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Research Center
for European Analysis
and Policy



EMUNA Brief 14/2025

UNDERSTANDING OF RELIGIONS – 29 October 2025

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Kenosis, Christianity, and Religious Universalism in Simone Weil

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Abstract

Starting from the question of universality, we seek to show how Simone Weil's thought highlights a shift from a logic of appropriative inclusion, rooted in exclusivity, like that which has dominated interreligious dialogue in the West, to a form of plural inclusion that, without renouncing the centrality of Christ, expands and essentializes Him in a kenotic manner, thus bending Him to forms of otherness without absorbing and canceling them out in the single, monocentric truth.

For Simone Weil, truth is not an Aristotelian golden mean, but a Heraclitean discordant harmony, or a Cusanian coincidence of opposites. Only by exalting differences, only by emphasizing their incommensurability, can the one and the same essence appear—in Heideggerian terms, *das Selbe*, which is never *das Gleiche*—which the thinker exemplifies in a text from her *Notebooks* in the identity between the Platonic idea of the Good and the Upanishads' Atman. "It is EXACTLY, IDENTICALLY the same idea," Weil explains.

The greatest distance is also the greatest unity, but to perceive the latter, one must have traversed and exhausted the former. To "touch" the One, one must have sunk into the Two, and the Cross is this sinking into the Dual that embodies the union of contradictions: a union that is dismemberment, dissemination, abdication. Weil embeds the *coincidentia oppositorum* in the pierced flesh of Christ. She subtracts it from the rarefied sphere of the Uranian to deposit it, plant it, hammer it, like the nails of the Cross, into the chthonic. The Cusanian Wall of Paradise, an image of the *De visione Dei*, beyond which lies the impenetrable *coincidentia oppositorum*, can be experienced here, embedded in the flesh of Christ.

It is as if by sinking into the uniqueness and nondeducibility of the singular that we love, the all-embracing Logos becomes visible, welcoming the multicentric plurality of paths, blessing the very truth that offers itself in unexpected forms, because "ubi vult spirat" (John 3:8), ceaselessly pursuing its traces scattered throughout the world, under remote vestiges, under implicit forms.

Meditating on Weil, one senses something akin to a loss of ground. The French thinker locates the point at which the inescapable inclusion of the other, tied to our embodied and situated starting point, rather than remaining entangled in the encumbrance of the self, rather than curling up in the reabsorption of the other, becomes kenotically decentralized. Kenosis instead of duplication of the self, dissemination instead of assimilation, mysticism instead of institution.

We free ourselves from the realm of the identical thanks to a torsion akin to the muscular dislocation of the Platonic myth of the cave, which, in turning the body, drags the soul with it. The resulting inclusive logic is like an inverted mirror that reflects the hollow of one's own absence rather than the encumbrance of the self, kenosis instead of doubling. Mirroring through the negative, through difference, through absence, rather than through identity.

This is how Weil conceives the dialogue between religions, as is evident above all in the "Letter to a Priest", but also in the *Notebooks*. The path to the universal—this is what the thinker suggests—passes through that kenosis or dissemination that implies, mirroring the evangelical grain of wheat that must die to bear fruit (John 12:24), the renunciation by religions and Churches of the logic of identity based on power, on the administration of salvation—the Church as an abhorred "social entity"—in favor of a more secret identity that unites religions, cultures, and civilizations, operating in the depths. It is no coincidence that to the power of triumphant Churches and religions, Weil contrasts the weakness of Gnostic or Cathar religious experiences: stories of rejection of the great systems of administering grace, stories of defeated and shipwrecked spiritualities.

The kenotic or Christic principle is the renunciation of name, of identity, to live under all other names. This passage transforms inclusion from projective and proprietary to plural and universal. Here, the Logos-Christ truly becomes a relationship, or relation, as Weil suggests translating Logos. The religious universal either takes the hollow form of kenosis or is a figure of power. Either it is a withdrawal of the name, so that all names are names of the subtraction of the Name, "artifacts of silence," as Michel de Certeau would say, or it is a cipher of strength.

But, even when in its history Christianity succumbed to the logic of force and power, the idea that what brings fulfillment is a defeated and crucified Messiah, the stone rejected by the builders, appears inescapable and destined to survive. Thus, in this history, as if entangled in memory, kenotic cracks remain, survivals of emptiness that halt totalitarian saturation, cracking, shading, and undermining its absolute claim. Significantly, even the Grand Inquisitor in Dostoevsky's *Legend* does not kill Jesus, who is taken to prison, but rather casts Him out, expels Him from the precincts of sacred, theological-political power, and condemns Him to the night, warning Him never to return. As if to signify that the kenotic remainder is never entirely annihilated, only marginalized. The kiss that Jesus gives the old Inquisitor itself is a cipher for this discarded remainder, both subversive and indelible, which takes its leave in the darkness. And in the darkness, at the margins, at the edges, the kenosis ends, a cumbersome residue that, from those margins, never ceases to murmur and question sacred power.

Truth is hollow, sunken, excavated, and therefore Christic, whatever form it takes. In this, the universal is called to repeat the principle of contraction and retraction of decreation, to be its mirror. God contracts from the beginning, and continues to do so in His Son on the cross, and in true Christianity, to be all in all without being totalitarian. It is the same movement of withdrawal, that is, of love.

The kenotic loss of the name and Weilian's Christic universality remind me of the work of a great 20th-century interpreter of crucifixes, whom I love dearly—if I may use this reference—the American painter William Congdon (1912-1998). His obsessively reiterated, repainted crucifixes fade away until they disappear, melt, liquefy, blend with the black lava of the spatula's stroke, buried until they become tuber, rhizome, larva, or hole, scar, wound, bone, and lose their contours in that chthonic opacity, that material blindness. In these metamorphoses, these disseminations, this melting into the world's pain, they seem to be a vivid artistic expression of Weil's kenosis. Looking at them, it is as if I better understand Weil's kenotic logic.

Here, within the incarnation/cross/kenosis lies the source of the universal, which cannot but receive from that source the same kenotic nature. Kenosis opens the breach to the universal. For us to universalize ourselves without becoming totalitarian, it was necessary for God to be a crucified slave. For us to know ourselves, it was necessary for our universality to shrink, to contract in the constriction of a single flesh where, through all the pain of the world, we could learn to return.

If the Christian God is the God of the death of God, then He is also the God who absents Himself, withdraws from all religions, to be present in all of them. Only in the form of absence is God present in the world, and therefore also in religions. The transcendental nature, so to speak, of the Cross, its presence, that is, in all faiths, lies in what it veils, not in what it re-veils. It lies in the void it opens in faiths, not in proclaimed truths to be imposed. Here, the *revelatio* is a *velatio* that duplicates itself; here, the *Offenbarung* is the superior availability that the Cross presents to transcend itself toward the impenetrable *ignotum* of the divine.

The traces of spirituality sought, as the *Notebooks* and the "Letter to a Priest" attest, in Eastern traditions, ancient religions, fairy tales, myths, folklore, and mysticism take the form of kenosis. They therefore present a Christic essence that, in order not to be transformed into strength, must reach the point of renouncing its name, of undoing itself in the pain of the world, just as God renounced being God on the Cross.

Christianity acquires a non-totalizing universality only by disintegrating, disseminating itself, by crumbling, wandering, by being exodus-like and powerless in the plurality of names and in a dynamic process that flashes, appears and disappears wherever the spirit blows, unaware of progress, of linear logic or of fulfillment. For Weil, Christ is the one who never stops leaving, faithful in this to His "noli me tangere" and the emptiness of the tomb.

Weil says it is pointless to change one's religion, the religion one was born into; even more serious is to push others to do so. It is better to pronounce the name of God in one's native tongue rather than in a foreign one. Equally futile, as has been observed, is attempting to achieve a "synthesis of religions," that is, a syncretism or common denominator among faiths.

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