

## Theosis and the Problem of Human Suffering

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### **Abstract**

This article seeks to examine how the doctrine of theosis might prove fruitful in dialogue with the problem of human suffering. Theosis is explored as the means by which humans find the fullest expression of humanity, located in union with God. As a part of human experience, suffering is gathered within that union. The history of the doctrine of theosis is examined from 2 Peter to Boethius and through to Thomas Aquinas and Gregory Palamas. The problem of suffering is examined with particular reference to the writings of C. S. Lewis and Simone Weil. This is brought into dialogue with the doctrine of theosis through the incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, linked to the classical mystical pattern of purification, illumination and union first seen in *The Celestial Hierarchy* of Pseudo-Dionysus the Areopagite.

**Keywords:** Theosis; Divinisation; Participation; Human Suffering; Purification; Illumination; Union.

### **Introduction**

Most human beings encounter suffering at some point in their lives and these experiences can trigger challenging questions about faith. How can a loving God permit suffering? Does suffering have a purpose? How should Christians engage with suffering? One way in which we may seek to do this lies in the doctrine of theosis, or divinisation. After a historical survey of theosis we turn to the problem of suffering. A distinction is drawn between a post-Holocaust approach to suffering and attitudes prevalent before the Holocaust, which placed emphasis on suffering as punishment for sin, and as a means by which God gained the attention of the human being. This approach is called into question as it appears to run counter to human understanding of God's inherent goodness, his love for those he has created, and his desire for union with humankind. Instead of suffering as punishment or Divine 'wake-up' call, a more creative and transformative model is explored. The incarnation is viewed as a creative act, redeeming the human body and the whole of creation, purifying and transforming the world. In the great act of self-giving which is the crucifixion, humankind finds fellowship with Christ in his suffering. Therefore, any suffering humans undergo may be located in the scope of Divine suffering, leading to a special partaking in the Divine life. The crucifixion, as the act of illumination, orients humankind towards God in preparation for union. In the

resurrection Christ conquered death, the ultimate suffering, and ‘transformed what is in itself a universal power of diminishment and extinction into an essentially life-giving factor’.<sup>1</sup> The resurrection is the event by which union can be understood. Returning to the Father, Christ bore the marks of his suffering, bringing the creative act of suffering within the life of the Trinity.

### **An historical survey of the doctrine of theosis**

*From 2 Peter to Boethius*

As A. N. Williams notes, 2 Peter 1.4 is ‘the root biblical text on deification’.<sup>2</sup> It appears in a general exhortation to godly living and is *presumed*, appearing as a clause in a longer statement:

Thus he has given us, through these things, his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may escape from the corruption that is in the world because of lust, and may become participants in the divine nature.

This is as clear a statement of the doctrine of theosis as any other we might choose to present, pointing us towards the possibility of union with God. As the only explicit biblical warrant for theosis, it is the thread that links the reception and promulgation of the doctrine across a thousand years of theological thought. The image of a thread is appropriate; one may need to hunt for passages which point, albeit obliquely, to deification. Theosis is the thread that binds us inextricably to God. Yet because we stand within the whole pattern of glorious creation we cannot always distinguish individual threads. The fact that it weaves its way through so much of the thinking of those who have attempted to draw closer to God only confirms its central place.

There are passages in Paul - particularly in Ephesians, Colossians and Philippians - which seem to presuppose theosis without a defining statement of the doctrine. His readers are urged to come ‘to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ’ (Eph. 4.13) or to clothe themselves ‘with the new self, created according to the likeness of God’ (Eph. 4.24).<sup>3</sup> Participation in the divine life is participation in the life of Christ where ‘the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have come to fullness in him’ (Col. 2.10). For in Christ ‘the fullness of God was pleased to dwell and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things’ (Col. 1.19). Living a godly life entails being clothed ‘with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its Creator’ (Col. 3.10). Philippians contains the assurance that ‘he will transform the body of our humiliation so that it may be conformed to the body of his glory’ (Phil. 3.21). John 17 contains a more overt reference to divinisation. In this farewell discourse Jesus prays to the Father for His

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<sup>1</sup> Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *On Suffering* (London: Collins, 1975), 281.

<sup>2</sup> A. N. Williams, *The Ground of Union: Deification in Aquinas and Palamas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 34.

<sup>3</sup> All biblical quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version unless otherwise stated.

apostles: ‘that they may all be one. As you Father, are in me and I am in you, they may also be in us’ (John 17.21).

In his reply to second-century heresies, Irenaeus devotes much time to a discussion of the incarnation, which provides humans with the possibility of union with God. Because of this, those who ‘despise the incarnation of the pure generation of the Word of God, defraud human nature of promotion into God’.<sup>4</sup> By his life, death and resurrection, Christ has redeemed all creation and made possible our union with God: ‘perfecting man after the image and likeness of God’.<sup>5</sup> Irenaeus states the link between incarnation and theosis most clearly in the preface to Book V: ‘Our Lord Jesus Christ, who did, through His transcendent love, become what we are that He might bring us to be even what He is Himself’.<sup>6</sup>

In his response to different opponents, Athanasius provides the next clear statement of theosis, drawn from a defence of the doctrine of the incarnation. In *On the Incarnation of the Word* he asserts: ‘it was our sorry cause that caused the Word to come down, our transgression that called out His love for us, so that He made haste to help us and to appear among us. It is we who were the cause of His taking human form and for our salvation that in His great love was both born and manifested in a human form’.<sup>7</sup> Athanasius notes the effect of the Fall; through sin man is corrupt. Yet hope exists, because man was made in the image of God: ‘God has given them a share in His own Image, that is, in our Lord Jesus Christ and has made even themselves after the same Image and Likeness. Why? Simply in order that through this gift of God-likeness in themselves they may be able to perceive the Image Absolute, that is the Word Himself, and through Him to apprehend the Father’.<sup>8</sup> Because of this possibility of being able to reach to the Father through the Son, humankind can participate in the divine life; ‘He, indeed, assumed humanity that we might become God’.<sup>9</sup>

In his ‘First Letter to Cledonius’, Gregory of Nazianzus also addresses certain heresies, including Arianism, Apollinarianism and Manichaeism. This letter contains references to theosis, including specific use of the term in Gregory’s comments on the two natures of Christ: ‘the pair is one by coalescence, God being “in-manned” and man “deified”’.<sup>10</sup> This is an important point of doctrine for Gregory; Christ must be both fully human and fully divine if he is to redeem mankind. As he comments, ‘had half of Adam fallen, what was assumed and is being saved would have been

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4 Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies*, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: The Writings of the Fathers down to AD 325*, ed. by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, 10 vols (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1979-86), I, 448.

5 Ibid., 549.

6 Ibid., 526.

7 Athanasius, *On the Incarnation: The Treatise ‘De Incarnatione Verbi Dei’*, trans. and ed. by a Religious of CSMV, new edn, Popular Patristics Series, 3 (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1996), 29.

8 Ibid., 38.

9 Ibid., 93.

10 Gregory of Nazianzus, *On God and Christ: The Five Theological Orations and Two Letters to Cledonius*, trans. by Frederick Williams and Lionel Wickham, Popular Patristics Series, 23 (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2002), 157.

half too; but if the whole fell he is united to the whole of what was born and is being saved wholly'.<sup>11</sup> Both body and mind fell in Adam's transgression and both are subject to suffering. Therefore, for the whole person to be saved both body and soul must be redeemed. Only by being fully human and fully divine can Christ enact our redemption and make possible our deification: 'The unassumed is the unhealed, what is united with God is also being saved'.<sup>12</sup>

In *The Consolation of Philosophy* Boethius explores the nature of happiness, how it can be attained and maintained, in the form of a dialogue with a personification of philosophy. His interlocutor states: 'longing for the true good is naturally implanted in human minds' and that this true good is the ultimate happiness and a 'state of perfection'.<sup>13</sup> Riches, fame, power, and pleasure are all discounted as possible routes to happiness because they are imperfect and 'the goal of true happiness' is found elsewhere.<sup>14</sup> Since this perfect good is the 'source of all goods' and since God is the source of all good, it follows then that 'God is totally full of the highest and perfect good'.<sup>15</sup> Lady Philosophy has already established that true happiness is the perfect good; therefore, 'true happiness must reside in the highest God'.<sup>16</sup> This goodness resides in God, for He did not acquire it elsewhere; it is not distinct from Him. In accepting this premise it becomes clear that in striving for true happiness - perfect good - we desire nothing more than union with the Divine. If humans become happy by attaining a state of happiness and God is happiness (because He is the perfect good), then man can share in the divinity of God. Here, then, is a clear philosophical expression of the doctrine of theosis; 'Hence every happy person is God; God is by nature one only, but nothing prevents the greatest possible number from sharing in that divinity'.<sup>17</sup>

### *Thomas Aquinas*

The thread of theosis is woven brightly through the *Summa Theologica*, and merits separate treatment. Thomas evidences the key text of 2 Peter 1.4 but the doctrine is specifically named in only a few places (Ia-IIae. 62; Ia-IIae. 65; and Ia. 12). As Williams reminds us, 'Aquinas uses the technical vocabulary of theosis sparingly'.<sup>18</sup> Yet his discussion of the human relationship with the divine presupposes union as the ultimate and perfect goal of human life.

However, Divine simplicity and the gap between humankind and the transcendent Creator must be maintained in order to avoid pantheism. We cannot possess the divine nature as God does, but only according to our natural abilities, which are heightened or extended: 'The intellectual and moral virtues perfect man's intellect

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11 Ibid., 158.

12 Ibid., 158.

13 Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, trans. by P. G. Walsh, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 41.

14 Ibid., 40.

15 Ibid., 58.

16 Ibid., 58.

17 Ibid., 59.

18 Williams, *Ground of Union*, 34.

and appetite according to the capacity of human nature; the theological virtues, supernaturally'.<sup>19</sup> Participation in the divine nature does not subsume *our* nature into God's; His action 'does not violate or alter the composition of our nature'.<sup>20</sup> This participation is not something we can achieve on our own, 'not without Divine assistance'.<sup>21</sup> This 'qualified spanning of the chasm' is achieved by grace in the form of the theological virtues (faith, hope and especially charity).<sup>22</sup> By these virtues we are granted 'a partaking of the Divine Nature by a participated likeness' which quicken us to God.<sup>23</sup> This demonstrates what Williams terms 'the gratuitousness of the gift of participation'.<sup>24</sup>

Furthermore, it is important to note the difference in approach demonstrated by Western and Eastern theologians. In a different move to his Eastern counterparts, Thomas lays emphasis on the role of the created intellect in perceiving God. We apprehend the essence of God (*pace* the Eastern claim, after Palamas, to see only the *energies* of God) through this created intellect because 'God inhabits it'.<sup>25</sup> On Thomas's account it is through the theological virtues (chiefly charity) and the created intellect (aided and enhanced by God's action) that 'we know God because we become like to God'.<sup>26</sup>

How does this God whom we 'know' communicate himself to us? The incarnation is the logic that generates theosis, and for Thomas the incarnation is 'the fruit of divine desire for self-communication'.<sup>27</sup> The incarnation redeems by making new the whole of creation, but most especially humankind. By the hypostatic union of the Divine with human flesh a unique communication takes place which demonstrates the love of God for humanity, a point Aquinas makes on the authority of Augustine: 'what could afford us a stronger proof of this than that the Son of God should become a partner with us of human nature'.<sup>28</sup> It is in this specific revelation of God to us, 'rendering the Infinite comprehensible to the finite', that we see the Creator's desire for union with humankind.<sup>29</sup> With Christ as the example, we glimpse the divine life in which we may participate; we see 'the destiny of our souls'.<sup>30</sup> To participate in the life of Christ is to relinquish human will to that of the Divine.

Through his exposition of the divine nature, the divine action of love and grace in the world, the created creature's natural turning towards the divine and the natural inclination of the intellect, enhanced by the divine light of the glory of God, Thomas unfolds a theology through which the doctrine of theosis is threaded.

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19 *ST Ia-IIae*. 62, ii, ad. 1 (Dominican translation).

20 Williams, *Ground of Union*, 37. Cf. Thomas's principle that 'grace does not destroy nature but perfects it' (*ST Ia*. 1. viii, ad. 2; Dominican translation).

21 *ST Ia-IIae*. 62, i, resp. (Dominican translation).

22 Williams, *The Ground of Union*, 36.

23 *ST Ia-IIae*. 112, i, resp. (Dominican translation).

24 Williams, *Ground of Union*, 35.

25 *Ibid.*, 38.

26 *Ibid.*, 38.

27 *Ibid.*, 90.

28 *ST IIIa*. 1, ii, resp. quoting *De trinitate* XII.10.xiii (Dominican translation).

29 Williams, *Ground of Union*, 90.

30 *Ibid.*, 92.

*Gregory Palamas*

*The Triads* differs in structure, format, and style from the *Summa Theologica*. Williams describes Palamas's thought as being expressed through 'cognates', or images, which provide a method for connecting his doctrine of God with his doctrine of theosis.<sup>31</sup> These cognates are arranged in order of ascent to God but are not, in a sense, 'fixed'; their ability to approximate what theosis *is* occurs only by simile.

The cognates are in three groups, with the last acting 'virtually as synonyms' for theosis.<sup>32</sup> The first group consists of virtue, knowledge and vision. Living a virtuous life, following the commandments, might seem to us to emphasise human will and agency; 'we become God because we try harder', if you like.<sup>33</sup> However, it is better understood as a step along the way to divinisation, purification before union. By purification God 'creates men of divine character', to whom he will unite 'Himself as God with gods'.<sup>34</sup> Although it is God who offers his love in purification, human free will is necessary to receive it; we have the choice not to accept this first step towards the gift of divinisation.<sup>35</sup> Purification will involve suffering as the human tears itself away from its own will and surrenders to God. Turning to knowledge and theosis, it is logical that one can only be in union with something one knows; the intimacy of the relationship demands it. Palamas is clear that intellectual powers are not enough to attain sanctification; instead, 'infused illumination' is necessary for union.

Ordinary knowledge, generated by man's own capacities will not illuminate the mind, as man 'merely possesses knowledge of creatures'.<sup>36</sup> The only true knowledge is to be found in Christ, in whom all knowledge resides; we are 'enlightened by the knowledge of the glory of God, in the face of Jesus Christ'.<sup>37</sup> Vision functions as another way of apprehending the divine and key for this is the Transfiguration. We are created in the divine image and were once able to behold God, but this was lost in the corruption of the Fall. This vision is a gift of grace, which can only be granted by God and which the apostles experienced during the Transfiguration.

The second group of cognates are contemplation, light, glory and grace. Contemplation is received 'as a gift'.<sup>38</sup> It cannot be achieved through prayer alone and represents a real encounter with God. The image of light functions as a near equivalent for divinisation; divine light is God (1 John 1.5), but He is transcendent and unapproachable. This light 'may in a certain measure be contained by a created creature'; therefore, we may experience God, but might not be able to articulate this intellectually.<sup>39</sup> This difficulty in expressing intellectually the experience of God

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31 Ibid., 103.

32 Ibid., 103.

33 Ibid., 106.

34 Gregory Palamas, *The Triads*, ed. by John Meyendorff; trans. by Nicholas Gendle, Classics of Western Spirituality (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1983), 109.

35 We see evidence of this in the 'co-worker' imagery of 3 John 8 or 1 Corinthians 3.9 (AV translation).

36 Palamas, *Triads*, 61

37 Ibid., 43.

38 Williams, *Ground of Union*, 113.

39 Palamas, *Triads*, 58.

(which can often be expressed more easily in the language of ‘feeling’) is circumvented by the experience of the glory of God. Glory is how God ‘knows’ us and also the means by which we can contemplate God. It is transformative and means that ‘what we have seen in God, in virtue of God’s grace alone, we can see in ourselves’.<sup>40</sup> Grace makes divinisation possible; it resides in the divine nature and is made gift to us. Palamas is clear that no amount of striving on our part can achieve divinisation; grace is necessary for our union with God.

The last group of cognates are adoption, participation, and union. Adoption is linked to grace; ‘we are incorporated into divine life’ through God’s action, not ours.<sup>41</sup> We cannot participate in the divine *essence*, the very substance of God. Participation in the life of the transcendent, utterly unknowable God is made possible by the immanent and deifying *energies* of God, through which we enter into communion with the Creator. This distinction between *essence* and *energy* is crucial to Palamas’s theology, which he guards as closely as Thomas protects divine simplicity – and for the same purpose of ensuring absolute transcendence. Finally we come to the last cognate: union. The name itself leads us to suppose that it will be the nearest equivalent to theosis, which Palamas describes as being ‘union and not negation’.<sup>42</sup> This union is not the same as the hypostatic union of Christ at the incarnation, there are no ‘series of hypostatic unions’, but it takes us beyond our own natural abilities enabling us to begin to understand the transcendence of God.<sup>43</sup>

Theosis is made possible by the life of Christ, through his incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection. In bringing suffering into dialogue with this, we can examine how theosis might prove fruitful in approaching the problem of human suffering.

### **The Problem of Suffering**

Suffering is part of the reality of human life. Yet love and redemption are also part of human existence, expressed most perfectly in the person of Jesus Christ. If God is generous and merciful, why do humans suffer? While this article accepts the position that suffering occurs as a result of the Fall, it questions a common pre-Holocaust view of suffering as God’s punishment for wrong-doing, or as a divine ‘wake-up call’. Instead, it asserts the creative possibilities of suffering. A vital part of the experience of suffering is surrender, but this is explored as a life-giving possibility rather than a necessary capitulation to a wrathful Creator.

On the classical account God is goodness itself and the source of all goodness. Aquinas states that God is ‘not just supremely good within a particular genus or order of reality; he is the absolutely supreme good’.<sup>44</sup> As such, God is also the source of all good: ‘One may therefore call things good and existent by reference to this first thing, existent and good by nature, inasmuch as they somehow participate and

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40 Williams, *Ground of Union*, 119.

41 *Ibid.*, 122.

42 Palamas, *Triads*, 64.

43 Williams, *Ground of Union*, 125.

44 *ST Ia.* 6, ii, resp. (Blackfriars translation).

resemble it ... And in this sense all things are said to be good by divine goodness, which is the pattern, source and goal of all goodness'.<sup>45</sup> Or as Anselm asserts in chapter one of the *Monologion*, speaking of the supreme goodness of God, 'It therefore follows that all the other good things are good through something other than what they themselves are, while this thing alone is good through itself'.<sup>46</sup> Writing from a philosophical perspective, Boethius saw God as 'totally full of the highest and perfect good'.<sup>47</sup> Therefore if God is *good*, how can he allow suffering?

C. S. Lewis observes there is no necessary correlation between what humans call good and that which God sees as good. Nonetheless, we must understand *something* by the concept of goodness in God. This echo of the divine goodness may have its source in 'our existing moral judgement', in acts of kindness, or a desire to make others happy.<sup>48</sup> But on Lewis's account God's goodness goes beyond this: 'intimacy between God and even the meanest creature is closer than any creature can attain with one another'.<sup>49</sup> In this relationship, humans 'may become objects in which the Divine love may rest "well pleased"'.<sup>50</sup> By the free gift of his love humans are drawn into 'a reflection of the Divine life' and 'become like God'.<sup>51</sup>

Before the Fall, humankind lived in the divine life in 'obedient love and ecstatic adoration' as 'the prototype of Christ'.<sup>52</sup> Yet this intimate relationship was fractured at the Fall, when humankind chose self over a life in God's self.<sup>53</sup> By exerting human will over and against the will of God, humankind imperfectly re-created its own identity. In this assertion of free will there is no longer any surrender to the will of God; there is no longer union with God. By its nature this act must end in pain and anguish, for in granting free will to humankind God also 'allows' the laws of Nature. Free will gives humans recognition of God through self-knowledge; it also allows recognition of the other and the possibility of society. However, human life in society cannot replicate the joy of life in union with God. Instead it is prone to discord and disharmony because society can never be a substitute for the unique intimacy humans enjoyed in relationship with God before the Fall. For as much as humans try to recreate the world in their own image, they are striving towards the joy of a union which forever eludes them.

The misuse of free will at the Fall condemned humankind to battle for a freedom that is illusory; it is in surrender that we truly achieve happiness. This is expressed in the perfect love of the Trinity in which persons submit to each other in love. On Lewis and Weil's pre-Holocaust account humans will not surrender while all is well; they can only see beyond their own desires and will in pain and suffering. Pain, in

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45 *ST Ia*. 6, iv, resp. (Blackfriars translation).

46 Anselm of Canterbury, 'Monologion', in *The Major Works*, ed. by Brian Davies and G. R. Evans, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 1998), 5-81 (p. 12).

47 Boethius, *Consolation of Philosophy*, 58.

48 C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (London: Collins, 1940), 30.

49 *Ibid.*, 33.

50 *Ibid.*, 41.

51 *Ibid.*, 46.

52 *Ibid.*, 74.

53 *Ibid.*, 71.



Lewis's memorable phrase, is God's 'megaphone to rouse a deaf world'.<sup>54</sup> Humans must be roughly shaken by suffering out of a false sense of contentment in order to find that true happiness which is union with God. This must befall even the innocent and destroy their equilibrium, for even the simple happiness of the poor 'stands between them and the recognition of their need'.<sup>55</sup> Pain, therefore, destroys self-reliance and allows humans to know the strength they should have, if they would only hand over their will to God. This is exemplified most clearly by Jesus's abandonment on the cross. For when we are struck by great suffering, which Simone Weil terms 'affliction', we are far from God. We are at the foot of the cross, 'at the greatest possible distance from God'.<sup>56</sup> On this account suffering is inevitable, abhorrent and those in great suffering are almost sub-human. As Weil remarks: 'compassion for the afflicted is "an impossibility", and the afflicted person "will only keep half his soul"'.<sup>57</sup>

Yet this is the same human who is made in the image of God, whose soul has been lovingly fashioned to 'fit a particular swelling in the infinite contours of the Divine substance'.<sup>58</sup> Instead of viewing suffering as God's 'wake-up call', it might be understood as a creative act, one that is pregnant with the potential for transformation. This view does not deny or diminish the reality of pain and fear of suffering, as transformation can involve pain, but it offers a productive and positive image of growth *in* and *toward* our Creator. The transformative power of suffering is seen in the creative act of the incarnation, the illuminating experience of the Cross and the bursting forth from the tomb in the resurrection.

### *The Incarnation*

The purpose of the incarnation is to 'establish full communion between God and humanity, so that in Christ humanity may find adoption and immortality'.<sup>59</sup> By the incarnation humanity is redeemed and 'called to "dwell" in the Trinitarian God'.<sup>60</sup> As Olivier Clément reminds us, 'to be deified is therefore to become someone living with a life stronger than death'.<sup>61</sup> In the incarnation we see the 'restoration of the human form', the benefits of which are seen in all Creation.<sup>62</sup>

The act of creating contains within itself an element of vulnerability for the Creator; by creating free persons there was always a risk that humankind would not 'grow in maturity towards a conscious love' of the Creator.<sup>63</sup> As Clément states: 'God in some

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54 Ibid., 91.

55 Ibid., 95.

56 Simone Weil, 'The Love of God and Affliction', in *Waiting for God*, trans. by Emma Craufurd (New York, NY: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2009), 67-82 (p. 73).

57 Ibid., 69.

58 Lewis, *Pain*, 152.

59 Olivier Clément, *The Roots of Christian Mysticism: Texts from the Patristic Era with Commentary* (London: New City Press, 2003), 37.

60 Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church* (London: Penguin, 1997), 231.

61 Clément, *Christian Mysticism*, 264.

62 David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of The Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans), 325.

63 Olivier Clément, *On Human Being: A Spiritual Anthropology* (London: New City Press, 2000), 37.

manner limits himself, withdraws to give human beings space in which to be free'.<sup>64</sup> In this generous creation humankind is free to love or to withdraw from love. God waits upon his creatures, as 'the beggar of love waiting at the gate of the soul and never daring to force it'.<sup>65</sup> God's patient waiting on his wayward creatures demonstrates the kind of endurance with which humans need to bear suffering. In the incarnation we see patient waiting, vulnerability, become corporeally real. It comes to live among humankind in the physical body of Jesus. For only by this great act of ultimate openness to the horror of suffering can humanity *and* all creation be reconciled to God. The miracles of Jesus echo God's act of creating; they reaffirm the goodness originally bestowed by the Father and restore the world to its beauty. They demonstrate a new relationship, a new way of being human in the world in which 'the infinite distance' between God and his creation 'is shown to be entirely traversed'.<sup>66</sup>

Through Mary's acceptance of the Divine call upon her life God will 're-enter the very heart of his creation and reclaim it from within and, so to speak, recreate it'.<sup>67</sup> By his earthly life, his restoration of all flesh corrupted by the Fall, purification begins. The journey back to union with the Creator is made possible. Inhabiting a human body meant facing temptation and desires common to humanity. Jesus overcame these temptations, but affirmed his humanity through fasting and prayer. Pseudo-Dionysius states that all desires are merely an echo of the great desire to behold the Creator again, the 'hunger for an unending, conceptual and true communion'.<sup>68</sup> Christ is the pattern for humankind in that he faced temptation, overcame it and surrendered his will to the Father. His surrender demonstrated how humans could see God with their 'whole being'.<sup>69</sup> Fully human and fully divine, Christ did not require purification. Yet he willingly underwent baptism as a visible sign of his surrender to God's will. If the pain and suffering humans experience is to be purifying, it must become an act of surrender to God. This surrender is painful and must be practised, as a craftsman is hurt or tired as he learns to practice his craft.<sup>70</sup> Both joy *and* pain are necessary to appreciate the beauty of the world and 'to hear the universe as the vibration of the word of God'.<sup>71</sup> Suffering, then, can be used to 'grow in our knowledge of our human condition before God'.<sup>72</sup>

Since humanity suffers, the seed of suffering lies within Christ and - by virtue of the hypostatic union - also within God. To reject suffering is not only to turn away from the reality of the Cross but also to reject what it is to be human. The very fact of human birth involves pain; this is obviously the case for the mother, but a child's journey and entry into the world is fraught with danger. Born of a woman, Christ

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64 Ibid., 37.

65 Ibid., 37.

66 Hart, *Beauty of The Infinite*, 329.

67 Clément, *On Human Being*, 146.

68 Pseudo-Dionysius, 'The Celestial Hierarchy', in *The Complete Works*, trans. by Colm Luibheid, *Classics of Western Spirituality* (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1987), 143-91 (p. 151).

69 Weil, 'Affliction', 77.

70 Ibid., 78.

71 Ibid., 79.

72 Philip Le Masters, 'The Practice of Medicine as Theosis', *Theology Today*, 61 (2004), 173-86 (p. 176).

experienced the 'first suffering' of the human baby. But the incarnation also speaks of another type of suffering.

God is pure act; he is fully realised and *is*, he does not 'become'.<sup>73</sup> Yet in the incarnation God unites himself to something that *becomes*. When speaking of the crucifixion, Simone Weil describes the great suffering of God because of the 'supreme tearing apart' of God from God, which was 'agony beyond all others'.<sup>74</sup> Yet the *mere fact* of the incarnation, the pouring out of God's self in the hypostatic union, in a *becoming*, opened a distance between the persons of the Trinity, while remaining indivisible. This could be viewed as a type of suffering, involving a rending between God and God. As Teilhard de Chardin observes: 'Everything that *becomes* suffers or sins'.<sup>75</sup> And since God cannot sin, it follows that in the incarnation there is suffering, brought about by the fact of becoming.

### *Crucifixion*

The cross can be viewed from many perspectives. Here it is approached as a creative act, as a template for human relationships, as gift, as an event that conquers death, and as illumination.

The suffering of Jesus on the cross demonstrates the 'luminous corporeity' of the divine willingness to inhabit our earthly flesh with all its limitations.<sup>76</sup> As humans have suffered, so the Son of God suffers too, not only to redeem humanity and make atonement for sin, but as a demonstration of his full humanity. As MacKinnon states, 'in the worst that can befall his creatures, the creative Word keeps company with those whom he has called his own'.<sup>77</sup> There is a danger in rushing past the suffering of the cross in the desire for the resurrection, with its great story of hope. Yet it is here in sweat and blood that suffering is a truly *creative* act. The cross is the example of supreme self-sacrifice and a guide through the wilderness of pain because it is nothing less than 'the centre on which all earthly sufferings *converge* and in which they are *assuaged*'.<sup>78</sup> In MacKinnon's words, it is in the Christ who suffers that we find the God 'in whom all things consist [...] and by whom they will find their consummation'.<sup>79</sup>

The cross itself is a tree that was once a living organism with potential for life and growth, 'an immortal plant' stretching from earth to heaven.<sup>80</sup> Weil imagines a seed that is planted by God in the human heart, which grows into a familiar cruciform

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73 *ST Ia.* 87, i, resp.: 'Therefore it is that the Essence of God, the pure and perfect act, is simply and perfectly in itself intelligible; and hence God by His own Essence knows Himself, and all other things also' (Dominican translation).

74 Weil, 'Affliction', 72.

75 Teilhard de Chardin, *On Suffering*, 2.

76 Clément, *On Human Being*, 114.

77 Donald MacKinnon, 'Order and Evil in the Gospel', in *Borderlands of Theology and Other Essays* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011), 90-96 (p. 92).

78 Teilhard de Chardin, *On Suffering*, 3.

79 MacKinnon, 'Order and Evil', 94.

80 Clément, *On Human Being*, 114.

shape.<sup>81</sup> Slowly, the human begins to recognise it as the cross, as the ultimate symbol of suffering. Weil likens the experience of deep suffering - termed affliction - to a nail being hammered through the cross of existence into the human soul.<sup>82</sup> Teilhard de Chardin, however, takes the image of a seed in a more life-giving and creative direction. His challenge is to embrace suffering lovingly 'with that *active* sleep of confidence which is that of the seed in the fields in winter'.<sup>83</sup> In suffering the afflicted can feel far from God, but in reality this is often the time of greatest closeness, because suffering allows humans to 'cross the totality of space and time and come into the very presence of God'.<sup>84</sup> For this reason it can be seen to be a creative act, enabling relationship between the Creator and the created. It might also be seen as a *beautiful* act because Christian thought sees beauty in 'the entire scope of the divine life, even as it proceeds "downwards" into utter inanition: God ventures even into the godless, and still his beauty is there, still offered as gift, delight and love'.<sup>85</sup>

The cross is the template for right relationships between humans; the self-giving of Jesus is the example for life in community with others. Only by following this example can humans learn to love others 'more than their own nature, more than their own life'.<sup>86</sup> Christ's suffering is 'an anguish that reflects every anguish ever experienced, a "*cosmic*" suffering'.<sup>87</sup> As such it can bind humans to each other and to him; it gives the gift of empathy, 'an increasing emotional sensitivity to the joys and sorrows of others; a clearness of sight that gives new strength and simplicity in all that is real, seen in the omnipresence of God'.<sup>88</sup> In this relational approach to suffering the one who suffers is Christ-like, to be cared for and cherished. To spend time with those who suffer is to be given the great privilege of watching for an hour in Gethsemane to 'remain here and stay awake with me' (Matt. 26.38).

The cross is gift. It returns to the Father what is his, overturning the norms and power structures of society by an extravagant self-giving that does not end with the cross but carries on even *after* death. The gift of life given at birth belongs to God and he 'holds and values the whole of each life', *including* the diminishment of the end and any suffering that must be endured.<sup>89</sup> The natural diminishment of the human body in the ageing process, which is often accompanied by great suffering, involves a 'handing back our capacities to God, the calling in of a loan'.<sup>90</sup> As frightening and difficult as diminishment might be, it is in the cross that we find 'infinite refuge from all violence and suffering'.<sup>91</sup>

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81 Weil, 'Affliction', 80.

82 Ibid., 80.

83 Teilhard de Chardin, *On Suffering*, 112.

84 Weil, 'Affliction', 81.

85 Hart, *Beauty of the Infinite*, 323.

86 Clément, *On Human Being*, 39.

87 Teilhard de Chardin, *On Suffering*, 3.

88 Ibid., 119.

89 John Habgood, *Being a Person: Where Faith and Science Meet* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1998), 246.

90 Ibid., 237.

91 Hart, *Beauty of The Infinite*, 355.

The cross conquers death. Jesus was willing to bear the sins of humankind and though sinless himself, to descend to the dead. His triumph means there is freedom from suffering and death, for in being consubstantial with the Father and the Holy Spirit, he 'became consubstantial with us even in hell'.<sup>92</sup> Therefore death takes on a different meaning and is imbued with a 'mysterious and special fruitfulness'.<sup>93</sup> Because death 'surrenders us totally to God; it makes us enter into him; we must, in return, surrender ourselves to death with absolute love and self-abandonment'.<sup>94</sup> Surrendering with love changes the very nature of death. Christ gave death 'the value of a metamorphosis – through which the world, with him, entered into God'.<sup>95</sup> Therefore death no longer has a different meaning and simply cannot have the same hold over human life. In fact, death can now be put to 'good use, and in an unexpected direction, by the process of creative union'.<sup>96</sup>

The cross is illumination. When a human being experiences deep anguish and suffering all defences are stripped away and the sufferer, like Weil's butterfly, is pinned with the nail of affliction. Suffering clouds rational thought, but the mind can take on a luminous clarity providing an opportunity for God to be heard above the din of human life. But this is not a 'Divine megaphone' to catch the human being's wayward attention. Instead, like Pseudo-Dionysus's penitent, the suffering person, if willing, is cleansed of their impurities and an emotional space is created where illumination becomes possible. In an inexorable orienting towards the beauty and love of God, the one who suffers is prepared 'naked and barefoot', ready to receive the divine light.<sup>97</sup> This stripping away can be transformative; without the creative act of the cross, there is no ascent to union. Purified by the incarnation, humans are illuminated by the desolation of the Cross, which can provide the clarity of mind that leads to the resurrection and theosis.

### *Resurrection*

In the resurrection, Christ reconstitutes the human body through the transformation wrought by his own post-resurrection body: 'His risen body is not a dematerialised ghost; it is dense with all the flesh of the earth, and all the flesh of the earth is transfigured by it'.<sup>98</sup> This act recreates the whole physical world for his own. Christ's risen body bears the marks of his passion, transformed into something glorious; because of which all human suffering has the potential for glory. In the resurrection humankind is perfected, for we see 'our nature in Christ's resurrection body, a body entirely divinised and so entirely without pain'.<sup>99</sup>

Participation in the life of the risen Christ is an acknowledgement that suffering does not have ultimate power over human life. The hope at the heart of the resurrection is

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92 Clément, *On Human Being*, 147.

93 Teilhard de Chardin, *On Suffering*, 7.

94 *Ibid.*, 9.

95 *Ibid.*, 44.

96 *Ibid.*, 43.

97 Pseudo-Dionysus, 'Celestial Hierarchy', 206.

98 Clément, *On Human Being*, 119.

99 Hart, *Beauty of The Infinite*, 359.

the hope of theosis; that suffering is not meaningless, that it can be transformative, creative: echoing a 'beauty that is inextinguishable'.<sup>100</sup> All human experiences of suffering in this life may be transformed by the most creative and hopeful life story of all, in which Christ 'initiates a real counter-history, a new practice and form of life'.<sup>101</sup> In the story of incarnation, cross and resurrection God 'is displayed before the eyes of the world', where Christ has opened up a new way of being human through which we return to the Father.<sup>102</sup> This is open to humankind, perhaps most poignantly and perfectly, in the pain and anguish of suffering.

In the post-resurrection appearances, the gift of incarnation offered by Christ to the Father on the Cross is returned by the Father to the world *in the flesh*. In breaking bread, in fellowship, Christ is physically present, not 'transformed by the cross into a symbol of "religious truth", his form does not melt into comfortable abstraction'.<sup>103</sup> His physical presence shocks his disciples, intrudes into the rhythm of grief and mourning, and demands attention. It delivers hope and joy and, in due course, new life through the Spirit. In an echo of Christ's invitation to Thomas the apostle, to place his hand in his side, Teilhard de Chardin observes that in human suffering God is 'painfully parting the fibres' of his being, in order to 'penetrate to the very marrow' of his substance so that we might be borne away within God's self.<sup>104</sup>

In union with God is found the culmination of the human being as a creature. Anyone who walks the path of suffering does not walk alone, they walk in the company of the one who has walked the path before, for 'when he dwells among the suffering, God is most truly known as the God he is'.<sup>105</sup> The hope of the resurrection kindles in human beings the great *potentiality* of suffering, it offers a choice whereby humans can co-operate with, be 'co-workers' with Christ (1 Cor. 3.9). Teilhard de Chardin identifies this potential; if all those who suffer joined their suffering together; 'the world's pain might become a great and unique act of consciousness, elevation and union'.<sup>106</sup> As creatures with free will, humans have the choice to respond to suffering with negativity and fear, or surrender and hope. Echoing the Trinity, humans can emulate the great circle of love and within it, together, find the transformative possibilities of suffering.

## Conclusion

Suffering is a fact of life and a daily reality for many. It is actively avoided by the majority of humankind and is usually seen as a negative and destructive force. Modern medicine strives to alleviate all pain, if practicable, and to ensure that the end of human life is as free of suffering as possible.

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100 Ibid., 326.

101 Ibid., 326.

102 Ibid., 327.

103 Ibid., 333.

104 Teilhard de Chardin, *On Suffering*, 84.

105 Hart, *Beauty of The Infinite*, 338.

106 Teilhard de Chardin, *On Suffering*, 103.

To view suffering through the doctrine of theosis requires a shift in perspective. While suffering is still understood as a painful and potentially destructive experience, something to be avoided if possible, it is also seen as possessing a potential for transformation and good. The transformation occurs in the new way of being human opened up by the suffering of Jesus. The good is located in the hope of union with God held out to all humans in the resurrection. But to achieve this union purification and illumination are required.

Surrender to the will of God is central to the attainment of purification and illumination. This intimate surrendering of the self 'as if to a great loving energy' is the start of the path to union with God.<sup>107</sup> Through surrender, humans come to rely on God's strength, not on their own resources, in order to transform suffering and find the beauty within it. With this change in approach, the healing process is seen as including 'every dimension of the human being: body, soul and spirit'.<sup>108</sup> In modern medical care these aspects of the human identity are often detached from one another. Treatment is applied only to the physical body without attention to the way that a person's suffering is experienced by their soul and spirit. However, as Le Masters comments, 'Medical care should be used to serve our growth in holiness, to provide the kind of bodily care that helps us fallen creatures find holistic, eschatological healing in God'.<sup>109</sup>

Attention to the spiritual aspects of suffering puts humans on the path of purification and illumination. In the frailty of existence, humans face the only one who can know their fear and pain as they do; the incarnate God who willingly chose to walk the journey of suffering while on earth. Through the incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, humans are given a model to approach suffering and to live in healthy and life-sustaining community. When suffering is gathered into the life of the Trinity, which is the prototype for all loving relationships, it is transformed into a life-giving force which strengthens and sustains through shared experience, empathy, and greater understanding of others. God stands with those who suffer and some part of them 'remains secure, held in the mind of God'.<sup>110</sup> To witness the luminous beauty present even in the darkest and most difficult suffering is to see that when humans suffer they are not alone.

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107 Teilhard de Chardin, *On Suffering*, 112.

108 Le Masters, 'Theosis', 173.

109 Ibid., 174.

110 Habgood, *Being a Person*, 228.

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