ST SYMEON OF THESALONICA: HIS DOGMATIC THEOLOGY

St Symeon, bishop of Thessalonica, was born in the second half of the 14th century and died in September 1429. He is renowned in the Orthodox world, as well as in wider Christian circles, for his liturgical writings. These texts, published by Migne in *Patrologia Graeca*, have attracted the deserved attention of both Orthodox clergy as well as of people interested in Eastern liturgical theology and practice. Very little consideration has been given so far, however, to other aspects of St Symeon’s thought, and notably to his dogmatic writings, to which this paper is devoted.

The main focus of the paper will be St Symeon’s dogmatic treatise known under the title *Against All Heresies*. This work is in the form of a dialogue. St Symeon presents the doctrinal teaching of the Orthodox Church through a conversation with a priest, who represents his clergy, and who asks him several questions, to which St Symeon replies. The treatise is a substantial well-rounded presentation of the orthodox doctrine, a concise exposition of orthodox dogmatics. It is not as detailed and technical as Saint John of Damascus’ *Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, but it is in many ways comparable to it. At any rate, it is one of the rare systematic presentations of most of the central aspects of orthodox theology written by a saint of the Church, and this makes its examination particularly interesting and important.

I would like to begin by making two general remarks. First, whereas the first part of the exchange between St Symeon and his priest, namely the *Against All Heresies*, is dedicated to doctrine, later on the discussion turns to an examination of the sacraments and other liturgical matters. This is a reflection of the profound integration of *lex credendi* and *lex orandi*, of doctrine and liturgy, which is a typical characteristic of orthodox theology. The very word «orthodoxy» means right *doxa*, that is both right belief or faith and right praise or glory. Orthodoxy then denotes both right doctrine and the proper way of worshipping God. This integration of faith and worship is also found in the Orthodox Liturgy. Whereas its first part is the Liturgy of the Word, the second part is the Liturgy of the Sacrament. Faith, therefore, leads to worship. This movement is also reflected in the writings of St Symeon, this great theologian of the liturgy.

The second general point which I would like to highlight is the dialogical character of the treatise. This reminds us that theology develops within a context of dialogue, love, and communion, and not so much at the desks of isolated intellectuals.

With regard to its contents, *Against All Heresies* includes chapters against atheism, polytheism, other religions (notably Judaism and Islam) and several old and recent heresies. It refers to the knowledge of God, to divergences in ideas and practices between the Eastern and the Western Churches, to the hesychastic controversy of the 14th century, and so on. It also presents the teaching of the seven Ecumenical Councils and of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed. In general, most major doctrinal topics are dealt with in one way or another, under various headings. This work is a combination of dogmatics and apologetics. It aims at both presenting the Orthodox Christian doctrine and refuting the claims of other religions and heresies.

The presentation of the doctrinal teaching of St Symeon may be separated into the following sections. I) Theological Method, II) Revelation and Reason, III) Trinitarian Theology (the Doctrine of God), IV) Christology, V) Pneumatology, VI) Ecclesiology, VII) Anthropology and Soteriology, VIII) Ethics, IX) The Law and the Gospel, X) Criticism of Western Christianity and Other Religions, XI) Apologetics, and XII) Art. I will not present all the aspects of St Symeon’s teaching on the aforementioned subjects, but only those that are of particular historical and theological significance. My main focus will be his *Against All Heresies*, although I will also integrate into my presentation elements from all his treatises dealing directly with doctrine that are included in *Patrologia Graeca*, namely his *Interpretation of the Creed*, his *Exposition of the Creed*.1

---


2 For *Against All Heresies*, see PG 155. Col. 33A-176C.

3 PG 155. Col. 752-802.
Sayings, and his On the Twelve Articles of the Creed. For the sake of brevity, in this paper I will present only sections I, II, and XI, namely those aspects of St Symeon’s teaching that have to do with his epistemology and apologetics. In my conclusions, however, I will give an overall assessment of his entire dogmatic vision.

I. Theological Method

As already said, St Symeon’s treatise Against All Heresies is both dogmatics and apologetics. Its theology is traditional and polemical. It is traditional, namely rooted in the biblical and patristic tradition. St Symeon quotes Scripture very often, but he rarely gives explicit citations from the Fathers, or mentions them by name. He founds his theology primarily on the Bible. Scripture, however, is mediated through a patristic and especially a conciliar interpretation. He argues that we should not trust ourselves. We should instead say what we have learned from the Fathers. However, this does not mean that his theology lacks creativity. Some of the ways in which he selects, organizes, and presents his material, or his emphasizing this or that aspect of Christian doctrine, are original and characteristic of his personal theological vision and style.

St Symeon’s theology is also polemical. It aims at refuting atheism, religions other than Christianity, and heresies. And as a rule St Symeon pulls no punches when it comes to criticizing ideas that diverge from Orthodox Christianity.

Let us briefly look at the writer’s relationship to history and culture. The reader’s initial impression is that St Symeon presents his dogmatics in a typically Byzantine manner, namely a way that often tends to be somewhat unhistorical by emphasizing the perennial character of Christian truths without always giving due weight to some of its historical manifestations. However, this conclusion is partly misleading, as can be seen for instance by the fact that St Symeon pays particular attention to recent threats to the Orthodox faith, to the refutation to which he devotes a considerable part of his treatise.

Regarding the engagement of his theology with culture, this seems to be minimal. St Symeon explicitly refuses to use philosophical concepts and ideas taken from Plato, Aristotle, or other secular sources in order to construct his theological system, even though he claims that if he wanted, he could do so. The reason why he rejects this method of theologizing is: «it does not enter by the door», who is Christ. This is laudable, but one wonders whether it necessitates the exclusion of dialogue with culture, to which St Symeon seems prone, especially during the challenging times of the so-called Palaiologan Renaissance.

Let us briefly mention another two characteristics of St Symeon’s dogmatics. First, his treatment of his topics is both historical and systematic. For instance he presents the teaching of the Ecumenical Councils and also he offers a general, extensive, systematic presentation of the question of the knowledge of God. Second, for St Symeon the Creed is of paramount importance. A substantial part of his dogmatic writings is dedicated to the exposition of its teachings and to the refutation of the filioque, the insertion of which into the Creed he considers to be the greatest error of the Western Church.

More can be said with regard to the relationship between dogmatics and apologetics in Against All Heresies. Being a pastor and not an academic living and writing in his ivory tower, it comes as no surprise that in setting out his dogmatics St Symeon is particularly concerned to address pressing
pastoral and apologetic concerns. The emphasis he gives to the differences between East and West, his attempt to prove that the Old Testament, the constitution of man, and creation point not simply to God but to the Holy Trinity, the extensive refutation of Barlaam’s teaching and so on probably arise directly out of his pastoral duties, which involved apologetic and polemical engagement with Muslim, Jewish, Roman Catholic, and Barlaamite ideas. And conversely, the fact that he says so little about Christology, for instance, is also probably related to the fact that this topic was not the object of theological debate and controversy in his times. We will have the opportunity to come back to the subject of apologetics later, but for the time being it will suffice to say that our writer is careful not to allow a distortion of dogmatics for the sake of a «relevant», «convincing», and «successful» apologetic strategy.

Finally, St Symeon brings together dogmatics and ethics. In his On the Twelve Articles of the Creed, after having set out the doctrinal content of the Creed, he goes on pointing out that it speaks also about ethics. It teaches us humility by speaking about the incarnation of the Logos, it speaks about the importance of virginity, about forbearance, about the need to prepare ourselves for the eternal kingdom, and so on11. In this way St Symeon shows the interconnection between faith and works. Ethics is founded on doctrine and doctrine must be lived out in a Christian’s daily life.

II. Revelation and Reason

We will be better able to grasp St Symeon’s understanding of the relationship between revelation and reason by looking first of all at the way in which he deals with the question of the existence of God. In order to «prove» the existence of God, St Symeon names three relevant sets of «proofs», which are found first in the Scriptures, second in the constitution of man, and third in creation in general12. With regard to St Symeon’s use of Scripture, it is worth mentioning that all his references to it in the relevant section of the treatise are to the Old Testament (although this is partly due to anti-Jewish apologetics). This demonstrates that for him in both theory and practice Scripture is not only the New Testament, but both the New and the Old Testaments together. After referring to Scripture, St Symeon focuses on the constitution of man, whose nous (mind), logos, and life point to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit respectively. Last, St Symeon talks about creation, which, as St Paul argues in his epistle to the Romans, points to God.

There are three points worthy of mention here. First, with regard to the validity of «proofs», St Symeon believes that Scripture is by far the most reliable source of theological knowledge. This is after all why he puts it first13. Second, St Symeon does not resort to so-called natural theology in order to «prove» the existence of God. He does not, that is, claim that there is in man an innate rational capacity which can by and of itself construct an ontological system on which highest point is occupied by the true God. He merely argues that man is created in such a way as to be an image of God that points to Him. This view, however, is based on the relevant scriptural assertion14. St Symeon also cites creation, which is not an image of God in the way man is, and yet it too points to Him, as we know from St Paul. This leads us to our third point, namely to the following question: Do man and creation lead our minds to God, and to the Trinity in particular, in the light of revelation or independently of it?

This question is relevant to the fact that in his section on how creation points to God St Symeon refers to what Paul writes in his well-known passage in Rom 1. 2015. So the question is: is one able to infer the existence of God in general, or even of the Trinity in particular, merely by meditating on creation, or is this possible only after somebody is already a Christian and has perhaps also read Paul? If the case is the former, then this can be used as a «proof»16 even when conversing with an atheist on «neutral» grounds. But if the case is the latter, then this is a «proof»17 that is obvious only to those who have already believed in the Christian God. In this case the «proof» simply reinforces the faith they already have. On this issue St Symeon is rather in two minds. On the one hand he argues that if somebody does not accept the Scriptures, he can still come to the truth about the

11 PG 155. Col. 828A-830B.
12 See PG 155. Col. 37B-D, 40A-C, and 40C-41C respectively.
13 PG 155. Col. 37B and C.
14 PG 155. Col. 40C.
15 PG 155. Col. 40D.
16 I use single quotation marks, because this kind of «proof» cannot compel a human mind to believe.
17 I use double quotation marks here to indicate that this is even less of a proof.
Trinity from the observation of creation and the nature of man. On the other hand, in his *Interpretation of the Creed* he says that, although creation bears witness to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, it is only through faith that we can conceive of them and come to know them. This last point suggests that general revelation in creation points to the Trinity, but man is normally incapable of realizing this and of taking advantage of this, unless his mind has been already illumined by faith.

Another interesting aspect of our subject has to do with St Symeon’s anti-Barlaamite theology, which follows the lines of his predecessor — St Gregory Palamas. For St Symeon proper contemplation of the world leads our mind to God and causes our hearts to glorify him. «Scientific» knowledge of creation, however, that is knowledge of the movements of the sun and the stars, of geometry and so on, which can be acquired even by the greatest of sinners, has nothing to do with the divine knowledge of God, and is not conductive to our salvation, contrary to what Barlaam had falsely claimed.

### III. Apologetics

As I said at the beginning of this paper, in St Symeon’s *Against All Heresies* we find both dogmatics and apologetics. As the title itself suggests, apologetics is a basic component of the work. St Symeon’s aim is not simply to present the Orthodox Christian faith, but to present it in such a way as to refute atheist and heretical teaching and to bring people to the Church and consequently to salvation. The main question, as the priest with whom he is conversing puts it, is: «How then should we convince the faithless or secure the faith of weaker people and treat those who raise questions, since we have been taught to make a defence for the hope that is in us?»

St Symeon argues that although the confession of the faith is more important than every other undertaking, it is neither necessary nor possible to convince everyone. It is sufficient for the Christian to present the Christian faith as best as he can. One must be careful, however, not to speak on matters with which one is not sufficiently knowledgeable, because one may fall into heresy and blasphemy oneself. The other danger of apologetics, which the Christian should equally avoid, is to quarrel with people of different faith. This is because it is totally inappropriate for a Christian to quarrel.

As to the foundations of apologetics it is worth presenting a piece of dialogue between St Symeon and his interlocutor. The priest asks him whether one should argue on the basis of the Scriptures or on the basis of «natural concepts». St Symeon’s reply is that one should speak on the basis of the Scriptures. While it is not forbidden to use common concepts and examples from time to time one should take those used by most Saints and those that do not contradict the Scriptures. But even in this case these ways of arguing should be accorded a secondary and subordinate place.

To a further question as to how one should bring to faith those who do not believe in the Triune God, St Symeon replies that the first thing one should do is to pray to God that He might illumine them. After this one should show works of love and virtue, and only then should come the peaceful words of teaching, which should be based on the Scriptures. All this makes it clear that St Symeon believes in the power of theological argument, but also knows that this must go hand in hand with prayer and an inspiring example of the Christian life in order to be effective. He is neither a pietist who despises theology, nor a theologian who cannot see the importance of prayer and holiness.

St Symeon uses several arguments in order to «prove» the existence of the Triune God. We have already mentioned his claims that the Scriptures speak of the Triune God and that both the rational and the non-rational creation bear witness to Him. But St Symeon employs other arguments too. The success of the dissemination of Christian teaching throughout history, the desire for the

---

18 PG 155. Col. 57A.
19 PG 155. Col. 784C-D.
20 General revelation is different to natural theology. The former is God’s revelation through creation. The latter is man’s innate rational capacity to reach a reliable knowledge of God.
21 For the relevant teaching of Barlaam and its refutation, see PG 155. Col. 145B-152A.
23 PG 155. Col. 36B-D.
24 PG 155. Col. 37A-B.
25 PG 155. Col. 36D-37A.
26 PG 155. Col. 37A-B.
27 PG 155. Col. 57A. On this, see also footnote 12.
practice of the life of virginity, the grace of priesthood, the forgiveness of sins, the existence of relics, and miracles in general «prove» that the Church’s teaching of the Triune God is true. Even the fact that Orthodox Christians have been and are persecuted is used by St Symeon as an argument to show that they are followers of the true God, who does not find rest in this world. As already stated earlier, the arguments that St Symeon brings to bear, however, are not intended to be proofs in the strict philosophical meaning of the term. In other words, they do not attempt to prove in a rationally compelling and irrefutable way that the Trinity is the only true God. St Symeon knows very well that the power of his «proofs» is limited. He says that to convince a sinner and bring him to faith is as difficult as to raise someone from the dead. This can only happen if God gives his help, as he did when he opened the eyes of the man who was born blind. Without the grace of God man cannot understand his creator, for He is «beyond mind and reason». St Symeon believes that no argument can be convincing for a mind and soul that is not transformed by the grace of God and chooses to remain unconverted.

To whom should the preaching of the Church be addressed? Who is the «object» of evangelism? St Symeon argues that it is not necessary to present the faith and make a defence of it to everyone. He argues that we should have discussions only with those who want to learn and not simply to quarrel. St Symeon, therefore, is not in favor of general and aggressive evangelism, but endorses only the peaceful preaching of the Gospel to people of good will. As to the «subject» who is qualified to carry out evangelism and apologetics, St Symeon believes that this task belongs to the ordained clergy. In his Interpretation of the Creed, he also argues that the defence of the faith of the Creed is the duty of those who have more knowledge than the others and have received the office of teaching. This also probably refers to priests and bishops.

Conclusions

St Symeon’s Against All Heresies is an interesting and important summary of the Orthodox Christian doctrine. It has both a historical and a theological value. It is conceived within the context of traditional Orthodox theology. It is founded on the Bible, the Councils, and the Fathers. It is neither dependent on nor even mixed with the wisdom of this world, which so easily can adulterate the authenticitity of the fisherman’s teaching. It is written with faith, clarity, and concision. It is not scholastic in the sense of being isolated from and irrelevant to the life of the Church, but on the contrary it is thought of within the framework of the confession and preaching of the Christian faith both to those within the Church and to those outside it. Its author is not a fanatic, yet the work is imbued with his pastoral concern and missionary zeal. It is not scholastic in the sense of being isolated from and irrelevant to the life of the Church, but on the contrary it is thought of within the framework of the confession and preaching of the Christian faith both to those within the Church and to those outside it. Its author is not a fanatic, yet the work is imbued with his pastoral concern and missionary zeal. Its emphasis on the doctrine of the Trinity, on the importance of orthodoxy, prayer, spirituality, virtue, and worship are some of its typically Orthodox characteristics. At times the presentation of the Christian doctrine is somewhat unhistorical, and yet St Symeon addresses the people of his own age, knows what the contemporary challenges to the Orthodox Christian faith are, and fights against threats present and real, not bygone or imaginary.

With regard to his apologetics, something worthy of particular note is that his dogmatics is to some extent shaped by his apologetic concerns yet without his making problematic accommodations to the spirit of the day in order to be convincing. His judgment of views that differ from Orthodox Christianity seems extreme to a reader of our age, an age of tolerance and ecumenicity. It is obviously influenced by theological polemics, which often fails to see any value in other people’s points of view. The outspoken expression of his faith however evades the modern dangers of political correctness, which tends not to allow things to be said by their own name. Telling the truth in love is always a difficult task.

Several merits of the treatise have been pointed out in the course of this paper. I would like to finish off by making three final comments. First, an observation on St Symeon’s theology. I would like to underline here that St Symeon keeps the right balance between the Bible and the Fathers. His way of setting out theology differs from that of some Orthodox theologians of our times, for whom

28 PG 155. Col. 57A-64B. This is an interesting point on theodicy!
29 PG 155. Col. 64A-B.
30 PG 155. Col. 64C.
31 PG 155. Col. 64D.
32 PG 155. Col. 752A. That this «office of teaching» implies ordination can be inferred from the context as well as from what St Symeon says about himself a little further, namely that he has been called «to the order of teaching and archpriesthood» (ibid.).
the Bible is nothing more than the background to patristic teaching, which replaces it and becomes the centre and foreground of theological discourse. For St Symeon the Bible, understood in the light of traditional patristic and conciliar theology, remains in both theory and practice the ultimate theological authority and plays an instrumental role in the construction and exposition of Christian doctrine.33

Second, a point about St Symeon’s apologetics. It is not so much an apologetics based on proofs, which aspire to compel conviction. Rather we have the proclamation of Christian truth, which is made in a spirit of humility and prayer so that God may work the miracle of converting the hearts and the minds of the hearers.

My third remark has to do with the relation between Christianity and culture. St Symeon must have been faced with the challenge of secular wisdom, which held in thrall some of the best minds of the Empire and probably also of his own city. Indeed it was in around his time that further down in Mystra in the Peloponnese the philosopher Plethon was moving away from Christianity towards a philosophically-minded pagan Hellenism. The clash between Christianity and Hellenism had played a part a century earlier in the so-called hesychastic controversies. St Symeon had fully assimilated the teaching of St Gregory Palamas against Barlaam’s claim that the knowledge of this world leads to the knowledge of God. By restating St Gregory’s theology, St Symeon wished to invalidate all attempts to turn, let us say, physics into metaphysics or, indeed, science and philosophy into theology. His engagement with secular culture, however, is rather limited. I wonder how his dogmatics was received by people of faith and good will who were, however, well versed in philosophy, art, and the science of the day and as a result presumably occupied their minds with the question of finding ways of addressing new cultural challenges in traditional and yet creative ways. St Symeon’s Against all Heresies does not sufficiently respond to this need. It belongs more to the area of Christian doctrine and less to that of systematic theology.

33 His Exposition of the Creed’s Sayings, for instance, is a kind of biblical foundation for the Creed, a kind of biblical catena presenting the Creed’s scriptural basis.