

Cornelia A. Tsakiridou

Theophany and Humanity in St. Symeon the New Theologian and in Abū Hamid Al-Ghāzālī

Abstract

This paper argues that despite a common theological vocabulary centered on theophany, illumination, purification of the heart and direct knowledge of God, St. Symeon the New Theologian and Abū Hamid Al-Ghāzālī have two fundamentally different visions of divinity and humanity and two irreconcilable spiritualities. In Symeon, theophany is Incarnational and Trinitarian and the divine light is experienced hypostatically in communion with Christ, leading to the transformation of the entire person. By contrast, in al-Ghāzālī theophany is a reflection in the heart of an abstract, supra-rational luminance that imparts the understanding of divine realities. The act is entirely dependent on the divine will and assumes a passive recipient. Increments of divine knowledge flood and impress the heart but do not transform the human person nor require her existential participation. This is why the heart is likened to a mirror and a tablet.

THE AUTHOR



M.A. Ph.D. Cornelia A. Tsakiridou is Associate Professor with special interests in aesthetics, social and political philosophy at La Salle University, Philadelphia, USA

Keywords

Communion, Divine Light, Gnosis, Heart, Humanity, Hypostasis, Illumination, Intellect, Neoplatonism, Prophecy, Reason, Religious Experience, Theology, Theophany, Theosis, Union

Separated by less than a century, the lives of St. Symeon the New Theologian (949-1022), and Abu Hamid al-Ghazālī (1089-1111) are associated with two great cities: Constantinople and Baghdad. In these legendary centers of learning and religious power, the two theologians chose to follow the marginal path of the ascetic who abandons the world in order to experience God.

Symeon claimed that without an intimate, personal knowledge of God in this life, Christ is merely a prophet and the Gospel only words.¹ This knowledge was not the result of the “exterior wisdom and book-learning” (*he exo Sophia*) mastered by the philosophers and humanists of his time.² It was placed in the purified heart and intellect directly by the Holy Spirit. Al-Ghazālī argued that the direct knowledge of God is the origination ground (*fitra*) of all religion and its doctrinal expressions in Judaism, Christianity and Islam.³ His turn to asceticism and departure from Baghdad in July of 1095 was preceded by an intellectual and spiritual crisis. Having for some time lost confidence in logic’s self-evident truths, he regained it through a direct religious experience.⁴ The new found certitude “was the effect of a light which God Most High cast into my breast,” a light that the Prophet Muhammad had described as being “sprinkled” on human beings in “gusts of grace.”⁵ In spiritual terms, his life-long interest in Sufism was intensified when he realized that his faith had been intellectually but not experientially founded and that he needed to “taste” (*al-dhawq*) God, know the ecstasies of the divine light and internalize the divine qualities.⁶

¹ Syméon le Nouveau Théologien, *Traité Théologiques et Éthiques Sources Chrétiennes Vol. II*, (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1967), X 740-745, p. 312.

² St. Symeon the New Theologian, *On the Mystical Life: The Ethical Discourses, Vol. 2 On Virtue and Christian Life*, Alexander Golitzin trans., (Crestwood: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1996), pp. 113-114, #2.

³ Al-Ghazālī, *Deliverance From Error: Five Key Texts Including His Spiritual Autobiography*, al-Munquidh min al-Dalāl, R.J. McCarthy trans., (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2004), p. 55 (henceforth *Deliverance*).

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 78, 114-115, #162.

Al-Ghazālī was extensively read in philosophy and critical of its approach to religion. He rejected Aristotelian and Neoplatonic philosophies (e.g., al-Fārābī and Avicenna) that in his view made it impossible for God to determine natural and human causality and know the lives of particular beings.⁷ For Symeon, the exposure to philosophy and classical learning was limited to his youth and association with the imperial court but the distrust of intellectual approaches to religion never waned.⁸ Unlike the Baghdad ascetic, Symeon did not engage the philosophers of his time and tradition.

There are instances where what the two theologians write about the divine light seems to originate from identical experiences and to suggest similar theologies. Take, for example, this passage from al-Ghazālī's *Kitāb Sharh Ajā'ib al-Qalb*:

“When God becomes the ruler of the heart, He floods it with mercy and sheds His light upon it, and the breast is opened (*sharh*) and there is revealed to it the secret of the world of spirits (*malakūt*), and by a gift of mercy there is cleared away from the surface of the heart the veil of whiteness that blinds its eye, and there shines in it the real nature of divine things.”⁹

And this passage from Symeon's *First Ethical Discourse*:

“Yet, by that light and within the house of the soul—I mean clearly this tabernacle of the flesh—that wonderful light beyond brightness enters in and lightens him [symmetrically] according to the measure which nature allows. And, when he has thus further persevered so that, little by little, he becomes used to the light and lives as if he had always been with it, then...he both sees and knows, is initiated into and taught wonders upon wonders, and mysteries upon mysteries, and visions upon visions.”¹⁰

With an anthropology that converges on the heart (*al qalb, kardia*), the spiritual center of human life and the site of theophany, and on the mind

⁷ Al-Ghazālī, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, Michael E. Marmura trans., (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 2000), pp. 166-177, 226, xxv (henceforth *Incoherence*).

⁸ St. Symeon the New Theologian, *On the Mystical Life: The Ethical Discourses Vol. 3: Life, Times and Theology*, Alexander Golitzin trans., (Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1997), pp. 21-22.

⁹ See *Deliverance*, p. 323; Q. 6:125. Quotations from the Qur'an are taken from *The Qur'an: English Translation and Parallel English Text*, M.A.S. Abdel Haleem trans., (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 145. See also Al-Ghazālī, *The Marvels of the Heart: Book 21 of The Revival of the Religious Sciences*, Walter James Skellie trans., (Louisville: Fons Vitae 2010), p. 53 (henceforth *Marvels*)

¹⁰ Syméon le Nouveau Théologien, *Traité Théologiques et Éthiques Sources Chrétiennes Vol. I*, (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1966), 420-425, p. 302; St. Symeon the New Theologian, *On the Mystical Life: The Ethical Discourses Vol. 1: The Church and the Last Things*, Alexander Golitzin trans., (Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1995), pp. 77-78.

(*al aql, nous*), the recipient of mystical knowledge, Symeon and al-Ghazālī appear to be spiritual siblings. Both make the direct knowledge of God the *sine qua non* of religious experience and theology. For both, God is light and the path to illumination is the path of the purification of one’s heart. What al-Ghazālī expresses in these beautiful words, Symeon would have readily embraced:

“For Prophets and Saints have had divine things revealed to them, and the light has flooded their breasts, not by learning and study and the writing of books, but by asceticism (*zuhd*) in this present world, by cutting the self off from all of its ties, by emptying the heart of all of its busying affairs, and by advancing with the utmost concern toward God, the Exalted; for whoever belongs to God, God belongs to him.”¹¹

In *Hymn 21*, composed to respond to a question from one his opponents, the Metropolitan of Nicomedia Stephen, about the Holy Trinity, Symeon repeatedly returns to the theme of those who “philosophize about the Spirit” without having first experienced inner illumination, tears, and the purification of heart and mind.¹² Accusing them of insolence he asks rhetorically how having never partaken of the divine light and thus being “nothing but flesh,” they dare to speak about God without trembling.¹³ The similarity with al-Ghazālī is striking, particularly in the contrast drawn between intellectual theology and the kind of experiential theology that Symeon believes is essential to Christian life:

“The Spirit which has been sent by God to men,...not to the unbelieving, nor to the friends of glory, nor to orators, nor to philosophers, not to those who have studied the works of the Greeks...but to those who are poor in spirit and in their way of living, to those who are pure of heart and of body...”¹⁴

This brief comparison is sufficient to rouse our curiosity. Is it possible that a Muslim and a Christian theologian can envision the ultimate experience of God in the same terms? Are these apparent similarities pointing to a foundational knowledge of the deity that transcends religious identity and suggests various levels of syncretism and convergence—the originative knowledge dreamed by al-Ghazālī? I do not think so. Al-Ghazālī and Symeon share a language that goes back to Areopagite theology and

¹¹ *Marvels*, p. 54; *Deliverance*, p. 323.

¹² Archbishop Basil Krivocheine, *St. Symeon the New Theologian: In the Light of Christ*, Anthony P. Gythiel trans., (Crestwood: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1986), p. 45; St. Syméon le Nouveau Théologien, *Hymnes 16-40 Sources Chrétiennes Vol. II*, (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1971), Hymn XXI. 176, p. 144. See also Symeon the New Theologian, *Hymns of Divine Love*, George Maloney, trans., Denville: Dimension Books, 2001, p. 99.

¹³ Hymn XXI. 174, p. 144. See also Maloney (2001), p. 99.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

Neoplatonism.¹⁵ And both clearly mistrust any theology that is not informed by religious experience. But they are not partners in the spiritual life. As I will try to show in this paper, their descriptions of theophany reveal two fundamentally different visions of divinity and humanity and two irreconcilable spiritualities.

Theophany as Communion

Theophany is a baptism in the Holy Spirit, Symeon counsels his disciples. He likens the Holy Spirit to a “luminous baptismal pool” in which those touched by grace are immersed. Those who see God are held in the divine bosom (*engolposamenon*).¹⁶ Once incorporated in the divine life, they become “the divine offspring of the Divine Spirit” by assuming in body, soul and intellect the three hypostases of the Godhead.¹⁷ It is an act of “abiding” (*menein*) in God. This term appears repeatedly in the Gospel of St. John when Christ describes how those who love God enter into union with him—a union in which they exist with the Son as the Son exists with the Father (John 17: 21-23).¹⁸ The association of the divine light with activity (*theosis* brings one to a state of regeneration) reflects the perfection it brings to human nature, a perfection that, though never complete, becomes the source of a profound existential joy (*agalliaseos*).¹⁹ Symeon consistently associates this joy with theophany.

The divine light is simple but its simplicity should not be understood abstractly as unity or unicity. It is hypostatic, personal. Symeon identifies it with Christ: “This simple light is Christ” (*phos the aploun ho Christos*).²⁰ Its continuous, unifying and vivifying energy fills every aspect of one’s being. Symeon goes directly to Christ’s words in Lk. 11:36 that speak of the thorough illumination (*holon photeinon*) of the body (*soma*) which shines like a bright lamp (*hos otan o lychnos*).²¹ Those who partake of the divine light are purified of the divisions and contradictions that characterize

¹⁵ Hieromonk Alexander (Golitzin), “The Body of Christ: Saint Symeon the New Theologian on Spiritual Life and the Hierarchical Church, in Basil Lourie and Andre Orlov eds., *The Theophaneia School Scrinium 3*, (Piscataway: Gorgias Press LLC, 2009), pp. 117-127. See also Hava Lazarus-Yafeh, *Studies in al-Ghazālī*, Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1975, pp. 277-324; Al-Ghazālī, *The Mishkāt Al-Anwār of Al-Ghazālī*, W. H. T. Gairdner, (Forgotten Books, 2008), pp. 54-57.

¹⁶ Syméon le Nouveau Théologien, *Catéchèses 6-22 Sources Chrétiennes Vol. II*, (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1964), XXXII. 80-85, p. 244.

¹⁷ Cat. XV. 70-85, p. 228.

¹⁸ Ibid. See also Syméon le Nouveau Théologien, *Catéchèses 23-34 Sources Chrétiennes Vol. III*, (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1965), XXXIII. 165-175, pp. 260-262.

¹⁹ Cat. XX. 95-100, p. 372; Cat. XXXII. 80-85, p. 244; Cat. XVI. 125-130, p. 248. See also Golitzin (1997), p. 85.

²⁰ Cat. XXXIII. 55-60, p. 252.

²¹ Cat. XXXIII. 75-80, p. 254.

human thought and existence. The soul that sees Christ has true self-knowledge; all its actions and intentions become clear to it. The divine light transforms the intellect (*nous*) but its activity is not restricted there. It brings the ascetic to a state of ontological perfection, to a fullness of humanity and life. Symeon controversially argued that a priest who has not experienced Christ in the depth of his being is not ready to give spiritual direction.²²

Theophany is a way of life rather than the interruption of natural existence by supernatural encounters. Symeon may not be called a mystic in the latter sense, except in his novice years when he fell into ecstasies that he described in detail without revealing their personal nature.²³ Gradually, his life became an unceasing “communion” (*koinonia*) with God.²⁴ The passage from *Ethical Discourses* that we quoted earlier makes this clear. Those who see God (*theoptia*), Symeon says there, become used to this light and live as if they had “always been within it.” Theirs is a life of divine participation and companionship that resonates with the baptismal analogy. We may call it unceasing baptism and communion with the Trinity. This sacramental characteristic of Symeonian spirituality helps explain his prolific hymnography which seems to flow endlessly from a continuum of experiences rather than from the distilled insights of a few extraordinary moments.

With three hypostases and yet indivisible, the Godhead’s simplicity applies univocally to each hypostasis.²⁵ What can be said of one person can be said simultaneously and indivisibly of all three—except for the original distinction that indicates the modalities in which the three persons subsist in and as Trinity (no changes in the order or character are here allowed).²⁶ It is a simplicity filled with activity. Where Christ is present so are the Father and the Holy Spirit: “The Son is begotten and the Spirit proceeds simultaneously with the Father’s existence.”²⁷ The divine light is Christ but it is also the Father and the Holy Spirit. Symeon calls the Holy Spirit the “mouth” (*stoma*) of God.²⁸ When it speaks and illuminates (*ellampomenos*) the human intellect (*nous*), it reveals the Son and Word of God to our senses, making Him visible and audible (*te optike kai akoustike aisthesei*).²⁹ Anticipating the question of the participation of the senses in

²² Cat. XXXIII. 55-60, 30-40, pp. 252, 250. See also Golitzin (1997), pp. 40-41.

²³ Cat. XVI. 80-120, pp. 244-248. See also Golitzin (1997), p. 86.

²⁴ Cat. XXXIII. 70, p. 254.

²⁵ See Krivocheine (1986), pp. 278-279.

²⁶ Cat. XXXIII. 180-185, p. 262.

²⁷ Cat. XXXIII. 190-195, p. 262.

²⁸ Syméon le Nouveau Théologien, *Traité Théologiques et Éthiques Sources Chrétiennes Vol. II*, (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1966), III. 105-120, p. 398.

²⁹ Ibid.

the divine vision, Symeon explains that they exist unified in the intellect without losing their individual functions (*tas pente echei aestheseis en eaute*).³⁰ In this dynamic fashion, human perception reflects the mystery of the Trinity. The vision of God is one in which all the senses participate. God is “seen and heard, He is sweet to the taste and fragrant to smell, He can be touched and known.”³¹

For Symeon, the purpose of human life is the enjoyment of the “eternal goods” of God’s grace, an enjoyment that accompanies a person’s total communion with God.³² For, if, as we have seen him argue above, we cannot taste these goods while we are in the body, in this life, then Christ is “only a prophet and not God” while everything that has been said by the apostles is only a prophecy about things to come rather than the witnessing of their actual fulfillment.³³ And the New Theologian asks: “Who can be worse than us in faithlessness when we admit that Christ is the light of the world and God, and yet believe that no one can have an unceasing vision of him?”³⁴ He then continues with an analogy to communion, in which the physical eyes perceive the bread and wine but the eyes of the soul see Christ himself.³⁵ Thus theophany is the ultimate sacrament, where the total person (one in flesh and spirit) partakes of the divine life.

It is also a dialogue with the Trinity, as Symeon plainly indicates in an important passage from his *Ethical Discourses*, rightly noted by Krivocheine.³⁶ One suddenly encounters, Symeon says, a “threefold reality,” the One who is “through him and in him and into him.” The divine presence is described as an activity. Faced with this sight

“...he hears distinctly, ‘I am the Spirit, through Whom and in Whom is the Son’ and, ‘Behold, I am the Son, in Whom is the Father.’ While he becomes yet more puzzled, the Father speaks in His turn, ‘Behold, you see.’ ‘And I,’ says the Son, am within the Father.’ And the Spirit is saying: ‘It is truly I, for he who sees through Me, sees the Father and the Son, and is transported by the seeing beyond the things that are seen’.”³⁷

God refers to himself as an “oneness” (*enas*) and answers Symeon who wants to know how it is that God is in him, with an answer that reveals the

³⁰ Eth. III. 160-171, p. 402.

³¹ Eth. III. 185-195, 250-255, 260-265, 305-310, pp. 404, 408, 412. The translation is mine.

³² Eth. X, 735-740, p. 312.

³³ Eth. X, 740-745, p. 312.

³⁴ Eth. X, 750-755, pp. 312-314.

³⁵ Eth. X, 755-765, p. 314.

³⁶ See Krivocheine (1986), p. 281.

³⁷ Eth. VIII. 104-110, pp. 208-210. See also Golitzin (1996), p. 107.

paradox of divine mercy: “If then you are somewhere or somehow in Me, you would not know in which of Us you were. While you, who are circumscribed in as much as you are a man, I become as it were circumscribed and in a place—for One of Us indeed became a mortal and circumscribed.”³⁸ Divine visibility rests on God’s accepting limits, even death. The divine life is open to all beings; human beings participate freely through grace. But the divine essence—“my unitive nature” (*enousan moi physin*) God tells Symeon—remains beyond human grasp.³⁹ God’s inner life is not open to anyone, even the angels. Thus, the light of theophany suggests simultaneously the remoteness and proximity of God. We may call it “incarnate” not only because it enters the ascetic’s body but also because it is consistent with God’s acceptance of natural limits—hence its visibility and presence in the natural realm.

In one of his hymns, God is addressed as “Spirit, God of the universe” but he is also a “face” (*prosopon*).⁴⁰ Each one of the three divine hypostases is also a face; whatever is predicated of one is predicated of all simultaneously. God speaks as one light, personal to the point of being experienced as a countenance—never abstractly, as a force or energy. It is important to emphasize the centrality of the Incarnation which should be understood not only as the specific mystery of Christ’s divine humanity, but also as the mystery of the *philanthropy* of the Trinity itself which communicates with human beings not through an impersonal voice and word, but through a face-to-face communion. This is not an anthropomorphic notion because it is not intellectually or even analogically conceived. It is a lived reality, the basis of Orthodox spirituality and theology (then and now).

Comparing the soul and the intellect (*nous*) to a lamp, Symeon explains how union with the divine light operates in a triadic modality, uniting the three hypostases of the human person: the intellect, the soul and the body.⁴¹ All are illumined, filled with divine radiance. The union is an act of communion with the Holy Spirit where one becomes “by grace” what Symeon calls “God by disposition (*thesei*).”⁴² God consents to cooperation or synergy with human beings in all aspects of their existence. Thus the ascetic participates in God by the disposition of her entire being; not only in the given moment of the theophanic event but throughout her life which moves in the trajectory of divine grace. As long as one’s entire being and life are directed toward God, God reciprocates by opening his own being

³⁸ Eth. VIII. 115-120, p. 210.

³⁹ Eth. VIII. 118-125, p. 210

⁴⁰ Hymn XXIV. 248-254.

⁴¹ Cat. XV. 70-75, p. 228.

⁴² Cat. XV. 75-80, p. 228. See also Krivocheine (1986), p. 289.

and life to the human person. Theophany is therefore the consummate act of communion, the ultimate Eucharist.

As Symeon makes very clear in the *Ethical Discourses* (citing Jn 6:47-55), the Eucharist is a union with the Triune God, a participation in the life of the Trinity: “our union (*enoteta*) with Him through communion (*koinonia*) is such as the unity and life which He has with the Father.”⁴³ The ascetics who eat and drink Christ are consuming the Holy Spirit: “It is the Spirit which is truly being eaten and drunk.”⁴⁴ God is consumed and consumes, partakes and is partaken.⁴⁵ Symeon insists on the present tense: as long as those who love him seek him, God “is always and forever descending.”⁴⁶

Theophany is thus as much an objective, visible reality as it is subjective and invisible. God works inside the entire person. Illumination brings repentance because it clears the eyes of the heart and it can see its sins and slowly discern the perfection it lost. The more clearly one’s faults are seen, the more one’s tears become a spiritual and existential baptism. Out of the baptismal waters emerges Christ, as from a “womb.”⁴⁷ Conceived gradually in the soul of the ascetic, he is now fully formed and visible. Christ’s “leaps” are luminous—an interior light that brings the person to what we might call a gradual anthropophany.⁴⁸ When God finally appears, the true human being appears also. Thus, for Symeon theophany is not simply an encounter with an external being. It is simultaneously an encounter with one’s full nature and personhood, transfigured in the divine light, and thus living, to recall St. Maximos the Confessor, “carnal things in a divine fashion (*energon ta sarkika theikos*).”⁴⁹ Christ appears to those who have fully received him, who are “aware of his stirring” inside them.⁵⁰ Only a God-bearer (*theotokos*) can see God.

This, I believe, is how we should interpret Symeon’s important qualification of a metaphor that he often uses in his writings: that of the light of a lamp. “I see you also as a lamp, lighted inside a lantern” he writes in one of his hymns.⁵¹ What exactly does he see?

“Christ is not, for example, reflected like the light of a lamp in a mirror, is not an apparition without substance like the reflection, but appears in a light which is personal and substantial; in a shape

⁴³ Eth. III. 505-511, p. 426. See also Golitzin (1995), p. 133.

⁴⁴ Eth. III. 545-550, p. 428.

⁴⁵ Eth. III. 190-195, p. 404. See also Golitzin (1995), p. 135.

⁴⁶ Eth. III. 515-520, p. 426. *Ibid.*, p. 133.

⁴⁷ Eth. X. 885-890, pp. 322-324. See also Golitzin (1995), p. 169.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ *Ambigua* 4, PG 91.

⁵⁰ Eth. X. 880-885.

⁵¹ See Maloney (2001), p. 218 (Hymn XLII).

without shape, and a form without form, He is seen invisibly and comprehended incomprehensibly.⁵²

If Christ is not an image but is instead a personal being, how are we to understand his formlessness and invisibility? In what sense is his light “personal?”

The language of paradox is common in mystical poetry where it suggests the transcendence of conceptual opposites and the ineffable character of the divine vision. But Symeon is speaking here of an actual encounter. Theophany is both natural—in the sense that the ascetic is existentially involved in the divine life (has been deified)—and supernatural—in the sense that she is the recipient of a divine fullness hitherto unknown. The person who is transformed by *ascesis* and grace can, as we said earlier, see God because she already has God. And yet, the visible Christ-light is also invisible because one becomes aware in that moment of the encompassing and immeasurable presence of God. The distinction between illumination and deification is important to mention here since the former takes place within the heart which it purifies and fills, whereas the latter goes beyond the heart and encompasses the entire person who lives in the Holy Spirit, sees the glorified Christ and experiences all beings and her self permeated by the divine light.⁵³

Symeon returns to this simile to compare the flame burning inside a lit lamp (*lampades*) to the noetic lights burning inside the soul—these lights correspond to the spiritual virtues and thoughts (*logismoi*) that the soul has internalized and made her own.⁵⁴ Resembling the lamps/candles burning in Orthodox churches, and particularly the round corona (*stephanoeides*) that surrounds the chandelier, these lights illuminate the entire soul.⁵⁵ During the great feasts, the corona and the chandelier are lit and swing in a circular, double motion to intimate the mystical dance of the angels in heaven. It is an important analogy because it not only describes divine illumination in intimate terms, as reflected from multiple lights shining in every corner of the soul, but it also imparts on it the mystical motion of the Trinity—“burning ever with the fire of the Spirit, such that there is no break in the circle.”⁵⁶

The divine light leaves nothing untouched, untransformed. Dynamic and yet subtle it shines inside and around the soul, a notion that Symeon conveys with the use of two verbs: “lighted” (*photizesthai*) and

⁵² Eth. X. 885-890, pp. 322-324. See also Golitzin (1995), p. 169.

⁵³ Ioannes S. Romanides, *Paterike Theologia (Patristic Theology)*, (Thessaloniki: Parakatatheke, 2004), pp. 73-80.

⁵⁴ Eth. XIV. 94-100, p. 428.

⁵⁵ Eth. XIV. 105-106, pp. 428-430. See also Golitzin (1995), p. 175 #2.

⁵⁶ Eth. XIV. 104-106, pp. 428-430; Hymn XVI. ??? p. 58??

“illuminated” (*katalampesthai*)—the Greek in the latter denoting light that envelops in splendor.⁵⁷ God descends in the recesses of the human person with a light that is both made to human measure (the Son) and revealing (the Spirit) of his majesty (the Father). The God of the Incarnation is the God of the Trinity, a God in whom man finds his humanity and divinity, who is both human and unmistakably divine.⁵⁸

If we now wish to specify the nature of the divine light, Symeon associates it most expressly with the Holy Spirit—although always in its Trinitarian expression (the Father and the Son are simultaneously present where the Spirit is). In Hymn 22, it becomes clear that illumination has multiple forms all of which reflect the psychical and existential state of the person who is experiencing it. When God says to Symeon that “I am a light absolutely without form, entirely simple, without composition, with no part, by nature...” he immediately adds: “I mercifully show Myself according to the capacity of each person, I change form; it is not I who undergo this change but it is those who see Me, who are worthy of seeing Me under this form.”⁵⁹

Thus the Holy Spirit becomes water (tears) when one feels remorse, gentleness when one’s anger recedes, a ray, flame, star or sunshine, depending on the purity of one’s heart. It is not simply an intellectual, contemplative light that is directed to a detached intellect but one that recognizes the condition of the soul it fills. Illumination, as we have seen, becomes baptismal immersion, immense joy, mystical conversation, or embracing sweetness. In theosis, Christ himself is seen, heard and felt by the entire person (rather than simply by the intellect). In Hymn 13 we read: “I see Him and I converse with Him... [He] takes me within Himself and hides me in His arms...He is in my heart He dwells in Heaven.”⁶⁰

For Symeon, *theoria*, the soul’s vision of the divine light, is total “nourishment” (*trephomai kalos*), the good food that sustains the ascetic’s spiritual and physical existence.⁶¹ Those who see God see him with the totality of their being—not as pure intellects or disembodied minds. In fact, in the divine vision all discursive activity ceases so that by grace the mind not only reaches its optimal receptivity but actually transcends it.⁶² In those instances, it is appropriate to speak of the transforming union of

⁵⁷ Eth. XIV. 95-100, p. 428.

⁵⁸ Hymn XXXIII. 1-25, pp. 412-414. See Krivocheine (1986), p. 221.

⁵⁹ Hymn XXII. 159-165, p. 182. See also Maloney (2001), pp. 110-11; Krivocheine (1986), pp. 237-238.

⁶⁰ Syméon le Nouveau Théologien, *Hymnes 1-15 Sources Chrétiennes Vol. I*, Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1969, XIII. 65-70, p. 262. See also Maloney (2001), p. 45.

⁶¹ Hymns XIII. 66-68, p. 262. See also Maloney (2001), p. 45.

⁶² See Crivocheine (1986), p. 225. Cap. II. 17-18.

all human faculties, a union in which the identities of each are separately and jointly perfected by participation in the divine life. Thus deification brings the mystery of the Trinity to human existence (the “threefold hypostasis” that we mentioned earlier).⁶³ The one whose mind and heart are immersed in the divine light thinks in God—“he indeed then merits to have truly Your mind”—but also lives in God.⁶⁴ He *incorporates* the divine life. God “dwells in the Saints [their entrails] and pitches His tent in them in conscious awareness and in a substantial way.”⁶⁵

Theophany as Gnosis

The analogy to sunlight is at the basis of al-Ghazālī’s explanation of theophany in *The Niche of Lights*. There are two key points that should be emphasized in this regard. The first is that light is understood dynamically, as an activity that brings things to view. Illumination in this sense implies manifestation: a thing emerging from invisibility and being seen for what it is. Things receive and reflect light according to their natures. Olive oil and glass, for example, are more transparent than other substances.⁶⁶ Sunlight is absorbed by all kinds of physical bodies, suggesting an ontological component in the activity of illumination since things are generally receptive to the illuminating act. The nature of this receptivity and the extent to which light is incorporated rather than reflected is an important question (to be considered later). Al-Ghazālī defines light as “that which is seen in itself and through which other things are seen, such as the sun.”⁶⁷ True light is the illuminating act itself and the source from which it originates.

The second point is that the activity of divine light is consistently compared to that of reason. In contrast to the first analogy, light in this case is defined subjectively and intentionally, in terms of an activity that originates in an agent rather than a physical body. This is why al-Ghazālī turns to the eye, the organ of vision. The eye is limited by its physical nature while reason is not. Reason resembles light in three respects. It can penetrate or “unveil” things and bring their otherwise hidden or invisible aspects to view, something that the eye cannot do.⁶⁸ It is transcendent and

⁶³ Cat. XV. 75, p. 228.

⁶⁴ Hymn XXXIX. 64, p. 480.

⁶⁵ “How can He who contains all creation be contained in our entrails (*splagchna*)? How can He shine in the thick flesh of our hearts?” Hymn XXIX. 160-175. See also Maloney (2001), pp. 203, 156. The translation is mine.

⁶⁶ Al-Ghazālī, *The Niche of Lights*, David Buchman trans., (Provo: Brigham Young University, 1998), pp. 1-4 (henceforth cited as *Niche*). Q. 24:35.

⁶⁷ *Niche*, p. 4.

⁶⁸ *Niche*, p. 6.

immanent with regard to its objects (i.e., light is immaterial but also corporeal just like reason has concepts and things as its objects), and it perceives all things according to their due proportion, a task in which sense perception is liable to err.⁶⁹ It also perceives the substances of things and those aspects of their being that are not evident to the senses. It makes introspection and self-reflection possible: “Inward mysteries are apparent to it, and hidden meanings are disclosed to it.”⁷⁰ These activities can be obstructed or impaired by fancy and the imagination which affect reason because they direct it to sensible experience and especially the visual sense. Only after death will this connection be totally severed, reason “perfected” and its vision made “piercing.”⁷¹ Thus, “the rational faculty is more worthy of the name ‘light’ than the eye” but cannot reach perfection by itself.⁷²

In this life, reason can be enhanced when it is mediated by “the speech of God,” an act of grace open to all believers.⁷³ The Qur’an, the word of divine wisdom, elevates rational activity to transcendental understanding, transforming reason to a spiritual faculty. “When the light of wisdom radiates, the rational faculty comes to see in actuality, after having been able to see only potentially.”⁷⁴ Aside from implying the inherent rationality of the Qur’an—which is in this view the penultimate rational act or expression of reason (in anthropic and cosmic terms)—this statement suggests that the encounter with the divine Word is principally gnosiological. The Qur’an sheds “clear light” on those aspects of the intellect that are obscured by nature or sin. If we judge by the context of the verse on which al-Ghazālī relies in this case (Q. 4:174), this clarity is related to the undivided unity of God. Thus a divided light in any form would be an instance of polytheism—just as in the case of reason it would be a sign of confusion and in that of the senses of delusion.⁷⁵ When reason is thus unified—or aligned with God’s Word—it becomes possible for human beings to think and experience “wonders” while in this life. Al-Ghazālī explains that this “spiritual” or “luminous” world is not confined to heaven.⁷⁶

The highest form of intellectual unification occurs in prophetic revelation which as we shall see below is a form of inspiration (*ilhām*). Those

⁶⁹ *Niche*, p. 8.

⁷⁰ *Niche*, pp. 6-7.

⁷¹ *Niche*, p. 9. Q. 50:22.

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ *Niche*, p. 10.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ *Niche*, p. 10. Q. 4:174.

⁷⁶ *Niche*, p. 11.

endowed with a prophetic spirit are themselves a wonder but also a source of wonders for others. The analogy to light remains operative here, as al-Ghazālī returns to the famous light verse in the Qur'an (24:35) and to the description of Muhammad as a "light-giving lamp" (Q. 33:46). In the prophets, reason is transcendentalized and the mind can apprehend phenomena and locutions that are deemed paradoxical by the natural intellect: "man receives an 'eye' possessed of a light and in its light the unknown and other phenomena not normally perceived by the intellect become visible."⁷⁷

This kind of inner vision is centered in the heart and follows logically from the dynamic hierarchy of human cognitive faculties. The existence of a hierarchy implies the possibility of yet higher stages that are inconceivable to those with impaired cognitive abilities. Even though its necessity cannot be demonstrated rationally, its possibility, argues al-Ghazālī, cannot be denied. The occurrence of unique astronomical phenomena that reason cannot systematically explain is used to justify similar phenomena in religious experience: "a way exists to grasp those things which the intellect does not normally perceive."⁷⁸

According to the *Niche*, the light of prophecy is not kindled directly by God but by an angelic being that is likened ("similitude") to a "fire."⁷⁹ A hierarchy of lights ensues within the angelic orders which surround God and derive their light from Him who is the "Furthest, Highest" and "First Light."⁸⁰ Reaching down to the sensible things of this world, this light belongs to them by metaphor since no thing or being (angels included) really possesses it: "[it] has no light of its own with respect to its own self."⁸¹ God is the lender of light and human beings its temporary users from whom illumination can always be reclaimed. Al-Ghazālī hastens to add that this act of temporary participation by finite beings in the divine presence and its extension in their direction has no impact on God's unity.⁸² No boundaries are crossed (i.e., between the divine and human) and ontologies redefined, as we see in the case of the Trinity (particularly the movement of the Son in the Incarnation) and in deification.

Beings owe their light or existence entirely to God who can withdraw it at any moment. Having created the world in archetypal form first—as a master icon—and imprinted it in "the Preserved Tablet" (*al-lawh al-mahfūz*), God is free to actualize it or bring to life but also to return beings

⁷⁷ *Deliverance*, p. 84.

⁷⁸ *Deliverance*, p. 85. See also Lazarus-Yafeh (1975), pp. 295-297.

⁷⁹ *Niche*, p. 13.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 14-15.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

⁸² *Ibid.*

to the passive and specular state of an image or type.⁸³ Sequences of actualized images constitute the sensible or corporeal world but the contents of the Tablet are also imprinted in the imagination and the intellect where they recreate an image of the cosmos and the very possibility of objective knowledge.

This transference is the work of divine wisdom which inserts spiritual (*rūhāniyya*) and corporeal realities in the human heart thus creating in it an iconic microcosm. In the human eye is “pictured...the image of the world, the heaven and the earth, with all their widespread extent,” and the same act of depiction is replicated in the inner faculties.⁸⁴ The divine power is here absolute as it is in the case of causality where God is the agent who directs the qualities of things to be of one or another kind and in a given sequence according to his will.⁸⁵ Thus God can at any time drive human beings to solipsism and ignorance by either opening or closing their eyes to what they already possess—just as he can intervene and stop a piece of cotton behaving like cotton in relation to a flame.⁸⁶ Ontological determination is always tentative and subject to the divine will, as are self-consciousness and knowledge in human persons:

“...and were it not that He has placed an image (*mithāl*) of the whole world within your very being you would have no knowledge of that which is apart from yourself. Glory belongs unto Him who has ordered these wonders in the heart and eye, and then blinded the heart and eye to the perception of them so that the hearts of the majority of creatures have become ignorant of themselves and their wonders.”⁸⁷

This idea is repeated in the *Niche*: “when the essence of anything other than He is considered in respect of its own essence, it is sheer non-existence.”⁸⁸ Beings participate in the divine life through the existence it bestows on them. But they exist only to the extent that God allows them to relate or turn to him: “Viewed in terms of the face of itself, it is nonexistent; but viewed in terms of the face of God, it exists.”⁸⁹ Thus to know beings as they are is not to know *them* but to know the One for whom and in whom they exist and without whom they are only similitudes.⁹⁰ God’s rule over creation is absolute. Man cannot claim ownership of his own being or of his sin and ignorance. Without God’s

⁸³ Ibid., pp. 52-58.

⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 59.

⁸⁵ *Incoherence*, pp., 166-169.

⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 171.

⁸⁷ *Marvels*, p. 59.

⁸⁸ *Niche*, p. 16

⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 17.

⁹⁰ See Al-Ghāzālī (2008), pp. 56-57.

majestic energy, beings are condemned to an iconic, phenomenal existence.

Al-Ghazālī's cosmology, theology and anthropology converge in a fascinating simile that is meant to elucidate the difference between the acquired knowledge of the theologian and the bestowed or inspired knowledge of the Sufi. It is found in *Marvels* chapter 9. The story was popular and the subject of manuscript illuminations.⁹¹ *Rūm* (Byzantine) and Chinese painters compete to create a beautiful painting on a portico. The *Rūm* bring and use all kinds of unusual pigments to create a masterful painting while the Chinese keep on polishing the surface allotted to them until they turn it into a virtual mirror. Once the curtain between the two sides is lifted, the *Rūm* image is reflected on the polished surface on the opposite side, with "added illumination and dazzling brilliance, since that side had become like unto a polished mirror."⁹² Thus using no colors and no painting art, the Chinese enabled the formation of a superior image which others had painted. Like the Chinese craftsmen, the Sufis opt to polish their hearts "until the true nature of the Real shines forth clearly therein," a nature which only God can paint.⁹³

Beyond the stated analogy, the emphasis here is not on how things exist but on how they are reflected. The purified heart will reflect reality because there is nothing left in it of the particular man or woman to whom it belongs to obstruct the divine transmission. In that respect, it is not really somebody's heart anymore but an impersonal primordial mirror in which God can project the original creative act, the inscription of the Preserved Tablet—here concentrated and released in bursts or flashes of knowledge of the divine. The Sufi's heart is a tablet on which God paints and writes. When the heart is opened to the divine reality, it is imprinted with the divine archetypes which it then contemplates in "dream-visions" (*ru-yā*).⁹⁴ But it is not thoroughly transfigured, as we see in Symeon. God does not embrace the heart. He imprints it.

Inspiration (*ilhām*) is involuntary knowledge, the inexplicable flooding of the purified heart with ideas, insights and visions. Whereas in the saint there is no perceptible secondary cause, in the prophet, inspiration (*wahy*) is the result of direct angelic intervention. In both it is preceded but not guaranteed by the external and internal abandonment of worldly pursuits and desires, the undivided attention of the heart to the remembrance of

⁹¹ It is illustrated in a fifteenth century Persian manuscript, currently in New York, the Metropolitan Museum of Art. See *Marvels*, pp. 61 #12, 62.

⁹² *Marvels*, pp. 61-62.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

God and the invocation of his name (*dhikr*). The infusion of knowledge is similar to a “blinding flash of lightning,” variations of which return according to the degrees of purification achieved by the mystic.⁹⁵ Al-Ghazālī calls the object of this knowledge “gleams of reality” which is knowledge about God that the speculative theologians (*nuzzār*) may achieve by means of discursive reasoning.⁹⁶ But there is no indication of personal transformation, of the joyful discovery of one’s authentic existence that we find in Symeon.

For Al-Ghazālī and Symeon, theophany brings both sterility and fecundity of reason and speech. The “gnostics” who surrender their minds to God and to the inner vision that he opens in the human heart, are subject to the silence of lovers in “a state of intoxication.”⁹⁷ Sunlight and lit lamps are the dominant metaphors and sometimes, as in this passage from Symeon, the resemblance is quite remarkable: “And yet I see you as a sun; I look at You as a star, and I carry You within my bosom like a pearl. I see You as a flame, lit inside a lantern.”⁹⁸ When the divine presence is not anymore visible, its most telling witness is speech that breaks into paradoxical locutions and claims of “extreme passionate love” like the mystical exclamation of Mansur al-Hallāj (c.858-922) repeated by al-Ghazālī in this context: “I am He whom I love, and He whom I love is I.”⁹⁹

Yet, for al-Ghazālī this kind of statement can never be taken literally, as it is for Symeon in whose hymns language too is transfigured and finds intimacy with being and God. Once reason is restored, the divine vision is only a similitude and al-Ghazālī hastens to affirm the solitary unity of God: “They come to know that what they experienced was not the reality of unification but that it was similar to unification.”¹⁰⁰ Hallāj’s ecstatic union is only a mirage. When the wine is in the glass, the two appear to be one but reason knows that they are not: “it is *as if* the wine is the cup.”¹⁰¹ Reason here comes to the assistance of orthodoxy. The mystic’s language becomes poetry.

In al-Ghazālī, those who see God are not transformed in the vital, existential sense that we find in Symeon and the Orthodox ascetical (hesychastic) tradition. It is not persons that encounter the deity but intellects. One’s senses and physical life do not participate. Neither does

⁹⁵ Ibid., p. 55.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ *Niche*, p. 18.

⁹⁸ See Krivocheine (1986), p. 233, Hymn XXXXII. 85-92. See also Maloney (2001), p. 218.

⁹⁹ *Niche*, p. 18. On this statement by al-Hallāj, its origin, reception and meanings, see Louis Massignon, *The Passion of al-Hallāj Mystic and Martyr of Islam, Bollingen Series XCVIII*, Herbert Mason trans., (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), pp. 64-71.

¹⁰⁰ *Niche*, p. 18.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

creation which in Symeon's theophanies is an indispensable part of the theotic experience. The God of Symeon is fully internalized. His simplicity becomes man's simplicity. His beauty and that of the ascetic who encloses him in his heart are one and the same because God mystically yields to human measure. Nature too shares in this feast of human perfection. In al-Ghazālī, those who seek God with pure hearts and come to experience his presence do share in the divine beauty. But they do so intellectually "observing their own essences in the beauty they attained."¹⁰² The world does not join them in this manifestation of divine and human synergy: "the objects of vision are effaced, but not the person who sees."¹⁰³ In the next stage, reached by "the elect of the elect," nothing is left but God:

"In their essence they are effaced and annihilated. They become extinct from themselves, so that they cease observing themselves. Nothing remains save the One, the Real. The meaning of His words, 'Everything is perishing except His face [Q. 28:88], becomes for them a taste and a state.'¹⁰⁴

Symeon also confesses that while in a trance "I forgot where I was and who I was."¹⁰⁵ But the experience immediately opens into a personal and cosmic vision where one's being, like a microcosm, is awakened to its own perfection while a parallel transfiguration affects the visible world. The divine light is not uniform and closed in itself but living and expanding. It brings all beings to a state of ontic plenitude that does not erode their distinctiveness and identity. It is an act of divine reverence toward the human person and all creation that invites reciprocity: "And this light envelops me and appears to me like a star, and exists incomprehensible to all. It sparkles like the sun and in it I can see contained the whole of creation, and it shows me all it encompasses but also orders me to respect my own limits."¹⁰⁶

For Symeon the *visio dei* is deeply physical. God's light "invigorates and strengthens the release of limbs and muscles" which are heavy with fatigue and mortality.¹⁰⁷ As a contemporary Orthodox theologian has put it, citing Job (42:5), "it is not only the human intellect that sees Christ but also the body."¹⁰⁸ Internally, the union or communion between heart and God, the ultimate erotic act in creation, recalls the Incarnation where the divine Word enters into a hypostatic union with human nature:

¹⁰² *Niche*, p. 52.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ Cat. XVI. 86-87, pp. 244-246. See also Krivocheine (1986), p. 218.

¹⁰⁶ Cat. XVI. 130-135, p. 248. See also Krivocheine (1986), p. 219.

¹⁰⁷ Cat. XVI. 95-100, p. 246.

¹⁰⁸ See Romanides (2004), p. 76.

While I reflect on this, He Himself is discovered within myself, resplendent in the interior of my miserable heart, illuminating me on all sides with His immortal splendor, completely intertwined with me, He embraces me totally.”¹⁰⁹

Conclusion

In Symeon, as Archbishop Krivocheine and Archimandrite Golytzin have noted, the experience of the divine light is an experience of a personal presence and participation: “*phos enhypostaton, phos trishypostaton*.”¹¹⁰ In al-Ghazālī, it is an experience of an abstract, supra-rational luminance (“flashes of the unseen”) that imparts understanding of divine realities on those graced with a “holy prophetic spirit” by numbing their senses and intellect and eliminating consciousness.¹¹¹ In Symeon, theophany is an encounter and conversation with Christ, a mystical communion between the human person and God in which the divine light permeates every aspect of a person’s being. To live in this light is to live in Christ. By contrast, in al-Ghazālī God is reflected in the purified heart as in a mirror.¹¹² Light is not existential and personal. It is a metaphor that is used to explain the supernatural knowledge of God’s unitude (*tawhīd*).¹¹³

According to Krivocheine, a vision of light that lacks communion “can cause an immense lassitude, a profound mystical dissatisfaction.”¹¹⁴ Symeon’s Christ is not an apparition. He is the living and lived God who speaks and is spoken to, who feels and is felt, sees and is seen, breathes and is breathed, who is at home in humanity. The light experienced by the ascetic is a “He,” a “You,” and when it addresses him directly, an “I.” In theophany, human life and nature are perfected by participation rather than passive reception. Repeatedly Symeon turns to Christ and pleads for closeness and adoration—“Grant me, Christ, to cover your feet with kisses.”¹¹⁵ Christ is a light that is “sweet” and “simple”, “distant” and “interior.”¹¹⁶ Christ offers communion with his divinized humanity while in this life. He is “the God without pride” (*O anyperyphanos Theos*)—an expression, as Krivocheine observes, that is unprecedented in Patristic literature.¹¹⁷

¹⁰⁹ Hymn XVI. 20-30, p. 12.

¹¹⁰ See Krivocheine (1986), p. 22. See also Golitzin (1997), p. 87.

¹¹¹ *Niche*, p. 37.

¹¹² *Marvels*, p. 32.

¹¹³ *Niche*, p. xxxii.

¹¹⁴ See Krivocheine (1986), pp. 22-23. ??? Euch. I. 156-161.

¹¹⁵ Hymn XXIV. 1, p. 226.

¹¹⁶ Hymn XXIV. 15-20, p. 228.

¹¹⁷ Cat. VI. 360-365, p. 46. See also Krivocheine (1986), p. 241; Euch. II. 137-141.

In those instances where God appears distant and majestic, there appears to be a resemblance to al-Ghazālī. In Hymn 22, for example, we hear God speak to Symeon in the solitary and majestic voice of *tawhīd*: “I am by nature inexpressible...alone (*monos*) in the unique All and alone with those who can recognize me in the darkness of this life...”¹¹⁸ Yet these words are there to underscore the gravity of human sin and the distance it sets between humanity and God. At the same time, they speak of God’s intimacy with those who genuinely repent—the tension between the two ultimately pointing to God’s triune being. Thus in Hymn 23, Symeon sings: “O Trinity, Creator of all things, Oh my God, Unique for the Unique.”¹¹⁹

For al-Ghazālī, the *visio dei* is not subject to the intimate union and existential paradoxes with which Symeon inundates his hymnography. It appears after the removal of all objects of consciousness and all the forms, real and imaginary, in which their intuition and perception subsists—a process that is “extremely difficult” and demands great discipline and devotion.¹²⁰ All concepts must be swept away to make room for God, the pure, eternal, self-disclosing light “through which, for which, and by which things are unveiled.”¹²¹ Symeon seems to move in the same direction when he describes the serene, contemplative stillness of divine illumination. But his is a stillness that is full of divine energy or grace, and coincides with the mystical perfection of one’s being in divine communion.

In Symeon, theophany is ontic and trinitarian. It is the light in and through which human nature is perfected or deified and comes to bear God. In al-Ghazālī, theophany is principally gnostic and unitarian. It centers on the transformation of the heart’s way of knowing and culminates in the imprinting on the entranced intellect of the ultimate, transcendent reality, the “First Light, the Real.”¹²² Divine knowledge may be reached incrementally by the saints or “Friends” of God or be granted immediately and without preconditions to prophets (the “Beloved”) like Muhammad: “the revelation of Himself rushes upon them at once.”¹²³ Even though it informs the intellect, it does not transform the human person.

The personal, hypostatic character of theophany in Symeon is possible only because of Christ and the Incarnation. Without the assumption of human nature, God remains distant and impersonal and therefore amenable to philosophical and metaphysical speculation as an abstraction. From Symeon’s standpoint, and that of Orthodox Christianity, the human

¹¹⁸ Hymn XXII. 50-55, p. 174.

¹¹⁹ Hymn XXIII. 1-5, p. 188.

¹²⁰ *Niche*, p. 9; *Deliverance*, p. 324.

¹²¹ *Niche*, p. 19.

¹²² *Niche*, pp. 43, 52.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

person becomes Christ by grace (*kata charin*) and only through Him “in the likeness” (*kath’ homeiosin*) of God. Since for al-Ghazālī this option is not available, God’s proximity to the human person resembles that of natural illumination or the appearance of an object’s likeness on a reflective surface (a mirror). Knowledge is transferred spontaneously to the intellect inside the heart, which is the passive recipient of divine truths. We may speak in this context of an intellect that is in the likeness of God but not of a person.

There is certainly much more to consider in both Symeon and al-Ghazālī in order to accept these conclusions as final or definitive. I would hope that this short venture into their understanding of theophany and human nature is the beginning of a conversation that will explore asceticism and the spiritual life in Orthodox Christianity and Islam in the light of their common aspirations and defining differences.