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Worship, veneration, and idolatry: observations from C. S. Lewis

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Abstract: **What does it mean to love God 'more' than people? This article engages the difficulty of defining worship, veneration, and idolatry, by looking at C. S. Lewis's observations on the subject. Lewis offers helpful nudges towards more than a merely conceptual distinction, but he does not consistently apply his love principles to cover human love for the saints (Mary in particular). The article concludes with eight follow-up questions that benefit philosophers and theologians alike as they seek to formulate more focused definitions of worship, veneration, and idolatry.**

If there is one kind of devotion to created beings which is pleasing and another which is displeasing to God, when is the Church, as a Church, going to instruct us in the distinction?
C. S. Lewis, *Church Times*, 15 July 1949

Introduction: a substantial sleuth

It is easy to make a conceptual distinction between 'worship' as love that is due to God only, and 'veneration' as love that is due to people. What is much more difficult is to substantiate a difference in the two acts themselves, apart from their different objects. What precisely is it that in love we ought to give or perform to God alone, and the giving or performing of which to creatures constitutes 'idolatry'?

The question is deceptively simple. The first obvious mark of its true complexity is the impossibility of formulating it without smuggling in assumptions. The two assumptions implicit in *my* formulation of the problem above are that worship and veneration are (1) something that can be given or performed and (2) essentially kinds of love. Indeed, one of the most influential approaches to this question – 'perhaps the most influential' (Adams (2002), 186) – is Augustine's famous distinction between two forms of love, *frui*-love and *uti*-love.

To speak of the difference between worship and veneration essentially *in terms of love* is certainly not biblically unwarranted. When asked which of the commandments is greatest, Jesus begins by quoting the *Shema*: 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind' (Deut. 6:4–5 [NRSV]). This, he says, 'is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these commandments hang all the law and the prophets" ' (Matt. 22:36–40).

The one point of substantial overlap between these two loves 'on which virtually everyone formally agrees' (Outka (1972), 4)[1] is that the first includes the second. Whatever else loving God with 'all' one's heart, soul, and mind may mean, 'one criterion is neighbor-love itself' (*ibid.*, 44). The question then becomes: Why does neighbour-love not *exhaust* our love for God? Why is love for God not *reducible* to neighbour-love? This is another way of asking our original question. What precisely is the difference between worship and veneration?

In this article, we will interact with the theology of love of C. S. Lewis. He attempts to *go beyond*, however slightly, a merely conceptual formulation of the difference. Lewis's observations are well worth considering. 'As survey after survey since 2000 demonstrates', notes Alister McGrath, Lewis is 'one of the most influential Christian writers of the twentieth century, with continuing relevance for the twenty-first' (McGrath (2014), 176).[2] 'If only because he is so influential', adds Robert MacSwain, we need 'to be familiar with the specific content of his many books in order to know (and if necessary counter or correct) his impact on the masses' (MacSwain & Ward (2010), 3). Even Lewis may have his own blind spots.

My argument will unfold as follows. Looking primarily at Lewis's book *The Four Loves* (1960), which Oliver O'Donovan has called 'one of the most popular contributions' (O'Donovan (2007), v) to modern discussions on love, I will delineate two 'love principles' that are relevant to our topic. Together they will propel us toward *working definitions* of worship and idolatry, which will briefly be tested against scriptural support. Lewis himself, however, applies his two principles inconsistently. Mary, Jesus's mother, turns out to be a stumbling block for him, as revealed by a careful analysis of his letters.

Lastly, after a comment on the important prevailing disagreements between Christian churches on the nature of worship and veneration, I conclude with eight follow-up questions that may help us to sharpen the *focus* of the working definitions. The questions may benefit individual believers who seek to love God and his creatures in everyday encounters, but especially philosophers of religion and theologians entrusted with the often onerous task of ecumenical discussion. Conceptual clarity is the first step in diffusing the still prevailing tension; a shared taxonomy, the *sine qua non* of meaningful dialogue.

Is it possible to love too much?

We begin with another deceptively simple question. Is it possible to love a human being too much? Lewis's answer, in short, is given in *The Four Loves*: 'It is probably impossible to love any human being simply "too much" ' (Lewis (1960a), 139).

This is the first of Lewis's two love principles relevant to our project. In fact, it could arguably be reformulated without the qualification 'probably'. Elsewhere he writes: 'No person, animal, flower, or even pebble, has ever been loved too much – i.e. more than every one of God's works deserves' (Hooper (2006), 782). One searches in vain in the ocean of his works[3] for a single admission of a genuinely 'excessive' love for anything, whether animate or inanimate. Upon closer inspection possible admissions turn out to be examples of *distorted* love, not excessive love. Lewis probably included 'probably' to be on the safe side, then. Mindful of the risk (however improbable) of misrepresenting Lewis, the First Love Principle can be rephrased:

It is impossible to love a human being simply 'too much'.[4]

Why does Lewis believe this? A brief detour may help to understand his position.

The Gospel of Mark records Jesus saying that the risen 'neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven' (Mark 12:25). Many theologians, like Gregory of Nyssa, have concluded from this that celestial inhabitants are neither masculine nor feminine but genderless. According to a rival interpretation, the one Lewis favours, Jesus's words are subtler than this, pointing to 'a more fundamental reality than sex' (Lewis (1953), ch. 16).[5] The risen remain gendered beings, but in heaven sex as lovemaking is superseded. There is no sex in heaven, because the reality that lovemaking symbolizes and is a sweet foretaste of on earth (life with God who is love) is there fully consummated. There is no need for lovemaking, because love has been made.

Accordingly, says Lewis, if we find the idea of a sexless heaven mildly disappointing we are like the little boy who is discouraged to learn that sex does not involve eating chocolate (or not necessarily). The boy has tasted the King of Pleasures; without it, 'sex' sounds like a mortification.[6] What has heavenly lovemaking to do with the question of whether it is possible to love a human being too much? Well, a person who thinks it *is* possible to love 'too much' is, Lewis would probably say, like our little boy. The belief is based on a misconception of the nature of things, in this case, the nature of the virtue of *love*. That Lewis thinks of love primarily as virtue will become apparent.

This is a rather audacious claim. Do we not sometimes go over board (so to speak) in our various loves? Let us look at two possible examples of 'excessive' love found in Lewis's own books.

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The Four Loves is full of psychological, philosophical, and theological ideas about love, but also metaphors, analogies, and practical case studies that flesh out its more abstract arguments.[7] One of the most memorable is the figure of 'Mrs. Fidget' who, Lewis tells us, had recently passed away. 'It is astonishing how her family have brightened up' (Lewis (1960a), 60). Mrs Fidget often said that she lived for her family, and this was regrettably true.

> She did all the washing [though] they frequently begged her not to do it . . . There was always a hot lunch for anyone who was at home . . . They implored her not to provide this . . . She always sat up to 'welcome' you home if you were late out at night . . . you would find the frail, pale, weary face awaiting you, like a silent accusation. Which meant of course that you couldn't with any decency go out very often. (*ibid.*, 61)

The family often protested but to no avail.

> For Mrs. Fidget, as she so often said, would 'work her fingers to the bone' for her family. They couldn't stop her. Nor could they – being decent people – quite sit still and watch her do it. They had to help. Indeed they were always having to help. That is, they did things for her to help her to do things for them which they didn't want done. (*ibid.*, 62)

The vicar said Mrs Fidget is 'now at rest'. 'Let us hope she is', Lewis concludes laconically. 'What's quite certain is that her family are' (*ibid.*).

Mrs Fidget is of course a caricature. Even her name is an obvious pun. A 'fidgety' person is slightly neurotic, over-protective, a busybody. Although Mrs Fidget is a caricature, fidgety misses are not. Undoubtedly she (and any real-life counterpart) loved her family on many levels. But something was amiss. We are tempted to call it 'excess' love. This is not, however, Lewis's verdict.

Lewis speaks of an element of *gift*-love in all human love.[8] Motherly love is largely gift-love. But like all loves, it too is also *need*-love. Paradoxically what it needs is to give. 'But the proper aim of giving is to put the recipient in a state where he no longer needs our gift' (*ibid.*, 62–63). Gift-love 'must work towards its own abdication' (*ibid.*, 63). Mrs Fidget had refused to relinquish her 'need to be needed', and as a result it had become 'ravenous' by 'keeping its objects needy' (*ibid.*). In reality, of course, the problem was not that she loved them too much but that her love was *defective*.[9]

Our second example is from *The Great Divorce*. Although it is not really about divorce or wedlock, it is pregnant with meaning. In this fictional and tragic (but not hopeless) drama, hell is depicted as a rainy, grey, advertisement-infested town.[10] A motley crowd of people hop on a bus to heaven. They are called 'Ghosts' because they lack solidity in contrast to the 'reality' of heaven, but are given new impressive solid bodies as they agree to separate (hence the name of the book) from whatever wicked attachments have thereto prevented them from embracing their whole humanity. Most of these attachments turn out to be various forms of distorted love.

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One of the most tragic Ghosts, Pam, is a broken-hearted mother grieving over the death of her young son. She is embittered and angry with God: 'If He loved me why did He take Michael away from me?' (Lewis (2001), 99). Her brother has been sent from heaven to meet her halfway. He tells her that her motherly instinct ('tigresses share *that*, you know!') had become 'uncontrollable and fierce and monomaniac' (*ibid.*, 100). She snaps back:

> This is all nonsense – cruel and wicked nonsense. What *right* have you to say things like that about Mother-love? It is the highest and holiest feeling in human nature . . . Give me my boy. Do you hear? I don't care about your rules and regulations. I don't believe in a God who keeps mother and son apart. I believe in a God of love . . . I want my boy, and I mean to have him. He is mine, do you understand? Mine, mine, mine, for ever and ever. (*ibid.*, 100–103)

C. S. Lewis has been observing this sad dialogue from a distance. The story turns out to be his dream in the end. George MacDonald, one of Lewis's spiritual mentors, is also present. He helps the confused Lewis by diagnosing her predicament: 'What she calls her love for her son has turned into a poor, prickly, astringent sort of thing' (*ibid.* 104).

Soon afterwards a male Ghost is liberated from the tyranny of lust, symbolized by a little red lizard slithering on his shoulder. After an Angel kills it, the lizard morphs into a spectacular stallion. Lewis is again confused. 'But am I to tell them at home that this man's sensuality proved less of an obstacle than that poor woman's love for her son? For that was, at any rate, an excess of *love*' (*ibid.*, 114). 'Ye'll tell them no such thing', MacDonald says sternly. 'Excess of love, did ye say? There was no excess, there was defect. She loved her son too little, not too much. If she had loved him more there'd be no difficulty' (*ibid.*).

MacDonald's corrective carries over to the second love principle to which we now turn. In order to assess it properly, we must begin by looking at Lewis's understanding of the nature of virtue. For love is not the only virtue beset by vicious misunderstanding.

What is the solution to disordered love?

'Give a good quality a name and that name will soon be the name of a defect', Lewis wrote in *Studies in Words* (Lewis (2008), 173). '[T]he unconscious linguistic process is continually degrading good words and blunting useful distinctions. *Absit omen*!' (Hooper (2006), 980). In some quarters this has arguably happened to the word *virtue* itself. A 'virtuous' person is a softy, a weakling, a pushover. Lewis learned his virtue ethics from Aristotle directly: 'Aquinas and I were, in fact, in the same school – I don't say the same class!' (*ibid.*). He knows that *aretē* means exactly the opposite: 'strength' and 'power' (the old English word *manly* was often used). Virtues are habitually trained character traits or dispositions that enhance our capacity for good action.[11]

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Following Aristotle, virtues are also sometimes called 'the golden mean' between two opposite extremes: 'vices of defect' and 'vices of excess'. But since the doctrine of virtue as 'a mean' invites the misconception (which Lewis rejects) of virtue somehow being average, mediocre, or lukewarm ('neither too hot nor too cold'), perhaps it would be better to use a mountain analogy and to think of virtue not as the mean but as the 'pinnacle' of human potential, and of the corresponding vices as murky 'valleys' or 'pits'.[12] This analogy also has its weakness. Busting one misconception, so far as Lewis is concerned, it inflates another: that one could somehow go 'too far' in virtue and 'fall off' the pinnacle down to the valley of the so-called 'vices of excess'. In reality these vices too are *defective*. To be rash is not literally to be too courageous but another way of being defectively courageous. Many goods can be consumed or owned in excess, like sherry or shoes, but it is difficult to see how a good human trait (virtue as defined above) could be in excess.[13]

G. K. Chesterton, another of Lewis's literary mentors, says that problems arise when one virtue becomes *dominant*. In his idiosyncratic style he writes in *Orthodoxy*:

> The modern world is full of old Christian virtues gone mad. The virtues have become mad because they have been isolated from another and wandering alone. Thus some scientists care for truth; and their truth is pitiless. Thus some humanitarians only care for pity; and their pity (I am sorry to say) is often untruthful. (Chesterton (1909), 53)

The backcloth here is the old doctrine of 'the unity of virtue'.[14] Virtues need one another in order to remain themselves. It is difficult to persevere in love without justice, in justice without courage, and so on.

In *The Allegory of Love*, Lewis writes that 'the virtues of a good lover were indistinguishable from those of a good man' (Lewis (1976), 199). This is his most succinct definition of a good lover = a good person.[15] In what was possibly the last essay he wrote, he elaborates: 'When two people achieve lasting happiness, this is not solely because they are great [sexual] lovers but because they are also – I must put this crudely – good people; controlled, loyal, fair-minded, mutually adaptable people' (Walmsley (2000), 391).[16] Notice the breakdown of character into a list (unity) of virtues: self-control, loyalty, fair-mindedness, adaptability, and so on. A good lover displays these qualities in abundance.

But to speak of a virtue's 'dominance' can also be a bit misleading. Certainly the passage from *Orthodoxy* does not support the idea of 'excessive' virtue. In one of Chesterton's poems, God says to a man in love,

> Thou hast begun to love one of my works
> Almost enough.[17]

And so, even when presenting Chesterton's view it would be truer to speak not of one virtue's dominance but of *other virtues' negligence*. A dominant virtue looks swollen only among shrivelled ones.

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What is the solution to this imbalance? We can imagine a ladder with one stile (or stringer) shorter at the bottom than the other, making the structure crooked and unstable. To balance it, one could of course cut off a piece of the longer stile. But by *extending* the shorter one the ladder would reach higher. If I love my children at the expense of loving my spouse, the solution is not to love my children less but to love my spouse more.

Similarly, Lewis writes in *The Four Loves*, we may love a person 'too much *in proportion to* our love for God; but it is the smallness of our love for God, not the greatness of our love for the man, that constitutes the inordinacy' (Lewis (1960a), 139–140). When we find ourselves loving people more than we do God, the solution is not to love people less. 'God wants us to love Him *more*, not to love creatures (even animals) *less*' (Hooper (2006), 782). This, then, is the Second Love Principle:

> *The solution to disordered love is always 'more' love, never less love.*

Notice two important interim implications that follow thus far. First, whatever *idolatry* means, the one thing it *cannot* mean is 'to love a creature too much'. Why not? Because it is impossible to love too much in the first place. The principle does not reveal the right answer to our substantial sleuth outlined in the beginning of this article, but it does eliminate one false answer: idolatry is *not* 'excessive veneration'. Second, the *solution* to the problem of idolatry, or what we misleadingly label 'excessive veneration' as a form of disordered love, is always more love, never less love. 'To love at all is to be vulnerable' (Lewis (1960a), 139), but we cannot escape this or any other danger by ceasing to love.

Worship as obedient love

Vulnerability belongs to the proper nature of love, but inordinance – the disorder of love – does not, and 'all natural loves can be inordinate' (*ibid.*). To speak of *dis*order presupposes a right order. What is it? Does Lewis subscribe to an Augustinian 'order of loves'? What does 'inordinate' mean?

We are now in a position to return to the original context from which we extracted the two love principles, and to see how together they point towards working definitions of both worship and idolatry.

> *Inordinate* does not mean 'insufficiently cautious'. Nor does it mean 'too big'. It is not a quantitative term. It is probably impossible to love any human being simply 'too much'. We may love him too much *in proportion to* our love for God; but it is the smallness of our love for God, not the greatness of our love for the man, that constitutes the inordinacy . . . But the question whether we are loving God or the earthly Beloved 'more' is not, so far as concerns our Christian duty, a question about the comparative intensity of two feelings. The real question is, which (when the alternative comes) do you serve, or choose, or put first? To which claim does your will, in the last resort, yield? (*ibid.*, 139–140)

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For Lewis, the right order of loves does not depend on quantifiable ingredients, like intensities of feelings. If Lewis here subscribes to any 'order of love', it is primarily in terms of loyalty. *A right order of loves is a right order of loyalties*. 'Inordinate' in this scheme means misplaced ultimate loyalty. Whether we are loving God 'more' – in other words, whether we love God with our 'all' (*Shema*) – does not turn on feelings because feelings are largely out of our control. Such cannot be our 'Christian duty'. The invitation to love God 'more' (with our 'all') presupposes something that is in our control. And this, according to Lewis, is our wilful obedience.

For him, love is primarily a relational act of the will for the good of the beloved. The crucial ingredient that prevents our earthly loves from degenerating into idolatry, and that helps us – or makes it even possible – to love God 'more', is obedience to him. Fulfilling our Christian duty to love God 'more' depends on remaining ultimately loyal to him, consistently aligning our will with his. But loving God 'more' is precisely to worship him in the technical sense signalled above. What ought to be given to God alone is, in this reading, *our ultimate obedience*. This, then, is the working definition of worship that surfaces from the inner twirls of Lewis's theology of love. Worship is *obedient love* or *loving obedience* to God and his good will. It follows that idolatry is a kind of *disobedient love*; a love for a created being that involves disobedience to God.[18]

Obedience and love, as Alan Jacobs has noted, are 'deeply Lewisian themes' (Jacobs (2010), 277).[19] When they appear in tandem in his writings, it seems to me, they usually denote *a proper creaturely attitude before the Creator*. For example, in *The Problem of Pain* Lewis uses precisely the term 'obedient love' (Lewis (1998), 60) to describe the unspoilt disposition of the Paradisal man towards God.[20] Our inability to live perfectly up to the ideal has left the ideal itself unscathed: the call to such obedient love is continually renewed. Lewis uses an analogy between a father and a son to describe this ongoing relation to God: 'in this symbol, [love] means essentially authoritative love on one side, and obedient love on the other' (*ibid.*, 30). 'The kind and degree of obedience which a creature owes to its Creator is *unique* because the relation between creature and Creator is unique' (*ibid.*, 93, my emphasis). Sometimes the key terms are used interchangeably, or for emphasis: 'He demands our worship, our obedience, our prostration' (*ibid.*, 37).

It is important not to gloss over the second ingredient of worship as 'obedient *love*'. Worship is essentially love, though ultimate obedience is necessary to set it apart 'in kind and degree' from other loves. The obedience in worship is not surly nor is the love static. Obedience is, or will become, sweet and hardly recognizable from pleasure: hence Lewis speaks of 'delighted and delighting obedience' (*ibid.*, 72) and of 'obedient love and ecstatic adoration' (*ibid.*, 60). Why does this happen? In his sermon 'The weight of glory', he explains that 'longing transforms obedience'. Our ability to desire and enjoy God can grow, not overnight, but

'as gradually as a tide lifts a grounded ship', and we find 'the first reward of obedience in our power to desire the ultimate reward' (Walmsley (2000), 97). The first steps of obedience will transpose into steps of increasing longing and joy. Worship as love for God can 'grow' in this way. This is why in *Mere Christianity* he says that we 'cannot learn to love God except by learning to obey him' (Lewis (1952), ch. 3).

The Four Loves ends with a somewhat coy and dizzying discussion of what Lewis calls 'the true centre of all human and angelic life' (Lewis (1960a), 159). This is the full blossom of our earthly approach to God in love, 'the Appreciative love of Him, the gift of adoration' (*ibid.*, 147). 'He awakes in us, towards Himself, a supernatural Appreciative Love. This is of all gifts the most to be desired' (*ibid.*, 159). Donald Bloesch believes 'Lewis sees the appreciative-love of God as the highest mode of charity [*agape*], since this is equivalent to adoration and worship' (Bloesch (1960), 1470). This is perceptive but not precise. Lewis himself never calls it 'worship'. Nor does he use 'adoration' in the technical sense of what *we* ought to give or perform to God alone. Instead he speaks of adoration as a 'gift'. This is not something we give to God but what *he* gives to us. It is a taste of the 'final reward' of worship. Lewis does not know ('God knows, not I') whether he has 'ever tasted this love. Perhaps I have only imagined the tasting' (Lewis (1960a), 159).

It is not difficult to see in Scripture the precursor for the idea of worship as obedient love. It seems to have the weight of both the Old and the New Testaments behind it. Brian Rosner has grouped biblical depictions of idolatry into three models: idolatry as adultery, idolatry as self-salvation, and idolatry as spiritual treason (Rosner (2007), esp. 43–47, 159–164).[21] We could spell out the common denominator behind all three in terms of disobedience or disloyalty. In addition to the *Shema*, an obvious source in the Old Testament would be the first two commandments:

> I am the LORD your God . . . you shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol . . . You shall not bow down to them or [serve] them; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God . . . showing my steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments. (Exodus 20:2–6)

Love for God here manifests itself as obedience. You shall not have, shall not make, shall not bow down. Shall not serve. Love me and keep my commandments. The expression of love for God in the Old Testament is a matter of 'obedience to God's commandments, serving God, showing reverence to God, and being loyal to God alone' (Doob Sakenfeld (1992), 376).[22]

In the New Testament, the organic bond between love and obedience is most unambiguously promulgated in the Gospel of John (esp. chs 14–15). Time and time again Jesus connects the two. He speaks of them in unison practically as two sides of the same coin. 'If you love me, you will keep my commandments' (14:15).

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'They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me' (14:21). 'Those who love me will keep my word . . . Whoever does not love me does not keep my word' (14:23–24). 'This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you . . . You are my friends if you do what I command you' (15:12–14). Obedience is also manifest in Jesus's love for the Father. He says he does what the Father commands him to do 'so that the world may know that I love the Father' (14:31). 'If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love' (14:10).[23]

Understanding God's character and will and obeying his commandments is not always easy. Speaking to his disciples, Jesus said that there would even come the time 'when those who kill you will think that by doing so they are offering worship to God' (16:2). And the reason they do this, he explains, is 'because they have not known the Father or me' (16:3).[24]

Our situation is not, at first sight, alleviated by Jesus's command to 'hate' everyone and everything except him. Lewis also pays attention to these troublesome words: 'Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, even life itself, cannot be my disciple' (Luke 14:26). But how are we to understand the word 'hate'? Lewis rejects the simplistic answer.

> That Love Himself would be commanding what we ordinarily mean by hatred – commanding us to cherish resentment, to gloat over another's misery, to delight in injuring him – is almost a contradiction in terms. I think our Lord, in the sense here intended, 'hated' St. Peter when he said, 'Get thee behind me.' To hate is to reject, to set one's face against, to make no concession to, the Beloved when the Beloved utters, however sweetly and however pitiably, *the suggestions of the Devil* . . . So, in the last resort, we must turn down or disqualify our nearest and dearest when they come between us and our *obedience* to God. (Lewis (1960a), 140–141, my emphasis)

Obedience to God may feel, to our 'disqualified' dearests, like hatred of them. So we are to do everything in our power to avoid hurting them – that is, 'so far as Higher Love permits' (*ibid*., 143). Lewis believes it is not easy to know when a crisis that demands such 'hatred' is required, and that is why we ought 'so *to order our loves* that it is unlikely to arrive at all' (*ibid*., 142, my emphasis). The 'suggestions of the Devil' do not of course mean literal commands but rather all promptings, regardless of origin, that seriously conflict with God's good will. It is obedience to God, to Higher Love, that can ultimately resist this pull of idolatry. This is why Screwtape calls it 'the terrible habit of obedience' (Lewis (1942), letter 27).[25]

Often enough it is not our beloveds who usurp our loyalty to the Lord, but tragically 'love' itself does. *The Four Loves* illustrates how all earthly loves, whether affection or friendship or eros, when detached from the allegiance of agape, may compel the lover to sin. Many of Lewis's other works, too, from his early study *The Allegory of Love* (1936) to his late essay 'We have no "right to happiness" '

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(1963), discuss the mechanics of love that has turned into 'a sort of religion' (Lewis (1960a), 127).

With his don's hat off, Lewis's personal stand against this idolatry of love is uncompromising. 'If "All" – quite seriously all – "for love" is implicit in the Beloved's attitude, his or her love is not worth having. It is not related in the right way to Love Himself' (*ibid.*, 143). In other words, such an attitude or disposition harbours a skewed order of loyalties. God is love, but our love is not God. Our loves lack absolute trustworthiness as a moral compass. Apostle John's maxim 'God is love' is in Lewis's mind counter-balanced or complemented by Denis de Rougemont's maxim 'love ceases to be a demon only when he ceases to be a god' (de Rougemont (1940), 321).[26] Probably to avoid misunderstanding Lewis rephrases it as, love 'begins to be a demon the moment he begins to be a god' (Lewis (1960a), 15). Love is not a demon but it can become one.

Detached from obedience, love may compel us to sin, and the worshipper of love may even feel like a martyr: 'It is for love's sake that I have neglected my parents – left my children – cheated my partner – failed my friend at his greatest need' (*ibid.*, 130). These 'sacrifices' are actually collateral damage of an idolatrous love. They fail to express self-control, loyalty, fair-mindedness, and adaptability. In contemporary parlance, unruly lovers are suicide-bombers masquerading as martyrs. Their actions reveal a disobedience to Love Himself. Loves that are not subordinated risk turning into 'dumb idols, breaking the hearts of the worshippers' (Hooper (2004), 98) and those around them. Adrift from the anchor of obedience, love, in the waves of emotion, is in danger of breaking against the rocks of idolatry.

Aslan's mother: Lewis's blind spot?

What about our love for our beloveds *in heaven*, the cloud of witnesses (gendered or not) that has gone before us? We know that as far as Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox beliefs and practices are concerned, the role of Mary was a personal stumbling block for Lewis. But publicly, in his popular and apologetic works, Lewis tried always to be conciliatory. He rarely, if ever, deliberately imposes his own confessional leanings; rather he discusses what in his view unites all Christians, and avoids what does not – like devotion to the saints.

A rare exception to this taciturnity is a letter written to an American correspondent, Mary Van Deusen, in response to her questions about incense and Hail Marys. The letter was written in 1952 but only came to light in the 1990s. It is worth examining closely because it is rather revealing. After addressing her as 'Mrs. Van Deusen', Lewis tackles her questions directly.

> Incense and Hail Marys are in quite different categories. The one is merely a question of ritual: some find it helpful and others don't, and each must put up with its absence or presence in the church they are attending with cheerful and charitably [*sic*] humility.

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> But Hail Marys raise a *doctrinal* question: whether it is lawful to address devotions to any *creature*, however holy. My own view would be that a *salute* to any saint (or angel) cannot in itself be wrong any more than taking off one's hat to a friend: but that there is always some danger lest such practices start one on the road to a state (sometimes found in R.C.'s [Roman Catholics]) where the B.V.M. [Blessed Virgin Mary] is treated really as a deity and even becomes the centre of religion. I therefore think that such salutes are better avoided. And if the Blessed Virgin is as good as the best mothers I have known, she does not *want* any of the attention which might have gone to her Son diverted to herself. (Hooper (2006), 209–210)

What should we make of Lewis's answer? Some parts of it are not immediately clear. The central question is whether addressing devotions to a creature is lawful. By 'lawful' we must suppose Lewis means 'appropriate' in the sense of 'not idolatrous'. But what does he mean by 'addressing devotions' itself? It seems these include at least *salutations* – like Hail (*Ave*) Marys. Is it lawful to address devotion to a creature? Lewis is not perfectly forthcoming here, but if salutations, which cannot 'in itself be wrong', rank as devotions, then we must conclude (despite the tenor of the letter) that it *is* lawful to address devotions to a creature. Perhaps it is even recommendable to do so, for greeting one's friend is not, after all, against good manners.

'Such practices', however, may lead to treating a creature 'really as a deity' or as 'the centre of religion'. Again, it is not entirely clear what this means. What does 'treating a creature as a deity' look like? It cannot signify addressing devotions to them (like Hail Marys) for otherwise Lewis would end in a tautological circular argument: addressing devotions to a creature is not in itself wrong, but it may lead to addressing devotions to a creature. Whatever the case, such respectful practices carry an inherent and grave risk, the danger of idolatry.

The pastoral advice that Lewis offers is, however, surprising: 'I therefore think that such salutes are better avoided.' This advice or adopted attitude is surprising, even a bit odd, for two reasons. First, it is like telling a boy who is worried about accidentally speaking with his mouth full (of chocolate perhaps) that it would be 'better' for him to avoid speaking altogether, or eating altogether. More importantly, the advice seems to conflict with the overall thrust of Lewis's theology of love. As we have seen, at the centre of his thinking on love are the very two principles that (1) it is impossible to love any human being 'too much', and (2) the solution to disordered love is always more love, never less.

Did Lewis have a 'blind spot' when it comes to applying these two principles to Mary and the saints? I ask this 'with trembling', for he is 'a great saint and a great thinker to whom my own glad debts are incalculable'.[27] What makes Lewis's position even more interesting, almost unique, is that he believed in purgatory[28] and he prayed *for* the dead, even if not *to* them. That is to say that he asked God to bless the dead, but he did not ask the dead to ask God to bless him in turn. Lewis's communi(cati)on with the cloud of witnesses remained unilateral.

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The argument about the 'best mothers' is also far from conclusive. Its purported import is undermined by the deflective use of the word *might*. It is superfluous to say that much (or all) attention 'might' have gone to the son: the relevant question is what *ought* to go to him. Is it inappropriate for a good mother to accept *any* attention whatsoever? We can imagine a man celebrating his graduation. The guest congratulating his *mother* 'for writing such a stupendous thesis' is offering her attention that ought to have gone to her son. But congratulating her 'for raising such a hard-working son' is offering attention that might have gone to her son but which ought to go to her.

Lewis may have had other and better reasons for abstaining from, and advising against, devotion to the saints, but the two reasons he shares here are uncustomarily unpersuasive for a thinker of his calibre.[29] These other reasons would also have to explain and justify the deviation from his love principles. Chad Walsh wrote in his memoir of Lewis that one 'may see certain blind spots in his books' (Walsh (1965), 116). I suggest here that Mary may have been one of them. And it is possibly symptomatic of this that in the seven-volume *Chronicles of Narnia* (1950–1956) the Christ figure, Aslan, has no mother.[30]

An ecumenical challenge

'Thousands of members of the Church of England', wrote Lewis a few months after his letter to Mrs. Van Deusen, 'doubt whether *dulia* is lawful' (24 October 1952).[31] He was addressing the readers of *Church Times* and objecting to a proposal to 'set up a "system" of Anglican canonization'. This was not the first time Lewis had involved himself in a similar debate on the pages of *Church Times*.

In the summer of 1949 Lewis wrote four letters in response to a proposal of introducing devotions to Mary and the saints 'as a possible liturgical variant' in Anglican services. His main concern was that these 'liturgical variants' would be smuggled in before the underlying doctrinal issues were settled. 'Can you blame us [laymen] if the reduction of great doctrinal issues to merely liturgical issues fills us with something like horror?' (20 May 1949).

Interestingly, other readers helped Lewis to make (or remember) two important distinctions. One was a difference between 'invocation' and 'devotion'. Responding to Lewis's mention of 'the Romish invocation of saints and angels' (1 July 1949), which the Reformers had abandoned, one reader pointed out that Anglican services had continued to 'invoke' saints in some sense. Lewis replied:

> Mr Every (quite legitimately) gives the word *invocation* a wider sense than I. The question then becomes how far we can infer propriety of *devotion* from propriety of *invocation*? I accept the authority of the *Benedicite* for the propriety of *invoking* (in Mr Every's sense) saints. But if I thence infer the propriety of *devotion* to saints, will not an argument force me to approve devotion to stars, frosts and whales? (15 July 1949)

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The 'Benedicite', found in the Prayer Book service of Morning Prayer (Walter Hooper reminds us), 'has as its source the Song of the three Holy Children (vv. 35–66) in the Old Testament Apocrypha' (Hooper (2006), 1591 n. 313). This explains the opaque reference to stars, frosts, and whales. 'O ye Stars of Heaven, bless ye the Lord: praise him, and magnify him forever . . . O yet Frost and Cold, bless ye the Lord . . . O yet Whales, and all that move in the waters, bless ye the Lord' (vv. 41–57). The value of Lewis's rhetorical question about whales (whether it is probing or flippant) need not detain us here. What interests us more is the second distinction. He finally arrives at the true heart of the matter. In doing so, he puts his finger on a serious ecumenical challenge:

> I am also quite ready to admit that I overlooked a[nother] distinction . . . But if the issue is so much finer than I thought, this merely redoubles my anxiety . . . If there is one kind of devotion to created beings which is pleasing and another which is displeasing to God, when is the Church, as a Church, going to instruct us in the distinction? (15 July 1949)

Different understandings of worship – or, more regrettably, lack of awareness altogether – has troubled ecumenical dialogue for centuries. To oversimplify blurry party lines, whereas Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox have chided Protestants for their 'defective' love, manifested in the lack of devotion to the saints and Mary in particular, Protestants in turn have rebuked them for their 'excessive' love, manifested *in* the devotion to the saints and Mary in particular. Catholics can of course defend themselves in many ways. The Council of Trent, the Second Vatican Council, and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* all make a distinction between worship and veneration, and caution against inappropriate forms of devotion.[32]

It seems to me, however, that this does not suffice. The distinctions have been conceptual and the cautions generic.[33] We have argued in circles and past each other. Why? Because we lack criteria: a standard against which we could evaluate our own devotional practices, let alone those of our neighbours. It is not enough to define the worship of saints as idolatry, if worship and idolatry themselves remain undefined. Where is the line between the appropriate and the inappropriate, between the pleasing and the displeasing to God? Where are the goalposts, and when is the ball out of bounds? Without criteria, does not devotion to saints run the risk (like unfalsifiable pseudo-theories) of becoming *impervious to criticism*, and not because popular piety is self-corrective but because it is self-justifying.

By the same token, Protestant criticism of the cult of saints remains highly unconstructive without a comprehensive understanding of the central acts (worship, veneration, idolatry) and their decided difference. Uninformed criticism throws the baby out with the baptismal water: it risks hitting, by its reckless aim, also appropriate and pleasing forms of love.

There is also a regrettable tendency in all camps to stretch the meaning of the word 'idolatry' and to (over)use it irresponsibly, often confusing the different

connotations it has as a major category in theological, psychological, and sociological analysis. Idolatry has become a trendy word especially in theological jargon. But if everything is 'idolatrous' nothing is idolatrous, and a useful word is made redundant.

Lewis feared that in the lives of some Christians, Mary might loom unhealthily large. Little could he have guessed that fifty years after his death, in the lives of some Christians, Lewis *himself* might loom unhealthily large. MacSwain is even bolder than McGrath by calling Lewis 'almost certainly the most influential religious author of the twentieth century, in English or any other language' (MacSwain & Ward (2010), 3). Everyone agrees that his popularity transcends denominational borders.[34] He is loved by the masses. Lewis's biographer A. N. Wilson has spoken of 'Lewis idolatry' (Wilson (1990, xvi), and his atheist critic John Beversluis bemoans 'the escalating hero-worship of Lewis (especially in America)' (Beversluis (2007), 10).[35] These men do not mean their accusations of idolatry literally; rather they want to poke holes in the uncritical loyalty of some of Lewis's most devoted readers.

Nonetheless, theists believe that idolatry – whether the object is one's family, child, spouse, the Church, Mary, or Lewis himself – is a reality. The question relates to everybody. It relates fundamentally to Christian unity and disunity. For these reasons, locating the difference between worship and veneration is an important (albeit neglected) endeavour for theological and philosophical inquiry. I have suggested that Lewis's contribution to this enormous and elusive task is, in addition to his two love principles, a reminder of one relevant factor: the role of obedience in the heart of worship.

While this is helpful, it is far from exhaustive. I conclude with eight follow-up questions. They may help us further our understanding of the complexity of the problem, and nudge us toward more focused definitions.

Eight follow-up questions

The first question is the meta-question, which in the following seven is broken down into more manageable portions. This article has wrestled primarily with question 5. There is much work to be done especially for philosophers and theologians, but also for church historians, biblical scholars, liturgical theologians, psychologists of religion, sociologists of religion, and specialists in non-Christian (especially Jewish and Islamic) thought.[36]

1. As technical terms we call 'worship' (*latreia, adoratio*) that which is to be given to God alone, and 'veneration' (*douleia, veneratio*) that which is to be given to people. Do worship and veneration differ as acts in themselves, not only by virtue of their different objects? *What precisely is the act or gift that ought to be performed or offered to God alone, and the performing or offering of which to anything or anyone else*

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would count as idolatry? Or is there 'a single activity, though the objects to which it is directed are different' (Lewis (1961), 1)?[37]

2. *Is the difference between worship and veneration quantitative or qualitative?* Is veneration a mild electric current that, as it strengthens, approaches worship, or is veneration electricity and worship something more like fire?
3. *Is the difference between worship and veneration external or internal?* Is it perceptible to the naked eye, or is it merely a matter of inner disposition and intention? The distinction between *act* and *behaviour* is relevant here. Two acts may fundamentally differ, for example, in the case of a murder versus an accident, though the behaviour is identical: a pull of the trigger in a forest. What are the relevant inner thoughts and feelings, and can they be captured in outward behavioural formulas? Are we able to discriminate decisively between offering worship and offering veneration? Or are we faced with an 'incorrigible inner – outer problem, with an inscrutable "motive" to be forever contrasted with "mere" external acts?' (Outka (1972), 137)[38]
4. *Is the difference between worship and veneration objective or subjective?* Are certain criteria (whether inner movements or outer rituals) timeless and universal, or are they fluid, conventional, susceptible to changes over time and place? Could we, for instance, argue that the Old Testament prohibition of graven images does not apply to our post-New Testament era? If so, has this fact given 'an astonishing fluidity to "idolatry," a category that is supposed to be the firmest and strictest of all' (Harbetal & Margalit (1992), 250)?[39]
5. *What is the relationship between worship and loyalty?* Is obedience to God a necessary condition of true worship? Is disobedience a necessary condition of idolatry (and perhaps also by definition so, for idolatry is commanded against)? What are the relevant *ethical* dimensions?
6. 'The best love . . . is not blind' (Lewis (1960a), 143). Rational love identifies its object with all its strengths and shortcomings. Motherly love exemplifies this. Is idolatrous love, then, a cognitive misidentification of the object by equipping a created being with the characteristics unique to the Creator? Is idolatry a misunderstanding? *Can the difference between worship and veneration be traced back to cognitive factors alone?* No human being knows God perfectly: a deficient theology does not necessarily equal idolatry. How accurate must our perception of God be for our worship to be worship? How deficient must it be for 'worship' to miss its mark?
7. Some Roman Catholic and Orthodox theologians would like to call the special veneration offered to Mary 'hyperveneration' (*huperdouleia*)

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as distinct from 'ordinary' veneration offered to the saints. This is due to Mary's unique role in salvation history as the Mother of Jesus (to whom he showed perfect love[40]) but also due to her unique immaculate conception. These theologians stress that hyperveneration belongs to the (qualitative) category of veneration, not worship. *Does hyperveneration clarify the messy relationship of worship and veneration?* Or does it solidify the confusion further?

8. *Does the difference between worship and veneration hinge on the question of sacrifice?* We make sacrifices on behalf of each other daily. This is not idolatrous but can be heroic. What about ritualistic sacrifice?[41] Liturgical worship (the Mass) touches upon the idea of *forgiveness of sins*. Is the difference between worship and veneration a question of what is sacrificed, why, and to whom?[42]

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Notes

1. The focus of Outka's *Agape: An Ethical Analysis* (1972) is on human relations, but occasionally he discusses our relation to God, the question of worship.
2. For a perceptive discussion of the extent Lewis can be called 'a theologian' see McGrath (2014), 163–183.
3. '[F]orty published books during his lifetime, not to mention numerous articles, poems and countless letters' (Vaus (2004), 231).
4. This can be called the 'strong' version of the First Love Principle. A 'weaker' version would include the original conditional ('probably').
5. The citation is divorced from its original context. For Lewis's views on gender see Loades (2010), 160–173.
6. Lewis (1960b), ch. 16.
7. For a detailed account of the writing and recording of the radio broadcasts on which the book is based, see Hooper (1996), 86–90.
8. This is a conscious rejection of the idea popularized by his contemporary, Anders Nygren, that human love is pure need and derogatively so. See Meilaender (2003), 55–56, 122–123; Lepojärvi (2015, forthcoming).
9. The problem with 'Dr. Quartz', the devoted and respected teacher who cannot stand being disarmed by his brighter students (Lewis (1960a), 64), is essentially the same. For a less destructive example: 'This terrible need to be needed often finds its outlet in pampering an animal' (*ibid.*).
10. For an illuminating study of *The Great Divorce* as tragedy see Ward (2011), 149–166.
11. For a more recent study see Adams (2008), esp. 31–35. Lewis thinks that the apparent 'ease' of the moral life in *Nicomachean Ethics* will surprise readers 'more conscious of a difficulty in being good ... the divided will, the *bellum intestinum*' (Lewis (1976), 59–60).

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12. Some ethicists believe that the doctrine of virtue as a 'mean' may not fully represent Aristotle's own view either. Robert Adams, for example, argues that Aristotle's virtue of contemplation 'does not appear to be a mean, and has no clear human limit' (Adams (2002), 12).
13. Martha Nussbaum speaks of 'the fully human target of complete virtue' (Nussbaum (1990), 378). Robert Adams's problem with the concept of 'complete virtue' is that it signifies a limit (see Adams (2002), 54). Like ideals of deontological perfection, it too lacks 'an important open-endedness' (*ibid*., 55).
14. See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, bk 5; and Adams (2008), 171–175.
15. Lewis is referring to certain medieval poets, but this is undeniably also his own position. As Meilaender writes about Lewis's understanding of love: 'If the lover is not healthy, neither is the love; they are not easily separated' (Meilaender (2003), 175). This is also the central thesis in Erich Fromm's bestseller *The Art of Loving*, which was originally published in 1957. Fromm, a social psychologist and Lewis's contemporary, believed love required developing one's 'total personality', as 'love cannot be attained . . . without true humility, courage, faith and discipline' (Fromm (1995), vii).
16. The word 'lover' must be understood as '*sexual* lover'. The essay in question, 'We have no "right to happiness" ', critiques ' "a right to (sexual) happiness" which supersedes all the ordinary rules of behaviour' (Walmsley (2000), 391).
17. Chesterton (1914), 91. Love's object in this poem ('Femina contra mundum') is opaque, but the surrounding poems are mostly about love for a woman. I thank David Baird for drawing my attention to this.
18. This resembles Robert Adams's understanding of idolatry as 'disordered interest in good things' and 'inappropriate love for excellent objects' (Adams (2002), 57, 147). However, Adams argues that 'being preferred to God or duty . . . is neither necessary nor, without qualification, sufficient for a *motive* to be idolatrous' (*ibid*., 201–205, here 202, my emphasis).
19. According to a recent review essay, a weakness in McGrath's new biography of Lewis is that 'the notion of obedience is practically absent' from his account of Lewis's spirituality (Smilde (2014), 151).
20. See also the reference to 'our love and our obedience' in his essay 'Myth became fact' (Walmsley (2000), 142).
21. Rosner bases much of his OT analysis on Moshe Harbetal and Avishai Margalit's ground-breaking study *Idolatry* (1992). Other serious treatments include Barton (2007); Beale (2008); Meadors (2006). For a more popular account see Keller (2009).
22. See also Jeanrond (2010), 30–31.
23. Relevant here are also the temptations of Jesus recorded in the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew 4:1–11, Mark 1:12–13, Luke 4:1–13). Satan attempts to elicit 'worship' from Jesus through enticing him to disobedience.
24. In such cases, 'false worship' results from a 'false theology'. This is relevant to question 6 at the end of this article.
25. Elsewhere Lewis says: 'When we accuse people of devil worship we do not usually mean that they *knowingly* worship the devil. That, I agree, is a rare perversion' (Hooper (1982), 107).
26. Quoted in Lewis (1960a), 15. Lewis's book review in *Theology*, 40 (1960), 459–461, has recently been republished in Hooper (2013), 59–62 (where de Rougemont's book is mistakenly referred to as *Poetry and Societ*y).
27. These were Lewis's own words when he felt compelled to disagree with Augustine on an important question concerning human love (see Lewis (1960a), 137).
28. See, for example, Lewis (1964), ch. 20.
29. Lewis's most complete statement of his attitude toward the Catholic Church is found in his letter to Lyman Stebbins (8 May 1945) where he mentions his disagreement (on apostolic and scriptural grounds) with 'papalism', 'the doctrine of Transubstantiation', and 'their theology about the B.V.M.'. The latter he rejects 'because it seems utterly foreign to the New Testament' (Hooper (2004), 645–647). For insight on Lewis's relationship with his Anglo-Catholic confessor, Father Walter Adams, a great devotee of Mary, see Dorsett (2004), 99–101. See also Mastrolia (2000) and Milward (1995), 61–63.
30. I thank Michael Ward for opening my eyes to this glaring omission.
31. This and the following letters are from Hooper (2006).

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32. See Council of Trent, XXV; Second Vatican Council, esp. *Lumen Gentium* 51, 66; *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2132. See also John Henry Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, IV.2 (esp. 8), X.3–4, and XI.2.
33. The least unhelpful contribution is the *Directory on Popular Piety and Liturgy* (Vatican, December 2001), section 'Deviations in Popular Piety' (64–65).
34. Catholic readers figure in the millions, and Bishop Kallistos Ware, speaking for many Orthodox readers, calls Lewis an 'anonymous Orthodox' (see Ware (2011), 135–153).
35. Many books, Beversluis adds, 'venerate Lewis to the point of transforming him into a cult figure' (Beversluis (2007), 18). A related problem is what MacSwain has called 'Jacksploitation', a pun on Lewis's nickname and *exploitation* (see MacSwain & Ward (2010), 3).
36. The difference between worship and idolatry concerns monotheistic faiths above all, but it rises naturally from polytheistic premises as well. Perhaps only atheists and pantheists can ignore it.
37. In its original context, Lewis is referring to the difference between *liking* and *having a taste for*.
38. The Puritan David Clarkson distinguishes between 'external' and 'internal' idolatry in his sermon 'Soul idolatry excludes men out of heaven', in Clarkson (1864), 300. Cf. Outka: '[U]sually no clear boundary bisects the agent's "general inner direction" from external movements' (Outka (1972), 127).
39. When the notions of God and strange gods 'are interlocked, defining what are the strange gods is no less complicated than defining God himself' (Harbetal & Margalit (1992), 250).
40. Christians believe that Jesus loved both God and people perfectly, including his mother – without lapsing into idolatry. How did his love for his heavenly Father differ from his love for his earthly Mother and neighbours?
41. For a recent analysis of 'sacrificing to' and 'sacrificing for' see Harbetal (2012).
42. For pertinent questions, timely nudges, and encouraging feedback at various stages of preparing this article, I am grateful to Emil Anton, Werner Jeanrond, Alister McGrath, Olli-Pekka Vainio, Aku Visala, the gentlemen of Bulevardi Foorumi, Helsinki, and my colleagues at St Benet's Hall, Oxford.