where I would raise my one disagreement with the Stones' presentation. In the second chapter, "Christology and Religious Pluralism," it is argued that because Weil did regard incarnation as a *sine qua non* for genuine religion, she, in fact, did, when looking at other religions, take a systematic approach to them, tending to dismiss some of them out of hand, namely, Judaism and Islam, "primarily on the basis of their denial of the Christian theological doctrine of the incarnation (*sic*)." But that is not quite right. Weil's appreciation of the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation is rooted in a prior conception of her own that involves a certain kind of materialism, where grace is not simply an ethereal notion, but something that roots itself concretely in material life. As such, this concept of incarnation is witnessed to by the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation or, more precisely, it bears witness to what is revealed. This concept is hardly confined to Christianity for her. Her concept of incarnation is, moreover, and quite importantly, a matter of emptying out, of *kenosis* of the divine, and the ability to participate in this self-emptying is a mark of grace in our otherwise ever-expanding material lives. (The group she actually criticizes for getting it wrong is the Gnostics, who thought matter was evil and hence denied both the possibility and desirability of incarnating the divine.)

Now, there is no doubt that she had little good to say about Judaism, but that had little to do with the doctrine of the Incarnation; it had to do with her belief that the idea of a "chosen people" was idolatrous. It elevated the material; the divine did not descend into it. Islam is a little trickier, but the charge is largely the same. She thinks that it, too, elevates the tribe, and this lets Islam believe itself, too, justified in using violence to conquer other peoples. (To be fair here, Weil did know a number of Sufi texts and she quotes them quite favorably in the project she undertook while in New York, showing that there is a common mystical understanding of divine *kenosis* in all religions.) For Weil, this is not really about a doctrine at all; it is her refusal of idolatry and a willingness to critique it. If, then, this is the case, it is not at all obvious that her failure to be a thorough-going pluralist is really an intolerable inconsistency on her part. Rather, it seems that insisting on religious pluralism without looking at the conception of life embodied in a religion is itself an unfortunate apriorism. Now, this is certainly not at all to justify what she thought about either Islam or Judaism. In the case of the latter, for reasons that have been discussed for years with varying degrees of light, she really just seemed to be blind to Judaism as a whole, even prejudicial, and a lot of what she said about Judaism simply needs to be repudiated. With respect to Islam, overall she really says very little (and I think so little that to cite it at all is to put oneself in very murky territory). Her critical point is simply the idolatrous one that she blames for leading to conquest, and she is just as willing to level it against Christianity at numerous appropriate points. Here, the general point may well be valid, even if the application is sadly mistaken. More broadly, here, I think that a sharper sense of what theology is and what it does might have helped this chapter to make some distinctions that get blurred over.

But, with that said, this still remains a very good book—not only a very good, and insightful book on Simone Weil's thinking, but a very good and wise book overall, that will bear close attention itself. One may also learn something about the importance of attention from it.

## NOTE

[1] Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism* (New York: Norton, 1979).

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