

BOISI CENTER INTERVIEWS



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BENJAMIN BRAUDE is an associate professor of history at Boston College. His research focuses on the construction of collective identities in the Middle East and Europe, as well as Jewish and Ottoman history. He spoke with Boisi Center associate director **Erik Owens** before his presentation on the controversial legacy of 20th-century philosopher Simone Weil at the Boisi Center.

OWENS: How did you first become interested in Simone Weil?

BRAUDE: In a sense, I got into Weil completely from the outside. When I came across her work, I wasn't particularly interested in 20th century mystical thought. I became interested in her because of an article she had written, which was probably the most obscure piece of work she ever did—it's been completely ignored by scholars of Weil. When I was starting to track down that article, I realized I was having trouble finding it. The English versions of the book were readily available, and I started looking at them, but the article was missing. I realized the article was only in the French editions, and that was curious. I got a hold of the French article, and I started reading it, and then I found out that, while it wasn't published in the United States, it was published in the United Kingdom. This immediately presented a problem: why is it that everything is so different from one country's version to another?

This article is significant because it represents the only engagement with a major biblical story that a lot of people knew of. The great masters of myth, such as James Frazer, Carl Jung, Sigmund Freud and Claude Levi-Strauss had reason to know it, but they avoided this particular story. She engaged it in a completely

different way than did anybody else—and in a highly problematic way as well.

So I was looking at her from a very specific and limited vantage point. The significance of this particular biblical story is that it becomes the instrument by



which expressions of sexuality, justifications for slavery and supposed origins of racism are hung.

OWENS: This is, of course, the story of Noah's nakedness found in chapter 9 of Genesis.

BRAUDE: Yes. It was the story of Noah's nakedness and the very great problem that this biblical story has presented to

people for more than 2,000 years. Once I started looking at that essay in the context of her life, I started to expand my work to try to figure out, first of all, why it had been either suppressed or ignored. Second, I asked: what does it mean in terms of her life? If you use this particular angle to look at her, what does that reveal about her?

So I came at her, as I said, from the outside, from a completely different angle. I was concerned with issues of sexuality, race and slavery, which were in fact issues that, one way or another, she became involved with: sexuality in terms of repression; slavery in terms of an identification with the slave as the victim; and as for race, particularly in this essay, her attitudes toward race and racism emerge very clearly and in a very problematic way. That is one of the reasons why people who study Weil don't really want to talk about this essay, because it raises great problems about her attitudes on some important questions in the 1940s.

OWENS: Why don't you give a very brief sketch of the essay, then, and we can discuss why it would be redacted from American publications, and who was doing that editorial work.

BRAUDE: Let's first of all begin with the problematic content of the essay, why it was removed from the U.S. edition and

why it has been ignored in general. The essay purports to deal with the story of Noah and his sons. It's entitled "The Three Sons of Noah and the History of Mediterranean Civilization."

It begins with a conventionally racist interpretation of the story, identifying each of the three sons with certain racial continental marks. Ham is identified in part with Africa but more with Egypt. This is a slightly different take on the conventional definition, but not unusual. Shem is clearly and unquestionably identified with the Jews. Japheth is identified with the Romans, the Europeans, and the Germans, which is not unusual.

She then takes that story, accepting the racist framework in which it was conventionally depicted in the 1930s and early '40s, and starts mystically inverting it in a Gnostic fashion so that the act of Ham seeing the nakedness of his father becomes not a sin but a blessing, in contrast to the biblical interpretation. The contact between Ham and the naked Noah is considered to be a form of divine revelation, and the other sons who refuse to look at the nakedness of Noah are the evil ones, the cursed ones, because they are not prepared to accept God's revelation. These two evil ones, Shem and Japheth, are then considered to be partners in sin, deserving of being cursed.

Weil then goes on to say that these brothers are in fact now engaged in a horrible conflict, and basically this conflict—the conflict which she identifies as between the Germans and the Jews—is one in which they deserve each other. This was in effect an expression of "a plague on both their houses"—which in 1942 is a problematic and repugnant statement.

She then goes on to say, of course, that the Jews are repugnant and that's why they don't appear in a lot of ancient texts. She claims that the Jews are not only guilty of killing Christ, but that they also tried to kill one of the figures whom she identifies with Christ in the greater world mythology—the figure of

Dionysus, whom they tried to attack. And then she presents a rather silly, vitriolic interpretation of the *Iliad* and the Trojan War, arguing that the Israelites were able to conquer the land of Canaan so easily because the Canaanites had sent forth auxiliary forces to the armies of Troy to defend it against the Greek invasion. It's absurd, and it's a real embarrassment for someone who is such a serious intellectual to indulge in this vacuous and repugnant kind of thinking.

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OWENS: We should add, for context, that she comes from a secular Jewish background.

BRAUDE: Well, she comes from a secular Jewish background, which in fact was much less secular than the conventional story tells us. There was an interest in mysticism and Hinduism in her family, particularly on the part of her older brother. She had exposure to this, even if she did not immediately pick it up.

The reason why this article was censored—and I know this precisely because I got a hold of the correspondence of the publishers—is that the New York pub-

lisher, Putnam and Sons, had been contacted by the French publishers. There were two French publishers, La Colombe and Plon, and I think it was La Colombe that put this out. The French publisher told the Putnam editor that this essay had been severely criticized in Jewish circles and maybe they shouldn't bring it out in New York. So they just omitted it, even though they were planning to publish it. In fact, the original introduction, which was written by an American man of letters, Leslie Fiedler, incorporated a reference to the essay.

OWENS: What date was the American publication?

BRAUDE: As I recall, it was 1951. It was the first of her books that came out in English. It was called *Waiting for God* in the United States, *Waiting on God* in the United Kingdom and *Attente de Dieu* in French. A few years later, after the essay had come out in the United Kingdom and France, it was supposed to be published in German. The translator afterwards said that he had recommended to the publisher that it not be translated and included in the German edition. For some reason, nobody in France knew that the U.S. version had excluded it, even though they knew it didn't appear in German. They didn't realize that it also didn't appear in the biggest market in the world, which is the United States.

Once I discovered this kind of manipulation and variation on the text, I started realizing that this whole question of the presentation of Weil is much more problematic than people have a sense of. People knew there were some questions and criticism surrounding her work, but it's really a systematic problem in terms of how she was packaged and presented. That became the perspective from which I started looking at her early work.

OWENS: You have argued, then, that her legacy and work has been manipulated, and that we aren't getting the full picture. We aren't getting the real Simone Weil.

BRAUDE: Well, I'm not sure how easy it is to get the real Simone Weil. It's a question mark. This is not unusual with people whose works were published posthumously. If you look at the classic 19th century woman of American letters, Emily Dickinson, there's a huge controversy about who she really was. Do we really know that what is published in her name was really hers?

I've been arguing that we haven't addressed that problem with regard to Weil. Part of the reason is that the scholars whose instinct is to look at texts and set them in their context—historians in particular—have been afraid of touching her because she has this mystical aura. We don't want to touch mysticism. We don't want to confront question marks about this. People want to believe this, and we don't want to infringe upon or insult their beliefs. But if the beliefs are based on false or problematic evidence, then it's our duty to do that. That's been a real problem with Weil studies: she's been kind of walled off beyond this mystical barrier. And the result is that we're making all sorts of assumptions that are unwarranted.

OWENS: How do you see her engagement with mysticism relating to her politics? In what ways are they tied together?

BRAUDE: I think that her mysticism is certainly related to disenchantment with her earlier politics. I think the interest in mysticism, and particularly in Hinduism (which has gotten an insufficient amount of attention in Weil studies), was first of all a reflection of the influence of her older brother, who spent quite a bit of time in India.

OWENS: He was the mathematician?

BRAUDE: Yes, the mathematician. He taught in an Indian university for a year or two, and he read a lot of European Christian mystical texts. He was incredibly influential on her and on her life. He was always a model for her, even if she didn't go completely in his direction. In



other words, her family is called secular, but there was an interest and curiosity about mysticism and mystical religion in the household.

She then went through this period in the late '30s when her political inclinations were challenged by a number of events—particularly the Spanish Civil War, in which she tried, ineffectually, to participate. George Orwell, who sort of saw the same situation as she did, described the war in an incredibly disillusioning fashion, and Weil likewise became disillusioned by the republican cause in the Spanish Civil War. She was also disillusioned by the ineffectiveness of the working class movement, the socialist movement and the communist movement in Germany to resist the rise of Nazism. She correctly identified Nazism as a terrible threat, and she correctly recognized that it was not going to be overcome by the forces of the left. So she saw these two great crises of the 1930s going in a disastrous direction.

Consequently, she became less of a materialist and more of a mystic. This comes out in lots of different ways in the late 1930s. However, her most famous mystical experiences—which are the various events between 1935 and 1938, culminating in her sense that Christ had come down and taken possession of her—don't

get recorded until 1942. There's no question that she was in the places that she described, and there's no question that these were important events in her life. But the way in which they were realized and articulated took several years to develop. Her mystical understandings of these events culminated in a letter she wrote to a Dominican priest who was a sort of father-confessor to her. In looking at these writings, we have to acknowledge that she distilled, experienced and reexperienced these events over the course of several years.

So it's a much more complicated process. No one thinks of a mystical experience as something that you have and the next day you write it down. Everybody recognizes that there is an interactive process going on, between the event itself and the complicated way in which you process and experience it. In the case of Weil, this was a complication that was all the more fraught, tortured and tormented because she was going through the Shoah. My argument is that you can't ignore it, even though those people who first presented her work tried to.

OWENS: Can't ignore what?

BRAUDE: Can't ignore the effect of the early stages of the Shoah upon her and her family. (I don't use the word Holocaust, which I think is actually a repug-

nant word, for reasons we could go into in another conversation.)

OWENS: One thing that struck me as someone who's relatively new to Simone Weil is her identification of Christianity as a slave religion, which actually draws her toward Christianity rather than away from it. Many other political thinkers have rejected it as a slave religion that is problematic for politics. Could you speak a bit on that?

BRAUDE: Well, I think she came to articulate that in a period when she saw herself and her family persecuted and enslaved. Her perspective was in fact one of someone who is dominated, subordinated. She wanted to identify whatever she saw with that experience, and I think that helps explain her interpretation of the Noah story, because the figure who is the father of those who are to be enslaved becomes the hero, the blessed, the recipient of the revelation. There's this kind of Gnostic inversion, which reminds me of Luke—the idea that the potentates and the powerful are put down, and the humble are exalted. There's a desire to look at the world from that perspective, even though she doesn't like the concept of consolation in her writings. She rejects it, and says that Christianity doesn't give us consolation. But in a certain sense, it does because it says that real virtue lies in experiencing this tremendous form of affliction and suffering and oppression. And that is in fact the divine experience that we must seek out.

OWENS: I'm wondering about her understanding of religion as mystical, and thinking about the relationship between the public and private. She critiqued both Catholic and Protestant churches as being corrupted by the state or by institutional authority. I wonder if we can project that context forward to recent debates.

What can you say about her legacy, if any, in the contemporary French context, where questions of French nationalism, anti-Semitism, republicanism and this

sort of public-private split are still very much in play? Does she have something to say to us about the contemporary context, or is that a stretch?

BRAUDE: Actually, I would say that she does have something to say, but it is very problematic. I could imagine a lot of her writings being used to justify the National Front. Her whole concept of *enracinement*, or rootedness, is an exclusionary and discriminatory view that the right wing in France has never abandoned. To be fair, she has a complicated articulation of this concept, and it was complicated enough for Albert Camus to respect it. But it was also simple-minded enough for T.S. Eliot to respect it. If you want to give a favorable view of how her book on the need for roots can be understood, then you should look at Camus's take. If you want to look at the repugnant way in which this book can be understood, then you'd look at T.S. Eliot's introduction to that volume, which demonstrates all of his most repulsive political and religious feelings.

I think there's a fundamental ambiguity at work in Weil, because she didn't give the final take on anything she ever published. There's enough out there for people to push the narrative one way or the other.

OWENS: Does she have a voice in contemporary French letters and politics?


BRAUDE: Yes. Her work is constantly being republished. Discussions of her work are easily found in French media. If you Google her and look at any of the French radio stations, you will see lots of interviews with authors and experts on her. Anytime I'm in Paris, there's a good chance there'll be a new book on her on display in the serious bookstores. She's anthologized in major mass market publications. So she is still very much a presence, but I think she's a presence that has not really been interrogated with sufficient critical and objective distance.


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