

Troubled Bodies: Metaxu, Suffering and the Encounter With the Divine

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Abstract

The body is the canvas on which the female experience is painted and through which female identity is often understood. The female body is a slate on which a patriarchal story has been written, scarred onto the flesh. For Simone Weil *metaxu* was simultaneously that which separated and connected, so for instance the wall between two prison cells cuts off the prisoners but was also the means by which they communicated by knocking on that wall. Could the body be that *metaxu* all at once separating us and connecting us to the Divine? The nature of *metaxu* is that it offers a route not just for the individual soul but for the souls of others to travel. If all peoples renounce their outer shell – and by this I do not mean their bodies but rather the bodies or clothes or ideals written upon those people by patriarchy or capitalism or colonialism – if those real bodies come to the broken body of Christ [which is stripped and scarred] standing in solidarity with and mimicking this broken body, without the things which have been put upon their bodies but with scarred flesh showing, then this is where *metaxu* is possible for here we see a renouncing of ‘self’ as created by patriarchy and all that is left is a space that is the place where we are authentically self and God dwells.

Keywords

Body, Bodies, female, Metaxu, Weil, Divine, troubled

Our Troubled Body

Our bodies are troubled. Our body is troubled. It’s undeniable, there are troubles that infuse our bodies, troubles written upon our bodies, troubles shaping our bodies. My sisters’ bodies all around the world are troubled, this body we call women is troubled. Troubled by violence, by silence, troubled by illness and images, bodies troubled by political systems, troubled by breathing in lies; my sisters are troubled in their bones, in their bodies.

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It is those troubled bodies, however, which I want to argue draw us closer into, knit us into, the divine narrative of a troubled God and more than that, it is those troubled bodies that offer a way into that Divine One for others.

In this paper I will explore whether, specifically, the female body can be viewed as *metaxu* through Simone Weil's work and how this concept could dialogue with feminist theologies of the body. I will question whether the concept of the body as *metaxu* offers feminist theology a philosophical, theological argument for a theological re-evaluation of the female body as a tool of relationship to God rather than something which distances women from God.

Simone Weil

Simone Weil was of troubled body, both 'suffering' her own body and recognizing her part in a communal troubled body. She was,

of Jewish origin and Catholic faith; she was a Catholic who refused baptism and scolded the church; a Communist troublemaker from bourgeois parents who refused to join the Party; an intellectual who hung out with the working class and changed her grammar and intonation accordingly; and a woman who went to extremes to be unattractive ... she was also a philosophy teacher whose courses were wilfully scandalous ... and a factory worker whose inept hands and crushing migraines got her constantly fired (Meltzer, 2001: 622-23).

Weil believed that true thought only came through physical action, out of living in our physical bodies.

Her relationship to the body was not merely philosophical or idealistic it was troubled. Weil demonstrates an ongoing and underlying preoccupation with her body throughout her life, which appears to affect her relationships with others as well as informing her understanding of the nature of human suffering. This in turn affects her philosophy and her reaction to faith. Body and understanding are often described by Weil within one context so that the means by which she is able to understand her environment is through the body. There are a number of areas of Weil's life and work in which her awareness of body, and thus her resulting philosophy, provides a backdrop to her narrative and which points towards the importance of troubled bodies being woven into a divine narrative.

The suffering or troubled-ness of her body, its *malheur*¹ and its potential to work in solidarity with the oppressed become foci of her philosophical thought and writing. Weil has a particular understanding of the body in solidarity with the poor and the suffering. In her essay on human rights Weil claims she cannot imagine an account of ethics that would make a person's body merely incidental to their person. She speaks clearly about

1 Weil uses this word in both *Waiting on God* and *Gravity and Grace*, in translation the word becomes 'affliction' and yet the translator states that:

No English word exactly conveys the meaning of the French *malheur*. Our word *unhappiness* is a negative term and far too weak. Affliction is the nearest equivalent but not quite satisfactory. *Malheur* has in it a sense of inevitability and doom (Weil, 1951: 63).

how gouging a person's eyes out does not merely change their body, but assaults their very person. The body is for Weil the most powerful tool for change and the context in which this change can come about for her is on the factory floor. Stephen Plant writes that, 'one of the most important reasons, Weil thought, why left-wing thinkers had not understood the limitations of their theory was that none of them had experienced physical labour' (Plant, 1996: 64). It is these limitations to thought and theory which Weil sought to stretch and reach beyond by going into a position of physical labour in a car factory. The need to dwell within troubled bodies fully was, for her, participation in change. The body thus being the means by which the human can reach the Divine or the Divine reach the human. Weil was strongly critical of dualism claiming that the body and the mind [or perhaps even soul],² were in clear and inseparable relationship with one another.

Rather, Weil would claim through her experiences of manual work, that the body and the mind can work together to reach something beyond. Weil believed that something supernatural transcended all labour whether bodily or intellectual, in the same way as her belief that manual and intellectual labour could not be separated so too she would argue body and mind cannot be separated. 'The body is simultaneously psychic and somatic ... psychic and physical "events" are inseparable' (Browning, 2009: 57).

Browning Helsel reflects upon the nature of Weil's so called conversion experience in which she encounters God at the times of greatest bodily pain and suffering,

Therefore, the resources and symbol-world of the Christian tradition speak to the person suffering pain with the message that God suffers with, and not apart from, that person. Weil's mystical experiences with Christ occurred in the midst of bouts of intense pain, and these experiences served to reframe her pain and contribute to a theological processing of her encounter with pain (Browning, 2009: 60).

It could be argued that Weil's mystical experiences were merely a delusion whilst in incredible pain; however for the purposes of establishing Weil's relationship to her body as *metaxu* we will assume these mystical experiences are real in their experiencing. The idea of God suffering with the person is one which Weil would have accepted, the suffering God is both in solidarity with (and also offering a gateway to) the person through the suffering. It is not that pain must be felt in some kind of self flagellating way in order to reach God, but rather that suffering and pain open up a space where self previously dwelt, in which God can move.

Metaxu

The idea of *metaxu* is one which Weil borrows from Plato, and which I borrow from her. *Metaxu* is that which separates and connects us to something, in the case of Weil she uses *metaxu* to develop an understanding of how human beings relate to the Divine. In writing

2 When referring to soul, I adopt a position similar to Carter Heyward's: 'Soul' reflects not an individual's possession but rather a quality of the Sacred that we share, the spiritual foundation of community building (Heyward, 2010: 152).

of *metaxu* Weil puts it in the following way, 'two prisoners whose cells adjoin communicate with each other by knocking on the wall.' The wall, Weil says, is an example of *metaxu* because 'it is the thing which separates them but it is also their means of communication' (Weil, 1952: 132).

Weil explores *metaxu* as a bridge, or a wall which connects and separates us to and from something supernatural, that is God. Kit Fan writes that, '*Metaxu*, for Weil, is a kind of precarious in-betweenness, a bridge, an intermediary. In that sense very separation is a link' (Fan, 2007).

For Weil this concept of *metaxu* is centred on the physical present or reality as a means to relate to that which is supernatural, *metaxu* is a tool for the transcendent. She writes that, 'The world is the closed door. It is a barrier. And at the same time it is the way through' (Weil, 2002: 132). It is this sense of physical world and 'earthly things' which detaches and yet attaches the human soul to the Divine, the world itself here is the barrier by its very nature as a place of evil and suffering and yet it is also the way to the Divine because for Weil God was accessible through human pain and suffering, through its troubled nature. Weil would claim that the concept of *metaxu* being found in the self and the environment of the self was not a new revelation but rather the re-establishing of something mistaken or forgotten.

The bridges of the Greeks. We have inherited them but we do not know how to use them. We thought they were intended to have houses built upon them. We have erected skyscrapers on them to which we ceaselessly add storeys. We no longer know that they are bridges, things made so that we may pass along them, and that by passing along them we go towards God (Weil, 2002: 132-33).

An interpretation of Weil's '*bridges on which we have built houses, no longer knowing they are bridges*' could, I argue, be the body. The body which has been adorned, dressed up and reconstructed for Weil is meant for work or labour which then offers the opportunity of bridge or *metaxu*. Labour, like suffering and pain, offers the opportunity to vacate ourselves and allows space for the Divine.

In Weil's chapter on *metaxu* in *Gravity and Grace* she goes further to write that, 'The true earthly blessings are *metaxu*. We can respect those of others only in so far as we regard those we ourselves possess as *metaxu*' (Weil, 2002: 134). *Metaxu* can be found in the things that bring joy as much as in the things which seem bleak and life diminishing, it is not that *metaxu* is only possible in one or the other but rather it can be found in that which separates for in every separation there is a connection, it is this context of connection in which *metaxu* is found.

For Feminist Theology?

Simone Weil was not a feminist; it seemed never to occur to her to consider feminism. Lawrence A. Blum and Victor J. Seidler write of Simone Weil that,

She rarely talks about the particular oppression of women or the ways women could assume more control over their lives. She seemed to have identified closely with the values of family life, though she also seems to have deeply resented being treated differently as a young girl

from her brother. Her relationship to her femininity was difficult and complicated. Still, she does provide insights and ways of thinking that could be crucial to the development of feminist theory, though she never seemed to appreciate these connections for herself (Blum and Seidler, 1989: 96-97).

It's all well and good to dust off a dead French Jewish Catholic not-quite-feminist- philosopher called Simone Weil and say 'thanks, your theory of *metaxu* is great', but what I want to know within the bones of my so-called soul is how this notion of *metaxu* can draw me into God, how can it liberate my sisters and how can it usher in the kingdom of the mother of all creation?

Human beings are created in the image of God and formed from the dust of the earth, and thus the body has an echoing significance throughout Christian history. The body is the perceived seat of what some describe as the fall, the locus of the incarnation, the home of crucifixion, the vessel of redemption, salvation and resurrection. The body is not an external meaningless diversion from the spiritual path; rather it is an incredibly important recurring theme both biblically and in Christian tradition and history. Bray and Colebrook state that,

The body is a negotiation with images, but it is also a negotiation with pleasures, pains, other bodies, space, visibility, and medical practice; no single event in this field can act as a general ground for determining the status of the body (Bray and Colebrook, 1998).

Yet more than all of this, the body is the place in which we dwell, it is all we have. As Elizabeth Moltmann Wendell says 'I am my body' (Moltmann-Wendell, 1994). For each of our sisters the body is the canvas on which the female experience is painted and through which female identity is often understood. It is on the stage of our female bodies that some of the most fixed church doctrines have been written and enacted. The female body is a slate on which a patriarchal story has been written, scarred onto the flesh. These bodies of ours are patriarchal constructs which must be liberated and re-adopted into the Christian story without the limitations of perceived notions or definitions of 'gender'.

Isherwood and Stuart assert that 'From the moment we are asked to believe that Eve was a rib removed from the side of Adam we understand that theology is based in the body and we are at a disadvantage!' (Isherwood and Stuart, 1998: 15). The historical dichotomy between the Eve and the Mary constructions has led to a definitive inequality for women, both in terms of physical wellbeing and in terms of spiritual and psychological wellbeing. The choices for a woman to be the sin-formed, temptress Eve or the virginal pure vessel Mary are seen historically in the precarious place of women in the church and in society.

Elizabeth Stuart writes that 'Women were regarded as being ensnared in their bodiliness to a far greater degree than men and they too had to be tamed and subdued for their own good and the good of the men they might tempt into sin' (Stuart, 1996: 23). It is hardly surprising therefore that twentieth and twenty-first century feminist, womanist, *mujerista* and black theologians have worked hard to undo and re-express a theology of the body which offers a more authentic narrative of the relationship between the Divine and the physical which both liberates the female body and liberates God from the patriarchal box the Church has created around her.

The concept of the body as *metaxu* between the soul and the Divine is not a reproduction of a form of dualism which stands the body and soul in separation but rather it is the potential that the body and soul are inseparable so that the physical actions of the body and that which occurs within the body could link *or* separate from the Divine.

The female body, many feminist theologians may argue, is *metaxu* in the sense that it separates us from God, not owing to the fact that it is body-female but rather because it is a false body, a subverted body. Bray and Colebrook suggest that,

Both the idea of the “false body”³ and the phallic Imaginary suggest that women may have a particular propensity for developing an inauthentic body image because external phallogocentric representations of the female body are internalized to produce inauthentic representations of women’s bodies (Bray and Colebrook, 1998: 53).

Some could argue that this ‘man-made’ female body is removed from the reality of the female body which we seek to reclaim and when we reclaim it then it can relate to the Divine; until it is reclaimed or liberated the body is, as the early church fathers would have suggested, something which can only be set aside from the soul. In the reclamation/liberation of the female body comes the opportunity for the revelation of the Divine in the body. It could be argued that the constructed nature of the female body formed by patriarchy cannot unite us with the Divine rather it can only offer separation from the Divine because of its unreality. Naomi Goldenberg writes that,

What I am calling the body stands in contrast to the notion of transcendence in traditional theology. Transcendence is a wish for something beyond the body, beyond time, and beyond specific relationships to life. Such a world of perfect safety involves negation of this world and is probably motivated by a characteristically (but not exclusively) male fear of being merged with matter. Theologians envision salvation as up, out, and beyond, and call this hoped-for state of dissociation the ultimate reality (Goldenberg, 1993: 211).

If one is to view the body as Goldenberg does, to see the body as something which is not separated beyond the reality of actual body, then it is to assume that real body is able to dwell with the Divine without having to go beyond that body to reach the Divine, this then is to realize that *metaxu* is not to take the body beyond itself but rather is to reach to the Divine already present through the female body.

Another possible understanding of *metaxu* can be found in the suffering state of the female body where it is fully absorbed in the suffering Divine. The liberation motif of the suffering Divine standing in solidarity with the suffering people of the world fits with the way in which the female body could become *metaxu* which connects the soul to the Divine. So, the dichotomy between the suffering body connected to God because of its suffering, and the subverted body separating from God through its false state is one which sets up the ideal opportunity for *metaxu*, for the body to be that space which can connect us to God or separate us from God. This is, however, all too close to the dualism which separates the body and soul. Rather I would argue that the body as a facet of the

3 This idea of the false body comes from Orbach (1986).

soul [and the soul a facet of the physical] can connect the soul dwelling not just within the body but as a sphere of the body with the Divine. The Divine then relates to the body not only as a vessel of the soul but also as an inseparable part of the soul. Althaus-Reid writes,

I would like to reflect on the divine body as what I would call “cities of exiles” ... cities of exile are places of liberative refuge, in the sense that the divine body becomes the original grounded “divine signifier”, or the space in which to be *Other*. That is to say that the divine body holds a space of possibility to deconstrain the body from the ideologies that rule the body in society, politics and theology ... in other words, there is a space of redemption to be found in the interstices between the place of God and women’s bodies: such space makes of women’s bodies a place of salvation (Althaus-Reid, 2004: 157, 159 her emphasis).

This concept of a space between the space of God and the body [by ‘body’ here I believe Althaus-Reid is referring to the constructed body, the space itself is to be found in the reality of the body – the divine body, the God created and infused body] offers the potentiality of a space called body which is *metaxu*. It is this space, this body, this ‘space of redemption’ that there is opportunity to touch God, if *metaxu* can offer something of a thin place, a point of touch between human and God.

The very concept of a body which is truly female is one which seems an oxymoron. We have to question whether the invalidity of it as a female body makes it unlikely that there can be a *metaxu* of the female body. Rather if the female body is so constructed by patriarchy it is not itself, so as to be that bridge of which Weil writes. The theory of decreation can only apply to the physical decreation not intellectual, in other words decreation comes about, for example, through labour therefore the female body which is constructed by patriarchy cannot be decreated through the hope that it will become a truly female body and thus *metaxu*.⁴ Another argument could be that the thing most absent from the female body is the female body itself. Is it possible that this absention although not chosen allows for the space which Weil claims needs to be vacant in order to create that ‘gateway’ to the Divine? Weil writes that,

No human being should be deprived of his *metaxu*, that is to say of those relative and mixed blessings (home, country, traditions, culture, etc.) which warm and nourish the soul and without which, short, of sainthood, a *human* life is not possible (Weil, 2002: 133, her emphasis).

These things which Weil writes of as blessings could equally be interpreted as the cultural rights of any human, including and especially of a woman, so that what could be posited is that no woman should be deprived of the things that make her body female. Meltzer, when writing about Weil’s relationship to the Church, writes that, ‘Weil argues that the Church has no right to limit the operations of the mind or the illuminations of love in the realm of thought’ (Meltzer, 2001: 621).

4 Decreation: to make something created pass into the uncreated. Destruction: to make something created pass into nothingness (Weil, 2002: 28).

In the same way the Church has no right to continue to limit the female body both intellectually and physically⁵ nor does it have the right to continue to limit how all people think of the female body, to deny a body its authentic female-ness. The liberation of the female body to be the female body rather than a patriarchal construct allows it to be authentically that space, that gateway, of which Weil writes.

In troubled times and in troubled bodies it seems that the very nature of the female body as an authentic creation in its origins overlaid and re-constructed by patriarchy offers up the perfect condition for that which Weil would term *metaxu*. The argument for this state follows thus, if the female body is both a place which needs to be liberated and yet at the same time is in itself liberated by its female-ness it is the wall which separates and yet connects.

Christine Howe writes that,

This “impersonal” element of the soul is precisely that which Weil takes to be sacred within each person: the point within the heart that corresponds to absolute good. Absolute good, for Weil, as we have already seen, exists beyond this world. Central to her thought is the idea that this good is able to be made manifest on earth through people who consent to focus their attention on the reality beyond the world. People who have practiced this form of attention leave a legacy that, in turn, enables others to deepen their connection with the divine (Howe, 2005: 4).

The impersonal part of the female soul could be seen to be the female body, by impersonal purely meaning that it has not yet fully related to the person, it has not had the opportunity to relate because it has been hidden under and beyond the trappings of socialization and patriarchy. That ‘impersonal part of the soul’ stands in solidarity with all others marginalized from a liberation/feminist perspective so that it ‘enables others to deepen their connection with the divine’ (Howe, 2005: 3). This is the nature of a bridge or *metaxu* that it offers a route not just for the individual soul but for the souls of others to travel.

The female body can only be liberated from that patriarchal overwriting by writing its own narrative, much of which will be based upon experiences of being troubled. The true nature of the female body can only be revealed by a concerted effort to ‘re-own’ this body as our own not as we have been taught to understand it. This in turn means that the systems, doctrines and ‘ways of being’ which exist within the Church and society must be challenged and re-imagined from the perspective of the un-vocalized and troubled female narrative. In the sense that the female body has not really been ours, has not been an authentically female body and yet has the potential to be unlocked as such, it therefore makes for the perfect condition for *metaxu*, it is that thing which separates in its forms of oppression and connects in its potential liberation. It is at once a place where great evil has been wrought and a place of divine goodness.

Weil writes of love that,

5 By physically I mean in terms of the Roman Catholic Church’s teaching on contraception, the wider church’s teaching on sexuality and the role of women in ministry in the church.

Creation is an act of love and it is perpetual. At each moment our existence is God's love for us. But God can only love himself. His love for us is love for himself through us. Thus, he who gives us our being loves in us the acceptance of not being. Our existence is made up only of his waiting for our acceptance not to exist. He is perpetually begging from us that existence which he gives. He gives it to us in order to beg it from us (Weil, 2002: 28).

According to Weil, our very existence is from God and returns to God. I would argue that to be able to return this 'not being' to God the body has to take some form of action, or have some form of action performed upon it to open a space in which our not being or not existing can be offered to God. It is this removal of our self which I argue can be interpreted as a removal of the socially created self to leave only the God part of ourselves, the authentic self that is God. The body is *metaxu* in that it is imperfect and yet perfect. The body is human and therefore unreal and socially recreated, yet the body is also created by God and God dwells within it. The female body is both imprisoned and is liberated. Its imprisonment is the very thing that enables it to unravel the layers of patriarchal construction to locate the God part and its imprisonment is the things which allows for an authentic narrative to be written. The female body has to separate us from the Divine in order to connect us to the Divine. Again in *Gravity and Grace* Weil writes of the nature of the paradox of God and human love, she writes that,

We are what is furthest from God, situated at the extreme limit from which it is not absolutely impossible to come back to him. In our being, God is torn. We are the crucifixion of God. The love of God for us is a passion. How could that which is good love that which is evil without suffering? And that which is evil suffers too in loving that which is good. The mutual love of God and man is suffering (Weil, 2002: 81).

It is precisely because of the suffering nature of the female body that it is able to be *metaxu*; it is through this suffering that love is known. For Weil her mystical encounter happened at the peak of her suffering from migraines. It is no coincidence that this mystical event for Weil took place as she contemplated and meditated upon Christ's suffering during Holy Week, her suffering body becomes one with the suffering body of Christ and her focus on the suffering, crucified Christ connects with her attempt to understand her pain and the pain and suffering of others. This is not to say that God is some kind of perverse God who wishes pain upon women but it is because the female body is a locus for the suffering of all people just as Christ crucified is a body of global suffering. It is because of this suffering, this denial of that which is wholly ours through creation – the female body, it is because of this we are able to make one being with God. This is the aim of *metaxu*, the destination of the bridge or the point of the communication that is to make one being with God.

Lovers or friends desire two things. The one is to love each other so much that they enter into each other and only make one being. The other is to love each other so much that, having half the globe between them, their union will not be diminished in the lightest degree. All that man vainly desires here below is perfectly realised in God. We have all those impossible desires within us as a mark of our destination, and they are good for us when we no longer hope to accomplish them (Weil, 2001: 70).

The desire to reach into that ‘other’ which Weil would call the supernatural or God is the purpose of *metaxu*. If the female body through its unreality and troubled nature and its potential for liberated authenticity can be termed as *metaxu*, its aim is to be one being with the Divine through that *metaxu*. The female body is able to attain that oneness through its divinely created nature and through its suffering form so that ‘the love within it [the soul] is divine, uncreated; for it is the love of God for God which is passing through it. God alone is capable of loving God’ (Weil, 2001: 76).

If we are able to renounce our outer shell – and by this I do not mean our bodies but rather the bodies or clothes or ideals written upon us by patriarchy or capitalism or colonialism, if my sisters and I come to the broken body of Christ [which is stripped and yet scarred] standing in solidarity with and mimicking this broken body, without the things which have been put upon our bodies but with scarred flesh showing, then this is where *metaxu* is possible for here we have renounced our ‘selves’ as created by patriarchy and all that is left is an ‘impersonal space’ that is the place where we are authentically self and God dwells.

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