

The Lion

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Magic or Mystery: The Choice is Ours

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WE recently celebrated two major feasts in honor of the holy angels: that of Saint Michael and All Angels on 29 September, and that of the holy Guardian Angels on 2 October. Angels are rather fashionable these days, in a new-age sort of way. But for Orthodox Christians, angels are formidable and awesome creatures, far removed from the arena of fashion and superstition. It is no accident that most traditional appearances of an angel to a human being begin with the overwhelming terror triggered in us by the angel's presence. "Be not afraid!" is the angel's first message. This should remind us that sheer goodness is by no means comforting and cozy, but awesome and soul-blasting. Our God is a consuming fire; and his angels, reflecting some of his glory and goodness, terrify us by their appearing. God is not a kindly uncle or grandfather figure: it is a fearsome thing to fall into the hands of the living God. Like C. S. Lewis's great Lion Aslan, God is not tame, but he is good.

Angels, frightening as they are, provide for us a pattern of a proper relationship to God. We know that when the angels were created, with their swift intelligences unencumbered by bodily processes, their first decision was whether to serve God or themselves. It should not shock us that a vast number of them chose to worship themselves – we do it all the time. Fortunately, we, creatures in time with our sluggish intelligence and weakened, fallen wills, are given opportunity throughout our earthly years to continually revise that selfish turning by our repentance – something a fallen angel cannot do. But that is the basic pattern of all rational creatures: to choose God or oneself. The evil angels chose themselves and turned from God, and they confirm this choice every time they succeed in tempting us to turn from God.

This battle plays out in our lives in terms of our attitude toward magic or mystery.

It may seem odd to claim that many people wish to be magicians. But if we consider what the basic attraction of magic is, it becomes perfectly clear why magic tempts us. For what is a magician but one who wields power and control over things and people, someone who desires to control the course of life and death with certain knowledge and assurance? C. S. Lewis warned us that one of the great dangers of our time was the rise of the scientist-magician: the one who uses technology to control human beings and to shape the world into a realm ruled by science and subject to no moral or spiritual supervision, critique or control. But we need not go to scientists to see Lewis's point. Our own hearts tell us that we wish to control and manipulate the world and those we know to make them into something we can look upon and call good – that we can call ours. And we use all those tools a stage magician uses in his performance: manipulation, concealment, misdirection. Only when we perform our magic it is not for entertainment but for power, and its tools are more properly called using people, lying, and deceit. The psychology of a fallen angel is not (to our great embarrassment) entirely alien to us.

Yet we are not, like the fallen angels, fixed in our magician's role – the way of repentance lies open to us. And so, while the daylight of our earthly life lasts, it is helpful to ponder the unfallen angels of God, those who resisted the temptation to selfishness, magic and power, and turned instead to adoring and praising the Mystery of God.

What do we discover when we turn from the selfishness of Magic to the selflessness of Mystery? We discover that God is not subject to our control and manipulation. It is sad to think it, but is not much of our daily personal prayer and behavior often a kind of negotiation with God in order to get something or make something happen? Even the prayer of a fallen creature can be touched with fallenness, selfishness and manipulation. And this discovery – that God is not subject to our magic – is either liberating or threatening. If we still cling to our own image as little magicians – little imperial selves whose will is law – then the unbounded glory and power of God threatens our little empire of self. If I can't change God's mind, the choice becomes His way or my way – only one of us, God or my Self, can rule the roost.

On the other hand, if, like the unfallen angels, I turn to God with absolute and utter trust in His truth, His will, His power, then I am not threatened. It is true that, in the presence of this awesome and fathomless Mystery, I will see that I am utterly without power or resources, utterly with-

out influence or persuasion – that all my pitiful attempts to find security and comfort and joy in my petty magic are doomed to utter frustration and failure. And yet, if (like the unfallen angels) I bow to the Mystery, the Mystery becomes precisely my security, my comfort and my joy – in the knowledge that I am utterly and safely and lovingly in the caress and sustaining power of that burning Mystery of Love. It was in the mind and heart of this Mystery that I was first conceived; it is for life and joy within this Mystery that I was designed; and it is in this Mystery, and not in magic and the lust to control, that I must learn to live my earthly life, readying myself for that final endless and unwearied flight into the wild and fearsome Love of God.

Many of us will have read in school William Cullen Bryant's poem "To a Waterfowl." The last stanzas of that poem reflect on the water bird's serene trust in the guiding Mystery of God – beyond all attempts at magic or control or certainty – a trust that we cultivate in prayer of perfect submission to God's will:

There is a Power whose care
Teaches thy way along that pathless coast,--
The desert and illimitable air,--
Lone wandering, but not lost.

All day thy wings have fann'd
At that far height, the cold thin atmosphere:
Yet stoop not, weary, to the welcome land,
Though the dark night is near.

And soon that toil shall end,
Soon shalt thou find a summer home, and rest,
And scream among thy fellows; reeds shall
bend
Soon o'er thy sheltered nest.

Thou'rt gone, the abyss of heaven
Hath swallowed up thy form; yet, on my heart
Deeply hath sunk the lesson thou hast given,
And shall not soon depart.

He, who, from zone to zone,
Guides through the boundless sky thy certain
flight,
In the long way that I must tread alone,
Will lead my steps aright.