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renewal to restore spiritual vitality after the skirmishes in this conflict. Provision must also be made for sanctions against those who reject or ignore the call to holiness.

This view of the nature of Christian living explains the need for the daily Quiet Time, corporate prayer, Bible study and fellowship with other believers in worship and service. Similarly, there is also an important role for pastoral guidance and the help to be gained from reading devotional, biographical and doctrinal literature. Practices such as these are designed to strengthen zeal for God and resistance to sin and evil, while pastoral counselling and occasions of surrender and confession through prayer or publicly in response to the preaching of the Word are means of reconciliation and renewal.

However, the principles which underlie these disciplines can easily be distorted or lost, with the result that the disciplines are practices out of mere tradition or for their own sake. In any case, an observer without a sympathetic personal understanding of them is likely to see only a rigid, authoritarian rule. Furthermore, this kind of discipline does tend strongly to generate a 'world denying' spirituality, although in recent times some are attracted to the view, expressed by such a prominent contemporary exponent as Thomas Merton, that 'by disengaging from the world .. [it is possible to] become more closely involved with it.'⁴⁷ But for many evangelicals, 'other worldliness' is the epitome of spirituality, and therefore they devote themselves wholeheartedly to this pursuit, in the confidence that the best they can do for the world is to bring it to a knowledge of God through their prayer and evangelistic witness.

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Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church: Prayer in the writings of St. Symeon the New Theologian

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INTRODUCTION

The Eastern Christian tradition has never known any conflict, nor even made a sharp distinction, between theology and mysticism.¹ Indeed, the 'mystical' and 'experiential'

⁴⁷ LHCb, 380.

¹ The term 'mystical' in Byzantine theology 'does not imply emotional individualism, but quite the opposite: a continuous communion with the Spirit who dwells in the whole Church. It implies as well the constant recognition of the inadequacies of the human intellect and of human language to express the fullness of truth, and the constant balancing of positive theological affirmations about God with the corrective of

nature of Byzantine theology has often been stressed; theology and the life of prayer are inextricably bound. Therefore, it is no mere coincidence that the Eastern Orthodox Church has reserved the title of ‘Theologian’ for only three sacred writers who are ‘mystically’ inclined: St. John, ‘the most ‘mystical’ of the four Evangelists’ St. Gregory Nazianzen, ‘writer of contemplative poetry’; and St. Symeon the New Theologian, ‘the singer of union with God’.²

The last of this trio, St. Symeon (949–1022), is little known to the Western church, to the great impoverishment of that tradition. Born in Asia Minor, Symeon was raised under the reign of Constantine Porphyrogenitus, during a time of peace, prosperity, and expansion of the Byzantine empire. Although prepared since childhood for a diplomatic career, Symeon longed to pursue the monastic life. He eventually became the abbot of a monastery where he laboured for twenty-five years to revive and reform monasticism. While having gained a reputation for sanctity and learning, Symeon’s mystical approach to theology brought him into an ongoing polemic that led to [p. 168](#) his exile in 1009. He remained in the small town of his exile—writing and guiding others—until his death in 1022.³

St. Symeon lived and wrote during a period of increasing religious formalism within the Byzantine world. Similar to the trend in the Western church of the period, a form of Byzantine scholasticism was emerging, tending to divorce theology from a conscious, living experience of faith in God. While Symeon’s writings were addressed primarily to monks, he believed he was called to lead both laity and monks into a life in the conscious presence of God through repentance, purity of heart, and constant prayer. He openly shared much of his own mystical experience, an uncommon practice among Byzantine mystics. In so doing, however, Symeon lies in the tradition of the best of the Greek Fathers, ‘the true “theologians”, who theologized out of their living experience of what is given in Scripture, namely, a consciousness of the indwelling Trinity’.⁴

THE HESYCHAST TRADITION OF PRAYER

Undergirding the Orthodox approach to prayer, the spiritual life, and, for that matter, all theology, is the notion of ‘theosis’ or deification. This concept was expressed by Athanasius in the oft-quoted statement, ‘God became man so that man may become God’. Some describe deification as a sharing in the divine life of the Holy Trinity, humans thereby becoming ‘partakers of the divine nature’ ([2 Pet. 1:4](#)):

apophatic theology’, John Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology: Historical Trends and Doctrinal Themes* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1974), p. 14.

² Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Cambridge & London: James Clarke & Co. Ltd., 1973), p. 9.

³ For more detailed biographical information, see George Maloney S.J., ‘Introduction’ in Symeon the New Theologian, *The Discourses* (New York: Paulist Press, 1980). See also Archbishop Basil Krivocheine, *In the Light of Christ: Saint Symeon the New Theologian* (Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1986). This recent translation of a work on the life, spirituality, and doctrine of St. Symeon was not yet available at the time the present essay was written.

⁴ Maloney, ‘Introduction’, *Discourses*, p.4.

This participation takes man within the life of the three Divine Persons themselves, in the incessant circulation and overflowing of love which courses between the Father, the Son and the Spirit, and which expresses the very nature of God.⁵

The Greek Fathers considered deification—becoming like God through union with him—to be the very purpose of the Incarnation and the aim of the believer's life.⁶ While the fullness of 'theosis' awaits p. 169 an eschatological realization, participatory union with God in the present life is given as a foretaste of the glory to come.

For the Orthodox believer, it is via a pathway of contemplative prayer that one attains to union with God, to participation in the life of the Trinity. Prayer, then, is crucial to the life of faith; it is the means toward the ultimate goal in life. A certain approach to prayer, known as 'hesychasm',⁷ is generally associated with Orthodox spirituality. Unfortunately, 'hesychasm' has come to be much more narrowly defined than it ought. It tends to be identified with a well-defined method of prayer, involving a particular breathing technique for mental concentration, and the repeated recitation of the 'Jesus Prayer': 'Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me'. This system became highly codified in the monastic milieu of Mount Athos in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, and was polemicized by the writings of the Athonite monk Gregory Palamas.⁸

The roots of the hesychast tradition, however, can be found much earlier. A hesychast approach to the spiritual life, emphasizing unceasing prayer and stillness of the heart before God, was recommended by spiritual writers of the patristic era, particularly the Desert Fathers. It was then more fully developed by the Sinaitic school of John of Climacus in the sixth and seventh centuries. In keeping with this broader understanding of the hesychast tradition, the *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité* defines hesychasm as follows:

... a spiritual system of essentially contemplative orientation which places the perfection of man in union with God through prayer or perpetual praying. But what characterizes it is specifically the affirmation of the excellence, indeed the necessity of hesychia, or quiet, in the broad sense, in order to attain this union .. a pure means ... of disposing the soul to seek God, by placing it in desired conditions.⁹

In the same article, hesychasm is described as both the climate for, and the emanation of, prayer. Four common traits of the hesychast tradition are distinguished: detachment, or freedom from passion; watchfulness, or guarding the heart; the remembrance or continual thought of God; and unceasing prayer.¹⁰ Others outline the three characteristic levels, or deepening degrees, of hesychast prayer, namely: oral prayer, mental prayer, and prayer of the heart. These p. 170 phases encompass a general progression from words to silence. They comprise what is known as an 'apophatic' approach to prayer, a negation of all words, images, and symbols of God in order to affirm in inward silence the ineffable

⁵ A Monk of the Eastern Church, *Orthodox Spirituality* (Crestwood New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1978), p.22, cf. Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, p. 67.

⁶ For further discussion of 'theosis' or 'deification' in the Greek Fathers and other Byzantine writers, see Meyendorff, pp. 2-4; 159-165.

⁷ From the Greek word *hesychia*, meaning silence or stillness of heart.

⁸ Meyendorff, p. 76.

⁹ Pierre Adnes, 'Hesychasme', *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, Tome VII, Première Partie (Paris: Beauchesne, 1969), p. 384, (author's translation).

¹⁰ *Dictionnaire*, p. 389.

reality of who God is.¹¹ While there are differences of emphasis regarding the precise method or stages of hesychast or apophatic prayer, its aim is clearly to bring the one praying into personal encounter with God, to a union of love which surpasses verbal expression.

PRAYER IN SYMEON'S WRITINGS

St. Symeon himself makes no clear distinction between the various levels of prayer. In fact, he hardly uses the word 'hesychia' in his works.¹² Nevertheless, both Vladimir Lossky and the author of the *Dictionnaire* article on hesychasm place Symeon clearly within the hesychast tradition. They insist that his very variations from traditional formulations, his extremely personal style, and his doctrinal peculiarities, render him the founder of a neo-hesychasm. This is the explanation for the adjective 'New' attached to his title of 'Theologian'.¹³ Others point out that, as with most prophetic personalities, Symeon's views defy any attempt at rigid classification.¹⁴ This is certainly true of his writing on prayer. While his understanding of prayer emphasizes the essentially apophatic nature of theology and the spiritual life, characteristic of the Orthodox tradition as a whole, Symeon describes no clear-cut system of arriving at the desired goal. Rather, his writings reflect and support Kallistos Ware's contention that 'Prayer is a living relationship between persons, and personal relationships cannot be neatly classified'.¹⁵

The life of prayer permeates all of Symeon's works. His *Hymns of Divine Love*, a compilation of 58 metrical poems, overflow with his passionate love for Jesus Christ. Both the *Hymns* and his *Discourses*, a collection of teachings and exhortations to his monks, reveal the intimacy of his personal communion with God.¹⁶ Even Symeon's *Theological and Ethical Treatises*, which contain a fierce invective against the spread of abstract 'scholastic' theology in the Eastern church, expose the depth and centrality of his own prayer life.

While none of these works present well-defined instructions on how to pray or what to pray for, three themes in particular stand out and will form the basis of our discussion of Symeon's approach to prayer: repentance, progress in virtue, and union with God. These three themes are seen by many spiritual writers as a threefold pathway of prayer, or three progressive levels in the ascent to God.¹⁷ Symeon himself occasionally

¹¹ Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Way* (Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir's Theological Seminary, 1979), pp. 162–168.

¹² In the critical, two-volume edition of Symeon's *Traité Théologique et Ethique*, only six references to the various forms of the word are cited.

¹³ *Dictionnaire*, p. 396.

¹⁴ Meyendorff, p. 74.

¹⁵ Ware, p. 142.

¹⁶ Maloney affirms that 'No Christian writer before Symeon, not even Saint Augustine, opened his own interior experience of Jesus Christ and the indwelling Trinity to a reading audience as does Symeon', 'Introduction', *Discourses*, p. 13.

¹⁷ Spiritual writers use a variety of terms and nuances in meaning to describe this threefold way. St. Dionysius the Areopagite, followed by many Western writers, distinguishes stages of purification, illumination, and union. Gregory of Nyssa speaks of light, cloud, and darkness, modeled on the life of Moses. Evagrius and St. Maximus the Confessor develop Origen's three-fold division: *praktiki* or practice of the virtues; *physiki* or the contemplation of nature; *theologia* or the contemplation of God himself. Ware, p. 141.

distinguishes the ways of ‘penitence’, ‘progress’, and ‘perfection’ in the spiritual life.¹⁸ However, Symeon is less systematic than many, and these three stages in the spiritual life, or, the life of prayer, ‘are not so much successive as simultaneous ... three deepening levels, interdependent, coexisting with each other’.¹⁹ Symeon also presents his own unique variations or emphases in each of these areas, but the themes themselves disclose an understanding of the nature and goal of prayer that is common to all spiritual writers in the Orthodox hesychast tradition.

1. REPENTANCE

While Symeon is one of the great charismatic figures in Christian spirituality—writing of visions and ecstasies, emphasizing the operations of the Spirit, even the necessity of a ‘baptism of the Holy Spirit’—he certainly sees deep and constant repentance from sin as the foundation of all other spiritual experience and, indeed, of the whole of Christian life. Repentance is a dominant theme throughout Symeon’s writings. In fact, one cannot be truly conformed if one has not sincerely repented of sin, for, ‘how then can He exist in the soul **P. 172** which has not been completely purified and which has never reached the conscious awareness of repentance?’²⁰

Symeon describes repentance from sin as the ‘baptism of the Holy Spirit’. He even employs the same biblical texts that are commonly used in such discussions today (e.g., [John 3:5](#), [Acts 1:5](#), etc.). But, in contrast to many modern charismatic believers who emphasize the gift of tongues as the sign of that baptism, Symeon speaks of the ‘gift of tears’ as the mark of the Spirit’s baptism. When the Christian comes to be truly and deeply sorrowful for sin, the Holy Spirit will pour out a profusion of tears of penitence. While teaching on tears is hardly known today, and Symeon certainly emphasized it more than most, it was actually taught quite consistently by the Eastern Christian Fathers, especially by John Climacus.²¹ Symeon speaks of this gift both in his own experience and as a necessity for all Christians.

Symeon also provides some concrete instruction on how to repent.²² He himself uses and recommends the ‘Jesus Prayer’ as an example of penitent prayer, and directs his monks to the discourse of John Climacus, *On Penitence*,²³ for further instruction on methods of repentance. Symeon often proposes fasting as the ‘beginning’ or ‘foundation’ of every spiritual activity. He also stresses the use of the imagination in penitent prayer in order to concentrate one’s thoughts and to ‘Remember the foul deeds they [your hands] may have committed with fear’.²⁴ Always modeling what he teaches, Symeon, in his *Hymns*

Basil of Caesarea often distinguishes between beginners, progressors, and the perfect (e.g., *On the Holy Spirit*, 9), which seems to be more in keeping with Symeon’s tendency.

¹⁸ *Discourses*, XVII, 3, p. 207. Likewise, he mentions ‘those who begin ... those in the middle ... those at the end ...’ XX, 2, 232.

¹⁹ Ware, p. 143.

²⁰ *Hymns*, Hymn 55, p. 281.

²¹ Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, p. 205., cf. Mme, Lot-Borodine, ‘Le Mystère du ‘don des larmes’ dans l’Orient chrétien’, in *La Vie Spirituelle*, XLVIII, n. 3 (1936), pp. 65–110; L. Gillet, ‘The Gift of Tears’, in *Sobornost* (1937), pp. 5ff.

²² Cf. esp. *Discourse XXX*, ‘On Penitence’, pp. 318–328.

²³ *Discourses*, XXX, 6, pp. 321–322.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 322.

of Divine Love, spares no detail in recounting and confessing the wickedness of his own offences against God. Sensitive to those who find it difficult to feel true penitence, he offers the following advice: 'Even though at the beginning you cannot say this from your soul, yet will you gradually come to this, as grace helps you ... merely begin to do and practice and say these things, and God will not forsake you!'²⁵

The major emphasis in Symeon's teaching on repentance is undoubtedly the need for fervency and perseverance in this endeavour. Unceasing repentance, and even daily shedding of tears over sin, is to be characteristic of the life of every Christian: p. 173

When your soul is pricked by compunction and gradually changed, it becomes a fountain flowing with rivers of tears and compunction. But if we make no effort thus to become clean, but prefer to continue in carelessness, idleness, and slackness, ... it will avail him nothing to have wept merely once. It is not this alone that at once purifies us and makes us worthy; it is mourning daily and without ceasing till death. The master himself enjoined us to do so when he said, 'Repent', and 'ask, seek, and find' ([Matt. 4:17](#), [7:7](#); [Luke 11:9](#)). How long? 'Till you receive', says He, 'till you find, till it is opened to you'.²⁶

Having obviously encountered opposition to his teaching that it is necessary for all to repent and weep daily, Symeon writes:

Let no one say that it is impossible to weep daily! He who says that it is impossible to repent every day subverts all the divine Scriptures ... For if you say that it is impossible daily to repent and to weep and shed tears, then how can you say that it is impossible for men who are subject to corruption ever to attain to humble mind, to rejoice at all times and pray without ceasing ([1 Thess. 5:17](#))?²⁷

Although Symeon clearly stresses spiritual warfare in prayer and the effort involved in maintaining an unceasingly penitent heart before God, he is also eager to speak of the rewards of repentance. He makes it clear that God hears and forgives those who truly repent.²⁸ He expresses that confidently time and time again, and effuses prayers of thankfulness to God for his great mercy and forgiveness. Confession of sin also results in great joy to the one who repents, for God 'will pour on him goodness and change his sorrow into joy ([Ps. 30:12](#)). He will change the bitterness of his heart into the sweetness of wine ...'²⁹ In addition to bringing forth forgiveness and joy, only repentance can purify the soul and enable the Christian to make progress in good works.

But most important, repentance is 'the gateway to the light', the crucial preparatory step on the pathway toward union with God, which is the ultimate goal of the spiritual life. Symeon never loses this larger perspective. Therefore, after graphically describing the depths of his own sinfulness, he marvels at the wonder of God's forgiveness:

... That which I am convinced of, O my God, is not the magnitude of offences ... nor the shame of the actions which will never exceed Your mercy ... which You pour out in abundance on those who offend You p. 174 and repent fervently; You purify them; You communicate Your divinity to them; You speak with them and converse with them, as to Your friends, Your true friends; O unbounded goodness, O inexpressible love!... Just as you

²⁵ *Discourses*, XXVI, 3, p. 277.

²⁶ *Discourses*, IV, 15, p. 87.

²⁷ *Discourses*, IV, 12, p. 83.

²⁸ See, for example, *Discourses*, V, 8–10, pp. 98–100.

²⁹ *Discourses*, XXIII, 3, p. 256f.

received the prodigal and the sinful woman when they came up to You, receive me also, O Merciful One, I who repent from the bottom of my soul!³⁰

2. PROGRESS IN VIRTUE

Inextricably linked with repentance is the practice of virtues, for 'penitential sorrow disposes the virtues.'³¹ Keeping the commandments is the fruit of the truly purified life. This theme or stage of the spiritual life reveals the crucial connection between prayer and ethics in the Orthodox tradition. In Symeon's thought, prayer is clearly both the prerequisite to Christian action and a prominent part of Christian action itself. For Symeon, ecstasies and mystical experiences in prayer are clearly secondary to progress in godliness. In fact, the Spirit is sent 'to those who are poor in spirit in their way of living, to those who are pure of heart and of body ... who consider only the sole glory of the soul and the salvation of all their brothers' and who care not for human glory or earthly passions.³² Accordingly, the 'workings of the Spirit' ought not to be sought apart from faithful practice of the commandments.³³

Yet Symeon knows that he cannot attain to the virtues on his own strength, and he frequently prays for God's grace to live rightly: 'Deign, in the darkness of this life, in this world, in this place of misery, to permit me to serve You, to honour You well and to observe your holy commandments'.³⁴ He also calls others to pray for progress in holiness of life. Towards this end, he suggests the use of the Beatitudes. One ought to prayerfully consider each of the commandments in turn, examining one's own life in relation to each precept.

If we should find that we are fulfilling it, let us give thanks to God our Master and from henceforth observe it without fail. If, however, up till now we have forgotten it or failed to keep it, let us, I entreat you, run to embrace it and take hold of it ... Thus as we ascend the ladder by one step after another we shall arrive, as well I know, to the very city of heaven.³⁵

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Prayer is required not only for progress in virtue, but also as a virtuous act in itself. Symeon repeatedly calls Christians to intercede for others. He models this by fervent prayers on behalf of his monks. He recounts examples of the efficacy of intercession, especially on the part of his own spiritual guide. He speaks of the need to pray with 'tears', 'weeping', and 'groaning' for the salvation and well-being of friends, neighbours, and all people, but especially exhorts Christians to pray for their enemies. Combining his emphases on love ('the queen of the virtues'), good works, and prayer for enemies, Symeon often gives advice of this nature:

³⁰ *Hymn 17*, p. 61.

³¹ *Discourses*, IV, 12, p. 83.

³² *Hymn 21*, p. 96.

³³ *Discourses*, XXII, 2, p. 244.

³⁴ *Hymn 2*, p. 18.

³⁵ *Discourses*, XXXI, 9, p.333.

If you love your enemies and all who hate you and if you pray exceedingly from the depths of your soul for those who calumniate you and if you do good to them as far as you can, you really have become like your Father above.³⁶

This double enjoiner—to ‘pray’ and ‘do good’—recurs appositionally throughout Symeon’s writings. The two appear to flow naturally out of a penitent heart and unceasing awareness of the presence of God. Herein, Symeon reflects one aspect of the Orthodox understanding of intercession, described as follows: ‘Once we recognize his [Christ’s] universal presence, all our acts of practical service to others become acts of prayer’.³⁷

Symeon sees the practice of virtue, like repentance, as part of a larger whole. Prayer on this level, too, should dispose the soul to apprehend and shine forth the divine light of God’s presence. Thus, while he speaks of ‘the works and sweat and the toils of virtue’,³⁸ both in fervent prayer and loving deeds, he also reminds us that ‘illumination is the infinite goal of every virtue’.³⁹ Therefore, he exhorts Christians to ‘do those things the Saviour commands you ... then you will see the light most brilliantly shining’.⁴⁰ The vision of God for which the Christian longs is given to the pure in heart. This should provide motivation to persevere and progress in the path of virtue.

3. UNION WITH GOD

The final stage in the spiritual life, that of union with God, represents the summit and ultimate goal of prayer. It is principally this stage of **P. 176** prayer that Symeon celebrates in his *Hymns of Divine Love*. The first two levels of prayer are sometimes termed the ‘active life’, while this last is called the ‘contemplative life’.⁴¹ It is ‘contemplative’ because it is beyond verbal expression, beyond mental images. This, then, is the apophatic prayer of the hesychast tradition.

In Symeon’s writings, participatory union with God—attained along a pathway of prayer, commencing with repentance and culminating in contemplation of the Godhead—is most often represented by a transforming vision of Divine Light: ‘God is light ([1 John 1:5](#)), and to those who have entered into union with Him He imparts His own brightness to the extent that they have been purified ... How great a marvel!’⁴² In various passages Symeon describes his own vision of this Light. In Hymn 25, for example, he recalls that he was meditating (seemingly on the Scriptures) when God appeared to him as Divine Light. Struck by his own wretchedness, he repents of his sins and worships God. He is then caught up into the light and becomes light himself. Elsewhere, speaking of himself in the third person, he describes his initial vision of the light in similar terms:

One day, as he stood and recited, ‘God, have mercy upon me, a sinner’ ([Luke 18:13](#)), uttering it with his mind rather than his mouth, suddenly a flood of divine radiance

³⁶ *Hymn* 40, p. 206. cf. *Hymn* 41, p. 211; *Hymn* 4, p. 24; *Discourses*, IV, 12, p. 84 for other references to the need to pray for enemies.

³⁷ Ware, p. 161.

³⁸ *Discourses*, VI, 4, p. 122.

³⁹ *Discourses*, XXII, 6, p. 248.

⁴⁰ *Hymn*, p. 255.

⁴¹ Ware, p. 142.

⁴² *Discourses*, XIII, 3, p. 183.

appeared from above and filled all the room. As this happened the young man lost all awareness [of his surroundings] and forgot that he was in a house or that he was under a roof. He saw nothing but light all around him ... he was wholly in the presence of immaterial light and seemed himself to have turned into light. Oblivious of all the world he was filled with tears and with ineffable gladness.⁴³

While Symeon often speaks of such visions and the need to experience God as Light, he is careful to distinguish occasional ecstatic experiences from a conscious life in the light of God's presence, a life of constant communion with God. Ecstasies, though certainly valid, are given more for the benefit of beginners or novices in the spiritual life! Symeon contrasts their experience of the Light with that of those who are mature in the life of prayer. Of the perfect he writes:

When he has thus persevered for a time, he considers it [the light] little by little as familiar and as if in some way he has always been with it; ... p. 177 Thenceforth he is as if he were in the light, rather with the light, and not as in a continual ecstasy.⁴⁴

The one who has attained to this loving union with the Divine Light is changed. Symeon emphasizes the results of contemplative prayer, and its culmination in union with God, as much as the experience itself. One effect of having come to such an experiential knowledge of the Trinity is a heightened understanding or awareness of spiritual truth. Symeon particularly marvels at his realization of his own deified humanity. Having seen the Light, he exclaims:

He took upon Himself my flesh and he gave me His Spirit and I became also god by divine grace, a son of God but by adoption. O what dignity, what glory!... But by the divine adoption I see that I have become god and I become a participator of intangible things.⁴⁵

His writings abound with such joyful exclamations of the phrases 'a god by adoption', and 'a god by grace'. He tries to explain how the experience of union itself has brought about this new depth of insight into his own deification: 'I am entirely god by sharing in God in a conscious awareness and by knowledge, not by essence but by participation'.⁴⁶ If his explanations lack perspicuity, it is because of the essentially ineffable, apophatic nature of the vision of God, as Symeon himself repeatedly affirms.

Symeon's experience of the Light also engenders sharpened understanding of his own spiritual state. He explains that one who succeeds in contemplative prayer is no longer attracted by the pleasures of the world, understanding anew the fleetingness of such passions. Nonetheless, the struggle with the passions has not ended, for it is all too easy to lose sight of the Light if one fails to persevere in the practice of virtue. Nor does the need to repent cease once union with God has been attained. Here again Symeon has gained a keener perception of spiritual truth. Having ascended to the Light, he confesses, 'I received the certain knowledge of the forgiveness of my sins, yet I saw myself as a greater sinner than all other men'.⁴⁷ Such realizations attest to the fact that the various

⁴³ *Discourses*, XXII, 3, p. 245.

⁴⁴ Syméon le Nouveau Théologien, *Traité Théologiques et Ethiques, Tome I, Sources Chrétiennes*, Vol. 122, ed. Jean Darrouzès (Paris: Les Editions du Cerf, 1966), *Ethique I*, 424–435, pp. 303–304 (author's translation).

⁴⁵ *Hymn* 25, p. 136.

⁴⁶ *Hymn* 50, p. 254 (emphasis mine).

⁴⁷ *Discourses*, XVII, 2, p. 206.

levels or stages of prayer must constantly intermingle. One does not supersede the next. As Ware explains, 'Apophatic prayer coexists with cataphatic, and each strengthens the other. The way of negation and the way of affirmation are not alternatives; they are complementary'.⁴⁸

One of the greatest results of the vision of God is a new empowering to influence others in the life of prayer and holiness. In fact, the believer has no right and no authority by which to guide others if he or she has not attained to this vision. However, those who have been united with the Light become 'light' and 'salt' to others. This is graphically portrayed by Symeon's comparison of the true contemplative, the person who has seen and experienced God, with Moses.

May he also be like Moses, returning to the summit of the mountain and entering into the interior of the cloud until he disappears from the sight of all. He who will go that far will see God not only from the back, but will find himself knowingly face to face with Him, seeing nothing but God alone and being seen by Him; and hearing his voice he will be, first of all, initiated into the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, then he will dictate the laws to others; he will be illumined, then he will illumine others with the light of knowledge; he will be forgiven, and he in turn will forgive. It is this one who asks and receives; and having received, he distributes to those who ask of him; he is delivered from the bond of his evils, and in turn he himself delivers others.⁴⁹

Because of the surpassing joy and the incomparable benefits of participatory union with the Trinity through prayer, experienced as a vision of Divine Light, Symeon urges all Christians to seek this experience. As has been demonstrated, he does not separate the experience of union with God from the need for repentance and ongoing progress in virtue. However, he stresses the need for conscious, incessant awareness and experience of God's presence. This is what prayer is all about. Accordingly, Symeon upbraids those who deny the need for experience and contemplative knowledge of God. He particularly inveighs against certain theologians who do not understand because they have not experienced.⁵⁰ He poses a question in this regard that is fundamental to all his teaching on prayer: 'And how is it that one made god by grace and by adoption will not be god in awareness and knowledge and contemplation, he who has put on the Son of God?'⁵¹ For Symeon, to deny the validity or even the necessity of such experiential knowledge of God would be to undercut all of Christian theology. As Maloney has aptly stated, all of Symeon's teaching (and certainly his understanding of prayer, must be viewed in light of the ultimate goal:

... the divinization of the individual Christian into a loving child of God, more and more consciously aware of the transforming love of the indwelling Trinity that makes him 'a god by adoption and grace',⁵²

CONCLUSION

⁴⁸ Ware, p. 163.

⁴⁹ *Traité, Tome II, Ethique*, XV, 61–70, p. 449 (author's translation).

⁵⁰ e.g. *Ethique*, VI, p. 133; *Hymn* 21, pp. 99.

⁵¹ *Hymn* 50, p. 254.

⁵² Maloney, 'Introduction', *Discourses*, p. 35.

An examination of the salient features of St. Symeon's understanding of prayer demonstrates that he stands within the hesychast tradition, in as much as hesychasm is used in its broader sense to describe the spiritual tradition of the whole Eastern church. The intensely personal quality of Symeon's writing distinguishes him from the majority of Eastern writers, as few others so openly expose the depths of their own soul. Symeon is also less systematic and precise than most hesychasts in his use of terminology. However, the themes that dominate his writing and his underlying apophatic approach to theology are characteristic of Orthodox spiritual writers. In short, 'Symeon stands for the basic understanding of Christianity as personal communion with, and vision of, God, a position which he shares with hesychasm and with the patristic tradition as a whole'.⁵³

Certainly Symeon holds some more unusual doctrinal variations. For example, it is difficult to see the Scriptural justification for a 'gift of tears' as the mark of the Spirit's baptism, or for tears as the *sine qua non* of true repentance. Regarding his visions of Light, however, one must affirm that the Bible abounds with such images to describe or express the presence of God. Lossky explains that 'In the mystical theology of the Eastern church, these expressions are not used as metaphors or as figures of speech, but as expressions for a real aspect of the Godhead ... It is both that which one perceives and that by which one perceives in mystical experience'.⁵⁴ Symeon's is far from a pantheistic or nirvana-like experience of light and union, but rather speaks of a positive and edifying encounter with a personal God:

In the experience of the divine light in St. Symeon's writings there is no trace of the depersonalizing ecstatic state, where human consciousness is lost in the contemplation of an impersonal God which renders the experience of His light inexpressible in human language.⁵⁵ p. 180

In conclusion, three questions may prove helpful in assessing Symeon's mystical theology of prayer and in considering mystical experience in general.⁵⁶ First, is to appeal to one's own mystical experience a valid norm for other Christians? For Symeon, the answer is both negative and affirmative. While he never demands that his own experience be explicitly duplicated (in fact, he himself finds it difficult to articulate), he does insist that Christians should indeed have a personal experience of God. As mentioned above, he denounces theologians who deny the necessity or even the validity of such experience. There can be no true theology, nor even true Christianity, without vital experiential knowledge of God.

A second question arises from Symeon's visions of God as light. How do visions of God differ from mere hallucinations? On what basis can one distinguish between them? At the very least, visions differ from hallucinations by the transformation of life which they effectuate. Symeon always relates true mystical experience to moral consequences. His visions lead to repentance and moral transformation. A true vision of the Light will dispel inner darkness and cause the Christian to shine forth the Divine Light in the world. One cannot see God and remain unchanged. For Symeon, mystical experience is never remote from the realm of ethics.

⁵³ Meyendorff, p. 74.

⁵⁴ Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, p. 220.

⁵⁵ Vladimir Lossky, *The Vision of God* (Bedfordshire: The Faith Press, 1963), p. 119.

⁵⁶ I am indebted to Dr. James Houston for these insights.

A third question of importance concerns the role of the Scriptures in Symeon's understanding of the spiritual life. What is the relationship of personal communion with God to Scripture? Symeon's answer is clear, both in his teaching and in his own life. Just as true Christianity and true theology must be rooted in true experience of God, so must personal communion with God be firmly rooted in the Scriptures. Like the monks of the Western tradition, nurtured daily on the *lectio divina*, Symeon was devotionally devouring Scripture. His writing is saturated with Scripture, both direct quotations and biblical language and imagery. Indeed, for Symeon, there is no contemplative life without meditation on the Scriptures.

Perhaps of greatest significance in Symeon's writings is his very approach to prayer. Reflecting as he does the heritage of the Eastern church, with its distinct mentality and expressions of spirituality, Symeon uses categories in discussing prayer that differ from those that we in the West might employ. The Western tendency toward pragmatism drives the Christian to pose questions of a highly practical nature: How ought one to pray?, For what should one pray, and so on? The Eastern penchant toward idealism tends to lead to a different p. 181 set of questions on prayer. For the Eastern mind, the crucial issues are, rather, what is prayer?, or even more important, who is God? These are clearly the questions that occupied the mind of St. Symeon.

Symeon's approach to prayer sheds light on the essential unity in the Eastern Christian tradition—mentioned at the outset of this essay—between prayer and mysticism, on the one hand, and theology, on the other. Lossky's words in this regard are in perfect keeping with Symeon's own emphasis concerning the life of prayer: 'To know God one must draw near to Him. No one who does not follow the path of union with God can be a theologian.'⁵⁷

In considering what the Western church might gain from St. Symeon the New Theologian—or, for that matter, from the whole Orthodox tradition—regarding the life of prayer, I was struck by the words of an Anglican writer toward the end of his own essay on St. Symeon. As he, too was grappling with questions concerning the relevance and application of Symeon's teaching on prayer, I quote, for the sake of reflection, what he calls his 'paradoxical suggestion':

What is necessary is not so much that we should take one or two hints from the East to solve our Western problems, adding a touch of exotic, Oriental colour to the familiar pattern of our Western Christianity. No, the requirement is greater than that. It is that we should be willing to let our whole way of posing the questions, our whole set of presuppositions be challenged by the radically different nature of the Eastern tradition. We should seek to place our questions in a new context, and let our perspectives be correspondingly transformed by a direct encounter with the reality of Orthodoxy. For here is another way of living, thinking and praying the mystery of the Gospel of Christ, a way which, for all its limitations ... seems to correspond to the complex nature of man, himself created in the image of the Triune God.⁵⁸

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⁵⁷ Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, p. 39.

⁵⁸ A.M. Allchin, *The Kingdom of Love and Knowledge: The Encounter Between Orthodoxy and the West* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1982), p. 52.