

TRADITIONS OF SPIRITUAL GUIDANCE

Simeon the New Theologian

Biographical account of the life of Simeon the New Theologian

SAINT SIMEON WAS BORN in 949 C.E., at Galatea in Asia Minor. His parents were wealthy and politically influential Byzantine aristocrats. When Simeon was eleven, he was taken to Constantinople, and besides continuing his education, was given a position in the Emperor's court through his uncle Basil's influence. Simeon refused this honour and became instead somewhat of a dandy. Writing about himself at this time of his life, Simeon used the name 'George', to describe the antics of his pre-conversional early manhood. Only after his monastic profession does Simeon refer to the name 'Simeon', perhaps as an honorary title chosen in light of his spiritual mentor's own name of Symeon the Pious.

For at least seven years after meeting his spiritual guide Simeon continued, in his own words, the rather dissolute life of the politically wealthy interacting within the circle of the Emperor's court. During these years, however, like a clear stream running beneath the earth's surface during a harsh winter, Simeon was paradoxically leading a life of prayer, maintaining nightly vigils, and reading the classical spiritual texts of the time. Included among these was Mark the Wrestler's *The spiritual law* which left a deep impression on Simeon because of Mark's emphases on spiritual healing and the development of conscience.¹

Blundering spiritually, Simeon would vacillate, according to his own account, between total devotion to God and falling back into the milieu of his worst propensities. This terrible seesaw between the interior Jekyll and Hyde is a common pattern among Christianity's great saints: Augustine, Francis of Assisi, Teresa of Ávila are but a few who shared with Simeon an irresistible pull towards the passions of the ego against a more holistic self gained through divine union. Finally, like the saints before and after him, Simeon broke the destructive pattern and attained a simplicity of purpose in his life.

At the age of twenty-seven he entered the monastery of Studion. There, under the continuing mentorship of Symeon the Pious, Simeon began his spiritual entrance into monasticism. Because of his zeal, his steadfast devotion to his mentor, the Elder Symeon the Pious, and a desire to purify the monastery of rhetorical practices and meaningless rules, Simeon was expelled by the abbot. Beginning as a novice once again, Simeon

entered the monastery at St Mamas near enough to the Studion, in the western region of Constantinople, so that he could continue to receive direction from his mentor.

Having made his priestly profession by the age of thirty-one, Simeon was elected the new abbot (*hegoumenos*), with the approval of Patriarch Nicholas Chrypoberges. It is interesting to note that Simeon's biographer Nicetas Stèthatos described the monastery at St Mamas as dilapidated and filled with 'worldly men' who cared little for genuine interior transformation.² Simeon thus found himself the abbot of such a sad environment. Immediately he set to reform and alter the atmosphere externally and internally through the monks' own personal spiritualities. Francis of Assisi's and Teresa of Ávila's lives read much the same. As reformers, all three appear at a time historically filled with apathy and decadence, all go through extreme ordeals of internal purification and, finally, transform the environment surrounding them. Francis' mission really begins at San Damiano when Jesus speaks to Francis from the crucifix: 'Go, rebuild my temple'. Simeon's mission however, does not begin with a specific identifiable single event yet, with the zeal of a true 'Builder', Simeon set to work reforming the monastery and the spirituality of the monks. That may account for some of the moral exaggerations in *The discourses*. The Chinese Taoist classic the *I Ching: the book of change*, describes well such a deteriorated condition as the one faced by Simeon in the hexagram: 'Work on what has been spoiled':

This contains a challenge to improvement. It is the same with debasing attitudes and fashions, they corrupt human society. To do away with this corruption, the superior person must regenerate society. The methods likewise must be derived from the two trigrams (*Kên, Keeping Still*, and *Sun, The Gentle Wind*) but in such a way that their effects unfold in orderly sequence. The superior person must first remove stagnation by stirring up public opinion, as the wind stirs everything, and must then strengthen and tranquillize the character of the people, as the mountain gives tranquillity and nourishment to all that grows in its vicinity.³

The *I Ching* is one of the oldest classical works in Chinese philosophy. Confucius is said to have declared that he wished he had known of the *I Ching* before his fiftieth birthday. He believed his entire life would have been much more in keeping with the Great Tao through discernment and divination if he had known of the book's existence. The Tao is a unifying principle (somewhat parallel to the English word 'Spirit'), working through 'Spirit-filled' human motivations and actions, as well as conditions in the entire universe. Simeon's life reads at times like someone living the noblest hexagrams of the *I Ching*. After removing the 'stagnation'

at St Mamas, Simeon remained there for a total of almost twenty-five years. Having weathered mutiny, potential violence, and even an inquiry by Patriarch Sisinnos, Simeon resigned in 1005.

Simeon had aided his monks in becoming holy; now he longed for the silence and pastoral life, just as a new battle arose with the Synod in Constantinople. Falsely accused and condemned to exile, Simeon was sent in the middle of winter to a small village named Paloutikan, on an island across from Constantinople. On 3 January 1009, Simeon and several monks who were loyal to Simeon's cause and believed devotedly in his personal holiness, landed. Simeon, according to Nicetas, immediately praised God, and found a deserted oratory dedicated to Saint Marines. This was to become the centre of his church and community. Ironically, not long after Simeon had settled at Saint Marines, the Patriarch reviewed Simeon's case, declared Simeon innocent, and wanted to make Simeon archbishop of a major metropolis. Simeon by this time wanted only to return to 'his little flock', and with them complete the monastery of Saint Marines given to him as a gift by Christopher Phagouras, one of his spiritual children.

Simeon now also began the writing of his *Hymns*, the apex of his mystical life. Much more liberated and free from the worries of a moralistic reformer, Simeon now soared in these paeans of the *unio mystica*. His kindness to the women and men, children, people generally from all walks of life, became legendary. He walked with a staff like the good shepherd he was, serenely giving counsel, and helping people who came to see him from every direction. Simeon, like the Buddha, died from dysentery. At the age of seventy-three, Simeon passed into glory on 12 March 1022.

Being Eucharist

Eucharist implies an incarnational embodiment of God, i.e., the person who becomes Eucharist is one whose God-consciousness is reflected on every level of her being. For Simeon, as for many a Christian saint, to become Eucharist is ontologically to articulate one's theology. What one believes, one is, and furthermore, what one is, is present for others to eat of and drink. Just as the Way is ontically present in Jesus for people to eat and drink, so too each of us at the stage of union with God, is ready then to lead others into the experience of God-consciousness. That the definition of becoming Eucharist is also the final stage of the spiritual journey is no coincidence. To have finally become one with God is to share in unselfish love, the love Jesus had by giving of himself. Since food is so highly symbolic of what one must ingest to remain alive, to become another's spiritual nourishment, another's food, is to love with a God-like giving.

Simeon, as teacher and spiritual guide, gave to those in his keeping, feeding them from the nourishment gained during his own journey. To

be Eucharist is to take the step into providing through one's deepest self for others' development and maturation. Simeon's years as teacher, spiritual director and writer were years of sharing his knowledge and wisdom with whoever was searching for the experience of God-consciousness. That the final stage of the journey is to give of oneself, to become Eucharist, is also compatible with the natural order. Whether dolphin, tree, bird or potato peel, in nature all beings give of themselves to be transformed into sustenance for others. On the spiritual level, to give eucharistically of oneself is to return to God what has been received through grace. (In Eastern Christianity, grace is called the 'uncreated energies' of God.) Now, one may give the gift of self, of God-consciousness to others, sharing completely in the spirit of Christ.

Experiencing the universe through the eyes of the spirit

Joseph Campbell in his classic work, *The hero with a thousand faces*, states that the hero's spiritual journey is one of 'separation-initiation-return'.⁴ If we look at the divinization process in Simeon the New Theologian, the path toward God-consciousness, we witness these same stages of development. *Separation* would be the constant purification of the ego whereby the self through a rigorous study of itself is brought into an identification with one's inherent God-nature. *Initiation* for Simeon would comprise the unification within to the indwelling Trinity through conscious awareness: whatever one did, breathed, thought, would be illumined through Christ's mind and presence. And finally, *return* would be the coming back, the Pentecost experience of going forth in the world with the Spirit's help to be the Good News.⁵

One is enabled to return to the world as Eucharist, because the experienced glory is a gift and, by the very nature of such a giftedness, to be shared in love and consciousness. The Buddhists describe the Bodhisattva who returns after enlightenment as one who sends 'gift-waves' to the rest of the cosmos. In Simeon's Christian framework, the gift is Christ's resurrectional presence: 'O paradise planted today by Christ Jesus! O unheard of mystery and formidable marvel!'⁶

In the immortal words of Dante: 'In thee mercy, in thee pity, in thee magnificence, in thee whatever of good is in any creature, are united'.⁷ When the self becomes God-conscious, the immanent and transcendent dimensions of the divinity are apparent on every level of life. Simeon, as with so many mystics, perceived the sacred, the Spirit of the Creator, in every creature. The universe is alive when related to by a person who is solidly centred, reality is a 'paradise' of Christ-presence here and now. 'It is here, it is here!' aptly declares a Tibetan aphorism. Simeonal theology is balanced in an acknowledgement of the transcendent glory and the wonderful immanence of revelation. 'Christ is the light of the world, and the door, it is surely a luminescent door; and not purely and

simply a door. Whoever finds themselves within this "door", finds themselves in the light of the world.⁸

Christ is literally the light of the world. By coming into union with God, the numinous light by which reality is woven together becomes apparent as one seamless garment luminous and sacred. The light, in Simeon's theology, is God; therefore God will be present to us once we communicate with the indwelling Trinity. God is light and the Word illumines the world through the continuing revelation of reality's essential nature available to each believer through commitment and faith. Simeon demonstrates the validity of such a perception by stating that the eucharistic gift is one of witnessing the transformation of bread and wine into the resurrectional Body of Christ. Reality is, thereby, understood as sacralized through Jesus' crucifixion and Christ's resurrection. The veil of darkness torn asunder by the cross revealed the actual nature of a possible redeemed creation as viewed through the eyes of hope. The original splendour and harmony with the Creator is accessible because of the cross's bridging the realms of the transcendent and immanent universes. That bridge is none other than the incarnation empowering life through the Spirit, giving the creation a sacred dimension, a sacramental presence centring on the spiritual *axis mundi* of the resurrection. Simeon is not alone in this type of theology articulating the divinity present in all reality. It is through consciousness of the divine presence that the creation is divinized. In fact, reality's mirroring of the Creator's image and likeness is apparent in the visible universe; it is one of the most frequently cited truths mystical theologians existentially testify to, for the dimensions of the smallest of the small and the largest of the large come to be viewed as reflections—in Saint Bonaventure's language, vestiges—of the Creator. All reality, whether a hazel nut or the infinite horizon at dawn, is an emanation of the divine mind. Simeon believed that the recognition of God's image in creation was possible because the individual had progressed spiritually to the level of recognizing her own God-nature within. God-consciousness results, then, in viewing the Trinity within and without. The love communicated between the Trinity is the love-energy that moves planets and sparkles in a tiger's eye. The entire universe is permeated with the eucharistic presence of transformation, the transmutation of our inner being and the perceptual awareness that awakens us through God-consciousness to the sacred abounding all around us. Simeon says,

Come and take because not only in the future, but already everywhere before your eyes, in front of your hands, at your feet, reposes the unutterable treasure that surpasses all power and might. Come and let yourself be persuaded that this treasure of whom I am speaking is the light of the world.⁹

The living word

The prayer of the heart, the Jesus prayer, whereby the contemplative becomes united to the reality of God, is a spirituality focused on the divine Name, the incarnate Form, Jesus, the living Word, manifesting the ontological source of the transcendent and immanent universes. Jesus, in the tradition of the Name, is therefore an experience of transformative presence enabling the hesychast to become one with the mercy and power of that very numinous source at the heart of all being. 'Our heart is to absorb the Lord and the Lord to absorb our heart, and the two are to become one.'¹⁰ In Simeon's christology we become God-like and God-conscious through a process of entering the archetypal reality of the Word. Once the union takes place, we image God continuously and learn to reintegrate ourselves if we become distracted either in mind or through a situation occurring in our lives that may pull away from God-consciousness. Through a consciousness of who we really are, in union with the Trinity, we are empowered to work from that centre within, completely focused on the truth and presence of the living Word communicated in love through the Trinity. In Simeon's experience and reflective theology, the Word, Christ Jesus, gives language to the divine archetype each of us holds within. Christ presents the way; the truth thus conveyed in Simeonal theology is an insightfulness pointing to the timeless and yet particularized dimensions of the God-human. Jesus was an individual alone at a certain point in history, contained in a form which bodily and culturally marked him with distinct psychological-sociological characteristics. For example, Jesus was a male Jew. The fact that Jesus was a male and from the Hebrew tradition does not limit the effect of his Christ-nature from transmuting a Chinese woman who would be relating to the God-like aspects of Jesus' embodiment through her own attainment of wakeful consciousness. She would not have to be a Middle Eastern Semite to attain a level of God-consciousness commensurate to the same pursuit undertaken by a Hebrew male, for example the apostle Peter, to be a holy and fully integrated human person. Actualizing the Christ then, is a potential reality possible for every human being. Christ is a universal symbol particularized through Jesus, but certainly not limited by the forms of Jesus' ethnic or sociological limits. 'The one who has reached this degree views all people as Christ, loves them as Christ, honours them as Christ, and despises no one . . .'¹¹ By definition, then, the closer one comes archetypally to mirroring the Christ in one's total personhood, the closer one comes to believing such an actualizing, a mirroring of the divine image, is possible for other people as well.

Every theologian, every mystic, works with a symbolical language that 'words' the divine reality he or she wishes to communicate. In Simeon's mystical-theology, the Word, experientially understood, brings about a lucid knowledge of what is going on in the person during this transformed

state and what the God-imaging within signifies existentially. 'So the one who has Christ's resplendent light shining in the mind is said to have the *mind* of Christ.'¹²

To have Christ's mind gives language to the formless dimension of mystical experience. When the individual has emptied his or her self, enters the cloud of unknowing, and is transformed into a being ontologically connected to God, the Word describing these foundational religious experiences is essential for spiritual health and psychological wholeness.

Symeon is the prophet of Christian *experience*, but this experience is, for him, that of Christ, the incarnate Word, and it implies the possibility here on earth for each Christian to be consciously in communion with the divine life The reality of deification, which is neither a subjective state nor a purely intellectual experience, but the very content of Christian faith, such is Symeon's own message, which in fact set the pattern for all the original developments of Byzantine theology.¹³

The love of inner realities

Simeon loved God; his complete devotion to the spiritual life gave his theology an intense and universal application. Simeon's love of God led not only to his own transformation, but to an articulation of the path which has enabled others to discover the truths of internal growth. Simeon's spirituality focuses on the inner realities which participate in our divinization. That is, a 'spiritual wisdom'¹⁴ at once divinely given through the Spirit, and simultaneously *acted with* through our personal devotion and will. Simeon is very definite about defining the reciprocity necessary in the spiritual life. What activates the transforming power of the Trinity is our 'yes' to the inner reality of Trinitarian love and energy. Nothing will occur in terms of our journey towards the Transcendent unless we commit ourselves and concentrate upon the real nature of who we are at the very centre, ontologically. God calls us home to indwelling, a God-conscious presence prayerfully connected to the ongoing illumination of the Trinity. God gives us the physicality of the Christ through Jesus, and the Spirit reveals the inner dynamics of how we may come close, and remain in union with the love that created and moves through the entire cosmos.

It is the love of inner realities which spurs us onward in a deepening theology of God-consciousness. We are made whole and holy by the original love of our quest toward union now impregnating our continued development in the life of the Spirit. God is at the heart of every thought and activity; we are purified and illumined, finally reaching union through our devotional commitment, maintaining the Trinity as the foundation of our life:

Christ opens the entrance and plants a tree of life in the entire world. And more, gives us also to plant each day this tree which instantly increases and procures eternal life to all who eat of Christ.¹⁵

The tree of life is the perspective of God-consciousness active in us and in all we do. That tree planted within us becomes a tree growing, for Simeon, into an awareness of eternal life, along with life experienced here and now as gift in an alive universe. We are not aliens, but unified through Christ in an integration of relationships centring on God within, but expanding and including people and the material world. Without a love of internal realities, the ego present within us as distractions and illusions, fears and reactions, would become omnipotent, blocking the power of actualizing the Christ. Simeon was especially cognizant of the damage that was likely to occur within an individual who did not centre his or her self in a love of God's presence and deepening consciousness of just what God was birthing forth in terms of that individual's transformed self.

Contemplation and action

'Faith is shown by deeds, just as the features of a face in a mirror.'¹⁶ In the Simeonal framework, faith and action are inseparable. By the power of one's faith and through the love of inner realities, the Christ becomes activated within us acting as a loving presence through our actions. Faith as the contemplative dimension within moves into producing a harmonious movement evident in the results produced. If one's action is drawn from a faith position, the outcome will reflect the value systems by which one has determined one's ethical thrust. 'By practising such actions [one] is brought into fellowship with God.'¹⁷ Our partnership with God will be obvious because of the implicit values we will exhibit in our response to life-situations. The faith we have in the truth of the gospel and the person of Jesus as the Christ will be a solid foundation from which all our actions will be developed. For Simeon, faith and action are inextricably linked. Theology is regarded, as well, as a practice of faith by which one comes to terms with how profound one's faith really is, and the areas that still need to be perfected.

Contemplation, in Simeon's view, perfects action. Action is enriched and made a vehicle of the Trinity through the time we have spent contemplating, that is, learning to be united to a God-conscious awareness. Martha and Mary are not disparate archetypes, but a totality spiritually embodying in the unique balance each personality represents of actualizing contemplation and action. It would not be appropriate for Mary to pursue the path of overt action; that way simply does not correlate with her natural gifts and temperament. Mary is more the devotional

contemplative interested in the knowledge of who Christ is ontologically and the mystery incarnate through Christ's presence. In Hindu theology, Mary would be a combination of a *bhakti* and *jnana* yogi, unifying devotional love and reflective learning, thereby exemplifying a figure of serene wisdom.

Martha, as a *karma* yogi, is much more the social activist, an individual who finds fulfilment and is satisfied with discovering and revealing God through action. The only point I might labour here, is that that very balance of the three paths may take different emphases, depending on the individual's capacity and temperament in actualizing the paths. Simeon, as a Christ-centred believer, examined the three paths in his own life and perceived that at the heart of balancing the three was one important reality, dedication to, and actualizing of the Trinitarian mystery.

Planted in love and built on love

Simeon's entire theology is one of integration on the transcendent and immanent levels achieved through a comprehension within and without of one's relationship to God, self, people, and the material creation. That community is planted and built through the deepening awareness of the divine presence made possible through consciousness of the Trinity. Simeon's importance as a spiritual mentor is in the experiential guidance he communicated to all those who sought and, today, continue to hope to discover, a knowledge clarifying through consciousness who God is, who we human beings are intrinsically, who looks at us through the eyes of creatures, and whose song inspires the dance at the centre of reality.

Maria M. Jaoudi

NOTES

¹ Syméon le Nouveau Théologien: *Catéchèses*, edited and translated by Archbishop Basil Krivocheine and Joseph Paramelle, S.J., Volume II (Paris: Sources Chrétiennes, 1964), XX: 56-58, p 319.

² Nicetas Stéthatos: *Un grand mystique Byzantine: vie de Syméon le Nouveau Théologien (949-1022)*, edited and translated by I. Hausherr and G. Horn, *Orientalia Christiana* 12 (Rome, 1928).

³ Hexagram: *Ku*, #18 *The I Ching or Book of changes*, translated by Richard Wilhelm, with an Introduction by C. G. Jung (Princeton: Bollingen Series XIX, Princeton University Press, 1979), p 76.

⁴ Joseph Campbell: *The hero with a thousand faces* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), p 30.

⁵ *Ibid.* Cf 'A separation from the world, a penetration to some source of power, and a life-enhancing return' p 35.

⁶ Syméon le Nouveau Théologien: *Traité théologiques et éthiques* Volume I (Paris: Sources Chrétiennes, 1967) *Éthique* II, Chapter 7: 57-58, p 371.

⁷ Dante Alighieri, *Paradiso*, translated by Charles Eliot North (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1962): XXXIII: 12-21, p 252.

⁸ Syméon le Nouveau Théologien: *Catéchèses*, translated by Joseph Paramelle S.J., Volume III (Source Chrétiennes, 1965) XXVIII: 304-306, p 153.

⁹ *Ibid.*, XXXIV: 300-305, pp 295-297.

¹⁰ Lev Gillet: *The Jesus prayer*, revised edition and foreword by Kallistos Ware (New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1987), p 50.

¹¹ Basil Krivocheine: *In the light of Christ*, translated by Anthony P. Gytheil (New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1986), p 357.

¹² Syméon: *Catéchèses* Volume III, XXXIII: 58, p 253.

¹³ John Meyendorff: *Christ in Eastern Christian thought* (New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1975), pp 194-195.

¹⁴ Symeon the New Theologian: *The practical and theological chapters*, translated by Paul McGuckin, C.P. (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 1982), Chapter I: 33, p 41.

¹⁵ Syméon, *Traité*s Volume I; *Éthique II*, Chapter 7: 52-55, p 371.

¹⁶ Symeon the New Theologian, *The discourses*, translated by C. J. deCatanzaro (New York: Paulist Press, 1980) XXIX: 142, p 312.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, X: 95, p 164.