Orienting Deification: Queer Bodies and the Manifold Works of God

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Introduction

Contemporary Eastern Orthodox discussion of sexuality and embodiment generally assumes a static, binary gendered essentialism. Opponents of female ordination, same-sex relationships, and the legitimacy of transgender persons generally define appropriate roles and relationships according to binary essentialism. Arguments in favor tend to focus on theories in which sexed bodies are eschatologically transcended. Using the iconodule arguments of Theodore the Studite and the gender-bending monastic discernment of Symeon the New Theologian, I suggest an alternative trajectory: unique human personhood exists in and becomes more fully divine through its embodied material diversity. Bodily experiences are metaphorical vehicles through which persons and the community may be transformed by participation in God. To say it another way, deification occurs in diverse bodies, each unique, whose real and imagined gender fluidity allows particular persons and communities to partake in the magnificent creativity of God.

Orienting the Gaze: Theodore the Studite

Theodore the Studite's defense of icons against the second wave of iconoclasm focuses on Christology and veneration: the anthropological grounds which make it possible to paint images of Christ, the necessity of painting Christ, the acceptable diversity of such images, and how icons ought to be "used." From his arguments, I will make three points: first, bodies and their often common particularities are constitutive elements of human uniqueness; second, the material diversity of icons, and by analogy bodies, expands our vision of the magnificent creativity of God; third, icons both begin and "end" with a real person.

In accord with Athanasius' Christological and soteriological principle that "what is not assumed is not saved," Theodore argues that Christ assumes the entirety of our shared human nature, a nature which can only be recognized when it is seen in a particular, embodied individual.[1] Unique combinations of shared visible traits, such as eye or hair color, help us recognize, and are constitutive of, unique persons (ref. III.A.34). Theodore specifically references Christ's male biological sex as one common trait which assists us in distinguishing particular persons from one another. In this case, Christ is distinguished from the male Peter and Paul (ref. III.A.34, III.A.45).[2] For Theodore, biological sex is one among many recognizable physical characteristics. It is possible to paint

[1] Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 54. For a list of related "exchange formulas," see Norman Russell, *Fellow Workers With God: Orthodox Thinking on Theosis* (Crestwood: SVS Press, 2009), 38. Theodore's arguments are a set of numbered "refutations." Theodore the Studite, *On the Holy Icons*, trans. Catherine Roth (Crestwood: SVS Press, 2001), ref. III.A.4, III.A.16, III.A.34. Subsequent references given in text.

[2] Other theologians who refer to the maleness of Christ, including Gregory the Theologian, are discussed in Nonna Verna Harrison, "The Maleness of Christ," *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 2 (1998).

Christ for no more complicated reason than Christ, like other fully human beings, has an actual, unique body. In Theodore, there is no suggestion that bodies indicate ontological maleness or femaleness. Rather, biological sex is a constitutive element, among other bodily elements, of personal uniqueness.

Second-wave iconoclasts, however, were not primarily concerned with whether one *could* depict Christ, but whether images were *necessary*. In their mind, Christ himself should be sufficient, and multiple material depictions ran the risk of confusing superstitious minds who might confuse a material object with the person depicted. At root here was a concern about right worship. Yet for Theodore, to reduce the diversity of images of Christ is to minimize the glorious wonder of the incarnation. Icons are necessary because Christ without "an artificial image" is like a seal without wax: an "idle and ineffective" prototype (ref. III.9). Theodore unequivocally declares that diverse material depictions of Christ stir in us greater praise, and that "the failure to go forth into a material imprint eliminates His existence in human form" (ref. III.10). Theodore is arguing that because God *can* be seen, touched, and kissed through a plethora of material forms, God *must* be so seen, touched, and kissed. Icons are a necessary part of right veneration and should be properly "used" as essential aspects of venerating the person depicted and worshiping the one in whose image all are made.[3]

As Theodore explains, correct veneration depends on understanding the relationship between image and person. Person and image are not to be confused, as the honor always passes from image to prototype—a theory employed by Basil centuries earlier. This legitimate iconoclastic concern is addressed by ensuring that images clearly indicate their prototypes. Inscribing a name on an icon of a person assists in establishing this relationship (ref. II.16, 17). Resemblance (which is not portraiture) is evoked via an entire visual language that helps clarify the identity of the person depicted, from clothing to facial hair, age, and accoutrements drawn from the corresponding hagiographic narrative. Mary of Egypt's hair indicates her personal form of asceticism, and Thekla's book reminds us of her preaching mission. It is their lives that make them saints in the first place, worthy of veneration, says Theodore, "because they have earned honor by the blood of martyrdom or by a holy way of life" (ref. I.18). People do not start as icons, but as persons who embody virtue according to their own life situations. The *person* is the prototype, and the icon serves to make that person present. The "grammatical order" moves from person to icon and back to person.

Theodore's work suggests the following guidelines when speaking of bodies, persons, and icons: First, in Theodore's anthropology, bodies and their characteristics are constitutive elements of unique human personhood. We are not reduced to our bodies, but they constitute part of our uniqueness. Second, material diversity expands our vision of the magnificent creativity of God. Finally, icons begin with a particular embodied person, and their veneration serves to make that unique person present. It is worth noting at this point that for Theodore, there is neither an eschatological transcendence of sexed bodies nor ontological biological sex.

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[3] Patrick Henry, *Schools of Thought in the Christian Tradition* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 78–79; Theodore, *On the Holy Icons*, 13.

Orienting Desire: Symeon the New Theologian

Holiness and virtue are the primary way in which Eastern Christian traditions believe that salvation as deification is practiced. Deification is the chief metaphor for describing divine-human communion.[4] Symeon the New Theologian provides striking examples of envisioning deification in and through bodies. He served for decades as a successful, if controversial, abbot. As the leader of all-male monastic communities, Symeon repeatedly exhorts his monastic audiences to pursue virtue via their monastic life through the ascetic practices of obedience, dispassion, and love. He does this not by denying the body or its desires, but by seeking to orient them towards God. His theology of "embodied theosis" is one in which, according to Alexander Golitzin, the virtuous human body becomes "a theophany," an embodiment of God.[5] Hilarion Alfeyev sees deification as the "nucleus" of Symeon's thought.[6] In particular, Alfeyev argues, the iconoclastic language used by Symeon's biographer to frame his ecclesial opponents reflects Symeon's own theological response to protracted iconoclasm, in which human sanctity and the possibility of deification is at stake.[7] Symeon shares Theodore's certainty that the reality of bodily divine-human communion underlies the legitimacy of imaging the saints whose lives invite fellow believers into holiness and virtue.

Symeon speaks out of an utter conviction that deification is a bodily experience that occurs in and through the everyday lives of living people. Sainthood is not a thing of the past, but a present reality. Symeon appeals with striking regularity to passion and desire in order to encourage his charges to orient their desire rightly towards God. Specifically, Symeon insists repeatedly that bodies can and do bear the fullness of Christ. Hymn Fifteen of his *Hymns of Divine Love* makes the point clear: all members of a body, every part, every hand and every foot, are filled with the indivisible Christ. Lest we assume that Symeon certainly cannot mean all members, Symeon is quite explicit: "For while we become many members He remains one and indivisible, and each part is the whole Christ himself. And so thus you well know that both my finger and my penis are Christ."[8] Somewhat less willing to refer to female body parts, Symeon insists that those who might be ashamed to think so explicitly should "look at Christ in the womb and notice the things in the womb, and escaping the womb, and from whence my God went out and passed through."[9] For the virtuous person to be ashamed of the body is to be blind to the light of Christ, which shines in and through all parts of the deified person.

Symeon frequently depicts salvation as a locus of nuptial delight, a positive expression of mutually shared desire, God's for humanity and humanity's for God. For Symeon, we ought to seek divine-human communion eagerly with the same desire with which we might pursue our nuptial lover, since this is the desire that God feels for us.

One parable in particular stands out. In the Tenth Ethical Discourse, Symeon tells the story of a rebel who, after many years, finally returns home to his emperor. The emperor is faithful to his many promises of mercy, and joyfully welcomes the rebel home, falling upon his neck with

[4] For discussion of deification as a technical metaphor, see Russell, *Fellow Workers With God: Orthodox Thinking on Theosis*.

[5] Alexander Golitzin, "St Symeon the New Theologian and Orthodox Tradition," *St Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 46.2–3 (2002): 300.

[6] Hilarion Alfeyev, *St Symeon the New Theologian and Orthodox Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 262.

[7] Ibid., 141

[8] *Divine Eros: Hymns of Saint Symeon the New Theologian*, trans. Daniel K. Griggs (Yonkers: SVS Press, 2010), hymn 15, 159–60.

[9] Ibid., hymn 15, 195.

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kisses and ordering that a crown, robe, and sandals be brought out. At this point, the allusion moves away from its clear precedent in Luke:

"And this is not the whole tale, but day and night he rejoices and is glad with him, embracing him and kissing his mouth with his own. So much does he love him exceedingly that he is not separated from him even in sleep, but lies together with him embracing him on his bed, and covers him all about with his own cloak, and places his face upon all his members."[10]

Symeon's exegesis of his parable invites his "beloved brothers" to "run naked and, approaching Christ the Master, let us fall down and weep before his goodness, so that He . . . may like the emperor in our story . . . make us worthy celebrants of the bridal chamber of heaven."[11] What started as a coronation celebration shifts to an extended experience of joyful nuptial intimacy. It is an invitation to return to God and enter into God's desiring—and desired—embrace.

Derek Krueger notes the biblical precedents for metaphorical slippage from ruler or parent to lover. Take, for instance, the quick move from coronation garments to nuptial adornment in Isaiah 61:10, where the beloved is both a groom adorned with a garland and a bride with a jewel, or the many New Testament images of salvation as a wedding feast (Matt. 22:2, Luke 14:16–24, Mark 2:18–19, Matt. 25:1, Luke 12:35, Mark 13:34), or the frequent sexual overtones of covering another with a cloak (Ezek. 16:4–9, Ruth 3:8). The term "members" in this parable is the same as the term in Hymn Fifteen. It is not clear what sort of activity is indicated when the emperor "places his face upon all his members." Little is known about Byzantine same-sex practices, and the possible euphemism of "places his face" for kissing introduces ambiguity in interpretation. Krueger argues that the ambiguity of this scene is part of its point: "Symeon invites rather than denies further fantasy."[12]

What is unambiguous is that such fantasy requires a referent, namely awareness of desire for physical intimacy between men. Analogies only make sense if we are aware of their referents; otherwise, the analogy means nothing. As Krueger notes, "Symeon calls on his audience to identify with such desire in order to understand salvation."[13] Christ's love for them included a physically intimate love for their bodies, and in this image, both Christ and the monks remain male. Reading this parable together with other nuptial parables, Krueger rightly observes that Symeon's "commitment to the deification of the male monk's body in its entirety leads him to ascribe both cross-sex and same-sex desire to God."[14]

Symeon's commitment to bodily deification is not limited to male bodies, or the maleness of bodies. In the First Discourse, Symeon offers a nuptial parable in which God's "incomparable and inexpressible goodness and condescension" is evident in the bride chosen for Christ.[15] Rather than a woman appropriate for the son of a king, God chooses the daughter of the rebellious David, an adulterer and murder. The marriage between the rebel daughter and the king occurs in the conception of Christ in Mary's womb, a conception that is to be repeated in the bodies of each and every Christian. Here Symeon invites

[10] St Symeon the New Theologian, *On the Mystical Life: The Ethical Discourses*, vol. 1: *The Church and the Last Things* (Crestwood: SVS Press, 1995–97), 150–51.

[11] Ibid., 152. Golitzin finds that in this parable Symeon has exceeded "discretion and good sense" (152n2). Perhaps it only exceeds good sense if one has already assumed that same-sex desire is nonsensical.

[12] Derek Krueger, "Homoerotic Spectacle and the Monastic Body in Symeon the New Theologian," in *Toward a Theology of Eros: Transfiguring Passion at the Limits of Discipline* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), 137.

[13] Ibid., 140.

[14] Ibid., 137.

[15] Symeon, *On the Mystical Life*, vol. 1, 54.

males to imagine not their souls but their bodies as female. The "strange and new exchange," in which Christ takes his flesh from a young woman, continues at the eucharistic table, where the "flesh of the Lord is the flesh of the Theotokos." This communication of the mother's body through the son's is a continuation of the "all-immaculate and ineffable marriage which took place with and in her."[16]

In this marriage, the Son becomes a mother, birthing new children who believe and practice faith. Christ "begets and gives birth to immortal and incorruptible children, after having first been born of the virgin by the Holy Spirit." Paradoxically, this birthing *by* Christ is simultaneously a birthing *of* Christ, who is a "kind of seed" conceived in the hearts of the faithful. "Blessed is he," says Symeon, "who has seen the light of the world take form within himself, for he, having Christ as an embryo within, shall be reckoned His mother."[17] Symeon's imagery demands that male monks see themselves as birthed by Christ-in-Mary, as birthers of Christ-as-Mary, and as Christ-who-births-Christ. What begins as an echo of the typical late antique trope of a distinctly feminine receptivity to God turns into an image of the Christian life as one of constant motherhood, birthing and raising to maturity one's own self through a life of virtue.

Symeon refuses to shy away from our bodies and their desires as the place where deification occurs. As Krueger notes, Symeon's parable of the emperor's rebel takes seriously the experience of same-sex desire and directs it towards God. This parable stands out from other nuptial imagery precisely because the beloved remains undeniably male, expanding "the meaning of 'nuptial' to include same-sex nuptiality," which serves a locus for deification.[18] In this parable, bodies, both the monks' and Christ's, remain as they are—male. Yet Symeon simultaneously invites his monks to view their bodies as they are not. Symeon's rich and gender-bending evocation of the monks (and Christ) as mothers invites them to stand (or perhaps sit, squat, or kneel, moan, bellow, or grunt, as is necessary for giving birth) *in persona Theotokos*. Symeon invites them to imagine themselves as birth-giving wombs of a God who passes through that supposedly most shameful of places, their vagina, on the way to the life of virtue that is the goal of all their ascetic effort.

It is important to be clear about what the parable is *not* saying. The parable of the rebel no more legitimizes same-sex activity between monks than the parable of the rebel's daughter justifies other-sex intercourse by monks. Celibacy remains a criterion of the monastic life. What the parable *does* say is that sexual desire, regardless of the biological sex of either the subject or the object, is a means of reflecting on our desire for God and God's desire for us. Likewise, Symeon's gender-bending imagery of birthing monks does not make them women, but instead, exhorts them to see their embodied life of ascetic virtue as a birthing of Christ, who is graciously given to them, and as a strenuous birthing of themselves as lovers of God and neighbor.

What the parable, and Symeon's imagery in general, demands is a proper orienting of our bodies, desires, and relationships *toward deification*, with little regard to whether the body, or

[16] Ibid., 60, 59.

[17] Ibid., 60, 56, 168.

[18] Krueger, "Homoerotic Spectacle," 125.

the relationship, "fits" a particular biological or gendered mode of being or relationship. For Symeon, it appears that any body or relationship oriented toward God is doing exactly what it ought: experiencing deification.

Orienting Us

So how ought the iconodule theology of Theodore the Studite and the body-affirming and gender-bending monastic exhortations of Symeon the New Theologian shape contemporary discourse around sex, sexuality, and bodies (with their various abilities and disabilities)?

First, we must begin with bodies as they are. With Theodore, we can say that bodies and their distinct characteristics are essential elements in human uniqueness. This position cedes nothing to gender essentialism, ontological complementarity, or non-sexed eschatological transcendence. It respects the importance of bodies, recognizing that human uniqueness includes but cannot be reduced to biological sex.

Second, with Symeon, we are free to recognize sexual desire as a good to be celebrated when properly oriented. Rather than begin with the question of whether a body is experiencing the right kind of desire, we begin by asking: how does this body, with its particular desires, inclinations, orientations, abilities, and experiences, engage in deification? By emphasizing *the body* I am not reducing personhood to bodies, nor am I claiming that personhood, desire, and deification is *only* bodily. Rather, I am highlighting that particular bodies desire in particular ways, and if properly oriented, such bodily desire participates in our deification as embodied persons. Asking how our body engages in deification does not concede that all desire is deifying, nor does it claim that desire is not also located in the mind or soul, but insists on a reorientation away from prioritizing the proper *form* of desire and toward prioritizing its proper *end*, that is, God.

Third, Theodore's insistence that the material diversity of icons stirs in us greater praise for God allows us, by analogy, to glorify God for human bodily diversity. Symeon's body and gender-bending metaphors invite us to allow the diverse experiences of other bodies, bodies not like our own, to teach us how we might more fully enter our shared life with God. Queer bodies and queer experiences which manifest God's presence and result in a life of virtue may result in rejoicing at the manifold works of God.

Each of these elements is a trajectory that starts with bodies and focuses on deification. I use the word trajectory intentionally. In part, because I am not claiming that Theodore or Symeon would endorse same-sex marriages, affirm queer bodies, or even imagine women lifting the eucharist with their hands. However, their insights allow us to consider these things as extensions of the same tradition to which they are committed. More importantly however, I use the word trajectory specifically as a word that indicates movement in a particular direction. Whether referring to icons or nuptial metaphors, Symeon and Theodore start with bodies and bodily experience, and then move towards deification. This trajectory does not reduce experience to the body, but it does remind us that all experience, even that of mind

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or soul, is expressed through our bodies.

This is not the direction in which Orthodox arguments regarding sex and gender typically move. Such arguments all too often begin with a limited set of metaphors severed from their bodily origin and insist on bodily conformity to the metaphor. The grammatical order goes from metaphor (or "verbal icon") to body; icons exist first as imagined abstractions which bodies must literally match. For example, the male body of the priest reflects the maleness of Christ in which "he" *metaphorically* stands (though, tellingly, not the femaleness of either the Church or the Theotokos in which "she" also stands). The metaphor, *in persona Christi*, dictates the body. As a result, female-bodied persons are suddenly unable to embody Christ (a belief which jeopardizes the very possibility of their deification, which is always *in Christ*) and same-sex "marriage" rejected because we refuse to imagine its deifying possibilities. Clearly, at least Symeon's imagination was not so limited.

Yet this movement inverts the very movement upon which Theodore insisted: from embodied person to icon and back again. Icons are not the prototype. Embodied persons are the prototype. To replace this by moving from icon to person to icon is to commit the very idolatry that both Theodore and his iconoclast opponents resisted: assuming a particular material or form in and of itself carries the weight of the divine. Iconoclasts wanted to obviate this danger by moving icons out of reach, where they could not be touched or kissed. Theodore, and by extension Symeon, instead press us towards seeing, touching, and kissing the glory of God in all our material, bodily, and relational diversity.

The corrective, and I think the only corrective, is to begin with the question strikingly absent in conversations regarding same-sex marriage, the full participation of female and differently-abled bodies, and the gracious welcome of queer and trans bodies: How is this person, with this body, through this experience, in this relationship, living a life of embodied virtue which contributes to the shared deification of God's holy and virtuous people? How do we see in such persons and relationships the magnificent creativity of God? ❋

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