



THE ROMANESQUE FAITH OF SIMONE WEIL: AN OCCITAN CHRISTIANITY

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In 1942, Simone Weil wrote two articles about the Occitan region of the 12th century. Inspired by the [*Song of the Albigensian Crusade*](#), she presented not so much facts as the spirit that, according to her, animated the ancient Pays d'Oc, of which Romanesque Toulouse was the new Troy. According to her, by destroying the Cathar region, [*Simon de Montfort*](#) deprived Europe of a spiritual freedom that it has never managed to regain.

Because of the persecutions carried out against the Jews by the Nazis and their allies, Simone Weil, Jewish by birth, published, in the *Cahiers du sud*, in 1942, two articles under the pseudonym of Émile Novis, which Claude Le Manchec published in 2014, under the title of *L'Inspiration occitane* (ed. L'éclat). At that time, modern civilization reached the paroxysm of its material unconsciousness: brute force, drunk with its new technical powers, was unleashed before the banners of that "satiated spider, swollen with blood" of which Mauriac speaks. But the Third Reich is only the actualization of the same tendency that corrupts humanity since it chose sin against God: here is the "empire of force" that reproduces itself, the one of the Greeks annihilating Troy, the one of Rome annihilating Toulouse, the Cathar, the chivalrous, the courteous. It is of this last great confrontation that Simone Weil speaks, through the reading of the poem of 9578 verses, written in the langue d'oc, the Song of the Albigensian Crusade (Chanson de la croisade albigeoise).

Weil does not see the conflict between Catholic Rome and Cathar Toulouse as a war of religions, in the plural. The Song of the Albigensian Crusade shows that allusions to religious controversies are rare, too rare when one knows how much "the disasters that befell this country could have led the population either to attack the Cathars as the cause of its misfortune and to persecute them, or to adopt their doctrine out of hatred for the invader and to look upon the Catholics as traitors." But it seems that "neither of these reactions occurred. This is extraordinary." This can be explained by the fact that in medieval Occitania, there was "a spiritual freedom" which was that of a collective tolerance made religion, permeating the whole country of Occitania. In contrast, modern tolerance inherited from the Enlightenment "only eliminated from the struggle of ideas the crudest forms of force," without eliminating the struggle between ideas. This spiritual impotence had no other effect than to logically lead the democratic mentality to lock itself in "the constitution of crystallized parties." The modern tolerance "substituted material constraints for spiritual barriers."

And for good reason, intolerance is the product, not of fate, but of a historical and civilizational "decision." Ever since "the father of St. Louis, as the poem tells us, thought he was serving God by coldly authorizing the massacre of an entire city after it had surrendered," Europe has chosen force, against

the spirit. Failing to choose the spirit, the Enlightenment could only try to imagine a tolerance in force. With Manichean belief, Weil estimates that "the alliance of the throne and the altar," of which the Catholic tradition affirms the possibility, is not realizable: a struggle opposes ineluctably the logic of the world, which is that of force, and the logic of the Kingdom, which, not being of this world, ignores force and knows only the spirit.

The Occitans of the twelfth century were on a crusade against force itself, which they did not use beyond the necessity that desperation made them feel. Only then did the population of Toulouse, "crushed and unarmed, rose up" against the conqueror Simon de Montfort. Although they lost the war, "they won repeated victories over an enemy powerfully armed and puffed up by his triumphs;" and, as in the Bible David against Goliath, "a stone thrown by a woman's hand killed Simon de Montfort." But the use of force did not go beyond the necessity of duty. The Cathar decision was that of the spirit, Weil assures us—this is why the tolerance that was in force was indeed that of a spiritual freedom where "ideas did not clash," but "they circulated in a sort of continuous environment," achieving what the Enlightenment did not even desire. It is in any case what superbly suggests the epic poem of which we speak, where Weil finds the same inspiration that founded the Iliad of Homer.

The Two Renaissances

In her article, "En quoi consiste l'inspiration occitanienne?" (What does the Occitan Inspiration Consist of?), Weil, in the perspective of her *Lettre aux religieux* (Letter to Religious), indicates in what way the religion of each civilization has valued one of the complementary aspects of supernatural truth. She cites Israel, which worshipped God in His unitary nature, as well as India, focused on the holy identification of man with God, but also Persia, China and Egypt. As for Greece, it was the aspect of mediation that inspired its religion and its activities, haunted as it was by the "infinite distance between God and man," which had to be bridged. Thus were born philosophy, science and the cults of the Greek Mysteries, with the aim of establishing bridges between the finite and the Infinite. "It is this idea which was expressed in their notion of harmony, of proportion, which is in the center of all their thought, of all their science, of all their conception of the life."

The Roman conquest broke this "bridge-building vocation." The rebirth of the Greek spirit could thus be made only by the rebirth of the concern for mediations. Now "the idea of mediation received the fullness of reality; the perfect bridge appeared. Divine Wisdom, as Plato had wished, became visible to the eyes": it is the revelation of Jesus Christ, God incarnate, the Mediator between Heaven and Earth. By

baptizing Greek heritage, Christianity gave life to its spirit. This spirit was to give rise to an entire civilization, a civilization of spiritual freedom, the only living and free Christian tradition, on the occasion of the Carolingian Renaissance:

"After the tenth century, security and stability had become sufficient for the development of a civilization; the extraordinary mixing accomplished since the fall of the Roman Empire could from then on bear fruit. Nowhere could it do so to the same degree as in this country of Oc where the Mediterranean genius seems to have been concentrated... Spiritual riches flowed in from all sides without obstacle. The Nordic mark was quite visible in a society that was above all chivalrous; the Arab influence easily penetrated into countries closely linked to Aragon; an incomprehensible prodigy made the genius of Persia take root in this land and flourish there, at the very time when it seems to have penetrated as far as China. This is not all perhaps; do we not see in Saint-Sernin, in Toulouse, sculpted heads that evoke Egypt? The ties of this civilization were as distant in time as in space."

On the other hand, the humanism of the Renaissance of the 15th century constitutes only "the last pale and confused image that we possess of the supernatural vocation of man," elaborated on the opposition of Christianity and the Greek spirit, "while they are in the same place." With the modern conception of science, art and philosophy, these bridges have been taken for permanent dwellings; these mediations between the human and the divine have been taken for the very hypostases of Divinity. Human intelligence has progressively closed in on itself, denying itself realistic access to that which transcends it. The destruction of the "chivalric civilization" of medieval Occitania even took with it that "intense civic feeling" by which, "in spite of certain conflicts between lords, and in the absence of any centralization, a common feeling united these regions; one saw Marseilles, Beaucaire, Avignon, Toulouse, Gascony, Aragon, and Catalonia spontaneously unite against Simon de Montfort." According to the Song of the Albigensian Crusade, the medieval Occitans "even had a word to designate the fatherland; they called it language." It is a common language, a common fabric of representations and ways of conducting life that these disparate regions defended against the armies of Rome.

The Roman versus the Gothic

Traditional Christianity includes two aesthetics, and with them, two ways of ordering the human world to the divine Principle: Romanesque art, elaborated during the High Middle Ages, and Gothic art, later, which accompanied the great movement of building cathedrals. We see there two complementary representations of the relation of the human to the divine. But Weil's judgment is harsh: these two

styles embody for her two antithetical religious options within the Christian world.

In the Romanesque, art shines forth the same inspiration as that of courtly love. Courtly love designates that supernatural love which, in contrast to natural love, is not based on the force of passionate and egocentric possession, but, freed from lust, it "is only an expectation directed towards the beloved and which calls for consent... Such love in its fullness is love of God through the beloved." The troubadours used a word to designate this love: *Merci*. Courtly love denotes gratitude. Likewise, Romanesque art frees itself from the empire of force to assent to the spirit: "the architecture, although having borrowed a form from Rome, does not have any concern for power nor for force, but only for balance." This balance, as on the Cross "the body of Christ was the counterweight of the universe," is verified as well in "Romanesque churches," the "sculpted entities," the sublime "Gregorian chant," and in "Occitan poetry"—everywhere this kind of deliberate awkwardness which is "a nudity," the sensitive mark of the pure presence of Being which, unlike modern religion, does not seek to fill an interior poverty by an external effusion of grandiloquent representations.

On the contrary, according to Weil, "there is some defilement of strength and pride in the momentum of the Gothic spires and the height of the ogival vaults." The Gothic still remains the sacred art of Christianity; but already a spiritual degradation is evident, because the sacred domain feels the need to dominate and exclude to prove its superiority. "The Gothic Middle Ages, which appeared after the destruction of the Occitan homeland, was an attempt at totalitarian spirituality," writes Weil harshly; and she adds, in a highly questionable way, that "the profane as such had no right to be present," while in Romanesque Occitania, "the supernatural did not mix with the profane, did not crush it, did not seek to suppress it. It left it intact and thus remained pure. It was the origin and the destination."

Weil died a Catholic, baptized at the moment of death, on August 24, 1943, in Ashford, where she wrote her last profession of faith. But she was, singularly, a Roman Catholic rather than a Roman; tolerant, she considered that demanding "more faith" in the "incorruptible rigor" of Catholic dogma should not have resulted in the "extermination" of the Cathars. Worse, she discerned the value and greatness of the Christian faith according to a double criterion, not of originality and strength, which were the pride of Gothic religiosity, but on the contrary of archaicity and love, which were the pride of Romanesque piety. Archaism, on the one hand, since it is the "ability to combine different environments, different [previous] traditions" that seduced Simone Weil to "the Christian civilization [which] is the Romanesque civilization." On the other hand, her life and her holy devotion to the working condition are commanded by an ethic of "human love" which, as in the Pays d'Oc; it is Christianly regarded as "one of the bridges between

man and God." So, the task of contemporary man is certainly not to restore what has "prematurely disappeared after an assassination," but to irrigate his future projects with the inspiring source of Romanesque faith. "To the extent that we contemplate the beauty of this age with attention and love, to that extent its inspiration will descend into us and gradually make impossible at least some of the baseness that constitutes the air we breathe."

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