

The Doctrine of Tears in the *Discourses* of Symeon the New Theologian

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Abstract

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Symeon sought to reform an overly-scholastic emphasis in the Church of his era (10th to 11th centuries); he believed this required copious daily tears of repentance on the part of all believers. His doctrine of tears is rooted in Scripture and influenced by patristic authors, with whom he saw himself in continuity, and is also based upon his own experience. He discusses two types – tears of refreshment and of repentance. The latter, which are given by God, have a dual purpose: to purify, and to foster union with God. He taught that lack of tears comes from hardness of heart. Though he was accused of Messalianism, his writings do not support this accusation. His teaching can be helpful today in countering a tendency to overemphasize intellectual knowledge of God and outward forms of worship, rather than the abiding presence of God.



*For as food and drink are necessary for the body, so
are tears to the soul;
so much that [they] who [do] not daily weep – I
hesitate to say every hour, for
seeming to exaggerate – will destroy [their] soul and
cause it to perish from hunger.¹*

¹Symeon the New Theologian, *The Discourses*, trans. C.J. deCatanaro (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), 29, 2.229-233. All quotations of the *Discourses* are taken from deCatanaro's English translation. Subsequent

Symeon the New Theologian (949–1022) sought to reform a church caught in the grip of arid scholasticism.² Rituals and tradition had become more important than a vital, experiential relationship with God.³ He longed to give back to the Church what he believed every Christian should possess: an abiding sense of the God's presence.⁴ Yet Symeon also believed that this desirable fruit would not be received without copious tears of repentance on the believer's part.

After a brief consideration of the Holy Spirit's role in tears, I will explore Symeon's teaching on this topic. He considers tears to be essential in the believer's journey to God: they are both a gift of God and the way to God. Without tears of repentance, the believer will not be purified and will therefore be unable to attain union with God. These two fruits of tears – purification and union with God – will be examined more closely. Finally, I will consider what this tenth-century Byzantine mystic may have to offer North American Christianity.

Rooted in Tradition and Scripture

Symeon follows a long-established tradition of Eastern Orthodoxy in his teaching about the necessity of tears.⁵ He is influenced on this subject by Gregory of Nazianzus, Gregory of Nyssa, Pseudo-Dionysius, Maximus the Confessor, John Climacus, and Isaac the Syrian and others.⁶ Symeon's treat-

references will list (as here) the discourse number first, followed by the section number, followed by the line number. The Greek critical text (with French translation) of the Discourses are found in *Sources chrétiennes* 96, 104, 113, ed. Basile Krivocheine (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1963–1965).

²C.J. DeCatanzaro, "Introduction," *Discourses*, 1.

³*Ibid.*, 2.

⁴*Discourse* 34, 2.104–115.

⁵*Discourse* 22, 1.35.

⁶Cf. Irénée Hausherr, *Penthos: The Doctrine of Compunction in the Christian East*. Cistercian Studies Series: Number 34 (Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 1982); I am indebted to Hausherr's definitive work on the topic of *πένθος*. See also George A. Maloney, *The Mystic of Fire and Light: St. Symeon the New Theologian* (New Jersey: Dimension Books, 1976), 43, 113; Alexander Golitzan, *St. Symeon the New Theologian on the Mystical*

ment of tears is in a class of its own, however, and deserves more study than it has received.⁷ Above all, Symeon was influenced and formed by Scripture. His writings are peppered with Scriptural references and allusions. God's Word receives a priority that exceeds all other texts.

Tears – a Gift of the Holy Spirit

Symeon pondered the tradition handed down from the Early Church Fathers, he saw this tradition as a unity of faith and experience, which he sought to bring back into the Church so as to reform the heavily scholastic emphasis that had come to predominate. He stressed the necessity of a vital, living relationship with God, derived from the Spirit.⁸ For Symeon, such a relationship necessarily means tears. The way to be certain that the Spirit is active in a Christian's life, beyond the initial stage of faith, is by the tears that she sheds, and the changes they effect in her.⁹ Apart from Isaac the Syrian, no other patristic writer placed a greater stress on the necessity of receiving the gift of tears from the Spirit.¹⁰ Nevertheless, the insistence on the outward sign of tears as proof of the Spirit in a believer's life made some uncomfortable. This "uncom-

Life: The Ethical Discourse, vol. 3, *Life, Times and Theology* (New York: St. Vladimir's Press Crestwood, 1997), 118; Hilarion Alfeyev, "The Patristic Background of St. Symeon the New Theologian's Doctrine of Divine Light," in *Studia Patristica*, ed. Elizabeth A. Livingstone (Louvain, Belgium: Peeters Publishers, 1997), 32: 229–231.

⁷Hausherr, *Penthos*, 51; Maloney, *Mystic of Fire and Light*, 52; Sylvia Mary Wantage, "St. Symeon the New Theologian and the Way of Tears" in *Bibliographic Zur Jüdisch-Hellenistischen und Intertestamentarischen Literatur 1900–1965*, ed. Gerhard Dellling (Louvain, Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1969), 432; Lev Gillet, "The Gift of Tears: In the Ancient Tradition of the Christian East," *Sobornost*, 12 (December 1937): 5.

⁸Symeon taught that knowing God and understanding Scripture came from the illumination of the Holy Spirit alone, not from intellectual pursuit; hence the necessity of being baptized by the Spirit. In trying to bring an authentic mysticism back into the church, he came up against the tendency towards scholasticism which then prevailed. Cf. *Discourse* 1, 2.59–70; 29, 1.17; 32.12ff; 3, 1.36.

⁹*Discourse* 4, 9.360–10.419; 29, 5.190–200; 32, 2.38–42.

¹⁰Maloney, *Mystic of Fire and Light*, 129.