

Conscience and the Holy Spirit: Moral Foundations in the Writings of St. Symeon the New Theologian¹

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Abstract

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An analysis of Saint Symeon the New Theologian's (†1022) primatial autobiographical work, the *XXII Catechetical Discourse: On Faith*, as well as several other of his writings, illustrate the intrinsic relationship between the human moral capacity known as conscience and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. For Symeon, radical obedience to conscience becomes one of the central portals through which one acquires the Holy Spirit, thus attaining divinization. Ginter then suggests that a pneumatological influence on moral anthropology can serve to renew Christian ethics today.



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Generally speaking, hagiography is the methodology most typically employed in the Eastern Christian tradition to explain how one lives the moral life. The late Fr. John Meyendorff summarized this Orthodox approach to morality as follows:

In the Byzantine tradition, there has never been any strong tendency to build systems of Christian ethics, and the Church has never been viewed as the source of authoritative and detailed statements on Christian behavior. Church authority was certainly often called upon to solve concrete cases, and its decisions were seen as authoritative criteria for future judgments; but the creative mainstream of Byzantine spirituality was a call to “perfection” and “to holiness,” and not a propositional system of ethics. It is the mystical, eschatological, and, therefore, maximalistic character of this call to holiness which gives it its essential difference from the legalism of medieval Roman Catholicism, the puritanical moralism of other Western trends, and the relativism of modern “situation ethics.” Whenever they searched for models of Christian behavior, Byzantine Christians looked rather at saints and “athletes of the faith,” especially the monks. Monastic literature is the source *par excellence* for our understanding of Byzantine spirituality, and it is dominated by a “quest” of the Spirit.²

The life of the eleventh-century monk St. Symeon the New Theologian (949–1022) provides a unique example of this “quest” of the Spirit in Byzantine hagiography. The uniqueness of St.

² John Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology*, (New York: Fordham University Press, 1979), 176–77. Certainly, there are more common genres than hagiography which address ethical concerns. But it is in the lives of saints that the most common explanation for *how to live* the moral life is taught. For example, the homilies of St. John Chrysostom are a rich source for ethical teaching on *what to do*, but inspiration on *how to live morally* primarily comes from those who have already succeeded. For Chrysostom’s homilies as immense contributions to the Christian understanding of conscience, see Philippe Delhaye, *The Christian Conscience*, trans. C.U. Quinn, (New York: Desclee Company, 1968), 71-77, 80-83, 89-95.

Symeon's hagiography for an Eastern Christian approach to Christian ethics is two-fold. First, he is unique because, as Bishop Kallistos Ware observes, "In a manner altogether exceptional in the Christian East – for there is in Greek patristic literature no autobiographical work equivalent to the *Confessions* of St. Augustine – Symeon refers explicitly to his own personal experiences."³ Second, he is unique because his autobiographical writings provide a superlative example of the centrality of conscience⁴ in this "quest" of the Spirit.

While other Christian ethicists have only relatively recently rediscovered the methodological importance of narrative writings for moral inquiry,⁵ the Christian East has retained within its treasury of resources the lives of the saints. This paper will present a narrative analysis of Symeon's primatial autobiographical writing, *The XXII Catechetical Discourse – On Faith*.⁶ From this analysis, I will argue that there is an intrinsic relationship between the human moral capacity known as conscience and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Based on this relevance of moral anthropology

³ Kallistos Ware, "Symeon the New Theologian," in *The Study of Spirituality*, ed. Cheslyn Jones, Geoffrey Wainwright, and Edward Yarnold, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 237.

⁴ Stanley S. Harakas, "The Centrality of Conscience in Eastern Orthodox Ethics," *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 23 (Summer 1978): 144.

⁵ Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethics*, (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981); Philip J. Rossi, "Moral Imagination and the Narrative Modes of Moral Discourse," *Renascence* 31 (1979): 131–41. Most interestingly, as a group, these narrative ethicists show a strong reliance on St. Augustine, especially his *Confessions*. See Christopher J. Thompson, *Narrative Ethics and St. Augustine* (Ph.D. diss., Marquette University, 1994). If these ethicists were to be exposed to St. Symeon, one wonders if they would also rely upon him in the same way.

⁶ In the strict sense of hagiography as a narrative written by one person about another person who has been canonized by the Church, this text of Symeon's does not fit that classification. But, as we have pointed out above, the uniqueness of Symeon's writings on the whole and this text in particular have no classificatory precedent in the Christian East. This is, after all, the life of a saint which happens to have been written by the saint himself before he was canonized by the Church. Situated as it is between hagiography and autobiography, it appears to defy the generally accepted categories, and also any attempt to invent new ones ("autohagiography?").