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**‘NOBODY HAS EVER SEEN GOD’ – THE DENIAL OF THE POSSIBILITY OF  
MYSTICAL EXPERIENCES IN EIGHTH- AND ELEVENTH-CENTURY  
BYZANTIUM**

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**‘NOBODY HAS EVER SEEN GOD’ – THE DENIAL OF THE POSSIBILITY OF  
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**Abstract**

In scholarly treatments of Byzantine mysticism the eighth, ninth and tenth centuries are given short shrift. Authors deal at length with the seventh-century authors John Climacus, Maximus the Confessor and Thalassius the Libyan and then immediately proceed to a discussion of the oeuvre of Symeon the New Theologian who flourished in the late tenth and early eleventh century. There is, of course, a simple reason for this approach. In the intervening years no mystical literature was produced in Byzantium. This raises the question: how can we account for this yawning gap? Two explanations are possible: either there was no interest in mysticism, or mysticism was actively rejected. This article argues that the latter explanation is correct. It analyses texts that rule out the possibility of mystical experiences and implicitly accuse mystics of heresy.

**Keywords**

Byzantine mysticism – John Climacus – Maximus the Confessor – Symeon the New Theologian

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Among the *pseudepigrapha* of Athanasius of Alexandria we find a sermon on the Annunciation, which can be dated to the eighth century.<sup>1</sup> The author of this sermon, most likely a bishop, did not follow the footsteps of earlier preachers who had dealt with the same topic. Instead of giving a rhetorically embellished version of the Biblical account, he focused on the doctrinal implications of the incarnation.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, he tried to make sure that the congregation did not draw heretical conclusions from the Biblical text.<sup>3</sup> This concern is particularly evident in the following passage:

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<sup>1</sup> See M. JUGIE, “Deux homélie patristiques pseudépigraphes,” *EO* 39 (1940), pp. 283-289, who argues for an early eighth-century date.

<sup>2</sup> See D. KRAUSMÜLLER, “Radical Scepticism, Bogus Etymologies and Grammatical Theory: Theological Innovation in the Byzantine Dark Age,” *RSTN* 51 (2014), pp. 3-26.

<sup>3</sup> For a full discussion of the following two passages see D. KRAUSMÜLLER, “The Flesh Cannot See the Word: “Nestorianising” Chalcedonians in the Seventh to Ninth Centuries AD,” *VC* 67 (2013), pp. 185-208. Dirk Krausmüller, “‘Nobody has ever seen God’ – The denial of the possibility of mystical experiences in eighth- to eleventh-century Byzantium,” *Journal for Late Antique Religion and Culture* 11 (2017) 65-73; ISSN 1754-517X; website: <https://jlarc.cardiffuniversitypress.org/>; <https://doi.org/10.18573/j.2018.10453>

Μηδὲ γὰρ ὑποληπτέον, ὅτι καθ' ἀπλῆν τῆς φύσεως ιδιότητα ἰδεῖν ἠδύνατο τὸν ἐν αὐτῇ ἐνσκηνώσαντα Θεόν ἢ Παρθένος· τοῦτο γὰρ οὐδὲ αὐτὴ ἢ ἐμψυχος, λογικὴ τε καὶ νοερὰ σάρκωσις ἰδεῖν ἠδύνατο· ἀλλὰ κατὰ τὸ δυνατόν, ὡς ἐπισκιαζούσης αὐτῆς τῆς τοῦ ὑψίστου δυνάμεως, καὶ οἷον σκιάς ἐμποιοῦσης πρὸς τὸ ἰδεῖν τὸν ἐνσκηνώσαντα Θεόν.<sup>4</sup>

For it must not be thought that the Virgin could see the God who had taken abode in her according to the simple property of his nature, for this could not even the ensouled, rational and intelligent flesh (literally: incarnation) itself see, but according to what is possible, as the power of the Most High overshadowed her, and so-to-speak gave her shadows in order to let her see God who had taken his abode in her.

Here the author rejects the possibility that Mary might have been able to see the divine nature of the Word with whom she was pregnant. In order to support his position, he employs an *argumentum a fortiori*. According to him, not even the human nature of Christ could see the divine nature with which it was hypostatically united. Coming from the mouth of a Chalcedonian, this is a very strange statement. Such strict division between Christ's humanity and divinity one would expect to find in the writings of Nestorians. Indeed, the same view was held by contemporary Nestorian authors in Iraq.<sup>5</sup> They, too, constructed an *argumentum a fortiori* based on the claim that the flesh could not see the Word. Their concerns, however, were somewhat different. What worried them was not the possibility that superhuman powers might be attributed to the Virgin Mary but rather the claims of mystics that they had direct access to the divinity. Yet this discrepancy may only be due to the lack of sources for dark-age Byzantium. It is entirely possible that Byzantine authors of the eighth century also reacted against the mystical tradition.<sup>6</sup>

Evidence for an anti-mystical stance can indeed be found in Byzantine texts dating to the early ninth century. Two of these texts, the *Lives* of the abbots Nicephorus and Nicetas, were produced in the same setting, the monastery of Medikion in Bithynia.<sup>7</sup> The anonymous author of the *Life* of Nicephorus shows clear reservations about the possibility of visions of the divine. In the proem he states that in the Old Testament “the Lord was barely imagined as if in a fiery vapour and darkness and the wind of a very light breeze,” ὡς ἐν πυρὸς ἀτμίδι καὶ γνόφῳ καὶ λεπτοτάτης αὔρας θυέλλη ἐφαντάσθη κύριος ἀκροθιγῶς, whereas in the New Testament God could be seen in Jesus Christ.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>4</sup> PSEUDO-ATHANASIUS, *On the Annunciation*, c. 10, PG 28, 917-940, esp. 932A11-17.

<sup>5</sup> See A. TREIGER, “Could Christ’s humanity see his divinity? An eighth-century controversy between John of Dalyatha and Timothy I, Catholicos of the Church of the East,” *Journal of the Canadian Society for Syriac Studies* 9 (2009), pp. 9-27; A. BERTI, “Le débat sur la vision de Dieu et la condamnation des mystiques par Timothée Ier: la perspective du patriarche,” in A. DESREUMAUX (ed.), *Les mystiques syriaques* (Études syriaques, 8), Paris, 2011, pp. 151-176.

<sup>6</sup> The striking similarity between the sermon on the Annunciation and the Nestorian texts begs an explanation. Although direct influence cannot be ruled out it seems more likely that the author of the sermon and his Nestorian counterparts drew on a common ‘Antiochene’ tradition, which emphasised the unbridgeable gap between creator and creation.

<sup>7</sup> F. HALKIN, “La vie de saint Nicéphore, fondateur de Médikion en Bithynie (+ 813),” *Analecta Bollandiana* 78 (1960), pp. 396-400; THEOSTERICTUS, *Life of Nicetas of Medikion*, in *Acta Sanctorum* (henceforth: AASS), Aprilis, I: Dies 1-10, Paris<sup>2</sup>, 1866, pp. xviii-xxvii.

<sup>8</sup> *Life of Nicephorus of Medikion*, c. 3, ed. HALKIN, p. 403, ll. 13-14.

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Even more interesting is the *Life* of Nicetas, which was written by the monk Theosterictus.<sup>9</sup> This text contains a passage where Christ's blessings are applied to the saint. The list includes the statement that Nicetas was "pure in his heart through which he was seen by God and also conversed with him," καθαρός τῆ καρδίᾳ δι' ἧς καὶ ὤφθη θεῷ καὶ προσωμίλησεν.<sup>10</sup> This statement is evidently based on Matthew 5:8: "Blessed are the pure of heart because they will see God," μακάριοι οἱ καθαροὶ τῆ καρδίᾳ ὅτι αὐτοὶ τὸν θεὸν ὄψονται. However, the hagiographer has made one significant alteration. According to him, it is not the purified saint that sees God but rather God that sees the purified saint. This inversion puzzled the scribe of the Greek manuscript who changed ὤφθη θεῷ to the strange ὤψε θεῷ, evidently because he was convinced that the verb must be in the active voice. Only the Slavonic translation, which reads виденъ бысть at this point, permits us to reconstruct the original.<sup>11</sup> The hagiographer clearly believed that it was impossible, even for saints, to have direct access to the divine. In order to impress this view on his readers he was even prepared to tamper with the Bible, which he otherwise would have considered the most authoritative text of the Christian faith.

At this point we need to ask: why did the two authors take such a stance? Since they were coenobitic monks one must consider the possibility that there exists a link between the rejection of mystical experiences and the coenobitic ideal. The following hypothesis can be formulated. In coenobitic communities, conformity is of the utmost importance. All monks should live according to a common rule and nobody should stand out. Mystics, however, are by definition exceptional figures. They claim that they have access to privileged knowledge that is unattainable for ordinary people. Accordingly, the presence of mystics in coenobitic communities would have threatened their coherence. This would have induced champions of the coenobitic ideal to reject the possibility of mystical experiences.

Even if it is correct, however, this explanation cannot be considered sufficient. We are in the presence of a coherent worldview that insists on a clear distinction between God and creation and that reacts strongly against perceived transgressions. Such a worldview was not limited to coenobitic milieus. This can be seen from a third text, the *Life* of Theophanes the Confessor by the later patriarch Methodius, which dates to the 820s.<sup>12</sup> After Methodius has spoken about the saint's death in exile on the island of Samothrace he inserts into his narrative a lengthy excursus about the intercessory activity of dead saints, which ends with the exclamation: "Therefore may be shamed those who do not accept the intercessions of the saints," ἀισχυνέσθωσαν ἐντεῦθεν οἱ τὰς πρεσβείας τῶν ἁγίων οὐκ ἐκδεχόμενοι.<sup>13</sup> This excursus is clearly directed against the Iconoclasts. As is well known, the Iconophiles excoriated Constantine V and his followers

<sup>9</sup> On author and text, cf. J. O. ROSENQVIST, "A Philological Adventure. Editing the Life of St. Niketas of Medikion," *Acta Byzantina Fennica*, n.s. 1 (2002), pp. 59-72.

<sup>10</sup> THEOSTERICIUS, *Life of Nicetas of Medikion*, c. 16, AASS Aprilis I, p. xxi.

<sup>11</sup> D. E. AFINOGENOV, "Cerkoslavjanskij perevod "Žitiya Sv. Nikity Midikijskogo". Feosterikta i ego tekstologičeskoe značenie," in: *Žitie prepodobnogo otca našego Konstantina, čto iz Iudeev. Žitie sv. ispovednika Nikity igumena Midikijkogo*, Moscow, 2001, pp. 147-159, esp. p. 150 where the emendation ὤπται θεῷ is proposed. The alternative ὤφθη seems more likely since the following verb is also in the aorist.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. J. GOULLARD, "Une œuvre inédite du patriarche Méthode: La Vie d'Euthyme de Sardes," *BZ* 53 (1960), pp. 36-46, esp. pp. 36-38, who establishes 831 as the *terminus ante quem* for the *Life* of Theophanes.

<sup>13</sup> METHODIUS, *Life of Theophanes*, c. 50-53, ed. V. V. LATYŠEV, "Methodii Patriarchae Constantino-politani Vita S. Theophanis Confessoris," in *Zapiski rossijskoj akademii nauk, viii. ser. po istoriko-filologičeskomu otdeleniju*, 13.4, Petrograd 1918, p. 32, l. 1- p. 34, l. 27; esp. p. 34, ll. 18-19.

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for having denied the intercessory powers of saints.<sup>14</sup> Unlike other Iconophile authors, Methodius does not merely affirm the belief in the intercession of saints but presents an argument in favour of this belief:

Ὁ ἡμέτερος ὑπερπρεσβευτής ... τῆς ἐν παραδείσῳ τρυφῆς, τῆς τε οὐρανῶν βασιλείας καὶ τῶν ἡτοιμασμένων τοῖς τὸν Θεὸν ἀγαπῶσιν ἀγαθῶν, ἃ πάντα μόνος αὐτός ἐστιν ὁ Θεός, ὃν οὐδεὶς ἐώρακε πώποτε καὶ διὰ τοῦτο οὐδὲ τὰ παρ' αὐτῷ ἀγαθὰ, ἅπερ ἐστὶν αὐτός, ὥσπερ ἔφαμεν, καταξιούται γυνμῆ τῆ ψυχῆ.<sup>15</sup>

He who intercedes for us ... is deemed worthy of the pleasure in Paradise and of the Kingdom of Heaven and of the good things that have been prepared by God for those who love him, which are all only God himself, whom nobody has ever seen and therefore neither the good things that are with him, which are he himself, as we have said.

In this passage Methodius lists several expressions that are used in Scripture in order to describe the afterlife. He claims that they do not denote places separate from God but must instead be understood as metaphors of God himself. This permits him to conclude that the dead saint is in direct communication with God and can therefore intercede with us. However, at the same time he makes an important qualification. He states that such communication does not amount to a vision of God since the possibility of such a vision is ruled out by John 1:8: “Nobody has seen God,” Θεὸν οὐδεὶς ἐώρακε πώποτε. Having adduced further evidence from Revelation he concludes the discussion by declaring that the saint enjoys Paradise and the Kingdom of Heaven “wherefore he can also intercede only being seen by the Lord,” ἔξ οὗ καὶ τὸ πρεσβεύειν ὀρώμενος καὶ μόνον τῷ δεσπότῃ δεδύνηται, but as we can infer not actually seeing him.<sup>16</sup>

This last statement has a close counterpart in the inversion of Matthew 5:8 in the *Life* of Nicetas of Medikion. This shows clearly that the two texts are expressions of the same discourse, which denied the possibility of a vision of God. However, the contexts are radically different. Whereas Theosterictus portrayed the ideal coenobitic monk, Methodius engaged in polemic with the Iconoclasts. The *Life* of Theophanes affords us an insight into the nature of this debate. Methodius’ reasoning suggests that he was confronted with an Iconoclast argument against the notion that dead saints can intercede with God on behalf of the living. This argument would have rejected such a notion on the grounds that dead saints would then also be able to see the divinity. It is evident that this nexus only makes sense if the person who constructed the argument considered blasphemous all claims that God can be seen and if he knew that his opponents shared this view. Thus we can conclude that there was common ground between Iconophiles such as the hagiographers of Medikion on the one hand and at least some Iconoclasts on the other.

In order to explain this consensus we need to consider the social background of the monks of Medikion. Nicephorus, the founder of the monastery, was the scion of a family

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<sup>14</sup> See D. KRAUSMÜLLER, “Contextualising Constantine V’s radical religious policies: the debate about the intercession of the saints and the ‘sleep of the soul’ in the Chalcedonian and Nestorian churches,” *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* 39 (2015), pp. 25-49. This article makes the case that Constantine V did indeed reject the cult of saints.

<sup>15</sup> METHODIUS, *Life of Theophanes*, c. 51, ed. LATYŠEV, p. 32, ll. 27-32.

<sup>16</sup> METHODIUS, *Life of Theophanes*, c. 52, ed. LATYŠEV, p. 33, ll. 18-19.

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of high-ranking bureaucrats, and the quality of his prose suggests that Theosterictus had also received an elite education.<sup>17</sup> This means that both men had been socialised in the same manner as the leading Iconoclasts. This socialisation may have made them receptive to the notions of conformity and social control, which had informed elite mentality since the late seventh century as is evident from the disciplinary canons of the Council in Trullo.<sup>18</sup>

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After the end of Iconoclasm in the mid-ninth century the debate about whether or not it is possible to have mystical experiences seems have lost much of its urgency. The topic is hardly ever mentioned in hagiographical literature and when it appears it does not seem to have much significance. There is only one text, the *Life* of Euthymius the Younger, that includes a paraphrase of Matthew 5:8. There we read that through his asceticism the saint “had been deemed worthy of seeing God, because he was pure of heart,” θεὸν ὁρᾶν ἠξιωμένω ὡς τῆ καρδίᾳ καθαρεύοντι.<sup>19</sup> However, this is hardly a programmatic statement because the vision merely gives the saint the ability to find a suitable spot for his monastic foundation.<sup>20</sup>

We need to wait until the eleventh century to find a text that can be compared with the *Life* of Nicetas of Medikion in depth and sophistication. This text is *Vita A* of Athanasius the Athonite, which was written in the years between 1000 and 1025 in the Constantinopolitan monastery of Panagios.<sup>21</sup> In an early part of the narrative the hagiographer states that Athanasius revealed to the abbot Michael Maleinos his wish to become a monk and that he immediately won him over. Then he adds the following comment:

Πάντως δὲ μέγας ὢν καὶ ἀπὸ τῶν βλεπομένων τὰ μὴ βλεπόμενα  
τεκμηριῶσαι ταχύς, ἔγνω καὶ αὐτὸν τοιοῦτον ἐσόμενον· καὶ θαυμαστὸν  
οὐδέν· εἰ γὰρ τὸν Θεὸν αὐτὸν οἱ καθαροὶ φαντάζονται τῆ καρδίᾳ, πόσῳ γε  
μᾶλλον τοὺς τοῦ Θεοῦ χαρακτηρίζειν δύνανται.<sup>22</sup>

Indeed, being great and quick to conjecture what is not visible from what is visible he knew that he, too, would be such a one. And this is not cause for wonder for if the pure of

<sup>17</sup> See L. BRUBAKER and J. HALDON, *Byzantium in the Iconoclast Era, c. 680-850: A History*, Cambridge, 2010, pp. 654-655.

<sup>18</sup> See J. HALDON, *Byzantium in the Seventh Century. The Transformation of a Culture*, Cambridge, 1997, pp. 327-337. The rejection of the possibility of direct access to God and the souls and the insistence on the reading of outward signs may help to account for Theodore's and Theosterictus' belief that Christ and the saints must be represented in images in order to be approachable.

<sup>19</sup> BASIL, *Life of Euthymius the Younger*, c. 27, ed. L. PETIT, *Vie et office de saint Euthyme le Jeune*, in *Revue de l'Orient Chrétien*, 8 (1903), pp. 155-205, esp. p. 192, ll. 18-19.

<sup>20</sup> BASIL, *Life of Euthymius the Younger*, c. 28, ed. PETIT, p. 19, l. 3.

<sup>21</sup> On this author see D. KRAUSMÜLLER, “The lost first *Life* of Athanasius the Athonite and its author Anthony, abbot of the Constantinopolitan monastery of Ta Panagiu,” in M. MULLETT (ed.), *Founders and Refounders of Byzantine Monasteries. Papers of the fifth Belfast Byzantine International Colloquium, Portaferry, September, 1999* (Belfast, 2007), pp. 63-86.

<sup>22</sup> ATHANASIOS, *Vita A of Athanasius*, c. 20-21, ed. J. NORET, *Vitae duae antiquae sancti Athanasii* (Corpus Christianorum. Series Graeca 9), Turnhout-Leuven, 1982, p. 1-124, esp. pp. 8-12, ll. 10-15.

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heart imagine God himself, how much more can they get an understanding of those who belong to God?

In this passage the author of *Vita A* not only claims that Michael Maleinos could assess Athanasius' inner qualities but also affirms that holy men can have mystical experiences. Together these two statements form an *argumentum a fortiori*. At first sight it seems that this argument has a simple purpose, namely to remove any doubt about Michael's capabilities as a spiritual guide. However, a closer look at the text reveals a radically different agenda. In the first part no mention is made of supernatural powers of perception. Michael Maleinos gains his knowledge about Athanasius by watching his appearance and behaviour. In the second part the author of *Vita A* presents his audience with a paraphrase of Matthew 5:8 where the original ὁρᾶν is replaced with φαντάζεσθαι. The function of this manipulation is evident. It reduces the vision of the divine to the mere shaping of a mental image. How little the author is prepared to concede can be seen from a later narrative, Athanasius' surprise visit to Nicephorus Phokas, where the general is said to have been dumbfounded "when he saw what he had not even imagined in dreams," ὡς εἶδεν ὁ μὴ δ' ἄν ὄναρ ἐφαντάσθη ποτέ.<sup>23</sup> Here we have a clear juxtaposition of seeing something that is present and imagining something that is absent. The statement about Michael Maleinos is evidently a response to an *argumentum a fortiori* that defended the ability of holy men to read minds by pointing out that they had mastered the even more difficult feat of seeing God.<sup>24</sup> The author of *Vita A* has turned this argument on its head. By claiming that there can be no direct vision of God he underscores his contention that holy men can only ever make inferences from outward signs.<sup>25</sup>

It is evident that the author of *Vita A* shares the views of Theosterictus of Medikion. This raises the question: what prompted him to follow the lead of this author? Earlier it was suggested that in the Second Iconoclasm two factors played an important role, elite mentality and the coenobitic ideology, which both put great emphasis on conformity and moderation. Can these factors also explain the stance of the author of *Vita A*? From the text we know that he lived at the monastery of Panagios, which in the early eleventh century was one of the foremost coenobitic houses in the capital. Moreover, before he became a monk he had been a member of the Constantinopolitan elite. He says about himself that he had served in the imperial administration, and the high quality of his prose shows that he had received the best education available at the time.<sup>26</sup> This suggests that we have a repetition of an established pattern. However, then we still have to ask why Athanasius resurrected a debate that as far as we can tell had been dormant for a century and a half. In order to find an answer we need to look at the spiritual discourse of the time.

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<sup>23</sup> ATHANASIUS, *Vita A of Athanasius*, c. 68, ed. NORET, p. 32, ll. 3-4.

<sup>24</sup> A variant of this argument is found in PETER, *Life of Joannicius*, c. 36, ed. J. VAN DEN GHEYN, in *AASS Novembris* II.1, Brussels, 1894, pp. 384-435, esp. p. 405AB. There the author argues that a saint who can read thoughts can also read the mind of God.

<sup>25</sup> The aversion to clairvoyance is typical of the author of *Vita A*. See D. KRAUSMÜLLER, "Diorasis Denied: Opposition to Clairvoyance in Byzantium from Late Antiquity to the Eleventh Century," *JÖB* 65 (2015), pp. 124-128, esp. pp. 124-128.

<sup>26</sup> See Noret's introduction to his edition, chapter four: 'L'auteur de la Vie A, Athanase de Panagiu', pp. cxxx-cxlv.

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In the late tenth and early eleventh centuries mysticism took off again in Byzantium after a break of almost three hundred years. This was due to the activity of Symeon the New Theologian who experienced visions of light and as abbot encouraged his monks also to strive for such visions. Significantly, Symeon frequently mentions one or more opponents who do not accept his point of view. The most detailed information about these people is found in his fifth *Ethical Discourse*, which bears the title: “about those who say that no human being can see his (sc. God's) glory in this present life,” *περὶ τῶν λεγόντων μὴ δύνασθαί τινα τῶν ἀνθρώπων κατὰ τὴν παροῦσαν ζωὴν ὄρα τὴν δόξαν αὐτοῦ*.<sup>27</sup> The text takes the form of a conversation with an adversary, which may well reflect a real debate. In this conversation Biblical proof texts play a prominent role. Symeon claims that his adversary would say to him: “And who would be so daring to say that he sees it (sc. the Spirit) or contemplates it? God forbid! For it is said: ‘Nobody has ever seen God,’” *καὶ τίς ποτε ἰδεῖν τοῦτο τολμηρῶς εἶποι ἢ ὅλως αὐτὸ ἐθεάσατο; ἄπαγε. Θεόν, φησὶν, οὐδεὶς ἑώρακε πώποτε*.<sup>28</sup> To this thinly veiled accusation of blasphemy Symeon responds with another quotation from the Gospel of John: “Who has seen me has seen the Father,” *ὁ ἑώρακώς ἐμὲ ἑώρακε τὸν Πατέρα*, insisting that this verse refers to the revelation of Christ's divinity and not to the sight of his humanity as his opponent would have it.<sup>29</sup> The discussion then moves on to another contentious verse, Matthew 5:8. Symeon's adversary is made to say: “Yes, the pure of heart do indeed see God, but this will happen in the next world and not in this one,” *ναί, ὄντως οἱ καθαροὶ τῇ καρδίᾳ τὸν Θεὸν ὄψονται, ἀλλ' ἐν τῷ μέλλοντι τοῦτο καὶ οὐκ ἐν τῷ νῦν αἰῶνι γενήσεται*.<sup>30</sup> It goes without saying that Symeon rejects this interpretation, too. He points out that we purify ourselves in this life and should therefore also be rewarded in this life.

Symeon does not identify his opponents but he does at least characterise them. In his fourth *Ethical Discourse* he claims that they will always misunderstand the true nature of the divinity and then adds:

Τοῦτο δὲ συμβαίνει αὐτοῖς, ἐπειδὴ τῆς μὲν νοερᾶς αἰσθήσεως καὶ θεωρίας καὶ τῆς παντουροῦ ἐνεργείας αὐτῆς πείραν ὅλως οὐ κέκτηνται, στοχαστικῶς δὲ καὶ ἐν ἐπινοίαις ποικίλαις καὶ πολυτρόποις τὰ κατ' αὐτὴν ἀναλογιζόμενοι, ἀλληνάλλως ταῦτα ὑπὸ τῆς ψευδωνύμου φυσιοῦμενοι γνώσεως φιλολογοῦσιν τε καὶ περὶ ὧν οὐκ οἶδασι διαβεβαιοῦνται τοὺς πυθομένους.<sup>31</sup>

This happens to them because they completely lack the experience of the intellectual sensation and contemplation and all-powerful activity of it, but approach it through analogies based on conjecture in manifold and various concepts and, puffed up by the falsely named knowledge, give learned explanations, constantly changing track, and reassure those who listen to them about things they do not know.

This is a characterisation that could well apply to the author of *Vita A* who as we have seen was a very learned man. Of course, it can no longer be determined whether Symeon

<sup>27</sup> SYMEON THE NEW THEOLOGIAN, *Ethical Treatises* 5, tit., ed. J. DARROUZES, *Syméon le Nouveau Théologien, Traités théologiques et éthiques*, II (Sources Chrétiennes 122), Paris, 1967, tit.

<sup>28</sup> Symeon the New Theologian, *Ethical Treatises* 5.1, ed. DARROUZÈS, ll. 88-90.

<sup>29</sup> Symeon the New Theologian, *Ethical Treatises* 5.1, ed. DARROUZÈS, ll. 95-97.

<sup>30</sup> Symeon the New Theologian, *Ethical Treatises* 5.1, ed. DARROUZÈS, ll. 112-114.

<sup>31</sup> Symeon the New Theologian, *Ethical Treatises* 5.1, ed. DARROUZÈS, ll. 33-39].



had the author of *Vita A* in mind when he wrote this passage. However, even if Symeon polemicised against other people – for example, his nemesis, Stephen, the retired metropolitan of Nicomedia – we still learn something about the milieu to which the author of *Vita A* belonged. It seems likely that he was one of a group of upper-class men who reacted against Symeon's lofty claims by denying the very possibility of visions of the divine.

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To conclude: This article has discussed texts dating from the eighth to the early eleventh century that all share the same characteristics: strong emphasis on the incomprehensibility of God and denial of the possibility of mystical experiences. It has further sought to establish why the authors of these texts held such views. It has highlighted that two of the most important opponents of visionary experiences, Theosterictus of Medikion and Athanasius of Panagios, belonged to the Constantinopolitan elite and were members of strictly coenobitic communities, and it has suggested that these two factors determined their stance in the debate.

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