

Beholding Beauty In Nicetas Stethatos' *Contemplation of Paradise*

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I. BEAUTY IN THE BYZANTINE TRADITION

In *Standing in God's Holy Fire*, a jewel of an introduction to the rich heritage of Byzantine spirituality, John Anthony McGuckin rightly affirms the centrality of beauty within the eastern Christian tradition. There is no other concept, McGuckin asserts, that "so summates the ethos or guiding cultural spirit of eastern Christianity as much as that perennial search for beauty which inspired and organized the Byzantine mystical quest."¹ The search for beauty, according to McGuckin, provides the vital organizing principle within the Byzantine tradition. The eastern Christian tradition in all its complexity and continuity, beginning with the likes of Origen of Alexandria, followed by the Cappadocian Fathers (Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Gregory of Nyssa), and up through Maximus the Confessor and Symeon the New Theologian, boasts of numerous mystical theologians who have composed writings filled with vivid descriptions of the soul's ascent toward the beautiful. Beyond the above-mentioned bright luminaries and other notables of the eastern mystical tradition loom numerous lesser-known Byzantine theologians, who in consonance with their more highly touted counterparts, have consistently reflected upon the ultimate reality and importance of divine beauty.

II. NICETAS' *CONTEMPLATION OF PARADISE*

Nicetas Stethatos (ca. 1005 – 1085), a monk primarily known as the faithful disciple and biographer of Symeon the New Theologian (949 – 1022),² provides an

1 John A. McGuckin, *Standing in God's Holy Fire: The Byzantine Tradition*, (New York: Orbis, 2001), 23.

2 For a brief assessment of Nicetas's life and works, see Nicéas Stéthatos, *Opuscules Et Lettres*, tr. J. Darrouzès, *Sources chrétiennes*, no. 81 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1961), 7-14. From here onward, the above text (*Sources chrétiennes*, no. 81), which contains the literary works of Nicetas, will be cited as SC 81, followed by the page number, then when applicable, a colon mark followed by the paragraph and line number as it is reflected in *Sources chrétiennes*. The most helpful encyclopedia articles on Nicetas Stethatos are: M. Th. Disdier, "Nicéas Stéthatos," in *Dictionnaire De Théologie Catholique Contenant L'exposé Des Doctrines De La Théologie Catholique*, ed. A. Vacant, E. Mangenot, and E. Amann, vol. 11 (Paris: Letouzey et Ané, 1931), 479-86; Aimé Solignac, "Nicéas Stéthatos," in *Dictionnaire De Spiritualité* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1982), 224-30; A. P. Kazhdan, "Stethatos, Niketas," in *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*, ed. A. P. Kazhdan, vol. 3 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 1955-56; Franz Tinnfeld, "Nicetas Stethatos," in *Theologische Realenzyklopädie*, ed. H. R. Balz, G. Krause and G. Müller, vol. 24 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1994), 463-64; John A. McGuckin, "Stethatos, Niketas (ca. 1005-1085)," in *The Encyclopedia of Eastern Orthodox Christianity, Volume II, N-Z*, ed. J.A. McGuckin, (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 583-84. Beyond the above encyclopedia articles, there are a limited number of studies devoted to Nicetas. In descending chronological order, the following notable articles examine aspects of Nicetas's life and thought: Dirk Krausmüller, "Private vs. communal: Niketas Stethatos's Hypotyposis for Stoudios, and patterns of worship in eleventh-century Byzantine monasteries," in *Work and worship at the Theotokos Evergetis 1050-1200*, (Belfast: Belfast Byzantine Enterprises, 1997), 309-28; Alexander

illuminating case of a neglected eastern theologian who critically reflected upon the quest for beauty.³ As an ardent disciple of Symeon, Nicetas played a pivotal role in securing the return of his spiritual father's relics to Constantinople. Nicetas is also remembered for being a rather pugnacious opponent of the Christian West during the so-called Great Schism of 1054.⁴ Furthermore, the prefatory inscription in Nicetas' *Exposition of the Profession of Faith* suggests that he attained the position of hegoumen at the monastery of Studios.⁵ Limited to the above pieces of historical information and his modest collection of extant literary works,⁶ modern assessments have often characterized Nicetas as something of a cultural elitist and devoted guardian of Symeon's teachings. Nicetas largely adheres to standard precepts of the Byzantine tradition inasmuch as he privileges theological preservation over innovation. Eastern Christians predominantly safeguard the theology of their predecessors, who have stood before them as their spiritual fathers in the golden chain of tradition.⁷ Nicetas, as would be expected, preserved Symeon's central theological ideas throughout his own literary works, although he occasionally supplies additional flourishes when detailing the magnificent depths of the spiritual life.⁸

In his tractate entitled *Contemplation of Paradise*,⁹ literally translated *Theōria*

Golitzin, "Hierarchy Versus Anarchy? Dionysius Areopagita, Symeon the New Theologian, Nicetas Stethatos, and Their Common Roots In Ascetical Tradition," *Saint Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 38, no. 2 (1994), 131-79; Joost van Rossum, "Reflections on Byzantine Ecclesiology: Nicetas Stethatos' On the Hierarchy," in *Saint Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 25, no. 2, (1981), 75-83; W. Volker, "Nicetas Stethatos als mystischer Schriftsteller und sein Verhältnis zu Symeon dem Neuen Theologen," in *Praxis und Theoria bei Symeon dem Neuen Theologen*, (Wiesbaden, 1974), 456-89.

3 As a devoted disciple of Symeon the New Theologian, Nicetas collected Symeon's various literary works and he composed Symeon's biography, titled *The Life of Symeon the New Theologian*. See *Un grand mystique byzantine. Vie de Syméon le Nouveau Théologien (949 – 1022) par Nicéas Stéthatos*, edited and translated by I. Hausherr and G. Horn, *Orientalia Christiana* 12, (Rome: Pont. Institutum Orientalium Studiorum, 1928), 1 – 128.

4 For further discussion concerning Nicetas' role in the schism of 1054, see A. Michel, "Schisma und Kaiserhof im Jahre 1054," in *L'Église Et Les Églises, 1054-1954; Neuf Siècles De Douleoureuse Séparation Entre l'Orient Et l'Occident. Études Et Travaux Sur L'unité Chrétienne Offerts à Dom Lambert Beauduin*, vol. 1, Collection Irénikon (Chevetogne: Éditions de Chevetogne, 1954), 411-16. Furthermore, for a seminal reappraisal of the so-called Great Schism of 1054, see Steven Runciman, *The Eastern Schism: A Study of the Papacy and the Eastern Churches during the XIth and XIIth Centuries*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1955).

5 For Nicetas' self-attestation of his role as hegoumen, see the opening lines in Nicetas' *Profession of Faith*. For the *Profession of Faith* in its entirety, see SC 81, 444-63.

6 Nicetas' extant writings are located in SC 81 and also see Niketas, *Centuries of Practical and Gnostic Chapters*, eds. G. Palmer, P. Sherrard, and K. Ware, (London: Faber and Faber, 1995).

7 The role and doctrine of spiritual fatherhood is essential for the transmission of spiritual knowledge in the Byzantine monastic tradition, especially punctuated in the life and thought of Symeon the New Theologian. For an excellent discussion of Symeon's doctrine of spiritual fatherhood, see H.J.M. Turner, *St. Symeon the New Theologian and Spiritual Fatherhood*, (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1990)

8 Golitzin suggests that Nicetas may have added some content to Symeon's theology, but the disciple ultimately remains a faithful adherent of his mentor. In the case of hierarchy, Golitzin observes, "There is therefore nothing in Nicetas' basic picture of hierarchy that cannot be found in Symeon. While the disciple obviously adds some detail to the master's images, the fundamental presupposition, the saint as microcosm in whom the heavenly and earthly liturgies are present and mirrored, is identical." Golitzin, "Hierarchy Versus Anarch?," 147.

9 For the entire text of the *Contemplation of Paradise*, see SC 81, 154-227.

of *Paradise*, Nicetas provides his fellow monks with a descriptive account of the quest for beauty. The notion of *theōria* is not easily translatable into modern parlance, but it is closely associated with seeing or beholding beauty.¹⁰ It is a concept deeply rooted in the Platonic tradition,¹¹ and remains a central theme within the eastern monastic tradition.¹² The attainment of *theōria*, within the Byzantine tradition, is often considered the third stage of contemplation whereby the faithful transcend creation in order to behold God face to face.¹³ *Theōria* is not only consistent with the Platonic tradition, but as Nicetas readily implies, *theōria* is implied within the prayer of Jesus Christ, who approached the Father and requested that the faithful be permitted to enter into the divine presence in order to see the glory of God.¹⁴ Following in the footsteps of his predecessors,¹⁵ Nicetas consistently baptizes the Platonic notion of *theōria* within the deep waters of the Christian scriptures and the Trinitarian economy of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

III. THE SENSIBLE AND THE INTELLIGIBLE IN PARADISE

After completing his tractate entitled *Concerning the Soul*,¹⁶ Nicetas decided to compose *Contemplation of Paradise* in order to provide a philosophical examination of *theōria* within the setting of the divine paradise. In the following excerpt from

10 In his detailed examination of eastern Christian spirituality, Spidlik defines *theōria*, as follows: “The word *theoria* is derived from *thea* (vision), and consequently expresses the idea of seeing in a more emphatic way: to watch, to go to a spectacle, and by extension (when applied to the mind), to reflect, meditate, philosophize...When such reasoning becomes scientific, we have what is called ‘a theory’, in contrast to practice. Thus, the word *theoria* can be defined fairly well, but its meaning in specific texts is harder to define.” Tomas Spidlik, *Prayer: The Spirituality of the Christian East*, vol. 2, translated by A.P. Gythiel. (Kalamazoo, MI.: Cistercian Publications, 2005), 156.

11 There are numerous scholarly works that have already detailed the relationship between Christian spirituality and the Platonic tradition. In regards to the centrality of *theōria* in Plato’s teachings, Louth asserts, “It could be argued that mystical theology, or perhaps better, a doctrine of contemplation, is not simply an element in Plato’s philosophy, but something that penetrates and informs his whole understanding of the world...The soul is naturally divine and seeks to return to the divine realm. And it does this in the act of contemplation – *theoria* – of Being, Truth, Beauty, Goodness.” Andrew Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition: From Plato to Denys*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), 1-3; also, see Olivier Clément, *The Roots of Christian Mysticism: Text and Commentary*, (New York, NY: New City Press, 1995).

12 In *The Republic*, Plato describes *theōria* as the vision of what is most excellent in beings, that is the Beautiful, divine beauty, or God. See Plato, *The Republic* VII.532C.

13 Ware notes, “A distinction is often made between two basic stages on the spiritual journey: the active life (*praxis, praktike*) and the contemplative life (*theoria*). This distinction is found already in Clement of Alexandria (ca. 150 – ca. 215) and in Origen (ca. 185 – ca. 254), where Martha is treated as the symbol of the active and Mary of the contemplative life (cf. Luke 10:38-42). See Kallistos Ware, “Ways of Prayer and Contemplation,” in *Christian Spirituality: Origins to the Twelfth Century*, edited by B. McGinn and J. Meyendorff, (New York, N.Y.: The Crossroads Publishing Company, 1985), 395 – 414, esp. see 396, 399.

14 SC 81, 158:4.8-10, 158; also, see John 17:24.

15 Beyond his steady reliance on Symeon and the Platonic tradition, Nicetas frequently appropriated other eastern Christian theologians, such as Gregory of Nazianzus, Dionysius Areopagite and John of Damascus. For further discussion, see Golitzin, “Hierarchy Versus Anarch? Dionysius Areopagite, Symeon the New Theologian, Nicetas Stethatos, and Their Common Roots In Ascetical Tradition,” 145.

16 For the text of Nicetas’ treatise *Concerning the Soul* in its entirety, see SC 81, 56-153.

Paradise,¹⁷ Nicetas provides a precise summary of the second or intelligible paradise, where the faithful saints are graced with another opportunity to engage in spiritual discernment which, in turn, may potentially lead them back to their Creator:

The entirety of creation (*ktisis*) is both visible and sensible (*aisthētos*)... Indeed, God knowing the disobedience of Adam in advance through foreknowledge (*prognōsis*), anticipated that the divine paradise would be closed and that the exiles would remain. Therefore, God prepared beforehand as a delight for us...the visible world, a second and different paradise than the other. If we look at the magnificence of grace...(paradise is) full of contemplation (*theōria*) and even with luxury (*truphē*) so that to us, who are double in our principle of being...(what) we find there is also double, sensible and intellectual...in the words of the wise Solomon, “I say from the beauty (*kallos*) of creatures, by analogy (*analogia*), we are led to the Creator.”¹⁸

In accord with much of the eastern monastic tradition, Nicetas believed that God foresaw (*prognōsis*) the fall of Adam and the closure of the original Eden.¹⁹ In light of this divine foreknowledge, God prepared an inexhaustible banquet in a second paradise, which was intelligible and gifted with its own luxuries.²⁰ This second paradise exists and agrees with the interiority of humanity;²¹ paradise is constituted within a dyadic framework,²² whereby both the visible and invisible creation resides within the human microcosm in a manner that allows for the nourishment and perfection of the dual nature of humanity.²³ The spiritual drama is set within paradise, where the faithful must discern between the sensible (*aisthētos*) and intelligible (*noētos*) fruits.²⁴ The sensible entities are perceived by the natural senses, whereas intelligible entities are apprehended by the mind (*nous*), that distinct faculty credited to humanity, which allows the diligent and virtuous seeker to perceive the spiritual order of things. The sensible and intelligible realities may potentially work in binary opposition against one another; however, often within the eastern tradition, the sensible world compliments the intelligible world inasmuch as visible entities assist in leading the soul upward. In the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, for example, Dionysius Areopagite analyzes the interplay between the sensible and intelligible as follows:

We see our human hierarchy...as our nature allows, pluralized in a great variety of perceptible symbols lifting us upward hierarchically until we are brought as far as we can be into the unity of divinization. The

17 From here onward, Nicetas' *Contemplation of Paradise* will simply be referred to as *Paradise*.

18 SC 81, 162-64:8.1-19.

19 SC 81, 162:8.6-8. For further discussion of the monastic teachings on divine providence, see Spidlik, *Prayer*, 188-89.

20 SC 81, 162:8.9-13.

21 SC 81, 158:3.15-16.

22 SC 81, 160:6.1-2.

23 SC 81, 160:6.3.

24 SC 81, 162:8.14-15; 154:1-10.

heavenly beings, because of their intelligence, have their own permitted conceptions of God. For us, on the other hand, it is by way of the perceptible images that we are uplifted as far as we can be to the contemplation of what is divine.²⁵

Dionysius' assessment of the relation between perceptible images and the uplifting of humanity unto the contemplation of the divine is marked with footprints of Hellenistic notions of ascent, most readily exemplified in Plato's *Symposium*, which describes the seeker's use of earthly beauty as steps that guide one upward until arriving at the absolute beauty.²⁶ In accord with his esteemed predecessor Dionysius, Nicetas shares similar philosophical presuppositions with Plato, albeit with the major difference that his analysis of the sensible and intelligible is situated within a narrative largely shaped by the biblical themes of creation, fall, and the restoration of humanity and the saving economy of the Trinitarian outreach.²⁷ Nicetas affirms that the invisible perfections of God are partially revealed through creation even if the Creator remains beyond the reach of the human intellect.²⁸ In his negotiation of human capabilities and the ineffability of the divine, Nicetas ultimately concludes that with the assistance of the Holy Spirit, the faithful are able to reverently approach the divine beauty in their contemplation of paradise and, thereafter, even dare to philosophize on *theōria*.²⁹ Ultimately, Nicetas asserts that the faithful ones, with the assistance of the Holy Spirit, receive nourishment from all the plants in paradise through meditating on the divine realities while also freeing themselves from all sensible things.³⁰

IV. THE HOLY SPIRIT AND THE QUEST FOR THE BEAUTIFUL

Following in the charismatic tradition of his spiritual father Symeon, Nicetas was an enthusiastic theologian of the Holy Spirit. Their collective zeal for the efficacious power of the Holy Spirit was subversive inasmuch as Nicetas and Symeon opposed the rise of Byzantine hierarchal clericalism. They criticized the apparent loss of authentic spirituality, which by the eleventh century, had been replaced with a stale ecclesial formalism.³¹ For all its subversive potentiality, Nicetas' experiential spirituality was less than novel inasmuch as he attempted to access the charismatic potentiality of the individual imbued with the Holy Spirit. The emphasis on the vivifying

25 Pseudo-Dionysius, *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* I.I.2. Translation is borrowed from Colm Luibheid in Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Complete Works*, translated by C. Luibheid; foreword, notes and translation collaboration by P. Rorem, (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1987), 197.

26 See Plato, *The Symposium* in *The Works of Plato* (four volumes in one), translated by B. Jowett, (New York, NY: 1936), vol. 3, 342.

27 For further discussion, see Darrouzès' comments on the *Contemplation of Paradise*. SC 81, 27.

28 SC 81, 162:8.1-15.

29 SC 81, 162:7.6-7.

30 SC 81, 168:13.1-3.

31 Nicetas's emphasis on the ordinary (i.e. non-clerical) individual reflects the thought of his famed teacher. In one memorable quote, Symeon asserted that the Holy Spirit "was sent by the Son to the people: not to the perfidious and the ambitious, not to rhetoricians and philosophers, not to those who are curious about pagan writing, not to readers of profane books, not to the comedians of life, not to wits, artists of the word, not to those who carry famous names, not to the favorites of the powerful...but to those who are in spirit." Spidlik, *Prayer*, 162.

energy of the Holy Spirit was already constituent within the writings and life of the church fathers throughout much of late antiquity.³² In agreement with much of the eastern Christian tradition, from Origen of Alexandria to the desert fathers of the fourth and fifth centuries, Nicetas believed that the Holy Spirit allowed the saints to apprehend the divine realities (*logikos*), which provided the possibility for participating and orientating their spiritual quest for beauty.³³

In the tractate *Paradise*, Nicetas argues that the saints are utterly dependent on the Holy Spirit, who provides divine illumination, which in turn makes it possible for them to ascend towards the comprehension of beauty.³⁴ Human beings, in their natural state, are unable to behold either the intelligible or spiritual realities. If seekers of beauty dismiss the intellectual (*noeros*) work of the Holy Spirit, then they remain only capable of considering the visible world. The faithful saints are able to discern good from evil while tasting of the tree of knowledge so long as they remain entirely reliant on the operations (*energeia*) of the Holy Spirit.³⁵ Nicetas grounds his argument in the Christian scriptures by returning to the words of the Apostle Paul, who asserted, “the natural (*psuchikos*) man rejects things of the Spirit as foolishness (1 Cor. 2.14).”³⁶ Contrary to the wayward (natural) ones, who reject the grace of the divine energy, the faithful (spiritual) ones participate (*metousia*) in the Holy Spirit and ultimately find rest in the pastures of God.³⁷ Nicetas insists that the faithful are totally dependent upon the Holy Spirit within the framework of the Trinitarian economy of salvation, which entails the transformation of creation into a more perfect communion with the Holy Trinity.³⁸

In the final chapters of *Paradise*, Nicetas examines the relationship between the theologian and the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit brings the theologian to a life of

32 Rossum, “Nicetas Stethatos’ On the Hierarchy,” 79.

33 It should be noted that Nicetas’ spirituality was not completely subjective, but rather it appears to fall outside of the rigid categories of the objective (objectivity) and the subjective (subjectivity). Spidlik, for example, rightly notes that the term *logikos* has both a “subjective” and an “objective” meaning in the Byzantine tradition. The saints participate in the Logos as they are simultaneously directed toward Christ the Logos. Spidlik, *Prayer*, 474.

34 On this point, Nicetas adheres to the Byzantine anthropological tradition, which emphasizes full dependence on God. In his well received study on aspects of Byzantine theology, John Meyendorff rightly asserts, “Thus, the most important aspect of Greek patristic anthropology, which will be taken for granted by the Byzantine theologians throughout the Middle Ages, is the concept that man is not an autonomous being, that his true humanity is realized only when he lives ‘in God’ and possesses divine qualities.” John Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology: Historical Trends & Doctrinal Themes*, (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 1979), 139.

35 SC 81, 224:58.12.

36 Nicetas contends, “As for others who have no regard for the things of God, who made no effort and had no zeal for intellectual work of the Spirit, because they can not imagine anything more than the visible, be folly notorious for naturalists like them, according to these declarations of the divine apostle: The natural man receives not the things of the Spirit, because they will be foolishness to him.” SC 81, 174:18.12-16.

37 SC 81, 194:32.12.

38 Nicetas describes the Trinitarian life as a movement of dynamic interpenetration and participation, where the Son is in the Father and the Spirit, while the Spirit is in the Father and the Son, and the Father is in the Son and in the Spirit. Furthermore, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit interpenetrate one another without blending together or creating a confounding comingling or any other confusion. SC 81, 204:39.15-20.

repentance (*metanoia*) and purification (*katharotēs*).³⁹ The gift of repentance (*penthos*), throughout much of the Byzantine tradition, but especially in the writings of Symeon, represents an integral stage in preparing the soul for contemplation of beauty.⁴⁰ The spiritual cleansing marked with tearful repentance is the essential prerequisite, preparing the theologian to engage in prayerful contemplation, and thereafter, obtain the limited ability to articulate the profundity of God.⁴¹ The theologian, through the power of the Holy Spirit, possesses the temperance, which allows for the regulation of all the senses (*aisthēsis*).⁴² As theologians fully participate in these divine gifts, they become full of mercy and replete with the good fruits of the Spirit.⁴³ The following passage, derived from *Paradise*, contains a concise synopsis of key elements recapitulated throughout Nicetas' mystical theology and his schema for the ascent towards beauty:

As for the tree of knowledge (*gnōsis*) of good (*kallos*) and evil (*kakos*), it is the discernment of multiple branches, following the strong opinion expressed well by others having come before us in their philosophy. It is the discovery of our own structure and of our own nature (*phusis*), that which is good for us who have attained perfect (*teleios*) humanity and the measure of the age of Christ thanks to the absolute impassibility (*apatheia*) and the wisdom (*sophia*) of the Spirit and which we are returned toward the magnificence of the Creator in order to begin the contemplation (*theōria*) of the same beauty (*kallos*) of the creatures; for them, the cause of their progress is realized with time in the stable possession of virtue (*aretē*), it is not and neither can it be produced to wander from this property, because their work is firmly assured in the divine contemplation (*theōria*).⁴⁴

In the above excerpt, Nicetas provides a precise summary of the archetypal eastern monastic movement of the soul, where one begins with considering the structures of nature, then in Christ through the Spirit, advances in stages of contem-

39 SC 81, 220:56.2. The Byzantine tradition has long valued the role of repentance and purification as a preparatory step leading to the contemplation of beauty. Spidlik explains that, "With the Fathers, *katharsis* (purification) coincided with perfection as the restoration of our original, primitive condition...The first condition of contemplation is purification from sin, repentance, because 'the Bridegroom does not like to mingle with an alien soul'." Spidlik, *Prayer*, 176; also, see Gregory Nazianzen, *Carminum liber*, 2.45, v. 45; *Patrologiae Graeca* 37:1356.

40 In his profound appreciation for the gift of repentance, Symeon declares, "Let us repent with our whole soul and repudiate not only our wicked deeds but even the twisted, defiled thoughts of our heart." *Cat.* 5.49 – 52, translation borrowed from Basil Krivocheine, *St Symeon the New Theologian, Life-Spirituality-Doctrine: In the Light of Christ*, (Crestwood, NY: Saint Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1986), 68.

41 SC 81, 220:56.3-6. For further discussion concerning the relationship between compunction and the spiritual life, see Iréné Hausherr, *Penthos: The Doctrine of Compunction in the Christian East*, (Kalamazoo, MI.: Cistercian Publications, 1982).

42 SC 81, 224:57.21.

43 SC 81, 222:57.1.

44 SC 81, 170:15.1-11.

plation.⁴⁵ The golden chain of tradition, which is embodied in those who have “come before us,” provides Nicetas and his fellow monks with a descriptive template for their contemplation (*theōria*) of beauty. In another excerpt from *Paradise*, the saints are described as responding to the Holy Spirit with an openness that facilitates an intimate connection to the divine life, thus allowing penetration into the sanctuary (*bagiasma*) through the door of contemplation (*theōria*).⁴⁶ In the sanctuary, that is the metaphorical state of blessed contemplation, one advances in knowledge of being and recognition of both divine and human realities.⁴⁷ The Holy Spirit brings the faithful saints into perfect contemplation of beauty (*kallos*),⁴⁸ where the efficacy of love and the quest for beauty, both (love and beauty) essential features derived from the Platonic notion of ascent, become heightened as the faithful are empowered by the Holy Spirit with a perfect love (*agapē*) towards God.⁴⁹ In harmony with the Byzantine tradition and his spiritual father Symeon, Nicetas believed that the power and energy of divine love, measured in Christ and through the wisdom of the Holy Spirit, directs the faithful saints towards perfection.⁵⁰

V. TRINITY, LANGUAGE AND THE QUEST FOR BEAUTY

Nicetas' *Paradise* is a tractate devoted to analyzing the quest for beauty through allegory and imagery associated with paradise (e.g. good and bad fruits), contoured by Hellenistic philosophy, the Byzantine tradition, the biblical story of creation, fall and redemption, and finally, steadily anchored in the doctrine of the Trinity. Perhaps, above all else, the Orthodox doctrine of the Trinity indelibly shapes Nicetas' mystical theology. It seems rather fitting, especially on this particular occasion, to move towards a conclusion with another quote from McGuckin. In his recent study on the history, doctrine, and culture of the Orthodox Church, McGuckin offered the following perspective on the meaning of the doctrine of the Trinity within eastern Orthodox Christianity:

As God the Father moves out to creation through the Son and in the Spirit, so it is meant, and destined as the communion of our grace, that

⁴⁵ Nicetas' structured analysis of the spiritual life reflects the Byzantine theological tradition. In his seminal study on Maximus the Confessor, Thunberg observes the progression of theoretical contemplation as follows, “Contemplation, according to the early church, particularly in the East, starts in the ontological and ends in the mystical. Accordingly, contemplation is a threefold activity. It consists, according to Maximus the Confessor, in ‘natural contemplation’ (i.e., contemplation of natures), in spiritual contemplation of what is revealed through Scripture, and in mystical contemplation of the triune God himself.” Lars Thunberg, *Microcosm and Mediator: The Theological Anthropology of Maximus the Confessor* (Chicago: Open Court, 1995), 363-74.

⁴⁶ SC 81, 218:54.6.

⁴⁷ SC 81, 218:54.7.

⁴⁸ SC 81, 170:15.3.

⁴⁹ SC 81, 222:57.3-6.

⁵⁰ SC 81, 170:15.3-8. Regarding the centrality of charity or love (*agapē*) in Symeon's spiritual theology, Krivocheine concludes, “Symeon's entire spirituality is characterized, permeated, even dominated by the spirit of charity (*agapē*), of which it is the cornerstone...Symeon describes charity as a divine quality, as Christ or God Himself. Charity is the greatest of the virtues, the first and the last.” Krivocheine, *In the Light of Christ*, 371.

the highest levels of the creation (spiritual intelligences above all, though the pattern is noticed in other parts of the sensible creation) themselves move towards God the Father. The movement to the Father directly is impossible: such is his transcendence and glory that no creature can make that pathway without meditation. One moves to the Father through the promptings and guidance of the Spirit. The movement is perfected by the Spirit's incarnation of each spiritual intelligence in the image of the Logos, whose pattern forms our substrate of being, and our perfection of enlightenment.⁵¹

The above excerpt, obviously, provides only one selection from a much longer and detailed assessment of the Orthodox doctrine of Trinity.⁵² On other occasions, prior to the publication of *The Orthodox Church*, McGuckin has made similar observations regarding the central meaning behind the eastern Christian doctrine of the Trinity.⁵³ McGuckin's point is an important one for understanding the Orthodox doctrine of the Trinity, but also, it has merit for rightly interpreting the Trinitarian theology embedded throughout Nicetas' *Paradise*. The Orthodox doctrine of the Trinity is primarily about the mystery of salvation, which is grounded in the outreach of the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit, and realized within the liturgical life of the Church. The doctrine of the Trinity is less a mathematical conundrum, and much more so, as McGuckin argues above, an explication of the Christian experience of the communion of grace. The Trinity is not a philosophical puzzle inasmuch as shorthand for the divine movements of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, which are bound up with the economy of salvation. In melody with Nicetas and the Orthodox tradition, McGuckin asserts that the Holy Spirit prompts the faithful to move toward the Father, ultimately leading one to the perfection of enlightenment, or to refer back to the ancient term for sublime contemplation of the divine: *theōria*.

McGuckin's reassessment of the doctrine of Trinity provides an overdue corrective to the modern tendency to approach the doctrine of the Trinity as an abstract philosophical problem. The modern focus on philosophical issues has shifted the attention away from the stakes originally embedded within the debates over the doctrine of the Trinity. In regards to the early disagreements over the doctrine of the Trinity, the underlying concerns were soteriological and doxological. McGuckin's challenge to modern Trinitarian theology deserves ongoing reflection, though his timely corrective should remain nuanced inasmuch as Nicetas and theologians throughout the Byzantine tradition were committed to modes of logic and grammar rules aimed at clearly proclaiming and rightly worshipping the Triune God. McGuckin himself recognizes that theological language matters throughout his discussion

51 John A. McGuckin, *The Orthodox Church: An Introduction to its History, Doctrine, and Spiritual Culture*, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 125-26.

52 For further discussion, see chapter 3 in McGuckin, *The Orthodox Church*, 120-81.

53 For example, see his study of Gregory Nazianzen's Trinitarian theology: John A. McGuckin, "Perceiving Light from Light in Light: The Trinitarian Theology of St. Gregory the Theologians," (Commemorative Volume for his 16th Centenary), *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 39:1-2, 7-32.

of the doctrine of the Trinity in *The Orthodox Church*.⁵⁴ Orthodox theologians have been, and remain committed to, reflecting upon and articulating the Christian doctrine of God within received parameters of logic and speech; however, these same theologians also recognize the limits inherent to theological speech. The meagerness of language does not prohibit the faithful from experiencing, worshipping, and proclaiming the beauty of the Gospel, which is beheld in the outreach of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Salvation is not reserved for those who attain theological exactitude. Rather, the gift of divine communion is one that, according to the above excerpt from McGuckin's *Orthodox Church* and Nicetas' *Paradise*, begins with the Trinitarian outreach and concludes with the faithful seekers beholding divine beauty in perfect enlightenment.

The tension between the sublime depths of experience and the unfortunate limits of language is an underlying theme throughout Nicetas' *Paradise*. On multiple occasions, Nicetas asserts that it is impossible for seekers to contemplate the Trinity while they remain in their created human nature.⁵⁵ At the same time, from late antiquity onward, theologians believed that it was inconceivable to fully understand human nature without considering the relationship between humanity and the Trinitarian God.⁵⁶ In *Paradise*, Nicetas' numerous references concerning the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit rarely focus upon formally explicating the sacred doctrine of the Trinity. Nicetas is not concerned with explication, at least not in the technical and philosophical sense of the term. Rather, his reflections upon the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are predominantly in the context of assessing and describing the soteriological dimensions of the Trinitarian outreach in relationship with humanity. Description and attentive reflection, so it seems in the case of Nicetas, trump formal explication. Nicetas' description of the soul's ascent is intended to arouse the monastic community towards reflecting upon the mystery and beauty of salvation. The eastern Christian monastic way of life may be misconstrued as an austere vocation, one where dour monks battle against the appetites of the flesh by engaging in rigorous practices. This caricature of eastern monasticism is not without merit, for there is a storied ascetical thread throughout eastern monasticism. But warring against the flesh and sparring with demons in the desert are not the primary purposes of the monastic vocation. Nicetas' *Paradise* suggests that ascetical practices, from the ordinary to the most rigorous, clear the way for allowing diligent seekers to orientate their attention towards

54 McGuckin readily recognizes that theological grammar, such as the names of the three *hypostases*, remains central and non-negotiable for the eastern Orthodox tradition. McGuckin asserts, "Orthodoxy holds strongly to the belief that the 'names' of the *hypostases* of God are part of the deposit of divine revelation. For this reason it refuses to follow the advice of some modern theologians of Western traditions who advocate an abandonment of traditional terms in favour of a feminist rearticulation of God as Mother, Daughter, or other titles invented so as to avoid gender reference. McGuckin, *The Orthodox Church*. 168.

55 For example, see SC 81, 204:39.21.

56 Regarding the relationship between the Trinity and human existence in the early church, Thunberg rightly asserts, "Thus, in the ancient church, no evaluation of human beings is possible without consideration of their relationship to God – one in three persons – or to Christ, the divine/human Savior, who is one person in two natures." Lars Thunberg, "The Human Person as Image of God," in *Christian Spirituality: Origins to the Twelfth Century*, eds. B. McGinn and J. Meyendorff (New York, NY: The Crossroads Publishing Company, 1985), 291-312; 292.

the end goal (*telos*), which is nothing other than the beholding of divine beauty.