

St Symeon the New Theologian

The vision of the Divine Light

I was nine years old when, full of enthusiasm and excitement, I approached my Church School teacher and exclaimed, 'I have seen Jesus!' Receiving an understandably surprised look from the man, I repeated again, 'I have seen Jesus!' 'What do you mean?' he asked. At this point I removed a copy of 'The Bible with Illustrations for Children' from my bag, opened it to a page at the beginning of the New Testament, and showed him the painting which was clearly captioned, 'Jesus Christ of Nazareth.' My teacher smiled. Then, crouching down to my level, said, 'I see... but you have only seen a picture of Jesus. But you haven't really seen *Him*.'

St Symeon the New Theologian would have agreed with my Church School teacher in stating that my vision of a painting of Christ was quite different from actually seeing Christ Himself. Yet where he and my teacher would have departed would have been on the possibility of such a vision; for while my teacher seemed to believe such things to be confined only to the dreams of children, Symeon fervently believed that God Himself was visible to the human person—not only in the representative form of a painting or even a holy icon, but by a direct, immanent, and personal encounter with the divinity Himself.

This short paper will examine St Symeon's understanding of the nature of the Divine Light. We will begin with a look at how Symeon saw the vision of this Light as relating to the whole of the spiritual life, and will then proceed to examine in more detail his views on its particular characteristics.

Vision of the Divine Light as Man's Created Purpose.

To say that Symeon saw the vision of the Divine Light and personal union with God as the goal and end of human existence—the very thing for which humanity was created—would be to do nothing more than quote the Saint himself, who was to say this very thing several times in his writings. [1] Yet before we may fully understand the character of this claim and appreciate the significance of divine vision in his understanding of human spirituality, we must first explore Symeon's overall understanding of human spiritual growth and progression.

Symeon clearly understood the true Christian life as beginning with the sacrament of baptism. [2] There is no departure here from the standard patristic synthesis of which he considered himself a follower. In this sacramental act, the human person is regenerated into the new life of Christ—is restored to the divine mode of existence that is rightfully his as a human person, but which has been lost through the influence and predominance of sin. Humanity is grafted into Christ, that the life which he has lost may be once again his possession.

It is only through this regeneration of the fallen person into the new life of

Christ that any salvific activity can occur. Symeon's relative lack of written attention paid to sacramental baptism, when coupled with the few statements he does make on it, suggests that he took it as an unstated assumption that this was to be the beginning of any true Christian spirituality. Baptised and chrismated, the Christian person possesses within himself the Spirit, the indwelling of God, and thus contains in his being the seed which he must then tend and nourish in order to bring the grace of baptism to fruition through a life of sanctification. Each Christian possesses this divine spark, Symeon notes, yet not every Christian makes the effort to sow it. He writes, 'there is one out of a thousand, or better out of 10,000 who has arrived at mystical contemplation.' [3] While we may all possess the divine spark within us, it is only the relatively few who take the action necessary to fan it into a flame.

Yet it is this very few who are engaging upon life as Symeon understood that it was created and intended to be lived. To live a fully spiritual existence requires action; and this necessary action is, for Symeon, a life of asceticism. The divine presence within each person is a reality, yet the self-centred mind and life enslaved to the passions dims his view of this presence—may even keep it from his sight altogether. It is necessary, in order to regain that vision, that the human person willingly and energetically battle the reigns of self-conceit and worldly ties, simplifying his mind and focusing his whole being on his attempt to grow closer to God. We find here the echoes of a common theme in eastern patristic thought: that the ascetical engagement is not intended to turn man into something supra- or extra-human, but only to return him to his true self. [4]

When this begins to occur, when the ascetic individual makes his body and mind into fertile soil receptive to the actions of God's grace, God begins to make Himself more visibly manifest to man. Symeon recalls this process through a recounting of his own experiences. At first, struggling to know God whilst still in the world, he was rewarded by a vision of Christ as light 'afar off', in a vision of short duration. This encouraged and inspired him to further his efforts; and then, as he was purified further by a more strict asceticism and simplified life, the visions became more frequent and more personal, as Symeon's vision became ever more clear. He uses more than once the imagery of a blind man slowly regaining his sight—emphasising not only the gradual nature of this growth, but his underlying idea that this spiritual sight, like physical sight, is an aspect of life that *humanity is supposed to possess*. [5]

We will not dwell too long on Symeon's account of his own spiritual growth and the experiences it entailed, as interesting as it is; for our main interest here is in his understanding of the Light which he saw—and such shall be the subject of our next section. Yet it is important to note the place this vision held in his own spiritual progression. Growing out of baptism, Symeon's desire to be closer to God urged him into the practise of asceticism, at first slight. This was rewarded by God's gift of vision of His presence as light, which in turn inspired Symeon with an ardent desire to further increase his devotion to God—leading to more extended and personal visions, and these once again to an even *deeper* desire for growth. We note here the striking similarity to St Gregory of Nyssa's famous concept of eternal growth: that no matter how high we ascend on the spiritual mountain, we are always at the beginning of our journey, and always possess the desire to go further. [6] We must also take note of the fact that this desire and its 'motivational satisfaction' in the divine

vision, are both the gifts of God and are not directly the results of man's own human efforts. Man's activities are important, for they prepare the person for the conscious reception of the Divinity; but, as Krivochéine writes,

La simple observation des commandements, les vertus ascétiques ne sont pas en elles-mêmes la lumière, mais des charbons éteints que la grâce allume. [7]

It is God's grace that fuels man's desire, and brings him into the vision of His presence as Light. And it is when this occurs, when this holy desire leads us to a truly sanctified life in which we freely see God as Light in our own lives, that Symeon believes we begin to actually live life as Christ intends it to be lived—in constant and personal communion with God. The vision of the Divine Light, then, is not something extraneous to Christianity; for Symeon it is at the very heart of a true Christian faith. It is that for which man was created, and that after which he must wholly strive if he is to know God in this life, and thereby in the next. [8]

Having thus made a cursory examination of the place of the vision of the Divine Light in Symeon's overall view of spirituality, we will now look at his understanding of the nature of that Light.

The Nature of the Divine Light.

We might begin with a quotation from the end of Archbishop Basil Krivochéine's chapter on the vision of the Light:

La lumière, c'est avant tout Dieu, la Sainte Trinité, lumière simple et indicible. Dieu est même supra-lumière, comme surpassant toute lumière. C'est ensuite le Christ et l'Esprit Saint. Ici son expérience personnelle correspond exactement aux données de l'Écriture et s'appuie sur elle. C'est aussi la gloire et les « énergies » de Dieu ou du Verbe et de l'Esprit, la grâce, identifiée quelquefois avec le Saint-Esprit. C'est aussi toutes les manifestations de Dieu, tous ses dons charismatiques et la vie charismatique elle-même qu'Il accorde à tous ceux qui observent ses commandements. [9]

Krivochéine here provides an outline of Symeon's understanding of the nature of the Divine light, upon which we shall elaborate in this section.

(1) – The character of the Light as personal.

A notion which Symeon goes to great lengths to clarify in his writings, is that of the Divine Light as *personal*. It is not simply a sensible radiance—an inanimate luminosity such as one might receive from a lamp, or from the sun. Rather the Divine Light is the very 'person' of the Divinity Himself: it is not simply a product of God, it *is* God. 'Your light, O my God, *is You*,' he writes, [10] and to this point of emphasis he often returns.

Yet understanding the light as God leaves one with driving questions: by 'God', does Symeon mean that the Light is the Father? Or the Son? Or might the Light in fact be the whole Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit?

Our author himself seems to have struggled with this question when his visions first began. Speaking of his first vision of the Light after taking the monastic profession, and speaking of himself—as he often did—in the third-person, Symeon writes:

He contented himself to look [at the Light] with great fear and trembling, (...) knowing simply that it was *someone* who had appeared before him. [11]

At this point in his spiritual growth, Symeon's vision was still much dimmed by his passions, he notes, and it lacked the clarity to know fully the character of the light before him. Yet as he grew in his efforts, and as God's grace grew within him, he came to know more fully its nature. He would come to identify the Light at times with the Holy Spirit, [12] at times with the full Godhead in Trinity, [13] but most often and most readily with the Son. At the end of the above-mentioned vision, when Symeon dared to verbally question the Light as to its character, he heard in response the Divine voice: 'It is me, God, Who became man for you; and behold that I have made you, as you see, and shall make you god.' [14] The Light as Christ is Symeon's favoured and oft-quoted understanding of its nature, perhaps because it was Christ Himself who affirmed, during His incarnate life, that He was the light (Jn 8.12, 9.5); and perhaps because, during the moments of vision in which Symeon experienced and saw this Light, he felt himself personally in the presence of Jesus his Lord.

Yet it would be an overstatement to say that Symeon is perfectly clear on his understanding of the 'personality' of the Light; for though he regards it as Christ in the great majority of his addresses, the above has already shown that he was far from exclusive in this view. We might rather say that Symeon is slightly unclear in his understanding of the personal nature of the Light—and perhaps even deliberately so. He knows beyond any personal doubt that the Light is God, and that he experiences God as Light, sometimes as Father, Son, Spirit, and sometimes as unified Trinity. Yet as to the precise 'personhood' of the Light, he is content to relegate such a knowledge to the divine mystery of the Divinity. [15]

(2) – The Light as Form or Luminosity, and What of 'Energies'?

Our lengthy quote from Krivochéine's conclusion also brings out a certain transcendental nature to Symeon's understanding of the Divine Light: it is God's grace, all the manifestations of His goodness, the workings of His Spirit, and even His energies. These might lead one again to consider his perception of the Light as an apersonal, inanimate luminosity; yet our discussion above shows that Symeon clearly did not see it as such. We might then ask, just what did he actually see—and what does he suggest that each of us can see—when experiencing the Divine Light?

Symeon records a whole host of forms which he ascribes to his visions of the Light. It is spherical, [16] as a sun shining above the clouds, [17] similar to a pearl or a star, [18] as a blinding ray or a flow of luminous waters, [19] and a heavenly beam which encloses all of creation. [20] On one occasion he even makes the bold claim of actually seeing Christ's *face* (prw/sopon) in the Light. [21] All these examples might lead one to ascribe to Symeon a rather definitive, corporeal nature to the Divine Light. However, we cannot fail to take note of the fact that Symeon

always carefully counters these statements of form with equally potent statements of formlessness—or perhaps more properly, *transcendence of form*. Symeon writes:

It [the Light] suddenly shows itself completely within me, / a spherical light, gentle and divine, / with form, with shape, in a *formless form*. [22]

Here Symeon's unique paradox is clearly seen: the Light has form, and this form he often attempts to describe; yet it is a form *without* form, beyond form, completely transcending form itself. His ascription of certain forms to the Light seems to be an effort to emphasize the immanent reality of the full and real presence of God: this Light is not simply some 'side-effect' of God's presence; it *is* the 'form' of God Himself. Yet to truly ascribe a physical *form* to God would be to diminish the transcendent character of His being, and thus the 'form' attributed to the Light must in reality be formless, admitting the supra-sensory nature of the Divine Being. [23] In this light (no pun intended), we are led to read Symeon's comments on seeing Christ's 'face' in a different way: to suppose that he actually saw the physical features of a man's visage goes against the formless nature of the Light that Symeon goes to great lengths to expound in other areas. Perhaps by *prw/so*pon, he refers instead to the full, real, immanent presence of Christ in the luminous manifestation of His being. 'You showed me Your face' reads not as a scientific account of seeing Christ's form, but rather of witnessing the reality of His presence in the personal experience of the Light.

The notion of the Divine Light as the *energies* of God is also present in Symeon's understandings, and for this reason his theology is often compared with that of St Gregory Palamas of the 13th/14th centuries. However, the importance which Palamas attaches to the essence/energies distinction in the Uncreated Light is dramatically greater than that which Symeon places upon the character of the Light as God's energies. For Symeon, this statement seems to be purposed by the same intent as his explanation of the 'formless form': he wishes to affirm the actual reality of God's presence *as* the light, but not to circumscribe Him wholly to the confines of the light, nor to proclaim that man can behold the complete fullness of God. He is thus far less precise than Palamas about just what it means for the Light to be the 'energies' of God—and indeed he doesn't spend a great deal of time trying to expound the idea beyond its simple use to help further clarify the mysterious nature of the vision.

(3) – *External or Internal Vision?*

We must not leave our discussion of Symeon's understanding of the nature of the Divine Light, without addressing the idea of its relationship and proximity to the human person. Is the Light something which the ascetic individual sees *outside* of himself, or is it something which he discovers within his own person?

Symeon's answer depends largely on the 'when' which must clarify the question. The Divine Light, he explains, is experienced in different ways at different times during the progression of the individual's spiritual growth. At first God comes, not as Light at all, but still in a real and active way to 'lift one up' into the path of contemplation. [24] Then, as the individual continues along this path, he begins to see the Light as a vision from afar

off; as a star or a sun, beaming down from above. As the process of purification continues, the Light becomes more immanent, nearer to the person, and is seen more clearly by illumined eyes. It is here that Symeon speaks of the Light as 'luminous waters' that wash away the impurities from the seeking soul. [25] Here the person is driven to simplify his mind and heart, devoting his full energy to contemplating God, knowing the 'simple character of the Light,' [26] and that God as Light *wants* to be seen. [27] When the heart is thus simplified, the Divine Light begins to *grow within it*, little by little, and the ascetic begins to see the light no longer as an external vision, but a radiance from within his own person. [28] Eventually the Light wholly transfigures the human heart, transforming it into light, [29] and now it is God Himself who radiates from within the transfigured person, and the person himself who—perhaps for the first time—truly knows God. Symeon writes:

In effect, there is no other way to know God, than by the vision (qewri/aj) of the Light which comes from Him. [30]

Concluding Thoughts.

We have seen then, albeit briefly, just how important the vision of the Divine Light was to the theology and spirituality of St Symeon the New Theologian. Not only does it represent the culmination and goal of the spiritual life—and indeed, the created intent and purpose of humankind—, but it represents as well the direct and personal encounter of the individual with the intimate Being of God. Such vision is not for Symeon a mere exercise in ecstatic joy (though he does speak of it in terms of ecstasy and a 'departure outside oneself' [31]); it is rather the very source and fountainhead of human transfiguration. The fallen, sinful person is met by the divine presence of God as Light, and purified until that very light shines from within his own heart like the sun. Symeon recounts the great joy that is this union with God, as he warmly remembers being borne up in the Light and drawn into his Saviour.

I cried and lived in an ineffable joy, to have seen You, You the Creator of the universe. [32]

You judged me, the prodigal, worthy to hear Your voice. /
And now I converse with You, the Master, as a friend to a friend. [33]

This is the heart of Symeon's theology of Light: the restoration of man to knowledge of and communion with his Saviour; that the two which have unnaturally become strangers might once again exist in union as friends.

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Notes.

[1] Cp., e.g., Hymn 53.206-207; Hymn 44.30-62.

[2] Cp. Maloney, pp. 85-86.

[3] Hymn 50.152-254; p. 253, Maloney ed.

[4] Symeon is fond of terms such as 'restoration' and 'revivification' (or simply 'vivification') in reference to the effects of the Incarnation and spiritual progression. Cp. 2nd Thanksgiving (Cat. 36) 10-14.

[5] 2nd Thanksgiving, 108-109, 208-212; Hymn 51.18-19.

[6] Gregory of Nyssa, *Commentary on the Canticle of Canticles*, Sermon 8; PG 940C-941C.

[7] Krivochéine, p. 254.

[8] 2nd Thanksgiving, 245-247.

[9] Krivochéine, p. 254.

[10] Hymn 45.6 (emphasis mine). Cp. also Ethics 5.276-277: 'God is light, and is seen as a great light.'

[11] Ethics 5.287-316 for full reference; emphasis mine.

[12] Hymn 55.126-129.

[13] Ethics 10.518-526: 'The Light is the Father, the Light is the Son, the Light is the Holy Spirit'. Also Cat. 33.194-195: 'Each of [the Divine Persons] is on His own count light, and all three are only one light'.

[14] Ethics 5.310-316.

[15] Symeon's general views on the ineffability of this mystery are well expressed in Hymn 50.13-15: 'Where and what and how? I do not know! / For the *how* is absolutely inexpressible. / The *where* appears to me as both known and unknown.'

[16] 1st Thanksgiving, 1.180; Hymn 50.44.

[17] Cat. 16.108-110; 1st Thanksgiving 1.179-180.

[18] Cat. 16.108-122; 127-136.

[19] 2nd Thanksgiving, 132-137; 150-155.

[20] Cat. 16.127-136; cp. Krivochéine, pp. 232-233, who brings out this 'cosmic character' to the Light.

[21] 2nd Thanksgiving 175-177;

[22] Hymn 50.43-45 (emphasis mine).

[23] Cp. Ethics 1.3.99-103. 'Supra-sensory' here does not imply that God lies outside the realm of our sense-perceptions, for that is precisely the claim Symeon makes as to the Light. But it is to admit that our senses can never fully grasp the completeness of the Divinity.

[24] 2nd Thanksgiving, 55-65.

[25] 2nd Thanksgiving, 140-148.

[26] Hymn 33.1-8; cp. Maloney, pp. 94-95 for comments on the importance of 'silencing the heart.'

[27] Hymn 32.84-85.

[28] Hymn 50.35: '[The Light] shines brilliantly within me like a lamp'; 43: 'It shows itself completely within me'. Hymn 51 clearly shows the progression from the Light as external and enveloping to internal and transfiguring.

[29] 2nd Thanksgiving 265-269.

[30] Ethics 5.263-269.

[31] Cp. Hymn 13.70; 25.18; 40.16; 49.72, etc.

[32] 2nd Thanksgiving 262-263.

[33] 2nd Thanksgiving, 226-227; 237-242.