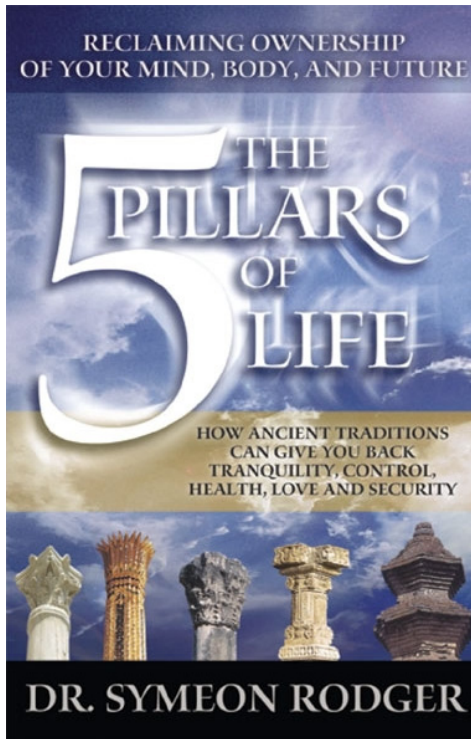


Symeon Rodger, *The 5 Pillars of Life: Reclaiming Ownership of Your Mind, Body and Future – How Ancient Traditions Can Give You Back Tranquility, Control, Health, Love and Security* (Ottawa: Core Systems Press, 2005, 493 pages)



*By Archpriest John A Jillions*

This is one of those rare books that can accurately be called “ground-breaking.” I have a few critical comments, but I must admit that I was stunned by Fr Symeon’s achievement. The claim is often made that Orthodoxy is “holistic,” that it is a “way of life” and embraces every aspect of our day-to-day existence. But you will search in vain for a contemporary book that actually teaches you *how* to put this holistic tradition into practice. Fr Symeon Rodger has filled this gap. Yet the book is not narrowly Orthodox, and this has already made it controversial in some quarters (more on this later). In fact, the book is not addressed primarily to an Orthodox readership at all. He writes for anyone who wants to re-shape their lives—health, relationships, sexuality, finances and inner world—but is trapped in the dead-ends of western secular culture. And this will include many who actively participate in church but are unable to connect this experience with the rest of their daily lives. Rather than throwing the entire tradition at the bewildered reader Fr Symeon guides readers step-by-step and week-by-week. The book is written in an unconventional but very engaging and accessible “self-help” style (though this will be annoying to some).

One of the frustrations that led to the writing of this book was that millions of spiritual seekers “out there” are largely ignored by the Orthodox press. Most of these people have never heard of Orthodoxy and have given up hope of finding meaningful direction for their lives in Christianity. Eastern religions, on the other hand, have grown rapidly in popularity and are widely viewed as the truly spiritual faiths. Fr Symeon demonstrates that the ancient traditions of life-transformation—Christian, Buddhist and Taoist especially—have a remarkable agreement about what works, what doesn’t, and the predictable temptations and trials along the way. This wider scope makes the book ideal for anyone seeking to lead a more intentional life, but it also serves as a back-door to introduce seekers to a tradition of Christianity that can indeed prove to be spiritually beneficial in real life.

The word “prove” is important for Fr Symeon.

People today are less willing than ever to ‘buy the car without test driving it.’ They don’t want to become Buddhists or Taoists or Orthodox Christians or whatever else unless these traditions can first *prove* that they have something to offer. That is all the more reason to make the fundamentals of self-transformation available to a wider audience in a form that anyone can use, regardless of his or her metaphysical opinions (xv).

In this sense the book is “pre-evangelism.” It breaks up the ground for sowing the seeds of the Gospel at some later stage. But this will make the book unsettling for those who want the full message of Orthodox Christianity to be baldly and exclusively stated up front.

He assumes that most people looking at the state of their lives are disappointed and frustrated. The ancient traditions he describes have a centuries-old record of making real change possible, and he promises readers that if they follow the book’s program their lives will be dramatically transformed for the better (14-15).

- A rock-solid inner peace and tranquility
- Harmony and order in your physical surroundings
- Fulfillment in your relationships with others
- Vastly improved health through specific diet and exercise programs
- Control of your time and energy
- Unbending willpower
- Mastery of thoughts, emotions, complexes and hang-ups that had previously enslaved you
- Leaving the crippling stress of modern life behind
- Vanquishing anxiety, fear and their source—the fear of death
- Defining and achieving your goals and objectives
- Distinguishing worthwhile goals from seductive traps
- Recognizing authentic traditions of self-transformation from their modern imitations
- Stepping onto the path leading to union with the Absolute
- Transforming your life into a work of art

The program for this ambitious set of goals is outlined step-by-step and week-by-week based on five “pillars.” The table of contents gives some sense of the progression.

*Chapter One: Introduction to the Only Proven Path to Real Happiness*

**Pillar 1: Take Back Control of Your Circumstances**

*Chapter Two: The Program: Reclaiming Your Time, Energy and Life*

*Chapter Three: The Cleanup: Reclaiming Your Health, Relationships and Finances*

**Pillar 2: Master Your Inner World**

*Chapter Four: Stillness, Reclaiming Your Stress-Free Life*

**Pillar 3: Become Unstoppable**

*Chapter Five: Intent: Reclaiming Your Invincible Willpower*

**Pillar 4: Embrace the Most Effective Life Paradigm**

*Chapter Six: The Warrior’s World: Reclaiming Your True Human Life*

## **Pillar 5: Turn Life Into Love**

*Chapter Seven: Virtue: Reclaiming the Power of Love*

*Chapter Eight: Trials and temptations: Reclaiming a Life of Victory*

*Chapter Nine: The Final Challenge*

### **Appendices**

Appendix A: Choosing a Focus

Appendix B: Your Program Planner

Appendix C: The Training Program at a Glance

Appendix D: The Formulas, Principles and Paradoxes of Training

Sprinkled throughout the book (and then summarized in Appendix D) are dozens of pithy sayings that Fr Symeon calls Miraculous Ancient Formulas, Principles and Paradoxes. Here is a sample of each:

*Miraculous Ancient Formula # 10: Lowliness is Greatness.*

*Inner Principle 3.2: creating external order in your surroundings is of pivotal importance in gaining inner peace.*

*Paradox 3.1: people tend to implement changes that leave intact the very inner dynamics which have given rise to the life-situations they do not like. Consequently they recreate similar life-situations over and over again.*

All right, the format is sometimes a bit hokey, but the book is anything but an intellectual, "all in the head" approach. The program is built around practical exercises that tackle every aspect of one's life and will take at least one year to complete (for the very keen), though Fr Symeon says there is enough material for 21 months of training. He admits that this is not the 30-day wonder program so common in the self-help world. In fact, the first month is largely spent just assessing your current life and making time and space to begin the work of transformation.

The next ten weeks are devoted to creating external order in your life, everything from managing time, money and paper to

groceries, garbage and laundry (see *Inner Principle 3.2* above). Then it is one week each to begin to stop judging people, treating your enemy well, praising others, showing gratitude. In later weeks one starts to learn how to "Sit Still and Do Nothing," or SSDN. This is a key daily feature of the program which gradually builds in specific "focus points" for each week during these times of silence. These move from focusing on stabilizing the *nous* (defined as "the innermost aspect of the human mind and consciousness", 24), to the blessings in your life, to seeking mercy for the other, to neutralizing evil (the last focus).

I have three points of contention. First, does *everyone* need or have time for such a systematic program? What of the "little way," of going to church, saying prayers, remembering God? What of the liturgical immersion that has produced saints? Must one be so focused all the time that one can't simply rest in, enjoy, learn from and be transformed by the presence of God in church? It was this essential Orthodox experience of life built around the church's liturgical rhythm that shaped Orthodox Christians for generations. Fr Symeon contends that this no longer works when Orthodoxy is uprooted from the organic cultures which produced it. Yes, there are many challenges and it is a sad fact that experience often leads people to abandon any hope of encountering God through their church life. But I'm not pessimistic. I still see people who are transformed by repeated encounter with God in church. This *unsystematic* approach has also produced results and saints throughout Christian history, and while it may be frustrating for more systematic types like Fr Symeon, it should be acknowledged.

Second, there is a danger with making things *too* clear. The book rightly seeks to give strong guidance to counter the woolly thinking and confusion that abound in spiritual matters these days, but this often leads to black and white either/or statements that go to the other extreme. Words like radical, absolute, totally, all, only and always abound. There is not much room here for uncertainty and "seeing through a glass darkly."

Third, the either/or thinking is most apparent in his views on the West. Here Fr Symeon is too hard and too categorical, looking at everything through the lense of Fr John Romanides. In my opinion this is the book's major blind spot. Fr Symeon is willing to see positive approaches in Buddhism and Taoism, but are there no authentic traditions of genuine transformation and encounter with God to be found in western Christianity? This tradition too, after all, has produced people who experience love and are genuinely loving. Is this completely in spite of their religious life, or can some credit be given to those traditions themselves? Fr Symeon correctly diagnoses the western spiritual malaise, but his analysis of its causes does not ring true.

In the final section of this review I would like to address the criticism leveled by some at the book's handling of non-Orthodox sources. It must be said that while Fr Symeon uses many Buddhist and Taoist sources, more than half of the references are taken from the Orthodox tradition and include works by Tito Colliander, Hieromonk Damascene (*Christ the Eternal Tao*), the Desert Fathers, Elder Joseph the Hesychast, St Ephraim the Syrian, Elder Epraim, Saints Barsanuphius and John, St Hesychios of Jerusalem, St Ignaty Brianchaninov, Elder Porphyrios, St Isaac the Syrian, Matthew the Poor, *The Philokalia*, John Romanides, Philip Sherrard, Fr Sophrony (Sakharov), St Silouan of Athos, Archimandrite Vasileios (Gondikakis), Bishop Hierotheos (Vlachos) and Christos Yannaras.

There is clearly a traditional (and even traditionalist) slant here, so it is all the more ironic that the book has been criticized by some for being at best too accommodating to other ancient traditions, and at worst a dangerous syncretistic mish-mash. In my opinion, this is an egregious misreading of the book. Fr Symeon is careful and discerning in his use of Far Eastern religious traditions and limits it precisely to those areas of spiritual practice that share common ground with Orthodox experience. This is a well-founded approach. Indeed, a recent book on the Orthodox understanding of other religions, John

Garvey emphasizes that the most fruitful discussions with Buddhism have been on monastic practice.

Perhaps the reason that monastic meetings between Christian monks and Buddhist monks have been fruitful is that those who spend a lot of time in prayer and meditation encounter the false moves the mind makes in the effort to protect the ego, and these take a common form. The resemblance between the Buddhist sense of mindfulness and the various ways the Orthodox *Philocalia* addresses the idea of guarding the heart are fascinating. Both traditions caution against allowing either aversion or attraction to mislead us; both are careful and attentive about what might be called the psychology of prayer. At this level there can be fruitful discussion and learning from both sides (John Garvey, *Seeds of the Word: Orthodox Thinking on Other Religions*, Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2005, 121-122).

What is at issue here is how the Orthodox view any religious tradition outside its borders. And on this point, as Garvey also shows, there are wide differences among the Orthodox themselves. These differences in outlook will largely determine how an Orthodox reader will react to *The 5 Pillars of Life*. Some insist that Orthodoxy totally replaces any other form of religion, and anything outside is simply demonic, masquerading as an angel of light. Others accept that there is some limited possibility of divine encounter outside Orthodoxy, but for salvation Christ must be explicitly named. Still others believe that God can work through other religions, and wherever anyone experiences and expresses love, truth, goodness, beauty, it is the Logos, the Word of God whom they encounter, whether they know it or not. This is Justin's *logos spermatikos*, the seeds of the word which give Garvey's book its title. Speaking of the ancient Greek philosophers Justin says,

Thus, whatever has been spoken aright by any men belongs to us Christians; for we worship and love, next to God, the Logos which is from the unbegotten and ineffable God; since it was on our behalf that he has been made man, that becoming partaker of our sufferings, he may also bring us healing. For all those writers were

able, through the seed of the Logos implanted in them, to see reality darkly (*First Apology*, in Garvey, 86).

Fr Symeon insists that all religious traditions – including Orthodoxy – need to be evaluated by the results they produce, not by ideology. Has practice of a religious tradition consistently and over a period of centuries produced people who experience and genuinely express love? Then it is “authentic,” even if, from an Orthodox point of view, it is not 100% of the fullness revealed in Christ. Fr Symeon makes it abundantly clear that while he uses and respects these other authentic traditions, he is a priest and has chosen to live as an Eastern Orthodox Christian. But one of the great strengths of the book is that it is ultimately respectful of each person’s freedom to choose; Fr Symeon trusts that God is at work in the wide world beyond the Orthodox cocoon and beyond our control. Is it the whole Gospel? No, but neither was our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount. Eventually, by God’s mysterious grace, those in whom the seed is planted may find their way to the Church, the “fullness of Him who fills all in all” (*Ephesians, 1:23*). But in the meantime, we can be grateful that Fr Symeon is doing the work of planting and nurturing the seeds.

There should be no surprise that a daring book like this will stir up controversy within the Orthodox world. Fr Symeon is attempting to do something that hasn’t been done before, and that fact alone is likely to draw fire. If it is a meaningful storm then this is good for the life of the church.

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