

Hilarion Alfeyev, *St Symeon the New Theologian and Orthodox Tradition* ('Oxford Early Christian Studies'), (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), xiii+338p.

This fine book is the result of doctoral research carried out under the supervision of Bishop Kallistos Ware, former Spalding Lecturer in Eastern Orthodoxy at the University of Oxford. Its author is a young and renowned patristic scholar from Russia, distinguished not only academically, but also by his pastoral activity all over Europe, now in the Archbishopric of Vienna. Hilarion Alfeyev's CV is impressive. He has written a large number of books in Russian, French or English on various topics, covering Patristics, Christian doctrine and education, Church history and monastic spirituality. This monograph on St Symeon the New Theologian (henceforth: NT) is as one of the best available in English, written with commanding rigour and sobriety, exactness and perceptiveness. Alfeyev's linguistic proficiency is impressive: he can read secondary literature in five or six languages, mastering also the ancient Greek, Syriac and Latin original sources.

The book's structure is friendly and accessible: two main parts, of respectively four and six chapters, framed by a short introduction and more elaborate conclusion. Curiously, the acknowledgements are dated 'Easter 1995' although the book has some references after that date (such as Alexander Golitzin's article 'Hierarchy versus Anarchy', from 1996), but it doesn't include other references available in 1995 (namely the volume four of the English translation of *Philokalia*). However, these are negligible details, in contrast with the wealth of information, which the author provides in his thorough bibliography¹, completed by an excellent index of Greek words, plus a general index with entries including both names and topics. Bishop Hilarion's writing is neat, careful and respectful towards other researchers in the field; perhaps, occasionally, this deference lapses into schooling formality: to say, for instance, that Michael Psellos was 'the first Byzantine humanist' (which might well not be true²) one doesn't need to quote anybody, not even Haussig's *Kulturgeschichte von Byzanz*; equally artificial appears to be the antithesis displayed by the introductory sentence: 'In what follows Symeon the New Theologian will primarily be considered as a monastic writer and theologian, rather than hero of eleventh-century Byzantium' (Alfeyev, *op. cit.*, p. 11). It is precisely in his quality of monastic writer and theologian that St Symeon (NT) became a spiritual hero of the eleventh-century Byzantium, and the book of Hilarion Alfeyev only helps us to understand why.

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The first chapter situates Symeon (NT) in the context of the urban monasticism championed by the Studite Monastery in Constantinople (founded around mid 5th century). This monastic community had had great leaders, such as St Theodore of Studite, who put much emphasis on the importance of literary education of the monks. The latter were supposed to know not just the biblical texts, but also the ascetic writings of the Church Fathers, which could only inspire and stimulate the monks in their daily struggle with the inner and external sources of distraction and passion. It is in this Studite environment where the personality of

¹ There are a few slips I have noticed: at page 312, the author of *Pachomius* (in fact, the complete title is: *Pachomius : the Making of a Community in Fourth-Century Egypt*) is Philip Rousseau (and not 'H. Rousseau'). With regard to spelling, in the body of the book, see also on page 76, fn. 17: '*Hypotyposis*'; at page 129, fn. 18, the name of the Hungarian scholar is correctly spelled Perczel, and not "Perszel"; page 283: "Neamțu" (or 'Neamț') instead of 'Niamets' (as it occurs also in T. Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, 1997, p. 117). In the bibliography and the index, the forename of the German scholar Hans Wilhelm Haussig is not correctly spelled (the initials J. M. belong in fact to the translator: J. M. Hussey). In a future and most welcomed paperback edition, it might be useful to operate these corrections.

² See the view of Paul Lemerle, *Le premier humanisme byzantin*, Paris, PUF, 1971.

Symeon's spiritual father, also Symeon (the Pious³), was decisively shaped. Alfeyev draws the contours of the personality of Symeon the Studite and emphasises how important the personal and immediate initiation in the heavenly mysteries of God was for the younger Symeon, so that the latter would embrace the monastic vocation and pursue untiringly the virtues of Christ. This is followed by a succinct presentation of the life of Symeon (NT), according to the testimony of his disciple Nikitas Stithatos. Symeon was tonsured in the monastery of St Mamas the Martyr in Constantinople, where he immersed himself into a life of repentance, contrition and prayer, living on the communion of the divine sacraments and being refreshed more by the Word of God than by any foodstuff. Quickly becoming abbot of the monastery (at the age of 31), Symeon attracted many young novices around him, some from the aristocratic class of the Byzantine capital; and yet, his charismatic character annoyed other monks and members of the Church hierarchy, charging Symeon with accusations, questioning his truly radical orthodoxy.

Hilarion Alfeyev's book provides a defence against the charges of St Symeon's own contemporaries, and of those modern scholars who have not fully understood his place within the orthodox tradition. He does that by drawing many parallels between Symeon's theology and the teaching of other great Fathers of the Church, in particular St Gregory the Theologian (4th century), John Klimacos (6th century), St Maximus the Confessor, St Isaac the Syrian (7th century) and John of Damascus (8th century). Throughout the book, the author prefers to flesh out the famous *consensus Patrum*, rather than to search for subverting discontinuities. The second chapter is most fascinating. It deals with the role of the Holy Scripture in the formation of Symeon's spiritual universe, again in the general tradition of orthodox monasticism: the meditation of biblical verses (which would mean learning them by heart). Symeon had no room at all for the critical, and even patronising approach to the Bible, elicited by doubt and made possible through the epistemological pre-eminence of the subject (no invention of the modern age). That is how Symeon can make out of the Old Testament texts a fountain of living waters, sprinkling over the intelligence already purified of evil fancies. St Symeon's theology is very little about 'imagining' or 'making of', since it allows God first to speak and to act. Hence, Symeon's preaching can be only the inspired paraphrase of the Word revealed in the Scriptures. Chapter five deals with the patristic readings of St Symeon (NT), the reader is referred to chapter five. Gregory Nazianzen and John Chrysostom were Symeon's favourite authors, but in his writings there are also 'a few reminiscences from Gregory of Nyssa, Maximus the Confessor, and Dionysios the Areopagite' (Alfeyev, *op. cit.*, 129). Chapter three is a discussion of the place of divine worship in St Symeon's ascetic teaching (with its peculiar insistence on the Eucharistic communion, prepared by the ever renewed baptism of tears), where Alfeyev makes some comparison between Theodor the Studite and St Symeon NT. The conclusion of the first part of the chapter is that 'the mysticism of the two Symeons' (which is not the most fortunate way of putting it) could be easily juxtaposed: repentance, tears and prayers, remembrance of God, biblical and patristic readings, rigorous fasting, frequent confession or disclosing of thoughts to the spiritual directors (or better: 'the elders'), self-condemnation form an entire web of attitudes that help the mind of the Christian to be in the living presence of the All-mighty, and therefore, to become an arresting icon of his divine light. The whole life of the Christian moves towards the state of

³ H. Alfeyev was also in charge for the critical edition of the work of Symeon the Studite (or 'the Pious'): *Discours ascétiques* (SC 460), recently published in Paris by Editions du Cerf ('Sources Chrétiennes', 460).

continual contemplation of God, which in some case could be appropriately called a conscious 'vision of God'.

The best way of defending St Symeon's spiritual teaching ('mysticism' would be an inadequate expression, especially when this is related to an individual) is that chosen by Bishop Hilarion. The author clearly feels at home in dealing with Symeon's doctrine of divine names, apophaticism and Trinitarian theology. Symeon is very close to Gregory of Nazianzen and Denys the Areopagite in his doxological apophaticism; he adopts 'negative theology' only as invocative and poetic discourse, which prevents him, and any other Christian theologian, from ever becoming rude or forensically accusative in talking about God. It is only the hyperbolic discourse⁴, more than the superlative one, that avoids the ontic reification of God under a single name (usually transformed into an idolatrous concept). It is only through hyperbolic speech (beyond affirmation and negation), that God's innate transcendence can be kept safe, on the fringes of hymnic language, in 'margins of silence' (to use here V. Lossky's phrase). In discussing the Trinitarian doctrine of Symeon, I personally would have liked to read a commentary on the famous passage in which the Byzantine saint, perhaps with tacit reference to the St John's definition ('God is love', I John 4: 16), makes this extraordinary statement: 'love is not a mere name, but the divine being' (*Hymn 52, intro*). This idea has been reappraised by modern orthodox theologians, such as Pavel Florensky, Dumitru Stăniloae or Archimandrite Sophrony Sakharov, to the effect that 'love' is regarded not as the manifestation or the activity (*energeia*) of God, but something more constitutive of the 'inner relationships' or 'perichoretic communion' of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Since *this* picture of the Holy Trinity is unknown in the writings of Athanasius, of the Cappadocian Fathers, Cyril of Alexandria, Maximus the Confessor or John Damascene (who preferred more intellectual metaphors for expressing the mystery of Christ's begottenness, for instance), one wonders if a first Patristic occurrence of this kind (excepting the famous Augustinian model) could be found in the writings of St Symeon. Would then the modern Trinitarian models receive their authority from St Symeon? Would also St Symeon agree, together with Denys the Areopagite, that among all conceivable names, that of 'love' (or 'goodness', for Denys) is the most befitting to God?

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Alfeyev ends by showing how the ecclesiastical superiors persecuted St Symeon for his deep attachment to the orthodox tradition. For all their wickedness, they still could not manage to make of Symeon a Byzantine version of Martin Luther. Marginalised during his life, his sound theological doctrine and ascetic teaching was acclaimed by important representatives of the hesychastic revival in Mount Athos, such as Nikiphoros the Monk ('On Watchfulness and the Guarding of the Heart'), Gregory of Sinai ('On Stillness and Prayer'), Gregory Palamas and the leaders of the Kollyvades (*i.e.*: Nikodimos the Hagiorite and Makarios of Corinth). But St Symeon's influence spread to the Slavs; Bishop Hilarion mentions

⁴ Bishop Hilarion (*op. cit.*, p. 166-168) slots the hyperbolic names (such as: *hyperagathos* for Denys the Areopagite, or *hyperanarchos* for Symeon) in the rubric of superlative discourse, which is both grammatically and theologically incorrect. First of all, the superlative form of *agathos* is, obviously, *aristos*. When Denys the Areopagite uses the word *hyperagathos*, his attempt is to move the theological discourse beyond the realm of negation and affirmation, at the level of paradoxical speech. Yet, within the limits of the cataphatic *and* apophatic discourse, comparison suits better the actual transcendence of God and conveys of his unfathomable otherness more and better than the superlative can ever do. Saying that God is 'better than any creature we know of', or that he 'is less known than the most remote island of the earth' are two examples of *comparative* discourse, which expresses in the *superlative* form only the reality of the created item ('the most remote island'). It is also crucial to know that, for the mystical tradition of the Eastern Christendom, the 'negative' discourse is not the last word, since, eventually, even the *hyperbolic* discourse of praise *opens up* in a gulf of doxological silence. This is the case of Denys the Areopagite, and of Symeon the New Theologian, too.

St Nil of Sora (†1508), Joseph of Volokolamsk (†1515), Paisy Velichikovskiy (†1794), Seraphim of Sarov (†1833) and Teophan the Recluse. In short, unlike many contemporary charismatic Christians who might refer to the Byzantine saint, St Symeon does not express in his teaching the outcome of his 'private' experience of God, in separation from the body of Church and without being able to articulate it theologically. His mind is 'of Christ' insofar as it was shaped by the apostolic tradition of the Church.

My only concern with this book is related to the abundance of terms such as 'mysticism' and 'personal experience', brought in the argumentation without any prior conceptual groundwork⁵. It is not enough to state in one paragraph what is the 'Orthodox' meaning of 'mysticism' and 'personal experience', in the absence of a comparative genealogy of the same concept within the Western tradition. Given the whole apology of St Symeon's prophetic and challenging teaching, which emphasises the importance of one's participation in the life of God, the taint of subjectivism cannot be easily brushed off, when such language (which, in fact, does not occur in the writings of Symeon) is heavily employed. An example of misunderstanding caused by this usage is shown in the contrast, which Alfeyev establishes between the 'rationalistic' Trinitarian approach of Stephen, and the 'mystical'⁶ insight of Symeon (*op. cit.*, 150 sq.). One wonders if it is not the sloppy and presumptuous way of talking about the same and mutually acknowledged mystery of God, that upset St Symeon in Stephen's discourse, and not so much an approach which could be equally labelled 'rationalistic' in the case of Athanasius or Gregory of Nyssa (where no appeal to religious emotions is to be found). And yet, H. Alfeyev tells us in conclusion that 'those who try oppose a formal and rationalistic "tradition" to an enthusiastic and inspired "mysticism" fall into the mistake of misunderstanding what tradition is' (*op. cit.*, 274). Hence, 'rationalism' and 'enthusiasm' would be two inappropriate categories to deal with in this area. But *against* this conclusion here is the sentence which tells us that the present research on St Symeon's life and doctrine is, in fact, a case-study revealing 'the mystical nature of tradition, and the traditional nature of mysticism' (see also the dust-jacket of the book). Though the reader might easily guess what Hilarion Alfeyev pledges here for, one cannot help noticing how inappropriate these terms are, to communicate St Symeon's teaching. At its centre one doesn't find the category of 'mysticism', but, quite simply, the gripping presence of God. Especially given the impact exercised by 'traditionalists' such as R. Guénon, J. Evola or F. Schuon during the 20th century, I think this language should be avoided, especially when a defence of the Christian orthodox tradition is intended. Instead of 'mystical nature of tradition', Bishop Hilarion could have said 'the pneumatic' or 'the spiritual dimension of the tradition', clearly indicating that the subject of this tradition is, in effect, the Spirit of God and not man's limited 'experience' or projection of it.

This marginal criticism does not detract from the overall excellence of Hilarion Alfeyev's engrossing book. The author, the editors of the series (Gillian

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⁵ A thorough, clear and indispensable introduction into the matter is provided by Bernard McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism*, vol 1, 1991, see especially, 131-189.

⁶ See the comments of Mark J. Edwards, *Origen against Plato* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), 144: 'When it has a meaning at all, the word "mystical" in modern English usually connotes an experiential knowledge of God acquired in solitude, distinct from (though compatible with) subscription to authoritative doctrines inculcated by the Church. Since the patristic era, those authors who are styled mystics, by themselves or by others, are seldom either architects of dogma or continuous expositors of scripture; they are scrutineers of inward states, exponents of a higher sensibility, inducing or assisting the effervescence of the spirit by a voluntary mortification of the flesh. A mystical exegesis of the scriptures, on this view, would be verified only by the private illumination of the reader, and would be unconditioned by objective factors such as philology, lexicography, the age of the text, the stated or deducible intentions of the author or the character and capacities of his audience.'

Clark and Andrew Louth), and the publisher, deserve altogether loud praise for making this first-rate Patristic monograph available to the general public. Alfeyev's volume will certainly appeal to all scholars of Christian doctrine, Byzantine history, orthodox monasticism, theology and comparative research in religious studies. None of them should have this book missing from their shelves.

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