



# SHINE AS THE SUN: C.S. LEWIS AND THE DOCTRINE OF DEIFICATION

Friend of *Road to Emmaus*, Chris Jensen, first presented this luminous essay at the 2005 C.S. Lewis Summer Institute at Oxford University. We are very pleased to offer it here, adapted for our readers as Part II of “The Orthodox Worldview and C.S. Lewis.”

When C.S. Lewis was president of the Socratic Club at Oxford University in the 1940s and 1950s, he liked to feature weekly discussions on “repellent doctrines.” By this, he meant Christian teachings that were hard for modern people to swallow—on topics like hierarchy, miracles, or pain. The Socratic Club was an open forum for discussing intellectual difficulties related to the faith. Under Lewis, it became one of the best-attended societies in Oxford. It welcomed agnostics and nonbelievers, which was apt considering that Lewis (1898-1963) once passed through the grip of atheism before finding the robust and articulate Christian faith that would make him one of the best-selling religious authors of the twentieth century. Lewis came to realize that many of the doctrines that once repelled him in fact conveyed life-giving truths. These truths, he thought, were the ones modern people most needed to know but were least likely to recognize. “If our religion is something objective, then we must never avert our eyes from those elements in it which seem puzzling or repellent,” he wrote. “The new truth which you do not know and which you need must, in the very nature of things, be hidden precisely in the doctrines you least like and least understand.”<sup>1</sup>

Any list of repellent doctrines, in Lewis’s day or in ours, would include the doctrine of deification. Largely unknown to modern Christians, deification (or *theosis*) has been described by Professor Georgios Mantzaridis of the University of Thessaloniki as the deepest longing of man and the ultimate goal of existence, while Fr. Kiprian Kern calls it the religious ideal of Eastern Orthodoxy.<sup>2</sup> Deification teaches that salvation is not just an intellectual consent to an idea, not just an external or ethical imitation of Christ. Neither is it a solitary path to individual bliss. Rather, deification expresses human salvation as an inward process of transformation experienced within the life of the Church and leading to mystical union with God. As St. Basil put it, man is nothing less than a creature that has received the order to *become god*.

This might sound puzzling or even heretical to some, but it certainly didn’t to C.S. Lewis — at least not to the Lewis of the 1940s and beyond when he was leading the Socratic Club and producing many of his greatest writings in which deification shines forth as one of his central convictions. In *Mere Christianity*, for example, he argues that the whole purpose of Christianity is to turn people into what he variously calls “new men,” “little Christs,” “Sons of God” — and “gods and goddesses.” In his wartime sermon “The Weight of Glory,” Lewis says, “It is a serious thing to live in a society of

possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you can talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be tempted to worship.”

Lewis was a professor of medieval and renaissance literature by trade. A self-described ordinary layman of the Anglican Church, he made no claims to be a systematic or academic theologian. But he was a reader of immense range and appetite who encountered the concept of deification in St. Athanasius’s classic *On the Incarnation* as well as in Pseudo-Dionysius, Richard Hooker, Lancelot Andrewes, and George Macdonald, to name a few. In his writings, Lewis expressed the idea of deification in scriptural terms (being “in Christ,” becoming “new creatures,” sharing in the “glory of God”) as well as in figures (dances, fountains, marriages, winged horses, statues-come-to-life). All attest to Lewis’s abiding belief in the transforming power of



*Chris Jensen on the River Cherwell in the shadow of the Great Tower at Magdalen College, Oxford*

divine love. Significantly, rather than Lewis the scholar or rationalist, it was Lewis the poet, Lewis the Romantic, and Lewis the imaginative writer who was most sensitive to this idea’s power. In this, he was kindred to the mystical and monastic tradition of the Christian East, where the doctrine of deification is taught to this day and where theology remains more poetic than propositional, more experiential than systematic.

Given the obscurity of this doctrine in our times, perhaps it’s no surprise that scholars of C.S. Lewis have given scant attention to the importance of deification for Lewis or to its place within the larger constellation of his ideas including myth, longing, temptation, or the sacramental life. This is unfortunate, because it is a key that unlocks much of his life and thought. To study it not only promises to bring us nearer to the heart of Lewis, but also to explain why many in the Orthodox Church, including Bishop Kallistos Ware, consider him a trusted literary companion and embrace him as an “anonymous Orthodox.”<sup>3</sup>

### *God In and Out*

Some of the perplexity over the doctrine of deification comes from it being confused with variations in different religions. At the outset, then,

it should be said that deification does not mean the actualization or realization of a person’s latent divinity (a belief which is less Christian than monistic or pantheistic). Nor does it mean that human beings eventually will evolve into something essentially equal to God. Despite his poetic bent, Lewis didn’t follow the path of Emerson or others who blurred dogmatic boundaries by confusing God and creation or by teaching that human beings are naturally divine. Only God is essentially perfect, immortal, transcendent, and uncreated. Lewis was always clear on the difference between creature and Creator – an irreducible ontological difference. This distinction is captured in the memorable phrase of Rudolph Otto, a writer to whom Lewis often referred, that God is “wholly other.”

Deification, in Orthodox Christian terms, has been described by the patristic scholar Archbishop Basil Krivocheine as:

... the state of man’s total transformation, effected by the Holy Spirit, when man observes the commandments of God, acquires the evangelical virtues and shares in the sufferings of Christ. The Holy Spirit then gives man a divine intelligence and incorruptibility. Man does not receive a new soul, but the Holy Spirit unites essentially with the whole man, body and soul. He makes of him a son of God, a god by adoption, though man does not cease being a man, a simple creature, even when he clearly sees the Father. He may be called man and god at the same time. While affirming the possibility of ... deification even in this life ... its fullness belongs only to the eschatological infinite ... Divinization will always remain an awesome mystery, surpassing all human understanding and unobserved by most people.<sup>4</sup>

Lewis’s vision of deification is consonant with this. Stressing the boundaries between God and creation, Lewis once said that he saw human destiny not as the transformation into angels nor the absorption into Deity but rather as the fulfilling of humanity, in which human beings will become “like God ... [but] with the likeness proper to men.”<sup>5</sup> Deified human beings forever remain human while at the same time sharing in divine grace or energy, like iron in the fire shares the properties of flame but doesn’t cease to be iron. Human beings won’t melt into an impersonal God like a salt statue tossed into the ocean, or become new and independent divine beings

in a type of polytheistic evolution. Hence Lewis can't be categorized with Neoplatonists, Hindus, Mormons, or any number of mystics who seemed to lose sight of the essential distinction between God and humankind.

If the doctrine of deification requires an understanding of God's transcendence, it equally depends upon the notion of His immanence. This holds that creation, although distinct from God, is penetrated by divine energy and wisdom. As Lewis once put it, in speaking of the theology of the sixteenth-century Anglican writer Richard Hooker, "God is unspeakably transcendent; but also unspeakably immanent." Centuries earlier, St. Athanasius made the point this way: God is *in* everything through His love, but *outside* of everything by His nature. We're told by Lewis's biographer that the most precious moments in life to Lewis were when he was aware of the spiritual quality of material things, of the "infusion of the supernatural into the workaday world."<sup>6</sup> An analogy to this is found in Lewis's land of Narnia, where trees dance, rivers teem with nymphs, birds carry messages, and stars are glittering people with long hair like burning silver. Narnia's enchantment suggests a point about our world that Lewis made later in his book *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer*. "All is holy and 'big with God' ... and every bush (could we but perceive it) a Burning Bush."<sup>7</sup> Some have suggested that because this sort of understanding of God's immanence has been neglected in much modern theology, deification has fallen into the background.

But not so in Lewis. In *Mere Christianity*, Lewis speaks of humans making direct contact with the uncreated spiritual life of God (which he terms *Zoe*, as opposed to the created and natural life, *Bios*). This divine and eternal life is how believers share in the transforming power of Christ. Lewis calls it a communicable energy that can be spread into the depths of a person. Importantly, instead of seeing divine grace as something external like paint that is applied to a person's surface, Lewis says it's like "a dye or stain that soaks right through." Its goal is not to produce better human beings, but to generate a new kind of creature altogether.<sup>8</sup> This line of thought suggests that Lewis grasped the distinction made in the Christian East since the time of St. Basil between God's *essence*, which remains beyond human reach or comprehension, and God's *energies* (variously known as grace, providence, love, glory, and light) which allow one to make direct contact with God.

### Deification as Glory

Some have spurned the doctrine of deification on grounds that it is nonbiblical, such as scholars who dismiss it as a vague platonizing form of pantheism that betrayed the original understanding of salvation in favor of Graeco-Roman paganism.<sup>9</sup> While it's true that the term *theosis* was adopted by early Christians from the lexicon of Neoplatonism, it's also evident that it became standard in Christian theology and spirituality precisely *because* it was seen as expressing the genuine Biblical eschatological hope of personal and organic union with God. This hope is that humans, in the words of 2 Peter 1:4, could become partakers of the divine nature. The theme is basic to the Gospel of John with its motif of abiding or dwelling, a book where we find Jesus quoting Psalm 82 ("*I said, You are gods...*"). Further, the epistles of St. Paul teem with a mystical vision of life in Christ, of renewal in the likeness of God, and of transformation into the image of God. In fact, Lewis tells us that it was the very language of Scripture that forced him to take seriously the idea of deification.

He explains this in his 1941 sermon, "The Weight of Glory," which was preached to one of the largest modern crowds ever to assemble at the Church of St. Mary the Virgin in Oxford. In the address, he equates salvation with the Biblical term *glory*. This word, significantly, often is used in the patristic tradition to denote deification. For example, St. Maximus the Confessor defined deification as the work of divine grace by which human nature is so transformed that it "shines forth with a supernatural light and is transported above its own limits by a superabundance of glory."<sup>10</sup> In Lewis's sermon — its title alludes to 2 Cor. 4:17-18 — he says that at first he failed to find much immediate appeal in the glory imagery of white robes, thrones, or splendor like the sun and stars, all of which he found in the writings of the New Testament and other early Christian sources. In this sense, deification was initially repellent to Lewis. He was put off by the term's twin connotations of fame and luminosity. If glory meant fame, he observed, this seemed to be a competitive passion or a desire to be better known than others. And if it meant luminosity, "Who wishes to become a kind of living electric light bulb?"<sup>11</sup> To him, the first seemed wicked and the



second ridiculous. Misgivings aside, Lewis eventually came to understand the imagery and to believe that deification did indeed carry both connotations — luminosity in the sense of a glorious transformation of human persons by divine grace into new creatures, and fame in the sense of a personal encounter with God in which approbation and acceptance were the blessed hallmarks.

One of Lewis's favorite ways to describe this divine acceptance was through the image of the dance, a figure that hints at heaven's order and sanctity as well as its frolic and festivity. Lewis claimed that one of the most important differences between Christianity and all other religions is that the Trinitarian God is not a static thing, not even a single person, but "a dynamic, pulsating activity, a life ... Almost, if you will not think me irreverent, a kind of dance."<sup>12</sup> Such an analogy calls to mind early theologians who described the dynamic exchange of love in God as *perichoresis* (meaning a *dance* or *indwelling*, from which we get our word *choreography*).

As John Meyendorff has explained, "Deification or theosis of the Greek fathers is an acceptance of human persons within a divine life, which already is itself a fellowship of love between three co-eternal Persons, welcoming humanity within their mutuality."<sup>13</sup> Such divine welcome is what Lewis has in mind when he says that, "Some day, God willing, we shall get in."<sup>14</sup>

The sermon is remarkable, too, for its presentation of Lewis's cherished theory of Joy (his word for *Sehnsucht*, also called longing, desire, or nostalgia). The importance of this theory for Lewis can hardly be overstated. "In a sense," he wrote in his autobiography, *Surprised by Joy*, "the central story of my life is about nothing else."<sup>15</sup> The theory holds that human beings are conscious of a desire or longing that no natural happiness will satisfy. Joy, then, is the fleeting, sweetly painful experience of longing for divine or numinous beauty — an elusive experience which often departs as quickly as it arrives. From his youth, Lewis had many experiences like this and later read about them in writers like Richard Hooker. According to Lewis, these longings are often evoked by nostalgic memories, encounters with nature, or certain books or music. All of these are merely vehicles of something transcendent; the danger is that human beings will errantly seek

a sort of infinite satisfaction in such finite things: "They are not the thing itself; they are only the scent of a flower we have not found, the echo of a tune we have not heard, news from a country we have never yet visited."<sup>16</sup> Ideally, such experiences will keep us seeking something more, like "some vague picnicker's hankering for a 'better' place."<sup>17</sup>

The doctrine of deification is the capstone to Lewis's theory of Joy insofar as it offers an explanation of how that old ache of longing will be filled: "There is no other way to the happiness for which we were made."<sup>18</sup> In *The Problem of Pain*, Lewis wrote that our destiny in life is either to be like God — or to be miserable. There is no middle way. "If we will not learn to eat the only food that the universe grows ... then we must starve eternally."<sup>19</sup> In describing this longing, he says,

We do not want merely to see beauty, though, God knows, even that is bounty enough. We want something else which can hardly be put into words — to be united with the beauty we see, to pass into it, to receive it into ourselves, to become part of it. That is why we have peopled air and earth and water with gods and goddesses and nymphs and elves — that, though we cannot, yet these projections can enjoy the beauty, grace, and power of which Nature is the image. That is why the poets tell us such lovely falsehoods ... We cannot mingle with the splendors we see ... [But] some day, God willing, we shall get in.<sup>20</sup>

Deification, then, is bound up with Lewis's abiding appreciation of myth and poetry. Although Lewis's love for myth is most often remembered in terms of how he saw pagan myths prefiguring the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ (e.g., Balder, Adonis, or Bacchus, the myths which later became "fact" in the Second Person of the Trinity), it's equally true that Lewis saw in mythology a type of *our* resurrected life as well. Human participation in God, Lewis says, is something that the poets and the mythologies know all about.<sup>21</sup> In "The Weight of Glory," we are told that one of the reasons Lewis placed such a high value on myth and poetry was because he saw in them an intimation of *our* divine destiny. In the lovely falsehoods told in countless stories and poems, humans get married to gods, or west winds blow right into human souls. These may be false as *history*, but they may be quite near the truth as *prophecy* insofar as one day humans may pass beyond nature into the source of beauty and power itself, eating at the tree of life and drinking from the fountain of joy. This poetic and mythical radiance resting on



Christian theology is something that Lewis cherished. Just as Lewis said that the old myth of the dying God finally “came down from the heaven of legend and imagination to the earth of history,”<sup>22</sup> so too, we might say, the corresponding myths of godlike men and women will one day ascend from the earth of legend into the reality of paradise.

### *Big Medicine*

The concept of deification has challenged those who are accustomed to thinking of salvation as a once-for-all-time decision or as divine pardon in which God overturns our guilty verdict and lets us off the hook. As Vladimir Lossky has observed, a treatise of St. Anselm of Canterbury called *Cur Deus Homo* (completed in Italy in 1098 AD) deeply colored popular Western notions of salvation by presenting the idea of redemption in isolation from the rest of Christ’s life and work.<sup>23</sup> By so doing, the main focus of salvation became the cross and passion, where Christ is seen to have effected a change in the Father’s attitude toward fallen men. Oddly, this forensic model suggests that an angry God needs to be cured rather than sinful or mortal human beings. Salvation as deification, in contrast, accents human healing and transformation, looking to the Cross but additionally to the Resurrection, the Ascension, and the sending of the Holy Spirit. The implications here are significant. To see salvation as Lewis did — as infusion by divine energy leading to deification, and not merely a juridical transaction or pardon — means that the Christian life is more than merely accepting an idea, more than merely an external moral imitation of *Christ*. A genuine life *in Christ* becomes a possibility. In *Mere Christianity*, Lewis explained that when Christians speak of being “in Christ” or of Christ being “in them,” this ought to mean more than just thinking about Christ or copying Him. It should mean that Christ is actually operating through them.<sup>24</sup>

But exactly how does Christ operate? Or how does one acquire the Christ-life within? Lewis answers that this process, which leads to deification, isn’t a matter of exceptional experience reserved for some special few mystics, but rather the calling of all the baptized within the context of the sacramental life of the Church. Bishop Kallistos Ware once wrote, “If someone asks ‘How can I become god?’ the answer is very simple: go to church, receive the sacraments regularly, pray to God ‘in spirit and truth,’ read the

Gospels, follow the commandments.”<sup>25</sup> Similarly, in *Mere Christianity*, Lewis asserts that the three main channels are baptism, belief, and Holy Communion. Lewis says he never would have guessed these could convey spiritual life but for that matter, he wouldn’t have expected ordinary biological life to be reproduced in the way that it is, either. He calls the spreading of divine life the process of “good infection,” a phrase which nicely captures the internal aspect of deification:

Good things as well as bad, you know, are caught by a kind of infection. If you want to get warm you must stand near the fire; if you want to be wet you must get into the water. If you want joy, power, peace, eternal life, you must get close to, *or even into*, the thing that has them ... They are a great fountain of energy and beauty spurting up at the very center of reality. If you are close to it, the spray will wet you: if you are not, you will remain dry.<sup>26</sup>

Lewis thought that because men and women are physical beings, God uses material things (water, bread, wine) to infuse them with divine grace. In Christianity — which he says is “almost the only one of the great religions which thoroughly approves of the body” — the body as well as the soul participate in the spiritual life, and one day the rapture of the saved soul will flow over into the glorified body.<sup>27</sup> That God’s glory is in some sense communicable to physical beings is suggested by the face of Moses, whose skin shone after he met with God (Exodus 34:29), or by St. Paul’s handkerchiefs and aprons, which healed the sick and drove away demons (Acts 19:12). For Lewis, deification won’t destroy the human body but fulfill and resurrect it. In Christianity, the body is not to be dismissed as an inferior prison-house of the soul as it might be in Plato or in streams of gnostic thought — including contemporary varieties of gnosticism such as one evangelical strand that some observers see as dualistic at the core.<sup>28</sup> In Lewis’s view, it is not God but the devil who despises matter and resents the mingling of spiritual things with “dirt and slime.”<sup>29</sup> Speaking of human embodiment, Lewis says that although we may not be able to conceive exactly what we will be in the next life, “we may be sure that we shall be more, not less, than we were on earth.”<sup>30</sup>



Lewis took seriously the food of immortality of the Eucharist (John 6:48-57). For him, Holy Communion was not only a symbol or metaphor of union with God but a genuine and concrete way to receive the good infection of divine grace and to participate in the life of God. Like many of Lewis's most cherished Christian beliefs, however, this one was an acquired taste. His biographer George Sayer says that when Lewis first returned to church in the early 1930's following his conversion, Lewis took a rather limited view of Holy Communion. At this point, he received it only on great holidays. But by the early 1940's — about the same time he began meeting his spiritual director regularly for confession and counsel — Lewis began to perceive the sacrament differently and began to receive it weekly. Finally he developed a great reverence for the mystery of the Eucharist.<sup>31</sup> In *Letters to Malcolm*, which was published the year of his death, Lewis spoke of Holy Communion as an experience where the veil between the worlds gets thin. "Here a hand from the hidden country touches not only my soul but my body ... Here is big medicine and strong magic ... [and] I should define magic in this sense



as 'objective efficacy which cannot be further analyzed.'<sup>32</sup> For Lewis, this qualified sense of 'magic' carried the positive connotation of mystery.

Lewis was reluctant to try to explain the mystery. He regretted that precise dogmatic definitions had been made on this subject in the West (in part because he thought they led to divisions among Christians). He once said that he was glad that Jesus Christ said, "Take, eat," rather than "Take, understand." Although Lewis didn't embrace the medieval formula of transubstantiation, he did accept the doctrine of real presence as articulated by Anglicans like Lancelot Andrewes. In his reticence to take this mystery out of its holy context and to regard it as an object among objects, he echoed the concern of Wordsworth, who once warned that we murder by dissecting. Or, as Lewis once wrote, "It is like taking a red coal out of the fire to examine it: it becomes a dead coal."<sup>33</sup>

In light of that analogy, it's instructive to remember the passage from *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* where the children meet a venerable Old Man living near the world's end, a retired star named Ramandu. Every morning, Ramandu is brought a fire-berry from the valleys in the sun by a

bird. The fire-berries — little coals which are too bright to look at — will take away a little of the Old Man's age until he becomes young as a newborn child and rises again at the earth's eastern rim to join the great dance. In this we find echoes not only of Elijah's miraculous sustenance by the ravens who carried him bread and meat during his sojourn in the desert (I Kings 17), but also of the vision of Isaiah who saw the Lord of Hosts on a throne in the temple attended by Seraphim singing, "Holy, Holy, Holy" (Isaiah 6), one of whom took a live coal from the altar with tongs and brought it to the prophet's lips and said: "Behold, this has touched your lips, and your iniquity is taken away, and your sin is forgiven."

In our day, Lewis's stress on the importance of Holy Communion might seem odd, at least in those Christian communities that celebrate the Eucharist infrequently or express its importance in terms of how it affects God rather than how it transforms us.<sup>34</sup> But Lewis was adamant that eternal life must be spread not only by purely mental acts like belief, but also by bodily acts like baptism and Holy Communion. He insisted that Christianity "is not merely the spreading of an idea ... [because] God never meant man to be a purely spiritual creature. That is why He uses material things like bread and wine to put the new life into us. We may think this rather crude and unspiritual. God does not: He invented eating. He likes matter. He invented it."<sup>35</sup>

### *Flip Side of Incarnation*

One of the best-known lines from patristic literature on the topic of deification comes from chapter 54 of St. Athanasius's classic *On the Incarnation*: "He, indeed, assumed humanity that we might become God." When Lewis wrote an introduction to a new translation of this work made by his friend and longtime pen pal, the Anglican nun Sister Penelope, he praised St. Athanasius for "a very great book ... a picture of the Tree of Life ... sappy and golden ... [and] full of buoyancy and confidence."<sup>36</sup> In the book, deification is understood more broadly in the context of the renewal of all creation undertaken by the Word of God. Athanasius observes that the divine task of making all things new belongs to the same divine person through whom all things were made to begin with; hence there is a consistency between creation and salvation. Jesus Christ, as the Father's divine agent, saw our

sorry state after the Fall and stooped low to assume flesh in order to banish death and to begin the process of reversing the ills of corruption, mortality, pain, and sin – in short, to re-create the world.

According to Athanasius, Adam and Eve were by grace “as God” (Psalm 82:6) in Paradise in that they shared in divine life and were incorrupt and immortal. Church Fathers commonly express this by reference to Genesis 1:26, speaking of man and woman created in the *image* of God and with the possibility of attaining to the *likeness* of God. Their state of incorruption was lost after the Fall and exile from Eden. Deification, then, is the summit of a gradual process by which human beings are reintegrated into the life of God, beginning with the restoration of God’s image through baptism and continuing with purification of the heart and illumination by divine grace. This process reorders the powers of the human soul and restores the state of paradise inwardly while leading finally to the new paradise beyond this world. Orthodox describe this process as the Threefold Way, indicating that the soul must progress through three stages in order to reach the fullness of participation in God: first, purification or catharsis, in which the heart and mind are purified of egotistical passions and addictions; second, illumination or photisis, the enlightenment of the soul, a state that Adam and Eve enjoyed in Eden; third, theosis or deification, which is the ineffable union of the soul with God. Even at this lofty summit, we’re told that the state of perfection is relative and not absolute; it is dynamic not static, forever ascending ‘from glory to glory’ (II Cor. 3:18). In the words of St. Gregory of Nyssa, “True perfection never stands still but ever grows toward the better.”<sup>37</sup> This notion of *epektasis*, of eternal life as unending infinite progress, is found in Church Fathers like St. Irenaeus and St. Maximos the Confessor and is echoed memorably by Lewis himself in the final passage of *The Last Battle*.

It is significant that Athanasius’s famous quote comes in a book about the Incarnation, since deification has been described as the “flip side” of Incarnation.<sup>38</sup> It might be said that Lewis’s belief in deification can be seen as an index of just how seriously he took the doctrine of the Incarnation. Lewis seemed to understand the Orthodox view that the Incarnation not only revealed the *incarnate God* but also the *transcendent man*.<sup>39</sup> Lewis once wrote, “The Incarnation worked ‘not by the conversion of the Godhead into flesh, but by the taking of the manhood into God.’ ... Humanity, still remaining itself, is not merely counted as, but veritably drawn into, Deity.”<sup>40</sup>

In patristic terms, what Lewis describes as the “taking of the manhood into God” is the deification of human nature achieved in Christ. In other words, as a result of the Incarnation, the first fruits of our substance were deified and a new root was created for accessing divine life and incorruptibility.<sup>41</sup> However, the deification of all human *nature* in Christ – the so-called physical view of deification in Orthodoxy – doesn’t automatically guarantee the deification of every human *person*. At birth, human beings are still linked to the old root of Adam, with its death and decay and darkened soul. The task of every person, then, is to grow the new root of Christ by free, personal participation in God’s divine grace, and to put the old root to death through faith, repentance, and following Christ’s commandments. Vladimir Lossky helpfully points out that the primary role of Jesus Christ was the redemption of human *nature*, while the Holy Spirit’s primary role is the deification of human *persons* in Christ.<sup>42</sup> One way to express this, using the notion of image and likeness, is that Jesus Christ achieved the objective dimension of our salvation (our redemption) by bestowing upon our human nature His own glory and immortality; thus when we participate in Christ’s death and resurrection in the sacrament of Baptism, this *image* of God in our nature is restored. However, as St. Diodochos points out in the *Philokalia*, there remains a further subjective dimension to salvation, in which as persons we become transformed into the *likeness* of God: “His likeness is granted only to those who through great love have brought their own freedom in subjection to God.”<sup>43</sup> Lewis himself captures both the objective and subjective dimensions of salvation when he writes, “The business of becoming a son of God, of being turned from a created thing to a begotten thing, of passing over from the temporary biological life into timeless ‘spiritual’ life, has been done for us. Humanity is already ‘saved’ in principle. We individuals have to appropriate that salvation.”<sup>44</sup>



### *If We Let Him*

This appropriation of salvation, this bringing of our human freedom into subjection to God, naturally requires our cooperation. Therefore, deification hinges upon human free will. For Lewis, human freedom was a bedrock belief, fundamental to the idea of what it means to be created in the image of God and essential to the possibility of genuine love. This finds expression in *The Magician's Nephew* at the creation of Narnia, where Aslan says in a strong and happy voice, "Creatures, I give you yourselves."<sup>45</sup> Lewis thought that all humans beings had been given this same gift. Writes Lewis,

You must realize from the outset that the goal towards which [God] is beginning to guide you is absolute perfection; and no power in the whole universe, except you yourself, can prevent Him from taking you to that goal ... If we let Him — for we can prevent Him, if we choose — He will make the feeblest and filthiest of us into a god or goddess, a dazzling, radiant immortal creature, pulsating all through with such energy and joy and wisdom and love as we cannot now imagine.<sup>46</sup>



Lewis's doctrine of synergy was akin to the model of St. Paul, who said we are to be fellow-workers (*synergoi*) with God (I Cor. 3:9). This interaction of divine grace and human will was described memorably by a monk of the Eastern Church as "the cooperation of two unequal, but equally necessary forces."<sup>47</sup> For his part, Lewis once described this paradox as follows: "I don't

mean that I can therefore, as they say, 'sit back.' What God does for us, He does in us. The process of doing it will appear to me (and not falsely) to be the daily or hourly repeated exercises of my own will."<sup>48</sup>

Nowhere is the struggle to submit one's will to God more evident than in the arena of prayer, the spiritual discipline most basic and essential in the ascent toward God. Lewis often stressed that prayer takes work and that it's a duty, sometimes even an irksome and frustrating one, because human life is not yet perfect and our prayers are often impeded by distractions from within and without. We must pray, even when we don't want to — only in heaven will perfect prayer be possible and will there be no need for "ought."

## C.S. Lewis and the Orthodox Church

C.S. Lewis's belief in the doctrine of deification — as well as his apophatic sense of God's hiddenness, his teachings on Christ and the Trinity, and his understanding of creation and personhood — make a strong case for his "anonymous Orthodoxy." So observes Kallistos Ware in the essay "God of the Fathers: C.S. Lewis and Eastern Christianity" in *The Pilgrim's Guide: C.S. Lewis and the Art of Witness*. But what was Lewis's direct experience of the Orthodox Church?

First of all, Lewis knew of the Russian Orthodox tradition via his friendship with Professor Nicholas Zernov in Oxford. That Lewis attended at least one Orthodox service in England is confirmed by a letter of 13 March 1956 found in *Letters of C.S. Lewis*, in which Lewis wrote, "My model here is the behaviour of the congregation at a 'Russian Orthodox' service, where some sit, some lie on their faces, some stand, some kneel, some walk about, and *no one takes the slightest idea of what anyone else is doing*. That is good sense, good manners, and good Christianity."

Andrew Walker, in his essay "Under the Russian Cross" in *A Christian for All Christians: Essays in Honour of C.S. Lewis*, observes that Lewis's friendship with Zernov and his wife, Militza, lasted from the 1940s until Lewis's death in 1963. Writes Walker, "Militza Zernov told me, 'We have certainly talked with C.S. Lewis (we are calling him Jack) about the Orthodox Church. He was deeply interested in it.'" Nicholas Zernov was able to involve Lewis in a number of activities, including presenting at least two papers to the society of St. Alban and St. Sergius. One paper by Lewis, intriguingly entitled, "A Toy, an Icon, and a Work of Art," has apparently been lost. Another paper presented by Lewis to this society in 1945 has been published in *The Weight of Glory* under the title "Membership."

A few years before his death, Lewis was able to visit Greece for the first time. His biographer, George Sayer, writes that Lewis was moved by his visit to a Greek Orthodox cathedral in Rhodes during Pascha in 1960, where, with his ailing wife, Joy, he attended part of the Paschal service as well as an Orthodox wedding. In *Jack: A Life of C.S. Lewis*, Sayer writes, "Whenever the subject came up between us, [Lewis] said that he preferred the Orthodox liturgy to either the Catholic or Protestant liturgies. He was also impressed by the Greek Orthodox priests, whose faces, he thought, looked more spiritual than those of most Catholic or Protestant clergy."

Perhaps, then, it was fitting that his friends the Zernovs brought an Orthodox cross made of white flowers to Lewis's funeral in November 1963, under which Lewis was buried at the cemetery of his Anglican parish at Headington.

Lewis regularly prayed from the Book of Psalms (likely praying through all 150 Psalms each month) and from the Book of Common Prayer because he thought written or “ready-made prayers” handed down by the Church kept him in touch with sound doctrine and kept him from sliding so easily into the phantom called “my religion.”<sup>49</sup> Lewis would often spend an hour or more doing his evening prayers, integrating his prayer with the reading of Scripture. Lewis stressed the obligation to pray for others including our enemies (he prayed for Hitler and Stalin). He knew that human beings were not mere spirits and that it mattered what body position they took in prayer, and what they ate or drank beforehand: “They are animals and ... whatever their bodies do affects their souls.”<sup>50</sup> The connection between the physical and the spiritual was driven home to Lewis when he added the discipline of fasting to his habit of prayer, finding relief from obsessive sins.<sup>51</sup> The hard work of prayer made a difference in his life that others could notice. George Sayer, a friend and former pupil who knew him for twenty-nine years, said, “It was hard to be much in Lewis’s company without being aware of his goodness, even holiness. It was nourished by prayer — he meditated daily on verses from the New Testament — by his openness to mystical experience, and his habit of communing with nature.”<sup>52</sup>

Along with his private prayer, Lewis also attended daily Matins before his work day started. He understood the necessity for corporate expressions of faith, and explains his view in the essay “Membership,” which Lewis read in 1945 to the Fellowship of St. Alban and St. Sergius, a group that was co-founded by Lewis’s friend Nicholas Zernov, an Orthodox Christian who sought to bring eastern and western Christians together.<sup>53</sup> In the essay, Lewis insists that the Christian is called not to collectivism nor to individualism but to membership in the mystical body. Deification, therefore, can’t be properly construed as a solitary trip to individual bliss, but rather a corporate undertaking in Christ in which “everything that is joined to the immortal head will share His immortality.”<sup>54</sup> Zernov himself, formerly the Spalding Lecturer in Eastern Orthodox Studies at Oxford University (a post later held by Bishop Kallistos Ware), develops the same theme in his 1942 book *The Church of the Eastern Christians*. Zernov explains that the East does not think about salvation in terms of the individual soul returning to its maker so much as the process of transfiguration of the whole cosmos: “The East is clear that salvation for an individual means to become part of the redeemed community ... Man is saved not from the world but with the

world, because he is its guardian and master; he is saved, not apart from others, but with the rest of the Christian family, as one of its members.”<sup>55</sup>

### *Horror to Ourselves*

Our participation in the divine energies not only helps to restore the knowledge of God that was lost in the Fall, but also increases our self-knowledge, hence leading to ever-increasing humility and repentance. So thought Lewis, who held that the closer one drew to the light of God, the more perfect one became and the more clearly one’s sins and imperfections were illumined. For example, we might point to the protagonist Orual, the Queen of Glome, in Lewis’s masterful *Till We Have Faces*. Near her life’s end, she looks back over the passing of years and comments, “It was like being with child, but reverse; the thing I carried in me grew slowly smaller and less alive.”<sup>56</sup> This thing was her ego.

Lewis insisted that we are “creatures whose character must be, in some respects, a horror to God, as it is, when we really see it, a horror to ourselves ... I notice that the holier a man is, the more fully he is aware of that fact.”<sup>57</sup> In these terms, no one can dismiss deification as wishful thinking, escapism, or self-adoration; in fact, Lewis believed that even glorified human beings remained conscious of their sin, and that perfected humility called for continual repentance. In *The Problem of Pain*, Lewis writes:

It may be that salvation consists not in the canceling of these eternal moments [of sin] but in the perfected humility that bears the shame forever, rejoicing in the occasion which it furnished to God’s compassion and glad that it should be common knowledge to the universe. Perhaps in that eternal moment St. Peter — he will forgive me if I’m wrong — forever denies his Master ... Perhaps the lost are those who dare not go to such a public place. Of course I do not know that this is true; but I think the possibility is worth keeping in mind.<sup>58</sup>

Given this, it should be no surprise that Lewis came to see the practice of confessing sin as central to the Christian life — although it took him nearly



a decade after his conversion to find out a person to whom he could confess. This man was Fr. Walter Adams, an Anglican monk who was 71 years old when Lewis first went to him in Oct. 1940 when Lewis was 42. Fr. Walter belonged to the Church of England's Society of St. John the Evangelist, popularly known as the Cowley Fathers. Lewis called him his "confessor and ... Father in Christ" and Lewis met with him weekly for twelve years until Fr. Walter's death in 1952.<sup>59</sup> Shortly before his first appointment with this priest, Lewis wrote to Sr. Penelope with concerns that many Orthodox converts could appreciate:

I am going to my first confession next week, wh[ich] will seem odd to you, but I wasn't brought up with that sort of thing. It's an odd experience. The decision to do so was one of the hardest I have ever made: but now I am committed (by dint of posting the letter before I had time to change my mind) I began to be afraid of the opposite extreme — afraid that I am merely indulging in an orgy of Egoism.

Shortly afterward, a relieved Lewis wrote another letter to Sr. Penelope explaining that he successfully had passed through the wall of fire and found himself alive and well. The "orgy of Egoism turns out, like all enemy propaganda, to have just a grain of truth in it, but I have no doubt that the proper method of dealing with that is to continue the practice, as I intend to do."<sup>60</sup> Years later, when a female correspondent asked Lewis why she couldn't simply confess her sins to a friend or a neighbor, Lewis assured her that she could. But, he continued, the advantage with the priest was that he held a special office appointed by God for this and that everything spoken would be kept in sacred silence. While Lewis valued the counsel and advice he received from his spiritual father, he thought the most crucial thing was that the confessor is the representative of the Lord and declares His forgiveness while holding one accountable for repentance.<sup>61</sup>

### *Happiness Transposed*

Such, then, is Lewis's vision of deification. If it remains puzzling to some, it may be positively attractive to others in an age when the Christian life has often been understood in abstract and privatized terms, and when traditional religious practices have been dismissed by many as impediments

to genuine spirituality. On the contrary, Lewis shows us that salvation is not just an idea but something to be *done*, and he points to the efficacy of spiritual direction, corporate prayer, confession, and Holy Communion. Such practices are the hallmarks of the mystical theology at the heart of ancient Christianity which — in its Orthodox fullness — offers the means to deification and perfect communion with God. As one hieromonk has written, "It is only because the churches do not know about or make use of these means that our young people are searching elsewhere."<sup>62</sup>

The doctrine of deification has further piquancy in an era when human hopes for bliss and longevity are increasingly placed on the shoulders of cyberspace, biotechnology, or psychotropic drugs. Lewis reminds us that our pursuit of happiness is in accord with the fundamental pattern of reality; our pursuit of happiness is indeed blessed by God, provided that it is transposed into the key of another world. Thus Lewis both validates and redirects our perennial yen for perfection. Only beyond the shadowlands of this life, Lewis says, will our deepest longings be fulfilled. Only in the eternal dawn will we meet Glory face-to-face on that day when we are to shine as the sun.<sup>63</sup>

Finally, Lewis's doctrine of deification reminds us that we must not expect the path to perfection to be painless. The cross, he says, comes before the crown. Acquiring the life of Christ is a process that will be long and in parts painful, and we shouldn't be surprised if we are in for a rough time as we journey through the Lenten lands of earthly life. The reason? God will use every means possible to lift us to a higher level. "It seems to us all unnecessary," he writes, "but that is because we have not yet had the slightest notion of the tremendous thing that He means to make of us."<sup>64</sup> Those who aspire to such heights are offered this advice in Lewis's last sermon, which he preached in January 1956 at Magdalene College in Cambridge: "Our morning prayer should be that in the *Imitation: Da hodie perfecte incipere* — grant me to make an unflawed beginning today, for I have done nothing yet."<sup>65</sup> ✦

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1 “The Weight of Glory,” in *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (Touchstone, 1975), p. 31; and “Christian Apologetics” in *God in the Dock* (Eerdmans, 1997), p. 91.

2 Kern qtd. in Georgios Mantzaridis, *The Deification of Man: St. Gregory Palamas and the Orthodox Tradition*, (St. Vladimir’s, 1984), p. 12. Although deification is basic to Orthodox theology, Mantzaridis notes that the doctrine of deification sometimes has been neglected in modern Orthodox parish life. One Protestant scholar has observed that deification is “practically unknown to the majority of Christians (and even many theologians) in the West.” See Robert W. Rakestraw, “Becoming Like God: An Evangelical Doctrine of Theosis,” in the *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 40/2 (June 1997), p. 257.

3 Kallistos Ware, “God of the Fathers: C.S. Lewis and Eastern Christianity,” *The Pilgrim’s Guide: C.S. Lewis and the Art of Witness*, (Eerdmans, 1998), p. 55ff.

4 Archbishop Basil Krivocheine, *In the Light of Christ: St. Symeon the New Theologian* (949-1022), (St. Vladimir’s, 1986), p. 389.

5 C.S. Lewis, “Transposition,” *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (Touchstone, 1975), p. 84.

6 Sayer, *Jack: A Life of C.S. Lewis* (Crossway Books, 1988), p. 327. On the notion of immanence, Lewis was influenced by George MacDonald, whose *Phantastes* struck a deep chord with Lewis as a teenager during a period of intellectual skepticism. Speaking of MacDonald, Lewis once observed, “The quality which had enchanted me in his imaginative works turned out to be the quality of the real universe, the divine, the magical, terrifying, and ecstatic reality in which we all live” (qtd. in David C. Downing, *Into the Region of Awe: Mysticism in C.S. Lewis*, (InterVarsity, 2005), p. 39).

7 C.S. Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer*, (Harcourt, 1963), p. 75.

8 C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (Touchstone, 1996), p. 170, 183.

9 The Orthodox scholar John Meyendorff, in “Theosis in the Eastern Christian Tradition,” in *Christian Spirituality III* (Crossroad, 1989), p. 470-71, defends deification as a “Christocentric and eschatological concept expressed in Platonic language but basically independent of philosophical speculation ... It reflects the experience of Christ’s divinity.” Some of the negative assessment of deification in the past century took its cue from the Protestant church historian Adolph Harnack who sought an idealized Semitic Christianity without Hellenic influence. Yet certain Protestant writers have come to the defense of deification in recent years, including F.W. Norris, in “Deification: Consensual and Cogent,” in the *Scottish Journal of Theology* 49/4 (1996), who dismisses Harnack as poorly read on this point and sees these charges as false. Norris, who also finds examples of deification in Anabaptist writers, says “deification should be viewed by Protestants not as an oddity of Orthodox theology but as an ecumenical consensus, a catholic teaching of the Church, best preserved and developed by the Orthodox.” A.N. Williams, in *The Ground of Union: Deification in Aquinas and Palamas*, (Oxford, 1999), p. 174, argues that “The West has no grounds for rejecting deification, not only because it can be found in Aquinas but also because it figures extensively in the patristic corpus and derives ultimately from scripture.” However, some contemporary writers continue to question what they call the “slender Biblical support” for deification, such as Daniel B. Clendenin, *Eastern Orthodox Christianity: A Western Perspective* (Baker, 1994), p. 158.

10 Qtd. in Leech, *Experiencing God: Theology as Spirituality*, p. 258.

11 C.S. Lewis, “The Weight of Glory,” p. 33.

12 C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, p. 152. The fact that Lewis uses dance imagery so often at the ends of his works (e.g., *The Problem of Pain*, *Perelandra*) further accents its teleological significance.

13 John Meyendorff, “Theosis in the Eastern Christian Tradition,” *Christian Spirituality III* (Crossroad, 1989), p. 475.

14 C.S. Lewis, “The Weight of Glory,” p. 37.

15 C.S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life*, (Harcourt, 1955), p. 17. The theory is also central to Lewis’s autobiographical account *The Pilgrim’s Regress*.

16 C.S. Lewis, “The Weight of Glory,” p. 29.

17 C.S. Lewis, *Out of the Silent Planet*, p. 49.

18 C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, p. 153.

19 C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, (HarperCollins, 2001), p. 47.

20 C.S. Lewis, “The Weight of Glory,” p. 37.

21 Ibid.

22 C.S. Lewis, “Myth Became Fact,” in *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics*, (Eerdmans, 1970), p. 66.

23 Vladimir Lossky, *In the Image and Likeness of God*, (St. Vladimir’s, 1974), pp. 97ff.

24 C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, p. 65.

25 Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Church, New Ed.*, (Penguin, 1997), p. 236.

26 C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, p. 153.

27 Ibid., p. 92, and “The Weight of Glory” in *The Weight of Glory*, p. 38.

28 Harold Bloom, in *The American Religion: The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation* (Simon & Schuster, 1992), argues that the American religion is gnosticism and that, perhaps unwittingly, many American Christians are closer to the ancient gnostics than to early Christians: “The American Christ is more an American than he is Christ.” The term is broad, but generally gnosticism suggests a religious outlook that tends to see *ignorance* as the fundamental human problem rather than sin and hence stresses the acquisition of special knowledge; it tends to downplay the role of community and holds that there is no higher authority than the private individual; it tends to see external or objective expressions of religion—like conventional church affiliation, creeds, dogmas, etc.—as unnecessary or as a genuine impediment to true spirituality; it tends to be dualistic in stressing the purity of spiritual things and the inherent badness of matter; it tends to stress fate over human choice and free will; and it often holds that human beings have a spark of divinity within themselves independent of the body and soul. Bloom argues that this “American Religion” is the result of revising traditional religion into a faith that better fits the national temperament, aspirations, and anxieties. Significantly, C.S. Lewis can be seen as anti-gnostic on every count.

29 C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*, pp. 158, 17.

30 C.S. Lewis, “Transposition,” *The Weight of Glory*, p. 86.

31 Dorsett, *Seeking the Secret Place*, p. 83.

32 C.S. Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm*, p. 103.

33 C.S. Lewis, *Letters To Malcolm*, p.105.

34 For example, Kimon H. Sargeant, in *Seeker Churches: Promoting Traditional Religion in a Nontraditional Way*, (Rutgers, 2000), notes that in the burgeoning “seeker church” movement in the United States connected with the Willow Creek Association, fewer than one in ten assemblies offers communion every week, while most celebrate communion monthly or quarterly. In this setting, communion (rather than being seen as an objective contact with God) is often conceived as a symbolic gesture or one that promotes feelings of personal well-being that come from knowing that one is making God happy. For example, Bill Hybels, a pastor at Willow Creek, said in one of his messages that, “If you make a covenant with the Lord [to take communion], I think you’re going to sense smiles from Heaven; I think God’s going to say “That means a lot to me; your covenant moves me. Thanks for caring enough about me to remember me once a month” (qtd. in Sargeant, p. 72). The emphasis is thus placed upon change in God rather than change in human persons, creating an interesting parallel to forensic notions of redemption in which God is affected by the passion more than human nature itself.

35 C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, p. 65. Some contemporary Protestant writers who are attracted to the idea of deification have not yet understood the sacramental life as essential in the way that Lewis did. For example, one who defends deification nonetheless argues that a “weakness” of traditional deification doctrine is “a heavy emphasis upon the sacraments as the primary means of theosis” (Rakestraw, p. 267).

- 36 C.S. Lewis, "Introduction," St. Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, (St. Vladimir's, 1996), p. 9.
- 37 Qtd. in George S. Gabriel, *Mary: The Untrodden Portal of God*, (Zephyr, 2005), p. 30
- 38 Urban T. Holmes, *A History of Christian Spirituality*, qtd. in Leech, *Experiencing God: Theology as Spirituality*, p. 258.
- 39 "He alone is known in two essences: as incarnate God and transcendent man" (*The Octoechos*, Orthodox Sunday Matins, Tone IV, Ode IV).
- 40 C.S. Lewis, "Transposition," *The Weight of Glory*, p. 87.
- 41 Mantzaridis, *The Deification of Man*, p. 30.
- 42 Lossky, *In the Image and Likeness of God*, p. 109.
- 43 "On Spiritual Knowledge and Discrimination," *Philokalia*, p. 253.
- 44 *Mere Christianity*, p. 157
- 45 C.S. Lewis, *The Magician's Nephew*, p. 140.
- 46 *Mere Christianity*, pp. 174, 176. See also chapter 13 in *The Great Divorce*, where Lewis calls freedom a "deeper truth" than universalism and predestination.
- 47 Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, p. 222.
- 48 "A Slip of the Tongue," in *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses*, p. 142.
- 49 *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer*, (Harcourt, 1963), p. 12. Also, Dorsett, in *Seeking the Secret Place*, explores Lewis's prayer life particularly in chapters 2 and 3.
- 50 C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*, p. 25.
- 51 See Dorsett, *Seeking the Secret Place*, p. 102, and Sayer, *Jack*, p. 417.
- 52 Sayer, *Jack*, p. 416.
- 53 Andrew Walker, "Under the Russian Cross: A Research Note on C.S. Lewis and the Eastern Orthodox Church," *A Christian for All Christians*, (Hodder & Stoughton, 1990), p. 65.
- 54 C.S. Lewis, "Membership," in *The Weight of Glory*, p. 130.
- 55 Nicolas Zernov, *The Church of the Eastern Christians*, (Macmillan, 1942), p. 54.
- 56 C.S. Lewis, *Till We Have Faces*, (Harcourt, 1957), p. 226.
- 57 C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, p. 62.
- 58 *Ibid.*, p. 55.
- 59 Dorsett, *Seeking the Secret Place*, pp. 86-88.
- 60 *Ibid.*
- 61 *Ibid.*
- 62 Hieromonk Damascene, "The Sunrise of the East: From Eastern Religions to Eastern Orthodoxy," *The Orthodox Word* (No. 190, 1996), p. 210.
- 63 C.S. Lewis, "The Weight of Glory," p. 37.
- 64 C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, p. 176.
- 65 C.S. Lewis, "A Slip of the Tongue," in *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses*, p. 142.