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The Thought of C. S. Lewis

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In the Presence of the Holy

In his 1917 work *Das Heilige*, German theologian Rudolph Otto refers to God as the “mysterium tremendum,”¹ translating in modern English to “the mysterious one before whom we must tremble.” Otto here is attesting to the inherent otherness of God. The Creator of all Creation of whom “the heavens declare...[His] glory; the skies proclaim the work of His hands” (Psalms 19:1, NIV), God transcends all that man can see and feel. He is utterly and completely different from His creation; He is mysterious, divine, and infinitely holy. As the newly converted C. S. Lewis journeyed “further up and further in”² to his Christian faith, this doctrine impacted him to his core. Before long, his developing understanding of God’s holiness began to seep into his prodigious writing. An accomplished essayist, poet, apologist, and novelist, Lewis disseminated his theological perception of holiness across numerous genres and disciplines. In turn, drawing together these scattered threads of Lewis’s innermost thought reveals the depth and breadth of impact that the doctrine of holiness had on his understanding of life, God, and the universe. In this essay, I will argue that Lewis’s twin conceptions of joy and dread are in fact the outworking of the importance Lewis ascribed to the doctrine of holiness.

C. S. Lewis makes clear throughout his body of work that he believes there is a poignant, incommunicable joy that is present throughout the human experience. In his essay “Meditation in a Toolshed,” Lewis attempts to define this joy by establishing the difference between “looking at” and looking along” an experience. He describes this dichotomy as the difference between experiencing something from the inside, such as being in love, or observing it from the outside,

¹ Rudolph Otto, “Mysterium Tremendum.” in *Das Heilige* (1920), https://archive.org/details/RudolfOtto_dasHeilige/page/n3/mode/2up, 13.

² C. S. Lewis, “Further Up and Further In.” in *The Last Battle* (La Vergne: Dreamscape Media, 2018), ProQuest Ebook Central, 76.

as a psychologist may examine the sexual impulse of the said person in love.³ Looking along something is personal, profound, and intimate. Looking at something is cold, calculating, and scientific. The first can only be explained by such vague statements as “you just had to be there” and the like. As to the second, a brief reading of a relevant scientific journal is sufficient. In all my life, I have found no adequate way to describe the particular smell of the tulips in their springtime bloom along the driveway, the cruel beauty of a flash of lightning, or the strange, stark nobility of the Scottish bagpipe. Surely science could provide some diagnosis as to why my senses rejoice in those experiences, but that would not quite capture the whole picture. There is an element of experience that looking at a thing simply cannot perceive, and it is this inexpressible quality that Lewis calls joy.

C. S. Lewis would work to define and frame this idea throughout his vast body of work. In *Mere Christianity*, his apologetical defense of the core tenets of the Christian faith, he writes that “creatures are not born with desires unless satisfaction for those desires exists... 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.”⁴ Lewis also touches on the topic in his philosophical and theological treatise *The Problem of Pain*, writing that “[joy] is the secret signature of each soul, the incommunicable and unappeasable want.”⁵ This thought is further expounded upon in his essay *The Weight of Glory*, in which he calls joy “the secret we cannot hide and cannot tell, though we desire to do both.”⁶ As Lewis defined it, joy is that which is wakened in the fulfillment of the innate desire for the transcendent. Joy is felt in that moment when the soul is

³ C. S. Lewis, “Meditation in a Toolshed.” in *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics*. Edited by Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 73.

⁴ C. S. Lewis, “Hope,” in *Mere Christianity* in *The C. S. Lewis Signature Classics*, reissue edition (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2017), 114.

⁵ C. S. Lewis, “Heaven,” in *The Problem of Pain* in *The C. S. Lewis Signature Classics*, reissue edition (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2017), 640.

⁶ C. S. Lewis, *Weight of Glory*. <https://www.wheelersburg.net/Downloads/Lewis%20Glory.pdf>

stirred to long for something no earthly thing can fulfill. Furthermore, the joy Lewis is describing is intensely personal. The American song writer Charles Austin Miles put it this way in his 1912 hymn “In the Garden,” that “the joy we share, as we tarry there [in the garden], none other can ever know.”⁷

However, Lewis is keen to point out that this joy can be experienced only briefly and is accompanied by a painful longing. “Our Father,” he writes in *The Problem of Pain*, “refreshes us on the journey with some pleasant inns, but will not encourage us to mistake them for home.”⁸ Although one may tarry in the joyous experience for a time, it must not be allowed to be mistaken for the final destination. Seeking to prolong the experience of joy does little to bring the searcher any closer to the higher joy they seek, but instead only deadens the potency of the joy itself. Though a weekend holiday in a hotel may seem pleasant, refreshing even, to spend a week in the hotel room is to know boredom at the height of its powers. In his spiritual autobiography *Surprised by Joy*, Lewis adds that “joy is distinct not only from pleasure in general but even from aesthetic pleasure. It must have the stab, the pang, the inconsolable longing.”⁹ This joy carries within its very nature a piercing longing for something beyond the thing being experienced. The thing experienced cannot be mistaken for the thing itself because it is not the sense of joy that is left to be longed for. Rather, the longing belongs all to that which transcends the thing experienced. The longing that joy begets cannot be explained, nor fully satisfied. There is a distinct quality of supernatural otherness to joy that points to a higher source.

⁷ Chris Fenner, Hymnology Archive, “In the Garden” accessed April 16, 2023, <https://www.hymnologyarchive.com/in-the-garden>

⁸ C. S. Lewis, “Human Pain, Cont’d,” in *The Problem of Pain* in *The C. S. Lewis Signature Classics*, reissue edition (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2017), 618.

⁹ C. S. Lewis, “Renaissance,” in *Surprised by Joy*, reissue edition (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2017), 86.

Much akin to joy, Lewis's conception of the numinous betrays a sense of supernaturalism across his works. For a definition, he described a situation in which the reader is told that a "mighty spirit" is in the room with them, and the reader believes it. "You would feel wonder," he writes, "a sense of inadequacy to cope with such a visitant and of prostration before it... this feeling may be described as awe, and the object which excites it as the Numinous."¹⁰ Lewis's numinosity is the tangible evidence of the presence of the supernatural upon the mind. An inexplicable dread accompanies the presence of the numinous. The numinous cannot be controlled or influenced by mortal intervention and surpasses any human means of observation, and that is the source of its awe. Though much academic thought is given to the awe of the numinous in Lewis's scholarship, it is in the realm of fiction and fantasy that Lewis's idea of supernatural dread appears most memorably.

C. S. Lewis's science fiction Ransom Trilogy is littered with numinous imagery. In the first book of the trilogy entitled *Out of the Silent Planet*, Ransom is brought before the Oyarsa of the planet Malacandra. Upon sensing Oyarsa approaching, Ransom "felt the tingling of his blood and a pricking on his fingers as if lightning were near him; And his heart and body seemed to him to be made of water."¹¹ Coincidentally, this is not an experience uncommon to man. Lewis, a veteran of the First World War, certainly knew this. Ransom, though able to see Oyarsa only faintly, is powerfully aware of his presence because of the awe that his presence inspires within his own soul and those of the other *hnau* gathered there. It is awe because of the power felt, and dread because of that same power. Much as the angels must always command those they visit to

¹⁰ C. S. Lewis, "Introductory," in *The Problem of Pain in The C. S. Lewis Signature Classics*, reissue edition (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2017), 554-555.

¹¹ C. S. Lewis, *Out of the Silent Planet* (New York City: Scribner, 2003), 118.

“fear not” (Luke 2:10, ESV), so must the numinous Oyarsa, all for the very simple reason that their presence is terrifying in its distinct otherness from the rest of human experience.

Expounding upon this theme to an even greater extent in *Perelandra*, the second book of the Ransom Trilogy, Lewis reveals the being to whom even the Oyarsas of the cosmos must bend the knee. “Where Maleldil is, there is the center. He is in every place. Not some of Him in one place and some one another, but in each place the whole Maleldil, even the smallness beyond thought.”¹² In this midst of the Oyarsas’ hymn of praise, Lewis affirms the existence of a supreme numinous being within the borders of his fictional realm. Maleldil is present, and so is the dread and the awe of him. In this trilogy, Lewis’s sense of supernaturalism is transposed directly to otherworldly, numinous beings who are the direct root and cause of this dread and awe of the transcendent. The dread of the numinous is present throughout each of these two books, culminating in the protagonist’s awesome encounter with the source of the dread that lies so heavily upon him. Lewis’s fictional cosmos has an unseen numinous power, and the presence of this power fosters an incomprehensible dread.

To a lesser extent, this same sense of dread inspired by the presence of supernaturalism is also found throughout Lewis’s *Chronicles of Narnia* series. Much could be explored as to how the presence and roar of Aslan inspire this same dread throughout the Narniad, but there is also much to be gleaned from a particular moment in which the numinous is no longer active where once it was. In *Prince Caspian*, which Lewis intended to reflect the “restoration of the true religion after a corruption,”¹³ Lucy Pevensie takes a walk through a wood she knew had once been filled with dryads and the like. Yet now the trees are silent. The spirit that had filled them has fled. “Oh, Trees, wake, wake, wake. Don't you remember it? Don't you remember me,” Lucy

¹² C. S. Lewis, *Perelandra* (New York City: Scribner, 2003), 185.

¹³ Michael Ward, “Silence” in *Planet Narnia* (New York City: Oxford University Press, 2008), 12.

implores them, “Dryads and Hamadryads, come out, come to me.”¹⁴ Much as the presence of the Oyarsas and Maleldil were so palpable in the Ransom Trilogy, so also is the absence of this supernatural presence felt as a result of the Telmarine overthrow. Where once the awe and dread of the numinous had filled the woods of Narnia, now is found nothing but silence. From this can be seen the importance that the presence of the numinous had upon Lewis’s conception of Narnia, as its withdrawal is felt to be one of the most damaging results of the Telmarines’ arrival. Narnia, like Lewis’s cosmos, has a numinous presence within it, and its absence creates a distinct sense of loss.

The connection between Lewis’s twin conceptions of joy and dread is quite plain, as is their respective importance to Lewis’s creative imagination and understanding of reality. Lewis clearly understood there to be an otherness that permeated the natural world in a unique and tangible way, and I believe this to be the direct result of his understanding of God’s holiness. Joy he believed pointed to Heaven.¹⁵ Dread he thought qualitatively different from being merely afraid of the thing; for what reason would men have to fear the dead unless there were something that transcended death?¹⁶ Both joy and dread pointed to something beyond the ordinary human experience. If such unnatural and uncanny experiences like joy and dread could in truth be perceived, then Lewis felt that they surely cannot be grounded in the natural reality. They had to be grounded in something completely and utterly other from the created universe. Joy and dread by their natural definition had to be grounded in a God who was by His own definition holy.

Lewis’s idea of joy is present throughout the Scriptures in connection to the holiness of God. “You have given my heart more joy than they have when grain and wine abound,” writes

¹⁴ C. S. Lewis, “What Lucy Saw” in *Prince Caspian* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1964), 62.

¹⁵ C. S. Lewis, *Weight of Glory*. <https://www.wheelersburg.net/Downloads/Lewis%20Glory.pdf>

¹⁶ C. S. Lewis, “Introductory,” in *The Problem of Pain in The C. S. Lewis Signature Classics*, reissue edition (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2017), 556.

the psalmist of God in Psalms 4:7 (Psalms 4:7 NKJV), and in his first epistle the apostle Peter writes that “though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory” (1 Peter 1:8 ESV). In both cases, the Scriptures attest to God being the source of a joy that surpasses human experience. The holy otherness of God is the very thing that is both the cause and object of joy. His holiness stirs the human soul in a way no earthly thing can, and it is clear that this idea greatly impacted C. S. Lewis. The joy Lewis defined in his scholarly works like *Mere Christianity* and *The Weight of Glory* is the very same that Peter and the psalmist were moved by the numinous Holy Spirit to describe. The joy that each wrote of is unlike any other on earth because the God from whence it comes is a holy God.

As with joy, so too with dread. The writings of the Old Testament abound with passages about the awesome dread the presence of the Holy One inspires. In Job 38, God “spoke to Job out of the storm” and asserted His holiness over all Creation, to which Job can only reply “I am unworthy—how can I reply to you?” (Job 40:4 NIV) Ransom’s reaction to the presence of the Oyarsa descending in *Out of the Silent Planet* is also remarkably similar. “What are you afraid of, Ransom of Thulcandra,” the Oyarsa of Malacandra asks. “Of you Oyarsa, because you are unlike me and I cannot see you.”¹⁷ Both Job and Ransom feel inadequate even to speak in the presence of the holy, for such is the dread of it upon them. They recognize their own unworthiness in light of the supreme worthiness of the numinous. Lewis also mirrors in his works the journey from dread to wisdom that the Scriptures lay out. To this point, both King Solomon and the psalmist agree that “the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge” (Proverbs 9:10, Psalms 111:10 ESV). In *Perelandra*, as the Oyarsa of Perelandra describes how his rule will be taken away, the Oyarsa of Malacandra says “[Ransom] will not understand

¹⁷ C. S. Lewis, *Out of the Silent Planet* (New York City: Scribner, 2003), 118-119.

you...he will think this is a grievous thing.” But Ransom has experienced and dwelt within the dread of Maleldil, and he is able to craft a simple analogy for how this taking away of power can be understood within his Thulcandrian experience. “You understand well,”¹⁸ replies the Oyarsa of Perelandra. Ransom embodied this dread of the holy in the first book of the trilogy, and because of that he has become wise beyond his nature. Ransom’s journey from dread to wisdom reflects the impact of the proverbs and psalms upon C. S. Lewis’s thought, and the wisdom that the dread of the holy inspires became a key part of his *Perelandra* narrative. His idea of dread was transposed directly from Scripture to this fictional realm of mountainous harandra and vast planetary ocean, but the basis for it remained the transcendent, holy Creator God of the universe.

“Numen inest,” writes the Roman poet Ovid in his *Fasti*, “there is a spirit here.”¹⁹ Scattered across Lewis’s many writings lies the imprint of the numinous as a present force within the universe that has a direct and deeply personal effect on the individual. Narnia and Perelandra bear its mark and his scholarship is shot through with it. Lewis’s own conversion reveals the impact of this experience of otherness upon his journey towards Christian Theism. To Lewis, the spirit of God was indeed present. It imbued the joy he felt so poignantly and authored the dread that he saw reflected throughout the ancient myths and legends he so admired, for it was the holy presence of God from which this joy and dread flowed. This idea of the holiness of God impacted Lewis’s thought to its very core and became one of the building blocks of his creative imagination. Narnia must have Aslan and the Cosmos must have Maleldil because the Universe must have God. Throughout his vast works, this is the vision of both joy and dread that C. S. Lewis communicates, discovered and grounded within Lewis’s understanding of the importance of God’s holiness. In the presence of the holy, there is naught that man can do but fall “like a

¹⁸ C. S. Lewis, *Perelandra* (New York City: Scribner, 2003), 168.

¹⁹ Ovid, *Fasti* (Harvard University Press), 142.

dead man” (Revelation 1:17 ESV) at the feet of the Holy One. In the presence of the holy, the innermost desires, the long-silent secret of the soul, is stirred to life. The joy of the presence points to Him from whom it issues from, and the wisdom it imparts comes from that stance of surrender before the feet of He who is utterly holy.

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