

Personal experience and theology: St. Symeon the New Theologian

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Abstract: The theological work of St. Symeon the New Theologian, long marginalized by "official" academic theology and preserved mainly within monastic circles, has in recent decades become the subject of growing scholarly interest. This article examines the originality of St. Symeon's theology—rooted firmly in Scripture and Patristic Tradition, yet distinguished by the central place it gives to the author's personal mystical experience. Set against the backdrop of 11th century Byzantium, an era marked by political and cultural flourishing but also by theological formalism and scholastic conservatism, St. Symeon's insistence on the conscious, personal encounter with the uncreated light of God provoked considerable controversy among his contemporaries. The study explores the ascetic-monastic tradition that prepared the ground for his teaching and shows how Symeon transformed the principle that spiritual practice underlies true theological knowledge into an explicit and normative theological stance. Examining key Symeonian themes—divine light, dispassion, ecstasy, and deification—the article argues that his epithet "New Theologian" reflects not doctrinal innovation but a restoration of authentic, experiential theologizing, uniquely uniting doctrine with the personal revelation of the Holy Trinity. The article concludes by considering the enduring relevance of Symeon's "theology of self-consciousness", according to Dumitru Stăniloae, for the contemporary Christian's search for a living, personal relationship with Christ.

Keywords: St. Symeon the New Theologian, personal experience of God, Byzantine theology, mystical theology, deification / theosis, divine light, monastic spirituality

The theological work of St. Symeon the New Theologian — a body of work that throughout history has been somewhat avoided by "official," academic theology, circulating instead in a more clandestine and

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fragmentary way, especially within monastic environments - has, in the contemporary era, returned to the forefront. Studies devoted to the life, activity, and theology of St. Symeon the New Theologian have become increasingly numerous and varied, addressing the most diverse aspects from differing perspectives, which has led to a differentiated assessment of this body of work. (Ică Jr. 2001, 42-43) The phenomenon is understandable if we take into account the fact that Symeon's writings have a particular character, probably unique within the context of Orthodox theological literature - a literature inclined toward traditionalism, restraint, and conformity - in that they are, to the same degree, both provocative and rigorously traditional. Thus, starting from an initially rather critical assessment (Hausherr 1928), the tone of studies concerning St. Symeon the New Theologian gradually became more nuanced and moderate, as his theology - or, more precisely, his manner of doing theology - came to be better understood and appreciated in relation to its original setting: the monastic world of 11th century Byzantium.

Born approximately 1,000 years ago, the theological work of St. Symeon the New Theologian stirred up, even at the time, powerful controversies which, as is well known, played a role in shaping it. The principal source of the disputes concerning the theology of St. Symeon the New Theologian - a theology of strong originality, not so much in content (since it is firmly anchored in Holy Scripture and Holy Tradition) as in its expression - is the primary role that the author's personal experience plays in its formulation. Symeon's theology is a mystical theology, one that, as he himself testifies, was born out of a participation, through the grace of the Holy Spirit, in divine glory, in the unfathomable depth of the love of God, One in Essence and Three in Persons, who, revealing Himself as light, urged him to bear witness of Him to others, his brothers in Christ:

...I would like to remain silent - if only I could! - but the awe-inspiring wonder stirs my heart, opens my defiled mouth and, without my willing it, makes me speak and write. (St. Symeon the New Theologian. [c. 995-1005] 2001b, "Hymn 1", 53)

St. Symeon the New Theologian is thus a proponent of a kind of "theodidacticism" (Zamfirescu 1958, 411) - he maintains that all his teaching is inspired by the Holy Spirit and must, precisely for this reason, carry the same authority as the teaching of the biblical

prophets, the Apostles, and the Holy Fathers who wrote under the Spirit's inspiration:

All of you, people, emperors and powerful ones, priests and bishops, monks and married people, do not consider it unworthy to hear the voice and words of me, a humble man. But open the ears of your hearts, listen and understand what the God of all and before all ages, the Unapproachable One, the Sole Almighty, in whose hand is the breath of all who exist, is saying. (St. Symeon the New Theologian. [c. 995-1005] 2001b, "Hymn 58", 291)

This claim, openly expressed on numerous other occasions by St. Symeon the New Theologian in his writings, caused a scandal in his day, provoking from representatives of official theology a strong reaction of opposition - directed not so much against his teachings as such, but against the author himself. And yet this claim, this particular emphasis placed on personal experience, on the conscious, mystical knowledge of God as light which, shining forth, clarifies the deep meanings of human existence for the soul freed from passions and prepared through tears, repentance, and asceticism, represents precisely the original note, the unique aspect, of the theology of St. Symeon the New Theologian - the hallmark of his writing, which during his lifetime earned him the epithet "New Theologian" and which in our own day secures his relevance, because through this feature:

...Symeon's writings vividly illustrate what might be called the irradiating-explosive force of tradition in its charismatic, 'vertical' sense - as the handing-down and coming-to-pass of the divine presence 'as the life of the Holy Spirit in the Church' (in V. Lossky's famous formula) - rather than as the mere, socially organized transmission of certain ecclesial texts or religious practices. (Ică Jr. 2001, 9)

The purpose of our study is precisely to reveal to what extent, and in what sense, this original way of understanding and practicing theology - of speaking about God - represented a novelty in the age in which it appeared, as well as the interest it may still hold for the Christian of today. To achieve this goal we must first analyse the historical-cultural context in which the work of Symeon the New Theologian was born, then the main themes he addresses, as well as the relevance of his answers for the Christian of today and, why not, of tomorrow and of all time - because, as one of the finest contemporary Orthodox scholars of Symeon's work observed: "Although he spoke and wrote for an audience made up chiefly of monks, St. Symeon the New Theologian

felt that his message applied to all Christians, to every person seeking a personal encounter with Jesus Christ, the Risen Lord.” (Golitzin 2001, 393)

As for the era in which St. Symeon the New Theologian lived and wrote, it should be noted that historians consider it to be the period of greatest flourishing of the Byzantine world, in every respect distinctive to it - political, economic, cultural, and theological. It is the period in which the Empire largely recovered, both territorially and administratively, with centralized control ensuring the smooth functioning of economic and social life; this in turn gave rise, on the cultural plane, to a new Hellenism through the revival of philosophy within the so-called “Byzantine humanism”, represented by Michael Psellos and John Italos, while on the level of ecclesiastical life it produced a preoccupation with finalizing dogmas and canons, with codifying rites and liturgical offices. What was largely lacking within the life of the Byzantine Church of the period, however, was an authentic spiritual life - living, dynamic, creative, as in the first Christian centuries -, this having been replaced by a dangerous theological and ecclesiastical formalism, marked by a strong intellectualism and exegetical-dogmatic scholasticism, focused on immobility and conservatism, and largely confined to the simple, compiling transmission of the exemplary theological achievements of the earlier, patristic age. The role of philosophy in developing and clarifying the doctrinal distinctions necessary to counter the influences of the West or of heresies was, as always in Eastern theological thought, very important; but what was missing was the anchoring of philosophical speculation in the interior experience of the Spirit, so that, despite a considerable advance in erudition and refinement, the problems, arguments, and solutions proposed remained largely the same.

Against the backdrop of this society, which generally favored immobility and conservatism in every respect - but especially in theology, which had become somewhat of an ideology, a form of identity-discourse meant to preserve the theocratic Empire - there appears, at the turn of the first two millennia, an exotic figure who allows himself to speak freely, in the first person, without observing the accepted intellectual and stylistic canons, and whose legitimacy rests not on titles or advanced study but on his own mystical experience, on his personal encounter with the Holy Spirit: St. Symeon the New Theologian.

We must not imagine, however, that he appeared out of nowhere, for throughout the crystallization of Byzantine society and theology, one of the forces that constantly accompanied and contributed fully to its development - even if in a less visible, though not necessarily less influential way - was ascetic, monastic spirituality. This had already made its presence and importance felt in events such as the struggle against the iconoclasts, and also through the development of Christian doctrine in the writings of some of its notable representatives, such as Dionysius the Areopagite, St. Maximus the Confessor, Evagrius Ponticus, Diadochos of Photiki, Mark the Ascetic, Isaac the Syrian, Macarius of Egypt, John Climacus, and others. These authors, while maintaining respect for the dogmas and stressing the importance of patristic writings for the life of the Church, nonetheless brought - on the basis of personal mystical experience - certain additions and developments to patristic theology, bringing out and explicitly setting forth certain truths that were only implicit in the teaching of the Fathers, insisting on the necessity of purification from the passions as an initial condition which, as it is achieved, allows the Christian to “sense”, or “see” - to contemplate - God, leading him to “the suffering of deification.”

The whole of ascetic spirituality thus favored, as the source of true knowledge of God, prayer, holding that practice - the concrete spiritual life devoted to the ascetic effort of freeing oneself from the passions, combined with the glorification of the Holy Trinity through liturgical acts - represents the path that must be followed to attain the highest vision (*theoria*) of God, revealed through contemplation.

The principle that practice - life in the Holy Spirit within the Body of Christ, the Church - is the foundation of theory was thus a principle that constantly accompanied the development of Christian doctrine within Eastern theology; but it becomes a major force, explicitly recognized and affirmed as such in Orthodox teaching, through the theological work of St. Symeon the New Theologian. This does not mean, of course, that Holy Scripture or the dogmas as established by the Holy Fathers at the Holy Councils are to be ignored, but rather that, in order to understand and interpret them correctly, in order to draw out from them the true Face of Christ, spiritual experience is needed - an awareness of the personal presence of Christ within ourselves. This inward presence of Christ is the supreme reality, and only it allows for the knowledge of the treasure contained in the Scriptures and in the dogmas; only it allows for the surpassing and, at the same time, the

fulfillment of mere worldly, strictly intellectual knowledge, toward a new form of knowing God - a new, spiritual form of doing theology, based above all on the fulfillment of the commandments, but which does not stop there, overflowing instead into a conscious and personal experience of the Godhead:

Likewise, he who has consciously acquired within himself God, who gives knowledge to men (Ps. 93:10), has traversed the whole of Holy Scripture and gathered all its benefit from reading, and will no longer have need of reading its books. For how could one who has acquired as his conversation-partner the One who inspired the divinely-inspired Scriptures to those who wrote them, and who was taught by Him the unspeakable mysteries of hidden things, still have such a need? Such a one will himself become, for others, a God-inspired book, bearing written within him, by the finger of God, things new and old (Matt. 13:52), as one who has fulfilled all things and has rested in God from all his labors, having attained to original perfection. (*Practical and Theological Chapters by Saint Symeon the New Theologian*, 1997, 88)

This requirement - of conscious and personal experience of Jesus Christ - applies, in Symeon's vision, to every Christian individually, and is possible for every Christian to attain, insofar as all participate in the life of the Spirit in the Church as members of the Body of Christ. Every Christian - be the emperor, bishop, priest, monk, or layperson - must, and can, in order to be saved, encounter Christ directly, just as the Apostles encountered Him. True Christian theologizing must reflect the unique and specific Christian religious experience of the believer's personal communion with the Holy Trinity, inscribed within the broader communion of the Church and the saints, and must not be limited to a mere scholastic transmission of dogmatic formulas:

For if the recognition of true wisdom and the knowledge of God were to be given to us through letters and study, brothers, what need would there then be of faith, or of divine Baptism, or of the Communion of His Mysteries? None at all. (St. Symeon the New Theologian. [1003-1009] 2001a, 293)

It is precisely this emphasis - this struggle waged by St. Symeon against the conservative, repetitive, formalistic, and scholastic theology that dominated Byzantine spiritual life in his day - that most likely earned him, from his contemporaries, the unusual and exceptional epithet "New Theologian." Unusual, because within the highly conservative Byzantine world, as we have seen, novelty was usually associated with heresy; yet in Symeon's case the term does not designate an innovator of doctrinal content, a heretic, but rather, one might say, "the theologian anew" - that is, a restorer of the authentic

way of doing theology, born of and centered on the personal, existential living-out, within the Church, of the mystery of the Trinity, revealed through prayer and the Holy Mysteries. Exceptional, because before him only two saints had ever been called “theologian” - St. John the Evangelist and St. Gregory of Nazians - and to this day the Orthodox Church, in her liturgical worship, gives the title “theologian” only to St. Symeon and to the two saints just mentioned; a fact due, according to one contemporary scholar of Symeon’s work, “to the crucial historical role played by these figures in defending the Holy Trinity - the ultimate ‘object’ of all theology - and to the manner of theologizing proper to Trinity-founded theology, a manner inseparably bound up with the personal experience of the Revelation of the Holy Trinity, which the theologian undergoes in beholding (contemplating) the uncreated glory of Its love, radiating from the Spirit-filled and ecclesial humanity of Christ.”(Ică Jr. 2001, 26)

The “novelty” of Symeon’s theology is thus more a matter of psychology - having more to do with the way it was received by his contemporaries, unaccustomed to his manner of expression, to his use of the first person and his recounting of the most intimate personal mystical experiences within a theological text - than with any genuine doctrinal novelty in his teaching.

Yet even though it remains firmly anchored in Holy Scripture and Holy Tradition, Symeon’s theology does not, as already noted, represent a mere repetition of these, but is rather a living, renewing theology, one that develops - in the light of the Spirit, of personal experience - traditional themes and questions, unveiling the whole wealth of truths contained within them. A mystic par excellence, St. Symeon the New Theologian addresses in his writings the defining experiences of the spiritual life, such as divine light and the vision of God, dispassion, ecstasy, and deification. Through his insistence and his mastery - unique in Eastern mystical literature - in describing the personal experience of the vision of divine light, as well as the fruits of this encounter with the uncreated glory of the Holy Trinity - salvation, or perfection, the suffering of deification, a state accessible to all Christians desiring an improved spiritual life even in this present life - St. Symeon fully justifies his renown as the “New Theologian”, being the “new” apostle of the divine light, successor to the Apostle John, and the “new” theologian of the Trinity, successor to Gregory of Nazians.

We might call him, following a suggestion of Father Dumitru Stăniloae, “the theologian of self-awareness”, because through his writings he calls Christians of every time and place to the mystical search for the divine light, to the conscious and personal encounter, even in this present life, with Jesus Christ, to a personal dialogue with Him — a dialogue without which one cannot attain salvation, deification, and without which a true theology, a true knowledge of God, cannot be articulated. This is because, before being discourse, authentic theology is a mode of existence; it presupposes deification and dwelling in the light, “face to face” with God and with others, in full self-awareness and in boundless mutual love - apart from which there is the risk, so often underscored by St. Symeon the New Theologian, of falling into formalism and scholasticism.

We too, those of today and those of tomorrow, can be creative in theology — we can adapt and develop the teachings of Holy Scripture and Holy Tradition, keeping them living and dynamic, contributing to the fulfillment of their deep purposes - only if, understanding and following the example of St. Symeon the New Theologian, we do not merely read the Fathers, but transpose into our own personal existence their way of living within the light of the Glory of the Trinity — a light that is shared with all believers, and with each one individually, through the Spirit, in the Church, the mystical body of Christ.

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