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Mere Christianity for Mere Gods

Lewis on Theosis[1]

MYK HABETS

WALKING IN MIRABILIBUS SUPRA ME

In his essay "Transposition," after speaking about the Incarnation, Lewis makes the comment: "But I walk in mirabilibus supra me and submit all to the verdict of real theologians."[2] While Lewis is unclear as to what constitutes a "real theologian," I have taken his offer up and in this chapter discuss the contours of what a Lewis-inspired doctrine of theosis looks like. In this venture too we all walk "in things too wonderful for us"![3] Having said that, we can and must say something, despite the apophatic reticence

1. An earlier version of this essay was published as Habets, "Walking *in mirabilibus supra me*: How C. S. Lewis Transposes Theosis," *Evangelical Quarterly: An International Review of Bible and Theology in Defence of the Historic Christian Faith* 82 no.1 (January, 2010), 15–27.

2. Lewis, "Transposition," 83. Lewis often distinguished himself from "real theologians," as for instance in the preface to *Mere Christianity*, vi.

3. This is a slight misquotation of Ps 131.1 in the Vulgate, where the Psalmist says that he is not proud, and he does not occupy himself "with things too wonderful for me" (Latin: *in mirabilibus supra me*). I am grateful to my colleague Dr. George Wieland for this insight.

characteristic of all Christian theology, about the mystery of salvation. It is the mysterious nature of salvation which makes the concept of theosis so attractive to Lewis and indeed, to others of us.

In recent decades the doctrine of theosis, once a theological *bête noire*, has undergone a radical popularity shift and is now the toast of the Western theological guild. Doctrines of theosis now find their way into mainstream treatments in biblical theology, such as Michael Gorman's *Inhabiting the Cruciform God*, through to works of western systematic theology, such as my own attempts at "Reforming theosis" on the soil of Reformation theology.[4] So fecund have such studies been on theosis that it has provoked Eastern Orthodox scholars into a reaction—not much of it being very positive. In recommending a short work by Norman Russell, Peter Bouteneff identifies and labels much recent talk on theosis as "facile, over-spiritualized, or abstract."[5] Bouteneff also makes the point that theosis expresses a relation, not a thing; a point lost on many contemporary apologists for a doctrine of divinization. Themes and doctrines of theosis are now ubiquitous in works by the Orthodox,[6] Lutherans,[7] Roman Catholicism,[8] Anglicanism,[9] Evangelicalism,[10] and Reformed theology.[11] The many reasons for the recovery of theosis in recent thought need not detain us here;[12]

4. Something a number of detractors are obviously not happy about! See my "Reforming Theosis"; *Theosis in the Theology of Thomas Torrance*; "Reformed Theosis?"; and "Theosis, Yes; Deification, No,"; McCormack, "For Us and Our Salvation"; "What's at Stake"; "Participation in God, Yes, Deification, No"; and Jonathan Slater, "Salvation as Participation."

5. Bouteneff, "Foreword," 11.

6. Foundational texts here include: Stavropoulos, *Partakers of the Divine Nature*; Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*; Mantzaridis, *The Deification of Man*; and Nellas, *Deification in Christ*. Russell points out that before the 1960s the average Orthodox Christian would not have known what the term *theosis* referred to, it being a technical term familiar only to monks and patristic scholars.

7. One thinks here of the Manermaa School; see Braaten and Jenson, *Union with Christ*.

8. For instance, Meconi, "Deification in the Thought of John Paul II"; and Keating, *Deification and Grace*.

9. For an overview see Allchin, *Participation in God*.

10. See Clendenin, *Eastern Orthodox Christianity*.

11. In addition to works already cited see Murphy, "Reformed Theosis?"

12. Russell, *Fellow Workers with God*, 14, identifies four crucial factors: (1) the rediscovery of the theology of St Gregory Palamas, (2) the impact of Russian religious philosophy, (3) the recovery of the spirituality of the *Philokalia*, and (4) the reengagement of Orthodox scholars with the early Greek Fathers. See further in Bowron, "Eastern

we merely note the fact that, amongst other factors, there was a renaissance of Eastern Orthodox literature flooding into the West in French and English translation, due in large measure to the Russian diaspora following the Bolshevik revolution. Lewis, a renaissance man in Oxford and Cambridge, was one of the many recipients of this diaspora, and hence he was exposed to doctrines and themes of theosis which worked their way into his own thought and theology.

The sense that there is more to human life than mere existence, more to pleasure than a fleeting sensation, and more to reality than we currently experience, pervades the works of Lewis. As one follower of Lewis has written, "Lewis was a scholar, Oxford don, and international celebrity, but he was above all a man aware of the love and longing inherent in our restless souls. He adored fellowship and laughter and the diversity of human connection (the "four loves," as he called them) that offers but a glimpse of the greater Connection we all seek."[13] As a theological concept, theosis offers Lewis but one way to approximate this sense of longing, connection, and ultimate communion inherent in a Christian soteriology. How to articulate such a doctrine, however, has proven difficult.

Lewis strove, throughout his career, to expound what he knew as "mere Christianity." The concept and the words "mere Christianity" were not original to Lewis, of course, having their roots in earlier Anglican thought.[14] In the sixteenth-century, Richard Hooker, one of Lewis's most adored theologians, masterfully developed the notion of a "mere Christianity" that conformed to the vision of the newly established Anglican Church. Hooker was not striving for the "true Church" in Anglicanism, but rather sought to establish Anglicanism as a faithful but local expression of the body of Christ; a "mere Church" affirming a "mere Christianity" if you will. Of Hooker's masterwork, *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, Lewis had this to say:

> Hooker had never heard of a religion called Anglicanism. He would never have dreamed of trying to "convert" any foreigner to the Church of England. It was to him obvious that a German or Italian would not belong to the Church of England, just as an Ephesian or Galatian would not have belonged to the Church of Corinth.

Promises"; and Habets, "Theosis, Yes; Deification, No."

13. McCracken, "Foundations Mission."

14. Griffin, "What Is Mere Christianity?"

Hooker is never seeking for "the true Church," never crying, like Donne, "show me, deare Christ, thy spouse." For him no such problem existed. If by "the Church" you mean the mystical Church (which is partly in Heaven), then of course, no man can identify her. But if you mean the visible Church, then we all know her. She is "a sensibly known company" of all those throughout the world who profess one Lord, One Faith, and one Baptism.[15]

The words "mere Christianity" were not original to Lewis either. In the seventeenth-century Richard Baxter, another Anglican divine and favourite of Lewis, used the words "mere Christianity" in *The Saints' Everlasting Rest*. Lewis began making the words "mere Christianity" his own for the first time in print in his introduction to St. Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*. "The only safety is to have a standard of plain, central Christianity ('mere Christianity' as Baxter called it) which puts the controversies of the moment in their proper perspective."[16] Later he writes, "Measured against the ages 'mere Christianity' turns out to be no insipid interdenominational transparency, but something positive, self-consistent, and inexhaustible."[17] The most well-known use of the phrase comes from the 1952 publication of that name for the collected BBC Radio talks of 1943–44.[18] In the preface to *Mere Christianity*, Lewis gives a succinct definition:

> Ever since I became a Christian I have thought that the best, perhaps the only, service I could do for my unbelieving neighbours was to explain and defend the belief that has been common to nearly all Christians at all times. . . . For I am not writing to expound something I call "my religion," but to expound "mere" Christianity, which is what it is and was what it was long before I was born and whether I like it or not.[19]

15. Lewis, *English Literature*, 454. For more on the relationship of Lewis to Hooker see Allchin, *Participation in God*, 7–14. Allchin sees the link between the two men not only in terms of "mere Christianity," but also in their doctrines of theosis.

16. Lewis, introduction to *Athanasius on the Incarnation*, 4.

17. Ibid., 6. Not coincidently, this work is where Athanasius makes his famous statement that "The Son of God became a man to enable men to become sons of God." Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 340–41.

18. The three broadcast talks were published in three books: *The Case for Christianity*, published in England under the title *Broadcast Talks* (1943), *Christian Behaviour* (1943), and *Beyond Personality* (1944).

19. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, vi.

In his exposition of mere Christianity Lewis repeatedly turns to those who have preceded him for guidance, the recent past in Anglicanism (Hooker and Baxter for example), and the more distant past in the Doctors of the Church (Athanasius and Augustine, for example). Lewis sought to represent the Great Tradition by mining it for resources and then creatively expressing these thoughts for another generation. Theosis is one such resource Lewis receives and then passes on.

Theosis is largely synonymous with another term *theopoiēsis*. Literally, theosis means "becoming god," and *theopoiēsis*, "making divine" or "making into a god."[20] In English theosis is often expressed by the terms "deification" and/or "divinization."[21] The use of theosis has a rich pedigree extending back through the early church to Scripture itself.[22] While mostly associated with the Greek patristic theologians and Eastern Orthodoxy, theosis also has a developed use in Anglicanism in the west, as Lewis was well aware. In his useful introduction Arthur Allchin looks at the doctrine of theosis as it is to be found in representative Anglican theologians during the last four centuries and in the process uncovers a surprisingly rich heritage in theologians as diverse as Richard Hooker, John Henry Newman, Edward B. Pusey, and Lewis.[23] These Anglican thinkers sought to recover a patristic doctrine of theosis which speaks of a real participation between God and humanity in the work of redemption and sanctification.

When we turn specifically to the work of Lewis we find a veritable saturation of theotic language and concepts. Lewis's treatment of theosis ranges from the explicit to the implicit but it is never far from his sight. Throughout *Mere Christianity* Lewis speaks in the language of theosis on numerous occasions in order to express the ineffable mystery and magnitude of life in union with Christ. Early in the work we read, "If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world."[24] Not content with this ambiguity we later read that

20. Lampe, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon*, 649.

21. I make no effort to create specialized classifications for these terms but rather treat them as largely synonymous for our purposes here.

22. For recent overviews see Mosser, "The Earliest Patristic Interpretations"; Glazov, "Theosis, Judaism, and Old Testament Anthropology"; Finlan, "Second Peter's Notion of Divine Participation"; and Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification*, esp. 333–44.

23. Allchin, *Participation in God.* Also Newey ("The Form of Reason"), who examines the doctrine of participation and theosis in seventeenth-century Anglican theology.

24. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 108.

> [S]ome people think that after this life, or perhaps after several lives, human souls will be "absorbed" into God. But when they try to explain what they mean, they seem to be thinking of our being absorbed into God as one material thing absorbed into another. . . . If this is what happens to us, then being absorbed is the same as ceasing to exist. It is only the Christians who have any idea of how human souls can be taken into the life of God and yet remain themselves—in fact, very much more themselves than they were before. . . . The whole purpose for which we exist is to be thus taken into the life of God.[25]

If that were not clear enough then later still Lewis expresses his doctrine of theosis with the aid of Scripture (Jn 10.34, citing Ps 82.6):

> [God said] that we were "gods" and He is going to make good His words. 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, a bright stainless mirror which reflects back to God perfectly (though, of course, on a smaller scale) His own boundless power and delight and goodness. The process will be long and in parts very painful; but that is what we are in for. Nothing less. He meant what He said.[26]

In 1942, Lewis preached a sermon in the Church of St Mary the Virgin, Oxford, titled "The Weight of Glory," in which he stated in unmistakable terms his affirmation of theosis.

> 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 talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship. . . . There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. . . . But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit—immortal horrors or everlasting splendours.[27]

25. Ibid., 127–28.

26. Ibid., 162.

27. Lewis, "The Weight of Glory," 101–2. The quotation continues: "or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare. All day long we are, in some degree, helping each other to one or other of these destinations."

Put more succinctly, he writes, "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 bathe in it, to become part of it."[28]

Earlier still, in the 1940s Lewis writes, "And we must mean by that fulfilling, precisely, of our humanity; not our transformation into angels nor absorption into Deity. For though we shall be 'as the angels' and made 'like unto' our Master, I think this means 'like with the likeness proper to men': as different instruments that play the same air but each in its own fashion."[29]

Lewis is clear here, as elsewhere, to distinguish a Christian doctrine of theosis from a neo-Platonic notion of absorption, and equally, to guard Christianity from mythic connotations of apotheosis. This is confirmed when in the same work he writes, "'We know not what we shall be'; but we may be sure we shall be more, not less, than we were on earth."[30] This "more not less" principle is central to a Christian doctrine of theosis and Lewis is clear to keep this in mind. "Morality is indispensable," writes Lewis, "but the Divine Life, which gives itself to us and which calls us to be gods, intends for us something in which morality will be swallowed up. We are to be remade . . . and then, surprisingly, we shall find underneath it all a thing we have never yet imagined: a real man, an ageless god, a son of God, strong, radiant, wise, beautiful, and drenched in joy?"[31] In a much later work and in a very different frame of mind Lewis is no less clear on the god-like destiny of humanity, despite the struggle to see how it may come about, when in *A Grief Observed* he almost laments the fact that God's "grand enterprise" is: "To make an organism which is also a spirit; to make that terrible oxymoron, a 'spiritual animal.' To take a poor primate, a beast with nerve-endings all over it, a creature with a stomach that wants to be filled, a breeding animal that wants its mate, and say, 'Now get on with it. Become a god.'"[32]

It is clear that according to Lewis, as for the Patristic sources from which he derives his doctrine of theosis, human gods are distinct from, and different to God himself. Screwtape even knows this when he affirms that God "wants a world full of beings united to Him but still distinct."[33]

28. Ibid., 99.
29. Lewis, "Transposition," 80.
30. Ibid., 81.
31. Lewis, "Man or Rabbit?," 72.
32. Lewis, *A Grief Observed*, 61.
33. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*, 38.

These select quotations illustrate a point made by Walter Hooper who, writing in 1966, commented that if there existed a Complete Works of C. S. Lewis and "one were to read from start to finish all the volumes called "Religious Writings" he would, I think, be struck by what I consider the central premise of all Lewis's theological works—a premise implicit, even, in his books on other subjects. It is that all men are immortal."[34] This seems accurate to me. For Lewis, all people are bound for immortality, not the sloughing off of human nature but a participation in the triune Godhead. In *Mere Christianity* he categorically states: "Now the whole offer which Christianity makes is this: that we can, if we let God have His way, come to share in the life of Christ . . . Christ is the Son of God. If we share in this kind of life we also shall be sons of God."[35]

TRANSPOSITION CAN DO ANYTHING!

That Lewis has a doctrine of theosis is clear.[36] Exactly how he conceives the dynamics of theosis is less clear.[37] I propose reading his notion of "Transposition" in tandem with theosis will shed some light on this issue, after all, as Lewis stated in his now famous sermon of the same name, preached in Mansfield College, Oxford in the early 1940s, "in a sense Transposition can do anything."[38] Transposition is a relatively easy concept to grasp; it is to cause two or more things to change places with each other, or to transfer to a different place or context.[39] The connection with a doctrine of theosis is natural. God transposes human being into the divine being without

34. Hooper, "Preface," vii.

35. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 139–40.

36. According to Knickerbocker, "The Myth That Saves," "In his Christian writings, whatever the literary genre, Lewis's understanding of soteriology is cast in the language of theosis."

37. All arguments to date attempting to make Lewis's doctrine of theosis compatible with Mormonism's doctrine of divinization have failed to make a compelling case. See a survey of the literature and a rebuttal of the claim that Lewis is a "crypto-Mormon" by Passantino, "Are We Destined to Be Gods and Goddesses?" Due to Lewis's insistence on the "irreducible ontological distinction" between God and humans Jensen ("Shine Like the Son") rightly dismisses all appeals to make Lewis's work compatible with Neoplatonism, Hinduism, Mormonism, or even certain strands of Christian mysticism.

38. Lewis, "Transposition," 84. For other treatments of Transposition see Bramlett, "Transposition"; Hinton, "Transposition," 409; and Mitchell, "Transposition."

39. For a good survey of the concept of Transposition and critical interaction with it, in relation to tongues, see Richie, "Transposition and Tongues."

destroying the human being (or the divine) in the process. God has the ability to translate human existence into the sphere of his own existence.[40] As Lewis prefers to state it:

> You can say that by Transposition our humanity, senses and all, can be made the vehicle of beatitude. Or you can say that the heavenly bounties by Transposition are embodied during this life in our temporary experience. But the second way is the better. It is the present life which is the diminution, the symbol, the etiolated, the (as it were) "vegetarian" substitute. If flesh and blood cannot inherit the Kingdom, that is not because they are too solid, too gross, too distinct, too "illustrious with being." They are too flimsy, too transitory, too phantasmal.[41]

Taking the Incarnation as his starting point, Lewis prefers the downward reference of Transposition, from the divine to the human, although he does not rule out its upward return. Lewis illustrates his emphasis on the downward orientation of Transposition with the statement that "we are told in one of the creeds that the Incarnation worked 'not by conversion of the Godhead into flesh, but by taking of the Manhood into God.'"[42] Lewis then combines Transposition with theosis immediately after this when he concludes, "It seems to me that there is a real analogy between this and what I have called Transposition: that humanity, still remaining itself, is not merely counted as, but veritably drawn into, Deity."[43]

In *Miracles* Lewis further articulates this principle, namely: "the power of the Higher, just in so far as it is truly Higher, to come down, the power of the greater to include the less."[44] Thus the "Grand Miracle" is the Incarnation—the eternal Son becoming man without ceasing to be God. According to Lewis, God descended into humanity so that he could re-ascend and bring with him the precious thing which occasioned the descent—humanity. In order to illustrate this Lewis turns to nature: "It must belittle itself into something hard, small and deathlike, it must fall into the ground: thence the new life re-ascends."[45] This applies to vegetable and

40. This is the difference, argues Lewis, between human *bios* from human *zoe*; Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 126, 139.

41. Lewis, "Transposition," 81–82. Lewis develops this latter point tremendously in his allegory, *The Great Divorce*.

42. Ibid., 83.

43. Ibid.

44. Lewis, *Miracles*, 115.

45. Ibid.,116.

animal life. Amidst this discussion Lewis draws, again, upon the theme of Transposition to explain what is going on. He writes, "All the instances of [this principle] which I have mentioned turn out to be but transpositions of the Divine theme into a minor key."[46]

Lewis sees the purpose of creation as being to improve or develop: "God, from the first, created her (earth) such as to reach her perfection by a process of time."[47] The same goes for the human: "For God is not merely mending, not simply restoring a status quo. Redeemed humanity is to be something more glorious than unfallen humanity would have been, more glorious than any unfallen race now is. . . . And this super-added glory will, with true vicariousness, exalt all creatures and those who have never fallen will thus bless Adam's fall."[48] Lest he be misunderstood, the "development" of which Lewis speaks is not a natural one, conducive, say, to a theory of evolution.[49] Rather, the development of which Lewis speaks is what in theology would be called theosis—involving justification, sanctification, and finally, glorification. Within his works however, the stress of theosis seems clearly to be on this final aspect—glorification.[50]

In his magisterial sermon "The Weight of Glory,"[51] Lewis discusses the nature of the glory that is to be experienced when the believer is glorified, and it is worthy of extensive quotation:

46. Ibid.

47. Ibid., 125. In "The Weight of Glory," 90–92, 99–100, Lewis develops the same thing, stating that the earth as it currently exists is not our home, not the place to fulfil all our desires. Not yet at least.

48. Ibid., 127. Lewis goes on to favourably discuss what is known as the Scotistic hypothesis—that there would have been an incarnation irrespective of the fall. He also develops the idea throughout his science fiction trilogy. For a discussion of possible worlds semantics see Habets, "On Getting First Things First."

49. Lewis puts the axe to this concept in "The Funeral of a Great Myth." On Lewis's critique of developmentalism see Knickerbocker, "The Myth That Saves," who notes that "The Christian Myth is a Creation-Fall-Redemption-Consummation myth, while the contemporary Western myth is a Creation-Fulfilment myth, which is manifested in many variant expressions, from Social Darwinism to Marxism, imperialism, racism, materialism, and the cult of self-fulfilment."

50. Jensen, "Shine Like the Son," notes the stress throughout *Mere Christianity* on three main ways to achieve theosis: baptism, belief, and Holy Communion. In his other works Lewis stresses the corporate aspect of theosis, the centrality of human free will, the painful process of transformation and the humility that results from the journey. While Jensen is partially correct, the stress throughout Lewis's works is always on what we shall become rather than on how we shall achieve it.

51. This sermon was preached to one of the largest modern crowds ever to assemble

> And this brings me to the other sense of glory—glory as brightness, splendour, luminosity. We are to shine as the sun, we are to be given the Morning Star. I think I begin to see what it means. In one way, of course, God has given us the Morning Star already: you can go and enjoy the gift on many fine mornings if you get up early enough. What more, you may ask, do we want? Ah, but we want so much more—something the books on aesthetics take little notice of. But the poets and the mythologies know all about. 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 bathe in it, to become part of it . . . if we take the imagery of Scripture seriously, if we believe that God will one day give us the Morning Star and cause us to put on the splendour of the sun, then we may surmise that both the ancient myths and the modern poetry, so false as history, may be very near the truth as prophecy.[52]

Use of such analogies as glory, brightness, splendour, and luminosity in the context of soteriology, in particular the eschatological dimensions of such, place this discussion into the sphere of theosis language.[53] We see this, for instance, in Thomas Torrance's use of the analogy of light, and it may be instructive to see how he articulates the idea. According to Torrance the incarnation shows us what true humanity is; it reveals what true "seeing" or "knowing" God consists of,[54] for it is an accurate reflection of the uncreated Light in a created human subject.[55] Torrance contends:

> Jesus was completely and absolutely transparent with the Light of God. . . . Far from being less human because of that, he was more human than any other, indeed perfectly human, for with him the divine Light which is the source of all human life and light had its perfect way. . . . The union between his human life

at the Church of St. Mary the Virgin in Oxford.

52. Lewis, "The Weight of Glory," 99–100.

53. Elsewhere Lewis uses other terms to express his doctrine of theosis, including being "in Christ," becoming "new creatures," or sharing in the "glory of God"; as well as with literary images such as the celestial light, the face, the dance, the fountain, the marriage, the winged horse, an infection, and the statue-come-to-life. See Jensen, "Shine Like the Son."

54. Jesus Christ is both "luminous Word" and "audible Light." Torrance, *Christian Theology and Scientific Culture*, 101.

55. This corresponds well with the characterization to saints in heaven as the "Bright People" in *The Great Divorce*, first mentioned on page 29 and many times thereafter.

> and the humanising Light of the Creator was unbroken, so that it is through him that the eternal uncreated Light of God shines through to us.[56]

"Transparency" in this discussion functions as an analogy for theosis in the same way as Lewis's use of "glory" functions as such. To experience theosis is to become in a sense transparent or glorious. The goal of theosis is to reflect God's uncreated Light fully and completely, without spot or blemish. The Incarnate Son of God is the Light of God and the Light of the world and it is only as one is united to this Light that one can apprehend it, reflect it, and be light oneself. As Torrance explains: "Since it is in this enlightening and saving Life of the crucified and risen Jesus that the eternal Light and Life of God himself are mediated to us in a form in which we can share in death as well as life, it is through union and communion with Jesus that we are enabled to see the invisible God and live."[57]

According to Lewis, the "weight of glory" carries two connotations, both of which are integral to his doctrine of theosis: luminosity, and fame. Luminosity describes the participation of human creatures into the Divine life (2 Cor 3.18), fame refers to the recognition and joyous reception human creatures receive when united to Christ (Lk 15.7). Jensen reminds us that "one of Lewis's favorite ways to describe this glorious acceptance by God was through the image of the dance, which hints at the order, love, and festivity of heaven."[58] The image of participating in the Divine Dance is of course a clear reference to Patristic and Eastern Orthodox writers on the divine perichoresis and human deification.[59]

To further explicate the notion of Transposition, especially as it relates to theosis, we must turn to another of Lewis's essays, "Meditation in a Toolshed."[60] In this essay Lewis explains how to transpose from the lower level of things to the higher. In short this involves looking "at" something and then looking "along" it. This basically entails the ability to look beyond

56. Torrance, *Christian Theology and Scientific Culture*, 96.

57. Ibid., 99.

58. Jensen, "Shine Like the Sun." Jensen cites *Mere Christianity*, 138–40 and notes how often Lewis ends his work with the image of the Divine dance (e.g. *The Problem of Pain*, *Perelandra*).

59. See for example, Meyendorff, "Theosis in the Eastern Christian Tradition," 475; Cross, "Perichoresis, Deification, and Christological Predication in John of Damascus," 69–124; Otto, "The Use and Abuse of Perichoresis in Recent Theology"; and Choufrine, *Gnosis, Theophany, Theosis*.

60. Lewis, "Meditation in a Toolshed."

a fact (looking at a thing) to seeing the meaning of a thing (looking along it). To illustrate he uses the sunbeam visible through the crack in his toolshed door, a young girl in love, the thinking of a mathematician, a dancing savage, an anthropologist, and a little girl crying over her broken doll. As Lewis observed himself, "When you have got into the habit of making this distinction [between looking at something and looking along it] you will find examples of it all day long."[61]

When applied to human nature we see the usefulness of this distinction for a doctrine of theosis. If one simply looks at a human one may only see a biological entity; nothing but this brute fact. The ability to look along human nature, however, leads to the contemplation of such concepts as the *imago Dei* and then to the Creator God. At that point they will be able to apprehend how humans created in the *imago Dei* are fitted for immortality and ultimately, for participation in God. This helps to explain how and why Lewis refers to all people as potential gods and goddesses. To speak in such a way is not to be taken literally but, when transposed, means that humans are godlike, or, to be more specific, Christ-like. Transposition may only be understood, contends Lewis, from the higher to the lower medium:

> The brutal man never can by analysis find anything but lust in love; the Flatlander never can find anything but flat shapes in a picture; physiology never can find anything in thought except twitchings of the grey matter. It is no good browbeating the critic who approaches a Transposition from below. On the evidence available to him his conclusion is the only one possible.[62]

Lewis concludes, "Everything is different when you approach the Transposition from above."[63] Thus, to transpose the idea of humans as "gods" is not to redefine divinity in terms of anthropology but the other way round. Anthropology is properly speaking a sub-specie under God, relatively speaking; humans are *imago Dei*! As with any distinctively Christian doctrine of theosis, Lewis is clear throughout his writings to uphold the impassible gulf that exists between Creator and creature; between God and humans. In *Mere Christianity*, for instance, he affirms that "What God begets is God; just as what man begets is man. What God creates is not God; just as what man creates is not man. That is why men are not Sons of God in the sense that Christ is. They may be like God in certain ways, but

61. Ibid., 52.

62. Lewis, "Transposition," 77.

63. Ibid.

they are not things of the same kind. They are more like statues or pictures of God."[64] In *The Problem of Pain* he writes, "For we are only creatures; our role must be that of patient to agent . . . mirror to light, echo to voice. Our highest activity must be response, not initiative."[65] Nor does this mean the same as to say "God is human," unless we are referring to the specific case of the Incarnation and even then this is imprecise language at best. As Lewis closes *The Problem of Pain* he includes a clear and compelling comparison between God and humans:

> As our Earth is to all the stars, so are we men and our concerns to all creation; as all the stars are to space itself, so are all creatures, all thrones and powers and mightiest of the created gods, to the abyss of the self-existing Being, who is to us Father and Redeemer and indwelling Comforter, but of whom no man nor angel can say nor conceive what He is in and for himself, or what is the work that he "maketh from the beginning to the end." For they are all derived and unsubstantiated things. Their vision fails them and they cover their eyes from the intolerable light of utter actuality, which was and is and shall be, which never could have been otherwise, which has no opposite.[66]

The doctrine of theosis in the works of Lewis is understandable only when the method of Transposition is clearly understood. Instead of looking at the thing (the human), one must look along it (to Jesus Christ the imago Dei) in order to see how humans really can be godlike. Transposition is thus one way in which Lewis can posit human participation in the Divine nature, without risk of constructing one more myth among the many of human history.[67]

64. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 124. Lewis ends this discussion with another reference to theosis: "And that is precisely what Christianity is all about. This world is a great sculptor's shop. We are the statues and there is a rumour going round the shop that some of us are some day going to come to life" (126).

65. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 389.

66. Ibid., 153–54. In Passantino's essay, "Are We Destined to Be Gods and Goddesses?," we are also pointed to Lewis's science fiction trilogy *Out of the Silent Planet*, *Perelandra*, and *That Hideous Strength* for more examples of the "impassible gulf between the only Creator and His creatures."

67. For Lewis's defence of Christianity over opposing "myths" see Knickerbocker, "The Myth That Saves." When referring to Christianity Lewis uses "myth" in the Socratic sense of "a not unlikely tale." See Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 400.

THE PROBLEM OF PAIN

Earlier we noted Lewis's indication that the process of theosis would be a painful one. We find an allusion to this "painful" process of theosis in the example of the (initially) very annoying Eustace Clarence Scrubb ("and he almost deserved it"),[68] who in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* "had turned into a dragon while he was asleep. Sleeping on a dragon's hoard with greedy, dragonish thoughts in his heart."[69] However, captive in his dragon state and after trying to remove the scales himself, Eustace finally learnt to trust Aslan to do the painful task of changing him from a dragon back into a boy—but a transformed boy.

> Then the lion said . . . "You will have to let me undress you." I was afraid of his claws, I can tell you, but I was pretty nearly desperate now. So I just lay flat down on my back to let him do it. The very first tear he made was so deep that I thought it had gone right into my heart. And when he began pulling the skin off, it hurt worse than anything I've ever felt. . . . Then he caught hold of me—I didn't like that much for I was very tender underneath now that I'd no skin on—and threw me into the water. It smarted like anything but only for a moment. After that it became perfectly delicious.[70]

Here we find a vivid illustration of the transposing effect of theosis—something Nellas and other Orthodox writers refer to as Christification.[71] We are also reminded at chapters end that: "It would be nice, and fairly true, to say that 'from that time forth Eustace was a different boy.' To be strictly accurate, he began to be a different boy. He had relapses. . . . The cure had begun."[72] One cannot but think of the promise of the New Covenant spoken of in Ezekiel 36:26–27: "Moreover, I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness

68. Lewis, *Dawn Treader*, 7.

69. Ibid., 73. A similar degrading transformation happens to Rabadash who, after calling down the curse of Tash upon the Narnians, Archenlandians, and Aslan himself, was turned into the object most fitting his proud behaviour—an Ass. Thereafter Rabadash the Peacemaker was known more popularly as Rabadash the Donkey! Lewis, *The Horse and His Boy*, 168–71.

70. Lewis, *Dawn Treader*, 86.

71. Nellas, *Deification in Christ*, 40. In relation to the painful process of transformation Lewis would most likely have preferred the term "mortification." See Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 406.

72. Lewis, *Dawn Treader*, 89.

and from all your idols. Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh." In reference to Ezekiel 36 John Calvin offers a complementary interpretation to the allusion as used by Lewis when he writes,

> On the other hand, it behooves us to consider the sort of remedy by which divine grace corrects and cures the corruption of nature. Since the Lord in coming to our aid bestows upon us what we lack, when the nature of his work in us appears, our destitution will, on the other hand, at once be manifest. When the apostle tells the Philippians he is confident "that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ" [Philippians 1:6], there is no doubt that through "the beginning of a good work" he denotes the very origin of conversion itself, which is in the will. God begins his good work in us, therefore, by arousing love and desire and zeal for righteousness in our hearts; or, to speak more correctly, by bending, forming, and directing, our hearts to righteousness. He completes his work, moreover, by confirming us to perseverance. In order that no one should make an excuse that good is initiated by the Lord to help the will which by itself is weak, the Spirit elsewhere declares what the will, left to itself, is capable of doing: "A new heart shall I give you, and will put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh, and give you a heart of flesh. And I shall put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes" [Ezekiel 36:26–27]. Who shall say that the infirmity of the human will is strengthened by his help in order that it may aspire effectively to the choice of good, when it must rather be wholly transformed and renewed?
>
> If in a stone there is such plasticity that, made softer by some means it becomes somewhat bent, I will not deny that man's heart can be molded to obey the right, provided what is imperfect in him be supplied by God's grace. But if by this comparison the Lord wished to show that nothing good can ever be wrung from our heart, unless it become wholly other, let us not divide between him and us what he claims for himself alone. If, therefore, a stone is transformed into flesh when God converts us to zeal for the right, whatever is of our own will is effaced. What takes its place is wholly from God.[73]

73. Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.3.6: "Men's inability to do good manifests itself above all in the work of redemption, which God does quite alone."

The motif of the pain involved in our transposition into the likeness of God is often emphasized by Lewis. In *The Problem of Pain*, one of Lewis's most famous lines appears in this context and explains the way that God uses human suffering and pain as an instrument in our transformation: "God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pain: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world."[74] With Eustace Scrubb's transformation firmly in mind, we may note how Lewis goes on to say:

> Now God, who has made us, knows what we are and that our happiness lies in Him. Yet we will not seek it in Him as long as He leaves us any other resort where it can even plausibly be looked for. While what we call "our own life" remains agreeable we will not surrender it to Him. What then can God do in our interests but make "our own life" less agreeable to us, and take away the plausible sources of false happiness?[75]

Devin Brown helpfully points out that Lewis provides a moving account of his own spiritual transformation to Arthur Greeves, one that mirrors that of Eustace Scrubb's attempt to remove his own layers of dragon skin. "In a letter dated January 30, 1930, Lewis writes about his battle with his "besetting sin" of pride and observes, "I have found out ludicrous and terrible things about my own character. . . . There seems to be no end to it. Depth under depth of self-love and self-admiration."[76] In *Mere Christianity*, when Lewis discusses the higher nature of faith, he describes the process of moral effort required in Christian transformation as a "road of moral effort, of trying harder and harder." However, he immediately goes on to add, "But in another sense it is not trying that is ever going to bring us home. All this trying leads up to the vital moment at which you turn to God and say, 'You must do this, I can't.'"[77]

74. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 406.

75. Ibid., 408.

76. Brown, "Further Up and Further In."

77. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 115. Perhaps Lewis had in mind the sober teaching of Jesus in Matthew 7:14 that following Jesus involves walking along the "narrow way that leads to life, and there are few who find it." "Narrow" here is the perfect passive form of the verb *thlibō*; that is, narrow because this path squashes one on both sides with hardships and sorrows of all kinds. This merely echoes Jesus in Matthew 10.38, 39 that "He who does not take his cross and follow after me is not worthy of me. He who has found his life will lose it, and he who has lost his life for my sake will find it." Here we may think of the teaching of 2 Timothy 3:12 where Paul informs us that "indeed, all who

A similar imaginative scene is depicted in *The Great Divorce*, wherein a ghostly resident of Hell with a little red lizard (sexual lust) on his shoulder is confronted by a radiant Angel who offers to slay the lizard.[78] Only reluctantly does the Ghost give in to the Angel's relentless offers but when the Angel begins the Ghost is in fear of his life and winces from the pain of the process. To this the Angel replies, "I never said I wouldn't hurt you. I said it wouldn't kill you."[79] We also see a vivid picture in this story of the integral connection between the sovereignty of God and the freedom of the will. Eight times in this short exchange the Angel asks the Ghost if he may kill the lizard, explicitly asking "Have I your permission?"[80] Without such permission the Angel would not force his will upon the Ghost. We also see that the Ghost does not have it in him to slay the lizard himself: "I'm sure I shall be able to keep [the lizard] in order now. I think the gradual process would be far better than killing it," says the Ghost. To which the Angel replies, "The gradual process is no use at all."[81] Moral effort, heavenly grace, and transformation are what mark out Lewis's appropriation of theosis. After Eustace was a boy again he appeared to Edmund but he did not immediately recognise him.[82] Eustace initially appeared as a dark figure in the distance, too small to be Caspian, but too big to be Lucy. "Who are you?" asked Edmund; "Don't you know me? . . . It's me—Eustace."[83] And Eustace it was, the same little boy who had fallen into the picture at the beginning of the story, and yet a very different young man after his encounter with Aslan. So too the Ghost and the lizard, who, after the Angel killed the lizard both it and the Ghost were transformed; the Ghost into a majestic man just slightly smaller than an Angel, and the lizard the greatest stallion "silvery white but with a main and tail of gold."[84]

In his intellectual and aesthetic autobiography, *Surprised by Joy*, Lewis exchanges the dragon flesh of Eustace Scrubb for images of his own

desire to live godly in Jesus Christ will be persecuted."

78. Lewis, *The Great Divorce*, 89–96.

79. Ibid., 84.

80. Ibid.

81. Ibid., 83.

82. Perhaps here we have a direct allusion to Jesus's appearance to Mary at his resurrection, wherein she mistakes Jesus for the gardener until he reveals himself to her—the same Jesus that entered the tomb, and yet now a more glorious manifestation of himself in his resurrected body. John 20:11–18.

83. Lewis, *Dawn Treader*, 83.

84. Lewis, *The Great Divorce*, 93.

imprisonment to his self-will, that of "some stiff clothing, like corsets, or even a suit of armour, as if I were a lobster."[85] In the fictional account of Eustace Scrubb's transformation into a dragon and back into a boy we catch a glimpse of how Lewis understood the process of theosis, much like the process Jesus spoke of in reference to his own death, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit" (John 20.24). Lewis makes it clear that for Eustace, for Lewis himself, and for all who would seek to be transformed into the image of God, the process is a long and painful "undulation" but the result is beautiful and glorious. As Screwtape advises Wormwood, God "cannot ravish. He can only woo. For His ignoble idea is to eat the cake and have it; the creatures are to be one with Him, and yet themselves."[86]

OF THIS AND OTHER WORLDS

With much of the Great Tradition, Lewis considers the ultimate end for the believer is to participate in the Divine nature. Consequently he was compelled to write on the reality of our life beyond this life in his works of fiction. Throughout Lewis's fiction there is the dominant theme of the transfiguration of matter and the human being, and the moral prerequisite leading up to it.[87] We see this, for instance, at the close of "Man or Rabbit?," where we read, "Morality is a mountain which we cannot climb by our own efforts; and if we could we should only perish in the ice and unbreathable air of the summit, lacking those wings with which the rest of the journey has to be accomplished. For it is from there that the real ascent begins. The ropes and axes are 'done away' and the rest is a matter of flying."[88]

As the world of Narnia draws to a close and the "real Narnia"—the new heavens and new earth of Lewis's fabled land—is entered into by the righteous inhabitants of old Narnia, Lewis closes his fantasy epic with these words which reiterate his doctrine of theosis:

> "You do not yet look so happy as I mean you to be."

85. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 211.

86. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*, 23. I am indebted to Devin Brown, "Further Up and Further In" for this reference.

87. One thinks of such works of fiction as *The Chronicles of Narnia*, *The Screwtape Letters, The Great Divorce, The Pilgrim's Regress*, and *Till We Have Faces*.

88. Lewis, "Man or Rabbit?," 73.

Lucy said, "We're so afraid of being sent away, Aslan. And you have sent us back into our own world so often."

"No fear of that," said Aslan. "Have you not guessed?"

Their hearts leaped and a wild hope rose within them.

"There was a real railway accident," said Aslan softly. "Your father and mother and all of you are—as you used to call it in the Shadowlands—dead. The term is over: the holidays have begun. The dream is ended: this is the morning."

And as he spoke he no longer looked to them like a lion; but things that began to happen after that were so great and beautiful that I cannot write them. And for us this is the end of all the stories, and we can most truly say that they all lived happily ever after. But for them it was only the beginning of the real story. All their life in this world and all their adventures in Narnia had only been the cover and the title page: now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story which no one on earth has read: which goes on forever: in which every chapter is better than the one before.[89]

Theosis appeals to me, I think, for some of the same reasons it appealed to Lewis. In one of her letters to Lewis, Evelyn Underhill summarized this appeal in a sentence when she wrote, "It is this capacity for giving imaginative body to the fundamental doctrines of Christianity that seems to me one of the most remarkable things about your work."[90] Theosis is one biblically and traditionally sanctioned vehicle for the expression of salvation in such imaginative terms. I conclude with one final image from the theological imagination of Lewis. On the lips of the noble unicorn Lewis places some of the finest words ever spoken in the lands of Narnia, and some of the most well-known: "I have come home at last! This is my real country! I belong here. This is the land I have been looking for all my life, though I never knew it till now. The reason why we loved the old Narnia is that it sometimes looked a little like this. Bree-hee-hee! Come further up, come further in!"[91]

89. Lewis, *The Last Battle*, 165.

90. Underhill, *Letters*, 301.

91. Ibid., 161.