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From Kenosis to Theosis: Reflections on the Views of C.S. Lewis
Douglas Beyer

The Apostle Paul told the Philippians, “Of his own free will [Christ] gave up all he had, and took the nature of a servant. He became like a human being and appeared in human likeness” (Philippians 2:7). The word he used for giving up all he had was
Being *perfect* is mistakenly taken by some to suggest a fixed state of changelessness. They suppose that any so-called process of improvement necessarily implies a deficiency in a supposed original state of perfection. On the other hand, just as a perfect bud can become a perfect flower and then a perfect fruit, so by the grace of God we will grow from one stage of perfection to another throughout eternity. God is going to make us perfect someday if it kills us!

Lewis warns us that the process of perfection is not painless—either in this life or the next. Setting aside Lewis’s view of purgatory, we note his agonizing complaint following the death of his wife:

> Sometimes, Lord, one is tempted to say that if you wanted us to behave like the lilies of the field you might have given us an organization more like theirs. But that, I suppose, is just your grand experiment. Or no; not an experiment, for you have no need to find things out. Rather your grand enterprise. 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.’ *(A Grief Observed)*

Many years before Lewis wrote that, he anticipated the excruciating pain of deification. At the end of *Pilgrim’s Regress* John sings:

> *That we, though small, may quiver with fire’s same*  
> *Substantial form as Thou—nor reflect merely,*  
> *As lunar angel, back to thee, cold flame,*  
> *Gods we are, Thou has said: and we pay dearly.*

In his essay, *Man or Rabbit*, Lewis sees this as the painful end of a life of moral struggle.

Morality is indispensable: 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 re-made. All the rabbit in us is to disappear—the worried, conscientious, ethical rabbit as well as the cowardly and sensual rabbit. We shall bleed and squeal as the handfuls of fur come out; 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.

The process of becoming a god does not mean we become less human. (N.B. in his *kenosis* Jesus Christ did not become less divine, only more human.) Indeed instead of becoming less human, in *theosis* we become more human by having our humanity fulfilled. In his sermon on *Transposition* Lewis said,

> And we must mean by that the fulfilling, precisely, of our humanity; not our transformation into angels nor our 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. How far the life of the risen man will be sensory, we do not know. But I surmise that it will differ from the sensory life we know here, not as emptiness differs from water or water from wine but as a flower differs from a bulb or a cathedral from an architect’s drawing.

Lewis’s view of *theosis* is held in context with his strong Trinitarian theology. When Peter, Edmund and Lucy are brought through death into Narnia they meet Aslan; they don’t become Aslan. This Trinitarian context is important. Without it, the effort to put oneself in the place of God becomes the root of all sin and false religion. In fact, it is Satan’s own sin and the spirit of antichrist (*anti*, “instead of” Christ). “Ye shall be as gods” was and is still Satan’s beguiling temptation (Genesis 3:5).

Screwtape knows this when he says that God “wants a world full of beings united to Him but still distinct.” *(The Screwtape Letters, with Screwtape Proposes a Toast* (New York: Macmillan, 1974), p. 38.) He considers souls food to be consumed. In a letter to Dom Bede Griffiths, 27-9-48 he wrote: “I fully agree with your remarks about India. I even feel that the kind of union (with God) wh. they are seeking is precisely the opposite to that which He really intends for us. We all once existed potentially in Him and in that sense were not other than He. And even now inorganic matter has a sort of unity with Him that we lack. To what end was creation except to separate us in order that we may be reunited to Him in that unity of love wh. is utterly different from mere numerical unity and indeed presupposes that lover & beloved be distinct!”

Christian Science teaches a non-Trinitarian form of *theosis*, but Lewis takes issue with its simplistic view of pain and evil. In a letter to Mrs. Edward Auen, 1 Nov. 1954 he wrote:

Christian Scientists seem to me to be altogether too simple. Granted that all the evils are illusions, still, the existence of that illusion wd. be a real evil and presumably a
real evil permitted by God. That brings us back to exactly the same point as we began from. We have gained nothing by the theory. We are still faced with the great mystery, not explained, but coloured, transmuted, all through the Cross. Faith, not wild oversimplifications, is what will help, don’t you think? Is it so very difficult to believe that the travail of all creation which God Himself descended to share, at its most intense, may be necessary in the process of turning finite creatures (with free wills) into—well, into Gods.

Note: the capitalization of “Gods” is a form Lewis normally avoids when referring to our theotic destiny, but perhaps it was something he did in the informality of a casual letter.

The doctrine of theosis has been criticized by some as a self-improvement program on steroids. Lewis wrote to Clyde Kilby 20 January 1959 to answer the objection of Cornelius Van Til.

As to Professor Van Til’s point it is certainly scriptural to say that ‘to as many as believed He gave power to become the sons of God,’ and the statement ‘God became Man that men might become gods’ is Patristic. Of course Van Til’s wording ‘that man must seek to ascend in the scale of life’ with its suggestions (a) that we could do this by our own efforts, (b) that the difference between God and Man is a difference of position on a ‘scale of life’ like the difference between a (biologically) ‘higher’ and a (biologically) ‘lower’ creature, is wholly foreign to my thought.

Van Til’s words appear to be his attempt to rephrase Lewis’s thoughts on theosis—a rephrasing that Lewis rejects as implying something “utterly foreign” to his thinking. Whatever theosis means to Lewis, it is certainly not humanistic self-improvement.

Lewis grounds his view of theosis in the doctrine of incarnation (kenosis). In this he follows the tradition of Augustine who called Christ “the one who, already Son of God, came to become Son of man, so as to give us who were already sons of men the power to become sons of God” (Letter 140). Though Christ’s kenosis is the grounds of our theosis, Lewis points to the resurrection as its proof.

Christ has risen, and so we shall rise. St Peter for a few seconds walked on the water; and the day will come when there will be a re-made universe, infinitely obedient to the will of glorified and obedient men, when we can do all things, when we shall be those
The whole purpose of becoming a Christian is simply nothing else. (*Mere Christianity*)

The presence of *Zoe* in the life of a Christian is seen in the common act of prayer.

God is the thing to which he is praying—the goal he is trying to reach. God is also the thing inside him which is pushing him on—the motive power. *God* is also the road or bridge along which he is being pushed to that goal. So that the whole threefold life of the three-personal Being is actually going on in that ordinary little bedroom where an ordinary man is saying his prayers. The man is being caught up into the higher kind of life—what I called *Zoe* or spiritual life: he is being pulled into God, by God, while still remaining himself. (*Mere Christianity*)

Whether the transformation of a human from *Bios* to *Zoe* is called conversion or *theosis*, it is certainly more than mere self-improvement.

... mere improvement is not redemption, though redemption always improves people even here and now and will, in the end, improve them to a *degree we cannot yet imagine*. *God* became man to turn creatures into sons: not simply to produce better men of the old kind but to produce a new kind of man. It is not like teaching a horse to jump better and better but like turning a horse into a winged creature. (*Mere Christianity*, italics added)

The biblical words translated “eternal life” are literally “life of (the) age,”
minori ad majus—from the lesser to the greater. If they were gods to whom God’s message was given and who failed so miserably to live up to this honor, how much more am I?

Paul refers to Satan, as “the god of this age” (2 Corinthians 4:4). He is an imitation god in the same sense that men and women can be imitation gods. Satan was the first one to promise godliness back in the Garden of Eden. His devious route to theosis led to death and eternal separation from God.

The doctrine of theosis proclaims that the culmination of Christian life is not only influenced by Christ’s commands and example but also transformed by his grace. “Do not conform yourselves to the standards of this world, but let God transform you inwardly by a complete change of your mind” (Romans 12:2). It might be less shocking to consider this transformation a purely moral one: that our goal of godliness means merely “goodness” or “godliness,” in the moral sense. It certainly is all of that, but scriptural language suggests much more—a union with God that transforms us to the extent that we become by the grace of God, like Jesus Christ, both human and divine. John declares the moral implications of this. “Those who are children of God do not continue to sin, for God’s very nature is in them; and because God is their Father, they cannot continue to sin” (1 John 3:9). We do not achieve this theosis by human effort, but by being made to conform to Christ by the new nature given to us as believers. “If any man is in Christ, he is a new creature (2 Corinthians 5:17).
body of Adam, so the church is derived from Christ. And just as Eve was reunited to Adam in marriage, so the church is reunited to Christ in baptism.

That is our glorious destiny: “The Spirit and our spirit bear united witness that we are children of God. And if we are children, we are heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, sharing his sufferings so as to share his glory” (Romans 8:15-17). Note that we shall share his glory! Not the dazzling glory of the sun, but the far greater glory of the Son! “All of us, then, reflect the glory of the Lord with uncovered faces; and that same glory, coming from the Lord, who is the Spirit, transforms us into his likeness (2 Corinthians 3:18).

Our future glory is unimaginable. Paraphrasing Isaiah 64:4, Paul says, “What God has planned for people who love him is more than eyes have seen or ears have heard. It has never even entered our minds!” (1 Corinthians 2:9) Not even the phenomenal mind of C.S. Lewis. Someday you and I will become greater than the greatest angels in the heavenly hosts—we'll be like Jesus! John writes: “My dear friends, we are now God’s children, but it is not yet clear what we shall become.” What we shall become has already begun in what we are. The climactic conclusion of that process is something we do not know fully now. But that we don’t know everything, doesn’t mean we know nothing. “. . . we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him” (1 John 3:2 GNB). We are on our way to unimaginable glory. Paul describes that transformation in these words: “We shall all come together to that oneness in our faith and in our knowledge of the Son of God: we shall become mature men reaching to the very height of Christ’s full stature” (Ephesians 4:13). That’s our glorious destiny from kenosis to theosis. God’s written Word unfolds the plan of man made god by God made Man. (paraphrased from a half-remembered poem)