

# THE LIFE & LEGACY OF SIMONE WEIL

**Ronald K.L. Collins**

## Course Description

This course is designed to introduce one to the thinking – political, pedagogical, philosophical, psychological, and spiritual – of Simone Weil (1909-1943). Because of her philosophical rigor, some tagged her “the categorical imperative in skirts.” Owing to her political activism, others branded her “the Red Virgin.” Camus called her “the only great spirit of our times.”

Weil was many things; above all, she was complicated. Though she was trained as a philosopher with a deep roots in Platonic thought, she also had her existential side. Additionally, Weil was a political activist and revolutionary heavily engaged in the radical politics of her time. Her posthumously published books (15 volumes) were cast in trenchant essays, discerning diaries entries, aphoristic-like notebook reflections, perceptive class notes, and in a variety of extraordinary letters sent to friends. The range of her thought spanned from the philosophy and literature of the ancient Greeks to the thought of modern political philosophers and physicists and later on influenced a spirituality embraced by some Eastern and Catholic mystics.

The course, by no means comprehensive, will provide an overview of her life and philosophy with special emphasis on her notions of knowledge, attention, contradiction, necessity, language, and rights and obligations. Informed discussion and engaged interaction are encouraged.

## Teacher

Ronald Collins is the Harold S. Shefelman Scholar at the University of Washington School of Law. His areas of specialty are jurisprudence and constitutional law. He has authored some eleven books including *The Death of Discourse* (HarperCollins, 1996), *The Judge: 26 Machiavellian Lessons* (Oxford Univ. Press, 2017) *Robotica: Speech Rights and Artificial Intelligence* (Cambridge Univ. Press, 2018), and *People v. Ferlinghetti: The Fight to Publish Allen Ginsberg's HOWL* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2019). One of his future books is on the philosophy of Simone Weil. He is also the co-director of the History Book Festival.

## Assigned Text

- George A. Panichas, editor, *The Simone Weil Reader* (Moyer Bell Ltd., 2007)  
(Out of print though readily available on Amazon, used: \$11.00 - \$26.00+)

## Syllabus & Calendar

- Times: 10:00 – 11:30 a.m. (Mondays)
- Location: Lewes Public Library (room to be designated)

### PART I — THE WOMAN & HER WRITINGS

*Jan. 7* THE LIFE OF SIMONE WEIL  
Prefatory Note & Introduction, pp. xiii-xxxiii

*Jan. 14* SIMONE WEIL'S WRITINGS & WRITING STYLE  
Lecture

TOWARDS ATTENTION: (OR REORIENTING THE WAY WE THINK)  
Lecture

### PART II — PHILOSOPHY & PSYCHOLOGY OF WORDS

*Jan. 21* THE POWER OF WORDS (OR WHEN WORDS LOSE THEIR MEANING)  
Pp. 268-285

THE RESPONSIBILITY OF WRITERS  
Pp. 286-289

FREEDOM OF OPINION  
Pp. 303-312

### PART III — ON PERSONS & GROUPS

*Jan. 28* HUMAN PERSONALITY  
Pp. 313-340

THE GREAT BEAST (OR ON COLLECTIVE "THOUGHT")  
Pp. 391-396

PART IV — POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

- Feb. 4*        PRELUDE TO POLITICS  
                  Pp. 119-125
- ANALYSIS OF OPPRESSION  
                  Pp. 126-152
- Feb. 11*        THE *ILIAD* OR POEM OF [FORCE]  
                  Pp. 153-183
- Feb. 18 & 25*    UPROOTEDNESS & NATIONHOOD  
                  Pp. 184-258

PART V — ON PEDAGOGY (OR WHAT IT MEANS TO KNOW)

- March 4*        REFLECTIONS ON THE RIGHT USE OF SCHOOL STUDIES WITH A VIEW TO THE LOVE  
                  OF GOD  
                  Pp. 44-52

PART VI — ON ATTENTION & THE PHILOSOPHY OF CONTRADICTION

- ATTENTION & WILL  
                  Handout
- March 11*        ON CONTRADICTION (OR ON GRASPING NECESSITY)  
                  Handout
- ON CHANCE  
                  Handout

PART VII — METAPHILOSOPHY

- THE MYSTICISM OF WORK  
                  Pp. 53-72
- March 18*        THE LOVE OF GOD & AFFLICTION  
                  Pp. 439-468
- FORMS OF THE IMPLICIT LOVE OF GOD  
                  Pp. 469-491
- Optional*        LAST THOUGHTS  
                  Pp. 106-116