

**Conversions to Christianity and the meaning of suffering – the cases of  
Simone Weil and Nicolae Steinhardt**

**By**

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## **Abstract**

**This thesis reconstructs the intellectual biographies of two key figures in the history of twentieth century in Europe, Simone Weil and Nicolae Steinhardt. The first was a French philosopher, Jewish by origin, converted to Christianity, author of an original way of thinking theology and philosophy. The second was a Romanian writer, also Jewish, imprisoned by the communist regime, and converted in prison to Christianity, later orthodox hermit and father confessor. The content of the thesis will focus on two comparative aspects: the processes of their conversions and in relation with them, the way they envisage the problem of suffering as Christians. The necessity of this inquiry becomes visible when it is taken into consideration their stories of conversions and their special and particular mysticism, a much-intellectualized one. The large majority of European accounts of Christian mysticism appear to be centered on experiencing union with Christ, this fact being exposed in a very simple and elementary language. Nevertheless, in the cases of Weil and Steinhardt the mystic experience interferes with a new vision on culture**

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# 1. Introduction

This thesis reconstructs the intellectual biographies of two key figures in the history of the twentieth century in Europe, Simone Weil and Nicolae Steinhardt. The first was a French philosopher, Jewish by origin, converted to Christianity, author of an original way of thinking theology and philosophy. The second was a Romanian writer, also Jewish, imprisoned by the communist regime, and converted in prison to Christianity, later orthodox hermit and father confessor. The content of the thesis will focus on two comparative aspects: the processes of their conversions and in relation with them, the way they envisage the problem of suffering as Christians.

The necessity of this inquiry becomes visible when it is taken into consideration their stories of conversions and their special and particular mysticism, a much-intellectualized one. The large majority of European accounts of Christian mysticism appear to be centered on experiencing union with Christ, this fact being exposed in a very simple and elementary language. Nevertheless, in the cases of Weil and Steinhardt the mystic experience interferes with a new vision on culture, an aspect that will be treated separately in this thesis. In the field of intellectual history, that is to say the history of human thought in written form, the concepts *conversion* and *suffering* are indeed quite vast and complex.

First, the history of religious conversion can be considered as a history of a metaphorical concept which refers to “pursuit of goodness.”<sup>1</sup> There is a huge amount of

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Morrison, *Understanding conversion* (London: University Press of Virginia, 1992), 3

literature on this subject, and the two cases that will be analyzed here are indeed special ones mainly due to the intellectual background of the two writers, which placed their autobiographical discourse on personal conversions under the sign of a cultural quest of God. In plus, both of them wrote, mostly after the events that caused their conversion to Christianity, personal considerations about conversion, which can be inscribed in the history of similar autobiographical accounts on this theme.

Secondly, the theme of suffering had a long cultural history in both countries, that is to say France and Romania. In the French case, Richard Burton wrote a complete monographic work on culture of suffering, focused mostly on female mysticism of suffering,<sup>2</sup> in which Simone Weil occupied a special place. However, the big majority of the biographical works consecrated to Weil emphasize this unique component of her Christian philosophy, her original theorization of suffering. Among them, maybe the most representative and complete work on her thought is the monograph of the Hungarian philosophical researcher Miklos Veto.<sup>3</sup>

In the Romanian case, there exists a large amount of journals and testimonies of those which have been imprisoned during the communist period. All of them describe in a very realist way the tortures and privations endured. Here can be named only the works of Ioan Ianolide,<sup>4</sup> of Dumitru Bordeianu<sup>5</sup> or of Dumitru Bacu.<sup>6</sup> The autobiographical journal of Nicolae Steinhardt offers an overview of the cultural European paradigms centered on suffering, interfered with the exact exposure of the historical facts.

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<sup>2</sup> Richard D. E. Burton, *Holy Tears , Holy Blood - Women, Catholicism, and the Culture of suffering in France, 1840-1970* (London: Cornell University Press, 2004 )

<sup>3</sup> Miklos Veto, *The Religious Metaphysics of Simone Weil* (Abany: State University of New York Press, 1994)

<sup>4</sup> Ioan Ianolide, *Return to Christ* (Bucharest: Christiana, 2006)

<sup>5</sup> Dumitru Bordeianu, *Testimonies from the swamp of despair* (Bucharest: Scara 2005)

<sup>6</sup> Dumitru Bacu, *Pitesti experiment* (Bucharest : Christiana 2000)

Nevertheless, the theoretical approach of Steinhardt on suffering provides also a solution in the problem of how should a Christian responds to the problem of totalitarian tyranny, an aspect that will be developed in the thesis.

Analyzing the exceptional biographies of the two writers, it can be noticed in the case of Simone Weil a pronounced need for suffering and in the case of Steinhardt the centrality of the suffering endured in the communist prison on the ulterior changes of his intellectual life. These experiences have been exposed and theorized in their autobiographical works. In the thesis, a separate part will focus on suffering as a basic concept of the thought of Weil and Steinhardt.

In Weil's case, her notable and specific feature was "her growing interest in the redemptive value of suffering",<sup>7</sup> which has manifested increasingly until the moment of her death. It is likely that even her death occurred because of the food-privations that she had imposed on herself out of solidarity with the people struck by famine and poverty. Her entire life she regretted that she was not born into a poor family and she avoided always any type of earthly pleasure.

However, her unusual preference for suffering had led mostly after the conversion, to a very deeply rooted religious component. For example, she affirmed, "every time when I see the cross of our Lord, I commit the sin of envy".<sup>8</sup> She wrote also a very systematical and coherent essay about the suffering,<sup>9</sup> in which she identified the contemplation of the beauty of this world with the compassion for the suffering of the others and the acceptance of her own suffering. In respect to Weil's case, one aim of the thesis is to show in what way her intellectual background changed its direction after the

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<sup>7</sup> Francine du Plessis Gray, *Simone Weil* (New York: Viking Penguin Books, 2001), 23.

<sup>8</sup> Simone Weil, *Waiting for God* (New York: Harper Collins Books, 2001), 7.

<sup>9</sup> Idem, "Love of God and affliction", in Weil, *Waiting for God*, 70.

conversion and in what manner she gave sense to her individual and universal suffering - experienced by the whole humanity during the two world wars.

Nicolae Steinhardt is, at first glance, a very different historical case. The period of four years (1960-1964) which he spent in prison (and the Christian baptism during the first year of seclusion) changed radically his thought and his existential orientation. In his major work “The happiness diary”, he described suffering in a constant interconnection with real privations that he endured in the prison. He writes about certain facts that placed him on the edge of despair in prison and arrives to broader conclusions involving a specific way of approaching major cultural paradigms, literature, art, and music. Despite the fact that he is not a religious theorist, quoting a lot from works of literature, art, science etc, he essentially arrives to the same conclusion regarding the suffering as Weil.

However, the two writers have a lot in common: both were Jewish, intellectuals gifted with an unusual power of assimilation of culture, both were both converted to Christianity and, finally yet importantly, both confronted with a life of suffering and assumed it in a specific way. One special aspect of their personality was also their rejection of any relation with the opposite sex, before and after the conversion. Simone Weil is a unique case in this sense. She totally denied her femininity, preferring always the company of workers and affirming her repulsion to the idea of being an “object of desire.”<sup>10</sup> She is part of that category of “virile women”<sup>11</sup> who assumed the vote of chastity without embracing the life in the monastery, but rejecting entirely the earthly pleasure. Steinhardt’s case is more simple as he became a monk after the prison period assuming, so to say, in a legitimate way the vote of chastity.

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<sup>10</sup> Simone Weil, *Waiting for God* (New York: Harper Collins Books, 2001), 15

<sup>11</sup> Jo Ann Kay Mc Namarra, *Sisters in Arms –Catholic Nuns through two millennia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 256

Nevertheless, at the same time the two writers differ by many aspects: their style of writing, the way they envisaged culture, their intellectual formation and so on. In the case of Steinhardt the language is very personal, heterogeneous and ardent, in Weil's is impersonal, even monotonous and very philosophical – hence, the majority of monographic works dedicated to her personality saw her as a philosopher rather than as a mystic. This is not only a question of language, but touches also the nuances of 20<sup>th</sup> century Christian ideology. Their somewhat distinct conversions are important cases in point of contemporary Christian mysticism.

The phenomenon of conversion is generally considered as a mystical experience. This term in itself has received many nuances in literature. George Bataille, contemporary to Weil, spoke about “inner experience, a state of ecstasy, of rapture”.<sup>12</sup> Denise and John Carmody considered mystical experience as the “direct experience of ultimate reality.”<sup>13</sup> Or Martin Buber considered the “ecstatic confession as the moment where the word approaches us, the word of the I.”<sup>14</sup>

The exposure and development of the main characteristics of the “mystical experiences” of Weil and Steinhardt will be accomplished as well, though the emphasis will lay on the contextual information and the historical relevance of their cases in terms of intellectual history, comparison of biographies and the assessment of each other's discourse on Judaism, Christianity and historical suffering. Referring also to their conversion, both processes will be contextualized in the history of conversions and mystical experiences in general and specifically in France and Romania. There are many

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<sup>12</sup> George Bataille, *Inner experience* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1988), 3

<sup>13</sup> Denise Lardner Carmody and John Tully Carmody, *Mysticism – Holiness East and West* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 11

<sup>14</sup> Martin Buber, *Ecstatic confessions* (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1985), 45



historical studies on the process of conversion, as for example the works of Lewis Rambo<sup>15</sup> or A. D. Nock.<sup>16</sup>

However, given the considerations of William James<sup>17</sup>, it can be said that the mystical experiences of Weil and Steinhardt are part of that category of spiritual phenomenon known as transient: mystical experiences are limited in time and can only imperfectly be reproduced by memory. This is why an exact and precise exposure of facts, which caused their conversion, cannot be accomplished here.

The comparative approach used in this thesis focuses also on the different manners in which Weil and Steinhardt perceived their spiritual transformation. It is not without significance that the mysticism of love was more pronounced and evident in Weil than in Steinhardt. The mysticism of love is the main characteristic of the female mysticism, from 12<sup>th</sup> century until today.<sup>18</sup> Contemplation and union with Christ as a spiritual marriage are very present in the French case: “something stronger than me made me kneel ... Christ has fallen in my heart and took my soul “. <sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, the main difference of Weil’s mysticism is that the erotic component is completely absent – in addition, she led a celibate life. In the case of Steinhardt, the predominant state of the soul after the conversion is only characterized by the concept of “Happiness”: “this happiness that surrenders me, defeats me, embraces me ... silence ... and a sweetness in

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<sup>15</sup> Lewis Rambo, *Understanding religious conversion* (London, Yale University Press, 1993)

<sup>16</sup> A. D. Nock, *Conversion- The Old and the New in Religion from Alexander the Great to Augustine of Hippo* (London: Oxford University Press, 1972)

<sup>17</sup> Cf. William James, *The varieties of religious experience* (New York: Touchstone books, 2004), 55

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Matthias Riedl, *Christian Mysticism* in Marianne Horowitz, *New Dictionary of the history of ideas* (New York: ... 2005), 34

<sup>19</sup> Simone Weil, *Waiting for God* (New York: Harper Collins Books, 2001), 46

my mouth in my mind, in my body , in my muscles “. <sup>20</sup>Considering the fact that both are important intellectual figures of their time, it is interesting to analyze their conceptual reformulation subsequent to the conversion in the light of a contextualized and nevertheless active Christian theology.

This thesis draws on a variety of textual sources. The primary sources are the autobiographical accounts and political works of Weil and Steinhardt. The secondary sources comprise among others the numerous biographies of Simone Weil and the testimonies on Steinhardt written by his friends. In addition, for a proper contextualization of the two personalities several broader historical works will be used.

The theoretical approach to the body of sources will therefore be established by some key questions: In which sense were their considerations about suffering similar and in which do they differed? In what way their autobiographical account on conversion situates them in the general history of this type of mystical experience? How they are approaching their new Christian existential condition? Can we talk only of mysticism or also of a cultural metamorphosis in the two cases? In what way the Christianity that they have assumed gave solution to the problem of suffering and how did they justify it in their writings?

Regarding the problem of suffering, one may ask: why speaking about intellectuals? In what way their conversions and the manner that they assumed the new Christian condition make them special? The most suitable response is that the way they gave sense from the cultural point of view to the problem of suffering is similar with the Christian solution to it. Nevertheless, their language and their philosophy provide a

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<sup>20</sup> “Alminteri fericirea aceasta care ma impresoara , ma cuprinde ma imbraca , ma invinge...liniste...si o dulceata .In gura, in vine, in muschi” in Nicolae Steinhardt, *Jurnalul fericirii* (Cluj Napoca: Editura Dacia, 1992), 56

theoretical attitude totally unique, although similar to that of the common Christianity. What make them special are the assimilation of and the way they melt the big European cultural paradigms in order to build a cultural view of suffering very original and singular until at this moment of history.

However, the juxtaposition of the two personalities may seem far-fetched given the utterly distinct cultural and political contexts in which they lived. However, in spite of all differences, their trajectories share communalities from the point of view of religious manifestations and morphologies. Therefore, a comparison may prove relevant from the perspective of the intellectual history as well as the history of religious manifestations.

The first part of the thesis will be committed to Simone Weil, having as subchapters the biographical component (with an emphasis on her conversion and her almost pathological need for suffering) and the specific theory on the theme of suffering. The second part, dedicated to Steinhardt, will mainly follow the same structural pattern, being added also some of his considerations about Simone Weil. The third chapter will contain a comparison attempt and will expose and emphasize the similar and different aspects of the themes enounced above together with a contextualization of the two figures in the 20<sup>th</sup> century intellectual history.

## 2. Simone Weil and the unusual need for suffering

### 2.1. *Testimony of a spiritual evolution*

Simone Weil was born on February 3, 1909 in Paris. She was raised in an agnostic Jewish family. Since her childhood, Simone manifested precocious gestures of solidarity, refusing for example when she was three years old a ring given by a relative, motivating that she disliked luxury.<sup>21</sup> She also displayed the same behavior regarding food. At the age of six she refused to eat sugar, because it was not rationed to French soldiers in the war.

In her early teens, Weil had already mastered Greek and several modern languages. She used to communicate in ancient Greek with André, her brother, later a prestigious mathematician and teacher. When after the Russian Revolution a classmate accused her of being a Communist, she answered: "Not at all; I am a Bolshevik."<sup>22</sup>

She assimilated as her everyday mental fare the highest products of art and science during her studies at the Lycée Fénelon (1920-24) and Lycée Victor Duruy, Paris (1924-25), and at Lycée Henri IV (1925-28), where the noted French philosopher Alain taught her. By his real name Emile Auguste Chartier (1868-1951), Alain trained his students to think critically by assigning them *topoi*, take-home essay examinations.

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<sup>21</sup> Simone Petrement, *Simone Weil- a life* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2000), 14

<sup>22</sup> Francine du Plessix Gray, *Simone Weil* ( New York: Penguin Books, 2001), 24

In 1928, Weil succeeded with the highest mark at the entrance examination for the École Normale Supérieure; Simone de Beauvoir, her classmate, finished second. During these years Weil attracted much attention with her radical opinions- she was called the "Red virgin" by one of her teachers of ENS. In 1931, she received her *agrégation* in philosophy. After beginning to teach philosophy , mathematics and Greek language and literature , she continued to broaden her culture , always relating herself to the great ancient models, whether it was Homeric poetry or Euclidian geometry ... She alternated stints of teaching philosophy with manual labor in factories and fields, in order to understand the real needs of the workers. Between the years 1931 and 1938, she taught at various schools in Le Puy, Auxerre, Roanne, Bourges, and Saint-Quentin. Due to her solidarity with the workers and the poor social French milieus, she preferred the company of workers to the one of her teachers colleagues and sat with them in cafés. Her salary was shared by her with the unemployed. After participating in a protest march, she was forced to resign from Le Puy-en-Velay high school. In 1934-35 she was a "hopelessly inept" <sup>23</sup>factory worker for Renault, Alsthom, and Carnaud. This hard period nearly crushed her on her emotional and physical level - she had abnormally small, feeble hands - as she confessed in her diary.

In spite of her pacifist beliefs, she briefly served in 1936 as a volunteer for the Republicans in the Spanish Civil War. In the spring of 1937 she had a first mystical experience in Assisi which led her to pray for the first time in her life. She entered in a chapel of Saint Francis and she confessed that something stronger than she made her to kneel.<sup>24</sup> This event was in fact the first step of her conversion to Christianity. Later, she

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<sup>23</sup> Petrement, *Simone Weil – a life*, 78

<sup>24</sup> Weil, *Waiting for God*, 47

spent with her mother a week at Solesmes, a Benedictine monastery in the Eastern part of France. There, she later recalled, she felt during the services “the Passion of Christ entering into her being “.<sup>25</sup> Weil related her mystical experiences in the text “A spiritual Autobiography .” However, she refused baptism into the Catholic Church.

During the first years of World War II, Simone lived with her parents in Paris, Vichy, and Marseilles. She continued to write and worked at Gustave Thibon's vineyards in Saint-Marcel d'Ardèche. Before leaving France, she gave her notebooks and other papers to Thibon, who would become her first posthumous editor. In Marseilles she met Father Joseph-Marie Perrin, with whom she had long discussions, but in the end she refused his offer to baptize her into the Catholic faith.

After she was dismissed from the university post because of the racist laws imposed by the Germans, she accompanied her family to the United States in 1942. However, she was determined to go back again and take part in the struggle. She soon sailed for England where she entered the Gaullist organization –with the determination to go back into France by any means. But the trip in the dead of winter, under wartime conditions, was disastrous for her health, already undermined by her quasi –ascetic way of life; the efforts she had been making to help other people only aggravated her illness; finally, she would not eat more than the meager rations the French themselves were getting in France. She died at the age of 34 of tuberculosis and self-neglect in Ashford on August 24, 1943.

Specific about Simone Weil is that she was one of the few philosophers who had mystical experiences (as did Pascal for example). But in her case the conversion to Christianity had been preceded by a strange preference for suffering, a point that will be

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<sup>25</sup> Weil, *Waiting for God*, 28

centered also on the divine suffering , more precisely on the Passion of Christ . In her “spiritual autobiography”, she mentioned three moments of her conversion.

The first was related to her trip to Portugal and it happened while watching an evening religious procession in a little village on the shore of the sea. She described this as the revelation of her state as a “slave of God “<sup>26</sup> realizing that Christianity is preeminently “the religion of slaves .” The second moment, the decisive one, happened during the period that she spent at the abbey of Solesmes, when, during the religious services that she attended regularly, she felt that “the passion of Christ entered into her being once and for all “.<sup>27</sup> During this period, she made acquaintance with a young Englishman who will introduce her to some literature that would transfigure her life. That literature belonged to a metaphysical poet of the seventeenth century, George Herbert , whose poem , entitled *Love* , would influence her in a decisive way.

After few recitations, she basically felt, as she later claimed that “she is brought into Christ’s presence“.<sup>28</sup> The third and the last moment of her conversion happened when she was teaching Greek one of her students, she proposed to her that they both learn by heart the prayer *Our Father*, in the original text from the Gospel.

During the recitation of the prayer, the effects she experienced were described by her in the autobiography as follows: “At times the very first words tear my thoughts from my body and transport it in to a place outside space where there is neither perspective nor point of view. Then, there is a silence, but a silence which is not the absence of the sound but which is the object of a positive sensation, more positive than that of the sound. Sometimes, also, during this recitation or at other moments , Christ is present with me in

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<sup>26</sup> Weil, *Waiting for God*, 46

<sup>27</sup> Weil, *Waiting for God*, 67

<sup>28</sup> Weil, *Waiting for God*, 68

person, but his presence is infinitely more real, more moving, more clear than on that first occasion when he took possession of me.”<sup>29</sup>

Needless to say, the effects of her conversion could be analyzed on different levels of her personality. After Solesmes, however, for the first time, the main direction of her studies changed, from now on being orientated to comparative religion. She began following a pattern of studies that was totally devoid of any political dimension. She read attentively the Gospels, the Bhagavad Gita, Tibetan Book of Dead etc. In plus, what she would write after this period would be strongly impregnated with a religious aura as for example, the political essay, *The need for roots*.

Second, her way of living would be transformed. She would proceed to an incredibly ascetic life, out of solidarity, she said, with the local unemployed. From now on, until the end of her life, she would not sleep in bed anymore but on the floor. In addition, she will let the window open even in the depths of winter, heating her room only when receiving friends, despite the affliction of her parents who however, would accord to her all their care. Her mother especially will stay with her all her life until the voyage to England and would witness to all her eccentricities: “She’s unmarriageable“, she would conclude after noticing her rejection of all immediate pleasure of life, even elementary care for food and sleep, including sexual contact.

When trying to place Weil’s case in the history of conversions to Christianity, it can be stated that she belongs to a special group of converts. They generally follow a pattern of turning away from a well-established usual faith because of skepticism or

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<sup>29</sup> Weil, *Waiting for God*, 69



indifference.<sup>30</sup> Their opposite type is of those who are turning to an unfamiliar form of piety from a common one. Although her “deviations” from the official catholic doctrine are quite various, nevertheless she accepted the general truths of the Catholic Christianity.

She claimed in her autobiographical writings that since her adolescence she rejected ideas like knowing God, praying or any spiritual preoccupation. She explained this attitude in the following way: “I may say that never at any moment in my life I sought for God. As soon as I reached adolescence, I saw the problem of God as a problem the data of which could not be obtained here below, and I decided that the only way of being sure not to reach a wrong solution, which seemed to me the greatest possible evil, was to leave it alone. So I neither affirmed nor denied anything. It seemed to me useless to solve this problem, for I thought that, being in this world, our business was to adopt the best attitude with regard to the problems of this world, and that such an attitude did not depend upon the solution of the problem of God.”<sup>31</sup>

If it the general definition of conversion were to be accepted as “the deliberate turning of the soul of an individual from indifference or from an earlier form of piety, to another”,<sup>32</sup> then Weil seems to be one case in which the conversion marks a turning point of a person’s intellectual evolution. One another characteristic of many processes of conversion which posses the conscience that “the old was wrong and the new is right”<sup>33</sup> is also the “feeling of unwholeness, of moral imperfection, of sin, accompanied by the

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<sup>30</sup> A. D. Nock, *Conversion-The Old and the New in Religion from Alexander the Great to Augustine of Hippo* (London: Oxford University Press, 1972), 230

<sup>31</sup> Weil, *Waiting for God*, 23

<sup>32</sup> Nock, *Conversion*, 24

<sup>33</sup> Nock, *Conversion*, 25

yearn after the peace of unity”.<sup>34</sup> In the case of Weil, this feeling has also been present also before the conversion, but it has been accentuated after. In the majority of her letters, despite the fact that she always tries to be as impersonal as possible, she insisted on the idea of her sinfulness, and on the fact that she was not good enough to receive the Christian Baptism. Concerning the “symptoms” that she felt after the conversion, she acquainted herself with a new form of piety, the first indeed in her life, as she claimed that she had never prayed before. She began to participate in services of the Church, but her own ritual of prayer might be considered a very strange one, if we take into consideration only her testimonies on this subject, she was content with the recitation of Our Father in Greek language.

Simone Weil can also be associated to a typology established by A D Nock<sup>35</sup> while following the cases of Justin the Martyr, Arnobius, and Saint Augustine. The first one came to Christianity at the end of a disappointed intellectual search after an initial preference for Platonic, Stoic, or Pythagorean thought. For the second, Christianity was a “deliverance from what had been stupid and unworthy “,<sup>36</sup> that is to say his conversion meant discovering of the good and rejection of evil.

In the case of Saint Augustine, and here Simone Weil can be integrated also, the conversion began with a supernatural event –the hearing of a voice which advised him to read from the New Testament. The first text that he read brought to him an illumination of the mind and made him baptized. Like Augustine, Weil had the revelation of Christ, and her account about her vision is very audacious, as she claimed that during the

<sup>34</sup> William James, *The varieties of religious experiences* (New York: Touchstone books, 2004), 150

<sup>35</sup> Nock, A. D. , *Conversion-The Old and the New in Religion from Alexander the Great to Augustine of Hippo* , Oxford University Press, London, 1972, p. 233

<sup>36</sup> Nock, *Conversion*, 245

recitation of Our Father, Christ was present with her in person. Other mystics, as for example Therese of Avila, or Therese Martin of Lisieux, have experienced this union with Christ as experiences of erotic love, even for the former as sexual impulses for the Sacrament exposed.<sup>37</sup> But Simone reduces her experiences to a very ambiguous and elliptic story which retains only objective facts refusing to be affectively engaged in it.

In addition, what differs from the case of Augustine, is that the revelation which caused the conversion of Weil to Christianity was not followed by the immediate adhesion to the principal Christian institution, that is to say, the Church, by the common way of baptism, but only by an existential and indeed a cultural turning. Concerning the problem of baptism, Weil motivated her refuse to be baptized in a very complex and sophisticate way, in a few letters to Father Perrin, which urged her to receive the Christian baptism. She claimed that receiving baptism would mean for her the abandon of cultural adhesion to many religious paradigms. These were non –Christian indeed, but Simone was very attached by them: “In my eyes Christianity is catholic by right not by fact. So many things are outside it, so many things that 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 Manicheans and Albigenses for instance. All those things resulting from Renaissance, too often degraded

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<sup>37</sup> Andrei Kuraev, *The provocations of ecumenism* (Bucharest: Sofia, 2001), 67

but not quite without value...how could Christianity circulate through the flesh of all nations of Europe if it did not contain absolutely everything in itself? ”. <sup>38</sup>

In addition, a highly interesting aspect is the fact that after the revelation from Solesmes, in all acts of her life she tried to follow the impulses of the soul that would give her inner certitude about the accomplishment of the will of God. She affirmed: “I have never once had, even for a moment, the feeling that God wants me to be in the Church. I have never even once had the feeling of uncertainty. It may be also that my life will come to and end before I have ever feeling the impulse to be baptized... But why should I have any anxiety? It is not my business to think about myself. My business it to think about God. It is for God to think about me “. <sup>39</sup>

To sum up, given her acute need for intellectual freedom, not to mention the complexity of her psychological needs, virtual Church membership seemed for her not the wisest but the only option available. However, this attitude which was in reality a component of “her vocation for self-annihilation-*aneantisement*”, <sup>40</sup> of her predilection for suffering. This aspect that will be developed in the following subchapter.

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<sup>38</sup> Weil, Simone, *Waiting for God* : 28

<sup>39</sup> Weil, *Waiting for God*, 31

<sup>40</sup> Katherine T Brueck, *The Redemption of Tragedy : The Literary Vision of Simone Weil* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2003), 56

## 2.2. Suffering and affliction

Suffering is, in the view of Weil, a “privileged moment of the human condition”,<sup>41</sup> revealing its truth and, at the same time, some kind of its beauty. In and through suffering, the human being lives his separation from the supernatural harmony, realizes his fall but also his vulnerability, his fragile condition, a fact that approaches him to the real beauty of the world. This beauty is in fact an inner beauty, and the consciousness of its existence comes only after “breaking of the individual.”<sup>42</sup>

In any case, in the philosophical terms, the constructive role of this process was that of suppressing the created. This presupposed the annihilation of the selfish ego who made impossible the vision of the real beauty, the spiritual one, that is to say, “seeing the unseeing” (Hebrews 11, 1). The primary proof is her predilection for suffering manifested in the biography of Weil since her childhood, as it was emphasized in the previous chapter. Nevertheless, others biographical moments relevant in this sense can be added.

During the classes of Alain, she writes an essay about an episode of the life of Alexander the Great. In order to share solidarity with his men by sharing their thirst, while crossing a desert, Alexander had poured out on the earth the helmet full of water that soldiers had brought to him. Simone noticed that Alexander’s act only showed his purity and humanity and it was not useful to anyone else and she conclude that “every saint has rejected all well being that would separate him from the suffering of men”<sup>43</sup> - at the time of writing this essay she was only sixteen.

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<sup>41</sup> Miklos, Veto, *The religious metaphysics of Simone Weil* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1994), 34

<sup>42</sup> Veto, *The religious metaphysics of Simone Weil*, 25

<sup>43</sup> Petrement, *Simone Weil*, 68

Another significant moment of her biography and relevant for understanding the concept of suffering is the year that she spent working in the factory at Alshtom and Renault , where she discovered “the redemptive value of suffering, as the only road to spiritual growth.”<sup>44</sup> She later stated that the factory experience had brought her “a curious blend of physical pain and of profound moral joy“.<sup>45</sup> She recorded these experiences in her “journal of the factory”, one of the most compelling documents about the social state of workers of her time. The moments of profound moral joy alternate perpetually with those of physical despair: “fell asleep in the metro. A distinct act of will for each step ...a joyous day; tired but all in all happy ...a painful morning; my legs hurt me so; I ‘m fed up“.<sup>46</sup>

Considering herself to be a “Christian outside of the Church“,<sup>47</sup> Simone Weil would always manifest her preference for suffering in strong relationship with Christ’s passion. She once told to father Perrin that she committed the sin of envy “every time when she thinks of crucifixion.”<sup>48</sup> Also, she claimed that “If The Gospel totally would omitted any reference to Christ’s resurrection faith, that would be far easier to me. The Cross alone suffices.”<sup>49</sup> This was the only time when she mentioned in her writings the concept of resurrection. It seemed that the idea was “too joyful for her taste.”<sup>50</sup>

But suffering can be physical and spiritual. At the time of her first mystical experiences, Weil made a difference between *la douleur*, that is to say physical pain,

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<sup>44</sup> Weil, *Waiting for God*, 54

<sup>45</sup> Weil, Simone, *Journal d’ousine* ( Paris: Gallimard, 1983) in Gray, *Simone Weil*, 98

<sup>46</sup> Gray, *Simone Weil*, 99

<sup>47</sup> Weil, *Waiting for God*, 78

<sup>48</sup> Weil, *Waiting for God*, 45

<sup>49</sup> Weil, *Waiting for God*, 58

<sup>50</sup> Gray, *Simone Weil*, 157

corporal suffering, and *le malheur*, a term which refers to the inner pain, better said the psychological pain; the best translation of the latter concept will be “affliction“ .

In the first case, Weil sees the suffering in breaking the harmony between the good and the necessity, which is to say between the corporal needs and the desires of the body. The asceticism proposed by Simone Weil is a solution for reestablishing the lost harmony in order “to reduce the self from his vitiated condition of that-which-ought-not-to-be to pure non – being.”<sup>51</sup> Physical suffering is after all an intermediary state, which should be supported until it disappears, and it in itself does not leave any transient marks. Affliction, on the other hand “is a profound distress of both body and spirit that leaves permanent marks on our bodies and on our souls .”<sup>52</sup> It involves humiliation and social degradation, or, in its ultimate expression, it involves slavery, a state in which victims arrive to a state of degradation of human dignity. As such, they are considered to be mere objects, owned by others, deprived of any rights.

In the essay “The love of God and affliction“, this latter is called a “marvel of divine technique “<sup>53</sup> that plays an important role in our illumination. Through suffering the world’s beauty can become accessible to us since “suffering alone gives us contact with that necessity which constitutes the order of the world“.<sup>54</sup> The concept of beauty is considered as a sacramental quality of the world which “like a mirror, sends us back to our desire for goodness.”<sup>55</sup> In itself, beauty is considered by Weil as goodness, a finality which involves no objective, a pure goodness. Only by the world’s beauty, the brute necessity, which also involves at the end suffering, can become an object of love. Here is

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<sup>51</sup> Veto, *The religious metaphysics of Simone Weil*, 156

<sup>52</sup> Gray, *Simone Weil*, 124

<sup>53</sup> Weil, *Waiting for God*, 49

<sup>54</sup> Weil, *Waiting for God*, 49

<sup>55</sup> Weil, *Waiting for God*, 48

one of the very few points where Weil proves to be anti - ascetic. She accuses the Christian religion for not being preoccupied by the beauty of nature, and identified the longing of the human being for natural beauty as an inspiration of God.

The condition for making contact with the beauty is contemplating it in a state of freedom and depersonalization. In other words, Weil states that every time when the human being is addicted to things, he wants to change them; not being addicted to things it means wanting only to change oneself, one's own life. This depersonalization includes the absence of a goal in this life. The name that Weil gives to this process of self-annihilation, of depersonalization is *De - creation*.

In itself, de - creation is a divine act. After Weil, the creation of this world implied a renunciation made by God. He ceased to be everything in order to make space for other realities. The de - creation is a state to be attended by a human being which envisages a detachment of the things of this world and also of the selfish ego, following the divine example. The arrival to this kind of state of the soul cannot be accomplished but by suffering, by experiencing the absence of God, that is to say a state of the soul when "there is nothing to be loved".<sup>56</sup>

The solution would be, in her vision, that "the soul has to go on loving in the emptiness, or at least to go on wanting to love, though it may only be with an infinitesimal part of itself. Then, one day God will come to show himself to this soul and reveal the beauty of the world to it, as in the case of Job. "<sup>57</sup> Therefore Weil claims that

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<sup>56</sup> Weil, *Waiting for God*, 71

<sup>57</sup> Weil, *Waiting for God*, 70



affliction is a gift from God, but it can be also considered as a “distance ...as it is necessary to know that love is a direction and not a state of the soul”.<sup>58</sup>

Of course, the problematic of suffering is much more complex and present mostly in the majority of works of Simone Weil, but the principal theoretical approach to it is in the essay named above. However, it can be considered that, in general, the “ doctrine “ developed by Weil sees the suffering as a basic component of a human life and also as an instrument used by God in order to help the soul to detached itself from its sinful part. It also has to be recognized that the manner in which she applied it during her life included also an almost pathological component, an unusual attraction for poverty, privation from the elementary necessities of life.

In addition, this existential attitude is motivated by herself by claiming her solidarity with the suffering of the workers in factory, who were enduring precarious conditions of living from the, or with the soldiers of the two world wars. She claimed to assimilate the universal suffering of mankind and wanted to share it integrally. This attitude towards suffering is indeed very rare and can be found only in a small category of saints during twentieth century, as for example Sophrony Sakharov from Russia for example. In the next chapter it will be exposed a more common and at the same time realist vision about suffering: the case of Nicolae Steinhardt.

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<sup>58</sup> Weil, *Waiting for God*, 81

### **3. Communist prison for Nicolae Steinhardt: Academia and spiritual metamorphosis**

#### **3.1. *From agnosticism to “happiness diary”***

Nicolae Steinhardt occupies a special place in twentieth century intellectual history in Romania. On European level, he is not very known since the translations from him are not numerous and his work is so heterogeneous. Therefore, in this part of the thesis, a synthetic overview of his biography, of his work and of his way of thinking will be provided first. After, as in Weil's case, a presentation of the steps that led to his conversion will follow and finally, a few examples given in order to illustrate in what way he “converted” European cultural references in a Christian way.

Nicolae Steinhardt was born near Bucharest in 1912, from a Jewish father and a Romanian mother. He attended primary and secondary school at Pantelimon, the place of birth, the high school at Spiru Haret and a college in Bucharest-between 1919 and 1929-where, despite his background, he was taught orthodox religion by a priest. This biographical detail is mentioned in his diary. He was fellow student with key figures of the Romanian culture, such as Mircea Eliade, Alexandru Paleologu, Constantin Noica and some others. In 1934, he received his Bachelor degree from the Law and Literature school of the University of Bucharest and in 1936 his PhD in Constitutional Law. During the next two years, he traveled a lot in France, England, Switzerland, and published articles in important Romanian reviews –such as *Sburatorul*, a volume of literary critics, and two volumes on Judaism.

In 1939, he worked as an editor, but lost his job due to the implementation of policy of the ethnic cleansing by the Iron Guard regime supported by Ion Antonescu. Four years later, he regained his job but lost it again due to the instauration of the communist regime in Romania in 1948. As a non-communist intellectual, he was seen as an “enemy of the people.” His refusal to furnish a testimony against another intellectual – Constantin Noica- led to his imprisonment by the Communists.

The main allegations were that he was ‘plotting against the social order’ and was a member of the ‘group of the mystical thinkers of the Burning Bush’. He received a condemnation of thirteen years of imprisonment but in the end would execute only five years. The place of seclusion was not stable; he went over most of the places of sad remembering from Romania, namely the communist jails of Jilava, Gherla, Aiud, Malmaison.

As he wrote in his Journal, his condemnation “washed any doubt, laziness, discouragement from his soul”<sup>59</sup> and precipitated his decision of receiving the Christian baptism on March 15, 1960. Mina Dobzeu, his fellow convict, a Basarabian hermit and father confessor, baptized him. Together with the priest, there were also other participants, two Roman Catholic priests, two Greek Catholic priests and also a Protestant one. This fact will have given to the baptism, as Steinhardt claims, “an ecumenical character”.<sup>60</sup> This biographical episode constituted the principal reason for the writing of his major work, *The Happiness Diary*.

After his release in 1964, Nicolae Steinhardt had a rich activity as publisher and translator. Nevertheless, the prison experience determined a new existential attitude from

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<sup>59</sup> Nicolae Steinhardt, *The danger of confessing* (Cluj-Napoca: Dacia, 1998), 31

<sup>60</sup> Nicolae Steinhardt, *The happiness Diary* (Cluj-Napoca: Dacia, 1992), 20

now on in his biography. Aware, as he claimed, of the “fragility and futility”<sup>61</sup> of the profane existence he decided to become a monk. After many tentative of finding a monastery that would accept him – as he was still considered as a “dangerous element for the society” by the communist regime - he arrived at the Rohia monastery. In the beginning he worked there as a librarian and later on was accepted by the abbot and started his monastical life. He continued to work as a librarian there while dedicating an important part of his time to writing. His fame as a preacher and father-confessor continued to grow during this period. Later, his sermons were published in the volume “By giving, you will gain”.<sup>62</sup>

In March 1989, his health started to deteriorate (he suffered from lungs). He decided to go to Bucharest to consult a specialist. On his way to the capital city his health dramatically worsened and thus he was forced to remain in the hospital of Baia Mare. Few days later, he died there.

The reflection on the conversion of Steinhardt should consider his major work, *The Happiness Diary*, which is, after all, the “journal of a conversion”,<sup>63</sup> that is to say, in it the conversion of the author is the center and the event that assures the unity of the text. Contrary to Weil’s *Spiritual Autobiography* where she very clearly discusses the order of the key events that led to her conversion, Steinhardt’s autobiographical testimony is more complex. The aspect that singularizes it is the fact that it was written under an authoritarian regime that strictly controlled and punished actions of this type.

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<sup>61</sup> Steinhardt, *The danger of confessing*, 57

<sup>62</sup> Nicolae Steinhardt, *By giving, you will gain* (Cluj-Napoca: Dacia, 1997)

<sup>63</sup> George Ardelean, *Nicolae Steinhardt and the paradoxes of liberty* (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2009), 176

While other testimonies, such as Simone Weil's, of Paul Claudel's, of Julien Green's are written under a democratic, thus tolerant political regime, Steinhardt's journal was twice confiscated by the Security. Moreover, he was forced to declare why he was writing this journal. His journal recollects this moment as follows: "I felt the acute need to clarify for myself the reasons for my deep religious transformation. This kind of clarification appeared to me as an inner spiritual necessity. It was impossible to do that instead of the way of writing, the only process that systematizes and defines. Nevertheless, it exists the danger that this type of work becomes as having an artificial, solemn character, and I did not want to sound like that. I just wanted to be convincing, to give to my testimony a realist, authentic character..."<sup>64</sup>

Similar to Weil's case, Steinhardt's conversion comprises a few steps. He refers to them in his Journal, although not in a chronological order. However, here they will be mentioned following the evolution of the process of conversion. First, he claims that during childhood he was attracted by the bells of the Church situated near the factory leaded by his father. His family used to attend Sunday masses at this Church in spite of their Jewish origin.

The second such indication is in 1938, on a trip to Switzerland, when an Irish friend confesses to him that he had a dream in which God appeared to him and said He would call Steinhardt to Him to be among the Christians. The reaction of the young intellectual Steinhardt is very skeptic, even hostile: "I do not believe what the Irish guy told me. I cannot convert to Christianity...to a world obsessed by well being. How far is

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<sup>64</sup> Ardeleanu, *Nicolae Steinhardt...*, 177

Christ by me...I listened to what he tells me with a felling of mercy for him; how can he believe in dreams?”<sup>65</sup>

In 1954, in Bucharest, he started attending the meetings of a group of Christian Orthodox intellectuals. He became interested in Christian literature, took part in various reunions about Christianity, and he began to consider the possibility of baptism. However, he was still hesitant: “I am a lazy person; and I am afraid - do I really wish the baptism or is just a sentimental desire, a quest for compensation, a new joy in the sadness that continues to surrender me; and I am not sure; and I am ashamed: how will my relatives react...”<sup>66</sup>

The second phase of his conversion took place in the first months of his prison, at Malmaison, where his fellow of the cell was praying every day without being disturbed by his presence and by his Jewish origin. Learning about his sentence of thirteen years in prison, Steinhardt decided to be baptized. The moment is described in vivid details in the Journal: “The catechization is over. When the Guardians are busy, Father Mina takes quickly the only cup of the cell, fills it with stinking water. Two convicts survey the orifice of the door where the guards could watch. Father Mina pronounces the religious formulas of the ritual of baptism in a rushed manner then crosses me. He then empties the content of the cup on my head, on my shoulders, and baptizes me in the name of the Father, of the Son and of the Holy Spirit...I reborn by stinking water and Rapid Spirit.”<sup>67</sup>

Commenting on this moment, George Ardeleanu<sup>68</sup> speaks about the character of *hold-up* (literally robbery, attack of bandits) of the baptism, that is to say, rapid,

<sup>65</sup> Steinhardt, *The happiness Diary*, 72

<sup>66</sup> Steinhardt, *The Happiness Diary*, 333

<sup>67</sup> Steinhardt, *The Happiness Diary*, 82

<sup>68</sup> Ardeleanu, *Nicolae Steinhardt and the paradoxes of liberty*, 181

forbidden action. He also mentions the ecumenical character of this baptism because the participants were orthodox, Catholics and Protestants priests. The beauty of the scene is constructed by contrasting the exterior and inner aspects of the moment: the sacred dimension of the moment confronted with the improvised nature of the ritual's instruments- the damaged cup, the stinking water, the speed of the gestures.

During the five years of prison, the “illumination” of the recently baptized convict will amplify and he will experiment an inner metamorphosis. The baptism will be for him the source of the happiness, which will transform not only his life but also his written work. In this sense, Virgil Ierunca says that for Steinhardt, the communist prison “meant not just an altar, but also an Academia”.<sup>69</sup> In the prison, the convicts were discussing literature, philosophy, theology, politics, and were learning foreign languages. After the baptism, Steinhardt speaks about the act of creation to Marcel Proust, the conversion being quickly assimilated by the rhythm of the tensioned existence of the cell. However, baptism was followed and accompanied by feelings of total certitude and of tolerance: “some kind of sweet, kind air around, an atmosphere similar with that of the books which speak about childhood...and above all, the novelty- I am a new man- what is the source of such freshness and beauty?”<sup>70</sup>

At this point, it is important to develop a very important point about the concept of conversion as such. Above, it has been stated that, in general, conversions are transient and thus difficult to recollect in very details. They can be reproduced by memory but only in a very incomplete manner. Steinhardt developed this idea in a theoretical essay about the conversion, part of the volume “The danger of confessing.” He states an idea similar

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<sup>69</sup> Virgil Ierunca, *The years have passed* ( Bucharest: Humanitas, 2001), 89

<sup>70</sup> Steinhardt, *The happiness Diary*, 181

to the one supported by William James: it is an impossible to clarify in a sufficient rational manner the process of the spiritual transformation, which led to the conversion<sup>71</sup>.

It is necessary in this sense to quote an important fragment to his testimony: “to the accomplishment of any conversion there are various causes, melted around the phenomenal ties of every individual...I did not arrive to Christianity on historical, exegetical, archeological, comparative ways; not intellectualizing, rationalizing, comparing, studying, selectively reflecting. But I arrived only by the charmed way of love; however, some books have been useful in helping me, relaxing me, enlightening me, reinforcing me into this love “.<sup>72</sup>

The same idea was exposed in a theoretical way by some researchers who wrote about conversion, and by some Christian Mystical authors-quoted into Steinhardt’s journal. The conversion cannot be understood but to a little extent from a *logical - historical* perspective: “The true conversion is not produced at the level of ideas. It is not about choosing an ideology, it is not even responding to a *problem* – term which is absent from the Holy Scripture and whom the Holy Church does not know. Indeed, the conversion means evading from the night of despair. The one who comes to Christ do this in order to be resurrected, because he understood that this is the only way.”<sup>73</sup>

After his release in 1964, Steinhardt will complete his conversion with the Sacraments of Unction and of the Holy Communion in an Orthodox Church from Bucharest. Nevertheless, the feeling of release is mingled with the conscience of sinfulness as in Weil’s case: “Even now, after the baptism, I am dirty...the angel of Satan

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<sup>71</sup> James, *Varieties...*, 89

<sup>72</sup> Steinhardt, *The danger of confessing*, 177

<sup>73</sup> Alexandre Schmemmann, *Of water and Spirit* (Bucharest: Symbol, 1992), 17



beats me on my face; the thought that I will get rid of temptations was a stupid illusion”.<sup>74</sup>

Clear enough, Steinhardt’s process of spiritual metamorphosis was very complex, accompanied by incertitude, by falls and revivals, by many dilemmas. In it were a number of elements that singularize the story of his conversion among other apparently similar testimonies of this type. First, Steinhardt wrote his testimony under a regime of political terror. This partly explains why his conversion was not an instantaneous one. Between the fail of being integrated in the Synagogue and the baptism of Jilava there are more than twenty years of wavering around the Christianity.

Second, as in Weil’s case, the conversion meant for him both an intellectual and a spiritual metamorphosis. In his ‘Happiness Diary’, there are many cultural references, from all domains of knowledge, discussed and reinterpreted from a Christian perspective. A few examples in this sense are illustrative.

The experiences of two physicians, Michelson and Morley, proved that being closed inside a system it is impossible to make absolute observations about this system, as the observer cannot come out and observe it objectively from inside. From here, Steinhardt concludes that,<sup>75</sup> despite the fact that man cannot have an objective knowledge about the Universe and therefore certitude in the existence of God, nevertheless the correct attitude of a Christian would be that of accomplishing the good during his life, as the teaching of Christ advises him to do that. Moreover, only by accomplishing the good men can obtain the inner peace, a fact verified in practice.

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<sup>74</sup> Steinhardt, *The happiness Diary*, 197

<sup>75</sup> Cf Steinhardt, *The Happiness Diary*, 138

. He quotes a lot from French poetry, especially the modern one and he draws conclusions that bear the imprints of a Christian perspective. He claims that Mallarme makes the synthetic portrait of a Christian in the verse “Le vierge, le vivace et le bel aujourd’hui – the virgin, the enthusiast and the beauty of today -”.<sup>76</sup> Or, mentioning some verses of the poet Jacques Prevert- atheist declared- he comments them on a Christian key, stating that the author is completely Christian in the message exposed.

The last example concerns some considerations about the communist regime. He explains the main characteristics of the regime by making appeal to four examples from literature, history and from a fairy tale. He first quotes the Russian historian Rostovtsev that explained the decadence of the Roman Empire by the arrival in the political position of ignorant men who applied measures of extreme control to protect their sluggishness and conceal their ignorance- exactly like the Security. He also mentions a detective story by Edgar Wallace in which the characters were obliged to pretend to be other men under the regime of terror-as, he states, in the communism where the population acted as if it was under a permanent surveillance.

The third example is a novel of Jules Verne in which a starship sent to the moon does not arrive to the destination and it becomes a satellite. This metaphor stands for the fate of the communism: a regime that aims at bringing happiness but end up with transforming people’s lives into a nightmare by transforming the temporal measures of terror in a way of living. Finally, there is the story of Andersen “The emperor’s new clothes” in which all men sees that the emperor is naked but nobody has the courage to recognize it –as in the communism everybody knows that the system is an error, but does not dare to claim it.

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<sup>76</sup> Steinhardt, *The happiness Diary*, 67

The third peculiarity of Steinhardt's conversion- and that is valuable only for Jewish converts - is his original attitude regarding the similitude between the Jewishness and the Christianity. Before the prison period, he wrote together with his friend Emanuel Neuman two documented volumes on Judaism. He also followed - without big enthusiasm as he himself confesses - the precepts of his first religion. However, after his conversion he does not reject his former belief: "The conversion does not imply in a necessary way the anti-Semitism.", he states.<sup>77</sup> Nevertheless, he criticizes, in a very decent manner indeed, the Judaic rejection of the possibility of material elements to become sacred - as the bread and the wine in the Communion. In addition, he acknowledges the difficulty of conversion to Judaism of a non-Judaic person-difficulty and he attributes it to their complex of being the chosen people: "This lack of proselytism of Judaism is in fact a racism".<sup>78</sup>

### **3.2. *Suffering reflected in European culture***

Unlike Weil, whose vision about suffering was a very theorized one, Steinhardt melted into his journal a multitude of considerations about suffering, basically extracted from Bible, literature, philosophy and last but not least, historical realities. Of course, he had personal considerations included in them, but they he expressed them in a very elliptical and simple manner. He arrived, nevertheless, at the same conclusions as Weil's,

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<sup>77</sup> Nicolae Steinhardt, Emanuel Neuman, *Illusions et realites juives* (Paris: Librairie Lipschutz, 1937), 55 in George Ardeleanu, *Nicolae Steinhardt and the paradoxes of liberty*, 174

<sup>78</sup> Steinhardt, *The Happiness Diary*, 318

with the difference, that they were better contextualized, and the parallels made with paradigms of European culture are most frequent.

In the presentation that follows, the main points will be: in the introduction a few of Steinhardt's statements about the evolution of this concept in European culture, and after, his attempts to explain its sense in human existence. A special point of interest are the typologies that Steinhardt makes to the concept of suffering and also the difference between the suffering of men and the suffering of God, aspect that is present also in Weil's work. After, there will be exposed some attitudes suggested by Steinhardt in order to face the suffering imposed by a totalitarian regime. Finally, it will be analyzed the way Steinhardt incorporates the case of Weil in this topic of suffering.

First, regarding the sacred history, he takes into consideration the "strange contradiction between the Old and the New Testament",<sup>79</sup> in the sense that God provided two different attitudes towards human beings: in the Old Testament, he rewarded those who suffered here after they have passed the "exam" of suffering – as Job or Abraham for example. But, beginning with the Gospel's period, after Christ descended into hell, God acted in a very strange manner: He lets Christ to die on the Cross, the martyrs being sacrificed and tortured in a terrible way. Steinhardt states that, whereas at the beginning all souls had the only destinations as hell, after Christ's resurrection, the heaven is no longer inaccessible and men can be aware about "the terrible reality of the Earth: all is pain, injustice, suffering...children became men, and they can face the truth".<sup>80</sup>

He reinforces this idea by an observation made by Kenneth Clark,<sup>81</sup> which states that during the first centuries after Christ the Christian religious art put the accent on

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<sup>79</sup> Steinhardt, *The Happiness Diary*, 382

<sup>80</sup> Steinhardt, *The Happiness Diary*, 382

<sup>81</sup> Kenneth Clark, in Steinhardt, *The Happiness Diary*, 256

optimistic subjects –good Sheppard, The Resurrection, and the Ascension. But later on the religious art became more realistic –focusing on events like the Crucifixion, the Passion, the martyrs - and emphasizing the true human condition in this world, “world of suffering, of injustice, of absurd”<sup>82</sup>. Therefore, it seems that Steinhardt’s vision about suffering is a very pessimistic one: men are condemned to live in this world of suffering and they cannot avoid it. However, how long would that situation be? Here Steinhardt makes the difference between the suffering of God and that of men. The first one, and this position as also sustained by Weil, proves to be perpetual until the end of the world: “the crucifixion is not an historical fact, but an event which repeats always but our eyes are incapable to see it”<sup>83</sup>. The second one is in fact an inherent characteristic of our existence – as the French writer Camus, Steinhardt points that the suffering is unlimited and therefore impossible to be avoided during this life.

However, why the things happen to be like that? The responses given by Steinhardt are expressed from a multitude of points of view, together with solutions to the problems of suffering. First explanation is taken from the Bible, precisely by essential message contained in the response given by God to Job: how can a man judge the acts of God, which is above the human wisdom? In other words, men cannot understand God’s plan. The only way is to accept, with humbleness, the present situation and to pray, having trust in God’s goodness. Writing also about the duties of a Christian, Steinhardt names the first two: to be happy and at the same time to feel entirely the suffering enhanced in the human condition.

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<sup>82</sup> Steinhardt, *The Happiness Diary*, 291

<sup>83</sup> Steinhardt, *The Happiness Diary*, 379

How these two, that is to say the joy and the suffering- can coexist? Steinhardt mentioned the faith in resurrection, which helps man assuming the suffering as a way followed also by God. He also enounced the “paradoxical Christian law of suffering: it is the cause of real happiness and the spring of joy”.<sup>84</sup> That is to say, in order to escape from suffering, men must trespass their tragically condition, and assume that the only way to arrive at the joy in Christ is to accept to suffer. In order to suggest the manner of doing that, Steinhardt quotes a police novel “ The mystery of the yellow room” written by Gaston Leroux, in which the problem was that a crime was committed in a room of which nobody went out. But at the same time, it would be impossible that the killer would not have been in the room. In this sense Steinhardt concludes that if only the human reason is applied for getting out of suffering, that would be impossible to avoid it. The solution is, therefore, “the second birth”, that is to say, the baptism that leads to the inner peace, love, and accomplishment, an explanation from the rational point of view not being possible.

The second answer to the problem of the relevance of the suffering is again given under a theological key, but from a text of Kierkegaard:”All those which have been really loved by God have been obliged to suffer in this world. Being reformulated, the Christian doctrine is something like that –to be loved by God and to love Him means in fact to suffer. To be Christian means to suffer in all kind of ways...God is your worse enemy, the aim of this life is the arrival to the highest degree of disgust of this life ..., and that is not because Christ would be cruel. He is only love and kindness. The cruelty resides in the fact that despite His kindness, He nevertheless refuses to take out the Christians from this world”.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Steinhardt, *The Happiness Diary*, 346

<sup>85</sup> Soren Kierkegaard, in Steinhardt, *The Happiness Diary*, 245

The solution is extracted also from Kierkegaard, reformulated, but totally in the spirit of Weil: the Christian's joy resides in accepting the suffering. The paradox is that the men who are loved by God, can also consider God as their major enemy, but nevertheless by reason of His love. Steinhardt makes the difference between understanding and accepting the suffering. Understanding means annihilating it and that is not in fact the purpose of suffering. But accepting it would meant really letting God to act, to transfigured and heal your soul.

However, the typology of the suffering envisaged by Steinhardt differs by that made by Weil. Whereas the latter writer makes the difference only between physical suffering and affliction, the former one states that there is useless suffering and useful too. Steinhardt quotes Henri de Montherlant, who speaks about "the death suffering that runs with it all the good of the soul...so it's totally wrong to think that is enough to know the suffering in order to obtain salvation".<sup>86</sup> The second category of suffering is, after Steinhardt, the "saintly suffering",<sup>87</sup> the suffering that imitates Christ and is adequate to the divine commandments.

The second typology is done in taking as point of reference the difference between the tragedy and the mockery: there are real big, classical, heroic sufferings and there are also minor ones. In other words "the Enemy –the devil- has two ways of acting against human beings, the real serious, catastrophic pains, and the little sufferings, which aggravate the serious ones".<sup>88</sup> In order to be able to face the sufferings which are part of the first category, it is important to have patience with the latter ones.

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<sup>86</sup> Henri de Montherlant, in Steinhardt, *Happiness Diary*, 229

<sup>87</sup> Steinhardt, *The Happiness Diary*, 230

<sup>88</sup> Steinhardt, *The Happiness Diary*, 189

A special point of interest lies in the considerations made by Steinhardt about the proper attitude to be followed in the case of the existence of a totalitarian regime. Of course, this attitudes do no imply the fact that these considerations are addressed only to Christians, being the fact that some of them have been written before the event of conversion. Facing the sufferings and privations imposed by totalitarianism, men have at their dispositions three solutions to be followed, envisaged also by three cultural personalities: Alexandr Soljenitsin, Alexandr Zinoviev and Winston Churchill. These solutions are exposed at the beginning of Steinhardt's journal, under the subtitle of "political testament." They deal with the next possible attitudes: of self-mortification – or better said, getting out of the regime by total self-neglecting, the second one- refusing to adapt to the system , and finally, fighting against it. All these three solutions are "well established and valid by no mistake".<sup>89</sup>

Nevertheless, in the following pages – and very subtle in his prologue - Steinhardt's main idea is that the correct attitude in case of a Christian would be the last one. He states that "When there is a conflict between the divine commandments (natural law) and human commandments (positive law), there can be no doubt for a Christian... Christianity does not call us only to blind obedience, but to tolerance, justice, wisdom and intelligence."<sup>90</sup>

Perhaps not only because of their common Jewish nationalities, but also because of the cultural genius of the French writer, Steinhardt quoted a lot from Simone Weil in his journal, utilizing her in the context of his considerations about suffering. For example, Steinhardt comments on Crucifixion are made "invoking Dostoievski, Simone Weil, and

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<sup>89</sup> Steinhardt, *The Happiness Diary*, 9

<sup>90</sup> Steinhardt, *The Happiness Diary*, 121



Kierkegaard”.<sup>91</sup> His main idea is that the suffering of Christ was entirely assumed as and authentic, God has taken the human hypostasis in its integrality, including the capacity to suffer. To use the words of Weil –“the suffering made Jesus to pray, to ask Father to permit him to avoid the suffering, to feel Himself abandoned by Father. All that is different of this model of suffering is more or less false”.<sup>92</sup>

In the attempt of defining the suffering, Steinhardt does not give a proper original definition, but he quotes other writers who have given it, and he quotes also Weil: “The suffering: superiority of man over God. The materialization was needed in order that this suffering not to become scandalous.”<sup>93</sup> Regarding the same subject, there are another two reflections of Weil, often quoted by Steinhardt: “The terrible paradox of Christianity is that being chosen by God means being abandoned by Him ...The extraordinary superiority of Christianity is that it does not search for a supernatural remedy for suffering, but for a supernatural utilization of suffering.”<sup>94</sup> Let us stop a little on these two reflections of Weil and comment on them on relation with cultural references from *Happiness Diary*.

The motif of man - or of Christ - abandoned by God, is indeed a theme very frequent in Weil’s writings. In her essay, *The love of God and affliction*, she compares the one which suffers with a stigmatized insect pierced by a needle and totally incapable to react. For a human being pierced by “the blind mechanism of necessity”,<sup>95</sup> loving seems to be almost an impossibility. The Russian theologian Evdokimov, on a different formulation, enounces this fact also: “every man who baptizes it’s a person stigmatized

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<sup>91</sup> Steinhardt, *The Happiness Diary*, 167

<sup>92</sup> Simone Weil, *Waiting for God*, 89

<sup>93</sup> Weil, *Gravity and grace*, 156

<sup>94</sup> Weil, *Waiting for God*, 187

<sup>95</sup> Weil, *Gravity and grace*, 45

by an invisible way, a person which adds something at the suffering of Christ, which is in agony until the end of the world.”<sup>96</sup> Moreover, not without significance Steinhardt quotes Charles Peguy which reproached to Dante that he visited the Hell as a tourist.<sup>97</sup>

In the same way, Steinhardt speaks about the un- heroic character of the death of Christ, compared with that of Socrates. The latter one dies in a noble manner, calm, surrounded by his friends while Christ dies alone, leaved by all his followers and in torture. That is to say, the death of Socrates has something theatrical in it, he attempts to the condition of a God, while Christ “descends until the most inferior parts of human conditions”.<sup>98</sup> And this descent is in fact the most authentic suffering.

Regarding the “abandonment of human being” by God, here Steinhardt developed Weil’s idea, but in a more concrete way. During the suffering provoked by the abandon – because ultimately, the fact of being in God means experiencing real joy and happiness – God in fact watches carefully and protect the humans. But he acts apparently cruel in a way similar to a mother who learn her child to walk, and let him suffer in order to get use with her absence.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Paul Evdokimov, *The ages of spiritual life* (Bucharest: Christiana, 2003), 78

<sup>97</sup> Steinhardt, *The Happiness Diary*, 278

<sup>98</sup> Steinhardt, *The Happiness Diary*, 212

<sup>99</sup> Steinhardt, *The Happiness Diary*, 234

## 4. Two converts facing the new Christian existential condition – a comparative approach

### ***4.1. Two religious attitudes. Refusal and acceptance of the Church as institution***

The two conversions presented above are, without any doubt, singular cases in the history of Christianity. The majority of authors who have studied the phenomenon of conversion, such as Lewis Rambo, or Karl Morrison for example, generally treat it like a “turning or returning process”,<sup>100</sup> from and to religious groups, ways of life and so on. One aim of this thesis is to show that in the cases of Weil and Steinhardt the real significance of the process of conversion was one of *conferring sense*. First, their conversion conferred sense to the issue of suffering – from a Christian-philosophical point of view - , second to their cultural preoccupations and finally, - mainly in Steinhardt’s case- to the historical events of their time. In other words, their conversions were experiences that “vindicated the ways of God”.<sup>101</sup> This is the reason why a big part of their writings could be seen as “studies in theodicy”.<sup>102</sup>

Another aim of my thesis is to show that in these cases conversion meant a new way of life “mingling love, uncertainty, and affliction”.<sup>103</sup> In fact, these components are indeed the very content of the message of the Gospel’s call to repentance. Christ repeated many times to the apostles that in order to follow him they will have to suffer but at the

<sup>100</sup> Lewis Rambo, *Understanding religious conversions* (London: Yale University Press, 1993), 14

<sup>101</sup> Karl Morrison, *Understanding conversion* (London: University Press of Virginia, 1992), 67

<sup>102</sup> Morrison, *Understanding conversion*, 66

<sup>103</sup> Morrison, *Understanding conversion*, 67

end, their suffering will become “a joy that nobody would be able to take away from them.”(Gospel of Saint John 16, 16)

Weil’s and Steinhardt’s intellectual biographies are quite remarkable. Incorporating both Christian and profane references, they try to explain to themselves – and to others by their writings - the essential questions of the human life: its aim, its absurd aspects, its suffering. They moved “from the absence of a faith system to a faith commitment”,<sup>104</sup> “turned towards a positive ideal”<sup>105</sup> and, most importantly, acquired a new spiritual and cultural orientation in their life. Following the events that led to their conversion they saw very clearly which were the tasks to accomplish, the ways of acting in the world,

The next part of this chapter presents these spiritual and cultural metamorphoses in a comparative manner. Firstly, it looks at the main similarities and differences of their biographies – drawing on their autobiographical texts, other different writings and the testimonies of their friends- with a focus on the processes of their conversions, finally following the steps that led them to embracing Christianity. Second, the next part discusses their attitudes towards the Church as Institution and towards the Sacraments, with a special focus on baptism, as the ritual that, mainly for Steinhardt, is the very event that led to his conversion.

It has been said that “the experience of conversion is quite different from the subsequent description of this process ”.<sup>106</sup> James<sup>107</sup> and Steinhardt<sup>108</sup> have also touched this issue in their books. Human words, simply said, cannot depict in a complete way the

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<sup>104</sup> Rambo, *Understanding religious conversions*, 15

<sup>105</sup> Nock, *Conversion*, 9

<sup>106</sup> Morrison, *Understanding conversion*, 66

<sup>107</sup> James, *The varieties of religious experiences*, 178

<sup>108</sup> Steinhardt, *The Happiness Diary*, 95

real experience of God. Nevertheless, a certain percentage of historical and spiritual truth is, to some extent present in these texts. Morrison's statement "what historians have before them are not vivid experiences but only literary compositions, which by their very nature are fictive"<sup>109</sup> is perhaps only partially true. However, taking into consideration the case of uncommon converts, that is, intellectuals of a high stature, such as Saint Paul, Saint Augustine, Blaise Pascal, Paul Claudel, Simone Weil, and Nicolae Steinhardt, who provided authentic testimonies, one can rely on them as being very honest ones.

What Weil wrote, for instance, is an introspective analysis of the divine experiences of her life. Like Steinhardt –or Saint Augustine – her letter from the volume "Waiting for God" is a confession, even though she had addressed it to a single man. Contrary to Steinhardt though, she never expressed the need to clarify for herself the main aspects of her divine experience. She wrote her autobiographical letter just in order to be read by Father Perrin, her only confessor. There she explains her attitude towards Christianity: prayer, inspiration, searching for God, and "the instant of death as the center and object of life."<sup>110</sup> In fact, the main difference between her method of confessing and Steinhardt's is that she has numerous autobiographical notes, mainly contained in her numerous letters and in her notebooks. This is why, after her death, her manuscripts – quite numerous indeed - have been published in an approximate order, as she did not always put down the date of writing of her letters.

Weil claimed that her discovery of Christ happened "without the intervention of any human being".<sup>111</sup> Like Steinhardt, she was an agnostic ("I may say that never at any

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<sup>109</sup> Morrison, *Conversion and text*, 7

<sup>110</sup> Weil, *Waiting for God*, 57

<sup>111</sup> Weil, *Waiting for God*, 21

moment in my life have I ‘sought for God’”) <sup>112</sup> until the conversion, but, like Steinhardt, a highly trained one. She never considered the problem of God because, as one of her friends said, “She was afraid of making a mistake which in such a manner seemed to her the greatest possible evil”. <sup>113</sup> Moreover, as one of her pupils remembered, “she refused to mention God in her philosophical teachings, saying that one does not speak of a subject about whom one knows nothing”. <sup>114</sup> Weil claimed that her approach to Christianity was anticipated by the year of working in the factory and by the trip she made in Portugal. Both events made her conscious of the suffering implied by the Christian view on the human condition. She added that these experiences convinced her that “Christianity is pre-eminently the religion of slaves”, <sup>115</sup> a very Marxist affirmation for one who will later contest it.

Quite on the contrary, Steinhardt approached Christianity from a more culturally-oriented direction. Unlike Weil – a convinced agnostic woman, member of a Jewish agnostic family- he tried, under the influence of his friend Emanuel Neuman, to follow the precepts of the Jewish religion. He abandoned it after a while – unhappy with the cultural competence of the Rabbi and still retaining the nostalgic memories of childhood experiences of Christianity– and began his inner quest of God. The details of his spiritual evolution are recorded in the chapter “testimony” of the book “The danger of confessing.” He traveled a lot in England and France and was impressed by the “deep religiosity of English people... God, without any doubt, is at His home in Great

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<sup>112</sup> Weil, *Waiting for God*, 22

<sup>113</sup> J.M. Perrin, Gustave Thibon, *Simone Weil as we knew her* (London: Routledge – Taylor and Francis Group, 2005), 27

<sup>114</sup> Perrin, Thibon, *Simone Weil as we knew her*, 28

<sup>115</sup> Weil, *Waiting for God*, 22

Britain”.<sup>116</sup> During this period, he “sought for refuge in churches, Christian books, in prayer, in hopes”.<sup>117</sup>

Speaking about the events that produced Weil’s conversion she mentioned a few decisive episodes in this sense. The week that she spent at Solesmes before Easter, the liturgical services during that week, the recitation of the English mystical poetry, later the recitation of *Our Father* in Greek, all these contributed to the fact that, as she claimed, “Christ himself came down and took possession”<sup>118</sup> of her. She experienced her inner transformation as a totally new experience, as until these events she had never prayed, read or talked anything referring to Christianity.

There are two more important aspects of Weil’s personality – that she shares with Steinhardt – which are very relevant for the process of conversion to Christianity. Both are related to her experience of Christ’s presence, as she claimed that after the Solesmes period she was visited constantly by his divine presence.<sup>119</sup>

First, she can be included in the category of “virile women”<sup>120</sup>, a concept that has its origin in the rhetoric of the Antiquity. That is to say, in her case it is about “chastity combined with celibacy, the renunciation of biological sex and of social coupling”,<sup>121</sup> ingredients which would permit to name Weil as a “Bride of Christ”.<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> Steinhardt, *The danger of confessing*, 176

<sup>117</sup> Steinhardt, *The danger of confessing*, 179

<sup>118</sup> Weil, *Waiting for God*, 27

<sup>119</sup> “I was incapable of thinking of Him without thinking of Him as God...During this recitation or at other moments, Christ is present with me in person, but his presence is infinitely more real, more moving, more clear than on the first occasion when he took possession of me “ in Weil, *Waiting for God*, 24

<sup>120</sup> Jo Ann Kay McNamarra, *Sisters in Arms – Catholic Nuns through Two Millennia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 9

<sup>121</sup> McNamarra, *Sisters in arms*, 13

<sup>122</sup> “‘Brides of Christ’ a male concept of female spirituality, serves very effectively to anchor women to a traditional gender role, but women themselves rarely indulge in its implicit eroticism in their writings” in McNamarra, *Sisters in Arms*, 56- ce retorica trendy...

Nevertheless, her case is more complex than any other similar ones, such as Edith Stein's or Therese de Lisieux's for example. Even before her conversion Weil had tried to eliminate any male intrusion from her life. She deliberately masked her feminine beauty to such an extent that one of her friends, George Bataille considered her as "asexual, with something sinister about her".<sup>123</sup> Bataille's account is emphasized even more by Souvarine's testimony, which seeing her after she came from a bath into the sea, was "struck by her beauty".<sup>124</sup> Weil often spoke about her "singular misfortune of being a woman".<sup>125</sup> Her attitude was reinforced by her mother who called her "Simon" at home, as she always signed her letters addressed to her mother with the formula "your respectful son".<sup>126</sup>

After the conversion, she maintained her singular attitude regarding sexuality, but she did not claim to have adopted it for the love of Christ, neither did she orientate it to any of the traditional form of consecrated life –like the adoption of monastic lives as in the cases of Stein and Steinhardt. She simply motivated her attitude with the absence of any need for sexual relationships.

The second important aspect that singularizes her spiritual biography is related to a religious concept, which is *imitatio Christi* – imitating Christ – and, in connection with it, her special attitude on suffering. Like the nuns of the medieval period, Weil manifested her solidarity with the poor people her entire life, starting from her childhood. She pretended – while she was in agony in a hospital in England - to experience the sufferings of the whole humanity involved in the war and also to abandon herself to the

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<sup>123</sup> Bataille's testimony in Richard Burton, *Holy Tears, Holy Blood*, 139

<sup>124</sup> Gray, *Simone Weil – a life*, 157

<sup>125</sup> Perrin, Thibon, *Simone Weil as we knew her*, 45

<sup>126</sup> Perrin, Thibon, *Simone Weil as we knew her*, 46



will of God, as she wrote in one of her last letters: “Blind man’s stick. To perceive one’s own existence not as itself but as part of God’s will... Think to Christ with one’s whole soul”.<sup>127</sup>

In Steinhardt’s case, these two aspects- namely the chastity and the *imitatio Christi*- are, however, less complicated. Before and after the conversion, he had a life of celibate; there is no reference of any feminine presence in his life that is mentioned in his writings. He seemed to assume, mostly after the prison period, the vote of chastity. This however, did not prevent him making a lot of considerations about sexuality in his journal. Concerning the second problem - the imitation of Christ- as soon as Steinhardt arrived in the prison he realized the deep desire of his soul: “Christ accepted me, he wanted me; he saw me in the mud. The state of happiness lasted all period of prison...it happened to me not to be able to sleep, or to wake up in the middle of the night because of so much happiness”.<sup>128</sup> He also manifested the desire of imitating Christ mostly by refusal of all earthly pleasures especially after his retirement at the monastery. He followed the sayings of the Gospel: “He that love father or mother more than me is not worthy of me. And he that takes not his cross and follows after me is not worthy of me” (Matthew 10, 37). Later on, he motivated this choice: “I was too shocked by what I saw and lived in the prison, many of the truths regarding human being were revealed to me; shortly expressed: I was edified about how the world works. I wanted to see it, not with animosity, but from distance”.<sup>129</sup>

In discussing the main events that led to their conversion and the feelings that accompanied it one should consider the two components of the “normal” process of

<sup>127</sup> Gray, *Simone Weil – a life*, 211

<sup>128</sup> Steinhardt, *The danger of confessing*, 187

<sup>129</sup> Steinhardt, *The danger of confessing*, 185

conversion as presented by Karl Morrison: “*the need for love and penitence and the noble humility*”.<sup>130</sup> As has been stated before, one of Weil’s dominant characteristics as a child was a compassionate love for those in misfortune: “From my earliest childhood I always had the Christian idea of love for one’s neighbor”.<sup>131</sup> After the teaching experience and working in the factory, periods during which she accentuated to the brink of pathology the need of suffering (in fact a consequence of the need of love), Weil left with her mother to Solesmes.

After meeting the young men from England who introduced her to the mystical poetry, she persisted in repeating a poem called Love, despite of a terrible headache. The content of the poem is a perfect illustration of her need for love and penitence. It is a dialogue between Love – in fact Christ – and the soul “guilty of lust and sin”.<sup>132</sup> Love’s demand to the soul is to sit and eat with it, but the soul, conscious of its sins, initially refuses, only to finally accept that, after the urging of love.

All her biographers noticed the accentuation of the feeling of repentance after the conversion. However, this repentance is combined – like in other converts’ cases - by the feeling that “God played with her as a wife suspected of infidelity or even as a toy, that he was her laughing torturer”.<sup>133</sup> Another text that she wrote in the end of her life narrates another encounter with the Lord, just that this time he acts in a different manner and even brutally rejects her.<sup>134</sup> The assurance of love is generally present in the cases of

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<sup>130</sup> Morrison, *Understanding conversion*, 8

<sup>131</sup> Petrement, *Simone Weil*, 45

<sup>132</sup> Weil, *Waiting for God*, 23

<sup>133</sup> Morrison, *Understanding conversion*, 66

<sup>134</sup> “I kneeled, I embraced his feet, I begged him not to chase me from being next to him. But he threw me down on the scales. I descended without knowing anything, my soul in pieces...I know very well that he does not love me. How could he love me? But in my heart, some part of me cannot refuse to think,

conversion “even when the faithful were mocked, afflicted, and laid desolate”.<sup>135</sup> Weil manifested a terrible need not to be pitied for her patent absurdities: “Indeed, for other people, in a sense, I do not exist. I am the color of dead leaves, like certain unnoticed insects...never seek friendship... never permit oneself to dream of friendship”.<sup>136</sup>

“The noble humility”<sup>137</sup> is in fact a component of the spiritual process of imitating Christ and it contains a very paradoxical point of view: following Christ would mean not only embracing a life of suffering, privations and humbleness, but also assuming a noble existential condition. The acts of Christ expressed nobility of the soul, but the unique act of incarnation contained self-humiliation (kenosis) of the divine in order to sacrifice Himself for the salvation of the human being. In Weil’s case she wanted – before, but mostly after her conversion, to annihilate herself: “God, please accord me the right of becoming nothingness”.<sup>138</sup> Nevertheless, in many of her writings, especially in *Grace and gravity*, she emphasized the fact that the sign of human dignity is in fact recognizing man’s nothingness and assuming this truth: “For men of courage physical sufferings (and privations) are often tests of endurance and of strength of the soul. But there is a better use to be made of them. For me then, may they not be that. May they rather be a testimony, lived and felt, of human misery... We have to be nothing in order to be in our right place in the whole”.<sup>139</sup>

In Steinhardt’s case the two aspects manifest as follows. First, a few hours after the moment of his conversion, that is to say the baptism in the prison, the need for love

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trembling of anguish, that, maybe, despite all, he loves me” in Simone Weil, *La connaissance surnaturelle* (Paris, Gallimard, 1950), 10

<sup>135</sup> Morrison, *Understanding conversion*, 66

<sup>136</sup> Weil, *Waiting for God*, 24

<sup>137</sup> Morrison, *Understanding conversion*, 155

<sup>138</sup> Weil, *Waiting for God*, 157

<sup>139</sup> Weil, *Grace and gravity* (London: Routledge Classics, 2001), 34

and penitence manifests plainly, but, as it became usual in his case, always interrelated with cultural dimensions. This is in fact one of the important differences of his account on conversion, comparing it with Weil's: almost every paragraph of his account mentions the name of a writer, a book, a character of a book, a song, or a piece of art. To illustrate this I will briefly refer to one of his testimonies on the feeling of repentance recorded in his journal after the moment of his conversion.

He feels "the first effect of seclusion, accentuated by the sound of bells – in the prison the convicts could hear the bells of the Church near the prison – : the feeling of our guiltiness. Although the fact that we are here on basis of imaginary accuses, we realize a general culpability: regarding ourselves, regarding others. We carry on our shoulders, on our souls, on our backs, the sins of the entire humanity. And the suffering of the animals, too. Markel, the brother of abbot Zosima in Dostoevski's novel, *The Brothers Karamazov* : it is because of our sins that they arrived to eat one another, and to be eaten"<sup>140</sup>. On the aspect of imitating Christ, he quotes Lean Bloy's claim – "oh Christ, who prays for those who crucify you and crucifies those who love you".<sup>141</sup> He states that in order to share the normal Christian condition, one needs to accept "the moment when God takes out the instrument of surgery, he decides to heal us of any pathological attachments regarding this world".<sup>142</sup>

The second aspect- the *noble humility* of the recent converts- is present more in Steinhardt's case than in Weil's. When judging the entire religious philosophy of the two writers, it is easy to notice an important difference. Steinhardt's point of view about the Christian condition is, generally, more optimistic, more realistic, less philosophical and

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<sup>140</sup> Steinhardt, *The Happiness Diary*, 99

<sup>141</sup> Steinhardt, *The Happiness Diary*, 128

<sup>142</sup> Steinhardt, *The Happiness Diary*, 267

more existential. That is to say, he states first that one of the most important characteristic of Christ is that of being a “gentleman”.<sup>143</sup> He argues that almost in all cases the behavior of Christ is full of dignity, of respect for every human being, of trust and condescendence. From here he concludes that the message of the Lord for all humans would be an invitation to recognize their true condition: that of being sons of God, heirs of Heaven.

The second aspect of the comparison between the two refers to their attitudes towards the Church. One aspect that should be taken into consideration is that Weil’s position in the Catholic Church is quite ambiguous, whereas Steinhardt integrally assumed the Orthodox Church as an institution ”mother.” Many researchers, such as Miklos Veto or Eric Springsted have raised the question: to what extent could Weil be named Christian or Catholic?

If her “religious philosophy” were to be analyzed in detail, it is possible to “take an inventory of her deviations”.<sup>144</sup> But this is a quite too substantially subject which does not enter into the aims of the present thesis. It suffices to say that, in contrast to Steinhardt, Christianity came relatively too late to open and develop Weil’s world-view. In addition, the Christian theology she knew influenced her on a very superficial level and in any case to a smaller degree than her own experience of Christ and her reading of the Gospels.

Following Father Perrin’s - one of her closest friends – testimony, she claimed to “accept the Church as the guardian of the truth”,<sup>145</sup> but she stated also that she had the

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<sup>143</sup> Steinhardt, *The Happiness Diary*, 33

<sup>144</sup> Veto, *The religious metaphysics of Simone Weil*, 160

<sup>145</sup> Perrin, Thibon, *Simone Weil as we knew her*, 231

certain feeling that, for instance, “God does not want her in the Church”.<sup>146</sup> And this is not her only argument for her refusal of being of baptism. She said: “I love God, Christ and the Catholic faith as much as it is possible for such a miserably inadequate creature to love them. I love the Saints; I love the Catholic liturgy, hymns, architecture, rites and ceremonies. But I have not the slightest love for the Church in the strict sense of the word, apart from all these things that I do love”.<sup>147</sup>

The problem of how Weil understood the Church is very complicated and complex and, given the size of this thesis, only a few synthetic ideas about it will appear here. In short, she thought that, taken as a component of the society, Catholicism is an “*ersatz* of truth”.<sup>148</sup> She made the difference between two aspects of life, the vegetative – the real sensitive, practical one – , and the social, regarding the latter as bad in itself for the spiritual part of the soul: “Christ redeemed the vegetative, not the social. He did not pray for the world. The social order is irreducibly that of the prince of this world. Our only duty with regard to the social is to try to limit the evil of it. A society like the Church, which claims to be divine is perhaps more dangerous on account of the *ersatz* good which it contains than on account of the evil which sullies it. Something of the social labelled divine: an intoxicating mixture which carries with it every sort of licence. Devil disguised”.<sup>149</sup>

So to speak, she preferred to remain, as she claimed “on the threshold of the Church, waiting”.<sup>150</sup> She wanted to be included in it, but she refused to accept it, going to the final limit. She reproached the Church for the rigidity and narrowness of its social

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<sup>146</sup> Weil, *Waiting for God*, 31

<sup>147</sup> Weil, *Waiting for God*, 12

<sup>148</sup> Weil, *Grace and gravity*, 165

<sup>149</sup> Weil, *Grace and gravity*, 166

<sup>150</sup> Weil, *Waiting for God*, 145

organization and for the inflexibility of its authority. Moreover, she arrived even to compares Rome, the capital-city of Catholicism with the Great Beast from Apocalypse, and she also has anti-Semitic affirmations: “Rome is the Great Beast of atheism and materialism, adoring nothing but itself. Israel is the Great Beast of religion. Neither the one nor the other is likable. The Great Beast is always repulsive...The Jews, that handful of uprooted people, have caused the uprootedness of the whole terrestrial globe. Their involvement in Christianity has made of Christendom, in regard to its own past, something uprooted”.<sup>151</sup>

In the first chapter were exposed the principal reasons concerning the refusal of Weil to receive the baptism. However, here it would be proper to add a few ideas regarding this aspect, connected with her opinion about the Catholic Church. First, Father Perrin affirmed that for Weil, the love of Christ “seemed to be enough”.<sup>152</sup> He states that, due to her “extremely superficial idea she had of the Church and Catholics”,<sup>153</sup> she preferred to find refuge in her own individualistic religious ritual, stating that she does not feel the need to be baptized.

Steinhardt’s position towards the Church is, simply put, a very obedient one. After the baptism, event that he regarded as his spiritual reborn, mostly all of his considerations that he wrote concerning the Church are fully within the Christian Orthodox Tradition, with one particularity that makes his case singular in the history of Christian orthodox converts. In all his writings concerning Christianity, articles, letters, sermons, literary analyses, he utilizes very atypical cultural artifacts for this area of

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<sup>151</sup> Weil, *Grace and gravity*, 165

<sup>152</sup> Perrin, Thibon, *Simone Weil as we knew her*, 45

<sup>153</sup> Perrin, Thibon, *Simone Weil as we knew her*, 46

Christianity. He seems to be until now, the only converted who succeeded to view all areas of culture in a Christian Key. Moreover, by his apology of Christian orthodoxy, he melted a variety of language styles: juridical, economic, poetical, etc. In this sense, it is proper to stop at one of his sermons regarding the cult of the Cross-and of the Mother of God.

The sermon was included in the volume “*By giving you will gain*” and it was preached to Rohia monastery a short period after Steinhardt became a monk. The beginning of it marks the ecumenical character of Steinhardt’s thought, who was after all baptized in the presence of priests from three Christian confessions Christian confessions. He states that, even if he is not at the same opinion with those generally recognized as member of “sects” (neo-protestants or evangelicals), nevertheless he thinks that everyone has the liberty of choosing his own way of seeing religion. However, he feels “compassion” for “brothers of a different belief”<sup>154</sup> because they miss two great consolations and helps for the soul, that is to say, the Cross and Mother of God.

He states, among other things, that the Cross anticipated literary creations, as *Human fate* of Malraux or *Journey at the end of the night* of Celine, books which prove the tragic and merciless character of human condition. He uses the text of a song of George Brassens in order to illustrate the charity of the Mother of God. Defining the Cross, he uses a mathematical and also a literary style: he uses concepts as “metaphor”, “plan”, “perpendicularity”, “graphics”, “psychoanalysis”, “the coordinates of the universe”.<sup>155</sup> But he doesn’t neglect the theological language, mentioning dogmas, fragments from Gospels or samples of prayers addressed to the Mother of God.

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<sup>154</sup> Steinhardt, *By giving, you will gain*, 277

<sup>155</sup> Steinhardt, *By giving you will gain*, 282



Shortly put, Steinhardt is the model of multilateral Christian intellectual, in some way a counterpart of Simone Weil. But whereas the latter one cannot go out of Platonic ideas and, as one of her friends mentioned “she refused with obstinacy any concession made to the social conditions”,<sup>156</sup> the former is really a practical and obedient servant of the Church unlike Weil who theorized a lot the concept of obedience understanding it in a very unusual way. Moreover, Weil’s faith “was stuck, so to speak, on Good Friday”,<sup>157</sup> whereas Steinhardt’s main vision of Christianity is in fact focused on resurrection, while not neglecting the suffering of the Lord. The cultural profile of Weil allowed her to arrive at a syncretism, one in which she attempted to decipher Christian message in writings as Iliad, Bhagavad Gita or Upanishads. Steinhardt, despite his multicultural skills, seems to be more simple, more comfortable for the reader and, probably, more human in the content of his spiritual message.

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<sup>156</sup> Perrin, Thibon, *Simone Weil as we knew her*, 120

<sup>157</sup> Burton, *Holy Tears, Holy Blood*, 145

## 4.2. Two ways of suffering in Christ

In their very different ways, Weil and Steinhardt held to the idea that suffering was meaningless unless one was taught to refer it to Christ. He is, in essence, the true meaning of suffering. Nevertheless, from this sense, other ones emerge also, and they will appear in the content of this chapter. In the theoretical part, the comparative approach will focus on their definition, typology of suffering and attitudes suggested to be followed. The second part will comment upon two cases of attitude towards suffering as Christ's and Job's.

Referring first to their autobiographical writings, both turned again and again to Christ's passion and also to their relations with him and with his suffering. But whereas Weil is very direct and audacious in her account as he claim that God is present with her in his very "person",<sup>158</sup> Steinhardt writes only about states of soul: happiness, inner silence, sweetness, calm and so on. He does not pretend that he "experienced" Christ, but a light that he supposed to be Christ: "I do not see Christ in person, but only a huge light – white and bright – and I feel extremely happy. The light that surrenders me from all parts, it is a total happiness, and that is nothing outside it. I am in the light. I know it will last forever, it is a *perpetuum immobile*. It's me, the light whispers to me, but not by words, but by the transmission of thoughts. And I understand, by intellect and by feeling – I understand it's the Lord and that I am inside of the taborical light."<sup>159</sup>

Weil's discourse on suffering is, as it was shown in the first chapter, very heterogeneous, present in the majority of her writings, but the main essay which deals about this theme is *Love of God and affliction*. Here it is obvious that in her case the

<sup>158</sup> Weil, *Waiting for God*, 58

<sup>159</sup> Steinhardt, *The Happiness Diary*, 95

concept is interrelated with that of de-creation, in fact imitating Christ. He renounced to his divinity in order that we obtain salvation: “Suffering: superiority of man over God. The Incarnation was necessary so that this superiority should not be scandalous”.<sup>160</sup>

The Passion of Christ would be the model to be followed by men in order to de-create themselves. In fact, the de-creation about which Weil theorizes was present in a simpler form in the New Testament in the Epistle of Saint Paul to Philippians: “Let this mind be in you which was also in Jesus Christ. Who, being in the form of God, though it not robbery to be equal with God. But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men. And being found in fashion as man, he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even the death of the Cross” (Philippians, 2, 6-8). The Greek word to express the words “he humbled himself” is *ekenosen*, which means “to become empty”, so to say, to renounce to the divinity in Christ’s case. In the same way, a human being can arrive by de-creative suffering to follow Christ in this de – personalization.

Unlike Steinhardt, whose theorization of the suffering is minimal in his journal – he generally tries to find a meaning of it – , Weil gives many ways of defining it. She states that “affliction is an uprooting of life, a more or less equivalent of death”, “affliction makes God appear to be absent for a time, more absent than a dead man”, “a kind of horror submerges the whole soul”, “affliction inject a poison of inertia into the soul”, “affliction is in fact a distance”, “a marvel of divine technique”.<sup>161</sup>

She makes the difference between physical suffering and affliction and, as Steinhardt, she states also that suffering is not always de-creative, in other words, it can

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<sup>160</sup> Weil, *Grace and gravity*, 48

<sup>161</sup> Weil, *Waiting for God*, 73

be also, “useless and degrading”,<sup>162</sup> infernal indeed when it is only a purely external destruction of the ego, without the soul’s consent and cooperation. However, true de-creative suffering makes the soul arriving to a state of total renunciation and, moreover, a necessity of suffering. This is the sense of what Simone Petrement, her close friend and biographer, rightly called “ the terrible prayer” found in one of the notebooks of Weil. She desires that “May all this – she meant her will, her senses, her intelligence even her love for God - , may all this be wrenched from me, devoured by God, transformed into the substance of Christ, and given as a food to the unfortunate whose body and soul lack all kind of nourishment. And let me be paralyzed, blind, deaf, an idiot, an imbecile. Father, bring about this transformation now, in the name of Christ”.<sup>163</sup>

To sum up, her basic attitude would be that of accepting suffering, assuming it. The pain in itself is insignificant. Everything was about the recognition and desire of pain, as obedience to a divine order and, so to say, as a means of entering into God’s order. Moreover, accepting it and desiring it would mean also finding pleasure in it: “Suffering and enjoyment as sources of knowledge. The serpent offered knowledge to Adam and Eve. The Sirens offered knowledge to Ulysses. These stories teach that the soul is lost through seeking knowledge in pleasure. Why? Pleasure is perhaps innocent on condition that we do not seek knowledge in it. It is permissible to seek that only in suffering”.<sup>164</sup>

In order to give a sense to the problem of suffering, Steinhardt, and that is very interesting, uses as sources first the poetry, in general the French one but not only. He quotes the verses of T. S. Elliot: “We must try to penetrate the other private worlds/ of

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<sup>162</sup> Weil, *Waiting for God*,

<sup>163</sup> Weil, *Notebooks*, in Petrement, *Simone Weil – a life*, 142

<sup>164</sup> Weil, *Gravity and grace*, 145

make believe and fear/ To rest in our own suffering/ is evasion of suffering./ We must try to suffer more”<sup>165</sup>. That is to say, Steinhardt claims, the aim is not that of remaining in our own suffering, but to learn to suffer more, the very Christian approach to human life. Also, responding to questions as – Why men suffer? Why is so much injustice in the world? Why there are so many diseases and why every man must die? Why the devil mocks the human being? – He states that, in principle, in the text of the Bible all becomes very clear: there is no use to find a rational response to them. The correct Christian attitude is that of accepting and assuming, and, very important, to be conscious of “the paradoxical law of Christianity that suffering is the spring of joy”.<sup>166</sup>

Speaking about models of suffering, Weil first refers to Christ and she quotes Leon Bloy who states that “Christ would be in agony until the end of days.” On the same opinion is also Steinhardt who makes a parallel between the Passion of Christ and a scene from a book written by Valery Lerbaud, “La mort de Atahualpa.” Here the French writer depicts an Incas king who is killed repeatedly and incessantly in a room of a hotel<sup>167</sup> as sins of man crucify Christ until the end of the world. Also Steinhardt quotes Simone Weil referring to the problem of *Eli, Eli lama sabahtani – O, God, why did you abandon me?* - to the debate concerning this strange exclamation of Christ before his death which would suppose that his divine nature was lost at that moment.

Arguing that Christ assumed entirely the suffering of human condition, Steinhardt states that he is in the same opinion with “Dostoievski, Simone Weil and Kierkegaard”<sup>168</sup>. Like the two writers named before her, Weil thinks that “this marvel of

<sup>165</sup> T. S. Elliot, *The Waste Land* in Steinhardt, *The Happiness Diary*, 224

<sup>166</sup> Steinhardt, *Happiness Diary*, 227

<sup>167</sup> Steinhardt, *Happiness Diary*, 256

<sup>168</sup> Steinhardt, *Happiness Diary*, 53

love, the Crucifixion”<sup>169</sup> was a real and authentic drama, both human and divine. This fact is verified after the resurrection when “the glorified body of Christ bore the marks of the nails and spear”.<sup>170</sup> That is to say, as Steinhardt claim “it is not without significance that the only things made by humans which have arrived in the heaven are the wounds of the body of Christ”.<sup>171</sup>

The second model of suffering proposed by Weil is the biblical figure of Job considered to be “less a historical character than a figure of Christ”.<sup>172</sup> She discussed the story of Job in many of her writings, considering it as a model of authentic suffering and also as model of authentic love for God. In big, her main idea is that, accepting the fact that suffering is, indeed, the very reality of our world, man must, as Job, endure it and assume it. As a consequence, seeing his patience and his faith, God will come to man, as he came to Job, and he will show him the beauty of the world.

Steinhardt use the story of Job in order to justify the existence of suffering on Earth. The “cipher of the book of Job”<sup>173</sup> is contained in the final. As Weil, Steinhardt claim that the answer of God to the problem of suffering does not resolve it entirely, in other words, there is no logic response, at least from the rational human point of view. God’s reaction after the controversy between Job and his friends is very strange, resuming a series of interrogations, in fact as Weil claims, he shows to Job the marvels of creation. In addition, the reaction of Job is one of recognizance of divine wisdom and self-humbleness.

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<sup>169</sup> Weil, *Waiting for God*, 73

<sup>170</sup> Weil, *Waiting for God*, 72

<sup>171</sup> Steinhardt, *The Happiness Diary*, 213

<sup>172</sup> Weil, *Waiting for God*, 70

<sup>173</sup> Steinhardt, *The Happiness Diary*, 228

### ***4.3. The place of Simone Weil and Nicolae Steinhardt in the 20<sup>th</sup> century intellectual history***

Weil and Steinhardt are, indeed, unique figures in intellectual history of modern era. However, paradoxically, despite their singular way of seeing God, culture, society, history and so on, their popularity in the present time is reduced, perhaps because of the complexity of their thought that makes them difficult to be understood. This part of the thesis will contain first an overview of how they were perceived in the intellectual area of our century and second, how their political and historical works influenced European cultural area.

Many of the Twentieth Century's political thinkers are better known to cultural audience than is Simone Weil. For example, Albert Camus, Mahatma Gandhi, Simone de Beauvoir, are more easily recognized as having effected some change either in our actual world or in our thought about the world. Nevertheless, Simone Weil deserves greater visibility first for the originality of her thinking and for the potential ways in which her thought can influence the way we think about justice, friendship, education and so on. Additionally, her work is really enormous as dimension and difficult to understand, and until present time for no matter what researcher, an investigation on her philosophy is, indeed a provocation. As one of her Romanian translator used to say, she is part of that category of thinkers which cannot be understood but after reading their entire work.<sup>174</sup>

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<sup>174</sup> [www.nistea.com](http://www.nistea.com)

The challenge of reading Simone Weil is to “translate” her, to transform her philosophical language into an ordinary idiom and “to connect her uncommon ideas to our common life”.<sup>175</sup> After all, even during her life, she was discussed, approved, denied, mocked, detested, loved, condemned, contested, commented, interpreted, simply said, she influenced a great number of important thinkers of our century. Maurice Schumann, classmate of Simone Weil and subsequent foreign minister of France under Charles de Gaulle said that since her death there was hardly a day that the thought of her life did not positively influence his own and serve as a moral guide.<sup>176</sup>

Both Albert Camus and André Gide referred to her as the most important spiritual writer of the century. Camus had Simone Weil in mind as “the very prototype of the *The Rebel*”.<sup>177</sup> He states that he spent an hour of meditation in her Paris room before taking the plane to Stockholm in order to accept the Nobel prize.<sup>178</sup> In the early 1960s two successive Popes, John XXIII and Paul VI, found Weil to be among the most important influences in their intellectual development. Angelo Roncalli, the future John XXIII, once exclaimed to Maurice Schumann, “O yes, I love this soul!” Even as a schoolchild, her reputation was big. Simone de Beauvoir wrote of Simone Weil: “Her intelligence, her asceticism, her total commitment, and her sheer courage all these filled me with admiration; though I knew that, had she met me, she would have been far from reciprocating my attitude. I could not absorb her into my universe, and this seemed to constitute a vague threat to me.”<sup>179</sup>

<sup>175</sup> Simone Petrement, *Simone Weil – a life*, 256

<sup>176</sup> Perrin, Thibon, *Simone Weil as we knew her*, 45

<sup>177</sup> Albert Camus, *L’homme revolte* (Paris: Gallimard, 1987), 78

<sup>178</sup> Gray, *Simone Weil*, 229

<sup>179</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *Memories of a Dutiful daughter* in Gray, *Simone Weil*, 228



In addition, other well-known literary and political figures of the twentieth century have testified to the powerful influence that Simone Weil had on their thinking and their lives. Thomas Eliot wrote, “Simone Weil possessed a kind of genius akin to that of saints”.<sup>180</sup> The American critic Leslie Fielder wrote that she “symbolized the Outsider as Saint in an age of alienation”.<sup>181</sup> American lay theologian Doris Grumbach accused her of manifesting an “almost protestant pride” for refusing a mediator between herself and God.<sup>182</sup>

Now, referring to her political work, two titles are very well known: *The need for roots*<sup>183</sup> (1942) and *Oppression and liberty*<sup>184</sup> (1934). The latter one is a very powerful critique of Marxism which postulates that the historical revelations of the 1930’s were undermining Marx’s notions of the proletariat as an agent of revolutionary change – for example in Russia the working class has been cheated by its own leader. She also proves herself extremely pessimistic about the modern age: men will be, without any doubt, subjugated until the end of days by the tyranny of a few people, as for her “the basic dynamic of history is not economic need, as Marx would have put it, but the very race for power”.<sup>185</sup>

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<sup>180</sup> T. S. Eliot, preface to Weil, *The need for roots* (New York: Putnam’s sons, 1952), xii

<sup>181</sup> Leslie Fielder, introduction to Weil, *Waiting for God*, 5

<sup>182</sup> Gray, *Simone Weil*, 227

<sup>183</sup> Simone Weil, *The need for roots* (New York: Putnam’s sons, 1952)

<sup>184</sup> Simone Weil, *Oppression and liberty* (London: Routledge group 1958)

<sup>185</sup> T. S. Eliot, preface to Weil, *The need for roots* (New York: Putnam’s sons, 1952), xiii

For her, the concept of liberty “ is not defined by a relationship between desire and its satisfaction , but by a relationship between thought and action: the absolutely free man would be one whose every action proceeds from a preliminary judgment concerning the end which he set himself and the sequence of means suitable for attaining this end”.<sup>186</sup> Albert Camus published her book in 1940 when he works as an editor to Gallimard. In his introduction, he noted, “western social and political thought has not produced anything more valuable since Marx”.<sup>187</sup>

The former work, *The need for roots*, is much more complex and extended as dimension, as it considered to be her most important political text, one of the most representative utopia of the modernity. Weil finished the book in 1942, a year before her dead, as her response to the historical crisis of the moment – that is to say, the World War 2. Her main thesis is that the Western nations’ failure to fulfill the human need for roots was a central cause of totalitarianism in the twentieth century. She describes the different kinds of “obligations” nations must fulfill towards their citizen, and she defines them in her own way: liberty, equality, honor, security, freedom of opinion and so on. At last, she enounces some principles of education of youth in the postwar era, impregnated with a pronounced religious tendency – among other things she demands the reintroduction of religion into all schools .

However, she was admired and contested for this work. For example an American research referred to it as a “collection of egregious nonsense surpassed only by the deranged fantasies of the chauvinistic Peguy” and accused Weil of a “captious,

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<sup>186</sup> Weil, *Opression and liberty*, 146

<sup>187</sup> Albert Camus, Introduction to Weil, *Oeuvres completes* in Gray, *Simone Weil* , 81

misinformed playing with Hinduism and comparative mythology”.<sup>188</sup> Eliot appreciated it as “one of those books which ought to be studied by the young before their leisure has been lost and their capacity for thought destroyed in the life of the hustings and the legislative assembly”.<sup>189</sup>

Nicolae Steinhardt doesn't possess, without any doubt, the reputation of the French writer, as Romanian culture is generally not very known in the European cultural area. Nevertheless, *The Happiness Diary* was translated so far into a few foreign languages as French or Italian for example. Here, only the Romanian cultural appreciations of his personality and his work will be remembered, together with a general overview of his political and cultural thought.

Perhaps the most synthetic appreciation of the thought of Steinhardt is expressed by Mihail Constantineanu, who studied in detail all his work: “Steinhardt had on Christianity a new, alive, fresh point of view. He kept repeating the idea that Jesus came to us, humans, not to found a new religion, but to introduce a new *way of life*, in order to scandalize us, trouble us, violate us, take us out of our prejudices. He associated the image of Christ with the idea of nobility, aristocracy. He stated that our obligation is to be happy, joyful all time and well – disposed...”<sup>190</sup>

One of the most known Romanian literary critics, Arsavir Acterian appreciated his journal as “a unique work by his content and style in the Romanian culture”.<sup>191</sup> Indeed, among the testimonies written by the convicts of communist prisons, this one is, however, not *just* a document about the communist gulag. The journal is in fact the

<sup>188</sup> Kenneth Rexroth, *Twentieth century literary Criticism* in Gray, *Simone Weil*, 228

<sup>189</sup> T. S Eliot, preface to Weil, *The need for roots* (New York: Putnam's sons, 1952), xiii

<sup>190</sup> Mihail Constantineanu, *The literary Romania*, nr.3, 1988

<sup>191</sup> Arsavir Acterian, *How I became Christian* (Bucharest: Ed. Harisma, 2001), 34

history of a conversion, a religious, cultural, political one. The literary works quoted in it count hundreds of books, articles, journals, movies and so on.

The best known political works of Nicolae Steinhardt are the followings: his essays on Judaism, “In the thought...of the young generation”(In genul tinerilor), and *The Book of Communion* . The two essays on Judaism are “*Essai sur une conception catholique de Judaism*” (*Essay on a Catholic Conception about Judaism*) and *Illusions et realites juives* (*Illusions and Jewish realities*). They were written in collaboration with his friend, Emanuel Neuman and contains a critique of Judaism – considered as being incompatible neither with communism or with socialism - during the era between the two wars and the propose solutions of reforming of mosaic religious institutions after the Catholic model. Here Steinhardt states, “Those who sustains the existence a *Jewish problem* and seek for its *solution* are to be called anti-Semites. The anti-Semitism takes pathological forms during the moments of decadence of a people and lead to the ruin of the economy of that state. In fact the anti-Semitism is the first sign of social disorder”.<sup>192</sup>

“In the thought...of the young generation”<sup>193</sup> was written under the name of Anthistius just after Steinhardt gave his PhD in legal studies. The volume is in fact a group of essays that are written for parodying his contemporary fellow writers – Mircea Eliade, Geo Bogza, Geo Bogza, Emil Cioran and so on. All these are part of what is called “The young generation” of the Romanian cultural area. As reaction, Mircea Vulcanescu named Steinhardt as being an hypocrite .<sup>194</sup>

<sup>192</sup> Nicolae Steinhardt and Emanuel Neuman, *Essays on Judaism (Eseuri despre iudaism)* (Bucharest: Ed. Humanitas, 2006), 35

<sup>193</sup> Nicolae Steinhardt, *In the thought... of the young generations* (Bucharest: Ed. Humanitas, 2006)

<sup>194</sup> Mircea Vulcanescu, in George Ardeleanu, *Nicolae Steinhardt and the paradoxes of the liberty*, 123

*The book of communion*<sup>195</sup> is in fact an anthology of articles written by Steinhardt, among which there is a very interesting one – the longest – entitled “The secret of the lost letter.” He refers to a piece of theatre written by Caragiale in which Steinhardt sees the portrait of the Romanian society from the first half of the twentieth century, but under a Christian key. He basically states that the characters from this comedy form in fact “the Romanian world situated under the confluence of Occident and Orient, the world of a joyful relativism”.<sup>196</sup>

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<sup>195</sup> Nicolae Steinhardt, *The book of communion (Cartea impartasirii)* Cluj – Napoca: Ed. Apostrof, 2004

<sup>196</sup> George Ardeleanu, *Nicolae Steinhardt and the paradoxes of liberty*, 351

## 5. Conclusion

In her study “Autobiographical accounts on conversion in Roman Empire”,<sup>197</sup> Nancy Gautier discusses the origins of the autobiographical genre in the context of the phenomena of conversion. During the Antiquity the practice of introspection and self – analysis is extremely rare and, therefore, the exceptional psychological experience of conversions of the Modern Age give people the possibility to reflect and become conscious of themselves. This awakening takes place in a very special way and approaches one of the most terrible problems of the human lives, namely the suffering.

Our century is, without any doubt, full of literary confessions and testimonies. Whereas during the first centuries of the Christianity the confessions about conversions were very elliptic and rare, during our times they have become a very frequent phenomenon. On the one hand, Paul the Apostle, Apuleius, Saint Paul of Nola, and the rhetorical maestro Aelius Aristide wrote testimonies on how they turned their attention to Christianity in a very concise and sober style- perhaps with the exception of Saint Augustin. On the other hand, Paul Claudel, Julien Green, Max Jacob, Simone Weil, and Nicolae Steinhardt, to mention just a few, wrote a huge amount of journals, letters, testimonies, all of which unfold their spiritual evolution. As Leopold Levaux, a convert, himself expressed it: “Writing a journal, I submitted myself to an imperious desire to open my heart. I was trying to elucidate, the pencil in my hand, a curious state of soul caused by the powerful agitation brought by the Divine Grace”.<sup>198</sup>

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<sup>197</sup> Nancy Gautier in Ardeleanu, *Nicolae Steinhardts and the paradoxes of liberty*, 171

<sup>198</sup> Eugen Simion , *The fictional aspect of intimate journal (Fictiunea jurnalului intim)*, (Bucharest: Ed. Univers , 2001) , 12

An even better testimony in this sense is that of Pierre Van der Meer. He states that “This journal written day by day became the history of my spiritual adventure, which, if I had not been led by a supernatural force, it would make me erring from the path of salvation. But by it, I arrived to the Gates of the Church where somebody was waiting for me and, taking my hand, led me inside”.<sup>199</sup>

Steinhardt and Weil belong, without any doubt, to the same area of culture where the act of conversion and the autobiographical impulse are intertwined. Research on their contribution to this area of the intellectual history is scarce. Moreover, the similarities and differences in their trajectories of converted intellectuals – the key point of the present thesis – are quite numerous and interesting. A synthetic view on them is to claim the two intellectuals stand for two very different types and experiences of the religiosity. However, these types of religiosity do not stem from their attachment to different confessions: Steinhardt was Christian Orthodox and Weil a Catholic – though not a baptized one.

The very ingredient that makes them and their way of understanding God so special and unique is their intellectual formation. Looking at Steinhardt’s case, none of the Christian orthodox writers did succeed in melting so many cultural references in their religious writings. One of his former fellow convict, Alexandru Paleologu declared “Steinhardt amazes me with his extraordinary capacity of assimilation of information. He knows everything, he is in connection with everything: microphysics, cybernetics, biology, psychoanalysis, dodecaphonic music, abstract art, and so on. I cannot understand how he succeeds to do that, in what way he possesses the time to do it. His knowledge is enormous. He reads by an electronic rapidity and retains everything. Reading Happiness

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<sup>199</sup> Eugen Simion, *The fictional aspect of intimate journal (Fictiunea jurnalului intim)*, 127

Diary you became struck by so much erudition.”<sup>200</sup> Usually, in the area of religious writing, the Romanian Orthodox writers mention as sources of inspiration and analysis just other religious writers: saints, Fathers of the desert, bishops, monks and so on. In Steinhardt’s writings one finds comments of profane poetry – even from self-declared atheistic authors he extracts Christian meanings- – music, literature, biology, fairy tales and many more.

Weil follows a similar pattern with Steinhardt’s. The primary source of her work that I quoted in my thesis is reflecting only the “theoretical part” of her way of thinking. This selection was made in order to give an overview of her very complex and at times difficult to understand writing. However, her notebooks include are a multitude of literary references, too. The main difference between Weil’s and Steinhardt’s writing styles and ways of filtering culture through the Christian metaphors is the way of expressing versus concealing the self: the personal and the impersonal approach. As Gustave Thibon puts it “she always wanted to be absent from her writing”<sup>201</sup> in order to let the reader manifest his liberty. Whereas Steinhardt is very vivid, ardent, engaging, Weil is complex, sometimes monotonous, and difficult to read. This is perhaps one reason why she is not very popular in the French secularized cultural milieu.

The other element that both connects and separates them is the way they theorize and assume the suffering. Firstly, an evident similarity between the two is that they both deal with real suffering: self-imposed in one case and externally imposed in the other. This very experience of suffering leads them to the same conclusion that they express in a totally Christian spirit: suffering is the most common acts by which God is active in our

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<sup>200</sup> Alexandru Paleologu, *The alchemy of existence* (Bucharest: Ed. Humanitas, 2001), 145

<sup>201</sup> Perrin, Thibon, *Simone Weil as we knew her*, 213



lives. Weil's case takes this experience to an extreme as she refuses the all of the earthly joys of this life, an attitude which is in contradiction with the true spirit of Christianity, which states that man is called to participate to the "abundant, enormous joy of living on this Earth",<sup>202</sup> not to refuse it because of a personal preference for poverty and pain. Weil gives sense to suffering though by relating it to Christ, an attitude that is also found at Steinhardt.

Secondly, both assume that following the commandments of God does not imply a reward from his part, at least not in the human sense of reciprocation. God's reward is in fact the suffering. From the moment a human soul turns to God, it enters under the seal of suffering. That is to say, in order to clean the soul from its impurities, God acts like one "decided to heal us from all the dependence of this world".<sup>203</sup> Steinhardt adds a very important thing here: after passing a period of big suffering, after being exposed – by God's approval - to all vicissitudes of life, "the happiness becomes mandatory".<sup>204</sup> In other words, after being purified by suffering, the soul can "enter into the joy of the Lord"( The Gospel after Luke 25, 21). In Weil's case, suffering has no end, at least not during this life. She experienced the suffering and wanted to travel with it "until the end of the night", to paraphrase Celine's famous title.

Finally, one may wonder to what extent these two ways of approaching Christianity and life – as "suffering is life"<sup>205</sup> – are compatible and, more important, to what extent they do speak to the dilemmas that modern life are facing? The very essence of the comparative approach answers the first part of this question. First, the two authors

<sup>202</sup> Steinhardt, *The Happiness Diary*, 234

<sup>203</sup> Steinhardt, *The Happiness Diary*, 156

<sup>204</sup> Steinhardt, *The danger of confessing*, 145

<sup>205</sup> Feodor M. Dostoievski, *Karamazoff brothers (Fratii Karamazof)* (Bucharest: Ed. Albatros, 1982), 267

have the same cultural genius and the same intransigence, perhaps in Steinhardt's case more moderate especially after his detention. However, their religious experiences were different and so were the conclusions they drew. After her conversion, Weil perseverated in her spiritual loneliness, whereas Steinhardt found it better to live the rest of his life as a monk. Steinhardt's attitude, however, cannot be seen as "that of a hermit who is exclusively preoccupied with himself, an egoist of piety",<sup>206</sup> but, as he himself confessed, as the attitude of a man who understood the world around him and chose to be detached from it.

Secondly, in the contemporary societies, where the entire social discourse, media, culture, and publicity are trying to convince people that the true happiness resides in the earthly existence, ideas like "joy into the suffering", "desire to become nothing", "self-annihilation" appear as absurdities or mere exotic ways of thinking. The modern man is incapable to understand the suffering in another way than being something which brings him privations and affliction. It is not without significance that both writers assumed the true meaning of suffering after they converted. In this sense, everyone who seeks for the inner quest of God as a component of life and perseveres in attention and patience, being honest with himself and with God, will finally be able to become self-conscious. Self conscious of him, of his role on this earthly existence and on the eternal one.

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<sup>206</sup> Leo Baeck, *Judaism and Christianity* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1958) 236

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