

ST SYMEON THE NEW THEOLOGIAN AND HIS TEACHING ON THE VISION OF THE DIVINE LIGHT

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Abstract. The article deals with the problem of the divine light in the mystical works of St Symeon the New Theologian (949–1022) in the context of the Eastern Christian ascetical tradition. The author focuses on the passages referring to the divine light in the works of Evagrius Pontikos, St Isaac the Syrian, St Maximus the Confessor, and in the Makarian corpus. As is shown in the present contribution, none of these authors created a fully-developed theory of the vision of the divine light. Being close to these writers in many ideas, St Symeon was generally independent of any of them in his treatment of the theme of vision of light, always basing himself primarily upon his own experience.¹

St Symeon the New Theologian (949-1022) was one of the most distinguished mystical writers in the Byzantine tradition. His major ideas are rooted in Orthodox spirituality and his teaching in many ways corresponds to the teaching of preceding Fathers. In some ways Symeon's personal message was very much a continuation and development of that of his predecessors. What distinguishes Symeon from the majority of other church Fathers is his autobiographical approach to mystical themes, in particular his openness in description of his own visions of the divine light. All the elements of Symeon's doctrine are traditional, but the particular emphasis that he gives to specific themes is highly personal. Symeon's contemporaries were not entirely unjust when claiming that none of the great Fathers before Symeon had spoken so explicitly about himself and his personal experience. Moreover, among

¹ References to patristic sources in this text are given in footnotes with titles in abbreviated form, followed by chapter/section and paragraph/line numbers (where appropriate), with page numbers (where available) indicated in square brackets. A key for the abbreviations is contained in the bibliography, along with details of the titles and the collections of patristic texts in which they can be found.

the ascetical writers, Symeon was the first to emphasize the central place of the Eucharist in one's spiritual journey towards perfect union with God. He was the first to place the vision of the divine light as the main goal of one's ascetical struggle. He was the first to speak of dispassion and deification in such an experiential manner. Symeon's mystical theology is perfectly in harmony with preceding and subsequent Fathers of the Eastern Church, yet he is one of the most personal writers Christian tradition has ever known.

The vision of God as light is definitely the most characteristic component of Symeon's mysticism. This theme is touched upon in almost all of his poetical and prose works, and the terminology related to it is much more developed in him than in any other Byzantine writer of the preceding period. This theme is also one of the most personal in him, thoroughly indebted to his extraordinarily intense mystical life, and he speaks of the vision of light primarily as a matter of his own experience. Dozens of pages in his writings are devoted to the descriptions of his visions of the divine light: needless to say, all these descriptions are fully original and independent of any other literary source. Symeon is even so much engaged in the description and comprehension of his own experience of the vision of light that he is not especially interested in the scriptural episodes, such as the Transfiguration of Christ, which were often used as a starting-point by other Fathers to express their theory of the divine light.

Though Symeon was the first Byzantine author who put such a strong emphasis on the vision of light, this theme was discussed in Eastern patristic literature long before him. From the fourth century onwards, monastic sources provide us with many examples of such discussions, clearly indicating that the vision of light was the common experience of many generations of monks and ascetics. Let us look briefly at how this experience is reflected in Evagrius Pontikos, Makarios of Egypt, Maximos the Confessor and Isaac the Syrian as the authors whose doctrines are close to Symeon's. None of them created a developed theory of the vision of the divine light and none of them speaks so constantly of this vision as Symeon does; rather, they allude to it only occasionally. However, it is clear that, when referring to the divine light, they speak of the same kind of experience as Symeon, as will be illustrated by the passages quoted below.

The theme of light runs right through the writings of Evagrius, the first great monastic author. One autobiographical passage from his

Antirritikos is devoted to the 'holy light' which is seen by the 'eyes of the intellect':

I and the servant of God Ammonios wanted to learn about this light: where is it from. We, therefore, asked Saint John of Thivais whether the nature of the intellect is radiant and the light proceeds from the intellect itself or something else appears from outside and illumines it. He answered and said: 'Man is unable to distinguish this; however, without the grace of God the intellect cannot be illumined during prayer' ...²

Therefore, for all three personages mentioned, the experience of the vision of light was common, but Ammonios and Evagrius tried to explain the nature of this experience, advancing the notion of the natural light of the intellect, whereas John of Thivais abstained from detailed discussion, emphasizing only that the light has a divine origin.

Evagrius posed to John the question of crucial importance: was the light that appeared to them a manifestation of the initial luminosity of the human intellect or was it rather a super-natural light of divine origin? In his other writings Evagrius answers this question himself. According to him, there is firstly 'the blessed light of the Holy Trinity',³ since 'God is light by His nature'.⁴ At the same time there is also the light of the human intellect, its proper radiance.⁵ Between the two lights, divine and human, there is a 'kinship': as the intellect is created after the image of God, its light is 'related to Him'.⁶

At the time of prayer, the intellect of the one who has achieved dispassion is able to contemplate its own initial state of luminosity, becoming 'like light',⁷ 'like a star'⁸ and 'somewhat like a sapphire or heavenly colour'.⁹ When 'the inner man' becomes a 'gnostic', Evagrius says elsewhere, he contemplates the light of his own beauty ('the light of the beauty of his soul').¹⁰ In other words, both intellect and soul are transfigured during prayer: the first regains its initial light, the second its beauty. Evagrius explains this by means of the allegorical interpretation

² *Antirr.*, VI, §16 [p. 525].

³ *Thoughts*, §42 [p. 55] *et al.*

⁴ Cf., *Gnost.Chapt.*, I, §35 [p. 33].

⁵ *Gnost.*, §45 [p. 178].

⁶ *Skemm.*, §2 [p. 38].

⁷ *Gnost.Chapt.*, V, §15 [p. 183].

⁸ *Thoughts*, §43 [p. 55].

⁹ *Ibid.*, §39 [p. 55].

¹⁰ *Ps.-Suppl.*, §50 [pp. 462-464].

of *Psalm 75:3/76:2*: the ‘rational soul’ of man becomes the place of God, and the ‘luminous intellect’ – God’s ‘dwelling place’.¹¹

But it is not only the light of the intellect that is seen by the dispassionate in the time of prayer; Evagrius also speaks of the vision of the trinitarian divine light. Thus, in his *Skemmata* (‘Reflections’), which survived under the name of Neilos of Sinai, we find the following two definitions:

- (1) The [initial] state of the intellect is the intelligible elevation, somewhat like heavenly colour; also the light of the Holy Trinity is imparted to the intellect in the time of prayer.¹²
- (2) Prayer is the state of the intellect when it becomes totally under the light of the Holy Trinity.¹³

According to another Evagriian definition,

The divine intellect is the intellect that is calm from all movements and is clothed in the light of the vision of the Trinity.¹⁴

The fiancée from the *Song of Songs* is a type of the intellect which contemplates the light of the Holy Trinity during prayer, Evagrius says.¹⁵ He describes the encounter of the intellect with the divine light in terms of ‘mingling’:

As fire possesses its own body with power, so the intellect will possess the soul with power when it is totally mingled with the light of the Holy Trinity.¹⁶

The Evagriian concept of light can be reduced to the following basic ideas: 1) the intellect sees its natural (‘created’) light in the time of prayer; 2) the intellect sees the light of the Holy Trinity (‘uncreated’); 3) it sees the beauty of the soul; 4) it is mingled with the light of the Holy Trinity. The vision of light is considered by Evagrius as a fruit of dispassion, chastity of the intellect and prayer. He also emphasizes the necessity of God’s collaboration (*synergeia*) to achieve this vision.¹⁷

Turning to the *Makaritan Homilies*, we encounter in them several passages with references to the vision of the divine light. In one such

¹¹ *Skemm.*, §25 [p. 41].

¹² *Ibid.*, §4 [p. 38].

¹³ *Ibid.*, §27 [p. 41].

¹⁴ *Ps.-Suppl.*, §53 [pp. 464-465].

¹⁵ *Thoughts*, §42 [p. 55].

¹⁶ *Gnost.Chapt.*, II, §29 [p. 73].

¹⁷ Cf., *Skemm.*, §2 [p. 38].

passage, which contains an allegorical interpretation of *Ezekiel* 1:1-2:1, the question is about the state of the soul when it participates in the divine light:

For the soul that is counted worthy to participate in the spirit of the Lord's light and illumined by the beauty of His unspeakable glory., becomes all light, all face, all eye ... Like the sun that is the same all over, without any part behind or imperfect, but is completely all light., and like the fire, or the very light of fire, which is also entirely full of light., in the same manner the soul that is completely illumined with the unspeakable beauty of the glory of the light of Christ's face and perfectly participates in the Holy Spirit., becomes all eye, all light, all face, all glory, all spirit ...¹⁸

Thus, deriving images from the prophecy of Ezekiel, Makarios tells us how man participates in the Holy Spirit and his soul is transformed in the divine light through illumination by the face of Christ.

Another important passage from the *Makararian Homilies* (which will be treated more fully in the next section in connexion with its clear ecstatic characteristics) is devoted to the different types of the vision of the divine light: sometimes, Makarios says, the holy cross appeared as light, and in other times, 'the very light itself shining in the heart opened up an interior, profound and hidden light'.¹⁹ Elsewhere Makarios states that the Invisible One may be seen by worthy souls, who may 'taste His sweetness and enjoy in actual experience the goodness of the light of ineffable enjoyment'.²⁰ This motif of 'enjoyment' and 'sweetness' was to become important for other monastic writers who spoke of the vision of light. If Evagrius spoke of the 'eyes of the intellect' as the mystical organ which sees the divine light, Makarios speaks also of the 'eyes of the intellect',²¹ 'eyes of the heart'²² and the 'inner eyes of the soul'.²³

In Maximos the Confessor, the notion of the vision of the divine light plays a significant role. He describes the state of the intellect when it, being full of the 'desire of love' for God, goes out of itself and has no perception of itself and of creatures; 'for once illumined by the divine

¹⁸ *Hom.*, I, §2 [p. 2].

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, VIII, § 3 [pp. 78-79].

²⁰ *Ibid.*, IV, § 11 [p. 36].

²¹ *Hom.* (III), XXVI, § 6, l.36 [p. 308].

²² *Ibid.*, XVI, § 8, l.14 [p. 206].

²³ *Ibid.*, XV, § 1, l.14f [p. 172].

and infinite light, it remains insensible to any created being ...²⁴ The highest state of the intellect is when it finds itself in the light of the Holy Trinity, Maximos states.²⁵

Mystical illumination by the divine light takes place during prayer: in this Maximos is close to Evagrius. The highest type of prayer, according to Maximos, is when 'at the very onset of prayer the intellect is taken hold of by the divine and infinite light and is conscious ... only of Him Who through love illumines it.'²⁶ Having reached this stage of prayer, the intellect becomes totally transfigured: 'by an enduring participation in the divine illumination it has become altogether shining bright', so that its passible element is transformed into 'a never-ending divine desire and unceasing love.'²⁷ The transfiguration of the intellect is described in Maximos in terms of 'mingling': 'the intellect is totally mingled with the light of the Spirit.'²⁸

The theme of the divine light was extensively discussed by the Syriac mystical writers of the seventh and eighth centuries, especially by Isaac of Nineveh, Joseph Hazzaya and John of Dalyatha. In the works of Isaac the Syrian the term 'light' occurs frequently, and the doctrine of the vision of light is generally close to the Evagrian; for instance, he also distinguishes between the two levels of light. There is, on the one hand, the divine light,²⁹ which is the light of the Holy Trinity.³⁰ On the other hand, there is the light of the human soul,³¹ or of the intellect.³² The illumination of man by the divine light takes place during prayer³³ or during the reading of the Scriptures.³⁴

The most striking writing of the 'Greek Isaac' devoted to the theme of the divine light, *Homily 43*, belongs in fact to John of Dalyatha, in the writings of whom the theme of light occupies an even more prominent place than in Isaac. John speaks there of the divine light, which is the light of the Holy Trinity.³⁵ The divine light is sometimes described as

²⁴ *Love*, I, §10 [p. 52].

²⁵ *Ibid.*, I, §97 [p. 86].

²⁶ *Ibid.*, II, §6 [p. 92].

²⁷ *Ibid.*, II, §48 [p. 116].

²⁸ *Quest.*, §80, l.68-70 [p. 62].

²⁹ Cf., *Syr.Hom.*, LXVIII [p. 474].

³⁰ Cf., *Ibid.*, XXII [p. 174].

³¹ Cf., *Ibid.*, LIII [p. 379]; LXXX [p. 557].

³² Cf., *Ibid.*, LXIX [p. 482]; LXXX [p. 560].

³³ Cf., *Ibid.*, XIII [p. 124-125]; XLV [p. 326].

³⁴ Cf., *Ibid.*, I [p. 6].

‘the light from the Father’,³⁶ or the light of the Holy Spirit;³⁷ at other times the question is of Christ, ‘the light from the light of the Father.’³⁸ This light illumines the intellect.³⁹ When one is illumined by the divine light, one is filled with joy, contemplating at the same time one’s own beauty:

The sun that shines within him is the light of the Holy Trinity ... Christ, the light of the Father’s light, is [his] life, joy and happiness. Such a man is gladdened at all the times by the divine vision of his soul, as he is enthralled by his own beauty which is truly a hundredfold more resplendent than the brilliance of the sun itself ...⁴⁰ This realm is a cloud of God’s glory into which only the pure in heart may enter to behold the face of their Master and to have their intellects illumined by the ray of His light.⁴¹

It should also be pointed out that there is closeness between the concept of the divine light in *Homily 43* of the ‘Greek Isaac’ and the *Makararian Homilies*: in both texts the light appears as the sun shining from within rather than from outside; it fills man entirely, giving him joy and happiness; it makes man see the beauty of his soul; it transforms man himself into light; it allows him to contemplate the ‘face’ of the Lord.

Let us now look at Symeon’s visions of the divine light. The first of them is described by Symeon in the third person in his 22nd *Catechetical Discourse*, where he speaks of a certain George but implies himself:⁴²

One day, as he was standing and reciting ‘God, have mercy upon me, a sinner’, uttering it with his mind rather than his mouth, suddenly an abundance of divine radiance appeared from above and filled all the place. As this happened, the youth lost all awareness and forgot that he was in a house and under the roof. He saw only light all around him ... He was wholly united to the immaterial light and thought that he himself became light; having forgotten all the world, he became filled with tears and with ineffable joy and gladness.⁴³

³⁵ *Hom.*, XLIII [p. 177].

³⁶ *Ibid.* [p. 179].

³⁷ *Ibid.* [p. 178].

³⁸ *Ibid.* [p. 177].

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Cf., *ibid.* [pp. 176-177]: ‘The soul of a good person shines brighter than the sun.’

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, XLIII [pp. 177-178].

⁴² The same episode is told by Symeon in *Euch.*, I, 1.87-110. This suggests that the story in Symeon’s *Cat.*, XXII is autobiographical.

⁴³ *Cat.*, XXII, 1.88-100.

Then, Symeon continues, George's mind ascended into heaven and saw an even brighter light in which his spiritual father appeared to him ... When the vision passed, the youth came to himself and soon the cock crowed: the night had passed by unnoticed.⁴⁴

Another vision, depicted in *Cat.*16 also in the third person, has many details in common: the hero of the narration is suddenly moved to tears while he is standing in prayer; he falls down and sees a great immaterial light; he loses self-consciousness and forgets of the earth.⁴⁵

If in the *Catechetical Discourses*, addressed to his monks, Symeon sometimes felt obliged to speak about his experience of the vision of light in a somewhat indirect manner (as in *Cat.*16 and 22), his two *Thanksgivings* represent a kind of mystical autobiography, where Symeon thanks God openly for the revelations and visions of which he was counted worthy. In *Euch.*1, after the description of his first vision of light,⁴⁶ Symeon speaks of the second vision, when the ray appeared in his intellect, and the light descended upon his head, as a 'small and flame-shaped cloud'.⁴⁷ Then Symeon describes his subsequent visions, giving us to understand that they were numerous throughout his life:

I have frequently seen light, sometimes within me ... , and sometimes it appeared externally, from afar, or even it was completely hidden, and by its hiddenness caused me unbearable pain, because I thought I would never see it again. But when I again lamented and wept ... , it appeared like the sun which penetrates through the thickness of the clouds and gradually shows itself as a gently glowing sphere.⁴⁸

Symeon, therefore, distinguishes between the vision 'from outside' and vision 'from within', the latter being the most powerful and delightful: in both cases, however, the question is about the divine and uncreated light (rather than of the natural intellectual light). Like the preceding authors, Symeon refers to the vision of the 'face' of Christ in the light:⁴⁹ it is still, however, an experience of pure luminosity rather than the appearance of the 'face' in any form or shape. Perhaps the new element in Symeon is that the dynamics of mystical experience include periods of

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, XXII l.101-113.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, XVI, l.78ff.

⁴⁶ *Euch.*, I, l.87-113; described also in *Cat.*, XXII, l.88ff.

⁴⁷ *Euch.*, I, l.135-137.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, I, l.172-180.

⁴⁹ Cf., *ibid.*, II, l.141 ('to see the light of Your face').

abandonment by God as a necessary, though painful, element, references to which accompany many of his descriptions of the vision of light.⁵⁰ The theme of abandonment was widely discussed in ascetical literature before Symeon,⁵¹ but not in such a mystical and personal way as Symeon treats it.

In *Euch.2* Symeon shows that the divine light, which regularly appeared to him, gradually became more and more recognizable:

From then on ... You came to me more frequently ... and made me see more clearly the light of Your face. Yet immediately You flew away ... Coming at times and then going away in such a manner, You gradually appeared to me more and more fully., granting me to see [You] more obviously, and giving me more light.⁵²

Symeon then describes several of his subsequent visions, making clear that they became more frequent as time went on.

Let us now indicate some most important characteristics of Symeon's doctrine of the vision of light, deriving primarily from his *Hymns*, in order to reveal the points of correspondence and difference between Symeon and preceding writers.

First of all, it is clear that for Symeon the divine light is not an angel or any created being or phenomenon.⁵³ According to Symeon, the divine light is God Himself in His revelation to the human person. 'Your light is You, O my God,' he says in one of his hymns.⁵⁴ As in Syriac mystics, the light is sometimes identified in Symeon with the Holy Trinity;⁵⁵ at other times it is identified with the Holy Spirit.⁵⁶ Quite regularly Symeon also speaks of the vision of Christ as light.⁵⁷ It is still, however, an experience of pure luminosity: Symeon never speaks of Christ as appearing in

⁵⁰ See *Hymn*, XI, l.88-94 *et al.*

⁵¹ See, for example, Evagrius, *Gnost.*, §28 [pp. 134-142]; Isaac, *Hom.*, XLVI [p. 287] = *Syr.Hom.*, XXXIX [p. 302]; Maximos, *Love*, IV, §96 [p. 237].

⁵² *Euch.*, II, l.137-146.

⁵³ Cf., *Hymn*, XVII, l.238ff. 'It is not anything belonging to the world, nor a creature; for it is uncreated and beyond all creatures ...'

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, XLV, l.6.

⁵⁵ Cf., *ibid.*, XII, l.19-23: 'The three of Them are light: the Father, Son and Holy Spirit ... The three are seen to me as in one countenance ...'; cf., *ibid.*, I, l.226; II, l.86-94; XXI, l.147; XXIV, l.248ff., XXV, l.33-48; XXXIII, l.1ff. *et al.*

⁵⁶ Cf., *ibid.*, XLIV, l.114 'The Spirit shines in the light'; cf., *ibid.*, XVII, l.36; XXII, l.177 *et al.*

⁵⁷ Cf., *ibid.*, LI, l.15ff. 'Little by little You shone upon me Your divine light., O Christ, my God'; cf., *ibid.*, XXV, l.145-151; *Eth.*, IV, l. 263 *et al.*

a visible image, but only of the light and sometimes the voice of Christ.⁵⁸ Incidentally, let us mention that Symeon never describes a vision of the Mother of God,⁵⁹ and only once does he mention the vision of a saint, namely his spiritual father Symeon the Studite, near the divine light.⁶⁰

Next, the light which Symeon describes is not a physical or material phenomenon: it is characterized as ‘immaterial’,⁶¹ ‘simple, formless, altogether non-composite, bodiless and inseparable.’⁶² Using apophatic expressions, Symeon emphasizes that the divine light is beyond any categories of matter or form, as well as beyond human speech and understanding: it is ‘like a treasure which is ineffable, unspeakable, without quality or quantity, without image or matter or form, which is formed in overwhelming beauty, which is all simple as the light that transcends all light.’⁶³ The last expression recalls the Dionysian theory of the divine light as ‘supra-light’ which is not comparable with any material light; without going so far in his apophaticism as to describe the divine light in terms of ‘darkness’, Symeon clearly indicates that the term ‘light’ must not be understood in the sense of material light: the term only symbolizes the reality that is far beyond any human word.

Being immaterial, the divine light is ‘intelligible’,⁶⁴ which means that it has an effect firstly upon the intellect, shining in it,⁶⁵ illumining it,⁶⁶ purifying it,⁶⁷ catching it up in mystical rapture to God.⁶⁸ Unlike Evagrius and other preceding writers, Symeon does not usually speak of the natural light of the intellect, but only of the divine light which illumines the intellect from outside or from within.

⁵⁸ In this Symeon’s visions of Christ might be compared with Paul’s vision as recounted in Acts 9: 3-4. In the case of Paul’s vision, the light and the voice of Christ appeared at the same time. Symeon, when describing his first visions of light in *Euch.*, I, emphasizes that he was not immediately granted to hear the voice of Christ. See *Euch.*, I, l.159-161. It is only later that Symeon heard Christ speaking to him. See *Euch.*, II, l.225ff.

⁵⁹ But he does speak of the vision of light which took place after he venerated an icon of the Holy Virgin. See *Euch.*, I, l.255ff.

⁶⁰ *Cat.*, XXII, l.102-104.

⁶¹ *Hymn*, XXXVIII, l.64; cf., *Hymn*, LI, l.141; *Eth.*, XI, l.176 *et al.*

⁶² *Hymn*, XIII, l.41-42.

⁶³ *Eth.*, XI, l.174-177.

⁶⁴ Cf., XXXIII, l.64; XVI, l.2; XXIII, l.222

⁶⁵ Cf., *ibid.*, XXXIV, l.79; XL, l.11 (in both cases the light shines in the intellect and the heart).

⁶⁶ Cf., *ibid.*, XI, l.42; XVII, l.338; XVIII, l.82; XX, l.236 *et al.*

⁶⁷ Cf., *ibid.*, XXX, l.579 *et al.*

⁶⁸ Cf., *ibid.*, IX, l.33; XLVIII, l.23 *et al.*

The divine light, Symeon says, is invisible to one's bodily eyes,⁶⁹ but is seen with the intellect or rather with what Symeon calls 'the eye of the intellect',⁷⁰ 'the noetic eye of the intellect',⁷¹ 'the intelligible eyes of heart',⁷² 'the eyes of the soul',⁷³ 'the intelligible eyes of the soul',⁷⁴ etc. Sometimes Symeon even asserts that the divine light is 'inaccessible to the intelligible eyes of heart';⁷⁵ at other times he says otherwise, namely that the Inaccessible One becomes 'accessible to my intelligible eyes.'⁷⁶ Symeon also speaks of the spiritual 'mouth' and 'hands' by means of which the ascetics participate in the divine light:

They see in abundance the simple light of God's divinity with their intellectual eyes; they touch it with immaterial hands in irresistible love; they eat it without eating with the spiritual mouth of their intellect and soul, without being able to be satiated by the contemplation of its beauty and sweetness.⁷⁷

The mystical vocabulary of this passage is remarkably close to that of the preceding Fathers quoted above, who also speak of the divine light as seen by the 'eyes of the intellect' (Evagrius, Makarios), of its unspeakable beauty (Makarios), of its being touched in an ineffable manner (Hesychios), of the sweetness that is tasted and joy that is experienced during the vision (Makarios, 'Greek Isaac'), of the loving desire which accompanies the vision (Maximos). Employing the unusual images of 'touching' and 'eating' the light, Symeon points to the total and intimate union between the mystic and the light during the vision, emphasizing the all-embracing and all-absorbing character of this experience. In another instance, when speaking of the transformation of the soul by the light, he employs the language of 'embrace' by the light or 'immersion' in it:

God becomes for those who are worthy
Like a divine and luminous pool,
Embracing them all ...

⁶⁹ Cf., *ibid.*, XXXVIII, l.83.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, XI, l.46.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, XXXVIII, l.86.

⁷² *Ibid.*, XXXII, l.82.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, XXII, l.108.

⁷⁴ *Eth.*, X, l.673-674.

⁷⁵ *Hymn*, XXXVIII, l.84.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, XV, l.52-53.

⁷⁷ *Eth.*, IV, l.862-867

The divine Spirit ... ,
 Being Himself light without sunset,
 Transforms all those in whom He lives
 Into light ... ⁷⁸

In Symeon the patristic notion of the transformation and transfiguration of human nature by virtue of the vision of the divine light has undergone considerable development. As was indicated above, some earlier Fathers asserted that, during this vision, the intellect sees its own natural light (Evagrius, Diadochos), the mind shines brightly (Maximos), the soul becomes all fire and light (Makarios), and the transfigured man contemplates his own beauty (Evagrius, 'Greek Isaac'). The experience of Symeon proves that the whole of human nature, including the intellect, the soul and even the body, is transfigured by the divine light. This is one of the central ideas of Symeon, to which he constantly returns. When you see the divine light, he says, 'your body shines, and so does your soul, for your soul then ... becomes as resplendent as God Himself'.⁷⁹ In *Cat.*22 Symeon says that the young George, when seeing the divine light, 'thought that he himself became light'.⁸⁰ Elsewhere Symeon describes how he contemplates his own beauty when seeing the divine light:

He shines in my poor heart,
 Illumining me from every side by His immortal radiance,
 Lightening all my members by His rays ...
 I partake of His light, I participate in His glory,
 And my face shines as the face of my Beloved,
 And all my members become light-bearing.
 I become then more beautiful than the most beautiful ... ,
 And much more precious than all visible things ... ⁸¹

Symeon's imagery of the vision of light is of exceptional interest because of its richness and diversity, especially in the *Hymns*. He normally employs images which had become traditional for mystical literature side by side with those characteristic of his own usage. It has already been mentioned that Symeon widely employed the traditional image of the sun: he speaks of the vision of God as the sun,⁸² of the sun shining in his heart,⁸³ of

⁷⁸ *Hymn*, XLIV, l.349-375.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, l, l.238-246.

⁸⁰ *Cat.*, XXII, l.98.

⁸¹ *Hymn*, XVI, l.24-37.

⁸² *Ibid.*, XLII, l.85.

the sun shining in his hands,⁸⁴ of the intelligible sun,⁸⁵ the sweet sun,⁸⁶ the inaccessible sun,⁸⁷ the sun without sunset,⁸⁸ the dazzling sun,⁸⁹ of the sun's disk,⁹⁰ the sun's rays,⁹¹ the sun's beauty,⁹² of the supra-solar light.⁹³ If the image of the moon is only occasionally employed by Symeon,⁹⁴ the image of a star appears more frequently.⁹⁵ Among other images and terms connected with light are: candle,⁹⁶ lamp⁹⁷ and lantern;⁹⁸ radiance,⁹⁹ glow¹⁰⁰ and luminosity;¹⁰¹ the cloud of light¹⁰² and light-like teat.¹⁰³ The striking image of the lightning, which blinds one by its brightness, occurs in the *Chapters*.¹⁰⁴ The image of the oyster which, when the sun's ray penetrates through its open folds, gives birth to a pearl, is also remarkable.¹⁰⁵ Sometimes different images are joined in one description of the divine light: 'I see You like the sun and like a star, I carry You in my belly like a pearl and see You like a lamp that is lit inside a vessel.'¹⁰⁶ At other times different images indicate different degrees of the vision: 'You are seen from afar, like the rising star, and then You grow little by little ... and are seen like the sun.'¹⁰⁷

⁸³ Ibid., VII, l.4.

⁸⁴ Ibid., XXIII, l.124.

⁸⁵ Ibid., XXIX, l.225; XLIX, l.75.

⁸⁶ Ibid., VIII, l.54.

⁸⁷ Ibid., I, l.143.

⁸⁸ Ibid., XV, l.94; XVIII, l.17; XLV, l.38.

⁸⁹ Ibid., XXIII, l.237.

⁹⁰ Ibid., I, l.39; XVII, l.387.

⁹¹ Ibid., XII, l.59; XV, l.49; XXIX, l.225 *et al.*

⁹² Ibid., XLIX, l.75.

⁹³ Ibid., XI, l.41.

⁹⁴ Cf., Ibid., XXIX, 9; *Eth.*, IV, l.769-776.

⁹⁵ Cf., *Hymn*, XVIII, l.18; XXII, l.5; XXII, l.14; XLII, l.85; XLV, l.38; *ibid.*, XVII, l.386; XLIX, l.74-77 *et al.*

⁹⁶ Ibid., XXIII, l.148; XLII, l.87 *et al.*

⁹⁷ Ibid., II, l.18; XXII, l.11 *et al.*

⁹⁸ Ibid., XX, l.205; XXIX, l.221 *et al.*

⁹⁹ Ibid., XVII, l.344-354; XXII, l.8 *et al.*

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., XLV, l.92 *et al.*

¹⁰¹ Ibid., I, l.15.

¹⁰² Ibid., XVII, l.326.

¹⁰³ Ibid., XXVIII, l.183.

¹⁰⁴ Cf., *Cap.*, III, §54. Cf. also *Euch.*, II, l.150ff. *et al.*

¹⁰⁵ *Eth.*, VIII, l.72-84.

¹⁰⁶ *Hymn*, XLII, l.85-87. Cf., *ibid.*, XVII, l.325ff.; XXII, l.5-9.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., LI, l.35-38.

In Symeon's imagery of light, warm and bright colours are thoroughly dominant. Symeon's light is not a cool luminescence of the moon, but is dazzling sunshine or the blazing radiance of fire. The image of fire occupies an important place in Symeon's mysticism; he describes how divine fire purifies the soul and makes it full of light and radiance:

God is fire: and He came to send fire on the earth (Luke 12:49) ... If [this fire] is lit in someone, it grows in him until it becomes a great flame and reaches heaven ... The burning of the soul that is inflamed by it does not occur in an unconscious manner ... , but in full assurance and knowledge ... Having entirely purified us from stain of passions, [this fire] becomes our food and drink, illumination and joy within us, and it makes us light by participation ... When the soul ... is united with the divine and immaterial fire ... , then the body as well becomes by participation the fire of this divine and unspeakable light.¹⁰⁸

This happened to Peter and Paul and other apostles, Symeon continues, and to the Holy Fathers, who 'destroyed all heresies by this divine fire': it happens also to all those who love God to such a degree as not to spare their lives for Him.¹⁰⁹

At this point Symeon is very close to the author of the *Makarion Homilies*. The latter also speaks of the kindling of the soul by the fire of God,¹¹⁰ of the illumination of the soul by the divine light which occurs 'in assurance and knowledge'.¹¹¹ He describes how the soul becomes inflamed by the fire,¹¹² and how the body participates in the transfiguration of human nature.¹¹³ He also cites Paul and other apostles as examples of people who were inflamed by the divine fire.¹¹⁴

Generally, in his usage of the image of fire Symeon is close to Makarios. Symeon writes of the light which burns like fire¹¹⁵ and appears like a cloud of fire;¹¹⁶ the sun that appears as globe-shaped and light-like fire;¹¹⁷ the

¹⁰⁸ *Eth.*, VII, l.509-537.

¹⁰⁹ *Eth.*, VII, l.548-557.

¹¹⁰ Cf., *Hom.*, XI, §1ff. [pp. 96ff.] *et al.*

¹¹¹ Cf., *ibid.*, VII, §5 [p. 74].

¹¹² *Ibid.*, XXV, §9 [p. 204].

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, V, §7-12 [pp. 59-63].

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, XXV, §9-10 [pp. 204-205].

¹¹⁵ *Hymn*, XXIV, l.20.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, LV, l.86; cf., *Hymn*, XVII, l.373 and *Euch.*, I, l.136-137.

¹¹⁷ *Hymn*, I, l.39-40.

fire of Christ's divinity,¹¹⁸ the fire of divine love and desire;¹¹⁹ the fire that falls into the heart¹²⁰ and illumines the soul.¹²¹ This fire is characterized by Symeon as 'divine'¹²² and 'spiritual'.¹²³ According to Symeon, divine fire is 'inaccessible, uncreated, invisible, eternal, immaterial, totally immutable, infinite by itself, inextinguishable, immortal, limitless'.¹²⁴ Describing divine fire, Symeon often uses dynamic image of flame;¹²⁵ he speaks of mystical movements of fire and light: 'O, inebriation of light, O, movements of fire, O, scintillations of flame in me!'¹²⁶

To summarize what has been noted, some of the more important characteristics of the light in Symeon can be specified: 1) this light is not the created light of the intellect, but the uncreated, divine light of the Holy Trinity; 2) it is non-material and is not perceived through the sensible eyes, but through the spiritual 'eyes of the intellect'; 3) it is formless and shapeless, being totally beyond human categories of shape and form; 4) it transfigures the human person, including the intellect, soul and body; 5) the 'face' of God is seen inside the light, but in a spiritual manner rather than in any visible form.

As far as the link between Symeon and preceding Fathers is concerned, it can be stated that Symeon's doctrine of the vision of light definitely had its prehistory in patristic literature, particularly in the writings of Evagrius, Makarios, Maximos and Isaac the Syrian. Being close to these writers in many ideas, Symeon was generally independent of any of them in his treatment of the theme of vision of light, always basing himself primarily upon his own experience. He was also the first Byzantine author for whom the vision of light was the main goal of all ascetical exploits and good deeds and who claimed with such decisiveness that

We practise all this asceticism and all these actions only in order to partake of the divine light, like a lamp, so that we may bring our souls as a single candle to the inaccessible light.¹²⁷

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, II, l.8.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, VIII, l.37; XVIII, l.84; XX, l.239; XXX, l.198; XLVII, l.52 *et al.*

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, XXX, l.590.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, XXX, l.81.

¹²² *Ibid.*, XXVIII, l.157; XXX, l.1; XXX, l.11ff. *et al.*

¹²³ *Ibid.*, I, l.34.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, XXX, l.18-24.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, I, l.40; XVIII, l.215; XX, l.238 *et al.*

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, XXV, l.33f.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, XXXIII, l.130-133.

St Symeon's mysticism constitutes the most original part of his literary heritage. As has been stated before, unlike the majority of church writers, Symeon does not hesitate to speak openly of his own personal mystical experience. However, when describing his own mystical journey, Symeon always placed it in the context of Orthodox tradition, regarding his own experience as a part of the experience of the Church and insisting upon his faithfulness to the Orthodox Church.

One crucial conclusion concerning the very nature of Orthodox tradition might be drawn on the basis of a study of Symeon's mysticism in general and his teaching on the divine light in particular. His case illustrates, in a very striking manner, that the foundation stone of tradition is nothing else but an experience of the direct relationship between God and the human person – the experience of immediacy with God, which is commonly designated as 'mystical'. This implies that true tradition is unimaginable unless mystical experience stands behind it. Those who try to oppose a formal and rationalistic 'tradition' to an enthusiastic and inspired 'mysticism' fall into the mistake of misunderstanding what tradition is. Such people, whatever their rank and background, while trying to defend what they think to be 'tradition', favour its corruption and falsification. One may say that if ever the tradition becomes deprived of its mystical and prophetic core, it tends to be transformed into its own antipode.

Our conclusion concerning the nature of mysticism within the Christian Church is analogous to this: true mysticism is unimaginable and impossible outside of tradition. The true mystic is not he who places his personal experience above tradition, but, on the contrary, he whose experience is in agreement with the experience of the Church in general and its greatest representatives in particular. The historical role of the great mystics of the Church is very often the role of defenders of tradition and renewers of the ideal of living according to the Gospel: this is why they are usually maximalists and radicals. But it is precisely their maximalism which inspires thousands of ordinary Christians and keeps Orthodox tradition alive. In every age mystics emerge, or rather they are granted to the Church, so as to transmit their heritage to their contemporaries and to following generations, keeping the golden chain of sanctity unbroken.

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