HIDING IN PLAIN SIGHT: 
HETERODOX TRINITARIAN 
SPECULATION IN THE WRITINGS 
OF NIKETAS STETHATOS

When one looks for evidence of subversion in Byzantine religious literature, one will naturally first turn to the writings of known heretics and the refutations of these writings by their Orthodox opponents. However, such an approach fails to take into account authors who expressed heretical views in their works and were nevertheless never excluded from the Orthodox community. In this article I argue that the eleventh-century Stoudite monk Niketas Stethatos was one such figure: a member of the Constantinopolitan ecclesiastical establishment who nevertheless developed an understanding of the Trinity that deviated radically from official doctrine.

In order to make my case I focus on Niketas’ speculations about a particular understanding of the divine image in the human being, the so-called *Imago Trinitatis*, where counterparts for the divine persons and their interrelations are sought in the human soul and its various faculties. In his three exposés of the *Imago Trinitatis* Niketas seems to follow the lead of earlier theologians who create straightforward links between the human mind, word and “spirit,” on the one hand, and the divine Father, Son and Spirit, on the other, and who emphasise these links by referring to the Father and the Son as “Mind” and “Word.” However, close analysis of his statements reveals that this impression is misleading and that Niketas creates instead three asymmetrical links, matching the divine Mind with the human “spirit,” which he identifies with the soul, and further correlating the divine Word with the human mind, and the divine Spirit with the human word. As a consequence of this slippage the relation of “begetting” is not attributed to the human counterparts of the Father and the Son but rather to the human counterparts of the Son and the Spirit, which throws into question the validity of the analogy.
In order to make sense of this evidence I consider two possible explanations, that Niketas wished to demonstrate to his readers the ultimate futility of facile analogies between God and creation that are based on simple homonymy; or that he intended the human image of soul, mind and word to be the blueprint for a reconfiguration of the divine archetype. Through analysis of a definition of the soul, which at first sight does not seem to be related to the topic of the *Imago Trinitatis*, I make the case that the latter explanation is correct. In this definition terms denoting the inner-Trinitarian relationships are applied to the soul and its faculties in a highly idiosyncratic manner. The mind as part of the soul has only one product, the word, and the relationship between these two entities is described not only as a “begetting” but also as an “emitting,” a term that in orthodox theology denoted the relationship of the Father as the divine Mind with his second product, the Holy Spirit. On the strength of this evidence I argue that Niketas wished his readers to reorganise the traditional Trinity in such a way that a first hypostasis, the divine nature, begets a second hypostasis and this second hypostasis then in turn begets a third hypostasis. In a further step I show that this alternative model is already set out in exposés of the *Imago Trinitatis* by Symeon the New Theologian and that Niketas inserts himself into an existing tradition. In the last part of the article I ask how Niketas could nevertheless take on the role of a defender of traditional orthodox doctrine, and why he was never condemned for his heterodox teachings.

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Niketas Stethatos entered the monastery of Stoudios in the early eleventh century when he was still a boy and returned there after an extended period of exile in order to take up the lifestyle of a hesychast and to act as the spiritual guide of a group of disciples. Other evidence shows that he eventually became abbot of Stoudios and that he died at an advanced age some years before the end of the eleventh century.
