

What ascetics have taught me about divine light

In the eastern tradition, theosis—union with God—is the goal of the Christian life.

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August 6 is the Feast of the Transfiguration—it falls on a Sunday this year. When it comes to comparing [Moses' shining face](#) and [Jesus' transfigured appearance](#), I have always assumed that Moses' glow was a reflection of the light he encountered while speaking with God and that Jesus' light was the divinity shining from within. This summer, however, I took a class on early Christian monasticism and learned about theosis. Now I am beginning to wonder whether there is another angle of this comparison worth considering.

Theosis, or deification, is the process by which an individual attains union with God. By setting aside the aspects of this life that distract us from God through ascetic practices like repeated fasting, austere living, and intense prayer, one becomes more and more like God. As the divine displaces more and more of the human, one becomes more and more fully united with God. In the end, which is to say at the end of this life and at the end of all time, we are totally united with God. But we have an opportunity to begin to experience this resurrected body while still in this life, which admittedly makes this concept totally fascinating and totally strange.

This isn't very western and certainly isn't Protestant, but in the eastern tradition, theosis has always been (and still very much is) the goal of the Christian life. Salvation isn't described as a sin-debt being paid or a wrathful God being propitiated but as God in Jesus the God-Man, the Incarnate One, taking on our human nature so that our human nature might be reunited with the divine through death and resurrection. That death and rebirth do not only happen when this mortal life is over but also as we die with Christ in our baptism and continue to die daily to all that separates us from God. I know: it's strange and sounds dangerous. I'm not

attempting a full explanation here because I'm not really an expert on theosis. But I can tell that it's cool, and I know that it's a real thing, and I know enough to begin to think about Moses and Jesus in a new way.

The ascetics we studied in class this summer had bizarre traditions. They went to extremes of asceticism—not eating more than a morsel of bread every day or two, sleeping less than an hour every day, battling demons who sought to prevent this reunion with God. Prayer was an important part of the tradition, and some of them emphasized an approach to prayer known as *apatheia*, which has its root in *apathy* and means something like "a state of unaffectedness." When the prayerful person could reach that state of no longer being tied to the concerns of the world—the ups and downs of life—that person opened up the possibility of union with God. As the union increased, when all sight of the world disappeared, the person may see a divine light and even begin to glow with a sapphire-blue light that was a sign of theosis. This is thought to be the color of God's presence and is based on Exodus 24:10-11, which describes what Moses and a few others saw when they approached God: "...and they saw the God of Israel. Under his feet there was something like a pavement of sapphire stone, like the very heaven for clearness." One does not see God but sees God's throne, which apparently glows with a sapphire-blue clear light. When one is truly in God's presence, one sees that light.

Back to Moses and Jesus. Moses' face, we are told, shone like the sun because he had been talking with God. Maybe that glow wasn't totally external. Maybe Moses, entering God's presence as one might enter God's presence through transcendent prayer, began to shine with the light of God as he was united with God. Granted, the whole Incarnation not having happened yet thing makes this decidedly problematic, but isn't it worth noting that Moses wasn't your average person? Moses spoke with God in a way no one else did. That time with God was surely transformative, and that Moses was chosen, not unlike Mary, surely indicates a certain potential for transformation. During his time on the mountain, Moses neither ate nor drank for 40 days at a time. That sounds a lot like leaving behind the concerns of this world in an *apatheia* kind of way. Maybe Moses' shining face wasn't just an afterglow. Maybe it was a glimpse of his future resurrected body—a deified state of existence.

Jesus, of course, always had that full divinity within him. This Transfiguration moment is not simply the God-light unveiled. The divinity and humanity can't be separated like that. I wonder whether the focus should be on Peter, James, and John, who were able to see that shining light because they had come away, because they

had stayed awake, because they had left behind the concerns of this world. Maybe Jesus was always shining like that but only visible to those who emptied themselves of the disquietude of this world (see [Sunday's collect](#) from the Book of Common Prayer).

As you can tell, I don't really know what I'm talking about. I'm not preaching on theosis this Sunday. But I am asking myself (and perhaps my congregation) what it takes to see Jesus for who he really is. Beholding Jesus as the true God-Man is not an operation of the intellect. It is a process that requires our whole selves—mind, heart, soul, body. When we come to church, are we looking for a wise teacher or for God himself? Whether we encounter the living God in the person of Jesus the Christ may depend on whether we bring our whole selves and lives to worship.

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