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**Advancing in the Knowledge of God: A Comparison of the Thought
of Anselm of Bec and Symeon the New Theologian¹**

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While Anselm of Bec (1033-1109) and Symeon the New Theologian (944-1022) are not exactly contemporaries, Symeon having died about ten years before Anselm's birth, each stands as a major transitional figure between the Patristic and medieval periods as well as a harbinger of future developments in his respective tradition. James A. Weisheiple views Anselm as one of the outstanding masters of early Scholasticism² while Jaroslav Pelikan maintains that Symeon laid the foundations for doctrinal implications of Orthodox devotional practice which culminated in the fourteenth-century Palamite controversy.³ Thus each in his respective tradition played a major role in the development of new theological themes which were to influence subsequent theological and doctrinal expression.

What is particularly interesting is that both Anselm and Symeon address the same topic, namely how the Christian, or more specifically how the Christian monk, is to come to deeper knowledge of God. This seems to be one of the controlling themes of medieval theology in both Byzantium and Western Christendom. During the Patristic period, salvation and God's action through sacraments and hierarchy seemed to dominate theological discussions in the West while the East was more preoccupied with the clarification of the identity of Christ and the implications of that doctrine for piety, especially with regard to the veneration of icons. But by the eleventh century Anselm and Symeon seem to have a common theological agenda, namely clarifying just how one who professes Christianity is to come to a deeper knowledge of God. Each proposes a quite distinctive path for this journey to a fuller com-

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prehension of faith, a journey which is in reality a journey to a fuller vision of God.

Anselm's answer to the question of growth in knowledge of God is quite well known, in fact it has provided Western Christianity with its generic definition of theology, namely, faith seeking understanding. Actually the definition might be better stated as faith seeking understanding through rational and prayerful reflection. Certainly Anselm never envisaged theology as a mere intellectual game which began with presuppositions drawn from faith and proceeded by mental gymnastics to deduce further truths. In his *Monologium*, Anselm explicitly states that he had been called upon by certain brethren to put in writing meditations on the Being of God⁴ and the introduction to the *Proslogium* is an excellent example of such a prayerful, reflective meditation in which Anselm longs to understand to some degree God's truth which his heart believes and loves.⁵ Nevertheless, it is clear that for the abbot of Bec the way to a deeper understanding of God is rational reflection on the truths that he as a Christian believes and cherishes. This will become a controlling theme in Western Christian thought.

What is distinctive in Anselm's theology, of course, is the precise form of logical reflection he believes necessary for achieving the fuller illumination so earnestly sought; according to Weisheiple "reason, for him, has the power to discover at its own rational level the necessary connection that gives the truth of faith its objective coherence. That is what he means by understanding what we believe; this is true of the existence of God and it is true of redemption, which we can think out 'as though we knew nothing about Christ.'"⁶ The search for the necessary connections or necessary reasons why something is true is the means to understanding the realities in which one as a Christian believes.⁷ It is this method that Anselm applies both to the existence of God and the Incarnation in order to understand them better. Because these realities are, there must be a necessary reason for them to

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be; and, the devout Christian who believes in these realities can come to a deeper understanding of these truths by

rationally seeking after and carefully pondering upon the necessary reasons for them.

Subsequent theology in the West will abandon Anselm's particular logic but not his dictum of faith seeking understanding. Theology remains primarily a rational reflection on faith though the concept of what is proper rational reflection greatly changes. In Eastern Christianity, however, theology has quite a different meaning. In Orthodox Christianity a theologian is a mystic who through asceticism has achieved purity in prayer and in a silent gnosis has achieved an understanding of the Word.⁸ This knowledge for Symeon the New Theologian is associated with the divine light which illuminates each Christian who strives for a deeper knowledge of God. It is faith seeking understanding through personal religious experience, through encounter with divine energy present as divine light which illuminates the person of prayer.

Symeon's journey to deeper knowledge of God is through experience of the Holy Spirit in the depths of the soul. While as Pelikan states, "In the hands of the masters of the spiritual life such as Symeon the New Theologian, apophatic theology produced a refusal to pry into the mysteries of the divine being and a concentration on that which could be known," he also adds that "the positive counterpart to the negation that lay at the basis of apophaticism was the identification of personal religious experience as an epistemological principle in theology."⁹ He might better have said as *the* epistemological principle in theology. It must be remembered that Symeon had risked both patriarchal and monastic censure as well as exile to defend his personal veneration of his spiritual father, Symeon the Pious. For Symeon the New Theologian, the example of a pious spiritual father was the norm for theology, not ecclesiastical or monastic authority, still less that of the emperor. As John Meyendorff observes, "The Byzantine Church canonized Symeon the New Theo-

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logian, and generations of Eastern Christians have seen in him the greatest mystic of the Middle Ages. By so doing, Byzantine Christianity has recognized that, in the Church, the Spirit alone is the ultimate criterion of truth and the only final authority."¹⁰

For Symeon one must strive for illumination by the Spirit through the asceticism of tears of repentance, of fasting, and of fulfilling the divine commandments, particularly the Beatitudes. Such asceticism prepares one for the illumination of the divine light which results from the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in the believer. "Where there is abundance of tears, brethren, accompanied by true knowledge, there also shines divine Light. Where the light shines, there also all good gifts are bestowed and the seal of the Holy Spirit, from whom spring all the fruits of life, is implanted in the heart."¹¹ Such asceticism does not, of course, cause the illumination but is rather a necessary step to remove the barriers to the illumination which naturally flows from the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in the most intimate depth of the inner being.

For Symeon this light is identified with Christ, Himself. "... when we have kept God's commandments may our hearts be cleansed by tears and penitence, so that from henceforth we may see the divine Light, Christ Himself, and possess Him abiding in us. Through His most Holy Spirit may he feed our souls and keep them alive by making us taste the pleasant sweetness of those benefits of His kingdom."¹² The kingdom is the realized experience of Christ's resurrection, for by participating in this enlightenment the soul experiences the results of the resurrection.

For the light-bringing coming of the Spirit shows forth to us as in early morning, the Master's resurrection, or rather, it grants us to see the Risen One Himself.... Those to whom Christ has given light as He has risen, to them He has appeared spiritually, He has been shown

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to their spiritual eyes. When this happens to us through the Spirit He raises us up from the dead and gives us life. He grants to see Him, who is immortal and indestructible. More than that, He grants clearly to know Him who raises us up and glorifies us with Himself, as the divine scripture testifies.¹³

This is quite a different journey to the deeper knowledge of God than that proposed by Anselm, but it is the journey characteristic of Orthodox Christianity. As Kallistos Ware writes, "The bond between theology and prayer is heavily emphasized in Orthodoxy. Theology is seen not merely as an academic or scholarly pursuit but as preeminently

mystical and liturgical."¹⁴ Ives Congar concurs in this judgement, "[Orthodox theology] is not simple intellectual exercise but a call to live in a personal way the truth revealed by Jesus Christ and proclaimed in the faith of the Orthodox church, which draws its life and inspiration from the Holy Spirit. Theoretical knowledge must be integrated with life experience and with prayer that is practiced as part of the church community and its liturgical celebration."¹⁵ It might be more accurate to say not "integrated with life experiences and with prayer" but rooted in life experience and prayer.

In his own lifetime Symeon had encountered a form of rational search for God in Stephen of Alexina, Metropolitan of Nicomedia (called Stephen the syncellus [coadjutor], since he had resigned his metropolitan see and resided in Constantinople where he was well respected in ecclesiastical circles). Stephen seems to have tried to embarrass Symeon by posing an intricate question about Trinitarian theology to which Symeon responded based on his experimental knowledge of God (*Hymn 21*).¹⁶ In addition, having dealt with the theological conundrum in a few brief lines, Symeon then launches into a lengthy poetic diatribe in which he asks his adversary,

if you have not found Christ within yourself,

contrary to all expectation,
if you have not been struck with stupor on
seeing the Divine beauty
and have not forgotten human nature
on seeing yourself completely transformed
how do you not tremble, tell me, to speak of God?
How dare you, you who are completely flesh
and have not yet become spirit, like Paul,
how dare you to philosophize or speak about
what has to do with the Spirit,...¹⁷

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As Basil Krivocheine observes, "His [Stephen's] theological knowledge was beyond dispute but differed greatly from that of Symeon, which is perhaps the main reason for their dispute. There was a conflict between a learned, scholastic theology removed from the spiritual life yet still formally Orthodox and conservative, and a theology that was understood as expressing the Holy Spirit, one that emphasized how the mystery of God was beyond understanding yet was disclosed through the mystic experience of the saints."¹⁸

Certainly Stephen's theology differed from Anselm's in as much as the latter's was rooted in prayer. Nevertheless, the failure of Anselm's definition of the task of theology to root this knowledge in a continual growth of faith through mystical enlightenment seems to open the possibility of a growth in knowledge of God dependant on the human mind's ability to reflect on faith rather than on the experiential enlightenment of the Holy Spirit. This in itself is incompatible with Symeon's thought. The New Theologian stresses that the proper human preparation for deeper knowledge of God rests on repentance and tears rather than rhetoric and philosophy.

Thus as we have seen, Anselm and the Western Christian tradition see rational reflection on faith as the primary mode of increasing the knowledge of God. Thus in this tradition mystics will be judged valid in so far as they conform to what theologians

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find as normative for faith, the presupposition of the organization and functioning of the Inquisition. Symeon and the Eastern Christian tradition see the mystical experience of God as the primary mode of increasing one's knowledge of God, and theology in this tradition is judged as adequate only in so far as it is compatible with and rooted in the experience of the saints in prayer. These are quite different journeys to a deeper knowledge of God and each journey has quite distinctive institutional as well as intellectual ramifications.

The journeys are further distinguished by different preparations, different goals, and different authorities for guides. Concerning preparations for the journey, we can note that in the West stress is put on developing clear reasoning in order to advance in knowledge, while in the East stress is put on asceticism as a necessary prerequisite for increase in

knowledge of God. Tears, fasting, and a life of charity are more important than education as preparation for the journey. The Orthodox tradition will never divorce either dogmatic theology from moral theology or ascetical theology from moral theology, since they are too intimately related in the process of growth in the knowledge of God.

The terminus of each journey is also quite distinct. Western Christian theology, as typified by Anselm's ontological argument, seeks to know the divine essence. Eastern Orthodoxy, on the other hand, maintains that the divine essence cannot be known either by reason or by experience. Rather it is in the personal religious experience of prayer that one knows the energies of God but not His essence. In the West the ultimate vision of God, the beatific vision, is one of the essence of God. In the East the ultimate vision is of Christ in whom the Father is also known. Knowledge is of the Tripersonal God and not of the divine nature.

In pursuing the journey each tradition looks for different guides and authorities. In the West reason and the ecclesiastical rational formulation of the faith which becomes the teaching and taught

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doctrine of the church becomes normative for theology and Christian life. In the East the only ultimate criterion is the experience of God as exemplified in the saints and available to all Christians who undertake the asceticism necessary for the experience of illumination, as Symeon's own experience and his veneration of his spiritual father exemplify.

It is thus clear that Anselm of Bec and Symeon the New Theologian are important not only in their own right but as models of differing orientations which would come to characterize Western and Orthodox Christianity respectively. As such, their differing teachings on the Christian's search for a deeper knowledge of God exemplify a deepening gulf between Latin and Greek Christianity at the beginning of the medieval period. This gulf was more serious than the linguistic and cultural differences which were so obvious. These alternative approaches to faith's growth in knowledge would develop in each tradition till the ethos of either seemed incompatible with the other, a conclusion that the Palamite theologians at the end of the medieval period would not only endorse but articulate and proclaim.

Notes

1. Part of the research for this paper was undertaken in the 1986 National Endowment for the Humanities's Summer Seminar, "The Journey Symbol in Medieval Mystical Literature," chaired by Ewart Cousins of Fordham University.
2. James A. Weisheiple, "Early Scholasticism." *Encyclopedia of Religion*. 1987 ed.
3. Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Spirit of Eastern Christendom (600-1700)*. vol. 2 of *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine* (Chicago: U. of Chicago Press, 1974), p. 255.
4. Anselm, *Monologium* in *St. Anselm: Basic Writings*.

Trans. S.N. Deane. 2d ed. LaSalle, Ill.: Open Court, 1966, p. 35.

5. Anselm, *Proslogium*, *Ibid.*, pp. 1-7.
6. Weisheiple, *op. cit.*
7. Anselm's mode of argumentation can be best understood in light of his *Dialogue on Truth* in *Selections from Medieval Philosophers: Augustine to Albert the Great*. Ed. and trans. Richard McKeon (New York: Scribner's, 1929), pp. 150-84. McKeon's brief introduction is also quite helpful, pp. 142-49.
8. See Vladimir Lossky, *Orthodox Theology: An Introduction*/ Trans. Ian and Ihita Kessarcodi-Watson (Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1978), p. 13.
9. Pelikan, *op. cit.*, p. 259.
10. John Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology: Historical Trends and Doctrinal Themes* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1974), p. 75.
11. Symeon the New Theologian, *The Discourses*. Trans. C.J. deCatanzaro. "Classics of Western Spirituality" (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), p. 54.
12. *Ibid.*, pp. 58-59.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 184.
14. Kallistos Ware, "Eastern Christianity," *Encyclopedia of Religion*. 1987 ed.
15. Yves Congar, "Theology: Christian Theology," *ibid.*
16. See Hymn 21 in Symeon the New Theologian, *Hymns of Divine Love*, trans. George A. Maloney (Denville, New Jersey: Dimension, n.d.), pp. 95-96. For a good summary of the debate between Symeon and Stephen see Basil Krivocheine, *St. Symeon the New Theologian: Life, Spirituality, Doctrine*, trans. Anthony P. Gythiel (Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1986), pp. 44-51.
17. Symeon, *Hymns*, pp. 98-99.
18. Krivocheine, *op. cit.*, p. 45.