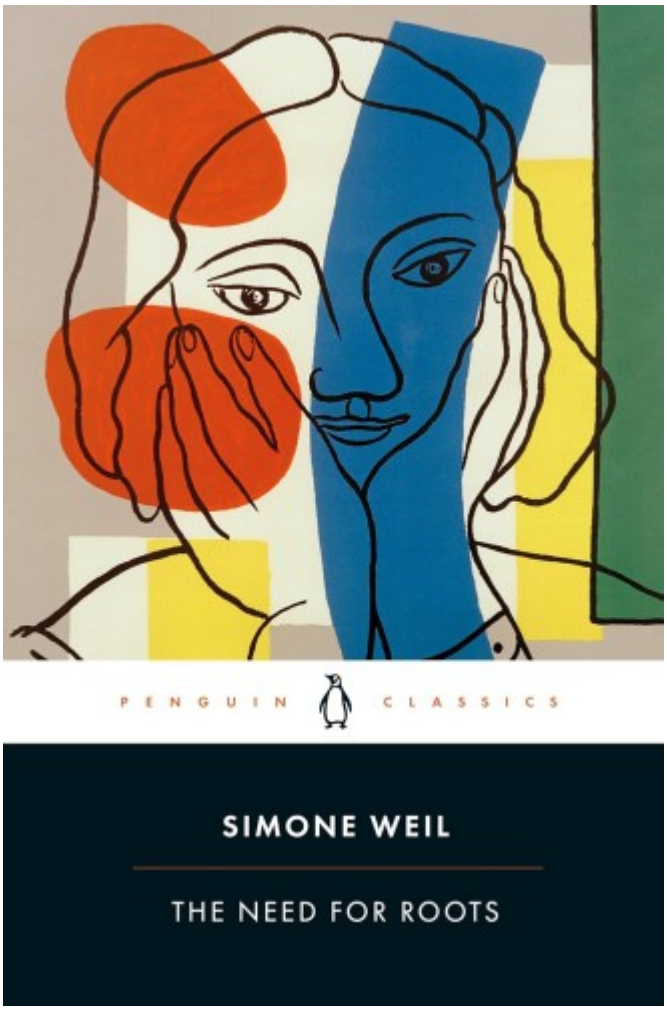
Simone Weil’s anti-fascist blueprint

Ros Schwartz’s translation of *The Need for Roots* makes Weil’s masterpiece feel as urgent today as it was in 1943.

by Mac Loftin in the March 2025 issue
Published on February 13, 2025

## In Review




### The Need for Roots

By Simone Weil, translated by Ros Schwartz
Penguin Classics

Buy from Bookshop.org ›
RW-REPLACE-TOKEN

In 1942, Simone Weil was tasked by Charles de Gaulle's Free France movement to write a report on how France could be rebuilt after driving out the Nazi invaders. What she handed in was something else entirely: a bizarre, meandering, politically uncategorizable, at times genuinely disturbing but always astoundingly brilliant masterpiece, published after her death as *The Need for Roots*.

First appearing in English in 1952, Weil's treatise has been newly translated by Ros Schwartz. English-speaking readers of Weil might be more familiar with her theological writings, collected in *Waiting for God* and *Gravity and Grace*, than her wonkish contributions to radical French politics. But *The Need for Roots* levels a searing critique of so-called Christian civilization that reads as more urgent than ever in our own era of rising Christian nationalism.

The book opens with a call to jettison the idea of universal human rights, the cornerstone of Western liberalism, in favor of universal human "obligations." Rights are flimsy things. I can recognize that others have all sorts of rights without changing my behavior whatsoever. I can pass someone begging on the street, lament that their right to food is being infringed—someone should do something!—and walk on. Things change if I shift my perspective from their right to food to my obligation to feed the hungry. Every time I walk on without helping, I fail an absolute and unshirkable obligation.

The obligation to feed the hungry provides Weil with a model of "eternal duties," obligations to meet our own and others' "needs of the soul." Many of these needs blend the best of liberal and leftist ideals: liberty, responsibility, equality, honor, freedom of opinion, security, risk, collective property, and truth. But Weil also claims we need private property, order, obedience, hierarchy, and punishment.

Politically, *The Need for Roots* is impossible to pin down. The book's central concept of "rootedness"—bringing all the soul's needs together—is kept broad enough to encompass a range of political forms. We're rooted when we feel ourselves irreplaceable members of a community with a past and hopes for the future. But these roots are fragile, and Weil spends much of the book talking about *uprootedness*. Colonization, war, capitalism, racial supremacy—all these structures of domination sever the attachments necessary to fulfill our deepest needs.

Weil's concrete suggestions for resisting uprootedness and cultivating roots range from quirky to confusing to outright reactionary. I'm on board with bringing back the old Tour de France (in which apprentices traveled the country learning new techniques) or making sure teachers in rural areas cultivate a deep appreciation for the folkloric importance of shepherds. But Weil's call for "special tribunals" authorized to send writers guilty of "avoidable mistakes" to prison camps makes me nervous.

It's easy to criticize the alternating haziness and harshness of Weil's vision. But animating all this weirdness is a vital concern. She drew on every current of political thought—left, right, and center—to answer the urgent question for a postwar Europe: Once fascism has been defeated, how can we be sure it won't come back? We can take or leave her specific suggestions, but we ignore her question at our peril.

The question at the heart of *The Need for Roots*, and also its most direct challenge to Christian readers, is this: What made fascism possible in the first place? Weil describes a young Adolf Hitler "wandering the streets of Vienna, avid for greatness." What idea of greatness would a young man like him form, given "the prevailing atmosphere of thought" in Christendom? Every street he walked down would be studded with statues of conquerors, every bookstore overflowing with histories of kings and emperors, every church and public building enshrining glory and majesty. "Our conception of greatness is the very same that inspired Hitler's entire life," Weil laments.

Underneath all the strange political suggestions, the real argument of *The Need for Roots* is that the West needs "a transformation of the meaning of greatness so complete that Hitler is divested of it." And for Weil, the responsibility for our idea that greatness means kingship, power, and glory sits squarely on the shoulder of Christian theology. The transformation of greatness begins with a transformation of theology. Christianity too often imagines God like "an important Roman landowner who has vast estates and numerous slaves," only expanding "the estate to the scale of the world"—God as sovereign master of the universe, King of kings and Lord of lords. For fascism to be truly defeated, we must renounce this "Roman conception of God," which "perhaps contaminates the whole of Christianity." We must cultivate a different theological imagination.

Weil doesn’t shy away from totally transforming Christianity’s most foundational ideas, including the meaning of Jesus’ death. For 2,000 years, she says, Christians have proclaimed that Jesus, “although he had been crucified, was then resuscitated and would soon return in glory to reward his followers and punish all the others.” For her, this story of divine power conquering death itself only proves how deeply the divinization of force has lodged in the heart of theology. She imagines new kinds of Christians who refuse any notion of power and glory, who “have no need of the resurrection in order to believe, and for whom perfection and the Cross are the proofs.” While Weil’s other writings explore more fully her heterodox and tragic theology, *The Need for Roots* argues forcefully that anti-fascist politics cannot do without this spirit of daring theological experimentation.

Schwartz’s updated translation makes Weil’s call for theological creativity in the struggle against fascism feel as urgent today as it was in 1943. At the sentence level, Schwartz opts for readability and liveliness over the literalness of Arthur Wills’s 1952 translation. But Schwartz also preserves the unfinishedness of Weil’s project. When *The Need for Roots* first appeared in France in 1949, its editors not only gave it a more commercial title (Weil called it “Prelude to a Declaration of Obligations Towards the Human Being”) but patched up the gaps and unfinished sentences and organized the book into three neat sections. Schwartz, on the other hand, lets fragments hang and preserves the original manuscript’s lack of structure. Weil’s *prélude* doesn’t even properly end; its final sentence is an unfinished fragment, a thought trailing off into nothing. Schwartz rightly keeps this ending. The unfinishedness of the text dramatizes Weil’s transformation of greatness, her looking for God in risk and transience rather than mastery and certainty.

Weil was a troubled and complicated writer, and *The Need for Roots* is a troubled and complicated text. We might not want to live in the society she imagined or follow her theology to its bleak and shadowed depths. But we, like her, live in an age when calls to make Christendom great again are growing deafening. We need the courage to risk new kinds of thinking—about ourselves, our roots, our communities, and our obligations; about God’s relationship to us and our relationships with each other. For this kind of risky thinking, *The Need for Roots* really is a blueprint.