

Between Tritheism and Sabellianism

Trinitarian Speculation in John Italos' and Nicetas Stethatos' Confessions of Faith

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Abstract

This article focuses on two confessions of faith, which were composed in the late eleventh century by the philosopher John Italos and by the monk Nicetas Stethatos. In-depth analysis of selected passages shows that the two men subscribed to a Trinitarian theology that could be considered heretical. They denied the existence of a common divine substance that could safeguard the oneness of God and instead emphasised the closeness of the hypostases to each other, which made it impossible for them to accord to the hypostases the distinguishing function that the Cappadocians had given them. Thus it can be argued that it was their Tritheism that pushed them towards a 'Sabellian' solution.

Keywords

Tritheism – Sabellianism – Nicetas Stethatos – John Italos – Confession of Faith

The conceptual problems arising from the Christian belief in one God that is nevertheless three had in Late Antiquity resulted in a lively debate. In the late fourth century Basil of Caesarea and Gregory of Nyssa came to the conclusion that Father, Son and Spirit were three distinct hypostases, which shared one undivided divine substance. In the following decades this framework received universal recognition. Yet this did not mean that the issue was settled for good. In the sixth century the discussion resumed when the Monophysite philosopher-theologian John Philoponus proposed an alternative model according to which Father, Son and Spirit were three separate substances and the common

substance was nothing more than a mental construct. This model elicited responses not only from members of Philoponus' own sect but also from Chalcedonian authors who composed numerous texts in the form of treatises, dialogues and collections of definitions. However, this discourse was cut short when Late Roman civilisation disintegrated in the seventh century. From the eighth century onwards we have very little evidence for sustained Trinitarian speculation. Authors who show an interest in the topic appear to content themselves with summarising the Cappadocian position. At first sight the situation had not changed in the eleventh century. The few theological treatises that were written at the time were devoted to polemic against heretical groups such as the Jacobites, the Armenians and the Latins, and there is little sign that their authors reflected on the ontological foundations of their own beliefs. However, this picture changes radically when we take into account another type of text that has so far attracted little attention, confessions of faith in which individuals declare their orthodoxy and distance themselves from various heresies. When one reads these texts for the first time one gets the impression that they consist of dry formulae devoid of any original thought. Yet this impression is deceptive. In-depth analysis shows that confessions of faith were crafted with infinite care and expressed personal convictions, which might not be as orthodox as they first appear. This article focuses on two authors, John Italos and Nicetas Stethatos, who were both active in the second half of the eleventh century. It makes the case that in their confessions of faith Italos and Stethatos tried to safeguard the oneness of God not by appealing to the common divine substance but rather by claiming that the three hypostases were so closely related to each other that they could be regarded as one; and it furthermore suggests that Italos and Stethatos came to this conclusion because they did not accept the existence of a common divine substance any more than John Philoponus had done half a millennium earlier.

The Creedal Statement of John Italos

John Italos was a highly successful teacher of philosophy in Constantinople who counted among his students members of the secular and ecclesiastical elites and who furthermore enjoyed the patronage of Emperor Michael VII Doukas (1067–1078). Yet, this did not mean that he had no enemies. It was claimed that he did not simply study the texts of pagan philosophers but that he had made their views his own. Michael VII could prevent a condemnation of his protégé but this was not the end of the affair. Italos composed a confession of faith that was meant to clear him of all accusations and submitted it to the ecclesiastical authorities. However, neither patriarch nor synod were

willing to pronounce their views on it. At this point the new ruler Alexius I Komnenos (1081–1118) intervened. He appointed a commission, which went through the text with a fine comb and came to the conclusion that it contained heretical views.¹ The extracts that the commission quoted in its final report are the only surviving parts of Italos' confession of faith. The longest passage reads as follows:

Πιστεύω εἰς πατέρα ἄκτιστον καὶ υἱὸν ἄκτιστον καὶ πνεῦμα ἄκτιστον, καὶ ὡς ὁ πατήρ ἄκτιστος, καὶ ὁ υἱὸς καὶ τὸ πνεῦμα, οὕτω καὶ ἀκατάληπτος ὁ πατήρ, ὁ υἱὸς καὶ τὸ πνεῦμα, καὶ δὴ καὶ ἀμέριστος ὁ πατήρ, ὁ υἱὸς καὶ τὸ πνεῦμα, καὶ αἰώνιος ὁ πατήρ, ὁ υἱὸς καὶ τὸ πνεῦμα· καὶ διὰ τοῦτο οὐ τρεῖς αἰώνιοι, ἀλλ' εἰς αἰώνιος, ἐπεὶ οὐδὲ τρεῖς ἄκτιστοι, οὐδὲ τρεῖς ἀκατάληπτοι, ἀλλ' εἰς ἄκτιστος καὶ εἰς ἀκατάληπτος.²

I believe in an uncreated father and an uncreated Son and an uncreated Spirit, and as the Father (sc. is) uncreated and the Son and the Spirit, so also (sc. is) incomprehensible the Father, the Son and the Spirit, and in fact (sc. is) also impartible the Father, the Son and the Spirit, and (sc. is) eternal the Father, the Son and the Spirit. And therefore (sc. there are) not three eternal ones but (sc. there is) one eternal one, since (sc. there are) also neither three uncreated ones nor three incomprehensible ones but (sc. there is) one uncreated one and one incomprehensible one.

In this passage Italos first declares that each of the divine qualities can be predicated of each of the three divine persons, but then cautions that this does not permit one to speak of three carriers of the same idiom, but only of one. These statements remind the reader of the conceptual framework of substance and hypostasis that the Cappadocians had created in the fourth century AD. The Cappadocians had been confronted with the Arian claim that although the same qualities can be attributed to the Father and the Son they are in each case predicated of different substances. In order to rebut this claim they had declared that these qualities are indicative of one single substance, which is present in each of the divine hypostases.

Italos' Trinitarian theology thus appears to be unexceptional. However, this was not the opinion of the members of the commission that examined his confession of faith. They complained that Italos spoke of εἰς αἰώνιος, εἰς ἄκτιστος

1 Cf. M. Angold, *Church and Society in Byzantium under the Comneni (1081–1261)*, Cambridge, 1995, pp. 50–54. J. Gouillard, "Le procès officiel de Jean l'Italien. Les actes et leurs sous-entendus," *TM*, 9 (1985), pp. 133–174, esp. pp. 160–189.

2 *Basilike Semeiosis*, ed. Gouillard, pp. 148–149.218–223.

and εἰς ἀκατάληπτος without in each case adding the noun θεός that would have unequivocally identified the referent as the one divine nature.³ This raises the question: was this criticism justified? If we wish to find an answer we first of all need to realise that Italos' statement is not an entirely original text. As Vitalien Laurent had already pointed out in 1938 a very similar passage is found in the so-called Athanasian Creed (*Quicumque vult*).⁴ There we read:

Ἄκτιστος ὁ πατήρ, ἄκτιστος ὁ υἱός, ἄκτιστον καὶ τὸ ἅγιον πνεῦμα· ἀκατάληπτος ὁ πατήρ, ἀκατάληπτος ὁ υἱός, ἀκατάληπτος καὶ τὸ ἅγιον πνεῦμα· αἰώνιος ὁ πατήρ, αἰώνιος ὁ υἱός, αἰώνιον καὶ τὸ ἅγιον πνεῦμα· πλὴν οὐ τρεῖς αἰώνιοι ἀλλ' εἰς αἰώνιος, ὡσπερ οὐδὲ τρεῖς ἄκτιστοι, οὐδὲ τρεῖς ἀκατάληπτοι, ἀλλ' εἰς ἄκτιστος καὶ εἰς ἀκατάληπτος.⁵

The Father is uncreated, the Son is uncreated, and the Holy Spirit is also uncreated; the Father is incomprehensible, the Son is incomprehensible, and the Holy Spirit is also incomprehensible; the Father is eternal, the Son is eternal, and the Holy Spirit is also eternal. However, there are not three eternal ones but there is one eternal one, just as there are not three uncreated ones nor three incomprehensible ones but there is one uncreated one and one incomprehensible one.

The resemblance between the two texts is so strong that only one explanation is possible: Italos used the older text as the basis for his own statement. From his discovery Laurent drew two conclusions; that the commission was not prepared to acknowledge this dependence, and that it twisted the meaning of Italos' statement. Laurent conceded that a heretical reading of the Athanasian Creed was possible but that such a reading had never been intended by its author: the term θεός though not mentioned explicitly was clearly implied. In a second step he then argued that Italos' text as an adaptation of the Athanasian Creed was necessarily also orthodox.⁶

However, matters are not as straightforward as Laurent believed. Comparison of the two passages shows that Italos did not slavishly copy his model but introduced a number of modifications. In the first part of the Athanasian Creed the pattern ἄκτιστος ὁ πατήρ, ἄκτιστος ὁ υἱός, ἄκτιστον καὶ τὸ ἅγιον πνεῦμα is repeated three times and changes are confined to the replacement of

3 *Basilike Semeiosis*, ed. Gouillard, p. 149.225–236.

4 V. Laurent, "Le Symbole 'Quicumque' et Jean Italos," *Échos d'Orient*, 37 (1938), pp. 136–140.

5 Laurent, "Le Symbole 'Quicumque,'" p. 137.

6 Laurent, "Le Symbole 'Quicumque,'" pp. 138–139.

ἄκτιστος with first ἀκατάληπτος and then αἰώνιος. By contrast, Italos' confession of faith has a much more varied structure. In the first statement, πιστεύω εἰς πατέρα ἄκτιστον καὶ υἰὸν ἄκτιστον καὶ πνεῦμα ἄκτιστον, the three persons are linked through the copula καί and the quality is mentioned after each person; in the second statement the quality appears after the first person but is omitted after the second and the third person; and in the third statement the quality precedes all three persons and the copula καί between the first and the second person is omitted. This last pattern is then repeated twice.

What is the significance of these modifications? At first sight the successive changes of the initial sentence structure do not seem to affect the meaning of the statements. Italos introduces the second statement, ὁ πατήρ ἄκτιστος, καὶ ὁ υἰὸς καὶ τὸ πνεῦμα, as a paraphrase of the first statement, and he correlates the third statement, ἀκατάληπτος ὁ πατήρ, ὁ υἰὸς καὶ τὸ πνεῦμα, with the second statement through ὡς and οὕτω, which indicates their equivalence. This suggests that we are meant to expand the second and third statements to ὁ πατήρ ἄκτιστος, καὶ ὁ υἰὸς <ἄκτιστος> καὶ τὸ πνεῦμα <ἄκτιστον> and ἀκατάληπτος ὁ πατήρ, <ἀκατάληπτος> ὁ υἰὸς καὶ <ἀκατάληπτον> τὸ πνεῦμα.

This is without doubt one possible reading of the text. However, it is not the only one. A radically different picture emerges when we consider each statement on its own without taking into account the context into which Italos has integrated it. Then we notice a clear shift in meaning. In the initial statement, ὁ πατήρ ἄκτιστος καὶ ὁ υἰὸς ἄκτιστος καὶ τὸ πνεῦμα ἄκτιστος, the quality is predicated of each person separately. This is no longer the case with the third statement, ἀκατάληπτος ὁ πατήρ, ὁ υἰὸς καὶ τὸ πνεῦμα, where the omission of the first καί turns the three divine persons into a collective and where the positioning of the quality at the beginning of the sentence shows clearly that it is this collective of which the quality is predicated. If Italos had wished to avoid this impression he should have used the plural and written ἀκατάληπτοι ὁ πατήρ, ὁ υἰὸς καὶ τὸ πνεῦμα instead.

The significance of this statement becomes obvious when we turn to the concluding part of the passage where we find the complementary phrases εἰς ἀκατάληπτος and τρεῖς ἀκατάληπτοι. At first sight these terms seem to express the Cappadocian understanding of the divinity. However, a closer look reveals that this is not the case. The phrase εἰς ἀκατάληπτος is clearly a paraphrase of ἀκατάληπτος ὁ πατήρ, ὁ υἰὸς καὶ τὸ πνεῦμα, just as the excluded option τρεῖς ἀκατάληπτοι would have had a counterpart in the statement ἀκατάληπτοι ὁ πατήρ, ὁ υἰὸς καὶ τὸ πνεῦμα. In this way Italos signals to his readers that ὁ πατήρ, ὁ υἰὸς, καὶ τὸ πνεῦμα when seen as a collective are εἰς and not τρεῖς.

At this point we can conclude that the commission was entirely justified in its suspicions. The omission of the terms θεός and θεοί is not a mere oversight,

which does not affect the meaning of the text, but a deliberate move that permits Italos to express his own alternative view of God where oneness is not located in the one nature or substance, which is not mentioned at all, but at the level of the three hypostases where orthodox teaching would have required a stress on difference and distinction.

This reading of Italos' confession of faith can be further substantiated when we examine the second criticism that the members of the commission directed against it. They declared that the sentence ἀμέριστος ὁ πατήρ, ὁ υἱός καὶ τὸ πνεῦμα was irreconcilable with ecclesiastical tradition. In orthodox statements ἀμέριστος should always be complemented with its counterpart 'divisible', μεριστός, and the former term should be attributed to the divine nature in order to emphasise its unity whereas the latter term should be used for the three hypostases in order to indicate that they are distinct from one another. Italos, however, made no mention of μεριστός at all and applied ἀμέριστος to the three hypostases, which either made no sense or smacked of Sabellianism.⁷

Comparison with the Athanasian Creed shows that the quality ἀμέριστος is missing there. Thus we can conclude that Italos added it to the qualities ἄκτιστος, ἀκατάληπτος and αἰώνιος, which he found in his model. This suggests strongly that ἀμέριστος has a special significance in Italos' Trinitarian speculation. Therefore it is essential to establish what meaning it has in the context.

Since ἀμέριστος is treated exactly like the other qualities one could argue that it refers not to the three hypostases but to the common divine nature, which is present in each hypostasis. The commission considered such a statement to be nonsensical but it is not necessarily so. When the divinity is defined as a set of idioms such as ἄκτιστος and ἀκατάληπτος then it can be said that this set cannot be divided into its constituent 'parts', μέρη, not only in statements about the nature as such but also in statements about the three persons in which the nature is present. Such reasoning would be entirely orthodox. At best one could criticise Italos for not having made explicit the distinction between the hypostases but this, too, could be explained through the context. Italos was making an anti-Arian statement and would therefore naturally have emphasised the oneness of the divine nature rather than the separateness of the three divine hypostases.

However, this is again not the only possible interpretation. A different meaning reveals itself when we consider that ἀμέριστος is predicated of Father, Son and Spirit as a collective. Then ἀμέριστος indicates that Father, Son and Spirit are so closely linked to each other that they cannot be divided into three μέρη. This interpretation finds confirmation in the last part of the passage.

⁷ *Basilike Semeiosis* ed. Gouillard, p. 149.237–254.

Unlike the other qualities, ἀμέριστος is not mentioned there: the statement ἀμέριστος ὁ πατήρ, ὁ υἱός καὶ τὸ πνεῦμα has no counterpart εἷς ἀμέριστος. Yet this does not necessarily mean that it is absent. One could argue that the quality ἀμέριστος is not mentioned again in the last part because it is synonymous with εἷς and therefore represented by it. Thus one can conclude that ἀμέριστος makes the point of oneness already in the first part of the statement and that it functions as the linchpin of the argument.

This shows clearly that in this case, too, the commission's suspicions were justified. Italos locates inseparability not at the level of the one divine nature but at the level of the three hypostases where he should have emphasised the aspect of distinction instead.

There can be no doubt that Italos was aware of how problematic his framework was. As we have seen he closely follows the wording of an older text, which he clearly hoped would be recognised as orthodox. Moreover, he creates a complex web of cross references between individual statements that gives the passage the veneer of orthodoxy and he leaves blanks, which could be filled with entirely orthodox notions. Thus one can argue that Italos had already anticipated criticism. In order to ward off such criticism he constructed two lines of defence. If his adversaries only had a superficial look at the text they would only see the orthodox layer of meaning, and if they studied the text properly and discovered the 'heretical' layer they could still not accuse him because he could always point to the orthodox layer and maintain that he had never intended any other meaning. It is likely that under normal circumstances this strategy would have worked. After all, a direct intervention by the emperor was necessary in order to bring about his condemnation.

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From the discussion it is evident that we are in the presence of two mutually exclusive conceptual frameworks that seek to establish the oneness of God in radically different ways. The orthodox framework as defined by the commission posits a 'unified nature of divinity', ἐνιαία φύσις τῆς θεότητος, and then considers this nature to be present without division in Father, Son and Spirit who are nevertheless three because of the different hypostatic idioms that accede to the nature.⁸ Italos' framework, on the other hand, starts from the divinity as present in Father, Son and Spirit and then so-to-speak adds up these 'divinities' in order to form one common divinity. In such a model unity can only be maintained if the 'gaps' between the three components are closed. This leads to a

⁸ *Basilike Semeiosis*, ed. Gouillard, p. 194.228.

strong emphasis on the inseparability of Father, Son and Spirit from each other. By contrast there is no clear reference to the distinction between the three hypostases. Italos always speaks of the Father, the Son and the Spirit and does not add the qualification that Father, Son and Spirit can only be considered inseparable when one abstracts from their hypostatic idioms and considers their divinity alone. Thus one can see why the commission had to come to the conclusion that Italos was a Sabellian who wished to merge the three persons into one.

The Creedal Statement of Nicetas Stethatos

At this point we must ask: was John Italos a lone voice or was he a representative of a broader discourse? In order to answer this question we need to turn our attention to another confession of faith, which dates to the same years.⁹ It was composed by Nicetas Stethatos, monk and at that time most likely already abbot of the famous Constantinopolitan monastery of Stoudios.¹⁰ Stethatos who was born in the early years of the eleventh century was a prolific author. Apart from spiritual treatises he wrote the most sophisticated Orthodox response to the Western teaching of the *filioque*, the so-called *Synthesis adversus Latinos*.¹¹ Thus one might expect him to be in league with Italos' enemies, in particular since he polemicalised against the philosophers' views on the after-life.¹² However, a closer look at his creedal statement reveals that matters are not so straightforward. In the introductory section Nicetas complains that he is being attacked by people who weigh his every word and declare to have winckled out heretical elements.¹³ The purpose of the following sections is then to

9 Nicetas Stethatos, *Confession of Faith*, in: Nicétas Stéthatos, *Opuscules et lettres*, éd. J. Darrouzès (sc, 81), Paris, 1961, pp. 446–462.

10 On Nicetas cf. most recently, 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: *Networks of Learning: Perspectives on Scholars in Byzantine East and Latin West, c. 1000–1200*, ed. S. Steckel, N. Gaul, and M. Grünbart, Berlin – Münster, 2014, pp. 107–124.

11 Cf. A. Michel, *Humbert und Kerullarios. Quellen und Studien zum Schisma des XI. Jahrhunderts*, 2 vols (Quellen und Forschungen aus dem Gebiete der Geschichte, 21), Paderborn, 1924–1930.

12 Cf. J. Gouillard, "Léthargie des âmes et culte des saints: un plaidoyer inédit de Jean diacre et maïstôr," *TM*, 8 (1981), pp. 171–186.

13 Nicetas Stethatos, *Confession of Faith*, ed. Darrouzès, p. 446.

present a detailed account of his beliefs, which can silence the criticism of his detractors. Analysis of these sections yields surprising results.

Nicetas reproduces the Orthodox teaching that God is one substance or nature in three hypostases or persons and then rejects as heretical two alternative models, that there might be only one hypostasis or person or that there might be three substances or natures. His anti-Sabellian argument reads as follows:

Τέλειον οἶδα Θεὸν τὸν Πατέρα, τέλειον Θεὸν τὸν Υἱόν, τέλειον Θεὸν τὸ Πνεῦμα τὸ ἅγιον, ἐπειδὴ τὴν αὐτὴν καὶ μίαν ἕκαστον πρόσωπον ἀμέριστον καὶ ἀνελλιπή καὶ τελείαν ἔχει θεότητα καὶ ὡς μὲν Θεὸς τὸ αὐτὸ καθέστηκεν ἕκαστον καθ' ἑαυτὸ θεωρούμενον, τοῦ νοὸς μόνου γνωρίζοντος τὰ ἀχώριστα, τὸ δὲ Πατὴρ καὶ Υἱὸς καὶ ἅγιον Πνεῦμα, εἰς τὰ τρία Θεός.¹⁴

I know the Father to be complete God, the Son to be complete God, the holy Spirit to be complete God, since each person has one and the same godhead that is impartible and lacks nothing and is complete; and insofar as it is God each one seen by itself is the same, with only the mind telling apart the inseparable ones, whereas Father and Son and Holy Spirit, the three (sc. are) one God.

This statement consists of two parts. In the first part it is declared that each of the three divine persons contains all that constitutes godhead and is therefore god in the full sense of the word. In the second part it is then explained that insofar as they are each god there is no real distinction between the three persons but insofar as they are Father, Son and Spirit they are one God. This juxtaposition is oddly unbalanced. One would have expected a clearer distinction between the hypostases of Father, Son and Spirit, in particular since it is the function of the passage to demonstrate that the author is not a Sabellian. For a proper evaluation of the argument it is essential to realise that the passage is borrowed from an older text, a credal statement read out at the Sixth Ecumenical Council. Comparison shows that Nicetas copied his source word for word. However, in one case he made a significant modification. The last statement, τὸ δὲ Πατὴρ καὶ Υἱὸς καὶ ἅγιον Πνεῦμα, εἰς τὰ τρία Θεός, reads in the original: “but as Father, Son and all-holy Spirit, they are called another and another and another, and therefore they are proclaimed by those that are divinely inspired as god and god and god, but the three are one god,” ὡς δὲ πατὴρ καὶ υἱὸς καὶ πνεῦμα πανάγιον ἕτερον καὶ ἕτερον καὶ ἕτερον λέγεται, κἀντεῦθεν ταῦτα τοῖς

14 Nicetas Stethatos, *Confession of Faith*, ed. Darrouzès, p. 448.

θεολήπτοις κηρύττεται θεός και θεός και θεός, ἀλλ' εἰς τὰ τρία θεός.¹⁵ Nicetas has left out the thrice-repeated elements ἕτερον and θεός, which introduce the notion of separation at the level of the hypostases. As a result the careful balance between otherness and sameness that is found in the original text has disappeared and only the latter aspect remains, namely that the three hypostases together constitute the one God. We can conclude that Nicetas has toned down the anti-Sabellianism of the original text and we can further surmise that he did so because he found any separation of the three hypostases intolerable.

The implications of Nicetas' manipulations become evident in the next passage, which contains the corresponding anti-Arian statement and thus constitutes the direct counterpart of the passage in Italos' confession of faith that we have discussed before:

Οὐ γὰρ ἄλλος Θεός ὁ Πατήρ, οὐδὲ ἄλλος Θεός ὁ Υἱός, οὐδὲ ἄλλος πάλιν Θεός τὸ Πνεῦμα τὸ ἅγιον, ἐπεὶ μηδὲ ἄλλη φύσις ὁ Πατήρ, μηδὲ ἄλλη φύσις ὁ Υἱός, μηδὲ ἄλλη πάλιν φύσις τὸ Πνεῦμα τὸ ἅγιον· ἀλλὰ Θεός μὲν ὁ Πατήρ, Θεός δὲ και ὁ Υἱός, Θεός δὲ και τὸ Πνεῦμα τὸ ἅγιον, ὡς μίαν ἀμερίστωσ και ἀνελλιπῶσ τὰ τρία πρόσωπα πληροῦντα θεότητα, ἐν ἐκάστω δηλονότι οὔσης ὀλοτελῶσ τῆσ θεότητος.¹⁶

For the Father is not a different God nor is the Son a different God nor again is the Holy Spirit a different God, because the Father is not a different nature nor is the Son a different nature nor again is the Holy Spirit a different nature; but the Father is God, and the Son is also God and the Holy Spirit is also God, since the three persons fill the one Godhead without partition and shortcoming, since the divinity is evidently wholly in each.

15 *Acts of the Sixth Ecumenical Council (681)*, in: *Acta conciliorum oecumenicorum*, II.2: *Concilium universale Constantinopolitanum tertium*, ed. R. Riedinger, 2 vols., Berlin, 1990–1992, vol. I, p. 426.9–14: Τέλειος θεός ὁ πατήρ, τέλειος θεός ὁ υἱός, τέλειος θεός τὸ πνεῦμα τὸ ἅγιον, ἐπειδὴ τὴν αὐτὴν και μίαν ἕκαστον πρόσωπον ἀμέριστον και ἀνελλιπὴ και τελείαν ἔχει θεότητα· και ὡς μὲν θεός τὸ αὐτὸ καθέστηχεν ἕκαστον καθ' ἑαυτὸ θεωρούμενον τοῦ νοῦ χωρίζοντος τὰ ἀχώριστα· ὡς δὲ πατήρ και υἱός και πνεῦμα πανάγιον ἕτερον και ἕτερον και ἕτερον λέγεται, κἀντεῦθεν ταῦτα τοῖσ θεολήπτοις κηρύττεται θεός και θεός και θεός, ἀλλ' εἰς τὰ τρία θεός. This text itself is an excerpt from Sophronius' *Synodical Letter to Sergius*, PG 87, col. 3158AB. Interestingly Nicetas replaces χωρίζοντος with γνωρίζοντος. It is as if he could not stomach even a purely conceptual distinction.

16 Nicetas Stethatos, *Confession of Faith*, ed. Darrouzès, p. 450.

This passage, too, is adapted from the creed of the Sixth Ecumenical Council, again, however, not without modifications.¹⁷ In the original text we read “since the one godhead fills the three persons without partition and shortcoming,” ὡς μίας ἀμερίστως καὶ ἀνελλιπῶς τὰ τρία πρόσωπα πληρούσης θεότητος. This is evidently a statement about the one godhead that is present in the three persons and thus ensures their consubstantiality. The godhead is conceptualised as a continuum that underlies the separation of the three persons, and that is not affected by this separation. In Nicetas’ adaptation we read instead: “since the three persons fill the godhead without partition and shortcoming,” ὡς μίαν ἀμερίστως καὶ ἀνελλιπῶς τὰ τρία πρόσωπα πληροῦντα θεότητα. This statement has the exactly opposite meaning. Now it is claimed that the three persons constitute the godhead and at the same time unify it because they are inseparable from one another. This framework, too, is not an invention of Nicetas’. Ever since Late Antiquity, theologians had made use of the complementary concepts ‘part’, μέρος, and ‘whole’, ὅλον, and had employed the verb (συμ-) πληροῦν to describe the relation between them. In Gregory of Nyssa’s *Contra Eunomium*, for example, we read that everything is the work of God, “regardless of whether one looks at the world as a whole or at the parts of the world that fill up the whole,” κἄν εἰς τὸν κόσμον ἴδῃς ὅλον κἄν εἰς τὰ μέρη τοῦ κόσμου τὰ συμπληροῦντα τὸ ὅλον.¹⁸ In his treatise *De Spiritu Sancto* Basil of Caesarea had applied this conceptual framework to the Trinity when he stated: “The Holy Spirit, too, is one, as being conjoined with the one Father through the one Son and through itself filling up the much praised and blessed Trinity,” Ἐν δὲ καὶ τὸ Πνεῦμα τὸ ἅγιον δι’ ἑνὸς Υἱοῦ τῷ ἐνὶ Πατρὶ συναπτόμενον καὶ δι’ ἑαυτοῦ συμπληροῦν τὴν πολυῦνητον καὶ μακαρίαν Τριάδα.¹⁹ Nicetas will have known this statement because in his *Synthesis* he speaks of “the spirit ... that fills up the Trinity,” τὸ συμπληρωτικὸν τῆς τριάδος ... πνεῦμα.²⁰ However, this does not mean that it was universally considered to be above board. In his *Ambigua ad Thomam* Maximus the Confessor puts the finger on the conceptual problems that arise from

17 *Acts of the Sixth Ecumenical Council* (681), ed. Riedinger, vol. I, p. 426.14–20: Οὐ γὰρ ἄλλος θεὸς ὁ πατήρ, οὐδὲ ἄλλος θεὸς ὁ υἱός, οὐδὲ ἄλλος πάλιν θεὸς τὸ πνεῦμα τὸ ἅγιον, ἐπεὶ μὴδ’ ἄλλη φύσις ὁ πατήρ, μὴδ’ ἄλλη φύσις ὁ υἱός, μὴδ’ ἄλλη πάλιν φύσις τὸ πνεῦμα τὸ ἅγιον· τοῦτο γὰρ καὶ τοὺς πολλοὺς καὶ διαφόρους θεοὺς ἐκτεχνάζεται καὶ τὰς πολλὰς καὶ διαφόρους ἐκτίκει θεότητας· ἀλλὰ θεὸς μὲν ὁ πατήρ, θεὸς δὲ καὶ ὁ υἱός, ὁμοίως δὲ θεὸς καὶ τὸ πνεῦμα τὸ ἅγιον, ὡς μίας ἀμερίστως καὶ ἀνελλιπῶς τὰ τρία πρόσωπα πληρούσης θεότητος καὶ ἐν ἑκάστῳ οὐσίας ὀλοτελῶς καὶ ὀλικῶς. Cf. Sophronius, *Synodical Letter to Sergius*, PG 87, col. 3158BC.

18 Gregory of Nyssa, *Contra Eunomium*, III.4.43, in: *Gregorii Nysseni opera*, ed. W. Jaeger, I.1, II.2, Leiden, 1960, pp. 3–4.

19 Basil of Caesarea, *De Spiritu sancto* 18, PG 32, col. 152A

20 Nicetas Stethatos, *Synthesis*, II.2, ed. Michel, p. 386.1–2.

it. Insisting on the reality of the one nature he avers: “And the Trinity is truly a trinity, not filled up through a number that can be dissolved because it is not a composition of monads so that it may suffer separation,” Καὶ τριάς ἀληθῶς ἡ τριάς, οὐκ ἀριθμῶ λυομένῳ συμπληρουμένη· οὐ γὰρ ἔστιν μονάδων σύνθεσις, ἵνα πάθῃ διαίρεσιν.²¹ His use of the adverb ἀμερίστως shows that Nicetas was aware of this problem but thought that it could be solved through emphasis on the inseparability of the components. Whether his contemporaries would have agreed with him is another matter. They may well have concluded that Nicetas was both an Arian and a Sabellian, the former because he conceptualised the godhead as consisting of three different entities and the latter because he played down the differences between these entities in order to safeguard the oneness of God.



Of course, such a conclusion could only be drawn by readers who truly engaged with his text because Nicetas takes care to conceal his true convictions. As we have seen he bases his statement on an older text, which he reproduces with several modifications. He clearly expects his readers to recognise his source and therefore to conclude that he was only copying an existing doctrinal statement of indubitable orthodoxy. In order to maintain this impression he makes only almost imperceptible changes either through omission or through rephrasing of sentences. The most striking example of this technique is found in the anti-Arian statement. There Nicetas retains the vocabulary and the word order but changes the syntax in such a way that the infinitive πληροῦν takes on an entirely new meaning. One can assume that Nicetas would not have employed this strategy if he had not feared that he might be accused of heresy.²²

Byzantine Tritheism: The Long Shadow of John Philoponus

The similarities between the positions of John Italos and Nicetas Stethatos are evident. Both authors are concerned with safeguarding the oneness of god. However, in order to achieve this goal they do not have recourse to the notion

21 Maximus, *Ambigua ad Thomam*, PG 91, col. 1036BC.

22 Another example of this technique can be found in one of Stethatos' spiritual works, cf. D. Krausmüller, “Hiding in Plain Sight: Heterodox Trinitarian Speculation in the Writings of Nicetas Stethatos,” *Scr*, 9 (2013), pp. 255–284.

of a common divine substance. Instead they seek to establish unity at the level of the three hypostases. They declare that the divinity is made up of three components that are so closely linked to each other that there is no interval between them. This raises the question: why would Italos and Stethatos have expressed such views when they knew that they were controversial? A look at the history of Trinitarian doctrine can help us to find an answer. The Late Antique theological discourse had produced two radically different conceptual frameworks.

In the late fourth century Basil of Caesarea and Gregory of Nyssa had declared that Father, Son and Spirit were three hypostases but nevertheless only one God because they shared the same nature or substance, which was immanent in them and not divided by them. In order to defend this model they had located the process of individuation at the outermost layer of being. They had claimed that concrete beings came into existence when characteristic idioms were added to the properties that constituted the common nature.²³

In the middle of the sixth century John Philoponus had proposed an alternative model. He had averred that the substance, which was immanent in the three hypostases, was discontinuous and that one must therefore speak of three separate or particular substances. Moreover, he had claimed that these particular substances were already concrete beings and that the characteristic idioms played no role in the process of individuation. He had recognised the existence of a common or generic substance but had averred that it had no power to bind together the particular substances because it had no existence outside the human mind, which compared the particular substances and realised that they shared the same properties. Therefore the generic substance should also not be counted as a fourth element within the Trinity.²⁴

It is evident that the Trinitarian speculation of John Italos and Nicetas Stethatos shows a greater affinity with the Philoponian model than with its Cappadocian counterpart. If they considered the common divine substance to be a mere mental construct they would have had no other option but to locate the oneness of God at the level of the three hypostases. Of course, neither Italos

23 The secondary literature on the two authors is immense, cf. e.g. R. Cross, "Gregory of Nyssa on Universals," *VC*, 56 (2002), pp. 372–404; J. Zachhuber, *Human Nature in Gregory of Nyssa. Philosophical Background and Theological Significance* (SupVC, 46), Leiden – Boston – Cologne, 2000, pp. 71–72; and A. Radde-Gallwitz, *Basil of Caesarea: A guide to his life and doctrines*, Eugene, 2012, pp. 162–174.

24 A brief summary of Philoponus' Trinitarian theology can be found in A. Grillmeier and Th. Hainthaler, *Christ in Christian Tradition*, 11: *From the Council of Chalcedon (451) to Gregory the Great (590–604)*, 4: *The Church of Alexandria with Nubia and Ethiopia after 451*, tr. O. C. Dean, London, 1996, pp. 131–135.

nor Stethatos ever say that they are indebted to Philoponus. To do so would have been suicidal because Philoponus' conceptual framework had been condemned as 'Tritheism'. However, there is another way in which we can approach the issue. Philoponus had built his model on Aristotelian concepts. His particular substance corresponds to the Aristotelian first substance whereas his generic substance has a counterpart in the Aristotelian second substance.²⁵ Significantly, the same concepts are employed by Italos and Stethatos when they make Trinitarian statements in their other writings.

In the case of Italos the relevant passages are found in his *Opuscula*, a collection of short essays written in response to queries by friends and pupils.²⁶ The first text that I would like to consider is *Opusculum* 88, which is directed against Monophysite Christology. There Italos rejects the Monophysite notion of a composite nature and affirms instead the Chalcedonian position that the incarnated Word is a composite hypostasis. In his argument he emphasises the difference between the two concepts nature and hypostasis:

Καὶ ὡσπερ οὔτε ὁ Μωσῆς ἀνθρωπότης οὔτε ἡ ἀνθρωπότης Μωσῆς, οὕτως οὐδὲ ἡ ὑπόστασις φύσις ἀν εἶη, οὔτε ἡ φύσις ὑπόστασις· ἡ μὲν γὰρ ὑπόστασις οὐσίαν σημαίνει, πράγματι καὶ οὐκ ἐπινοία μόνη ὑφισταμένην, ἡ δὲ φύσις οὐσίαν ἐπινοία μόνη θεω<ρουμένην, ἀν>υπόστατον καθ' αὐτὴν καὶ ἀνύπαρκτον. Ἐπεὶ οὖν ὑπόστασις τε καὶ φύσις οὕτω διήρηνται ταῖς οὐσίαις, καὶ ἔστιν ὁ τοῦ θεοῦ Λόγος ὑπόστασις μία, τῆς μιᾶς τρισυποστάτου φύσεως καὶ ὑπερφώτου, οὐ φύσις οὗτος.²⁷

And just as Moses is not humanity nor humanity Moses, thus hypostasis would never be nature, nor nature hypostasis. For hypostasis denotes the substance that exists in reality and not just in the mind whereas nature denotes the substance that is seen only in the mind (or: through mental activity), which is non-hypostatic by itself and inexistent. Since hypostasis and nature are thus distinguished as regards the substances, and the Word of God is one hypostasis of the one tri-hypostatic and exceedingly resplendent nature, he is not a nature.

25 On Philoponus' dependence on Aristotle, cf. the previous note and M. Rashed, *L'héritage aristotélicien. Textes inédits de l'Antiquité*, Paris, 2007, pp. 352–357.

26 P. Joannou, *Ioannes Italos, Quaestiones quodlibetales* (Studia Patristica et Byzantina, 4), Ettal, 1956.

27 John Italos, *Opusculum* 88, ed. Joannou, p. 157.19–26.

Here Italos declares that the union of the human nature with the divine nature must take place within the hypostasis of the Son because a nature is ἀνυπόστατος καθ' αὐτήν.²⁸ Such a statement in itself would be reconcilable with Cappadocian teaching because Basil of Caesarea and Gregory of Nyssa had also emphasised that the common nature had no existence outside the hypostases. Thus one might conclude that Italos must also accept the existence of a nature that is immanent in the individuals and yet indivisible. However, a closer look at the text reveals the presence of a radically different conceptual framework. The Cappadocian terms hypostasis and nature are defined in a decidedly un-Cappadocian manner. Italos equates them with two different types of substance, which he characterises as πράγματι ... ὑφισταμένη and as ἐπινοία μόνη θεωρουμένη. This can only refer to the Aristotelian first and second substances, which have the same content but denote different states of being, either concrete individuals or abstract species. The consequences of this equation are obvious. The characteristic idioms, which are not mentioned at all in the passage, have lost their function, with the result that hypostasis is already constituted at the level of substance. Since the immanent nature is thus divided into three, there is no room left for a common nature that binds together the hypostases. This leaves only one way in which the oneness of God can be understood: the second substance must be a product of the human mind, which compares the qualities found in similar beings and then comes to the conclusion that these beings must constitute a single species. Such a conceptual framework is already found in a treatise by the sixth-century theologian Theodore of Raithou where we read that in the case of the human species “the one exists only as being seen in the mind,” τὸ ἐν ἐπινοίᾳ καὶ μόνη ὑπάρχει θεωρητόν, whereas “the many ... exist in reality and actuality,” τὰ πολλὰ ... πράγματι καὶ ἐνεργεῖα πέφυκεν.²⁹ Nevertheless, there is a crucial difference between the two authors. Theodore had then claimed that one must not apply this distinction to the Trinity.³⁰ By contrast, Italos does not hesitate to take such a step. This was, however, exactly what John Philoponus had done. Thus one could argue that Italos was a ‘Tritheist’ in reality if not in name.

However, can we be sure that this is indeed Italos' opinion? As I have already pointed out the arguments presented in *Opusculum* 88 are directed against the Christology of the Monophysites. In Late Antiquity and in the Byzantine

28 This is, of course, a gross distortion of the Monophysite position where the one nature is conceived of as a concrete being.

29 Theodore of Raithou, *Praeparatio*, ed. F. Diekamp, in: *Analecta Patristica. Texte und Untersuchungen zur griechischen Patristik*, Rome, 1938, pp. 182–222, esp. pp. 211.10–12.

30 Theodore of Raithou, *Praeparatio*, ed. Diekamp, p. 211.2–17.

period such polemic had its own rules. It was more important to score points than to set out a coherent framework. Thus one cannot exclude the possibility that Italos denied nature existence only because he could then declare that the Monophysite “one nature of Christ” was only a figment of the imagination.³¹ In order to arrive at a more definite conclusion we must turn to Italos’ discussions of philosophical concepts. Our focus must be on passages that explain in what way universals can be present in particulars. One such passage is found in his *Opusculum* 5:

“Ὁ δὲ ἐν ἐκάστῳ τῶν ἀτόμων ἀχωρίστως ὑπῆρξε, τοῦτο ἐν τοῖς πολλοῖς λέγεται· οὐ γὰρ τὸ ἐν τῷ Σωκράτει ζῶον καὶ ἐν Πλάτῳ ἐστὶ τὸ αὐτό, οὐδέ γε τὸ λογικὸν ἢ τὸ σῶμα· ἕκαστον γὰρ τῶν τοιούτων ἐν ᾧ πέφυκεν εἶναι ἐστὶ καὶ ταῦτ’ ἐστὶ τὰ ἐν τοῖς πολλοῖς γένη καθ’ ὃ μεμέρισται τε καὶ διακεχώρισται.”³²

What existed inseparably in each of the individuals, this is called “in the many.” For the animal in Socrates and in Plato is not the same, nor rationality or the body. For each of these is in which it is by nature. And these are the genera in the many insofar as they are divided and separated.

Here the species is said to be present in concrete beings but in such a way that it is both inseparable from them and divided into them. As Katerina Ierodiakonou has remarked this statement rules out the possibility that Italos conceived of the universal in the particulars as an indivisible immanent form.³³ Interestingly this passage has a close counterpart in the *Arbiter* of John Philoponus:

Τὸ γὰρ ἐν ἐμοὶ ζῶον λογικὸν θνητὸν οὐδενὸς ἄλλου κοινόν ἐστιν. Ἀμέλει παθόντος ἀνθρώπου τινὸς ἢ βοῦς ἢ ἵππου ἀπαθῆ μένειν τὰ ὁμοειδῆ τῶν ἀτόμων οὐκ ἀδύνατον. Καὶ γὰρ Παύλου τεθνεώτος μηδένα τεθνάναι τῶν λοιπῶν ἀνθρώπων ἐνδέχεται, καὶ γενομένου Πέτρου καὶ εἰς τὸ εἶναι παρενεχθέντος οἱ ἐσόμενοι μετ’ αὐτὸν ἀνθρώποι οὕτω τῶν ὄντων εἰσίν.³⁴

31 Cf. John Italos, *Opusculum* 88, ed. Joannou, p. 157.40–41: μεταπεσεῖν εἰς ἀνύπαρκτον φαντασίαν μόνῃ τῇ ἐπινοίᾳ ὑφεστηκώς.

32 John Italos, *Opusculum* 5, ed. Joannou, p. 8.4–7.

33 K. Ierodiakonou, “John Italos on Universals,” *Documenti e studi sulla tradizione filosofica medievale*, 18 (2007), pp. 231–248, esp. p. 236.

34 John Philoponus, *Arbiter*, excerpt in John of Damascus, *De haeresibus*, ed. P. Kotter, *Die Schriften des Johannes von Damaskos*, 5 vols (PTS 7, 12, 17, 22, 29), Berlin – New York, 1969, 1973, 1975, 1981, 1988, vol. III, p 52.55–59.

For the rational mortal animal in me is not shared with anybody else. Indeed, when a particular human being or ox or horse suffers it is not impossible that members of the same species remain free of suffering. For when Paul dies it is possible that none of the other human beings die, and when Peter comes into existence and is brought forth into being the human beings that will be after him are not yet among the being.

Of course, it is true that in his philosophical essays John Italos also recognises the existence of universals before the particulars, which he equates with the Platonic ideas and locates within God.³⁵ This “one before the many” is the “antecedent and cause,” *πρωτουργὸν καὶ αἴτιον*, of all members of a species, which participate in it and can thus be considered one.³⁶ However, this concept is not applicable to God himself because there cannot be an idea of God as the cause of the divinity of the three divine hypostases. Italos makes this point clear when he says that he believes in a “Father who has no other father nor a higher cause,” *πατέρα, οὗ οὐκ ἔσται πατήρ ἕτερος, οὔτ’ αὐθις αἴτιον ὑπερβεβηκός*.³⁷ Such reasoning is entirely orthodox. Already Basil had said that in the divinity there is no “overlying common genus,” *γένος κοινὸν ὑπερκείμενον*, and the same point was made again in the controversy about Philoponus’ teachings.³⁸ At that time some theologians who tried to safeguard the unity of God argued that the common substance had a reality of its own alongside the three particular substances. These men, who acquired the nickname Tetradites, were condemned as heretics.³⁹ A reflection of this latter debate can be found in Italos’ *Opusculum* 71:

Καὶ θεότης καὶ οὐ θεότης ὁ Υἱός, ἀλλὰ θεός, οὔτε τῶν προσώπων ἕτερον, ἀλλ’ ἐν θεότητι ταῦτα· καὶ ταῦτα μιᾷ καὶ φύσει καὶ οὐσίᾳ καὶ θελήσει ὡσαύτως. ἀλλὰ καὶ θεότης ἄρα ταῦτα· οὐ γὰρ κατηγοροῦμεν ὡς “Ἕλληνες τὰ μὴ ὄντα, οὐδὲ θεότητος τετράδα παρεισάγομεν.”⁴⁰

- 35 John Italos, *Opusculum* 5, ed. Joannou, p. 7.2–20. Cf. Ierodiakonou, “John Italos,” p. 235.
- 36 John Italos, *Opusculum* 5, ed. Joannou, p. 8.1. It is worth noting that like Italos, Philoponus had accepted the existence of the “one before the many” in his philosophical writings but had denied it in his theological oeuvre. Cf. Rashed, *L’héritage aristotélicien*, pp. 352–357.
- 37 John Italos, *Opusculum* 71, ed. Joannou, p. 124.19–20.
- 38 Basil of Caesarea, *Epistula* 361, in: Saint Basile, *Lettres*, éd. Y. Courtonne, 3 vols., Paris 1957, 1961, 1966; vol. III, p. 221.
- 39 Cf. Grillmeier and Hainthaler, *Christ in Christian Tradition*, II.4, p. 78, n. 110.
- 40 John Italos, *Opusculum* 71, ed. Joannou, p. 125.1–5.

The Son is godhead and is not godhead, but god, nor is another of the persons this, but these are in godhead, and these are likewise in one nature and substance and will, but these are then also godhead, for we do not predicate what is inexistent like the pagans nor do we introduce a quaternity of godhead.

Here Italos states that the common divinity should not be predicated of Father, Son and Spirit because it does not exist and that for this reason there is no fourth element in the Trinity. Such a statement only makes sense if the divine nature is conceived of as “one after the many,” that is, the common features that the mind abstracts from similar individuals. As a mere abstraction it has no reality of itself and therefore leaves the Trinity intact.⁴¹ This argument, too, is not new. As we have seen Philoponus had already made the same point when he defended himself against accusations that by speaking of one generic and three partial substances he had turned the Trinity into a quaternity. At this point we can see why Italos would have been opposed to the notion of a single divine substance. For him accepting the existence of such an entity would have meant introducing two layers into the divinity and thus exacerbating the problem of divine oneness rather than solving it.



This raises the question: was Nicetas Stethatos moved by similar considerations to play down the role of the common nature? Stethatos' confession of faith suggests that this may have been the case. There we find the statement “and I do not recognise another God beside the three persons, nor do I know beside the one God three other consubstantial persons of the Trinity, which is the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit,” οὐδὲ ἄλλον τὸν Θεὸν παρὰ τὰ τρία γινώσκω πρόσωπα, ἢ παρὰ τὸν ἓνα Θεὸν ἕτερα τρία τῆς Τριάδος ὁμοούσια ἐπίσταμαι πρόσωπα, ἃ ἔστιν ὁ Πατήρ, ὁ Υἱὸς καὶ τὸ ἅγιον Πνεῦμα.⁴² This statement, too, is taken from the creed that had been read out at the Sixth Ecumenical Council.⁴³ This creed dealt specifically with the heresy of Tetradism, which may have been one of the reasons why Stethatos chose it as his model.

41 Here, too, a Platonic reading must be excluded. If there is no idea of God then there can also not be an image of this idea in the soul. This is again in contrast with created being where Italos accepted such a Platonic interpretation. Cf. e.g. John Italos, *Opusculum* 71, ed. Joannou, p. 16.22–25; and Ierodiakonou, “John Italos,” p. 239.

42 Nicetas Stethatos, *Confession of Faith*, ed. Darrouzès, p. 448.

43 *Acts of the Sixth Ecumenical Council* (681), ed. Riedinger, I, p. 420.10–12:

Further evidence comes from Stethatos' treatise *Synthesis adversus Latinos*. The purpose of this treatise was to show why the Holy Spirit cannot proceed from the Father and the Son but must proceed from the Father alone. As a consequence the focus of the discussion is on the relationship between the three hypostases. However, this does not mean that other themes are absent. In order to speak meaningfully about hypostasis it was necessary to define first of all how this term should be understood and how it relates to the divine substance. Nicetas' most concise ontological statement reads as follows:

Οὐσία λέγεται μὲν καὶ τὸ καθόλου τε καὶ κοινὸν ὡς ὁ καθόλου ἄνθρωπος καὶ ἡ ἀνθρωπότης, λέγεται δὲ καὶ τὸ καθ' ἕκαστόν τε καὶ ἄτομον ὡς οὗτος ὁ ἄνθρωπος ὁ Πέτρος τυχὸν ἢ ὁ Παῦλος, ἦν καὶ πρώτην καὶ μάλιστα κυρίως οὐσίαν ὁ περιττὸς τὴν ἔξω σοφίαν Ἀριστοτέλης φησίν, ὡς οὐκ ἐπινοία κατὰ τὴν καθόλου φανταζομένην, ἀλλὰ πραγματικῶς καὶ ὄντως ὑφισταμένην.⁴⁴

Substance is called what is universal and common, such as the universal human being and the humanity, and it (sc. substance) is also called what is particular and individual such as this human being, for example Peter or Paul. Aristotle who is rich in outside wisdom says that the latter is the first and most of all true substance because it is not imagined in the mind like the universal (sc. substance) but exists really and truly.

In this passage Stethatos juxtaposes the Aristotelian second substance, which refers to universals and species, with the Aristotelian first substance, which refers to concrete beings. From the context it is clear that he identifies the former with the Cappadocian common nature and the latter with hypostasis.⁴⁵ In a second step he then explains how these two concepts differ from one another. The former is ἐπινοία ... φανταζομένη whereas the latter is πραγματικῶς καὶ ὄντως ὑφισταμένη. This is evidently the same framework that we also found in Italos' oeuvre, and the implications are also the same. If this framework is applied to God one can no longer speak meaningfully of a common divine nature. In the *Synthesis* Nicetas was not prepared to take this step. There he refers to the divine nature as if it had a reality of its own even though he offers no explanation why this should be so.⁴⁶ However, one can argue that he was well aware of the consequences of his ontological model and that for this rea-

44 Nicetas Stethatos, *Synthesis adversus Latinos*, 23.1, ed. Michel, p. 400.10–15.

45 Nicetas Stethatos, *Synthesis adversus Latinos*, 23.1, ed. Michel, p. 400.17–21.

46 Nicetas Stethatos, *Synthesis adversus Latinos*, 23.1, ed. Michel, p. 400.16–17.

son he tried to locate the unity of the divinity at the level of the three hypostases.

Conclusion

This article has focused on two confessions of faith, which were composed in the late eleventh century by the philosopher John Italos and by the monk Nice-tas Stethatos. In-depth analysis of selected passages has shown that the two men subscribed to a Trinitarian theology that could be considered heretical. They denied the existence of a common divine substance that could safeguard the oneness of God and instead emphasised the closeness of the hypostases to each other, which made it impossible for them to accord to the hypostases the distinguishing function that the Cappadocians had given them. Thus it can be argued that it was their Tritheism that pushed them towards a 'Sabellian' solution. This article has only dealt with one aspect of Italos' and Stethatos' Trinitarian speculation. In their writings the two authors present the Trinity not only as a static configuration but also as dynamic entity where one component produces another. These passages also need to be interpreted if one wishes to understand their theological models in their entirety. This, however, is the subject for another article. Here we can conclude that two authors who hated and fought each other held virtually the same views. This suggests that such ideas were wide-spread at the time. Then the accusations directed at Italos would be disingenuous. Although his theology did not conform to the teachings of the Cappadocians, at least in the way that his opponents understood them, it may well have reflected the current state of the theological debate. Then we can conclude that the Trinitarian discourse of the eleventh century was not as hide-bound or uniform as it is often claimed. There were choices to be made and the available options included not only the canonical Cappadocian model but also the heretical framework of John Philoponus.