

PHILOKALIA

The role and the understanding of the “Light” in the writings/theology of St. Symeon the New Theologian

I am at a loss when it comes to understanding the transcendent reality of the divine light and its uplifting effects on the elect. Even the hierarchs of the angels, the seraphim (the fire makers and the carriers of warmth) and the Cherubim (the fullness of knowledge and the outpouring of wisdom) cover their faces and the Throne of God with their wings during their unceasing fulfillment of their celestial duties, which consists by transmitting God’s illumination and wisdom to the lesser orders of angels and, then after, to human beings.¹

However, the New Theologian, one of these human beings who experienced God’s grace, is allowing me to discover some of these hidden and unveiled things, which are very hard to write on his understanding, theology, of the divine light. His understanding is the outcome of his personal experience of God’s grace. My understanding of this light, therefore, is going to be a dry analysis of his speechless, uncontrolled and captured emotions, thoughts, pulse and his spiritual uplifting. It is going to be very superfluous. For this reason, I ask the guidance and the illumination of the Holy Spirit to approach this subject without becoming blinded by illusions and unnecessary teachings.

Symeon expresses his experience of the vision in only three texts (68, 105-6) of the 153 practical and theological texts, and in one paragraph of his work “On Faith” that are included in volume IV of the English Philokalia. However, these few texts proclaim vividly a shivering, fearful, catechetical, uplifting and ecstatic experience of the enthusiastic zealous servant Symeon the New Theologian with the outpouring and abundant grace of God.

Symeon’s Understanding of the Light

Text 68 and the paragraph in the work “On Faith” proclaim the theology of the profuse flood of divine light. This description declares that this light is a non-material light. It is a light that is beyond nature, thought and conception. It is an inwardly light of the Holy

¹ See the Celestial Hierarchy of Dionysius the Areopagite.

Spirit that illumines the person from inside until he becomes wholly light by the incessant and uncontrollable flow of his tears. The person becomes transparent to this light and he will be absorbed and contained by it; no one can endure the vision of it. It is like the Thaborian Light, which throws the three disciples on their faces.

This light filled the whole room according to the New Theologian. It has overshadowed every other light that exists. Nor did it create any trace of shadow. It is safe to say that the whole room was immersed in abundant light that over covered every tiny space and angle. It also uplifted George the young man, who was in the room, to go beyond himself. It inflamed him with violent fever that made him lose his bearings and his awareness of the world. He even lost his fear and his knowledge. He was transformed into light and every particle of him was baptized in and by light.

As such, the understanding of Symeon the New Theologian of the divine light can be referred to the un-created light of God. It has a non-material and non-conceptual origin. It works mysteriously. It shines from the inside and it captures the entirety of the being, the place and time. It lives in those who have mortified whatever in them pertains to the earth and who freed themselves from every impurity and impassioned desires. It is a grace of God to ascend the elect in light to the Origin of light; “In Thy Light shall we see Light” (Ps 36:9).

The Role of the Divine Light

This light, according to St. Symeon, deifies. Those who are blind by their passions and sins cannot see the marvels of this light. Those who are unwavering in their dispassion become like light. It unites them to those who have joined themselves to God. It transcends them to a more lucid and splendid light. It transports them from glory to glory. This light is bestowed within the heart of the perfects. It turns the springs of tears and kindles the flames of continual repentance, awe and joy. It captures their wonders and inspires them to freely leave themselves captured and imprisoned by the beauty of this incomparable light for it washes, cleanses and purifies them.

The person, in the midst of this divine light, washes himself with more tears. This kindles the flames of his desire to grasp more of this light and to stay longer in this ecstasy *Ek Stasis*, out of the normal status. Then the tears flow more copiously in thanksgiving for

his unworthiness of God's mercies and the flames become more radiant until the person is bathed and baptized in and by light; he becomes incandescent and like God. He experiences in the present the brilliance and the purity of the yet to come; he becomes god as in the scriptures (John 10: 34; Cf. Psalm 82:6) and united with God.

St. Symeon's personal experience about the divine light is in accordance with the experiences and the teachings of the Fathers of the Church. His theology on divine light explains the words of the psalmist David and the evangelists: In the Light of God we shall see light (Psalm 36:9), and through the Lord Jesus Christ, the true Light (John 8: 12; 9:5 and 12:46), we become the light of the world (Matthew 5: 14).

The divine light is ever-existing. It is a grace of God and is available through the Holy Spirit to those who desire to walk in the light and live not in darkness, but who wish to be absorbed by the divine bright darkness that will never be overshadowed by darkness.

Submitted with God's grace by Deacon Jean El-Murr