

An embattled charismatic: assertiveness and invective in Niketas Stethatos' *Spiritual Centuries*

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*The Stoudite monk Niketas Stethatos played an important role in the religious life of Constantinople. Of particular importance are his *Spiritual Centuries*. In-depth analysis of this text reveals that it not only contains teachings about various aspects of spirituality. Niketas also makes numerous statements about the role of the mystic within society, which have no precedent in earlier spiritual literature. These statements are surprisingly specific and reflect Niketas' self-image as a charismatic, his attempts to establish himself as an authoritative teacher of the Constantinopolitan populace, and his bitter feuds with those who opposed his activities.*

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In the second half of the eleventh century the Stoudite monk Niketas Stethatos played an important role in the religious life of Constantinople. Niketas considered himself the disciple of the mystic Symeon the New Theologian whose works he edited and brought into circulation. Yet he was also a prolific author in his own right who published not only the *Life of Symeon* but also several treatises. Of particular importance are his *Spiritual Centuries*, which are made up of three hundred short passages or chapters as the Byzantines called them. In-depth analysis of this text reveals that it not only contains teachings about various aspects of spirituality. Niketas also makes numerous statements about the role of the mystic within society, which have no precedent in earlier spiritual literature. These statements are surprisingly specific and reflect Niketas' self-image as a charismatic, his attempts to establish himself as an authoritative teacher of the Constantinopolitan populace, and his bitter feuds with those who opposed his activities.

Niketas entered the monastery of Stoudios in the early eleventh century when he was still a boy. He spent almost his entire life there and eventually became abbot.¹ Acting as

1 See M. Hinterberger, 'Niketas Stethatos der "Beherzte"?', *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 103 (2010) 49–54. See now also G. Diamantopoulos, *Die Hermeneutik des Niketas Stethatos* (Diss. Ludwig-Maximilians-University Munich 2018).

spokesman of his community, he defended the customs of Stoudios against Patriarch Michael Keroullarios who sought to impose the practices of his cathedral on the entire Byzantine church. Yet when Keroullarios was attacked by Latin theologians he came to his rescue and spoke in favour of the Byzantine position. His initiative was not crowned with success because Emperor Constantine Monomachos forced him to back down.² Yet the two treatises against the *filioque* and against the use of unleavened bread in the Eucharist that he then produced became the standard works on these topics.³ Equally impressive is his literary output in the field of spirituality. As a young man he had come across the writings of the mystic Symeon the New Theologian, which had a profound effect on him. In the remainder of his life he did everything in his power to propagate Symeon's teachings.⁴ At the same time he began to compose works of his own. His first major undertaking was a collection of three hundred short statements, which were organised in three 'centuries' (ἐκατοντάδες).⁵ These statements contain his reflections on spiritual life. They are without doubt his most important contribution to the topic. Indeed, he quoted extensively from them when he composed his later treatises on the soul, on Paradise and on hierarchy.⁶

Natural Contemplation

Niketas called his three centuries 'practical chapters' (πρακτικὰ κεφάλαια), 'natural chapters' (φυσικὰ κεφάλαια) and 'gnostic chapters' (γνωστικὰ κεφάλαια).⁷ These titles refer to the three-stage model of spiritual ascent, which had first been developed by Evagrius Pontikos in the late fourth century and which had then been elaborated by

2 See D. Krausmüller, 'Establishing Authority in the Constantinopolitan Religious Discourse of the Eleventh Century: Inspiration and Learning in the Writings of the Monk Niketas Stethatos,' in S. Steckel, N. Gaul and M. Grünbart (eds.) *Networks of Learning: Perspectives on Scholars in Byzantine East and Latin West, c. 1000–1200* (Berlin and Münster 2014) 107–124.

3 See M. H. Smith III, *And Taking Bread ... Cerularius and the Azyme Controversy of 1054* (Paris 1978) 136–160; and P. Gemeinhardt, *Die Filioque-Kontroverse zwischen Ost- und Westkirche im Frühmittelalter* (Berlin and New York 2002) 395–398.

4 See M. Hinterberger, 'Ein Editor und sein Autor: Niketas Stethatos und Symeon Neos Theologos', in P. Odorico (ed.), *La face cachée de la littérature byzantine. Le text en tant que message immédiat* (Paris 2012) 247–264.

5 Niketas Stethatos, *Centuries*, PG 105, 851–1009.

6 See J. Darrouzès, *Nicetas Stéthatos, Opuscules et lettres* (Paris 1961) 82–90, apparatus fontium. For the dating of the texts see also F. Lauritzen, 'Areopagitica in Stethatos: Chronology of an Interest', *Vizantijskij Vremennik* 72 (2013) 199–215. The chapters about the divine image at the beginning of the third century are of one piece whereas their counterparts in the other treatises are less tightly organised, which suggests that they are secondary adaptations. See D. Krausmüller, 'Hiding in plain sight: heterodox Trinitarian speculation in the writings of Niketas Stethatos', *Scrinium* 9 (2013) 255–284.

7 Niketas Stethatos, *Centuries*, I, II, III, 851, 899, 953.

later authors such as Maximos the Confessor.⁸ This is a clear indication that Niketas was indebted to the Evagrian tradition. The influence of this tradition becomes even more obvious when we analyse the contents of the three centuries. Then we find that a great number of chapters deals with various aspects of the Evagrian framework. Chapters forty to forty-two of the first century may serve as an example.⁹ There Niketas claims that each stage of the spiritual ascent attracts the attention of a different demon: those who devote themselves to ascetic exercises battle with the spirit of lust, those who contemplate nature struggle with the spirit of greed, and those who commune with the divinity itself need to ward off the spirit of pride. This is a variation of a theme that is already found in the works of Evagrius and his followers.¹⁰ Of particular interest is the chapter about the contemplation of creation.

Ὁ πρὸς τὸ μέσον τῆς ἀρχῆς μεταθέμενος τὴν ἐπίβασιν καὶ τοὺς ἰδρώτας τοὺς κατὰ τοῦ φιληδόνου πνεύματος διὰ τοῦ σπόγγου τῆς πρώτης ἀπαθείας ἀπομαζάμενος, ἄρτι δὲ τοὺς ὀφθαλμοὺς ἀποκαλυφθεὶς καὶ τὰς φύσεις ὄρᾶν τῶν ὄντων ἀρξάμενος κατὰ τοῦ πνεύματος τῆς ἀπίστου φιλαργυρίας αἶρει τὰ ὄπλα τῆς πίστεως, τὸν νοῦν μὲν ἀνυψῶν ἑαυτοῦ τῇ μελέτῃ τῶν θείων πραγμάτων, τὸν δὲ λόγον παραθήγων τοῖς λόγοις τῆς κτίσεως καὶ εἰς τὸ τὰς φύσεις αὐτῶν ἐκδιηγέσθαι διατρανῶν, τὴν δὲ ψυχὴν ἀνάγων τῇ πίστει ἀπὸ τῶν ὀρωμένων ἐπὶ τὰ ὕψη τῶν ἀοράτων καὶ πείθων αὐτὸν εἶναι προνοητὴν τὸν ἐκ τοῦ μὴ ὄντος εἰς τὸ εἶναι τὰ πάντα παραγαγόντα θεὸν τῶν οἰκείων ἔργων καὶ ὄλην τὴν ἐλπίδα ποιῶν τῆς ἐνθέου ζωῆς.¹¹

He who has made the ascent to the middle of the beginning and has wiped off through the sponge of the first dispassion the sweat that comes from the struggle against the pleasure-loving spirit and who has opened his eyes and begun to see the natures of the beings takes up the weapons of the faith against the spirit of the untrusting greed, lifting up his intellect through the study of the divine things, whetting his reason through the reasons of creation and making it articulate so that he can narrate their natures, and raising up his soul through faith from what is visible to the heights of what is invisible and persuading it that God who has brought all things from non-being to being is provider for his own works and putting his whole hope in the godly life.

The technical terms ‘first dispassion’, ‘reasons of creation’ and ‘natures of beings’, which Niketas uses here, occur regularly in writings that belong to the Evagrian

8 See e.g. G. Bunge, ‘Praktike, Physike und Theologike als Stufen der Erkenntnis bei Evagrius Pontikos’, in M. Schneider and W. Berschin (eds.), *Ab Oriente et Occidente: Kirche aus Ost und West, Gedenkschrift für Wilhelm Nissen* (St. Ottilien 1996) 59–72.

9 Niketas Stethatos, *Centuries*, I.40–42, 869C–872A.

10 For the classification of vices see e.g. Maximos the Confessor, *Chapters on Love*, II.59, III.56, ed. A. Ceresa-Gastaldo, *Capitoli sulla carità* (Rome 1963) 122, 170.

11 Niketas Stethatos, *Centuries*, I.41, 869CD.

tradition.¹² This leaves no doubt that he took his inspiration from such texts. It needs to be said, however, that he never makes a statement that could be identified as a quotation of a particular passage in the spiritual chapters of Evagrios or Maximos. This makes it difficult to pin down his sources but is also a clear indication that he had thoroughly assimilated Evagrian ideas and that he strove to express them in his own personal way.

The full significance of Niketas' endeavour reveals itself when we consider the historical context. In Greek-speaking monastic milieus spiritual chapters had been produced continuously throughout Late Antiquity. The tradition reached its zenith in the first half of the seventh century when Maximos the Confessor wrote several centuries in which set out the three-stage model of spiritual ascent. After this date, however, there was a lull. For the next three hundred years we have only one work, the 'practical chapters' (κεφάλαια πρακτικά) of 'Theodore of Edessa'.¹³ As the title already indicates, this text focuses exclusively on the battle against passions. It contains only fleeting references to 'spiritual contemplation' (θεωρία πνευματική).¹⁴ It cannot, of course, be ruled out that there were other texts, which have not come down to us. Moreover, it is possible that the surviving works of Evagrios and Maximos continued to be read.¹⁵ Yet one notices in eighth- and ninth-century Constantinople a lack of interest in Evagrian themes. In his catecheses Theodore of Stoudios does not speak about visionary experiences.¹⁶ He tells his monks that they can get an inkling of God from creation but does so in very simple language without using Evagrian concepts.¹⁷ This situation changed in the late tenth century when Symeon the New Theologian composed his spiritual centuries. Unlike Theodore, Symeon emphasises the importance of the mystical dimension. This shift in focus is reflected in the titles of his centuries,

12 For 'first dispassion' see Maximos, *Quaestiones ad Thalassium* 55, Scholion 15, ed. C. Laga and C. Steel, *Maximi Confessoris Quaestiones ad Thalassium, I: Quaestiones I-LV, una cum latina interpretatione Ioannis Scotti Eriugena iuxta posita* (Turnhout and Leuven 1980), 523.157–158: Πρώτην ἀπάθειαν λέγει τὴν πρὸς ἁμαρτίαν τοῦ σώματος κατ' ἐνέργειαν ἀνέπαρον κίνησιν. On natural contemplation in general see D. T. Bradford, 'Evagrius Ponticus and the Psychology of "Natural Contemplation"', *Studies in Spirituality* 22 (2012) 109–125; and J. Lollar, *To See into the Life of Things: The Contemplation of Nature in Maximus the Confessor and his Predecessors* (Turnhout 2013).

13 See S. H. Griffith, 'The Life of Theodore of Edessa: History, Hagiography, and Religious Apologetics in Mar Saba Monastery in Early Abbasid Times', in J. Patrich (ed.), *The Sabaitic Heritage in the Orthodox Church from the Fifth Century to the Present* (Leuven 2001) 147–169.

14 Theodore of Edessa, *Century*, 21, 34, 68, ed. P. Possinus, *Thesaurus Asceticus sive Syntagma Opusculorum Octodecim a Graecis olim patribus de re ascetica scriptorum* (Paris 1684) 356–357, 362, 385.

15 However, see Andrew Louth, 'Maximus the Confessor's Influence and Reception in Byzantine and Modern Orthodoxy', in P. Allen and B. Neil (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Maximus the Confessor* (Oxford 2015) 500–515, who points out that Maximus' impact in eighth- and ninth-century Constantinople was very limited.

16 See H.-G. Beck, *Kirche und theologische Literatur in Byzantinischem Reich* (Munich 1977) 359. See also D. Krausmüller, 'Nobody Has Ever Seen God: The Denial of the Possibility of Mystical Experiences in Eighth- and Eleventh-Century Byzantium', *Journal of Late Antique Religion and Culture* 11 (2017) 65–73.

17 Theodore of Stoudios, *Parva Catechesis*, 100, ed. E. Auvray, *Sancti patris nostri et confessoris Theodori Studitis praepositi parva catechesis* (Paris 1891) 344.

‘practical and theological chapters’ (κεφάλαια πρακτικὰ καὶ θεολογικά). Yet even he shows little interest in the intermediate stage of ‘contemplation of the beings’ (θεωρία τῶν ὄντων), which is mentioned only in passing.¹⁸

Thus we can conclude that Niketas’ recourse to the three-stage model of spiritual ascent is an innovation in the Constantinopolitan spiritual discourse.¹⁹ This inevitably raises the question: why would he have taken this step? One might think that he was simply better read than his predecessors and that in the course of his studies he had come across Evagrian texts. These texts would then have impressed him so much that he founded his own spirituality on them and that he felt impelled to write a text that would allow him to disseminate his ideas. Yet such an explanation must be considered insufficient. Apart from personal preferences, one also needs to consider more general historical change. In the eleventh century recourse to writings from the Late Antique period became more common in monastic circles. Those who engaged in the religious discourse increasingly felt the need to justify their positions with references to ancient texts, which were considered authoritative. Significantly, Niketas took part in this development. In several of his writings he makes use of canon law and other normative texts.²⁰ Thus one can argue that he imitated spiritual works from Late Antiquity in order to present himself as an authoritative voice.

Mystical Union and Teaching

We tend to assume that the spiritual discourse was conducted in settings that were far removed from the hustle and bustle of this world, and we imagine the authors to have been serene and self-effacing figures who wrote for an intimate circle of disciples. This may be true for earlier authors but it is certainly not the case with Niketas. In-depth analysis of the centuries shows that he is aggressively assertive. The specific character of the text is already obvious in the programmatic first chapter of the first century.

Τέσσαρες οἶομαι τὰς αἰτίας εἶναι ἐν τριάδι τελεία τῶν ἀρετῶν τὰς ἐπὶ τὸ γράφειν κινούσας τὰ λυσιτελεῖ τὸν ἄρτι τὸ μέσον τῆς ἀρχῆς ὑπερκύψαντα, καὶ πρὸς τὴν τριάδα τῆς μυστικῆς ἐφθακότα θεολογίας. Καὶ πρώτην μὲν εἶναι τὴν ἐλευθερίαν, αὐτὴν φημι τὴν ἀπάθειαν τῆς ψυχῆς, τὴν ἐξ ἐπιπόνου πράξεως ἐπὶ τὴν φυσικὴν προκόψασαν θεωρίαν τῆς κτίσεως, καὶ εἰς τὸν γνόφον τῆς θεολογίας εἰσελθοῦσαν ἐκεῖθεν. Δευτέραν δὲ τὴν ἐκ δακρύων καὶ προσευχῆς τοῦ νοὸς καθαρότητα, παρ’ οὗ ὁ λόγος γεννᾶται τῆς χάριτος, καὶ τὰ ρεῖθρα πηγάζει τῶν νοημάτων. Τρίτην τὴν

18 Symeon the New Theologian, *Centuries*, I.34, ed. J. Darrouzès, *Syméon le Nouveau Théologien. Chapitres théologiques, gnostiques et pratiques* (Paris 1957) 49.

19 The spiritual centuries of Hesychius of Sinai and Philotheus of Sinai cannot be securely dated. It is possible that they were composed in the seventh century. Yet the earliest manuscripts only date to the eleventh century. See Beck, *Kirche und theologische Literatur*, 453–454. In any case these texts focus on a specific topic, ‘sobriety’ (νήπις).

20 See note 2.

ἐν ἡμῖν τῆς ἀγίας Τριάδος ἐνοίκησιν, ἐξ ἧς αἱ φωτοχυσίαι τοῦ Πνεύματος αἱ πρὸς τὸ συμφέρον ἐν ἐκάστῳ τῶν καθαιρομένων γινόμεναι εἰς φανέρωσιν τῶν μυστηρίων τῆς βασιλείας τῶν οὐρανῶν καὶ ἀνακάλυψιν τῶν κεκρυμμένων ἐν τῇ ψυχῇ θησαυρῶν τοῦ θεοῦ. Τετάρτην τὴν ἐπικειμένην ἀνάγκην παντὶ τῷ τὸ τάλαντον λαβόντι τοῦ λόγου τῆς γνώσεως τῆς ἀπειλῆς τοῦ θεοῦ· *Δοῦλε πονηρέ, λεγουσῆς καὶ ὀκνηρέ, ἔδει σε καταβαλεῖν τὸ ἀργύριόν μου τοῖς τραπεζίταις, κἀγὼ ἔλθων ἀπήτησα ἂν τὸ ἐμὸν σὺν τόκῳ. Δι' ἦν ἄρα καὶ Δαβὶδ μάλιστα δεδουκῶς ἔλεγεν· Ἰδοὺ τὰ χεῖλή μου οὐ μὴ κωλύσω, κύριε, σὺ ἔγνως. Τὴν δικαιοσύνην σου οὐκ ἔκρυψα ἐν τῇ καρδίᾳ μου, τὴν ἀλήθειάν σου καὶ τὸ σωτήριόν σου εἶπα· οὐκ ἔκρυψα τὸ ἔλεός σου καὶ τὴν ἀλήθειάν σου ἀπὸ συναγωγῆς μεγάλης.*²¹

I believe that there are four causes in a perfect triad of virtues, which impel him who has already transcended the middle of the beginning and has reached mystical theology to write what is profitable. The first is freedom, I mean, dispassion of the soul, which progresses from toilsome praxis to the natural contemplation of creation and which from there has entered the darkness of theology. The second is the purity of the intellect through tears and prayer, from which the word of grace is born, and the streams of intellections well forth. The third is the indwelling of the holy Trinity in us, from which come the illuminations of the Spirit, which happen for the benefit of each of those who have been purified in order that the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven be made manifest and the treasures of God, which are hidden in the soul, be revealed. The fourth is the compulsion exerted on him who has received the talent of the word of knowledge by God who threatens and says: *‘Wicked and slothful servant, you should have invested my money with the bankers and at my coming I should have demanded what is mine with interest’* (Mt 25:26–27). For this reason, David, too, shows great fear when he says: *‘See, I have not impeded my lips, Lord, you know. I have not hidden your righteousness in my heart. I have told your truth and your salvation. I have not hidden your mercy and your truth from a numerous congregation’* (Ps 39:10b–11).

In this chapter Niketas lists four reasons that induce people to write spiritual texts: they have rid their souls of passions, they have purified their minds, they have the Trinity within themselves, and they feel the obligation to pass on to others the knowledge thus gained. The most prominent feature in this statement is without doubt the repeated references to the Evagrian model of spiritual ascent. Already in the first sentence we encounter the distinction between beginning, middle and mystical theology. The first three reasons are then correlated with these three stages. Indeed, the first reason is defined in such a way that it already contains a mention of their traditional names: praxis, natural contemplation and theology. This leaves no doubt that the passage was meant to acquaint the reader with the Evagrian framework.

21 Niketas Stethatos, *Centuries*, I.1, 852A–853A.

This is, however, not its only function. As we have seen, Niketas creates a close nexus between the Evagrian scheme and the writing of spiritual centuries. Already in the first sentence he makes it clear that one needs to have passed through the stages of ascetic practice and natural contemplation and established direct contact with the divinity before one can write such texts, and the following statements emphasise this point even further. Niketas speaks about authors of spiritual texts in general but since he has also written such a text, which he is now presenting to his audience, one can only come to the conclusion that he claims for himself to have reached the highest stage of the spiritual ascent. Such self-advertisement is highly unusual in spiritual literature. It sets Niketas apart from his Late Antique predecessors. When Evagrius, Diadochos of Photike, Mark the Monk, John of Karpathos, Maximos the Confessor and Thalassios the Libyan wrote their spiritual chapters they invariably began with an impersonal statement.²² Evagrius, Mark, John and Maximos added prefaces where they spoke about themselves. Yet even here the tone is radically different. Mark and John simply state that they will give information about various topics, and Evagrius and Maximos ensure their readers that they have only reproduced the teachings of their forerunners.²³

That Niketas adds the necessity to communicate one's experiences to others as a fourth reason is equally significant. When one studies the chapters of the third century one realises that for him teaching was not only an integral part of spiritual ascent but its culmination. As one might expect the third century focuses primarily if not exclusively on the highest stage of spiritual ascent. Several chapters describe the experiences of the mystic. In chapter nineteen we are told that God is light, which makes the souls 'light-like' (φωτοειδείς), and 'fills them with peace, quiet, joy, ineffable wisdom and perfect love' (πληροῖ ταύτας εἰρήνης, γαλήνης, χαρᾶς, σοφίας ἀρρήτου καὶ τελείας ἀγάπης);²⁴ in chapter thirty-four Niketas speaks of 'the divine sweetness and pleasure of the intellectual things in an intellectual manner' (τῆς θείας νοερῶς τῶν νοερῶν γλυκύτητός τε καὶ ἡδονῆς);²⁵ in chapter thirty-seven he states that the soul of

22 Evagrius Pontikos, *Praktikos*, ed. A. Guillaumont and C. Guillaumont, *Évagre le Pontique, Traité pratique ou Le moine*, I (Paris 1971) 498; Evagrius Pontikos, *Gnostikos*, ed. A. Guillaumont and C. Guillaumont, *Évagre le Pontique, Le gnostique ou À celui qui est devenu digne de la science* (Paris 1989) 88; Evagrius Pontikos, *Gnostic Chapters*, ed. A. Guillaumont, *Les six Centuries des Képhalaia gnostica d'Évagre le Pontique*, *Patrologia Orientalis* 28 (Paris 1958) 16–17; Mark the Monk, *Century*, ed. G.-M. de Durand, *Marc le Moine, Traités*, I (Paris 1999) 74; Diadochos of Photike, *Century*, ed. E. des Places, *Diadoque de Photicé, Oeuvres spirituelles*, 2nd edition (Paris 1966) 85; John of Karpathos, *Century I*, PG 85, 1837; John of Karpathos, *Century II*, ed. D. Balfour and M. Cunningham, *A Supplement to the "Philokalia": the Second Century of Saint John of Karpathos* (Brookline, Mass. 1994) 42; Maximos the Confessor, *Chapters on Love*, ed. Ceresa-Gastaldo, 50; Maximos the Confessor, *Capita theologica et oeconomica*, PG 90, 1083; Thalassios the Libyan, *Centuries*, PG 91, 1428A.

23 Evagrius Pontikos, *Praktikos*, ed. Guillaumont and Guillaumont, 494; Maximos the Confessor, *Chapters on Love*, ed. Ceresa-Gastaldo, 48; Mark the Monk, *Century I*, ed. de Durand, 74; John of Karpathos, *Century I*, PG 85, 1837.

24 Niketas Stethatos, *Centuries*, III.19, 964A.

25 Niketas Stethatos, *Centuries*, III.34, 969A.

the mystic is deeply wounded by the love of God;²⁶ and in chapter thirty-eight he claims that the love of God makes one forget one's bodily needs.²⁷ These statements contain two major themes of the mystical discourse, the vision of God as light, and the emotional response to encounters with God. Yet these themes are not as prominent as one might expect from a self-confessed disciple of Symeon the New Theologian. Moreover, Niketas rarely speaks about mystical union in isolation. Statements about such a union are regularly followed by statements about teaching, either in the same or in the subsequent chapter.²⁸

The best example for this pattern is chapters forty-one to forty-four, which describe the ascent to God. Niketas first distinguishes between three stages - purifying, illuminating, and mystical or perfecting - and then correlates them with three groups of people - beginners, those in the middle, and those who have attained perfection. The following three chapters then define each of these stages.²⁹ In typically didactic fashion Niketas explains what is the 'property' (ἴδιον), the 'activity' (ἔργον) and the 'end' (τέλος) of each stage. The description of the first and second stages is traditional: through asceticism and repentance one achieves dispassion, and by honing one's faculty for discursive reasoning one gains an understanding of the divine master-plan that underlies creation.³⁰ By contrast, what Niketas has to say about the third stage is highly original:

Καὶ ἴδιον μὲν αὐτοῖς τὸ διατεμεῖν τὸν ἀέρα καὶ τοῦ παντὸς ὑπερκύψαι, τὸ περὶ τὰς ἄνω τάξεις γενέσθαι τῶν οὐρανῶν, καὶ τῷ πρώτῳ φωτὶ πλησιάσαι, καὶ τὰ βάθη τοῦ θεοῦ ἐρευνῆσαι διὰ τοῦ πνεύματος· ἔργον δὲ τὸ πληρῶσαι τὸν θεατὴν τῶν τοιούτων νοῦν τῶν περὶ προνοίας λόγων, τῶν περὶ δικαιοσύνης καὶ ἀληθείας, τῶν περὶ λύσεως αἰνιγμάτων καὶ παραβολῶν καὶ σκοτεινῶν λόγων τῆς θείας γραφῆς, τέλος δὲ τὸ μυσταγωγῆσαι τὸν οὕτω τετελεσμένον τὰ ἀπόκρυφα μυστήρια τοῦ θεοῦ, τὸ σοφίας ἑαυτὸν ἀρρήτου πληρῶσαι διὰ συνουσίας τοῦ πνεύματος καὶ σοφὸν θεολόγον μέσον ἐκκλησίας μεγάλης ἀποδειῖξαι θεοῦ τῷ λόγῳ τῆς θεολογίας τοὺς ἀνθρώπους φωτίζοντα.³¹

Its property is to cut through the air and to transcend the universe, to be with the heavenly orders above, and to approach the first light, and to explore the depths of God through the Spirit. Its activity is to fill the mind that contemplates such things with the words about providence, about righteousness and truth, about the solution of riddles and parables and obscure words of the divine Scripture. Its end is that the one who has thus been initiated teaches the hidden secrets of

26 Niketas Stethatos, *Centuries*, III.37, 969B

27 Niketas Stethatos, *Centuries*, III.38, 969D

28 In the third century teaching as a task for monks is mentioned in chapters 12, 13, 22, 27, 32, 46, 48, 50, 52, 54, 55, 57 to 69, 78, 83 and 89.

29 Niketas Stethatos, *Centuries*, III.42, 43, 44, 972D–975A.

30 Niketas Stethatos, *Centuries*, III.41, 972CD.

31 Niketas Stethatos, *Centuries*, III.43, 973BC.

God, that he fills himself with ineffable wisdom through the presence of the Spirit and that he shows himself a wise theologian in the midst of a great assembly of God, illuminating people through the word of theology.

This passage shows clearly that for Niketas mystical theology, the highest point of spiritual ascent, includes not only the unmediated encounter with God but also the passing on to other human beings of the knowledge that has been gained during this encounter. Indeed, he lavishes much more attention on this last stage.

Such an understanding of the spiritual ascent is without precedent in monastic literature. It is true that the authors of earlier texts felt an obligation to pass their knowledge on to others. Otherwise they would not have taken up the pen and communicated their experiences in writing. Yet they never mention teaching in the context of statements about mystical union.³² This leaves no doubt that teaching was considered to be an activity quite apart from the direct contact with God.

This does not, however, mean that Niketas could not point to a precedent. Further study of the third century reveals that in this instance Niketas' main source of inspiration was not the writings of Evagrius and his followers but Pseudo-Dionysios' treatise on the heavenly hierarchy. In chapters twenty-six and twenty-seven Niketas mentions the properties that Pseudo-Dionysios attributes to the highest-ranking angelic choirs and then claims that by assimilating themselves to them the perfect gain access to God 'without mediation' (ἀμέσως).³³ In a second step he characterises the perfect as follows: 'Their property according to power and divine habitus is the eternal movement and unbending rootedness and abode, and in addition the habitus that is receptive of illuminations, with which they participate in the one who is and ungrudgingly pass on to others through the word his lights and graces' (αἷς ἴδιον κατὰ δύναμιν καὶ θεῖαν ἔξιν, ἢ περὶ τὸ θεῖον ἀεικινήσια καὶ ἀκλινής ἰδρυσις καὶ μονή, καὶ πρὸς τούτοις ἡ δεκτικὴ τῶν ἐλλάμψεων ἔξις, μεθ' ἧς τοῦ ὄντος μετέχουσι, καὶ μεταπέμπουσιν εἰς ἑτέρους ἀφθόνως, διὰ τοῦ λόγου, τὰς τούτου φωτοχυσίας καὶ χάριτας).³⁴ In this statement Niketas not only uses overtly Pseudo-Dionysian language but also adopts Pseudo-Dionysios' conceptual framework: like the angels, the perfect not only receive illumination from God but also pass it on to those who have not yet reached this state.

Yet it would be wrong to think that Niketas follows Pseudo-Dionysios in all respects. In the tradition of intellectual mysticism to which Pseudo-Dionysios belongs it was taken

32 This is the case even with Evagrius' *Gnostikos* where teaching plays an important role. The mystic's attitude towards teaching can be quite ambivalent. Maximus once speaks about the spiritual ascent and about instruction in two consecutive chapters but compares the descent to the level of teaching with the Babylonian captivity of the Jews. See Maximus the Confessor, *Capita theologica et oeconomica*, II.48–49, 1145C–1148A.

33 Niketas Stethatos, *Centuries*, III.26, 965B. Cf. Pseudo-Dionysios, *Heavenly Hierarchy*, VII.1–2, ed. G. Heil and A. M. Ritter, *Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita, De coelesti hierarchia, De ecclesiastica hierarchia, De mystica theologia, Epistulae*, 2nd edition (Berlin and Boston 2012), 26–27.

34 Niketas Stethatos, *Centuries*, III.27, 965BC.

for granted that the knowledge gained from God was incommunicable because of its transcendent nature and could only be passed on in a diluted form.³⁵ By contrast, Niketas conceptualises God as a source of concrete knowledge. This knowledge reveals the divine plan behind visible events and the proper meaning of difficult passages in the Bible. It can be passed on as it has been received. This is a strikingly reductionist view of the mystical experience, which gives the impression that it is merely a means to an end.

How Niketas understands the mystic's insight into the workings of providence can be seen in chapter eighty-nine of the first century where he states that the mind of the mystic is 'most farsighted in human matters, which come from afar and will happen' (προορατικώτατον δὲ ἐν πράγμασι ἀνθρωπίνους, μακρόθεν ἐρχομένοις καὶ μέλλουσι γίνεσθαι).³⁶ This shows that the mystic has prophetic powers and is able to predict future events. This is a theme that one traditionally finds in hagiographical literature. There it is claimed that the saints can foretell the death of individuals, enemy incursions and natural disasters.³⁷ The authors take it for granted that their heroes receive quite detailed information from God about these matters. It is evident that Niketas' perfect monk fits rather closely the traditional template of the prophetic saint. Thus one can argue that Niketas has imported this template into the spiritual discourse and has then enriched it with a few touches taken from this discourse.

Monks and Public Teaching

More important than prophetic powers, however, is the ability to establish the true meaning of 'obscure passages' (σκοτεινοὶ λόγοι) in Scripture. As we have seen, Niketas claims in chapter forty-four that the perfect monk has an insight into God's mind and therefore knows how to explain riddles and parables. This claim is repeated several times in the text. In chapters fifty-four and fifty-five of the third century mention is made of 'doctrines ..., parables and riddles of things divine' (δόγματα ... παραβολάς, καὶ αἰνίγματα θεῶν πραγμάτων), and of 'problems' (προβλήματα).³⁸

Significantly, Niketas not only speaks about teaching in general. He also provides information about the context in which teaching should take place. In the programmatic first chapter of the first century he underscores the need for instruction by quoting Psalm 39:11: 'I have not hidden your mercy and your truth from a numerous congregation' (οὐκ ἔκρυψα τὸ ἔλεός σου καὶ τὴν ἀλήθειάν σου ἀπὸ συναγωγῆς

35 Pseudo-Dionysius therefore speaks of unlike symbols of transcendent realities. See R. Roques, 'Symbolisme et théologie négative chez le Pseudo-Denys', *Bulletin de l'association de Guillaume Budé* 1 (1957) 97–112.

36 Niketas Stethatos, *Centuries*, I.89, 893B.

37 See A. Timotin, *Visions, prophéties et pouvoir à Byzance: Étude sur l'hagiographie méso-byzantine (IX-XI siècles)* (Paris 2010).

38 Niketas Stethatos, *Centuries*, III.54–55, 981AB. See Diamantopoulos, *Die Hermeneutik*, 112–115.

πολλῆς).³⁹ A similar statement is found in chapter seven of the second century where Niketas claims that monks who have reached perfection speak ‘in the midst of the assembly of God and the numerous congregation of the faithful’ (ἐν μέσῳ ἐκκλησίας θεοῦ καὶ συναγωγῆς πολλῆς τῶν πιστῶν).⁴⁰ In the third century such references are even more common. They appear in no fewer than four chapters and thus constitutes a veritable leitmotif.⁴¹ This suggests that Niketas has in mind a particular setting. The repeated mention of great numbers rules out the more intimate settings in which spiritual direction traditionally took place. A better fit would be the preaching of abbots to their communities. Indeed, chapter eighty-nine of the third century contains criticism of abbots who only communicate with God and neglect their duties to their flock. In this context Niketas speaks about the need to ‘prophesy through the word of teaching and to build the church of God’ (προφητεύων τῆς διδασκαλίας τῷ λόγῳ καὶ οἰκοδομῶν τὴν ἐκκλησίαν τοῦ θεοῦ).⁴² Yet this reference to monastic instruction remains isolated in the text. In none of the other passages do we find a reference to monks. The audience is always described in general terms as the people or as the faithful. A closer look at chapter forty-four of the third century helps us to identify the locale. There Niketas declares that it is the aim of highest stage of the spiritual ascent that the initiate ‘fills himself with ineffable wisdom ... and that he shows himself a wise theologian in the midst of a great assembly of God’ (σοφίας ἑαυτὸν ἀρρήτου πληρῶσαι ... καὶ σοφὸν θεολόγον μέσον ἐκκλησίας μεγάλης ἀποδείξει θεοῦ).⁴³ This statement contains an allusion to Psalm 39:10a: ‘I have proclaimed righteousness in a great assembly’ (εὐαγγελισάμην δικαιοσύνην ἐν ἐκκλησίᾳ μεγάλῃ). The Psalmist does, of course, refer to a gathering of the people of Israel. Yet contemporary readers would undoubtedly have been aware that in a Christian context the term ἐκκλησία means ‘church’. Indeed, one can be even more precise. The phrase ‘great church of God’ (ἐκκλησία μεγάλη τοῦ θεοῦ) was a commonly used name for St Sophia.⁴⁴ Niketas makes this connotation even more obvious when he uses the adjective ‘wise’ (σοφός) and the noun ‘wisdom’ (σοφία) in the same sentence. This suggests that he envisaged the cathedral of Constantinople as the setting for the instruction of the perfect monk.

Unfortunately, it is difficult to establish the significance of such statements because we know nothing about who gave instruction at St Sophia at the time when Niketas wrote his centuries. Yet it is worth noting that a few decades later religious teaching became the subject of a debate. It was argued that the existing provision was inadequate and that

39 Niketas Stethatos, *Centuries*, I.1, 852D-853A.

40 Niketas Stethatos, *Centuries*, III.44, 973D.

41 Apart from chapter 44 see also chapters 54, 57 and 58.

42 Niketas Stethatos, *Centuries*, III.89, 1004A.

43 See above note 31.

44 Niketas himself uses the phrase in this sense. In his *Life of Symeon* he claims that ‘the clerics of the great church of God’ (ὁ τῆς μεγάλης τοῦ θεοῦ ἐκκλησίας κληρικός) attended commemorations of Symeon the Stoudite. See Niketas Stethatos, *Life of Symeon the New Theologian*, 110, ed. I. Hausherr, *Un grand mystique byzantine: Vie de Syméon le Nouveau Théologien* (Rome 1928) 152–154.

there was need for further instruction. These views were endorsed by Emperor Alexios Komnenos who created several new posts at St Sophia. The appointees were patriarchal deacons and not monks.⁴⁵ It is, however, possible that Alexios' decision was preceded by a discussion about the choice of teachers and that Niketas staked a claim for the monks.⁴⁶

Polemic Against Lay Intellectuals

In his endeavour Niketas must have encountered considerable opposition because he frequently polemicalises against people who challenged his claims. Indeed, chapters fifty-five to sixty-nine contain a constant stream of invective against detractors. One example may suffice.

Εἰ ἔγνωσ ὅτι ἡ φορὰ τῆς τῶν παθῶν ἐνεργείας ἐστὶν ἐν σοὶ ἄπρακτος, καὶ ἡ κατάνυξις ἐκ ταπεινοφροσύνης πηγάζει ἀπὸ τῶν ὀφθαλμῶν σου, γνῶθι ὅτε ἦλθεν ἡ βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ ἐπὶ σέ, καὶ ἐγκύμων ἐγένου τοῦ ἁγίου πνεύματος. Εἰ δὲ καὶ ἐνεργοῦν, κινούμενόν τε καὶ λαλοῦν τὸ πνεῦμα νοεῖς ἐν τοῖς ἐγκάτοις σου, καὶ διεγεῖρόν σε τοῦ λέγειν ἐν ἐκκλησίᾳ μεγάλη τὸ σωτήριον, καὶ τὴν ἀλήθειαν τοῦ θεοῦ, μὴ δὴ κωλύσης τὰ χεῖλη σου διὰ τὸν φθόνον τῶν Ἰουδαιοφρόνων ἀνδρῶν· ἀλλὰ καθίσας, γράψον ἐπὶ πυξίου, καθὼς φησιν Ἡσαΐας, ἃ τὸ πνεῦμα σοι λέγει· ὅτι ἔσται εἰς ἡμέρας καιρῶν ταῦτα καὶ ἕως εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα· κατὰ τὸν οὕτω εἰπόντα. Οἱ γὰρ τὸν φθόνον ὠδίνοντες, λαὸς ἀπειθής ἐστι, οἱ οὐ βούλονται ἀκούειν, ὅτι ἔτι τὸ εὐαγγέλιον ἐνεργεῖ, καὶ φίλους θεοῦ καὶ προφήτας κατασκευάζει· ἀλλὰ λέγουσι τοῖς προφήταις καὶ διδασκάλους τῆς ἐκκλησίας· *Μὴ ἀναγγέλλετε ἡμῖν τὴν σοφίαν τοῦ θεοῦ τοῖς τὰ ὀράματα τῆς φυσικῆς θεωρίας ὀρῶσι. Μὴ λαλεῖτε ἡμῖν, ἀλλὰ λαλεῖτε, καὶ ἀναγγέλλετε ἡμῖν ἑτέραν πλάνησιν, ἣν ὁ κόσμος φιλεῖ, καὶ ἀφέλετε ἀφ' ἡμῶν τὸ λόγιον τοῦ Ἰσραήλ.*⁴⁷

If you have realised that the onslaught of the operations of the passions has ceased in you and that contrition wells up from your eyes through humility, know that the kingdom of God has come to you, and that you have become pregnant with the Holy Spirit. And if you sense that the Spirit operates, moves and speaks in your innards, and rouses you *to speak about salvation and the truth of God in a great assembly, do not impede your lips*

45 See P. Magdalino, *Manuel I Komnenos, 1143–1180*, Cambridge 1993, 274.

46 Here it is worth noting that Niketas states several times that the charismatic monk is διάκονος of God's word. See Niketas Stethatos, *Centuries*, III.44, 973D: διάκονος γέγονε τῶν μυστηρίων θεοῦ στόμα γεγονὸς αὐτοῦ διακονῶν ταῦτα τοῖς ἀνθρώποις διὰ τοῦ λόγου. As Niketas indicates, this statement is based on I Corinthians 4:1 where Paul says that he wants to be seen by others 'as servants of Christ and stewards of the secrets of God' (ὡς ὑπρέτας Χριστοῦ καὶ οἰκονόμους μυστηρίων θεοῦ). That Niketas replaces the Biblical οἰκονόμος with διάκονος shows that the latter term had a particular significance for him. This may be a reference to competition with patriarchal deacons.

47 Niketas Stethatos, *Centuries*, III.58, 984A-C.

(Ps 39:9–10) because of the envy of the Jewish-minded men, *but sit down and write on a slab* (Is 30:8a), as Isaiah says, what the Spirit tells you, *because it will endure until future days and forever* (Is 30:8b) according to the one who spoke thus. For those who suffer from envy *are a disobedient people*. They *do not want to hear* that the Gospel still operates and creates friends of God and prophets (Is 39:9). But *they say to the prophets* and teachers of the church: ‘*Do not speak about the wisdom of God to us who see the visions of natural contemplation. Do not speak to us, but tell us and proclaim to us another error, which the world loves, and take away the oracle of Israel from us*’ (Is 30:10).

In this passage Niketas complains that some people do not listen to him and reject his claim to have privileged knowledge. Significantly, the statement is a pastiche of quotations from Psalm 39 and Isaiah 30, which are only slightly altered. By creating a parallel between himself and Old Testament prophets Niketas underscores his claim to be a charismatic.

The information that Niketas gives permits us to reconstruct the controversy. A feature that sets his perfect monk apart from his adversaries is use of simple and unadorned language. In chapter sixty-nine of the third century Niketas states that ‘perfect in knowledge and wisdom is not the one who is proficient in the apparent and correct speech’ (οὐδὲ τέλειος ἀνὴρ ἐν γνώσει καὶ σοφίᾳ ὁ ἐν τῷ φανερῷ μόνῳ καὶ κατεγλωττισμένῳ λόγῳ πολὺς) but the one who has a pure heart and speaks through the Spirit.⁴⁸ That linguistic register was a bone of contention is even clearer in chapter fifty-eight of the first century where Niketas complains that charismatic monks were ridiculed ‘because of the idiosyncrasy of their style’ (διὰ τὸ τῆς λέξεως αὐτῶν ἰδιότροπον) and ‘because they chose not to follow the selections of the neat turns of phrase of external knowledge nor cared about the good rhythm of their position’ (ὅτι μὴ ἐπεσθαι εἶλοντο ταῖς ἐκλογαῖς τῶν τετορνευμένων λέξεων τῆς θύραθεν γνώσεως, μηδὲ τὸ τῆς θέσεως αὐτῶν εὐρυθμον ἐπετήδευσαν).⁴⁹ These passages leave no doubt that Niketas’ adversaries are lay intellectuals who take pride in their learning and look down on those who cannot express themselves in Attic Greek.⁵⁰ Niketas does not name names but his text may contain allusions that would have allowed contemporaries to identify individuals. For example, he tells his readers that ‘those who grumble against you will learn to obey the words of Spirit and the babbling tongues will learn to speak peace’ (οἱ δὲ γογγύζοντες κατὰ σοῦ, μαθήσονται ὑπακούειν τῶν λόγων τοῦ πνεύματος, καὶ γλῶσσαι αἱ ψελλίζουσαι, λαλεῖν εἰρήνην μαθήσονται).⁵¹ This is a quotation of Isaiah 32:4. Yet it could be argued that Niketas chose it because

48 Niketas Stethatos, *Centuries*, III.69, 989D–992A.

49 Niketas Stethatos, *Centuries*, I.58, 877B–C.

50 A similar invective is already found in Symeon the New Theologian, *Centuries*, III.28, ed. Darrouzès, 87. See F. Bernard, *Writing and Reading Byzantine Secular Poetry, 1025–1081* (Oxford 2014) 157–158.

51 Niketas Stethatos, *Centuries*, III.58, 984C.

of the verb *ψελλίζειν*, which could be understood as a reference to Michael Psellos, the foremost intellectual of the time.⁵²

There can be no doubt that Niketas was irked by the criticism that he was uneducated. Yet this was only a side-issue in the conflict. The main bone of contention was his claim to have privileged knowledge and his particular approach to Scriptural exegesis. In the third century he frequently makes mention of these topics. He states that the lay intellectuals, too, engage in exegetical activity. However, according to him their method is flawed. In chapter fifty-seven he tells his reader: ‘Do not be afraid of those who envy the power of your words and twist the entire divine Scripture’ (μη φοβηθῆς ἀπὸ τῶν φθονούντων τῇ δυνάμει τῶν λόγων σου καὶ διαστρεβλούντων πᾶσαν θείαν γραφήν).⁵³ The following chapter gives us a first insight into what was at stake. There Niketas admonishes his reader: ‘Do not impede your lips because of the envy of the Jewish-minded men’ (μηδὲ κωλύσης τὰ χεῖλη σου διὰ τὸν φθόνον τῶν Ἰουδαιοφρόνων ἀνδρῶν).⁵⁴ This epithet conjures up Paul’s distinction between the Jewish and the Christian approaches to Scripture: whereas the former focus on the letter, the latter are concerned with the deeper meaning. The theme is then taken up again in chapter seventy-eight. There Niketas claims that his adversary regards it as folly ‘to examine the sense and to winkle out the meaning of the letter’ (τὸ τὴν διάνοιαν ἐρευνᾶν καὶ τὸν νοῦν ἀνιχνεύων τοῦ γράμματος) and ‘makes fun of those who compare these things spiritually and calls such people not spiritual or led by the divine Spirit but anagogues’ (καταμωκᾶται τῶν συγκρινόντων ταῦτα πνευματικῶς καὶ οὐ πνευματικούς οὐδὲ ὑπὸ θείου πνεύματος ἀγομένους, ἀλλὰ ἀναγωγικούς τοὺς τοιοῦτους καλῶν).⁵⁵ This is a theme that also appears in a later work by Niketas, his treatise on Paradise, where he complains that some people do not understand the spiritual nature of his exegesis and therefore ‘will call it anagogy and not a contemplation of truth’ (ἀναγωγήν ταύτην ἀλλ’ οὐ θεωρίαν τῆς ἀληθείας καλέσουσιν).⁵⁶ One of their number, the layman George, did indeed write a letter to Niketas in which he accused him of having neglected the literal sense of the Biblical description of Paradise.⁵⁷

The debate must have been exceptionally acrimonious. The lay intellectuals did not mince words: they told Niketas to shut up.⁵⁸ Niketas retaliated in kind. In chapter

52 It needs to be noted, however, that Psellos was not opposed to allegorical interpretation in principle. See also F. Lauritzen, ‘Stethatos’ Paradise in Psellos’ Ekphrasis of Mt Olympos’, *Vizantijskij Vremennik* 70 (2011) 139–151. On Niketas Stethatos and Psellos see now the detailed discussion in Diamantopoulos, *Die Hermeneutik*, 308–503.

53 Niketas Stethatos, *Centuries*, III.57, 981D.

54 Niketas Stethatos, *Centuries*, III.58, 984B. On the theme of ‘envy’ see M. Hinterberger, *Phthonos, Mißgunst, Neid und Eifersucht in der byzantinischen Literatur* (Wiesbaden 2013) 255–256, 361–370.

55 Niketas Stethatos, *Centuries*, III.78, 996. On this theme see Diamantopoulos, *Die Hermeneutik*, 108–110.

56 Niketas Stethatos, *On Paradise*, 18, ed. Darrouzès, 176.

57 Niketas Stethatos, *On Paradise, Appended Letters*, ed. Darrouzès, 260–272. See Diamantopoulos, *Die Hermeneutik*, 118–126.

58 Niketas Stethatos, *Centuries*, III.59, 984D.

sixty-eight of the third century he rails against ‘the one who struggles out of contentiousness and disobeys the words of those who are led by the Spirit but obeys his own cleverness and the deceiving words of those who only have the semblance of piety’ (τῷ ἐξ ἐριθείας ἀγωνιζομένῳ καὶ ἀπειθοῦντι μὲν τοῖς λόγοις τῶν ἀγομένων ὑπὸ τοῦ Πνεύματος, πειθομένῳ δὲ τῇ ἑαυτοῦ συνέσει τοῖς ἀπατηλοῖς λόγοις τῶν τὴν μὀρφωσιν περικειμένων μόνην τῆς εὐσεβείας).⁵⁹ In order to combat his adversaries he has recourse to the Pauline distinction between the soulish and the spiritual man, repeatedly quoting or paraphrasing I Corinthians 2:4: ‘The soulish man does not receive the things that are of the Spirit’ (ψυχικὸς ἄνθρωπος οὐ δέχεται τὰ τοῦ πνεύματος).⁶⁰ The theme first appears in chapters six and seven of the second century where it is developed at some length. Niketas juxtaposes the two types and identifies the former with lay intellectuals and the latter with the monks. The first stage of spiritual ascent, asceticism, plays an important role here. Niketas claims that the intellectuals shun all hardship and therefore never reach the state of dispassion. When they then study Scripture they therefore do so out of pride and vainglory. These vices, however, bar them from any communication with the divine fount of all knowledge.⁶¹

Niketas’ Envisaged Audience

Niketas does not envisage that the perfect might ever win over his detractors. Instead, he comforts himself with the prospect that they will come to a sticky end. In the sixty-eighth chapter of the third century he claims that the lot of him who does not obey the spiritual ones and misleads the people is ‘oppression and straightened circumstances ... envy and anger’ (θλιψις καὶ στενοχωρία ... φθόνος καὶ θυμὸς καὶ ὀργή) both in this life and at the Last Judgement. This is little more than wishful thinking. Indeed, Niketas cannot even be sure of his target audience, the ordinary faithful with their different spiritual needs. In chapter fifty-eight or the third century he admonishes the reader not to pay attention to the jealous because ‘the eyes of the blind in the darkness of life and in the murk of sin will see the light of your words, and the poor in spirit will rejoice in them’ (οἱ ἐν τῷ σκότει τοῦ βίου, καὶ οἱ ἐν τῇ ὀμίχλῃ τῆς ἀμαρτίας ὀφθαλμοὶ τυφλῶν, ὄψονται σου τῶν λόγων τὸ φῶς, καὶ ἀγαλλιάσονται ἐν αὐτοῖς οἱ πτωχοὶ τῷ πνεύματι).⁶² Significantly, however, this statement, which is adapted with minor modifications from Isaiah 3:7, is phrased in the future tense and thus expresses a mere hope. Other passages suggest that reality was rather different. Already in chapter sixty-seven of the second century Niketas claims that the perfect monk ‘clarifies the depths of the Spirit through the word for all those who have a divine spirit in their innards’ (διατρανοῖ τὰ βάθη τοῦ πνεύματος διὰ

59 Niketas Stethatos, *Centuries*, III.68, 989C.

60 See Diamantopoulos, *Die Hermeneutik*, 151–154.

61 Niketas Stethatos, *Centuries*, III.68, 989C.

62 Niketas Stethatos, *Centuries*, III.58, 984C.

τοῦ λόγου πᾶσι τοῖς ἔχουσι πνεῦμα θεῖον ἐν τοῖς ἐγκάτοις).⁶³ This gives the impression as if he were preaching to the converted. An even more pessimistic tone is struck in chapter sixty-nine of the third century where he says that the monk who derives his wisdom from the Spirit and not from education receives his praise ‘not from human beings but from God because he is envied by human beings and loved and known only by those who are moved by the same spirit’ (οὐκ ἐξ ἀνθρώπων, ἀλλὰ ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ, ὡς ἀγνοουμένου μὲν ἢ φθονουμένου τοῖς ἀνθρώποις, μόνῳ δὲ θεῷ καὶ τοῖς τῷ αὐτοῦ πνεύματι κινουμένοις φιλουμένοις τε καὶ γνωσκομένοις).⁶⁴ This gives Niketas’ enterprise a sectarian flavour, which is in stark contrast with his lofty claims that the perfect monk speaks to large audiences and has a beneficial effect on them. His followers were most likely the friends and associates whom he mentions in his *Life* of Symeon the New Theologian.⁶⁵ It is to boost the morale of these people, and most likely also his own, that he repeatedly adapts the words of prophets from the Old Testament who were equally embattled. In chapter fifty-nine of the third century, for example, he states that the true teacher will hide himself for a while from his critics but eventually will take his rightful place in the church of the faithful ‘and there will no longer be those who were turned by the envious ones’ (καὶ οὐκ ἔτι ἔσονται οἱ ὑπὸ τῶν φθονούντων ἀνατρεπόμενοι) but everybody will listen to him.⁶⁶ At the same time, however, he admits that for the time being the initiative is with his adversary even if in his eyes he only teaches ‘in order to disperse hungry souls and empty thirsting souls’ (ὡς ἂν διασπείρη ψυχὰς πεινῶσας καὶ ψυχὰς τὰς διψῶσας κενὰς ποιήσῃ).⁶⁷

Polemic Against Monks

The analysis so far has revealed that polemic against Constantinopolitan intellectuals is a major theme in Niketas’ centuries. Niketas hated these men because they rejected his claim that direct access to God gave him a privileged position within the religious discourse of his time and they made fun of his rustic style and his outlandish exegesis. However, it would be wrong to think that they were Niketas’ only target. Further study reveals that he also found fault with his fellow-monks. In chapters seventy-two to seventy-eight of the first century he rails against those who claim that in order to attain true virtue one must physically withdraw from all contacts with other human beings and live in uninhabited places. Niketas rejects this position out of hand. He insists that living in a monastic community under the control of an abbot is a safer option and offers an alternative interpretation of the commandment to withdraw from the world. For him withdrawal is an inner state that can be achieved everywhere. What

63 Niketas Stethatos, *Centuries*, II.67, 933B.

64 Niketas Stethatos, *Centuries*, III.69, 992A.

65 See Krausmüller, ‘Charismatic Authority’, 115–116.

66 Niketas Stethatos, *Centuries*, III.59, 984D.

67 Niketas Stethatos, *Centuries*, III.59, 985.

is required of a monk 'is not to get away from human beings and the world but to abandon himself, to get away from the urges of the flesh and to go away to the desert of the passions' (οὐ τὸ ἔξω τῶν ἀνθρώπων καὶ τοῦ κόσμου γενέσθαι ἐστὶν ἀλλὰ τὸ καταλιπεῖν ἑαυτὸν ἔξω τῶν τῆς σαρκὸς θελημάτων γενέσθαι καὶ ἀπελθεῖν εἰς ἐρημίαν παθῶν).⁶⁸ This was, of course, a long-standing debate, which for centuries had pitted against each other advocates of the eremitic and coenobitic ways of life. That Niketas took the side of the coenobites can be explained by the fact that he was a monk of the populous urban monastery of Stoudios. However, in his case another dimension must be added. Monks who were tucked away in hermits' cells on holy mountains could not intervene in the Constantinopolitan religious discourse. Thus it comes as no surprise that this criticism resurfaces in the third century where the teaching activity of monks plays such a predominant role.

Niketas' particular ire is reserved for monks who rejected his three-stage model of spiritual ascent and contented themselves with ascetic practice. This theme is developed at great length in chapters eighty-three to ninety-seven of the second century. Paraphrasing I Timothy 4:8 Niketas claims that asceticism is of little value because it only leads to freedom from the passions and does not result in purity of heart, which is the fruit of natural contemplation.⁶⁹ The tone of his argument is extremely scathing. He compares ascetics to mules that go in circles in order to power water-lifting devices and he tells them that even laypeople show more zeal in the imperial service because they constantly strive to attain higher dignities.⁷⁰ Similar criticism can already be found in Late Antique spiritual texts whose authors advocated the Evagrian model of spiritual ascent.⁷¹ Yet Niketas' focus on teaching again gives this theme a new urgency for it is evident that a monk who does not progress beyond asceticism cannot become a divinely inspired instructor. This nexus is made explicit when the topic is taken up again in the third century. In chapter seventy Niketas claims that asceticism is not an end in itself because it is only natural contemplation that fills the heart with knowledge of the divine 'so that old and new secrets can be dispensed from there and given to those who need them' (εἰς τὸ ἐκβάλλειν ἐκεῖθεν καινὰ καὶ παλαιὰ μυστήρια τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ διδόναι τοῖς χρήζουσιν).⁷² In the next chapter he goes so far as to accuse the ascetics of a lack of faith and of disobedience to God.⁷³ The virulence of his polemic explains itself when we consider the problems that Niketas faced. His claim that the culmination of the monastic life was public teaching rang hollow when most monks had a completely different understanding of their vocation. What made matters even worse was the virtual disappearance of the Evagrian

68 Niketas Stethatos, *Centuries*, I.76, 885D.

69 Niketas Stethatos, *Centuries*, II.83, 939D.

70 Niketas Stethatos, *Centuries*, II.85, 941CD.

71 Maximos the Confessor, *Chapters on Love*, IV.65, ed. Ceresa-Gastaldo, 222.

72 Niketas Stethatos, *Centuries*, III.70, 991B.

73 Niketas Stethatos, *Centuries*, III.71, 991CD.

tradition in the previous centuries. This made it even more difficult for him than it had been for Late Antique authors to present his own view as normative. One cannot doubt that some intellectuals took advantage of this weakness.

For Niketas the views of both groups were thus part of the same problem. Indeed, he does not refrain from drawing parallels between them. In chapter ninety-seven of the second century he claims that the ascetics not only do not want to move from physical hardship to contemplation of nature but also refuse 'to move from the literal body of Scripture to the sense and the meaning of the word' (*ἀπὸ τοῦ ῥητοῦ σώματος τῆς θείας γραφῆς ἐπὶ τὸν νοῦν καὶ τὴν διάνοιαν τοῦ λόγου χωρεῖν*).⁷⁴ The nexus between asceticism and literalism is, of course, traditional but it is given a new twist.⁷⁵ In the third century the reader will learn that the Constantinopolitan intellectuals read Scripture in exactly the same way. The link between the two groups is made explicit in chapter sixty-nine of this century, which effects the transition from polemic against intellectuals to polemic against ascetics. Here Niketas makes the rather less traditional point that both extreme asceticism and refined literary activity are highly visible and thus intimates that they are fuelled by vainglory whereas the inner life of the contemplative is graced with humility.⁷⁶

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To conclude: Niketas Stethatos revived the three-stage model of spiritual ascent in order to stake a claim in the religious life of the capital. He asserted that as a mystic he had privileged knowledge from God, which he could pass on to the faithful. In order to make this point he transformed traditional notions of spiritual ascent in such a way that mystical experiences were reduced to the appropriation of teachable knowledge. His aim was to be accepted as an instructor of the people who could speak in the cathedral St Sophia. He faced vicious opposition from lay intellectuals who made fun of his rustic language and his allegorical approach to Scriptural exegesis. What made his position even more precarious was the fact that his vision of the monastic calling was not shared by the majority of monks in the capital.

74 Niketas Stethatos, *Centuries*, II.97, 949B.

75 See e.g. Maximos the Confessor, *Capita theologica et oeconomica*, II.42, 1144BC.

76 Niketas Stethatos, *Centuries*, III.69, 989D-992A. This nexus is highlighted in Diamantopoulos, *Die Hermeneutik*, 86–88.