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## Christ, the ‘Sun’ and ‘Hearth’ of our Salvation

### Abstract

In the scriptural, patristic, and hymnographical traditions of the Orthodox Church, metaphors like ‘sun’ and ‘light’ are applied to our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God who assumed humanity for our sake. These metaphors are apt, since the saints’ experience of the Lord is often related to fire; not to mention that, like the sun, the Lord sustains all things (including the sun) as master of the cosmos. The purpose of this essay is to determine if another metaphor can be applied to the Lord to describe his immanence in saints and believers, i.e. that of the hearth, which, in the ancient world, was related to the sun as a source of warmth and nourishment and



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constituted the central point of orientation for people in their homes.

### Keywords

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## 1 Introduction

In the following, I delineate the early Church's approach towards solar imagery, which had several sources: the natural significance of the sun for our lives, Old and New Testament references to Christ that utilise solar imagery (cf. Malachi 4:2, Luke 17:2), pagan representations of the sun as a god who was celebrated on December 25 and depicted with a halo (both of which the Church transferred to Christ for apologetic reasons), and the saints who experience God's grace as light. In ancient times, however, the sun was always related to the hearth or fireplace because of its significance to pre-modern people as a source of heat, light, security, and nourishment. Since the Church's tradition includes many references to the experience of God as fire, an element which, in kindling the hearth, is intrinsically related to it, I also address these in order to demonstrate that both the sun and fire - but more specifically, the hearth - are existentially relevant metaphors applicable to our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

## 2 The Sun and the Hearth in the Ancient World

In our technological age, it is easy to take lighting and heating for granted, which for many of us is just the flick of a switch away. However, the importance of light, fire, and their attrib-

utes for peoples of the past cannot be underestimated. Of course, it might seem that I am stating the obvious: fire is a naturally occurring element, and its heat - like the heat of the sun - is necessary for our existence. Experience and science demonstrate this, and the Lord has made it so. Yet before the rise of ancient Greek science that attempted to explain the sun and fire naturalistically, and before the coming of Christ that despoiled idolatry, both the sun and fire - and especially the hearth - were considered so crucial for humankind's existence that they were made into gods and worshipped as such.

Should we consider this surprising? Not at all, given the widespread religiosity of ancient civilisations. Indeed, one would be hard-pressed to find an ancient culture without a sun god. The Egyptians famously had Ra, who was also their demiurge or creator figure and was embodied by Pharaoh. In ancient Mesopotamia, the sun god Shamash was the ultimate arbiter of justice and law, and special patron of Mesopotamian rulers. In Greece, Apollo, the son of Zeus and 'inspirer' of the Delphic pythoness, was related to the sun, as was the Persian god Mithras, adopted by the Romans who associated him with the sun, which, by the time of St Constantine the Great in the fourth century, was worshipped as Sol Invictus, the 'Unconquered Sun.'

These brief examples serve to illustrate the near-ubiquity of solar worship in ancient times. They also account for the approach that human beings had to the warmth that comes from above. (The earth does, after all, revolve around the sun!) However, what of the warmth generated here below by the hearth, which once comforted us on cold nights, was used for cooking, and was a shared place of conviviality, and security, in times gone by? The hearth was personified as a goddess, in a way that was of central significance for both the Greeks and the Romans, the former calling her Hestia, the latter, Vesta.

The significance of Hestia/Vesta cannot be underestimated. In the eighth century BC, in his *Hymn to Aphrodite*, Homer described Hestia as swearing by her father Zeus' head to remain a virgin all her days. In response, he honoured her by placing her in the "midst of the house" (μέσῳ οἴκῳ) - meaning, at the central position, the hearth, of every domicile in Greece - so that, by presiding there, she would be "among all mortal[s]...the chief of goddesses."<sup>1</sup> Significantly, apart from appearing in every private Greek dwelling, Hestia also appeared in the centre of the Athenian senate house, the Prytaneion, which was the polis' symbolic axis. She also appeared in Delphi, in the temple dedicated to the sun god Apollo; having been lit, according to Homer's *Hymn to Pythian Apollo*, by the god himself.<sup>2</sup> Solar worship and the worship of Hestia were thus related, as both the sun and the hearth were common sources of nourishment for human beings.



Picture 1. Remains of the Temple of Apollo in Delphi, Greece. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Homeric Hymns V – To Aphrodite*, in *Hesiod, The Homeric Hymns and Homerica*, trans. Hugh G. Evelyn-White (London: William Heinemann, 1914), p. 409.

<sup>2</sup> *The Homeric Hymns III – To Pythian Apollo*, in *Hesiod, The Homeric Hymns and Homerica*, p. 355.

For the Romans, Hestia, whom they called Vesta, was so crucial that she marked the symbolic centre for both the family and the city. Needless to say, the Romans appropriated Hestia from the Greeks in their typically grandiose style. The main arterial road in the city's pulsating heart, the Roman Forum, was called the Sacred Way and was modelled on the Sacred Way in Delphi that culminated at the temple of Apollo. This road ran past a temple dedicated to Vesta, to which was joined an atrium that housed the college of the Vestal Virgins who imitated the virginity of their matron goddess and dedicated much of their lives to serving her. Their principal task was to tend the fire of Vesta that burned in the centre of the circular structure, which was believed to connect heaven to earth via the smoke emanating from the flames. Given the significance of Vesta in the Roman pantheon, this fire was seen as engendering and symbolising the stability of Rome and its empire; if it were extinguished, it would spell dire consequences for the city. This was perhaps confirmed in the mind of the pagan population of Rome, when, in AD 394, the Christian emperor Theodosius I disbanded the college of Vestals and extinguished the fire in the centre of the temple.



Picture 2. In the centre, circular remains of the temple of the Vestal Virgins in the Roman Forum. Photo © Mario Baghos, 2016.

Long before the flame of Vesta was extinguished, the Greco-Roman biographer Plutarch (c. AD 120) related the hearth to the sun by interpreting the temple's circular form as a symbol of the cosmos, with the "perpetual fire" kept burning at its centre symbolising the sun.<sup>3</sup> This, he affirmed, corresponded to Pythagorean cosmology, which was heliocentric. In any case, what is important to note here is that just as the sun god Apollo was related to Hestia, the hearth, in Greek thinking, so too was the sun related to Vesta for the Romans.

### **3 Christ Displaces the Sun God**

Although the physical significance of the hearth was to persist well into modernity, its spiritual significance was not to last: the extinguishing of the fire of Vesta being preceded by a related phenomenon; the eclipse, on a widespread or societal level, of the sun god, Sol Invictus - pre-eminent in the Roman imperial court and among soldiers - by our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

Solar worship, as mentioned above, can be traced back to the ancient Mesopotamian and Egyptian civilisations. Its Roman iteration as the worship of Sol Invictus was popular in the second and third centuries AD, and remained so until the fifth century. Sol's dethronement, however, began to take place sometime in the fourth century when, particularly in Western provinces of the Roman Empire such as North Africa, 25<sup>th</sup> of December was chosen to celebrate the Nativity of our Lord.<sup>4</sup> According

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<sup>3</sup> Plutarch, *The Life of Numa* 11, in *Plutarch's Lives*, trans. Bernadotte Perrin (London: William Heinemann Ltd, 1967), p. 345.

<sup>4</sup> Other churches in the East combined the feasts of the Nativity and Theophany (or Baptism) of Christ until they were distinguished in

to a longstanding interpretation, the choice of this date was deliberate: it was the feast of *Dies Natali Solis Invicti*, the 'Birth-day of the Unconquered Sun,' which marked that point in the year when the sun made its journey back north from its southernmost point. (This, in the northern hemisphere, is known as the winter solstice: the shortest day in the year.) This is also the time when the day was shortest and began to increase, which was not lost on St Augustine, who saw this as a sign of the Son of God's kenotic outpouring (cf. Philippians 2:1-11); his humility marked by the shortness of the day, through which, with the increase of light via the expansion of days, he saw the Son's lifting us to heaven.<sup>5</sup> Another interpretation suggests that December 25 was chosen because it corresponds to the nine-month gestation period after the annunciation of the archangel Gabriel to the Theotokos, the Virgin Mary, celebrated on March 25, which is when Christ was conceived. In the northern hemisphere, March 25 coincides with the vernal equinox that marks the beginning of spring and during which day and night are equal in all parts of the world (since the sun is just above the equator) before days start getting longer due to the tilting of the earth's axis towards the sun. There is dual symbolism here: the Son of God begins his renewal of the world during the season of renewal, spring, at a time when the earth experiences diurnal and nocturnal equilibrium - which Christ, as God the Logos, is the source of on a cosmic level - before the days start getting longer; the expansion of the sun's duration evoking the dawning of Christ upon the world.

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Constantinople in the fourth century; with Justinian establishing the former as an official holiday in the sixth century.

<sup>5</sup> St Augustine, *Sermon 192*, in *St Augustine: Sermons on the Liturgical Seasons*, trans. Sr Mary Sarah Muldowney (Washington DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1984), p. 34.

So far in this section, we have seen the parallel astronomical dimensions of both the Nativity and the Annunciation, and that the feasts are providentially connected by the natural term of gestation in the womb. However, what concerns us here is the method that Christians used to accommodate solar imagery for the celebration of Christ's birthday, because it illustrates the Church's approach towards the prevailing culture of the time. This approach utilised the external *forms* of that culture - in this case, an existing solar feast day - to communicate the Gospel in a way that preserved the latter's *content*.

It is true that typological references to Christ as the 'sun' can be found in the Old Testament. Malachi 4:2 states that for those who revere the name of the Lord, "the sun of righteousness will arise with healing in its rays." Guy Freeland has collated some of the similes and metaphors in the New Testament that refer to the sun and light in relation to Christ, and how these were picked up by the early Christian apologists (like Clement of Alexandria) and made their way into Orthodox prayers and hymnographies'.<sup>6</sup> He also explained the symbolic importance of the east as the cardinal point from where the sun rises. The east was a powerful symbol for Christians, as it was the location where Eden or paradise was supposed to have been planted (Gen 2:8). Thus, Christians prayed facing east, built their churches with their altars facing east, and were even buried facing east "to greet the risen Christ at the resurrection of the dead."<sup>7</sup> Old and New Testament scripture, and nature - specifically the rising sun - provided spiritual metaphors for Christians that became part of Church tradition as reflected in pos-

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<sup>6</sup> Guy Freeland, 'Why Portray Christ as the Sun God' in *Windows to Orthodoxy* (Sydney: St Andrew's Orthodox Press, 2013), pp. 167-68.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 168-69.



tures for prayer, apologetic literature, hymnography, and architecture.

However, the Church went even further. In order to communicate the Gospel to the prevailing culture, it 'dressed' Christ in the forms of that culture, so that the halo - which was the radiate crown worn by the sun god and his various iterations (Apollo, etc.) - was transferred by the Church to Christ and his saints. This is evidenced by the fact that, as mentioned above, the Church emerged in a political environment where the emperor took the sun god as his protector. Even the emperor Constantine depicted himself as an adept of Sol Invictus both before and after he converted to Christianity, so much so was it ingrained in the religious landscape of the time. Thus, the Church, for apologetic reasons - to both communicate the Gospel to its immediate framework and to demonstrate the superiority of Christ to the Roman emperors and their 'god' - took the chief emblem of Sol, the halo, and transferred it to Christ to signify his holiness. This is also consonant with the fact that the Lord himself was seen to radiate light on Tabor (Mt 17:1-9, Mk 9:2-8, Lk 9:28-36), not to mention the Church's belief that the saints' experience of God's grace leaves a radiant 'imprint,' like in Exodus 34:29 when, after Moses descended from Sinai after conversing with the Lord, "his face was radiant" (the same is said about many other saints, like Symeon the New Theologian and Seraphim of Sarov). So, it is more likely that the Church appropriated the artistic form of the halo to communicate the pre-existing experience of its saints. In any case, at the same time, the Church applied the Old Testament epithet "sun of righteousness" to Christ as it displaced the pagan feast of Sol Invictus with the feast of the Nativity on December 25.



Picture 3. Ceiling mosaic of Christ depicted as Sol Invictus in the grotto beneath St Peter's Basilica in the Vatican, Rome, dating from the mid-3<sup>rd</sup> century. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

Rather than being literally equated with the sun god, Christ was considered by way of metaphor as *Christos Helios*, 'Christ the Sun,' and still features as such in Orthodox iconography where he is depicted as a child seated within a medallion representing the womb of his holy Mother, or on the underside of church domes as the adult Pantokrator: where the image of Christ takes the place of the sun - usually indicated by his wearing a golden tunic - at the centre of the circular dome that symbolises the cosmos.



Picture 4. 'Christos Helios' in the medallion representing the Mother of God's womb in Saints Raphael, Nicholas, and Irene Greek Orthodox Church, Sydney. Photo © Mario Baghos, 2018.



Picture 5. Byzantine mosaic of Christ ascending into heaven as the 'Sun of Righteousness' on the underside of the central dome in Basilica San Marco, Venice. Photo © Mario Baghos, 2016.

The Church, in its discernment, initiated a project to communicate the Gospel to the immediate culture, and this involved appropriating some external aspects of that culture and transforming them in light of the Christ experience. Not only was solar imagery utilised: in the early period figures from Greek mythology were depicted as metaphorical types of Christ (Orpheus, Hercules, and others). In this project, the Church did not compromise its unshakable adherence to Christ but instead attempted to fulfil the apostolic mandate to make “disciples of all nations” (Mt 28:19) by taking on forms from their respective cultures without necessarily considering the content of these cultures as mutually equivalent to Christian revelation.<sup>8</sup> This approach has apostolic and patristic precedents: St Paul wore

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<sup>8</sup> There were exceptions to this, for example: the Greek philosophers Heraclitus and Socrates were considered as having been inspired by God the Logos.

the 'Jewish dress' in order to evangelise his fellow Jews,<sup>9</sup> and St Justin Martyr donned the Greco-Roman philosopher's mantle, the *pallium*, to do the same for them.

My question is whether or not this process, which we have seen the Church accomplished in relation to the sun, can be undertaken in regards to the hearth, which, we saw above, was related to the sun and personified by the Greeks as Hestia and the Romans as Vesta? In other words, can the image of the fiery hearth be used, in tandem with the image of the sun, as a fruitful *metaphor* for Christ?

#### **4 Fire, the Christ Experience, and the Hearth**

In this life, we are like cave dwellers,<sup>10</sup> taking shelter from the tumultuous elements, the threats coming from physical and spiritual foes - and we are darkened, trapped, by our passions. But just as the burning hearth gives liberating light and warmth during the night, so too does the Lord of glory (James 2:1, 1 Cor. 2:8), "the light of the world" (Jn 8:12), illumine and warm our lives, if we but freely seek him. Indeed, while the sun and the hearth illumine and warm our physical eyes and bodies, the Lord Christ, who is "the joyful light of the divine glory," does the same for us spiritually.<sup>11</sup> The latter is incredibly important in relation to the saints that participate in Christ and whom we - who fall short of their experience and standard - are called to

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<sup>9</sup> His words are pertinent: "I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some" (1 Cor. 9:22).

<sup>10</sup> Plato's allegory in his *Republic*, book VII. 514a-521b, trans. Desmond Lee (London: Penguin Books, 2003), pp. 240-48.

<sup>11</sup> As reflected in a prayer of the Orthodox Church's office of the first hour that begins: "Christ, the true light, which enlightens and sanctifies everyone who comes into the world".

imitate. That God's grace can be experienced as light - albeit in a manner that transcends all physical manifestations of light - is attested to in the saints' lives.<sup>12</sup>

That God is experienced as fire, too, is reflected in the literature. In Heb. 12:28 we read: "our God is a consuming fire." According to 2 Thess. 1:8, our Lord Jesus Christ will return "in blazing fire" to pass judgment on the world at his second coming. That fire is often associated with punishment is clear from motifs that address the experience of hell: Rev. 20:10 and 14 speak of the "lake of fire" within which the devil, death, and Hades are thrown at the end of the world.



Picture 6. The lake of fire proceeds from 'Christos Helios' in the mosaic of the Last Judgment in Santa Maria Assunta, Torcello. Photo © Mario Baghos, 2016.

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<sup>12</sup> New Testament examples include the vision of the apostles Peter, James, and John on Tabor (Mt 17:1-9, Mk 9:2-8, Lk 9:28-36), and similar experiences of saints Symeon the New Theologian and Seraphim of Sarov mentioned above, and others.

However, although associated with the judgment at the second coming, fire also has a positive, immanent dimension. This is reflected in the scriptures, where God appears to the people of Israel and their saintly representatives, like Abraham and Moses,<sup>13</sup> as a 'pillar of fire,' and in the New Testament, when, in Acts, we read of the Holy Spirit descending on the apostles as "tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them" (2:3).



Picture 7. 12<sup>th</sup> century icon of Moses approaching the Burning Bush. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

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<sup>13</sup> For the former see Gen 15:17; for the latter, Ex 31:21.





Picture 8. Fresco showing descent of the Holy Spirit as tongues of fire at Pentecost, Monastery of Dionysiou, Mount Athos.

Moreover, after the Lord's resurrection, Cleopas and an unnamed disciple encounter the incognito Christ who later is made known to them in the Eucharistic 'breaking of the bread' (Lk 24:30–31). The disciples then ask themselves: "Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?" (v. 32).

This experience of grace as fire, felt by the disciples on the road to Emmaus, appears outside of the New Testament as well, in texts like the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers* and St Diadochos of Photike's *On Spiritual Knowledge and Discrimination*. In the latter case, it is described as a gift of the Holy Spirit<sup>14</sup> and in the

<sup>14</sup> St Diadochos of Photiki, *On Spiritual Knowledge and Discrimination: 100 Texts* 74, in *The Philokalia: The Complete Text Compiled by St Niko-*

former, it extends from the fingers of Abba Joseph, who, in response to Abba Lot's question to him concerning what else he can do in the spiritual life, St Joseph stretches his hands towards heaven, after which the text reads: "His fingers became like ten lamps of fire and he said to him, 'If you will, you can become all flame.'"<sup>15</sup>

The description of God as fire can be expanded to include both Christ's first coming - his incarnation - and his second coming, marked by the last judgment. In chapter twenty-six of St Gregory of Nyssa's *Catechetical Oration*, we read about "the approach of the Divine power" in the incarnation acting like fire and burning evil away from the human nature that the Son of God assumed as Christ Jesus.<sup>16</sup> Elsewhere in the same text, the saint speaks of the unbaptised as having to be purified by a fire that is "never quenched."<sup>17</sup>

Since God is a "consuming fire" (Heb. 12:28), then it can be inferred that the 'fire' of grace can be experienced in two different ways, both positively and negatively, according to one's proximity to Christ; the former leading, according to the will of God, to the vision of the divine light experienced by the saints, and the latter, as hell.

It is clear from the above that the images of the sun and the hearth can be used as metaphors to describe Christ, who is both far above us as the "sun of righteousness" and illumines us with the rays of his grace. The Lord, like the hearth, is also very near:

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*dimos of the Holy Mountain and St Makarios of Corinth*, vol. 1 (New York: Faber and Faber, 1983), p. 278.

<sup>15</sup> *Joseph of Panephrisis 7*, in *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers: The Alphabetical Collection*, trans. Benedicta Ward (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1975), p. 103.

<sup>16</sup> St Gregory of Nyssa, *The Great Catechism 26*, in *Gregory of Nyssa: Selected Works and Letters*, trans. William Moore and Henry Austin Wilson (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1979), p. 496.

<sup>17</sup> St Gregory of Nyssa, *The Great Catechism 40*, p. 509.



he took on our humanity and burnt up our propensity for evil - which will be entirely engulfed at the second coming - and the warmth of his grace encourages those who strive to follow him. In the case of the saints, because of their strenuous ascetic effort and their participation in Christ's defeat of evil, this grace 'consumes' them: it is manifested in their very bodies so that they become "all flame," as reflected in the description of Abba Joseph above, and, in the testimony of the Psalmist, who says that God makes "his ministers a flame of fire" (Ps 103[104]:4). Thus, for the saints, the image of the hearth, which we saw above warmed the centre of the house, can be considered interiorised, and so can the image of the sun, which is manifested in their experience of the divine light which, as we read in hagiographical and mystical texts, is often granted to them by God according to his will and purpose.

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At the beginning of this essay, I stated that the sun and the hearth were related in the thought of ancient persons, and throughout I have shown that, while the sun has been used by the Church as a positive metaphor for Christ and the experience of grace for centuries, the hearth can also be used in a like manner.

The dissipation of the hearth in modernity, with televisions or handheld devices taking its place in almost every household, is a failure in terms of both human relations - since, instead of the 'other,' screens become the focal point of our attention - and from the point of view of the hearth's symbolism, which is often lost today.

My hope for those who read this is that the next time one gathers around a fire with friends - or, for that matter, reflects on the importance of the sun - one can turn his or her mind to-

wards a reality that they metaphorically point to, namely, our Lord Jesus Christ; may we all be made worthy to receive him as the 'sun' and 'hearth' of our salvation.